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Stevenson, N. and Farrell, H.C.

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Taking a hike: Exploring leisure walkers embodied experiences

This paper uses walk along interviewing to investigate embodied experiences of walking on the South Downs Way, a long distance trail in southern England. Using a qualitative methodology - encompassing 93 walk-along interviews and auto-ethnographic reflections of two walker/researchers - it explores how walkers conceptualise their own walking experiences and captures this information while they are walking. It contributes to and extends the emerging body of literature which explores people's experience, specifically aiming to develop a deeper understanding of leisure walking experiences in the dynamic space of the walk. It examines a range of bodily sensations and emotional states associated with the leisure walking experience in the context of temporal and environmental aspects, identifying those feelings that are innate and those which are mediated by external conditions. Current experiences intertwine with memories of other places and times in a process where connections are made between mind, body, the immediate physical environment, self and others, and disconnections from everyday life and the wider environment. These connections and disconnections create a sense of perspective, achievement and well-being.

Keywords: walk-along interviews, walking, experiences

Introduction

Walking is "a fundamental human activity" (Bassett, 2004, p. 398), offering "much to many" it is "not so much an end in itself but rather a means to complex ends" (Kay & Moxham, 1996, p. 176). There is a wealth of research into walking which draws from and crosses a wide range of disciplines including health and well-being (Caulkins, White & Russell, 2006; Green, 2009), environment and urbanism (Jacobs, 1961; Leyden, 2003; Gemzoe, 2001; Zacharias, 2001), sociology and politics (Augoyard, 2007; Bostock, 2001; Creswell, 2010; Green, 2009; Kay & Moxham, 1996; Leyden, 2003). Some explores mundane walking practices: – for instance those daily journeys that transport people from A to B (e.g. Middleton, 2010; 2011) and regular leisure walking practices (e.g. Waitt, Gill, & Head, 2009). Others consider the less routine

practices such as those undertaken by tourists (Sarmento, 2016), artistic and performative interventions, (Edensor, 2000; Phillips, 2005; Ramsden, 2016) and long distance walking (den Breejen 2007; Olafsdottir, 2013; Slavin, 2003). In these irregular practices the walker encounters some aspects that are unfamiliar and outside their mundane experience.

Research into long distance walking by den Breejen (2007) and Slavin (2003) support Botterill and Crompton's (1996) contention that experiences are multi-phased and change over time. Before the walking trip, expectations are framed around multiple factors including other experiences, beliefs, personal traits, memories and communication. During the walk, experiences are lived/embodied as the walker undertakes activities, directly interacts with and contemplates the place visited. Afterwards these direct experiences are filtered and re-worked through a process of reflection, communication, story-telling and sharing pictures to create memories (Quinlan-Cutler & Carmicheal, 2011). Some studies capture data across these phases – for example den Breejen (2007) considers experiences as they emerge and evolve by asking participants to complete two surveys during a long distance walk. Olafsdottir (2013) conducts an ethnographic study focusing on walkers' perceptions and experience before, during and after a 14-day walking trip. Middleton (2010), Ramsden (2016) and Waitt et al. (2009) ask walkers to collect material (notes and photographs) during their walk and then interview to develop post-walk reflection and reworking of this material.

This paper explores people's embodied, social and spatial experiences and practices whilst they are on the move. One of its contributions is its use of a the walk-along method (Carpiano, 2009) which enables exploration of people's experiences and sense-making in the active, embodied, ephemeral space created as they walk. Performativity is central to the inquiry, researchers and participants walk together,

discussing, reflecting and co-creating experiences. This process highlights embodied aspects and sensory experiences in response to changes in the weather conditions or gradient of the path. Reflection is captured in the moment, not mediated by post-walk consideration of the overall experience of the completed walk.

The study is based on research undertaken along the South Downs Way, a 100-mile long National Trail located in the South Downs National Park and lying in England's most populous region (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI), 2012). Encompassing a well-marked path across chalk hills, it provides wide views across the countryside – comprising down-land, farmland, villages, woodland and some sea views. The trail is easily accessed by road and public transport, well served by car parks and there is a range of accommodation available along the route (Manthorpe, 2012; South Downs Way, 2016; South Downs National Park, 2016). It was chosen for this research because it is physically accessible, close to population centres and provides an environment for a wide variety of leisure activities including walking. This variety enabled us to develop useful insights across a range of leisure walking experiences.

This paper initially considers a range of literature on walking, focussing on walking and health, the walking environment and experience and then discusses the methodology and method in detail. Findings are outlined from the perspectives of walkers and considered in the context of our reflections and the walking literature. This gives rise to a discussion about the dynamic qualities, social aspects and the connections and disconnections experienced while walking. Its conclusions focus on the sense of perspective, balance and well-being experienced by people in the dynamic space of the walk. This arises from physical exertion, engagement with the immediate physical environment, and a mix of social interaction and introspective self- reflection that

creates connections between mind, body, place and other times and disconnections from stressful aspects of everyday life.

Walking Literature

Leisure walking experiences are multi-layered and influenced by a complex range of physical, social, cultural, economic and personal variables reflecting a variety of aspirations and norms (den Breejen, 2007; Edensor, 2010; Green, 2009; Kay & Moxham, 1996; Middleton, 2010; 2011; Waitt et al, 2009). In this section we consider walking literature focussing on well-being and engagement, the walking environment and experience.

Walking, well-being and engagement.

