The wellbeing benefits of sea swimming. Is it time to revisit the sea cure?

Abstract

Sea and open water swimming is rapidly growing in popularity and many participants are extolling the benefits to their mental and physical health. Despite the wealth of anecdotal reports, little empirical research has been undertaken exploring the impact of this activity. To gain access and understanding of the embodied, emplaced and temporal experience of swimming I developed a novel mobile method.   I carried out 'swim-along' interviews, and follow up land-based interviews, with six regular sea swimmers. Using a lifeworld phenomenological analysis based on the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, I identified three significant dimensions that reflected the experience for the swimmers interviewed. They found sea swimming **transformative**, causing changes in mind, body and identity; **connecting**, enabling a sense of belonging to nature, place and others; and finally **re-orientating**, through the disruption to the sense of time, space and body swimmers can find alternative and expanded perspectives about themselves and their world. All these effects positively impact on wellbeing and indicate that sea swimming offers benefits that go far beyond just a way of improving fitness.

Introduction

Sea swimming is currently enjoying a resurgence in popularity (British Triathlon Federation, 2018; Gibson, 2018) and there are many anecdotal reports of benefits to both physical and mental health. The idea that sea swimming and bathing can be beneficial to health is not new. Following Dr. Wittie's recommendation in 1637 that bathing in sea water was a remedy for gout, headaches, tumours and numerous other physical and mental complaints, visitors flocked to coastal towns and villages seeking a 'sea cure' for all sorts of ailments (Parr, 2011). In this paper I explore how sea swimming might be benefitting the wellbeing of modern-day swimmers. In addition, so that I could gain access to the embodied, emplaced and temporal experience, I developed a novel mobile methodology to enable me to interview sea swimmers whilst on their swim.

Conceptualising Wellbeing

Nearly two decades ago, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggested that rather than solely focus on treatments for mental ill-heath it was important to investigate what improves wellbeing. They called for a positive psychology that explores what contributes to 'the fulfilled individual and the thriving community' (p5). Interest in wellbeing has grown rapidly since, with governments now measuring 'happiness' alongside GDP (e.g. Office of National Statistics, 2014 in the UK). In 2008 the UK Government's Foresight project commissioned the New Economics Foundation (2008) to review the literature. They identified five ways to improve wellbeing which are now widely recommended; connect, be active, take notice, learn and give. A number of health strategies released in the UK reflect these ideas, including 'No Health without Mental Health' (Department of Health (DoH), 2011), 'The Five Year Forward View' (NHS England, 2014) and 'Prevention is better than cure' (DHSC, 2018).

Much of the literature on wellbeing focuses on the individual and what they can do for themselves. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) argues that 'happiness is not something that just happens… [It] is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person' (p2). Although this can be understood as empowering, as individuals are viewed as 'decision makers with choices, preferences, and the possibility of becoming masterful and efficacious' (Seligman,

2002 p3), it neglects some of the challenges that people face. Ultimately there is a danger that the individual is blamed for their own misery and the structural challenges that have contributed are neglected (Davies, 2015). Individuals who are not experiencing high levels of wellbeing can therefore feel at fault, further diminishing their sense of wellbeing.

In order to gain a different understanding of the lived experience of well-being, researchers have turned to phenomenology. Todres and Galvin (2010), using an existential and lifeworld approach, developed the model 'Dwelling-Mobility' as a way of conceptualising well-being. 'Mobility' refers to the capacity and sense of movement that allows for the feeling of possibility, of connecting with other people, other spaces, other times and other moods and the ability to live and carry out one's major and minor life projects. 'Dwelling' is the sense of 'at homeness', of being 'restful, accepting what is present at hand, or an experience of letting be'. They suggest 'mobility' and 'dwelling' should not be understood as separate kinds of wellbeing but are best expressed as a paradoxical unity (Galvin & Todres, 2011). Healey-Ogden and Austin (2011), also using a phenomenological approach, found that well-being does not come from following a list of activities with the aim of bringing the phenomenon about, rather their participants experienced well-being when they were 'came home to themselves by losing themselves to a new way of dwelling and being' (p93). They stressed the situated nature of well-being finding that play space, creative space, nature's space and spiritual space are all significant in fostering well-being.

Blue Space and Wellbeing

'Blue' space, previously included within 'green' space, has become a growing area of interest as having particular significance for wellbeing (Kearns et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2015; Foley, 2015; Lengen, 2015; Thomas, 2015). Aquatic environments are often an aspect of people's favourite places (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Korpela et al., 2010), preferred leisure activities (Natural England, 2009) and recollections of positive childhood activities (Waite, 2010). People are prepared to pay more for houses and hotel rooms with views of water (Lange & Schaeffer, 2001; Luttik, 2000) and over a third of the world's population live along 'a narrow fringe of coastal land' (United Nations, 2007). It is argued that we have evolved to have a preference for aquatic

environments (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, 1983) as early humans who settled near water were more likely to survive as a result of the resources available (Hardy, 1960; Morgan & Tattersall, 1997). Although it is important to avoid simplistic notions that everyone has an affinity with water, or that being near to the sea guarantees wellbeing, this evidence suggests that blue space is significant for some people.

