

This is the authors' version published as:

Rybråten, S., Skår, M., Nordh, H. 2017. The Phenomenon of Walking: Diverse and Dynamic. *Landscape Research*. Published online: 01 Dec 2017.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2017.1400527>

The Phenomenon of Walking: Diverse and Dynamic

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Abstract

Everyday walking is a far-reaching activity with the potential to increase health and wellbeing in the general public. From a phenomenological perspective, walking can be seen as a function of being-in-the-world, where the landscape, a sense of place, and the moment are closely entwined with the walker's own lived experiences. Using interviews with 73 walkers in a medium-sized town in Norway, this article explores the phenomenon of everyday walking. The data illustrate the multiple ways in which people emphasise wellbeing and ascribe meaning to their walking experiences, and how these ways may vary significantly during a life course, from day to day, and even within a single walk. Insights from this study may prove useful to policymakers and administrative bodies in acknowledging people's various needs and gains related to everyday walking, and hence for promoting a diversified management of walking within the field of health policy, as well as in urban planning for walkable cities.

Keywords: walking; wellbeing; public health; phenomenology

Introduction

According to the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007), it is through our bodies, on the

move, that we make sense of our surroundings. In this view, walking offers an embodied basis for experiencing and engaging with the world. Inspired by Ingold and a phenomenological approach to human-landscape engagements, this qualitative study investigates the multiple ways in which people ascribe meaning to their walking experiences, and illustrates various interconnections of walking, health, and wellbeing.

In line with current Western health discourses and the identification of physical inactivity as a major risk factor for global mortality, the World Health Organization considers walking a ‘regular physical activity of moderate intensity’ with the potential to improve public health globally (WHO, 2016). While the coupling of walking, health, and wellbeing is nothing new, stretching back to the early philosophers in ancient Greece (Solnit, 2014), the last 10 to 20 years have shown a growing public, political, and academic interest in walking as a health promotor. At present, a wide range of studies documents the positive effects of walking on both physical and mental health (e.g., Darker, Larkin, & French, 2007; Hanson & Jones, 2015; Morgan, Tobar, & Snyder, 2010; Song, Ikei, Igarashi, Takagaki, & Miyazaki, 2015; Wolf & Wohlfart, 2014). Other studies explicitly link walking and wellbeing (e.g., Doughty, 2013; Ettema & Smajik, 2015; Gatrell, 2013; Marselle, Irvin, & Warber, 2013; Middleton, 2010; Ziegler & Schwanen, 2011). Furthermore, because the activity of walking includes interaction with the physical landscape and social surroundings (whether intended or unintended), recent studies have encouraged mobilisation of the ‘therapeutic landscapes’ concept to better grasp the interconnections of walking, wellbeing, and place (Doughty, 2013; Gatrell, 2013).

The conceptual framework of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ is firmly embedded in the field of health geography, focusing on how settings and surroundings can contribute to good health and wellbeing (Gatrell, 2013). While the therapeutic landscapes literature

has delivered invaluable contributions to the knowledge on site-specific influences on people's health and wellbeing, the physical movement necessarily involved has commonly been neglected (Doughty, 2013). Within 'walkability' research, on the other hand, movement is central to investigations of how the built environment and its social variables facilitate or hinder walking (see e.g., Andrews, Hall, Evans, & Colls, 2012; Giles-Corti et al., 2013; Saelens & Handy, 2008; Van Dyck, Cardon, Deforche, & De Bourdeaudhuij, 2011). In a recent review of literature on different variables motivating pedestrian trips, Buckley, Stangl, and Guinn (2017) identify 15 categories of motivators. These span from 'distance to destination' and 'presence of sidewalks' via 'sense of personal security' to 'weather on a given day' and 'a visually appealing environment' (Buckley et al., 2017, p. 130). What walkability studies have tended to leave out, however, is the variability involved in how 'particular assumptions about physically, socially and culturally differentiated bodies and environments inform understandings of what a walkable environment looks like' (Andrews et al., 2012, p. 1927). Recent mobilities studies address this gap by acknowledging mobility to be a personal, embodied experience (Cass & Faulconbridge, 2017; Doughty & Murray, 2016; Middleton, 2010; Murray & Doughty, 2016). These studies are thus more in line with our aim of approaching walking, wellbeing, and landscape as connected phenomena. We further follow Atkinson (2013) in her recommendation of moving away from a components approach to wellbeing, because it primarily focuses on *outcome* by identifying and theorising different elements constituting or determining wellbeing. In its place, Atkinson proposes an understanding of wellbeing as *process*: 'a quality of situatedness and of relationality' (ibid., p. 142). In this view, wellbeing becomes a set of relations between people, and between people and places, at particular times.

