

'Relaxing Way to Spend a Day' or 'Best Way to Keep Fit and Healthy'. Comparison of Leisure Experiences in Rambling and Nordic Walking and their Contributions to Well-Being

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Abstract

The increasing academic interest in walking for health has paid limited attention to Nordic walking. This paper investigates the growing popularity of Nordic walking as a leisure activity in the United Kingdom and its contribution to well-being. It investigates the similarities and differences in leisure experiences between Nordic walking and rambling. Twelve Nordic walkers and thirteen Ramblers partook in semi-structured interviews at various locations in the United Kingdom. The interviews were analysed thematically. Using Seligman's PERMA model and Stebbins' concept of serious leisure, it was found that leisure experiences in rambling related to well-being by creating a strong emotional bond between the members and the natural environments, developing and maintaining friendships, and facilitating mobility and vitality. In contrast the leisure experience of Nordic walking involved developing physical activity skills and fitness, encouraging leadership, and promoting positive emotions through the participation in the activity. The contribution of this research lies in addressing this significant gap in knowledge by diversifying the concept of leisure walking and identifying the potential social and environmental influences in the leisure walking activities that contribute to well-being.

Keywords Nordic walking · Leisure walking · Rambling · Well-being

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1 Introduction

Walking is the main component of daily physical activity that contributes to reduce risk of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease (WHO 2017) and increases well-being (Zhu et al. 2014). In particular, therapeutic and restorative qualities of walking have been paid much attention in literature. Gatrell (2013) observed walking in pleasant and calm landscapes is considered “therapeutic mobility” benefiting physical health and mental well-being. Karupiah and Bada (2017) considered leisure walking as the therapeutic goal itself or/and as a motivation to achieve other goals, such as improving health. Leisure walking, as a goal itself, is not a mere physical activity of reaching a destination but is more spiritual. Slavin (2003) emphasised the importance of reflexive walking, the rhythmic activity of the motion and the spiritual experience of “being on the way”. Similarly, Danely (2015) proposed that walking embodied spiritual serenity into the everyday experience of movement through outdoor spaces. In this view, leisure walking experience is multi-layered, influenced by range of physical and social and cultural variables. It emphasises awareness of the self and synchronises inner (body and mind) and outer (social, collective) paces and rhythms as an experience of being exposed to natural and urban surroundings (e.g. Solnit 2002; Den Breejen 2007; Edensor 2010; Vergunst 2010; Staats and Hartig 2004; Pretty et al. 2005). The physical aspects of leisure walking are centred on the aesthetics and pleasantness of the natural settings that “are equipped to facilitate restorative processes, because they are filled with innately fascinating and aesthetically pleasing stimuli” (Duvall and Kaplan 2014, 686). Abundance of scientific evidence suggest that people tend to favour green spaces with depth, complexity, structure, such as woodlands and parks, over urban settings for stress recovery. Being exposed to the natural environment directs attention towards the landscape and away from the negative thoughts, which enhances wakefully relaxed attention of individuals (Zhang et al. 2014; Korpela et al. 2014; Ettema and Smajic 2015; Gidlow et al. 2016). Apart from the opportunities for psychological and spiritual renewal in natural environments, leisure walking also provides settings for building and maintaining social relationships and developing a sense of belonging. Many researchers have emphasised the significance of the social world in participation in leisure walking, arguing that the opportunities for socialising and social support are the strongest predictors for walking (e.g. Kwak et al. 2006; Moudon et al. 2007; Shores and West 2010a, b). In particular, group leisure walking, known in the United Kingdom as rambling, nurtures collective values of companionship and aesthetical appreciation of nature. Rambling offers a chance to be active, socialise, explore local places, and improve health. Duerden (1978) noted that joining a rambling club had many advantages, which broadened walking horizons and widened interests, such as meeting people with similar leisure pursuits, and opportunities to discuss equipment, routes, walking areas and accommodation. Rambling groups have walking leaders who are responsible for arranging walking routes and monitoring the progression of walks. The leaders set the pace of walking to optimise group enjoyment and compatibility because the main purpose of rambling is taking pleasure in the experience of moving outdoors in attractive environments, to overcome challenges, achieve fulfilment, improve physical health and for some spiritual dimensions (Green 2009). The popularity of leisure walking in the United Kingdom (Shores and West 2010a, b; Roe and Aspinall 2011; Ramblers’ Association 2014) led to interest in