There are many health benefits associated with walking which is promoted as an activity that is good for people, with the advantages of being an accessible and a low cost way of improving health (National Health Service (NHS), 2016). Research (including British Heart Foundation National Centre (BHFNC), 2013; Department of Health (DoH), 2004; 2009; 2011; Townsend, Wickramasinghe, Williams, Bhatnagar, Rayner, 2015; Walking for Health, 2013) shows that physical activity can help to alleviate a range of health problems including high blood pressure, obesity, an increased risk of cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis and depression. For over a decade, walking has been a key element of Britain's public health strategy (Green, 2009; DOH, 2004). The most recent iteration of this is underpinned by *Walking Works* which collates data around the "physical inactivity epidemic", its consequences, and the benefits of walking (Walking for Health 2013, p. 27) and supports a national programme aiming to engage more people through the programme of health walks.

Connections between walking and well-being (in this paper conceptualised as a state of being healthy), are identified by many including Doughty (2013), Gatrell (2013), Green (2009), Olafsdottir (2013), Caulkins et al., (2006), Middleton (2010) and Roberson & Babic (2009). Walking from one place to another provides "a route to reclaiming a particular consciousness, which involves some of the gains of a slower, more meditative way of life" (Green, 2009, p. 27). It has therapeutic and restorative qualities (Doughty, 2013; Gatrell, 2013) which can "negate the impact of living in modern society" (Roberson & Babic, 2009, p. 105), enabling people to escape the "'ills' of the everyday" (Olafsdottir, 2013, p. 219) such as excessive workloads and responsibilities. By enabling people to escape mundane responsibilities and slow down, walking provides a sense of perspective, freeing the mind and "open(ing) up the senses to allow the re-calling of incidents, feelings and experiences that were constitutive of that individual's understanding of the life world" (Anderson, 2004, p. 258). It creates "a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned" (Solnit, 2002, p. 5) which for some is a lone pursuit arising from introspective reflection (Edensor, 2000; Wylie, 2005) and for others through a relational and shared process facilitated by the supportive sociability of the walk (Doughty, 2013).

Walking is promoted as a "free, gentle, low-impact activity that requires no special training or equipment" (Walking for Health, 2013, p. 5). However in the UK the levels of physical inactivity reflect a range of social inequalities and cultural differences. For example, women are less likely to be physically active, as are those on low incomes, older people and people from some ethnic groups (Green, 2009; Walking for Health, 2013). The barriers to walking go beyond Solnit's (2002) three prerequisites associated with taking a leisure walk – "free time, a place to go, and a body unhindered by illness or social restraints" (2002, p. 234). Attitudes to walking are

socially constructed and are the result of a complex myriad of factors including physical accomplishment, culture, social status and relationships (Edensor, 2000). Public health literature and policy are criticised by Green (2009) for its assumption that walking is "solely an embodied activity" (2009, p. 35), a perspective which ignores its embeddedness in wider social practices and processes. She contends that these inequalities limit the effectiveness of health initiatives associated with walking and suggests that more attention should be given to social and cultural aspects of walking.

Walking is an everyday pursuit for most people encompassing a variety of purposes and styles. For example we might hike, trek, march, promenade, amble, stroll, saunter, swagger, wander or pace. Depending upon our age we may toddle, hobble or shuffle, if we are ill we may stagger or limp, and if wearing high-heels we may totter. These different styles of walking are associated with the places in which we walk, the nature of the walk and who we are (Green, 2009; Edensor, 2000; Nayak, 2006). Walking is "one of the many ways in which we create, display and reproduce social distinctions" (Green, 2009, p. 36) and is "suffused with contending notions about how and where to walk, by ideals and conventions laid down by the powerful and not-so-powerful" (Edensor 2010, p. 9). Our walking practices demonstrate our allegiances; masculinity/femininity, cultural norms, and power/powerlessness, and are learned by observation, practice and instruction. So for example in order to develop a style to improve our health we are advised to "Start slowly and try to build your walking regime gradually" walk "faster than a stroll" to reach a "moderate-intensity aerobic activity" and as the walk ends "gradually slow down your pace to cool down. Finish off with a few gentle stretches, which will improve your flexibility" (NHS, 2016). In contrast, advice to women who want to walk "sexy" is as follows. "Your head is up, shoulders are back, and you lead with your boobs. Your arms swing loosely back and forth while

your hips swivel from side-to-side. Your weight is more in your heels.…" (Cosmopolitan, 2010).

Attitudes to leisure walking are set within the context of the wider power structures, hierarchies and asymmetries (Green, 2009; Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006), and have changed over time. For example, Ingold (2004) identifies the re-imagining of walking in the nineteenth century, from a mode of transport for the poor to an elite leisure pursuit with poetic associations and de Certeau (1984) identifies its emancipatory, encompassing and democratic possibilities. These possibilities are less apparent to those who have to walk because they lack funds to access private or public transport (Bostock, 2001; Green, 2009). Obligatory engagement in walking as a means of transport renders it “less appealing as sporting or leisure activity” (Green, 2009, p. 29). This is illustrated in Bostock’s (2001) study of low income mothers who walk because they lack resources to access other modes of transport. Their functional and unavoidable walking is associated “physical fatigue and psycho-social stress” (2001, p. 1) reminding them of their deprivation and exclusion rather than providing a sense of well-being. So while leisure walking is free there are social and cultural barriers that limit entry. Green (2009) contends that in the UK leisure walking has “a particularly middle-class identity”…“in which a moral discourse valorizes the outdoor, the effortful, and the mundane as ‘healthy’, physically and spiritually, while denigrating other pursuits (television, theme parks, video games) as indoor, lazy and spectacle seeking” (2009, p. 33-34). Attitudes are constructed around the idea of “good behaviour” in terms of health (Caulkins et al., 2006; Kärrholm, Johansson, Lindelöw & Ferreira, 2014) and appropriate engagement with the environment (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2010; Waitt et al., 2009). Leisure walkers adopt a distinct walking identity marked out by

good technique (NHS, 2016), respect for the environment, membership of formal or informal walking groups and donning appropriate attire (Middleton, 2010).