Much of the research into blue space has focused on benefits of being alongside water (Wylie, 2005; White et al., 2010; Ryan, 2012) with research into open water swimming concentrating on the risks (World Health Organisation, 2003). Foley (2015) argued the need to 'jump in' and explore the immersive experience; he found that sea swimming is a 'performed and emplaced therapeutic encounter' with positive effects that 'accrete' over time (Foley, 2017 p 45). Throsby (2013) in her (auto) ethnographical study exploring her experiences and those of her fellow marathon swimmers, discovered there were unexpected pleasures including the immersive experience of being in the sea, feeling at home in the water as the body adapts and interacts with this different environment, being 'in the zone' and a changing and more positive view of the body. Huttunen et al. (2004) researched regular winter swimmers and found an improvement in mood. Straughan (2012) explored the experience of divers whilst in the aquatic world and concluded it is therapeutic for those who enjoy it, instilling a sense of well-being and calm through a re-centring of the self.

Within the growing body of work advocating the therapeutic potential of being active in green and blue spaces there are certain bodies, however, who 'feel out of place' in these settings, for example as a result of feeling judged for not having the 'right' kind of body (Thomas, 2015). If the fit, young, thin, athletic body is privileged, then other bodies who are not, may experience a sense of 'stigma' and that they are less welcome (Goffman, 1963). Rather than seeing it as positive for all, it is important to recognise that any setting is likely to be experienced in different ways by different people, with those who gain a sense of wellbeing appreciating personally relevant phenomena (Cattell et al., 2008). It has been suggested, however, that bodies of difference can be enabled in open water, either through immersion in the water (Foley, 2015; Kearns et al., 2015; Coleman and Kearns, 2015) or through a mental immersive engagement with the environment that takes one outside of oneself (Thomas, 2015; Lengen, 2015;

Volker and Kistemann, 2015). Outdoor swimming can transform the 'unhealthy' land body, for example 'large' and 'middle-aged', into a healthy sea body (Throsby, 2013) and enable older people to challenge perceptions of the burden and dependency (Pike, 2011).

Methodology

To capture the embodied, emplaced and temporal nature of sea swimming I chose to interview swimmers whilst in the water. Researchers are increasingly using mobile and creative methods 'to grasp' at the multi-sensory and situated nature of experience (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007). They allow for exploration into subtle changes in embodied, emplaced and sensory experience as well as 'the configuration and reconfiguration of assemblies of objects, spaces, people, ideas and information' (Büscher & Urry 2009 p110). Skills are 'developed ecologically, in the context of their body activity and their environmental relations' (Eden and Bear, 2010 p297) so not easily verbalised (Hunt, 2018). By swimming together we were able to attend to the unfolding experience prompted by the 'practice of moving one's body through place' (Doughty, 2013).

To safely join swimmers on a swim it was necessary that I also be a competent swimmer. Participants were recruited through a swimming club of which I am a member. As such I was 'utilising' my knowledge and experience as a result of being an 'insider' of the area of interest (Wilkinson & Kitizinger, 2013). Insider research is becoming more common as the traditional methods of knowledge production are challenged (Berger, 2015), the complexity and blurring between 'insider' and 'outsider' researchers is increasingly being acknowledged (Wilkinson & Kitizinger, 2013) and the range of research methods that make use of the self continues to diversify (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011; Wint, 2011). Insider researchers are becoming recognised as having insights and understanding about phenomena from their own lived experience that, through the process of reflexive awareness, can be used to inform the development of theoretical knowledge (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007 p60). In fact it is argued that some activities, particularly physical activities, are impossible to understand without the researcher having directly experienced them (Humberstone, 2011).

A lifeworld phenomenological framework was utilised, drawing on the ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962). Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience of phenomena and lifeworld refers to the pre-reflective experience before phenomena are interpreted and categorised (Dowling, 2007). Merleau-Ponty's most significant contribution to phenomenology was to locate subjectivity not in the mind or consciousness but in the body, positing the body has a 'unifying and synthesising' function (Young, 2005 p36). He believed we understand the world through our bodies and through moving through the world within our bodies.

Phenomenological attitude

There is a recognition throughout phenomenology that, in the same way that a human being is always in process, so our understanding can never be complete (Dahlberg et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty suggested that humans can never grasp the world in its entirety, we can only understand the world according to the mode in which we inhabit it (Finlay, 2011). As such there is no claim that the findings of this study capture an objective reality of sea swimming. Throughout the field of phenomenology, however, there is a consensus that a phenomenological attitude is fundamental. That to make visible our experience of the world we need to slightly slacken the intentional threads that attach us (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003) suggest 'bridling', cautioning the researcher not to understand too quickly, carelessly or slovenly or to make definite what is indefinite.