alternative forms. In particular, Nordic walking - walking with poles - has become a popular form over last two decades widely accepted by populations worldwide (Shove and Pantzar 2005).

Nordic walking was created as Finnish commercial enterprise. It combines the classic cross-country skiing technique with fitness walking. Nordic walking technique can be summarised as an enhancement of a normal arm swing that occurs when walking, with the addition of specially designed poles made of carbon fibre or glass fibre. When the poles are used correctly the activity strengthens the lower body and also improves the upper body performance, such as the endurance of arms, mobility of neck, chest and shoulders (Hagen et al. 2011; Pellegrini et al. 2015).

Nordic walking for health is typically practiced in groups supervised by expert instructors. It can be viewed as a form of leisure due to its links to outdoors and social benefits. The activity is suited for those who usually abstain from physical activity as it focuses on improving and maintain health and well-being (Piotrowska 2011). Unlike rambling, Nordic walking is not only a leisure practice but also contains competitive elements. Fitness Nordic walking consists of running and jumping to improve fitness and muscular endurance. It offers a softer alternative to running due to a lower impact on the knees compared to running at the same speed (Hagen et al. 2011). Sport Nordic walking is a competitive activity that develops individual performance during sports events, and it requires special knowledge, training and skills (Oksanen- Sarela and Timonen 2005).

Nordic Walking is easy to learn; its benefits and desired effects may be achieved by following the instructors' directions precisely, especially in the initial stages of learning "walking with poles" technique. In addition to teaching people to walk with poles, Nordic walking instructors organise activities to raise public awareness of physical activity and implement active lifestyle habits in local communities. Their key role is to promote Nordic walking through different strategies, motivate people to regular practice, develop and strengthen social bonds (Gotowski and Zurawik 2013).

One of the important aspects of Nordic walking is perceived beneficial effect on physical health. It has received increasing academic attention in exploring the positive effects of Nordic walking on groups of people with special needs and various medical problems (e.g. Breyer et al. 2010; Reuter et al. 2011; Choi 2017; Girold et al. 2017). The ample evidence of health benefits of Nordic walking gives the opportunity for reinventing leisure walking as an innovative means to maintain and improve health and well-being of British sedentary populations. Furthermore, the interest of academics and general populations in psychological benefits of leisure walking provides the opportunity for this research study to compare two leisure walking activities - rambling and Nordic walking in terms of their contributions to well-being.

2 Well-Being and Leisure

Philosophers have hypothesised contrasting notions of well-being. Hedonic well-being, also described as subjective well-being, is a theory based on the presence of happiness in terms of 'pleasure' and other positive emotions. In contrast, eudaimonic well-being categorised as psychological well-being, refers to positive functioning, human growth and meaningful experiences, which are the measurements for an individual's quality of

life. Both concepts of well-being equate with life satisfaction, yet in different ways. In general, the concept of well-being is best comprehended when it involves optimal functioning (eudaimonia) and pleasurable experience (hedonia) as both eudaimonic and hedonic pursuits compensate for each other to constitute authentic happiness. Seligman (2002, 2011) has developed the conceptual framework of authentic happiness, creating the PERMA model, in which positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M) and achievement (A) are unique predictors of well-being.

Based on Seligman's (2011) five pathways to overall well-being suggest that participation in engaging and meaningful activities leads to building a valuable and purposeful life of social connection, accomplishment, happiness, meaning and engagement that increases well-being and produces more happiness in life.