The walking environment and experience

The walking environment is socially constructed (Edensor, 2000; Lefebvre, 1991) and the relationship between bodies and the environment is historically situated. Ideas about the aesthetics and "art of walking" were developed in the Romantic era underpinned by an "urban-rural dichotomy" with the countryside associated with "beauty, freedom" and "natural order" (Edensor 2000, p. 84-85) a place where the walking body is free from the restrictions, regulations and distractions of city. This dualism persists and supports an association between countryside walking and well-being. Doughty (2013) moves beyond this, developing a more nuanced stance and conceptualising the "therapeutic landscape" (2013, p. 140) as "a dynamic and relational process, a moving space that unfolds within and through interactions with the environment" (2013, p141). Landscape is embodied as the walker treads a path, marks it with their body and feels its bodily affects (Ingold, 2004; Edensor, 2000; 2010). It is co-created by movement through space, using different senses, and responding to material objects, social context and environmental conditions which vary over time (Augoyard, 2007; Doughty, 2013; Kärrholm et al., 2014). The act of walking is "a place-making practice sustaining a sense of self-discovery through ascribing order over a place by passing through rather than simply inhabiting a pre-configured world." (Waitt et al 2009, p. 44) The walkers landscape is created by active engagement and a relationship between varied social, cultural, and physical characteristics, depending on the walker, the nature of the walk (Baran, Rodriguez & Khattat, 2008), familiarity with surroundings, (Zacharias, 2001) and social context (Costa, 2010). Walkers appraise and respond to internal and external stimuli which act as "triggers of new human-

environment transaction" (Kärrholm et al., 2014, p. 9). These triggers can change the experience of walking and the walk itself. For example, an external trigger such as the onset of rain might change the feel of the path, emotions experienced, pace of walking, or the direction of travel as the walker seeks shelter. An internal, embodied trigger such as tiredness might lead to an emotional or physical response and the walker may stop to rest.

There is a wealth of literature on walking paths and trails, where walkers choose to walk and their needs are privileged. On a walking trail, walkers are likely to encounter quite different *objects of passage* (Kärrholm et al., 2014) than they would traversing a busy urban street. In everyday walking the path is a means of getting from one place to another and more importance is ascribed to the "(s)hops, bars, parks and cafes" (Edensor, 2010, p. 70) at the destination. In contrast, in leisure walking the trail or path "marks out a quest", has a "narrative chronology" (Green, 2009, p. 32), and provides a "prior interpretation of the best way to traverse a landscape" (Solnit, 2002, p. 68). The leisure walker travels slowly along the path developing a particular "stretched out, linear apprehension of place" Edensor (2010, p. 70) and an embodied, intimate awareness of surroundings (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Wylie, 2005). The relationship between the walking body, the path and the environment, is intimate and integrative "sewing it together into a continuous experience" (Solnit. 2002, p. xv). Marking the path with our body creates an "embodied map" whereby the environment becomes part of our "inner landscape" (Slavin, 2003, p. 15-16).

The bodily practices of walking lead to a holistic sense-making process encompassing "felt sensations of moving" (Green, 2009, p. 27), feeling the environment and developing "embodied knowledge" by "coming into contact with things rather than contemplating them from a distance" (Vergunst, 2008, p. 112).

Walking has rhythmic qualities which connect the physicality of walking to emotions and thoughts, and the environment (Edensor, 2010; Lefebvre, 2004; Slavin, 2003; Solnit, 2002; Vergunst, 2008.) This is illustrated by Solnit (2002) thus;

> "It starts with a step and then another step and then another that add up like taps on a drum to a rhythm, the rhythm of walking. The most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world, this walking that wanders so readily into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory and heartbreak" (2002, p.1).

The rhythm of walking develops a particular consciousness (Anderson, 2004; Green, 2009; Edensor, 2000; 2010; Lefebvre, 2004; Gros, 2014; Slavin, 2003; Solnit, 2002) arising from an "experiential flow of successive moments of detachment and attachment, physical immersion and mental wandering, memory, recognition and strangeness" (Edensor, 2010, p. 70). Slavin (2003) illustrates this interplay between mind and body as walkers traverse different environments on a pilgrimage route. Many are not pilgrims in a traditional sense, however they engage in reflexive walking – a state which is meditative, supported by rhythmic activity and associated with well-being.

Researching embodied walking experiences

A number of studies explore the possibilities associated with researching people whilst they are on the move (including Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Evans & Jones 2011, Kusenbach, 2003). The go-along approach (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003) is a qualitative interviewing method involving the researcher accompanying participants as they travel through different environments. It has been used to explore peoples' interpretations and experiences of their social and physical environments and their spatial practices. The walk-along (Carpiano, 2009) is a version of this method which is

specifically focussed on walking journeys. Often walk-along studies involve participants navigating a familiar environment and explaining it to a researcher, exploring how people conceptualise and move through space. For example, Carpiano (2009) uses walk-alongs to explore how people "interpret environmental images in the course of their daily activities" (2009, p. 624).