As a regular and all year-round sea swimmer I have begun to feel 'at home' in the water and find sea swimming benefits my wellbeing. I therefore started this project with my own understanding of sea swimming. This understanding evolved through the process of talking with others in detail about their experiences. Throughout data collection and analysis I needed to be alert to my pre-existing assumptions and beliefs, intentionally remaining open to anything unexpected or surprising in the swimmers' accounts of their experience. Rather than focusing on the more familiar and dominant story, it was important to notice the subtle experiences that are perhaps less spoken about or recognised. Rapport and reciprocity with participants, developed through undertaking the activity together, allowed us to attend to these quieter experiences. I also shared the findings of the research with participants and other swimmers, not simply as a way of ensuring accuracy but rather so that we

could reflect together on whether it resonated with their experience and deepen my understanding. I undertook a self-interview, and kept a reflective journal throughout, as tools to aid my reflexivity.

Data Collection

Formal ethical approval was gained through the sponsoring university. Swimmers were invited to participate by an email sent to all 180 members of a sea swimming club. Nineteen volunteered and six were selected using purposive and convenience sampling. All were regular swimmers and had been members of the swimming club for over a year, to ensure sufficient experience in the water. The sample included three women and three men, their ages ranged from 38 to 73, and they were at various stages of working life including retirement. Four had children and one had significant caring responsibilities. All were white British and in good health. Full consent was taken before the interviews started. Swim-along interviews were recorded in the water using a waterproof video camera and voice recorder, and land-based interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. During the swim-along interviews, participants were invited to undertake their normal swim but to indicate to me when they had reflections or experiences they wanted to share. A semi-structured interview schedule guided the questioning.

Semi-structured interview schedule	
During the swim	- What thoughts, feelings, physical sensations are you experiencing? - Which sensations are you attending to, which are you not? - Which senses are most important? - How has your mood changed over the course of the swim, what seems to impact on this? - What thoughts are uppermost in your mind?

After the swim	- Thinking about this swim what did you notice about the experi-ence; changes in your body, changes in your mood, changes in your thoughts. Paying more attention did anything surprise you?
	- What motivates you to swim? Why swimming rather than an-other sport?
	- Do you think regular sea swimming has had an impact on your mood? If so, how and in what ways/
	- Has regular sea swimming had an impact on your body?
	- Are there any negative aspects to sea swimming?

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using methods outlined by Finlay (2011) and informed by the ideas of Galvin and Todres (2013). Initially I took time to dwell with the data and then grouped extracts together to identify similarities and differences between the participants. Drawing on my understanding of their responses, as well as my own experience of sea swimming, I attempted to develop an 'embodied interpretation' by going back and forth between my sense of the meanings and a search for words that communicated those meanings (Galvin and Todres, 2013 p166). Finally, following the suggestion of Finlay, the data was interrogated using lifeworld dimensions of temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity, embodiment and mood (Galvin and Todres, 2013). To reflect the rich multi-sensory nature of sea swimming I also made short film using clips from the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

https://vimeo.com/user4435940/review/291473670/87e1311771

Password: SeaSwimVideo

Through analysis of the interview transcripts three significant, although overlapping, dimensions emerged, each emphasising different aspects of the experience. The

swimmers found sea swimming **transformative**, the interaction between sea and swimmer resulted in changes in the swimmer's experience of themselves; **connecting**, the swimmer experienced a sense of connection to nature, place and others; and finally **re-orientating**, through the disruption to the sense of time, space and body, swimmers find alternative and expanded perspectives about themselves and their world. Quotes from the participants illustrate the different dimensions with names changed to protect identities.

4.1 Dimension one: Transformative

The interaction between the sea and the swimmer resulted in changes in swimmers' experience of themselves. These transformations ranged from identifiable stages within a swim; to longer term as a result of regular swimming. They were anticipated and sought out by the swimmers.

Swimmers described how during a swim their focus shifted towards their bodies.   This shift began with a sense of anticipation before entering the water; once in the water there was also a period of adjustment, followed by a subtle sense of relief, as their body adapted.

> When I first get in, faced the challenge of the coldness of the sea and when one has found it is ok, you are feeling good about that. It hasn't killed you (Richard).

In swimming an acute awareness of the body is needed to keep the swimmer safe; both in terms of managing themselves in the water but also noticing if they were becoming cold or tired and needing to get back to shore. Many swimmers in this study described anxious thoughts about safety during swims. Although not experienced as pleasant, these anxious thoughts would focus their mind onto their body.