Leisure can be a powerful medium to discover one's authentic happiness through experience of positive emotions, development of social connections, engagement in meaningful activities that provide personal satisfaction and sense of accomplishment.

The associations between leisure and subjective well-being can be found in opportunities to escape from everyday life problems and negative emotions, offering many small moments of immediate pleasure, enjoyment, excitement, relaxation and other positive emotions, which represent "nowness" - a pleasure inducing experience when engaged in leisure activities (Brajsa-Ganec et al. 2011; Heintzman and Mannell 2003; Newman et al. 2014; Carruthers and Hood 2004). Many research studies have produced sufficient evidence to suggest that walking for leisure benefits emotional well-being. For example, walking can provide an enjoyable antidote to stress and mental fatigue through engagement with the natural environments offering the experience of being away from daily routines, distancing oneself from daily stresses and problems (Roe and Aspinall 2011). Consequently, regular participation in leisure activities also influences psychological well-being by providing unique opportunities for meaningful experiences, developing skills, promoting self-actualisation and improving social functioning (Seligman 2002; Iwasaki 2007, 2008; Gould et al. 2008; Stebbins 2008; Heo et al. 2010). In particular, engagement in meaningful and satisfying leisure activities, which challenge skills, offer learning opportunities, develop talents and increase self-esteem, allows psychological growth (Csikszentmihalyi and Lefevre 1989; Elkington 2011; Chungsup and Payne 2016).

Furthermore, leisure keeps individuals together by offering a context for many types of positive relationships (Arai and Pedlar 1997). The individuals, who feel they have something in common with others, develop a sense of sense of belonging and perception of knowing and understanding the world (Keyes 1998). In particular, interacting and developing social networks in leisure groups gives a context for establishing and maintaining an affective bond with people with similar interests, beliefs, attitudes and shared goals in order to form close relationships, build social identity and increase social happiness (e.g. Kyle and Chick 2002; Green and Jones 2005).

Finding meaning in leisure contributes to a sense of life purpose through intrinsically motivated and challenging activities, which contribute to a greater skill set (e.g. Ryan and Deci 2001; Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2006; Schueller and Seligman 2010). Participation in meaningful leisure has the power to enhance well-being through freeing the mind of distractions, focusing on the moment, building affective appreciations and relationships with people and places and enhancing a sense of purpose and harmony (Watkins 2013; Harmon and Kyle 2016; Jaumot-Pascual et al. 2016). Similarly,

individuals who experience leisure as a source of accomplishment focus on overcoming challenges, making progress towards goals, improving skills, increasing resources and achieving a new level of success in leisure activities that enhance well-being and contribute to feelings of personal control and mastery (Mannell 2007; Gould et al. 2008; Stebbins 2008; Newman et al. 2014).

2.1 Serious Leisure Perspective

Leisure can be defined as a mental state that occurs in free time during voluntary activities, based on personal interests, pleasurable and pursued for the individual rewards (e.g. Shaw et al. 2006). Robert Stebbins (1980, 2001, 2005, 2008) conceptualised leisure participation as a continuum of involvement, from casual to serious, depending on behaviour, skills, commitment, motivations and preferences. Stebbins (2008) distinguished three categories of leisure commitment: project leisure, casual leisure, and serious leisure. Project leisure does not require long-term commitment; thus it is suitable for people with heavy workloads or those who want a temporary change in their leisure lifestyle. Casual leisure is an “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins 2008, xii). Casual leisure can be perceived as an opportunistic experience, which focuses on sensory stimulation, requires minimal knowledge from its participants and offers no career. It is a purely hedonic experience identified with the social world of the leisure pursuit, which suggests immediate self-gratification, pleasure and enjoyment rewards. Casual leisure benefits individuals by providing creativity, accidental discovery, and spontaneous invention, edutainment - being educated and entertained at the same time, regeneration and interpersonal relationships. For instance, leisure walking is a suitable example of casual leisure, as it does not require any type of formal training or special equipment and can be performed at any convenient time and place (Darker et al. 2010; Wensley and Slade 2012). Walking in diverse natural environments encourages fascination, enjoyment and offers opportunities for exploration and discovery of the countryside. Furthermore, group leisure walking offer social settings for interactions, developing and strengthening friendships, expressing and sharing interests (Edensor 2000; Darker et al. 2007).

