

A scenic view of a beach at low tide. In the foreground, a wooden walkway with a metal railing leads down towards the beach. The beach is covered in wet sand and small rocks. The ocean is calm, reflecting the bright sunlight. In the background, there are rolling hills and a clear blue sky.

# Older People & Water-based Outdoor Activities: Ageing Well

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# Summary

- This presentation will consider the interconnections of embodiment, water-based activity wellbeing and ageing.
- It will draw on recent research and theory on the senses and how the body 'learns to be' in the natural water environment.
- It will consider enjoyment, pleasure and place as features of wellbeing for older bodies engaged in water-based outdoor activities .



# Over view

- Research on health & wellbeing of blue space
- Blue space and wellbeing older people.
- Physical activity in water space and embodiment (see Foley) 4 themes
- Why do older people take part in water based activities
- Embodiment/pleasure-doing research (see summary)
- Methodologies- (auto) ethnographies
- Critiques- Response to critiques
- Embodiment-senses-place
- Narratives of physical bodies
- SeaVets –men windsurfing; SeaVets woman;

# Significance of water –based activities for health and wellbeing 1

- Bell, Phoenix, Lovell, Wheeler, B.W., (2015) Seeking everyday wellbeing: the coast as a therapeutic landscape.
- Walking interviews :- how both green and blue spaces can have a significant impact on physical, mental, and social health in later life. Participants felt motivated to get out of the house to exercise and enjoy the fresh air and surroundings. These spaces promoted mental wellbeing, in which experiences of nature provoked feelings of renewal, restoration, and spiritual connectedness. They also provided a space for multi-generational social interaction and engagement, including planned activities with friends and families, and impromptu social engagements with neighbors. Finley et al (2015:104)

# Significance of water –based activities for health and wellbeing 2

- ‘Within health geography and applied public health ‘blue spaces’ (particularly sea, but also sky) are increasingly associated with restorative potential. This idea complements the well-researched focus on healthy green space, with attention devoted ‘health-enabling places and spaces’ where water has an ‘identifiable potential for the promotion of human wellbeing’ (Foley and Kistemann, 2015)
- Coleman & Kearns (2015) gives therapeutic affect of being near ocean for older people on Waiheke Island where they argue memory is uplifting.

# **‘More of the same is not enough’**

Many people over 65 take part in water based physical activities, many of these activities are termed life-style, nature-based or adventure sports, such as open water swimming or windsurfing. These older people enjoy being on, in or under the water.



# Questions

- What is it about being in these blue spaces that creates this sense of wellbeing and health?
- How can we understand what it is that older people find differently enjoyable and have pleasure in water-based physical activity?
- What inspires and enables older people to engage in water –based physical activity as they age?

# Active swimmer

- Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Uw2FLNDU1U>



# Four themes of health and blue spaces

- In better uncovering how and why water spaces and places matter for health and wellbeing, Foley and Kistemann, (2015) identify four sub-themes for consideration, that might contribute to more nuanced discussion;
- embodiment,
- intersubjectivity,
- activities
- meanings.

# Emerging research

- Emerging research in the social sciences has turned to exploring the senses and pleasure (positive emotions) .
- ‘Pleasure’ has been a recent significant theme in looking at physical activity and ageing well.  
(Phoenix and Orr, 2014)
- Learning through enjoying physical /bodily activities in the outdoors can have benefits.  
(Humberstone, 2015)

# Beyond consciousness? Affect

- The affective may be understood as a multi-web of bodily systems which may facilitate embodied living beings' meaningful engagement with their environments, each other and non-human worlds.
- A high degree of this functioning may be at a subconscious and/or beyond consciousness /thought and language
- As Thrift (2008, p. 252) points out, '[a]ffect is a challenge to what we regard as the social because it involves thinking about waves of influence which depend on biology to an extent that is rarely recognised or theorised in the social sciences'.

# Pleasure

- Feelings of pain or pleasure or some quality in between are the bed-rock of our mind. We often fail to notice this simple reality .... But there they are, feelings of myriad emotions and related states, the continuous musical line of our minds. The unstoppable humming of the universal melodies that only dies down when we go to sleep, a humming that turns into all-out singing when we are occupied by joy, or a mournful requiem when sorrow takes over.