Walk-alongs can also be used to explore the embodied aspects of walking, the sensory stimulation and rhythms (Adams & Guy, 2007; Evans & Jones, 2011; Kusenbach, 2003), exploring peoples direct experiences as they are happening rather than the memory or the expectation of walking. The combination of "immediacy" and "kinaesthetic rhythm" (Evans & Jones, 2011, p. 850) enables researchers to collect and reflect upon perspectives and experiences within their embodied, temporal and spatial contexts (Anderson, 2004; Weiss, 1994). Evans and Jones (2011) contend that the rhythm and exertion of walking enhances peoples' abilities to articulate their attitudes and feelings as they traverse different environments.

Auto-ethnographic methods recognise the researcher's self as central to the investigation (Anderson & Austin, 2012). Researchers become immersed in the field attempting to develop an insider perspective and understanding of the people who are being studied. Anderson (2006) identifies five key auto-ethnographic features, namely: complete member status of researcher; analytic reflexivity; narrative visibility of the researcher's self; dialogue with informants beyond the self; and commitment to theoretical analysis. Auto-ethnographic research acknowledges the researcher's embodiment and emotional engagement (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001) in their research and their "complicity in knowledge building' (Swain, 2004, p. 116).

In this study we adopted a natural approach (Kusenbach, 2003), walking with interviewees and following their path while the interview was in progress. This

enabled us to develop knowledge in practice and reflect-in-action (Schön, 1983). Interviewing on the move created an unusual walking experience for us as it meant that we often repeatedly walked back and forth over the same stretch of path. Data were collected over 4 days as we walked along a long distance trail. We undertook 93 walk-along interviews, observed walkers and developed auto-ethnographic diaries to reflect upon our feelings, experiences, observations, and expectations as we immersed ourselves in the experience of walking and of walking research. Our interviews were semi-structured and conversational, beginning with a broad question about the walk to elicit wide-ranging perspectives on a breadth of walking experiences. Some explained the length of the walk or why a particular route was chosen, some talked about other activities or their companions. We then explored the things they liked and disliked about walking and their feelings associated with their walk. Finally, we asked them to describe their surroundings to get a sense of what was important to them and of the senses they used to create a description of the area.

In our reflective diaries we contemplated our experiences within the three phases identified by Botterill and Crompton (1996). Prior to the field work we each wrote an account, reflecting on our routine walking practices and our thoughts about the impending research trip. During the walk we completed a daily diary outlining personal reflections of our embodied and emotional experiences associated with walking and researching on the South Downs Way. Immediately after the trip we contemplated the overall experience. These diaries situated us within the study, enabling us to acknowledge and reflect upon our own experiences. Our reflections intersected with the experiences identified by our research subjects, helped us to frame our findings and added another layer to the thematic analysis. Interviews were taped, transcribed, numbered, scrutinised and initially coded by hand to identify potential themes. The text

was uploaded onto NVivo, sorted by theme and re-examined, referring to our reflective diaries to further interrogate and refine our emerging themes. Research memos captured ideas as they emerged and were revisited as the themes solidified. A detailed literature review was undertaken after themes were identified – this timing reflected our concern that the analysis should start from and be firmly grounded in our interviewees' experiences (Glaser, 1998). In this context it was necessary for the themes and ideas to have some substance before comparing with other studies and established ideas about walking. The literature review was used to discuss our findings and conceptually connect our emerging ideas to existing research in the field.

Walking experiences on the South Downs Way

Our interviewees were engaged in a range of touristic and mundane leisure walking practices, where the walk was "the goal itself, rather than being merely a mode of getting somewhere" (Green, 2009, p. 27). For most (76 interviewees) walking on the South Downs Way was novel – this novelty arising from location rather than walking as an activity. 18 interviewees were on a holiday involving walking for two days or more along the trail - often with the objective of completing the entire trail. 55 were undertaking day-walks; some were a part of a day trip to the area, some were part of a longer multi-activity holiday, and others encompassed training activity for a longer sponsored walk. 20 interviewees regularly walked on the South Downs, the majority of whom were retired and lived locally. All had chosen to engage in the walk and made an association between walking, well-being and pleasure. Enjoyable aspects were identified as relaxation, exercise, being outside, fresh air, the scenery, sunshine, peace, being able to think and being with friends.

Our findings are influenced by the specific conditions of our path which was clearly marked, easy to follow and accessible by public transport. The South Downs

Way provided a safer, gentler form of countryside experience than in den Breejen (2007) and Olafsdottir (2013). The trail is in the countryside but not very far from major population centres and our walkers were in a rural environment rather than the 'wilderness'. Walking in an environment which is quite controlled with a clearly marked path perhaps provided more opportunities to be sociable and reflective. It is easier to lose yourself in thought or conversation in a place where there is little fear of getting lost.

Our findings are considered in more detail focussing on the bodily sensations associated with walking and the emotional states experienced in the dynamic space of the walk. In this section interviewee numbers are used to ascribe quotes – often multiple interviewees use the same word and in these cases more than one number is used.