> And I will say that doing it for 12 years, that, every time I get to, say, the end of the pier, I am constantly thinking about, oh what if my back locks up, you know, what if I get cramp, what if I get stung? (Luke).

Leder (1990), building on ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962), suggested the body becomes the focus of attention during periods of dysfunction. During everyday activities the body 'dis-appears', since the body functions appropriately and unnoticeably. With unfamiliarity, however, the body 'dys-appears' and comes into view. Merchant (2011b) found that novice divers experienced moments of dysfunction when in the ocean and their body was brought sharply into focus as a result.

Some swimmers in this study chose to simply be in the water but for others exercise was also a critical part of the swim. Through the action of swimming the swimmer's attention would get further drawn towards their body and away from other thoughts.

> I have crossed the barrier now where, mentally I am totally clear, but I am much more aware of the physical now, so, that sort of gets to that feeling in the gym, where you are feeling you are using your muscles and you are breathing heavily (Luke).

Allen-Collinson and Owton (2014) introduced the term 'intense embodiment' for times during sport when a high level of conscious awareness of the body occurs.   During these periods of 'corporal aliveness' the body becomes the focus but without the negative connotations of *dys-*. The body 'eu-appears' (Zeiler, 2010 p333) as it emerges into the foreground of consciousness as capable and strong. The change in attention to the body found in this study, as a result of the physical activity of swimming combined with the sensory experience of immersion in water, can be understood as bodies of the swimmers both 'dys-appearing', during periods of discomfort, and 'eu-appearing' as 'intense embodiment' occurs.

Five swimmers described how they also experienced a calming of their mind as they settled into swimming:

> Physical movement produces not quite a trance state but certainly a different state in the brain and it is one in which my mind is a lot freer (Audrey).

The rhythmic motions of exercise, including swimming (Throsby, 2013), running (Hockey, 2005) and walking (Edensor, 2000), have been understood to enable contemplation (Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Throsby argues this indicates that thinking is an embodied activity (2013). It was clear, particularly as a result of the interviews in the water, that participants could become totally absorbed in the activity of swimming. Achieving a state when participants are so involved in an activity that nothing else matters, described in the literature as 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), has been shown to result in many psychological benefits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Although there has been much interest in 'peak flow' experiences, Bell et al. (2015) argue for an interest in 'microflow' experiences. They suggest that these result from less challenging activities but are nonetheless experienced as pleasurably immersive (Privette, 1983; Phoenix & Orr, 2014). From my interviews it seems that sea swimming provides many of these 'microflow' experiences.

Transformations also occurred in the mood of the swimmers as a result of their swim. It seemed that this was due to the capacity of being in the sea to be 'healing', 'resourcing', and 'a way to escape'. These transformations could be both immediate but could also 'accrete', as suggested by Foley (2017), as the embodied and emplaced activity of sea swimming has a deeper impact over time.

There was a sense from all the swimmers that going for a swim could be beneficial both physically and, as importantly, mentally:

> I can have that feeling… of being really low…. I'll know well it is ok because you are going to go swimming. And the swimming will bring me right back up to there (Dawn).

This 'healing' capacity is reported in previous research undertaken into sea swimming; respondents in Foley's study (2015) reported a relief from physical ailments as well as an impact on mood. Swimmers interviewed by Throsby (2013 p13) likened swimming to Prozac and 'better than therapy' and she concluded that sea swimming is an 'affectively transformative' experience.

Sea swimming is often viewed as a risky activity; there is always the potential to drown if the conditions of sea or swimmer are not fully considered. Swimmers in this study were not naive to these risks. This is also corroborated in other studies (Foley, 2015). All of the swimmers in this study had experienced periods when they felt concerned for their safety.

> I think we have all had the experience of, it is like a switch flipping, one minute you are fine and then literally the next second it is shit I am too cold I should have got out. And it is literally swim or die (Audrey).

Although potentially frightening at the time, and possibly resulting in an increased level of caution and respect for the sea, the risk was experienced in a positive way. Swimmers described the importance, as skills and confidence in the water developed, of having an untamed wildness that can be explored:

> It was always something that you want to explore but you know that it is dangerous and scary and then over time, I guess, it is that experience and knowledge you kind of, that completely changes and you end up going from something that you kind of really fear and don't want to go in to something you want to explore and have a look around (George).

There seemed to be a psychological strength, derived from swimming, which helped in other areas of life. In this study swimmers described being more able to manage in their lives as a result of an increased sense of psychological resilience or confidence in themselves and their abilities as they had taken on the challenge of the sea:

> There have been times when I have been in a stress situation, and you know you can look at yourself in the mirror and you know you say what are you worrying about, you have done this, you have done that, you know (Luke).