In this study, linking walking, wellbeing, and landscape, we see the landscape in

and through which walking takes place as both forming and formed by the walk. In the words of Bender (2002, p. 103), landscapes are ‘created out of people’s understanding and engagement with the world around them. They are always in process of being shaped and reshaped’. Consequently, even when walking the same route repeatedly, we cannot perform series of identical walks. Not only do external circumstances change with altering weather, seasonal variations, and landscape shifts or modifications. We, as humans, are also in a constant process of change. With varying experiences, we get involved with the landscape in different ways. Along these lines, our point of departure is an approach to walking, wellbeing, and landscape where we consider these phenomena relational, diverse, and dynamic.

Trails along which life is lived: Walking in a phenomenological perspective

A phenomenological approach to ‘human-being-in-the-world’ attempts to overcome the Cartesian, dualistic separation of body and mind, nature and culture, still permeating Western societies and sciences. From an embodied phenomenological perspective, we as humans find ourselves by our senses in an experience-based and dynamic relation to the physical and social environments (Heidegger, 1971; Merleau-Ponty, 1994; Abram, 1997). Ingold (2007, p. 81) describes this approach poetically: ‘Trails along which life is lived’ refers to walking as a fundamental mode of human living.

Merleau-Ponty (1994) clarifies how the embodied subject perceives the world, through sense impressions and embodied skills, where previous experiences are incorporated in the body’s sensory apparatus. In such an approach, neither nature nor other environments are something we consider from a distance, but something we are part of (ibid.). While landscape perception in the tradition of psychological behaviourism emphasises perception in *visual* terms, a phenomenological approach

emphasises perception as *participation* and *practice* (Abram, 1997). In this way, walking can be seen as a function of being-in-the-world, where a sense of place and the moment is closely entwined with the walker's own lived experiences.

Ingold (2011) elaborates on this, saying that for him, perception is fundamentally about *movement*. As culturally, historically, and socially situated inhabitants of the world, humans are found by Ingold to be 'embarked upon a movement along a way of life' (ibid., p. 12). Through the feet, people move *in* the world rather than *on* the world, and through walking 'landscapes are woven into life, and lives are woven into the landscape, in a process that is continuous and never-ending' (Ingold, 2011, p. 47). With the whole of their bodies, senses, individual backgrounds, and experiences, humans take part in a world-in-formation (ibid.).

This view accords with Manzo (2003, 2005), who describes people's relationships to places as ever-changing, dynamic phenomena, and as conscious processes in which people are active shapers of their own lives. Manzo finds that people describe the different relationships they have to particular places according to significant experiences rather than by using simple descriptions of the physical settings themselves. This she terms 'experience-in-place' (Manzo, 2005). Correspondingly, Merleau-Ponty (1994) emphasises how the multi-sensing body is always situated within the world. Humans therefore have to adjust themselves to a world and to terrains that are themselves continually shifting.

This view of a relational and experience-based interaction between people and their surrounding landscapes forms our point of departure in investigating the phenomenon of everyday walking. Using interviews with 73 walkers, we take a bottom-up approach and examine the multiple ways in which people emphasise wellbeing and assign meaning to their walking experiences. This study reveals how nuances and

diversities become visible when choosing a phenomenological approach to walking and landscapes. The embodied walking experiences and reflections shared with us by people on the walk are foundational to this work.