Damasio (2003: 3)

# Pleasure / enjoyment linked to senses.

- Coveney and Bunton (2003) indicate that “pleasure might be considered a motive for human action (or indeed inaction) and is integral to understanding how humans interact with each other and their environment in ways that promote health or create disease” (p. 163). Pleasure is an under-researched and under theorized concept within health and health-related areas (Coveney and Bunton, 2003) and also in water-based physical activity and ageing.
- Booth, (2009) “deafening silence” surrounding the subject of pleasure in relation to human movement (p. 133).

# Wellbeing

- Much research, particularly in the health related areas, has focused on the negative of pleasure.
- Experiences of enjoyment and pleasure are a central argument for maintaining people's habit of health behaviours (Crossley, 2006).
- Thus 'learning to be' in the body in a water environment might be considered to be pleasant and enjoyable by the participant and provide for further engagement and love and caring for the outdoors ( or the opposite)

# Embodied pleasure

- It is through our senses that we engage with the world and particularly make our relationships with nature and the elements:
- Moonlit meadows, crickets chirping, birds singing, snow crunching under foot, the smell of the spring thaw, summer sweetness, autumn decay, a salty breeze, burning leaves, the squish of mud, the sting of hot sand and the cold of snow are just a few among the plethora of sensory images we experience while outdoors. These sensations often tap emotionally and spiritually uplifting memories. (Consalvo, 1995, p. 2)





# How does the body 'learn to be' physically active?

- Very little research or evaluation has explored bodily experience, the senses; how the body 'learns to be' in the natural environment, particularly water.
- It is the way in which the whole body (body & Mind) through the senses engages with the environment which can be pleasant or unpleasant

# ‘Sense’ of self, embodiment, water spaces

- Older people may construct a sense of themselves and their environment
- single and collective understandings of self and senses of place.
- Through embodied, sentient practices (such as swimming, surfing, windsurfing SUPing, kayaking and so forth),
- by way of the many senses, people encounter natural water spaces and places affording feelings and emotions

# Physical activity and the older body: embodiment-methodology

- Interpretative research, (Auto)-ethnography (ethnography & autoethnography): researching the active 'ageing' body .
- Tries to understand and make sense of and interpret the embodied experiences of older people engaged in physical activity.

# Auto/ethnography/phenomenology



- Hammersley and Atkinson, (1995) argue that auto/ethnography is similar to reflexive ethnography;
- (see Humberstone, 2004). The researcher is part of the research process and their actions and feelings are part of the research process

# Examples

- Sparkes (2010)
- Humberstone, (2011)
- Humberstone & Cutler Riddick (2014)
- Phoenix & Orr (2014)

# Critique

- Critiques from a number of ethnographers :Delamont, (2007), Atkinson, (2006)
- Comments in favour that - not self indulgent : Sparkes & Smith (2014)
- Connecting the personal to the 'political' Anderson (2006)



# (Auto)-ethnography: researching physical sea-based activities

- Seascapes; Shaped by the sea (Humberstone & Brown, 2015) provides different water-based physical activities eg surfing, sailing etc. Tales of engagements with the sea . Through the use of auto-ethnographic accounting, scholars reflect on how the sea has shaped their identity, belonging and connection.



# (Auto)-ethnography as methodology

- Older people are seen as 'other' in much research on older people. Many 'Baby boomers' are academics still undertaking research or semi-retired people undertaking research for interest & PhDs
- I am a committed recreational windsurfer – over 30 years
- I have also been an ethnographer for most of that time ....



# Embodied Pleasure

- Think about your own pleasure of being in, on or near water
- Feelings
- Senses
- Place
- How can this be (re) presented?
- Narratives, picture ....



# ‘More of the same is not enough’

- ‘Baby boomer’ –windsurfers-Narrative of ‘Kitty’
- *It was Sunday and a pleasant day with a steady South Westerly. Kitty , 66yrs old....was determined to try out (her new board).....*

(Humberstone, 2011, p. 165)

# Concluding remarks

- Older people's voice significant
- (Auto)-ethnography important methodology which may link personal to political
- Address research to exploring emotions and consequently the senses ie embodiment
- Address place, the context of the feelings (pleasure).
- Holistic/democratic approaches to engage none habituated people/groups
- How do we evaluate the effectiveness of these types of intervention in ways acceptable to policy-makers?

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