Bodily sensations

Positive bodily sensations were identified such as feelings of "gradually building up the legs again" (19) or becoming "fit" or "fitter" (49, 53, 65, 74, 92, 93). These were often framed broadly – for example many said they felt great or good – a state which resulted from a combination of physical sensations and emotional responses to the walk. This contrasted with more negative sensations – the discomforts of walking or injuries sustained while walking. These were discussed by fewer walkers but the descriptions tended to be more specific and detailed. Respondents identified sensations in the knees, legs and feet and breathlessness after walking up a steep hill. Interviews 11 and 35 had "blisters" on their feet and 84 had blisters on his shoulders from carrying a heavy pack, 16 and 36 described ankle injuries sustained on the walk, and 25, 68 and 74 identified discomfort in the feet. However the discomforts of walking were outweighed by positive feelings and a sense of achievement around the completion of the walk. "My

feet are sore at the moment. If I'm honest I have a little degree of discomfort but, generally I feel really good" (65). "I have the odd ache and pain, but the aches and pains are well earned" (71). Both walkers who sustained ankle injuries were on a return visit, attempting to complete their walk.

One of the physical sensations associated with walking was tiredness. The term "tired" was used by thirteen interviewees, other words used were weary (27) knackered (78) worn out (32). However 16 and 39 were "less tired" when the walk was over. This was attributed to the combined effects of exertion and sense of achievement at having completed the walk. Several interviewees identify how their experience changed as the walk proceeded and they became tired "I was aware of the landscape maybe two hours ago but now I'm maybe 94% of the time looking at my feet. I look up occasionally but it's a heavy back-pack" (76). Interviewee 82 also recognised "a tendency to look at the path and not where I am going", a tendency which is recognised and counteracted by interviewee 89 who says "we take breaks and have a look at the flowers". Several people connected tiredness with getting older - "I cannot walk as far as I used to" (40) and "it can make you feel old, I least like the bits when you feel your bones creaking and grind to a standstill because it's a bit harder than you expected" (28).

Bodily sensations and environment

The bodily sensations associated with walking were linked to a number of external/environmental conditions including the gradient of the path and the weather. This was reflected in the language used by the interviewees as they traversed the more challenging sections of the path. For example interviewees 6, 7 and 9 use the term "struggle" to describe their experience of walking uphill. Interviewees 15, 17, 19, 24 72, 73, 76 and 82 were also interviewed on hilly sections of the path and said the walk was a challenge or challenging. One walker who was training and nearing the end of a

30-mile walk said “it is arduous… It is not a particularly easy walk. We have to walk up and down the hills. It is really hard on the legs and is really hard work” (11). Walking down steep slopes was associated by several with discomfort “I start to feel it in my knees and I don’t feel safe” (31) and injury “I hurt my ankle earlier in the week…the mist started to come down and the descent was very steep and I didn’t land quite right … and it went with a crack and I thought I had broken it.” (36).

Adverse weather contributed to the challenge or struggle. In particular, the physical sensations of walking in strong wind was difficult for some interviewees - “sometimes the wind is so hard you can hardly stand up – it blows so viciously and it’s so cold you can’t feel your face or your hands” (1). **“**The weather can play a big part – it is a bit windy today and sometimes if it’s blowing a gale it is less enjoyable.” (12) However twenty-two interviewees identified positive physical sensations related to walking in the wind which provided “a good blowout” (1) and “fresh air” (fifteen interviewees), was “cooling” and “clears the head” (84). The wind was associated with the exhilaration experienced during the walk (7, 36, 49, 50 78).

One and a half days of our walk was undertaken in fog and some enjoyed the experience of being enfolded and not seeing. Fog was associated with “quietness” (22), mystery “hearing unseen birds singing” (24) and the sense of “walking in the dark” (33). In foggy conditions people noticed the feel of the pathway referring to the “soft” (34, 38, 83) ground, contrasting with the “hard streets” (34). Six interviewees discussed their inability to see the views and imagined the views that they would encounter were it not foggy. There was a particular style of walking associated with the fog which was purposeful “head-down” (75) and involved “looking at the path” (82).

Emotional states

All but one of our interviewees expressed positive feelings about their walking experience which was enjoyable and made them feel good/great (seven interviewees), a feeling which they associated with enjoyment, happiness and joy. Walking made eight interviewees feel "well" which was linked to feeling "happy" (18, 45, 77) "peaceful" (25) and "calm" (34). Walking "lifts your spirit. It makes you feel better" (30) and is "absolutely essential for your state of mind" (29). Even the interviewee who expressed negative feelings said that walking generally made him "feel better than day to day life" (9). Well-being was linked to feeling relaxed (13 interviewees) a feeling which was associated with an escape from everyday life. "It is very absorbing and therefore very relaxing and you can leave work behind" (26) "it's relaxing – you can forget about the world" (12). For six interviewees the sense of achievement and exhilaration associated with completing a walk and contributed to their overall sense of well-being.

Eight interviewees explicitly identified walking time as thinking time. The walking/thinking association arose from a combination of unstructured time, a sense of solitude and the rhythm of walking. When walking "you don't have to think about anything" (22) and can be "reflective, contemplative" (37). The walk provided solitude and space - "I like the solitude and thinking…It gives me brain space – space to think" (20) and provides "'me' time to think things out" (79). Walking afforded a sense of perspective – time "to structure the mind – to collect different views and not to speak – just walk and encounter the day – and think about things" (34). The rhythm of walking enhanced the thinking process and so "put(ing) one step in front of the other" (22) was identified as a process which "clears" (23, 24, 29) or "cleanses the mind" (83). Physical and emotional alignment is identified for example - "Just walking foot after foot – it makes me think and makes me happy…. I have done some exercise and

perhaps have solved some problems" (54) and "There is something to do with walking with your legs that clears your head in some strange way" (29).