Serious leisure is characterised as a “systematic pursuit of an amateur, a hobbyist, or a volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience” (Stebbins 2008, 5). Serious leisure can also be defined by six distinctive qualities: perseverance, leisure career, significant effort, durable outcomes, unique ethos, and strong identification with the activity. A leisure career is developed through the leisure pursuit and progression through the activity related to skills, knowledge and abilities, which includes stages of achievement and reward. Significant personal effort in serious leisure is based on confronting various kinds of challenges, frustrations, disappointments and fatigue during leisure participation that emerge from the tendency for serious leisure to consume large amount of time and money (Gallant et al. 2013). However, the efforts to actively overcome the leisure drawbacks and constraints constitute the most important elements of serious leisure pursuits, which offer durable outcomes, such as increased self-esteem, self-expression, self-determination and self-actualisation (Lyu and Oh 2015).

Furthermore, serious leisure gives participants a sense of belonging to clearly identifiable group with its own unique ethos that is commonly shared by members (Heo et al. 2013). Such identification with a serious leisure group and its social world leads to feelings of self-worth and pride in the pursuit of the activity that plays a central role in the individuals' lives.

3 Purpose of the Study

The empirical evidence of the relationships between walking and well-being, and the role of social and environmental determinants in activity participation suggest that leisure walking benefits well-being by providing a sense of enjoyment, offering contact with other people whilst providing the opportunity for an encounter with the natural environment. However, the research into Nordic walking as a form of leisure is still non-existent in the academic literature. In addition, the matters of Nordic walking benefits towards well-being are under-researched. Furthermore, more scholars have been adopting qualitative research methods to explore social and environmental aspects of walking behaviours. At the same time, research studies into participation in Nordic walking have been primarily quantitative in design (Tschentscher et al. 2013).

This paper aims to address these gaps in knowledge by exploring Nordic walking from a leisure perspective, which provides a useful framework for beginning the discussion about Nordic walking benefits on well-being.

It is the first and the largest research study to offer an in-depth approach into leisure experiences in Nordic walking, by comparing it with rambling.

The significance of this paper lies in diversifying the concept of leisure walking, and broadening an understanding of how Nordic walking and rambling, as examples of recreational walking, are different in creating unique leisure experiences that contribute to well-being.

4 Methodology

4.1 Procedures

This particular study focused on investigating the similarities and differences in leisure experiences between two walking activities – Nordic walking and rambling. Therefore we needed to establish the general characteristics of these targeted populations. In case of Nordic walking, we looked for the participants who were trained in Nordic walking technique and had various levels of Nordic walking experience. In case of rambling, we approached members of the Rambling Association.

The process of recruiting participants was challenging. In the initial stages of data collection many participants refused to take part in the study due to time constraints or lack of interest in the research. Therefore, the researchers decided to employ a convenience sampling method, which was based on participants' availability, ease of data collection and limited resources available. The research team tried to find people who could and were willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Bernard 2002). We acknowledge that designing the qualitative research

around convenience sampling introduced issues of representativeness. Therefore, generalizability of the findings cannot be claimed.

We decided to approach walkers during selected social and competitive events: walking festival in Prestatyn in May 2014, Nordic walking session in Wigan borough in July 2014 and the Nordic walking Marathon in Bristol in July 2014, Garswood Ramblers' meeting in July 2014, Yorkshire Dales rambling groupings in May and June 2014. All participants were proficient walkers, and were able to communicate their experiences and opinions in an expressive and reflective manner.