Methods

Location

The study was carried out in the middle-sized town and municipality Moss, located by the Oslo Fjord in south-eastern Norway. The municipality has a population of approximately 32 000 and an area of 64 km² (Statistics Norway, 2016). The municipality includes large natural areas, farmland, residential areas, industry, and a city centre. The ferry port, the central seafront, a city beach, and the pedestrian shopping street characterise the city centre of Moss. Small and large green areas are within reach of only a few minutes' walk. Thus, people living in the centre of Moss have urban facilities as well as shoreline and green spaces available within walking distance.

The population of Moss is heterogeneous regarding age distribution, immigrant diversity, income level, educational background, and health conditions (Statistics Norway, 2016). This variation, together with the heterogeneity of Moss's physical landscape, makes Moss an appropriate location for investigating the phenomenon of walking. Furthermore, with resident organisation and infrastructure traits similar to those of several other middle-sized towns, the Moss case should be relevant in planning for public health and urban development internationally.

Data

Two of the authors carried out qualitative interviews among Moss's inhabitants during the summer of 2015. A total of 73 interviews, both in-depth interviews and shorter

interviews were performed. The study is a follow-up to a previously conducted quantitative survey among 780 participants covering different residential areas in Moss (Nordh, Vistad, Skår, Wold & Bærum *accepted*). A total of 443 persons in the initial quantitative survey were willing to participate also in this qualitative part of the project. Among these, a random sample of 50 persons were contacted by phone, whereupon six persons confirmed their willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. Two additional persons were recruited, one spontaneously on the street during shorter interviews (see presentation of interview forms below) and one enlisted by his already-interviewed wife. This resulted in a total of eight in-depth interviews, six with females and two with males.

The in-depth interviews were carried out while walking for approximately one hour in a neighbouring area chosen by the individual interviewee. Thereby, topics from the quantitative survey could be supplemented or investigated more thoroughly. During the walks, informants were stimulated to reflect upon their perceptions of and relations to the specific areas chosen (Miaux et al., 2010; Skår, 2010).

The eight in-depth interviewees were relatively active and eager walkers, and half were between the ages of 60 and 80. To broaden the sample, and because the recruitment process by phone was time-consuming, we decided to try another way of recruiting interviewees. Approaching people walking down the street in or nearby Moss city centre, asking if they had time for a short interview about walking, proved productive. Thereby, we broadened the sample by adding 65 shorter interviews. Informants were selected to represent a broad spectrum of the municipality's inhabitants in age and gender. Interviews were carried out at different locations, in order to cover people's different reasons for walking, like walking for errands or going for a stroll. The short interviews varied in length, from two to 20 minutes, with the majority lasting for

five to 10 minutes. The interviews covered a variety of walkers, spanning from people walking for hours every day, to people who preferably walked as little as possible. Furthermore, these short interviews covered all age groups. Men 40–50, however, were clearly underrepresented.

An interview guide formed the basis for both short and in-depth interviews. The interviews were carried out as research conversations, where questions were adjusted to the previous answer and to the time available. We started out with the open question ‘What do you think of when I say *walking*?’ To understand what the activity of walking means to different people, we further asked interviewees to describe everyday-life situations in which they walk. Despite the difference in time available during short and in-depth interviews, we addressed similar topics in our attempt to catch meanings informants ascribed to the activity of walking. Furthermore, by carrying out interviews during or in connection with the activity of walking, we were able to elicit from informants expressions of more immediate, embodied walking experiences than an interview in a detached setting would have enabled. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed, and data collection was conducted in accordance with the Norwegian Data Protection Official’s standards.

Analyses

In the analyses of the data, the thematic comparability of the interviews made it possible to use both short and in-depth interviews as the empirical basis of the investigation. Furthermore, data from both interview types revealed glimpses of various lived experiences, described by interviewees as influencing their walks.

The analyses followed a systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012) inspired by Giorgi’s psychological phenomenological analysis (2009). This analysis uses a descriptive and explorative method, representing a pragmatic approach inspired by

phenomenological ideas. An important goal is to search for the essence of a phenomenon, looking at objects from the perspective of how they are experienced (Malterud, 2012). This analytical procedure follows four steps: 1) total impression, 2) identifying and sorting meaning units, 3) condensation (from code to meaning), and 4) synthesizing (from condensation to descriptions and concepts) (ibid., p. 796).