Emotional states and environment

Emotional states were embedded within the physical environment (landscapes and weather conditions). Words commonly used to describe the walk environment were downs/hills countryside and park and our interviewees talked about views which were lovely or beautiful. They expressed emotional responses to the countryside, wide open expanses, and long views. "It's lovely to be in the countryside…. It makes me feel happy" (18), "I enjoy the countryside" (69) "I really enjoy the scenery…Now I feel joy" (10). "It is green…it is fantastic it makes me feel good" (67). Enjoyment is associated with "being outside" (76) and "breathing fresh air" (61). Several contrasted the surroundings with their everyday environment. "I feel about £3million compared to where I live which is down in the woods and that makes me feel very claustrophobic and lonely actually (79). "I get rather depressed living in the place where we are living now and we come up here and there is all of this space. It's good" (29).

Interviewee 86 explained how walking on a "dangerous part" near the cliff edge gave her a sense of perspective derived from "a feeling of being very small towards nature". This sense of perspective had a religious dimension for interviewee 64 who compared his "solace" with that experienced by other people in monasteries and interviewee 34 whose walking experience enabled him to contemplate his relationship to god. People also expressed emotional responses to the weather conditions. For some the wind contributed to the sense of exhilaration "Today, I'm feeling good. I don't know if it is because it's windy or what it is but I have a good sense of well-being" (65). For others it was associated with negative emotions - "The wind is getting me down - this wind is getting a bit much" (9) - "When it is not so windy it's relaxing" (12).

Emotional states were also embedded within the social setting of the walk. 88 interviewees were walking in pairs or in groups and many made an association between walking and talking. Social interactions with other people were also related to the emotional experience of walking. "I just like the company, really, just chatting, getting away from it all" (75). During the walk our interviewees were enjoying a "nice chat" (85) "catching up" (4, 13), "being with friends – talking together" (39), "re-living memories with friends…talking without having to watch for traffic" (40), "talking about life, the universe and everything" (33). Some felt a sense of camaraderie with other walkers - "everyone we meet on walks are nice really" (16), other walkers "say hi and everything and stop to talk" (17).

Insights

This previous section was drawn from our interviews and reflective diaries illustrated our experiences while walking– highlighting the connections between bodily feelings, emotions and the environment. In this section we identify and discuss broader insights arising from this study.

Contribution of the method

By walking-along we were sharing and co-creating an embodied walking experience. Our performativity was central and similar to Evans and Jones (2011) and Doughty (2013) we found that many interviewees shared thoughts in a way which was relatively unstructured and open. The rhythms and the indirect gaze associated with navigating the path resulted in a relaxed pace of interviewing and the silences associated with thinking were not awkward. Walking was identified as a way of coping with difficulties and although not prompted to do so some shared personal stories and intimate information with us about depression, sadness and loss. The rhythm of walking

unlocked many of the inhibitions and conventions about what is discussed with strangers. Our auto-ethnographic diaries firmly situated us in the research (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001; Swain, 2004) enabling us to reflect and acknowledge the interplay between the walking experiences expressed by the participants and our own experiences and emerging ideas. The combination of the two methods provided rich data and enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of experiences during the walk.

Exploring the dynamics of the walking experience.

The dynamics of the experience of planning, undertaking and then reflecting upon an activity are identified by Botterill and Crompton (1996), den Breejen, (2007), Olafsdottir (2013) and Slavin (2003). A contribution of this study is that it further develops understanding of the dynamic and embodied qualities of walking experiences as people traverse a path, become tired and respond to changes in the environment (Doughty, 2013; Edensor, 2010; Kärrholm et al., 2014; Lefebvre, 2004; Vergunst, 2008). As we interviewed people, our surroundings, the path and the weather changed. Some parts were relatively easy, others physically demanding, sometimes shrouded in thick mist, walking in the rain, the wind and then in bright sunshine. In this dynamic space our immediate bodily responses to internal and external stimuli became visible – sometimes the wind was exhilarating and at others exhausting, we became tired and our feet became sore. When conducting interviews on steep parts of the path or with speedier interviewees, we became aware of our own walking bodies as we became short of breath and our hearts pounded. Our responses reflected embodied movement along the path, and dynamic relationships with the walking environment (Evans & Jones, 2011; Kärrholm et al., 2014) felt sensations (Edensor, 2010; Green, 2009; Vergunst, 2008), emotional responses (Slavin, 2003; Solnit, 2002) and social interactions (Doughty, 2013).

There were temporal as well as geographical dimensions to the experience. In the morning, interviewees were more likely to tell us where they were going and their expectations of walking in the day to come. Afternoon interviewees talked more about being tired, but also referred to the sense of achievement associated with walking. In the late afternoon people were more likely to reflect upon where they had been and their expectations of post-walk activity. Slavin (2003) and Vergunst (2008) contend that the embodied aspects of walking focus thoughts in the present, but we discovered temporal variations with many of our walkers' thinking about the past or the future. Even when they talked about their current feelings - for example being happy or joyful – many explained how these feelings were either intrinsically connected to the past or to their anticipated feeling at the end of the walk. Their thoughts were most firmly situated in the present when they experience the challenges of walking through difficult terrain, in adverse weather conditions, or when they were physically tired.

Alignment, perspective and a sense of well-being.