This supports research into other adventurous activities; meta-analyses have indicated that adventure sports can offer significant positive health and wellbeing outcomes (e.g. Gass et al., 2012; Hattie et al., 1997). Although most accounts of risk in western cultures portray it as something negative and to be avoided, voluntary

risk taking or 'edgework' is pursued as a way of facing fears, seeking excitement and achieving self actualisation (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002; Lupton, 2013). Being 'out of one's comfort zone' as a result of engaging in risk taking sports has been found to be character-building, increasing self-esteem and enhancing psychological resilience (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011). Changes are also translated into day-to-day life (Brymer & Oades, 2009). Although it is important to recognise participants require considerable skills, to be able to navigate risk and danger, the benefits of adventure sports may have been overlooked, as a result of the focus on keeping people safe (Clough et al., 2016).

Finally, an important transformative part of the experience of sea swimming seemed to be the chance to gain a sense of distance from day-to-day lives:

> It is nice to do something that is totally unconnected.. to your day to day bills and people to speak to and family obligations and that kind of stuff, it is nice to do something that is completely unrelated to all of that. And is pretty much a totally different environment. It gives you a bit of space to kind of collect your thoughts. And, yeah, to get back to where you kind of like to be.. (George)

For those with challenging life circumstances this helps them to cope.

> I don't know I suppose I feel a bit more in control of things, it is just a bit of distance, like all of that over there, just really represents total madness, and a fair amount of awfulness really, and although the madness and awfulness is still there, I am just much more self-contained, and more steady (Dawn).

Hartig et al. (2011) suggested that, as a result of leading increasingly urbanised lives, people have a need to escape and nature is often perceived as a way of achieving distance. Although a dichotomy between 'society' and 'nature' is challenged, including this distinction between urban and natural worlds (Castree & Braun, 2001), there is still perhaps the need to 'get away' from highly stimulating environments. The capacity of blue space to provide opportunity for this is corroborated in other studies. Many of the swimmers interviewed by Throsby (2013) described the pleasure of finding a 'quiet, contemplative space', in which they could detach from the demands of

their everyday life (p13). Conradson (2007) suggested that during diving 'a person becomes more aware of their immediate embodied experience of the world and less concerned with events occurring 'out there' (p33). There is perhaps a particular sense of distance offered by being in water as the body is entering a different medium. There are a myriad of ways to swim; in indoor pools, in lidos, lakes, rivers and the sea, and it would be interesting to explore if they share the same capacity.

4.2 Dimension two: Connecting
The participants seemed to derive a deep sense of connectedness and belonging from swimming. This included feeling connected to the sea, to the place where they regularly swim, to the other swimmers whilst in the water and also a sense of belonging to the community of open water swimmers when on land.

Many swimmers described how they felt part of the natural world when immersed in the sea. When able to synchronise the movement of their bodies to the movement of the water this connection deepened, described by Dawn:

> When you are swimming with the energy of the sea…. you are just using the energy of this huge, amazing, physical element, just makes you feel, I don't know, makes me sort of feel like I am part of this amazing world, which I like…. I mean the sea is obviously a really dangerous awful place sometimes, but you know, there are times where, I don't know, I just love being part of nature I suppose (Dawn).

To swim well the body needs to be responsive to the environment. Throsby (2013) found that the body changes the way it *feels,* in order to adapt to the water and this allows swimmers a sense of being 'at home'. Straughan (2012 p25) suggests when diving in the sea the physicality and emotionality of the body need to be *in concert with* the textual qualities of the water. Merchant (2011b) found that divers needed to learn 'embodied practices that are different to those used on land'. Through 'continual attunement' to the unfamiliar environment they were able to use the movement of the water for transportation and this resulted in them feeling a deep connection (Merchant, 2011b).

As well as a connectedness from being in the sea, swimmers often swam in the same location and so developed a connectedness from a familiarity with a particular part of the sea. This contributed to them keeping themselves safe:

> I think it is quite nice in a way swimming in the same place because you do get to know the water very well and I think we are all really aware of what the tide is doing, what the current is going to do with the tide, where the lateral rips are.. what the state of tide is the safest to swim at. There is always stuff that is quite nice, to kind of know all of that information, and to put it all together and to be able to go out in conditions that might look quite challenging but actually you put the time in, you kind of know what you are doing (George).

Some of the swimmers felt an annoyance at the intrusion of many visitors in the summer to the place they routinely swim.   As found by Bell et al. (2015) this was particularly the case if it was felt that the other users were not taking care of the environment. A self-directed need to preserve and respect the natural world is an anticipated outcome of ecotherapy as individuals begin to recognise their dependence and connection with nature (Burls, 2007) and is often an outcome of nature-based sport (Humberstone, 2011; Olive, 2015). Engaging in activity in the natural world can result in becoming 'less anthropocentric and more ecocentric' (Brymer & Oades, 2009). This attachment to a particular place was not shared by all swimmers, however, partly because of the number of tourists and amount of litter, but also because of the steeply shelving shape of the beach. This reinforces the view that particular landscapes are not intrinsically healthy or unhealthy, it is how they are used, experienced and perceived (Conradson, 2005).