Our total impression was that ‘walking is such a comprehensive activity’. The diverse character of walking made the second analytical step challenging, as we struggled to find relevant and separate meaning units. The many meanings ascribed to walking could all be present for an individual, either simultaneously or in different situations, as illustrated by the following quote: ‘You can think, you can listen to music, you can listen to... All sorts of stuff. You can talk to people on the phone, you can walk together with people. It’s a kind of exercise. It’s... It’s how we move forward’ (LS110112 Man, approx. 25 years). Furthermore, the concept of wellbeing stood out as a transverse quality of walking, related to walking as exercise just as much as to walking for recreation or simply to clear one’s head.

In our attempt at making the empirical material fit into distinct categories, we found ourselves splitting up and simplifying a complex material. Returning to step two, we once again identified meaning units through decontextualization and coding. This time, however, our purpose was to illustrate the dynamic and complex character of walking more than to find separate categories of meanings ascribed to the activity of walking. Via condensation, in step three, illustrative quotations were identified and grouped in relevant topics. In step four, this condensation was further described through citations and analytical examinations, as presented and discussed in the following section.

Result and discussion: The phenomenon of walking

Walking is what you want it to be.

In what follows, we have grouped a number of selected interview quotes, to illustrate the multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon of walking, as well as to illustrate the relational connections between walker and landscape, where wellbeing constitutes a transverse effect. The following quote may describe the flexibility and fluidity involved in walking, through two 18-year-old boys' supplementary efforts to articulate their walking experiences:

LS110149 Two boys, 18 years¹

Researcher (R): What do you think about walking, then?

Interviewee (I): Think it's lovely.

Friend (F): Yes, it is really lovely.

R: Why is that?

I: I get to use ... You get exercised a little. And then still you get from a to b.

You get to enjoy nature a little better, in a way, or look around a bit and ...

F: Observe the surroundings.

R: Aha. And that's different from bicycling, or ...?

F: Yes, or ... It is kind of the same with bicycling, but then it goes a bit faster, in a way.

I: Have to pay attention to the traffic, then.

F: Mm, don't get to look around as much.

R: So walking is kind of ... You can walk around and see what is happening?

¹ A few informants told us their age. Others did not, and when quoted, these are referred to by an approximate age.

I: Yes, and then you can fall into thoughts.

R: Okay.

I: And then you can talk to others while you walk, and ...

What these boys put into words, in a few sentences, are precisely the diverse and dynamic characteristics of walking that we find to be consistent with the material as a whole. Walking represents a form of exercise, a transport mode, a possibility for enjoying the landscape or other surroundings, a facilitation of contemplation and reflection, or an activity for being social. Depending on time and place, personal experiences, life stages, and surroundings, these boys have probably experienced the activity of walking as representing some of those aspects more profoundly than others. Still, it is the multiplicity involved in walking that they emphasise, when encouraged to express why they find walking to be 'lovely'. In this way, they grasp the essence of walking as a human being-in-the-world, in dialectic interaction with the surroundings, always in flux and transformation (Ingold, 2007, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1994).

Most informants less explicitly expressed the diversity of the phenomenon of walking than the young boys above did. However, even if some aspects of walking were often given more weight than others, a certain similitude was nevertheless present in most interviews. Several informants included the health aspect in their accounts of walking, partly considering walking as a form of exercise, partly emphasising other aspects of the activity.

Walking in the span from cosiness to fitness

WHO states that '[p]hysical activity includes exercise as well as other activities which involve bodily movement and are done as part of playing, working, active transportation, house chores and recreational activities' (WHO, 2016). Some informants viewed walking as exercise, while others considered walking to be something different from exercise. A characterisation of walking as more 'cosy' than exercise was given by several informants. In the following quote, a young man expresses how walking is a way for him to 'get some peace', but simultaneously, he indicates the physical aspect of walking to the grocery:

LS110103 Man approx. 30

R: Is walking exercise for you?