During each interview, the first author briefly introduced herself, the research project, and the purpose of the study. XX ensured all participants of their anonymity and confidentiality. With permission from the participants, interviews were recorded digitally, using a voice recorder. The one-on-one interviews allowed participants to share their experiences. The interview guide was structured with broad questions around five main themes: (1) socio-demographic information; (2) motives for practicing Nordic walking and rambling; (3) the importance of other people in walking practices; (4) the role of natural environment in walking practices; (5) positive experiences in walking practices. However, based on individual answers, XX changed the order of questions, omitted some or asked follow-up questions. The follow-up questions provided new information about the topics of discussions, which on a few occasions were crucial for the interview outcomes. The interviewing process ceased when saturation of the key themes was reached. In total 13 ramblers and 12 Nordic walkers were interviewed.

5 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using MAXQDA 11 (VERBI 2014). Thematic analysis involves becoming familiar with the data by multiple reading of the interview transcripts and keeping the research objectives at the forefront (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In this study, we employed a hybrid approach of a deductive and inductive thematic analysis that focused on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data set. The data analysis started by reviewing audio recordings for content and manually transcribing the interviews. During the initial stage, the first author developed initial deductive themes, which were linked to the interview questions:

- 1) Motives for Nordic walking and rambling.
- 2) Importance of social influences on Nordic walking and rambling.
- 3) Importance of environmental factors in Nordic walking and rambling.
- 4) The leisure experiences in Nordic walking and rambling related to well-being.

Consequently, for each deductive theme, XX created the inductive codes, grouping together the codes featuring similar content. The inductive codes were verified by the research team.

The next stage of the data analysis focused on a qualitative comparison of the themes between Nordic walking and rambling groups. The first author searched for similarities and differences across different contexts and sought to capture the

complexity of meanings to produce some level of generalisation in exploring Nordic walking and rambling benefits for well-being.

The last stage of data analysis required latent thematic analysis, which focused on examining the underlying ideas and assumptions. In this process, the research team moved back and forth between the first-level data and more general categories that evolved through the theme repetition in the data. This stage of data analysis focused on grouping and linking the expressions of positive experiences and feelings in Nordic walking and rambling to Seligman's (2002, 2011) five pathways to overall well-being, and exploring relations between the subthemes to match them with participants' classification regarding engagement in the walking activities - the Stebbins' (2008) concept of serious and casual leisure. The analysis concluded with the development of themes, which were not only descriptive, but they were already theorised.

As with any research study, the researchers bring biases and prior experience that may impact upon the research outcomes. We recognised that our study is not free from subjectivity. In order to reduce bias, the research team made a significant effort to be as thorough and consistent as possible at all stages of data collection and analysis. The first author carefully transcribed the interviews, analysed texts using deductive and inductive thematic analysis, and discussed the interpretation of the data with other members of the research team.

In addition, the researchers followed a consistent and systematic coding procedure and latent data analysis in order to reduce biases and ensure the integrity of this study.

5.1 Participants

Twenty five respondents of which 12 were Nordic walkers and 13 were Ramblers participated in the study (Table 1).

The majority of Nordic walking respondents were female ($n = 10$), whereas in the rambling group there were eight males and five females. In terms of age, Nordic walking respondents were younger: from 30 to 70 years old (mean = 51). The age range of rambling participants varied between 56 to 81 years old (mean = 69).

With regard to employment, five of Nordic walking respondents had their own businesses, four were employed, one was unemployed and two were retired. In contrast, ten rambling participants were retired, and three were employed. Eight Nordic walking participants were married, three single and one was widowed. In rambling group seven participants were married, four were widowed, and two were divorced.

Considering the levels of engagement in the walking activities, the distribution of the roles (walking leaders/instructors and regular walkers) was rather equally allocated between the Nordic walking and rambling groups. The Nordic walking group consisted of five instructors, six respondents who walked regularly and one person who participated in Nordic walking occasionally. The rambling group consisted of six walking leaders and seven ramblers who walked regularly.