Although the act of swimming is not obviously sociable, as you have your face in the water, the sense of other bodies being alongside seemed to impact on the swimming experience. Three swimmers described how their decisions might be influenced by those around them. In more challenging conditions there was a feeling of being in it together which engendered a motivation that would be difficult to find without an ally equally prepared to take the plunge. Learning from those with more experience also allowed swimmers to stretch their limits. Autonomy remained critical, however, as ultimately the decision about the level of risk to take remained with each swimmer.

Swimmers who misjudged their ability, and therefore negatively impacted on others' swimming experience by unsafely pushing their limits, were mentioned. Finding someone who is the same speed and wants to go the same kind of distance can also be a challenge in sea swimming because of the temperature of the water, leading to worries of having to stop and get cold if a faster swimmer, or not being able to keep up if slower:

> There is that feeling of, that you are lagging behind a little bit, it is that feeling of loneliness, I'm being left, whereas once I then get in my stride I'm fine (Luke).

Although some swimmers preferred to swim alone, finding that trying to accommodate others detracted from their swimming experience, for those who did swim together there could be a deep enjoyment of sharing the experience. Some swimmers found coordinating their swimming with others even added to the sense of bonding as it was important that you looked out for your fellow swimmers and at times sacrificed your own preferred swim for theirs. This interdependency and negotiation perhaps contributes to the development of a close community that is found amongst sea swimmers:

> It is a fantastic feeling of camaraderie…… there were three of us in a row together, the whole time looking out for each other, but aware of each other there, a bit like a shoal of dolphins or whatever they are, pack of dolphins, swimming together, all totally aware and you know just remember the buzz of that particular day, and you do get similar buzzes all the time but you know, the text messages, emails (Luke).

For many swimmers in this study, it seemed that having others alongside them increased the potential for a 'peak flow' experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Clough et al. (2016) suggest that adventure environments provide opportunities to explore both relatedness and autonomy. They argue that when participants need to rely on each other for safety a different relationship is developed between practitioners compared to sports that have competition at the core. Also, unlike traditional sporting activities with more formalised 'rules', natural environments provide greater opportunities for making choices about courses of action. As these may involve an element of risk,

they are highly meaningful (Clough et al., 2016). This seems to be corroborated by Bell et al. (2015) who found the presence of others in blue space can be experienced positively, in part as a result of the potential of others in blue space to provide support and facilitate an enjoyable experience. This contrasts with green space (or on the beach) where the presence of others can be experienced as compromising the enjoyment (Edensor, 2000). It seemed in this study that this reliance on each other for safety may be a factor in how positive relationships within the sea swimming community are developed.

As well as swimming there was also a social element in the club which was very important for some swimmers. Some members would come down even if the conditions did not permit them to swim. For many this provided a backbone to their day . The swim, or the sea, gives purpose to any conversation with topics discussed often the same. It perhaps gives an easy way of being with others as it requires little more than the want to be in the water:

> No matter how many times you repeat it, the banter in the changing room, in the coffee shop, is always the same, about, did you get to the end of the pier, did you do that, did you experience some of those waves, or crikey wasn't it cold this morning. That side of common thing which takes down any other barrier at all. It is all, we are small little mortals, you know, but you can share an interest and share the experience (Luke).

The after-swim coffee chat, mostly focused around predictable banter, can be described as 'undemanding' (Bell et al., 2015). The friendships that are formed were considered in some ways superficial, as not much may be known about another, but in other ways very intimate, as aspects of personality are exposed as a result of sharing an extreme experience together. This means the dynamics that develop have the potential to be different from everyday life, giving an opportunity for swimmers to embody a different sense of themselves. The swimming club can therefore be understood as an 'enabling place', offering the chance, if necessary, for swimmers to constitute themselves (and others) in new ways (Duff, 2012). Positive relationships are often key to people continuing to exercise (Bauman et al., 2012) and the routine of meeting for coffee seemed to contribute to swimmers continuing to swim. This

parallels findings from research into *parkrun* which suggest the motivation to go regularly was not just for fitness goals but also the wider potential gains of social interactions and developing friendships (Stevinson et al., 2015).

Accessing blue space can result in a number of positive outcomes. There are, however, some bodies that feel less comfortable as a result of perceived judgements. Although not necessarily privileging the fit, young or thin there was nonetheless a perception that some bodies fitted better. It is a sport that is often undertaken near naked, or even naked, and the changing rooms do not offer much privacy which may be a challenge for the body-conscious swimmer. There was a sense that some in the swimming club see themselves as superior swimmers with the result of others feeling excluded and less adequate. There was also concern that some people also might want to join the club but fear they will not be strong enough swimmers or they may want to wear a wetsuit and worry that this will be judged:

> I think, this is one of the things that I think can be unfortunate, you've got very much a culture of skin swimming, and some people feel they want to wear a wetsuit but they can feel intimidated, like they are being made to feel like they are a wuss if they wear one (Audrey).