I: I don't look at it as exercise, but it is exercise.

R: Do you practice additional exercise?

I: Yes, a little.

R: A little. So walking is more like ...?

I: I walk to the grocery. That is nice. Get some peace.

A woman in her mid-40s pinpoints the adjustable character of walking and the possibility to switch between exercise and relaxation:

LS110106 Woman approx. 45

I: ... if I shall try to lose weight or exercise, then walking is my way. Because I can't do anything else, at health clubs, because I have such ... Well, things. So then it is walking.

R: Right, which is a good alternative?

I: Mm (confirming).

R: So, are you amongst those who adjust the walking in relation to that?

Sometimes walking slowly to relax, but other times thinking ‘now I’m going to exercise a bit’?

I: Yes. Actually. But right now I am not in a slimming mode, (laughter) so now it’s just strolling. But if I’ve kind of decided that now I have to do something, a few kilograms, then it becomes more structured. A bit faster walking, then.

This quote exemplifies our dynamic human life worlds, our ‘continuous itinerary of movement’ (Ingold, 2011, p. 46). From a phenomenological perspective, we recognize the woman as a participant rather than as an observer. With the whole of her body, she practices different ways of walking according to her various situations in life and according to the particular circumstances at the time of her walk. When determined to lose weight, she speeds up her walk. In periods when weight loss is not an issue, she instead strolls. As such, her experience of walking spans from fitness to relaxation, giving her the possibility to switch between the two as suitable. Other informants exemplify how different aspects of a walk coincide in both time and space.

Walking for transport: convenient and nice

Some interviewees expressed how they walked to activities and chose the shortest way, while others explained that when walking to work, school, or the grocery, they chose a slightly longer but nicer route. Quite a few mentioned how they considered parts of the walk to be transportation, while other parts belonged to ‘the real walk’. Some informants, especially those who had moved to Moss from larger cities, expressed how they considered walking to be practical and convenient compared to driving. In addition to the practical aspect, interviewees also emphasised other, and simultaneous occurring

qualities of walking, when walking for errands or for transportation. A woman in her mid-30s expresses it like this:

LS110099 Woman 36

R: But walking to the train ... How would you describe it?

I: It is absolutely fantastic in spring and summer and early autumn.

R: Yes?

I: And then it is really crappy in the winter.

R: Right.

I: Then it is cold and miserable and ... Yes. And at ten to six, when I start walking, no ploughing has been done if it has been snowing. And I can understand why, as it is terribly early in the morning. But then, well, then it is cold and miserable. Mostly.

R: But still you walk?

I: Yes.

R: I really think that is impressive. Ten to six. You do have a car?

I: We do have a car, so it is ... That's just how it is. But I would not have bothered to drive, even if we had two cars.

R: You would still walk?

I: Yes.

R: Why is that?

I: It almost takes longer to drive than walk. And then you have to park and then ... No.

R: You think it is pretty convenient?

I: It is convenient to walk. You just walk out the door, lock it, and then you enter the train. If I walk very fast, I use five minutes. If I walk normally, I use nine or ten. And even if it is cold ... You wake up a bit. You get a little 'ahh!' and that is ... When I was pregnant, I could not walk when it was slippery, so then we had to drive to get to the train. And even if it is kind of a hassle to walk in the morning, it is extremely nice as well. You can feel it when you *do not* do it. That 'uh, I would have liked to ...'

This woman can be seen to illustrate what Ingold emphasises in his descriptions of walking as 'wayfaring' (Ingold, 2007). Here Ingold couples locomotion and perception, stating that '[w]ayfaring, in short, is neither placeless nor place-bound but *place-making*' (ibid., p. 101, original emphasis). The woman quoted above primarily emphasises convenience when she expresses her reasons for walking to the train, at ten to six in the morning, when her life stage allows for it. As the conversation continues, however, it becomes apparent that this early morning walk is not transportation, or locomotion, only. She finds it to be pleasant as well, although she prefers some seasons above others. With her body and her senses, she perceives as she walks, and in doing so, she not only passes from one location to another. Rather, this woman's walk is 'place-making', as the surroundings are coupled with her experiences and senses, making her morning walk 'extremely nice as well'.