6 Findings

The participants' views present the essence of the study objectives by focusing on the key values in Nordic walking and rambling in the context of Seligman's (2002, 2011)

Table 1 Socio demographic characteristics of the respondents

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Marital status	Employment status	Place of interview	Role
NW 1	Adam	Male	30	Single	Own business	Lytham	Instructor
NW 2	Barry	Male	63	Married	Own business	Lytham	Irregular Walker
NW 3	Cathy	Female	45	Married	Employed	Bristol	Instructor
NW 4	Diane	Female	65	Married	Own business	Bristol	Instructor
NW 5	Emma	Female	48	Married	Own business	Bristol	Instructor
NW 6	Fiona	Female	49	Married	Employed	Bristol	Regular Walker
NW 7	Grace	Female	32	Single	Employed	Lytham	Regular Walker
NW 8	Helen	Female	42	Single	Unemployed	Bristol	Regular Walker
NW 9	Irene	Female	49	Married	Own business	Lytham	Instructor
NW 10	Joan	Female	55	Married	Employed	Bristol	Regular Walker
NW 11	Karen	Female	70	Widowed	Retired	Prestatyn	Regular Walker
NW 12	Lilly	Female	68	Married	Retired	Prestatyn	Regular Walker
R 1	Ally	Female	56	Widow	Employed	Prestatyn	Leader
R 2	Ben	Male	57	Married	Retired	Prestatyn	Leader
R 3	Carole	Female	68	Married	Retired	Prestatyn	Regular Walker
R 4	Dorothy	Female	73	Married	Retired	Skipton	Regular Walker
R 5	Eric	Male	81	Widower	Retired	Skipton	Regular Walker
R 6	Fran	Female	63	Married	Employed	Skipton	Regular Walker
R 7	Grant	Male	66	Married	Retired	Ingleton	Regular Walker
R 8	Harry	Male	57	Divorced	Employed	Ingleton	Leader
R 9	Ian	Male	77	Widower	Retired	Ingleton	Regular Walker
R 10	James	Male	72	Married	Retired	Garswood	Leader
R 11	Kate	Female	78	Divorced	Retired	Garswood	Leader
R 12	Luke	Male	68	Widower	Retired	Garswood	Regular Walker
R 13	Martin	Male	76	Married	Retired	Garswood	Leader

five pathways to overall well-being: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), positive relationships (R), meaning (M) and accomplishments (A), aided by Stebbins' (2008) concept of serious leisure.

6.1 Experiencing Positive Emotions in Nordic Walking and Rambling

In terms of positive emotions, this study suggests that participation in Nordic walking was associated with finding pleasures in active participation: "it doesn't matter how you feel when you get up, when you go Nordic walking, you always feel better" (Emma). Furthermore, a "meditative and relaxing" rhythm of the walk offered "freeing the mind" - disengagement from concerns about daily life, "time for oneself" - an escape from urban life and contemplation during interactions with nature.

Similarly, links to positive emotions were strongly emphasised in rambling community. Many participants expressed their feelings in a parallel way: "I am enjoying myself" and "I enjoy looking at scenery and wildlife".

Walking in the natural environments offered an experience of being away from negative thoughts and being engaged and interested in natural settings, which provided opportunities for reflection and effortless attention: "it's nice to be out in the fresh air. You can switch off from things going around in your head" (Ally).

6.2 Developing and Maintaining Social Relationships in Nordic Walking and Rambling

For the ramblers, the countryside was also a suitable setting for pleasurable social relationships, such as developing a sense of companionship and maintaining friendships. For Luke, a 68-year old retired widower, participation in rambling was an important part of maintain friendships: "they are my friends and most of the people I go walking with I don't meet any other time apart from when we are walking". In like manner, many ramblers stated that they "like company", "enjoy meeting people" and "enjoy talking to people". In particular, spending time and sharing a fascination with nature with "like-minded people" provided suitable settings for building long lasting friendships, which offered a sense of togetherness:

Dorothy: "Meeting up regularly every month with the same people and the atmosphere within the club and the group is very friendly and if people are not there that you usually walk with you can walk with anyone, they make you very welcome"

For Ian, a 77-year old retired widower, rambling club has become a centre of his social life: "I have been rambling since 1955 and these are all my family now and a great part of my life really".