Sea swimming does exclude people who are not competent swimmers. People with lower socio-economic backgrounds or black and minority ethnicities may not participate as a result of not having learned to swim. Swimming is not taught well in all schools, so to be a sea swimmer you perhaps had to have parents who paid for you to have swimming lessons. There is also a socio-cultural heritage that has resulted in many pervasive beliefs about people of colour not being able to learn and beaches still tending lack racial diversity (Bell et al., 2019; Burdsey, 2016). There are some groups, however, whose bodies may fit within open water swimming when they would face more of a challenge in other sporting environments. For example the difference in capability between women and men is much less in swimming. Throsby (2013) argues that, unlike other sports, in open-water swimming it is possible for women to have a feeling of 'power and entitlement to space' (p17). Young (2005) suggests that women in general are not as open with their bodies as men, that to perform 'appropriately' as women they have learned that their movements need to remain

within a constricted space. Within sea swimming, perhaps as a result of the spaciousness of the water or the lack of 'gaze', women feel able to be freer. In any swimming location, however, the near naked state results in the potential threat of social encounters misconstrued as sexual and so 'rituals' to protect against this still need to be enacted (Scott, 2010). Being larger can also be an advantage (Throsby, 2013). Swimmers may intentionally put on weight to facilitate their swimming and importance is placed on not being 'too vain to gain':

> I wanted to do a few longer swims and so I knew I wasn't going to be able to do it if I didn't put some weight on so… yes, so I just decided to put on a bit of weight (George).

Outdoor swimming can provide opportunities to offer a different view of the ageing body (Bhatti, 2006). Age and physical mobility issues may not be the barrier they can be on land especially if fins or other swimming aids are used, although getting up and down the beach and into the water can remain restricting. Within the club in this study, as in *parkrun* (Stevinson et al., 2015), the potential for different generations to participate together was seen as a significant positive. Finlay et al (2015) found that for their older participants the social interaction afforded by greenspace was highly valued. Sea swimming clubs may provide spaces for older people to feel valued and give opportunities for social interaction and routine. Within the club in this study, as with other sea swimming locations, there was an acceptance of people that want to swim in different ways; that the vigour of swimming may change as a result of size, age or gender (Foley, 2015). The swims might be different, but the conditions are the same, and the experience is therefore shared:

> The other cool thing, massively different thing between swimming and pretty much every other sport is you can have a 20 year old and an 80 year old having a completely shared experience. There is no competition there, there is no nothing, but they have a completely shared experience of the temperature, the conditions, which is something that is really attractive (George).

4.3 Dimension three: Re-orientating

A third, tentative, dimension emerged through the analysis that is both entangled and as a result of the other dimensions. The interaction between swimmer and sea seemed to disrupt habitual perspectives and patterns are disrupted and this allowed a different, and refreshed way of seeing the world.

The experience of linear time can be disrupted by being in the water. Being brought 'into the present moment' was mentioned by four of the swimmers reflecting how this different experience of time was valued.

> Something about that experience that forces you into the moment, and it is that, you do get that overwhelming, all your senses get absolutely overwhelmed and it brings on a bit of clarity really I think. Pushes all the rubbish out of the way (George).

Three of the swimmers also described how being in the sea gave a sense of transcending historical time, as they could imagine people of any era having the same experience:

> And it is kind of bonding isn't it? It feels very much like what humans have been doing since the beginning of time. It is that connection with the elements and humanity isn't it. And just being a person as opposed to whatever role you have in the rest of your life (Beth).

And finally, two of the swimmers described how when being in the sea they felt the same enjoyment and freedom as they had as a child:

> We just swam for a minute, two minutes, and a couple of big rollers came in, and I actually squealed like a little kid, I could see one coming and I thought right, that is going to break so I went under it, and you feel the wave take you up, and it reminds me as if I am six years old, and you used to play on the beach and in the small waves (Luke).

Foley also identified in his study that there is something primeval and ancient about the urge to enter water (Foley, 2017) and that the 'playful element' of being in the water can also connect one to different times in one's life (Foley, 2015 p223).

All of the swimmers also referred to how the sea and swimming in the sea offers a restoring sense of our place in the world. Sitting on the beach, looking at the sea, provides a liminal space between our everyday lives and the sense of openness and freedom represented by the sea:

> I will sit there for fifteen / twenty minutes, but I just love that relationship, you know, it is the fact that it is an end point, it is.. You can't see the horizon as such, you know, it is something that is there and it is forever changing (Luke).