In the dynamic space of the walk our interviewees experienced a feeling of well-being associated with a perceived alignment between the senses, emotions, bodily practice of walking, and engagement with the landscape. This resonates with other studies where alignment arises from active and integrated sense making and intimate connections with the landscape (Doughty, 2013; Kärrholm et al., 2014; Solnit, 2002; Waitt et al., 2009). There are parallels with the work of Edensor (2010), Slavin (2003) and Vergunst, (2008) in that our interviewees exhibit an embodied and tactile relationship with the path, the weather and the countryside. Walking brought their senses into play and they talked about the feel of the ground under their feet, the wind on their faces the smells, sounds and sights of the surroundings environment, and the physicality of the exertion associated with climbing a steep slope. Alignment was also associated with

disconnections arising from detachment from day-to-day experiences or the everyday stresses of modern life (Caulkins et al., 2006; Edensor, 2010; Olafsdottir, 2013; Roberson & Babic, 2009). In some cases, people discussed their physical detachment from more familiar environments. However our findings did not support dualistic notions of urban and rural environments (Edensor, 2000). Instead a more nuanced picture emerged with comparisons being made with a wide range of everyday environments - the woods, flat landscapes and home - as often as the city. For our interviewees, alignment was also associated with social detachment from family, mundane responsibilities and work related activities.

The alignment experienced while walking arose from a combination of connections (with the surroundings, friends, mind and body) and disconnections (from every-day environments, responsibilities home, family work). This afforded time and space for reflection, a process that enabled walkers to clear their heads and develop perspective about their lives and their worries. Gaining perspective was associated with connecting with other times - reminiscing and reflecting upon previous experiences. Often walkers were revisiting a journey, retracing the steps of a previous walk, or introducing a walk to friends. The combination of time with friends, the rhythm of walking and the visual prompts of the landscape jogged their memories and fuelled recollections of other times and places which were shared as the walk progressed. Achieving a sense of perspective was also associated with planning for the future a contemplative process which was perceived to be restorative and connected to well-being.

Relationship between self and others

Our findings supported the notion that walking is a profoundly social activity (Doughty, 2013; Ingold &Vergunst, 2008) and we identified a particular kind of collective

consciousness arising in leisure walking. This arose from a combination of individual and shared reflection – a process of conversation, mutual remembering and sense-making as people traversed a landscape together. For the majority, walking was a social experience associated with meeting friends, easy conversations, enjoyment and shared contemplation. The rhythms associated with walking provided opportunities to alternate between conversation and silent thought and reflect together and alone. This state of "being with oneself while also walking beside others" (Slavin, 2003, p. 11) enables walkers to open up to one another. In our own experience this was particularly apparent on the foggy day where we encountered few other walkers, and thus could engage more in our embodied experience of the walk and less on researching embodied experiences of others. Sometimes we talked but often the noise of the wind and rain around us created a cocoon which was conducive to 'looking inwards' and this combined with the rhythm of walking to create a space for contemplation. When we did talk, our conversations were deeper and more personal than our day-to-day conversations.

The social aspects of walking affected the routes taken, the rhythm of walking and the decision to walk. Walks were planned, curtailed or decelerated to take account of the needs of the least able members of the group. Similar to Ingold and Vergunst, (2008) our work illustrated that walking rhythms, patterns and styles varied, reflecting people's changing capacities associated with aging, fitness or illness. This affected not just individual walkers but also the rhythms of those they walked with. We observed dispersed and concentrated groups with walkers varying their pace to catch their breath, or to join others in the group. Constant movement enabled people to adjust their distance to create their own reflective space for parts of the walk and shared communicative space in others. This was apparent in our own practice and also in our

observation of groups of walkers. For example, one group of nine walkers were returning from scattering a parent's ashes. This group was dispersed (some single walkers and some couples) as they walked back down the hill, providing space for both individual and shared contemplation. Another group of four friends who were engaged in a reunion away from their families were sharing recollections and were tightly clustered.

Experiencing the walking environment

We walked along a ridge through beautiful countryside, a walking environment that is associated with romantic walking practices (Edensor, 2000) providing wide views over picturesque countryside and coastline. As we walked and talked we uncovered a paradox that many people were not paying much attention to the scenery, despite it being the reason they chose to visit. When asked to describe their surroundings many had to refocus their thoughts into the present - pausing, slowing their pace, or stopping to consider the view as if for the first time, and words commonly used – such as "beautiful" and "countryside"- were detached or lacked specific detail. Landscape was identified as a key factor in making the decision to walk on the South Downs Way but during the walk formed a backdrop for many who were engaged in the thrall of conversations, reflections or concentrating on the bodily sensations and physicality associated with traversing the path. The intimacy of the walker's gaze is supported by research by Ingold (2004), Slavin (2003), and Vergunst, (2008). Lack of attention to the wider surroundings was perhaps exacerbated on our well-marked path; with little fear of getting physically lost it was easier to become lost in thought or conversation.

Our walkers felt the intimate, embodied, tactile relationship with the path identified by Edensor (2010), Slavin (2003) Solnit (2002) and Vergunst, (2008). The path was experienced as being stony, slippery, eroded, with tree roots, well-maintained,

well-marked, green, soft and steep. These variations led to disruption in the rhythms of walking as our interviewees made decisions about where to step next or slowed to accommodate a steep climb or descent. Similar to Vergunst, (2008) in difficult conditions our walkers focused on the physical challenges associated with negotiating the path safely, the micro environment of the path adopting a “head-down” (75) style of walking which involves looking at the feet rather than the landscape.

