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Suspended and immersed: video methods and wild swimming

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Immersion in cold water is widely lauded for its health benefits: scientific studies describe the effects on the immune system, blood circulation and mental wellbeing of participants. The physiological basis for these claims has become widely publicised, together with medical and psychological discourses of wellbeing. Historically, the 'water cure' has been regarded as a legitimate medicinal intervention, with spa towns and seaside retreats accommodating these practices. Today, the 'water cure' lives on in wild swimming; accounts of increased mental, physical and psychological wellbeing sit alongside regular practices of swimming outdoors, often in cold water. Numbers of people participating in wild swimming are on the rise in the UK, with membership of the Outdoor Swimming Society rising from a few hundred in 2006 to over 70,000 at the start of 2019, and the practice is gathering substantial attention in the media and public imagination. Sociologically speaking, wild swimming allows us to consider the ways in which people negotiate ideas of wellbeing, risk and conviviality in the water.

While previous research has considered the clinical and physiological benefits of cold water for physical and mental wellbeing, there is little research to date on the ways swimmers themselves make sense of and describe their experiences, or which focus on the embodied, enmeshed, tacit ways of being in the water. Through this project, we are spending time with wild swimmers in the water, recording their lived experiences and accounts of wellbeing in situ. Our approach is alive to the situated, ongoing, unfolding accomplishment of being a wild swimmer in different bodies of water, in different weathers, and at different points in the days and lives of our swimmers. The interface between the natural world, the bodies of participants and their biographies, is opening up a space to foster new understandings of wellbeing, as a situated, contextual accomplishment.

We are interested in the sensory, embodied, emotional and social nature of wild swimming and its connections with wellbeing, and to research this we are using innovative, multisensory and mobile methods. We are experimenting with new technological opportunities, taking up the methodological challenge to conduct research on the move and in water. Using a GoPro harnessed to the body of participants, we send the camera into the water. Participants record their swims and make pre- and post-swim video diaries. The GoPro began its life in the sea, yet researchers have only touched on this opportunity to take a video camera in and under water.

The technological innovation of the GoPro, a lightweight, small, rugged and, most essentially for us, waterproof camera, provides new means of addressing methodological challenges, while the combination of this technology with the video diary method enables the development of a multidimensional and multisensory account that mixes together talk and action, helping us to develop more immersive and attentive ways of doing research through which we can come to understand different ways of being in the water. The resulting footage is intimate, raw and immersive, combining talk and action. Participants not only perform and describe what they are doing in the moment, they also recall memories and histories of swimming, experience outbursts of emotions, splash and swim, dip and dive, sit

and reflect. Being in the water while making a video diary allows for an instantaneous and personal account of what it means to swim outdoors.

In this sequence of video clips, Fi is swimming alone at Lake 32, a watersports lake in the UK. The lake is open to swimmers year round, and has a small but dedicated following in the early mornings throughout the winter months. It is a chilly, bright morning in October – Fi has been swimming here for the last two months, during which time the water temperature has dropped from 18 degrees to 11 degrees. She is a new wild swimmer and is taking herself through cold water adjustment. In the first clip, she enters the water. Slowly, carefully, she eases her body in. Her voice conveys a sense of dread – the cold is creeping through her body. She narrates the difficulty of entering the water, of putting her body on the cusp. Wild swimming is both something she wants to do and something that is physically uncomfortable. Numbness sinks in, and she explains how her blood vessels are constricting and her body heat is retreating into her core – rationalising a sensation through recourse to available frameworks. After a few minutes, she commits, and takes the plunge. She lets out a few gasps, her breathing quickens and her heart races. The experience is painful and there are questions to find answers to: How far to go? How cold to get?

<https://vimeo.com/374429357>

In the cold water, Fi can't swim as far or as fast as she can in a pool. But after a few minutes, the numbness turns into a burn, even a glow. She feels comfortable in the water, and transitions into front crawl. The camera records the green hue of the underwater, the bubbles rising as the water moves around her body. After a few hundred strokes, Fi is beginning to feel human again. At the 250 metre buoy, she decides to go further – this edgework is a delicate balance between satisfaction, pain, and risk. Out in the centre of the lake, things look different. When she is in the lake, everything else disappears. She is in her body and immersed in the natural world.

<https://vimeo.com/376353108>

The ways in which bodies and water intertwine in cold swimming, opens up ways of considering our embodied, multisensory existence. We can hear the process of entry into the water and into the social understandings of why it is a good thing to do: swimmers learn to enjoy the sensation, learn to account for the pain, the trepidation and the resulting feelings of release in positive ways. It takes time to learn how to perform this embodied identity and Fi consciously describes these steps as she moves through them. Wellbeing is used as a way of accounting for embarking on this process; other ideas could also be attached to the process just as legitimately (recently a friend described Kate's desire to swim in a river in March as 'clearly mad'). Fi talks about negotiating the line of feeling ok and going into a 'bad place of cold'; the negotiation is ongoing and embedded in internal justifications and external systems of knowing.

<https://vimeo.com/376355165>

Returning to where she began her swim, Fi tells the camera about how wild swimming makes her feel. She knows that when she gets out, she will feel fantastic for the rest of the day. Her head will be clear, her body energised. She describes how she 'has to be in her body, she can't really think about other stuff', as we hear the sounds of the water around

her and see the surrounding trees, and sky, her body alone in the clear water: suspended and immersed.

See more: <https://suspendedmotion.tumblr.com>

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