Correspondingly, in Nordic walking a sense of companionship and friendship in a group was important part of the leisure experiences. It provided a sense of belonging to a group, in which everyone was "a part of a group" or "equal there", and often developed beyond exercising together: "I met some good friends through Nordic walking. We are all friends here and we always go out for a drink after" (Irene). Cathy described the close relationships in a group as a way of social support: "we encourage each other, we support each other through good and bad times, we joke, we tease each other, so you actually forget you exercise".

Close bonds between the members and instructors have led to developing a sense of leisure identity by being involved in practicing a unique walking technique and overcoming barriers in Nordic walking. Many participants described the role of the instructors in a similar way: "she always supports me" or "he encourages our group". The instructors perceived their role is a group as activity facilitators: "we can help people with various difficulties to improve their coordination, people with Parkinson's are able to walk, people lost weight, they said they feel less stressed" (Diane). For Emma, being a Nordic walking instructor meant motivating participants to challenge their skills by entering and participating in competitive Nordic walks: "I am trying to encourage people to achieve their best, so encouraging them to enter the events like this, to do something they haven't done before".

6.3 Leisure Engagement in Nordic Walking and Rambling

In terms of engagement, the findings suggest that participation in rambling can be described as an example of casual leisure, which is a purely hedonic experience and does not require special training to enjoy it (Stebbins 2008). Rambling in natural environments offered enjoyment of nature, encouraged contemplation and effortless attention. Martin, a 76-year old married pensioner, described rambling as an experience of being away from daily routines and problems: “to be out in the elements gives me a feeling of being away from my everyday life”.

In contrast, the engagement in Nordic walking required commitment and perseverance from the participants associated with learning the correct Nordic walking technique and the initial, distinctive and embarrassing image of walking with poles, which can be viewed as a pursuit of serious leisure. Contrasted with casual leisure - rambling, which demonstrated changing patterns in participation, but there was no difference and progression through stages of achievement, serious leisure also involves a career progression and different stages of involvement that includes accomplishment and rewards. The members of the Nordic walking community tended to be professionally committed to the activity, and have a long-term leisure career as Nordic walking instructors. Many of them admitted: “it’s my profession”, “it’s a part-time job” or “it’s one of the source of income, but initially it was a hobby”.

6.4 Enhancing a Sense of Personal Achievement in Nordic Walking and Rambling

Another important aspect of Nordic walking participation was a sense of personal achievement. The associations between Nordic walking and a sense of personal achievement are best described by the respondents who were deeply involved in the activity. For instance, Helen, an unemployed 42-year old, found a sense of accomplishment by focusing on setting her own goals and observing own progress: “I did a 10 mile walk and it’s quite nice to say that I can walk 10 miles and I couldn’t walk that far before”. In addition, Nordic walking competitions were perceived as an opportunity for personally meaningful challenges that provided a sense of confidence and promoted feelings of self-worth. Karen, a 70-year old retired widow, referred to “feelings of achievement” when taking part in competitive events: “after walking long distances like today, and competing with other people. I didn’t win, but still I feel like I achieved something”. A sense of accomplishment was also enhanced by the active use of the walking poles, which enabled more intense workout.

Lilly: “I walk to lose some weight and I already lost a stone so I do feel a sense of achievement. It’s a good exercise because you don’t feel you actually did an hour is workout but you are getting fitter.”

6.5 Finding Leisure Meaning in Nordic Walking and Rambling

A sense of achievement and self-development in Nordic walking were the key leisure meaning, as participants found a sense of purpose and satisfaction in challenging themselves and reaching their personal health goals through Nordic walking: "to feel good, feel healthy, and be the best you can really be, keep fit and healthy" (Emma).