The combination of the power, limitlessness and unpredictability of the sea creates an an 'affective atmosphere' (Anderson, 2009) encouraging an alternative viewpoint on our day-to-day world as described by Beth:

> So when you go into work and someone says ok I can't believe that they left their computer on you can think… It sort of helps me with my irreverence…, it just makes you think all these things they're not important, and you look at the sea and you are like, well, you know, I'm going to be here for like seventy years, eighty years if I am lucky, and it is all going to be over at some point and this is all going to be here, you know, it gives you the bigger picture doesn't it?

The body is also experienced in a very different way when in the sea. Fully immersing oneself in water seems to assist with achieving different perspectives. Straughan (2012 p19) describes a 'familiar sense of cleansing, release and freedom' when both her head and body are submerged in water. Also referring to scuba diving, Ecott (2001 p102) describes how the 'liberation from gravity's tiresome pull frees not just the body, but also the mind… Underwater there is a freedom from everything terrestrial' Ecott, 2001 p102 quoted in Merchant, 2011a). When the movement is manageable the feeling of being rocked or lifted up and down by the water is enjoyable and offers a sense of being held:

> One of the things I love is to me this is real water because it has got life and movement to it and you can feel that there is this lovely swell coming through and the ripples over the top from the wind. And it is proper water, it is not all tamed (Audrey).

However there are also times when it is no longer safe. There is the potential to feel terrifyingly out of control in the sea:

> It is quite scary when you suddenly realise you are out of control and, so yeah, it is scary when that happens. It probably is familiar to any water user that you know you might be happily playing around in the waves but there is some other factor that you haven't taken into account or you catch a wave a bit wrong… get a bit dumped, take on a bit of water, or there might be a rip current or something (George).

In both there is the sense that you are in contact with something far more powerful than oneself. Considering oneself as a part of something larger than oneself, rather than being at the centre, can helpfully offer a different perspective to one's life (Brymer & Oades, 2009), no longer 'in charge' of the material world but instead directly experiencing the impact it can have.

Conclusion

In this study I conducted swim-along interviews, with six regular sea swimmers, to gain access to their embodied, emplaced and temporal experience of sea swimming and understand how it impacts on their wellbeing. Three dimensions emerged; transformative, connecting and reorienting.

Galvin and Todres (2013), in their existential model of well-being, highlighted the importance of 'mobility'. They suggested that we all need the 'adventure of being called into existential possibilities' (p76). This sense of adventure, excitement and vitality can be seen in how the swimmers in this study described some of their swims. The act of sea swimming seems to connect the swimmers to the 'existential possibilities' in a way that could at times get lost in day-to-day life. Alongside 'mobility', Todres and Galvin (2010) determined that 'dwelling', the sense of 'being at

home with', is also important for well-being. Swimmers derived this sense of connectedness from the activity in a range of different ways including a connectedness to the sea, to place and to others both in and out of the water.   In addition to both a sense of 'mobility' and 'at-homeness' afforded by being in the sea many taken-for-granted assumptions seemed to be challenged giving them the chance to experience themselves and their world quite differently. The interaction with the more-than-human world and the potential for rethinking health and wellbeing (Taylor et al. 2018; Andrew and Duff, 2019; Lupton, 2019) is clearly evident. In this study I have described this as 're-orientating', as swimmers seemed to use this disruption to reconnect to what they consider is important.

Although the swim-along interviews had the advantage of enabling swimmers to reflect in the moment, there were also some methodological challenges.   There were occasions when my own experience in the water distracted me from the swimmers' experience.   This method could not be used by someone who is not a competent swimmer. All the interviews were undertaken at a similar time of the year as it is not a method that can be safely used in all weathers and in all temperatures. There were also only a small number of participants, all were white British, all were members of the same swimming club with its own particular culture, and the swim-along interviews were all undertaken in the same place.

It would be of use to develop the swim-along method further, for example by using the film of the swim as part of the follow up interviews to encourage reflection on the non-verbal embodied aspects of the swimming experience. Future research could investigate if these dimensions are relevant for other swimmers, in different swimming clubs and in a variety of locations and determine if these dimensions could support the development of interventions using sea swimming as way of improving wellbeing. No investigation was made at this stage as to whether it could be of benefit to those was a diagnosed mental health condition due to ethical concerns but, as evidence grows, this may be a possible avenue to explore.

The study corroborates that sea swimming can positively impact on wellbeing. It is possible that, as a result of the rhetoric regarding the risk of sea swimming, it may have been neglected as a health and wellbeing practice. It is perhaps time to 'value'

outdoor swimming places more fully as suggested by Foley (Foley 2017 p49) and to explore whether it is possible to encourage their use as an enabling place for wellbeing. Assemblages organised around sea swimming, like the club in which participants were members, may offer a supportive space that is not 'organised around an illness identity' (Fullagar and O'Brien, 2018). The 'Sea Cure' may prove to have many benefits for the modern world.

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