Walking as both social time and time for oneself

Regarding social aspects of walking, variations in the interview material span from those who emphasise the qualities of walking together with others to those who focus on other qualities when walking alone. Nevertheless, for some, walking alone is not necessarily something they choose. Loneliness may be seen as a challenge in public

health in our modern society. As illustrated by the next quote, establishing a purpose for the walk can be a way to compensate for lack of company:

LS110128 Woman approx. 70

R: But you walk alone as well?

I: Yes, but it is ... I definitely think it is most pleasant to walk together with someone. Right now my husband is away, and then ... If I know I am going to stay home the whole afternoon, then I go for a walk. Then I make up an errand. In order to walk. I am very conscious when it comes to walking.

R: Right. But then you want something to go to? You don't go for the walk in itself?

I: No, then ... I walk in order to walk, but I find myself a goal (laughter).

R: So, you are not that concerned with qualities of walking alone?

I: No. Actually, I am not.

Among interviewees who both preferred to walk with others and had the possibility to do so, the quality of the walking companionship was important. The woman in the following quote is concerned about the way shared walking facilitates good conversation:

LS110101 Woman approx. 60

I: I think my husband and I, when we go for a walk in the park or when we walk in general, in beautiful places, then we talk incredibly well together....

R: You are not the first to say that. It is something about ... You both calm down and relax, and get such influences that you ...

I: Right. That we ... Give to each other and see each other. And can philosophize a bit.

Several informants, however, exemplified how walking alone may feel right under particular circumstances, while in other situations it may not:

LS110141 Man approx. 60

I: I would say yes, please, both. Because it is lovely to walk alone, when I am tired after tough workdays and those kinds of things, and I am not in need of communicating that much. And then there are these positive trips in the forest during weekends, with my wife and the dog and ... Those things. So I would say yes, please, both. I can happily walk alone occasionally, but it is very nice to walk in the forest and talk.

LS110116 Woman 59

I: I look around more when I am alone. And I think more and am more within myself, in a way. When I am together with a friend, we talk about things that have happened, for better or worse. And often it is good to let that out as well. So it is ... A little of both.

The first quote above shows how this man's desires and needs fluctuate throughout the week and influence his preferences for walking alone or with his wife. The woman likewise demonstrates how there are times when she prefers walking alone, paying more attention to the landscape, while she at other times favours having relieving conversations.

Her varying preferences correspond to Manzo (2003), who states that people's relationships to places involve an ever-changing, dynamic process. As for the woman quoted, she exemplifies how attention to place and surroundings can involve conscious processes and illustrates how people take active part in shaping their walks and engaging with the surroundings.

Walking as a feeling of freedom

Relaxation, but also recreational aspects of walking, was frequently mentioned by informants, as was the feeling of freedom connected to walking from home. A few interviewees preferred to walk in daylight and not in the dark, or mentioned particular places they would not visit in the night-time. Still, informants' prominent emphasis on walking as freedom and relaxation reflects how Norway is a relatively safe country, both for living and for walking. This safety allows for a focus on positive effects of walking related to recovering from mental fatigue. While some informants expressed a preference for not thinking as they walk, others focused on the possibility of thinking 'freely' when walking:

LS110106 Woman approx. 45

R: Are there other things you like about walking alone?

I: (Pause, thinking) I have not been thinking about ... I do not think (laughter). I just do it.

R: Right. Somebody says that then I get to think of whatever I want.

I: Right. Perhaps, yes? Or not to think at all. Rather that one.

R: Right. A kind of flow?

I: Yes. Not to think at all. Just go out and then, done with that. No thinking, just walking. That is probably the best.

LS110116 Woman 59

R: What do you think about walking?

I: Very nice. I like it a lot.

R: Right. But what is it about walking, then?