In contrast, a sense of achievement was not strongly emphasised in rambling groups and it was often associated with hardship in interacting with natural landscapes and weather conditions, such as overcoming natural challenges on the route like slippery and rocky paths, climbing hills and mountains to admire the view. Kate, a 78-year old pensioner, felt a sense of achievement mixed with satisfaction when walking through bodily pains in order to complete walks: "I feel a sense of achievement especially when I complete the walk. It's a bit of a challenge and you think 'oh that was good'. It's also a great feeling of satisfaction". The similar opinion was shared by a 63-year old Fran: "I feel a sense of achievement especially when I complete the walk. It's a bit of a challenge and you think that was good". In general, the bodily pain of sore feet and aching muscles when walking in the countryside was regarded as an integral part of the rambling experience and often contributed to participants' experiences of meaningful leisure. For ramblers leisure meanings were associated with nature, where the countryside was mostly perceived as a source of enjoyment, excitement, freedom and relaxation. Grant summarised rambling as: "a relaxing way to spend a day".

7 Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this comparative study was to explore social and environmental factors that constitute leisure experiences in Nordic walking and rambling and demonstrate how these experiences are beneficial for well-being. The study findings suggest that both activities offered pleasurable and meaningful leisure experiences; however their contributions to well-being are different. In order to facilitate a better understanding of differences in leisure experiences between these two walking activities, we created word clouds of the collective values in Nordic walking and rambling (Fig. 1) based on the most frequently occurring words in the participants' responses.

In case of Nordic walking, the involvement in the activity influenced personal growth by recognising the health and fitness benefits of the activity, and offered greater leisure satisfaction through skills development and self-confidence. The activity offered to its' participants self-actualisation, which resulted in personal development, enhanced the feelings of accomplishment and led to establishing a leisure career. Through developing self-realisation of the benefits from the participation, many Nordic walkers became instructors seriously committed to the personally meaningful activity. Kim et al. (2015) suggested that serious participation in the activity involves acquisition and expression of special skills, knowledge and experience. Participation in Nordic walking offered a sense of belonging to a unique leisure culture with its own norms, values and

suggesting that most people seek companionship and social support in group leisure walking (e.g. Rhodes et al. 2007; Kassavou et al. 2015; Lambert et al. 2015).

Similarly in Nordic walking, supportive relationships between the group members were an important part of the engagement. However, it was the support of the Nordic walking instructors that was valued by respondents. The instructors were perceived as important in developing fitness skills and achieving individual health related goals by teaching the correct Nordic walking technique, and encouraging regular practice. The instructors were also instrumental for promoting self-confidence in order to enjoy benefits of Nordic walking.

In conclusion, leisure experiences in rambling related to well-being are intensified by a strong emotional bond between the members and the natural environments, developing and maintaining friendships, and facilitating mobility and vitality. Whereas, the process of enhancing leisure experiences in Nordic walking involves developing fitness, encouraging leadership, and acquiring a sense of achievement, which derives from opportunities for the development of personal abilities.

8 Contribution to Knowledge and Recommendations for Future Research

This research adds a further dimension to the theoretical knowledge of Nordic walking. It is the first study to compare Nordic walking and rambling in terms of social and environmental influences, perception of unique leisure experiences and benefits for well-being. It broadens an understanding of Nordic walking engagement and leisure experiences suggesting that the activity, as the example of leisure walking, enhances a sense of achievement, which derives from opportunities for the development of personal abilities; whereas rambling concerns developing emotional bonds between the walkers and the natural environments.

This study is an initial exploration of Nordic walking from a leisure perspective. The potential future research may want to extend the present study and investigate Nordic walking from a serious leisure perspective. Serious leisure provides a rich context for examining participation in Nordic walking in terms of training, skills development, and potential benefits and rewards from serious participation. Also, it is a useful framework for describing commitment to the social world and leisure identities that can result from that participation.

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