Enjoyment, achievement and adversity

Our findings resonate with Vergunst (2008) and Green (2009) illustrating that adversity, mishaps and difficult experiences were part of the story of the walk. The notion of overcoming hardships was part of the enjoyment of walking, arising partly from the sense that it was a good thing to do and partly from pride in their achievement. Many interviewees were physically tired but expressed this as a virtuous, well deserved tiredness associated with a sense of well–being. Some sustained minor injuries which did not appear to detract from the enjoyment of the walk or the decision to continue walking. A discourse of pain and perseverance was a part of our walkers narratives – perhaps connected to the notion of “an appropriately embodied appreciation of the outdoor environment” (Green 2009, p. 27). Difficult sections of the path and adverse weather conditions did not prevent the experience from being enjoyable and appeared to add to the sense of achievement. The sensations of being “battered by wind and rain” (24) and the rain “hitting us full pelt in the face” (78) were retold with humour and perceived to be enjoyable. These adversities emphasised “the actuality of the walk” (Vergunst, 2008, p.120) and were shared with us to create a sense of belonging around our shared the physical hardship.

Our interviewees demonstrate “territorialising” (Waitt et al., 2009, p. 44) bodily practices which aligned their senses and body with the environment, creating a personal

landscape through their unique experience as they walked the path. The environment became part of their "inner landscape" (Slavin, 2003, p. 16) a process they associated with a sense of achievement and a feeling of well-being which for most was difficult to articulate in measurable terms. For a minority who were walking the entire route or in training, the path marked "a quest" (Green, 2009, p. 32) and their sense of achievement was expressed using external markers (miles walked, days taken, number of similar quests).

Limitations and further study

Adverse weather conditions created some limitations for this research. We experienced extremely windy conditions and faced difficulties in collecting audible recordings. Poor weather conditions (rain, fog and high winds) also meant there were few walkers on the second day. We had to postpone the last day of the trip when storm conditions and wind speeds meant that parts of the cliff path would be dangerous. We arranged to complete this part of the walk at a later date but despite a good forecast the path was shrouded by thick fog in the morning and we saw few people. However these conditions enabled us to reflect upon the walkers' reactions to adverse weather, their perceptions of their environment and their sense of achievement.

The power asymmetries associated with walking are implicit in our study – by studying walkers in a leisure environment we are engaging with those people who have the luxury of leisure time. Our walk was physically accessible by public transport, and the last section was close to several large towns with visitor centres, cafes and toilets provided at regular intervals. We did not set out to examine the characteristics of our walkers but can report that our interviewees spanned a broad age range (18-80's), there was a gender balance 45 were women and 48 men. We noticed that walking on this trail had a white identity - almost all walkers on the path were white and 90 of our 93

interviewees were white and Northern European. We strongly support Green's (2009) contention that further study required to explore some of the social and cultural barriers to walking.

Conclusions

In our study we explored diverse leisure walking experiences on the South Downs Way while people are walking. Despite this diversity we found that walkers shared common positive feelings – they felt good, relaxed, well, tired, happy and joyful. The rhythm and physical exertion of walking brought their senses into play and enabled them to make connections between body, mind, landscape, self and others. These connections were restorative enabling walkers to develop a sense of perspective which was associated with well-being. Their sense of perspective arose not just from the alignment afforded by their walking experience but also from the disconnection from fast pace, stresses and responsibilities associated with everyday life. Gaining a sense of perspective was connected to developing a particular rhythm of thinking which was associated with being away from usual distractions enabling walkers to slow down, reflect together and alone, to converse and walk in companionable silence. This rhythm of thinking comprised a flowing sequence of introspection and shared contemplation as the walk progressed.

While they were active, walkers were cocooned from many of the stresses and strains of their day to day lives. This cocooning effect was conducive to looking inwards - an example of this is innate sense of achievement expressed by most – a reward which was imagined by many as they engaged in the more difficult or tiring parts of the walk. The sense of achievement was inwardly focussed, and most frequently expressed in terms of self-acceptance and their personal accomplishment. It was less often quantified in terms of external markers (miles walked, speed). As

people walked many thought about other places and times – for some the walking space enabled them to reconnect with and reflect upon memories of the past, for others provided opportunities to imagine and plan for the future.

Traversing a space provides a particular understanding and appreciation of landscape and in this study we discovered the paradox that many walkers paid little attention to the scenery whilst they were walking. The physicality of negotiating the path meant that their observations were often focussed on its intimate and tactile micro-environment and their embodied sensations. The wider landscape provided a backdrop to their experience but was often described cursorily – with just a word or two such as lovely, beautiful or spectacular. Walkers frequently mentioned of the wide vistas that the path afforded and some identified the positive feelings these promoted. Wide vistas remind walkers "the-world-is bigger-than-you-are" which, in combination with the action of walking provides "a deep, nurturing sense of relief and calm happiness." (Olafsottir, 2013, p. 225). In our research, adverse weather conditions heighten this sense of calm - "roaring gales and the pounding rain" are perceived as "life affirming" (28) and strong wind "clears the head" (84).

In this paper we have chosen to examine embodied and emotional aspects of walkers' experiences, focussing on the lived experienced as it is happening. The contribution of this paper is the insights it provides about people's experiences while they are walking. Interviewing in motion provides many findings which resonate with other studies and deepen our understanding of people's walking experience. The major new contribution it provides is its finding that walkers pay little attention to the surrounding scenery while walking. While beautiful scenery provides setting for walking – the physicality, social interaction and introspection are more significant to the

walkers - with many becoming lost in thought or conversation. Further exploration of this paradox is warranted and is envisaged in the next phase of our research.

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