I: I can feel it is good for my body. And it is such a freedom. Such a breathing space. And ... While I walk, I can think. I think a lot (laughter). For better and worse, so to speak.

The quotes above illustrate how a walk can promote reflection, an aspect of importance in recovering from mental fatigue (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995). In these quotes, restorative experiences of walking are primarily linked to the ability to ‘think freely’ or ‘not to think at all’ during the walk. The state of ‘not to think at all’ resonates with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1999) concept of *flow*, defined as a complete absorption in what one does. As seen above, other informants emphasised how they occasionally preferred to walk alone to let their thoughts fly, while at other times they would favour company and good conversation. Again, the interviews reflect how lived experiences and the moment influence preferences: if to walk, where to walk – in what kind of landscape, how to walk, and with whom.

Walking as a gendered activity

When stopping people on the street for spontaneous interviews, it became obvious that few men 40–50 were out walking. An interviewee could confirm our growing suspicion: ‘I am in the car ... Rather than walking, I am using the car’ (LS110148 Man approx. 45). While female informants seemed to prefer walking either for recreation, for exercise, or for transport, often in company of a friend, walking seemed to constitute a

less appealing activity for many men. Among the men we interviewed, there was laughter when we wondered if they could have called a male friend and asked him to go for a walk. Such a request had not crossed their minds.

The quantitative survey from the same study area (Nordh et al., *accepted*) did not reveal any gender differences in neighbourhood walking. The qualitative data, however, are consistent with Ghani, Rachele, Washington, and Turrell (2016): To a higher degree than female informants, men we interviewed seem to want a particular purpose for the walk, like reaching a fishing ground, or sharing a walk with other men. Exercising together, such as running or bicycling, however, appeared to be much more common:

LS110100 Man 65

I: I don't have any great need of walking together with someone. It is strange, since I talk a lot, as you understand. But I don't. There is no point for me.

R: What is the difference, do you think?

I: Well, first you have ... It is kind of okay, you decide time and place yourself, when you walk alone. But making appointments ... Well, I have a few from my old workplace ... But then we bicycle. No, I am relatively weird. Or not weird, but I like it alone. Or I do these walks alone.

Some men, however, told how they appreciated walking with their wife. Additionally, several men above 50 exemplified how their view of walking had changed over the years:

LS110134 Man approx. 60

I: In my youth, I played football. To go for a walk just to walk, without anything particular connected to it, was somewhat unfamiliar. Going for a walk at that time was a bit strange. You should either walk in the mountains, go fishing... There had to be a specific purpose for walking, we did not just walk because that in itself was positive. But that has changed, over the years. So we now go for a walk just to walk. Just because it is quiet, so you can talk and ... Don't know ...

An impression from the interviews is that men start to consider walking as adequate exercise and walk more frequently when they get closer to 60. Several older male informants expressed a desire for walking as long as their health would allow for it. Both older men and women emphasised the importance of walking for their quality of life, including aspects of mental and physical health.

Walking through the life course

The degree to which people walk, and the meaning they ascribe to walking, will necessarily vary throughout their lives. Some male and female informants with small children explained the necessity of changing former walking routines, to make them fit their new life stage. A woman in her mid-30s expressed this necessity the following way:

LS110099 Woman 36

R: Do you walk more, now that you have children?

I: Well, both yes and no. We do more trips, but they are shorter. The oldest, when he walks himself, it takes all day. And it did not before. So we could walk

much further, then, than we do now.... If we are going somewhere a bit far, it takes a long time to get there, we stay for long, and then it takes a long time to get back. So we go for a walk differently now, than what we did before.

Among retired informants, on the other hand, their increased time available for walking, as compared to when they were employed, made some of them walk more frequently:

‘You get a lot more time, right. A lot of us old people get an incredible amount of time’ (LS110100 Man 65).

Several elderly informants emphasised the importance of walking for staying vigorous. A few, however, had entered a life stage where their health or feet placed restrictions on their ability to walk:

LS110097 Man 82

I: I used to walk a lot, before I had the surgery.... Exercising is important to... And it becomes even more important as you get older. You do not get more fit, but you might be able to keep yourself up and running a bit longer.

R: You talked about walking for exercise. That is something most can do, on their own individual level. But now you have come this far ...

I: It starts to become problematic, yes.

R: Is that ... Sad?

I: Both yes and no. I would love to ... No, I do not think it is sad in itself, because ... No, life is like it is. And at some point it is over.

Again, the interviews illustrate the diverse and dynamic phenomenon of walking. From one life stage to the next, several informants expressed ways in which their walking had

changed. Simultaneously, the material shows how the meanings and values ascribed to walking to a higher degree seem to change through life among men than among women, because women appear to prioritize walking throughout life. In general, some walk more, others walk less, while for some it is not so much a question of frequency or quantity, but rather an issue of walking in a different way than before. With their various walking experiences, their different life stages, and personal situations, they are all, however, 'embarked upon a movement along a way of life' (Ingold, 2011, p. 12). As such, there is always an interaction between the walker and the surrounding landscape or built environment in which the walking takes place. This interaction is, however, just as experience-based and relational as is the phenomenon of walking itself.

Conclusion: Walking as wellbeing

Common for most descriptions given by informants when sharing their experiences of walking and the meanings they ascribe to this activity is the close coupling of walking and wellbeing, in numerous ways. From the transcript excerpts above, this close coupling is evident in the two 18-year-old boys' explanation of why they consider walking to be 'nice'; it enables exercise, getting from a to b, looking around, falling into thought, and talking to others. Also in the span from cosiness to fitness, walking includes wellbeing, for instance as exemplified in the description of walking as 'my way' of exercise, just as wellbeing is evident in the sensuous aspects included in accounts of walking for transportation. Whether walking is preferred as a social activity or as giving room for being alone and 'one's self', for paying particular attention to the environment, or for experiencing seasonal variations, wellbeing is involved. For families with small children, walking is wellbeing as a shared family activity, but it can also be wellbeing in facilitating an accepted way of taking a moment 'off': 'When they [the children] fall asleep it is like: Now! Now! Outside! I need to get some air!'

(LS110099 woman 36 years). Even for those whose age or health makes it difficult to continue walking, wellbeing is an aspect, although in a sense of belonging to the past. Consequently, and in line with Gatrell (2013), wellbeing appears to constitute a transverse effect of walking. What is more, the various couplings of walking and wellbeing empirically underpin the processual approach advocated by Atkinson (2013), illustrating how wellbeing is constantly produced and reproduced through relations between people, and between people and places, at particular times.

By focusing on the phenomenon of walking, the previous sections have illustrated the flexible character of walking, because it can be ‘what you want it to be’. The data presented and analysed in this study show that the meanings ascribed to walking vary significantly not only during a life course; they may vary from day to day, and in the way that several meanings may be ascribed to a single walk. This dynamic character of walking empirically parallels a phenomenological approach to human-nature relationships, emphasising people’s relational engagement with the surrounding landscape. In this view, both humans and landscapes are in a constant process of change. While landscape studies following a dualistic approach tend to focus on categories of landscapes, landscape elements, or landscape benefits, this study has shown how nuances and diversities are revealed through a more integrated approach to people, landscapes, and ‘lived experiences’.

The flexible character of walking makes it a highly adaptive activity adjustable to changing contexts of people’s everyday life. Furthermore, the flexibility and wellbeing aspects of walking and its broad social appeal make it an accessible activity with a great potential to increase physical movement and wellbeing among the public. While several informants in this study reported to appreciate leisure walks in natural surroundings, recreational aspects were highly evident even in urban environments and

during walks for transport. Illustrating the various needs and gains related to people's everyday walking, this study may inspire policymakers and administrative bodies to advocate a diversified management of walking in their promotion of public health and wellbeing, as well as in urban planning for walkable cities.

Acknowledgements:

The authors would like to thank all those who contributed to the study through their participation in interviews. We would also like to acknowledge the insightful comments provided by the editor and two anonymous reviewers to the first version of this article. This work was supported by The Research Council of Norway.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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