Mental movements: how long-distance walking influences reflection processes among middle-age and older adults

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Abstract

By providing a distinctive room for reflection, long-distance walks can help people similar to professional counselling. To understand reflection processes’ influence on mental health, a framework focusing on personal transformations, specifically through the concept of liminality, can be used. Through nine semi-structured interviews with middle-aged and older long-distance walkers, this study answers the following question: How do middle-aged and older adults experience long-distance walking, and how do their experiences influence their reflective process? Four themes emerged during the analysis: a) overcoming strain and achieving a sense of capability, b) simplicity in obligations and having the time to pursue emotionally difficult experiences, c) solitariness and reflection on oneself, and d) calmness and embracing thoughts. These findings illustrate how going on long-distance walks may be similar to entering a liminal, or transformational, space. The findings show how long-distance walks can be helpful, or perhaps even therapeutic, in situations where personal transformation is required.

Introduction

Where we think can influence how we think. People may choose to go to certain places or do certain activities, based on knowing or hoping, that this will have a positive influence on their thoughts. Long-distance walks in nature are one activity, which can have such an influence. Research shows that by providing a particular room for reflection, going on long-distance walks can help people similar to professional counselling (Lean, 2009; Saunders, Laing & Weiler, 2013; Van Gennep, 1909/1960). Long-distance walks, defined as walks of 30 kilometres or longer, or lasting several days (Crust, Keegan, Piggott & Swann, 2011), are getting increasingly popular (Saunders et al., 2013; Szakolczai & Horvath, 2017) and can for some even be viewed as a form of psychotherapeutic walking (Edensor, 2000). The
The purpose of the current article is to examine how reflection processes may be influenced by experiences during long-distance walks. Through this, this article adds to current research by examining the notion that long-distance walking may influence peoples’ mental states in ways, which can be helpful or perhaps even therapeutic.

Physical movement can be psychologically helpful as it provides new experiences with body and self (Roessler, Glintborg, Ravn, Birkebaek & Andersen, 2012; Roessler, 2011). Physical movement in the form of walking is associated with good mental health, for example in regards to lower levels of depression (Cooney et al., 2013; Kandola, Ashdown-Franks, Hendrikse, Sabiston & Stubbs, 2019; Mau, Rasmussen, Jacobsen & Roessler, 2020; Sallis & Owen, 1998). Among mid-life and older adults, there can be both physical and psychological benefits of walking (Normansell et al., 2014). Interviews with adults and older people point to psychological benefits including feeling better, being more alert, and having a more positive outlook on life (Wahlisch et al., 2017). A sense of overcoming challenges and extending oneself physically and intellectually is also reported (White & White, 2004). An increased sense of well-being is a common and early finding in interventions of sedentary people taking up walking (Morris & Hardman, 1997), however, more research into the therapeutic aspects of walking is needed (Robertson, Robertson, Jepson & Maxwell, 2012). In addition, green exercise where the physical activity is practiced in nature is promising regarding mental health, as the benefits of exercise are combined with the restorative effects associated with being in nature (Barton, Hine & Pretty, 2009; Crust et al., 2011; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Song et al., 2018).

Compared with other types of physical exercise, walking may be especially useful. Walking is a relatively simple and easily accessible activity (Lee & Buchner, 2008). The self-regulatory aspect of walking is an advantage e.g. among older people, as the individual walker can adjust the intensity and frequency according to their physical capacity (Barton et al., 2009). Moreover, the bodily rhythm of
walking may generate a particular way of reflecting (Edensor, 2010). However, we have yet to examine, specifically how long-distance walks influence ways of reflecting.

Reflection processes during long-distance walks can be important for mental health. To understand how, a theoretical framework focusing on personal transformations, specifically liminality, can be used (Saunders et al., 2013; Turner & Turner, 2011; Van Gennep, 1909/1960). The concept of liminality describes a particular phase in a personal transformation. In this phase, the persons transforming have separated from former, but have not yet incorporated a new, status, or identity (Stenner, 2017; Turner, 1986).

To be in a liminal phase is to be in a state of uncertainty and ambiguity, characterized by a reflective process of self-questioning and self-change (Beech, 2011). Going through a liminal phase is challenging, as in a test or a trial (Stenner, 2013). The expectations and rules which formerly gave structure and predictability to one's daily social life have been temporarily removed (Molzahn, Bruce & Shields, 2008; Stenner, 2013; Stenner, 2017). Former worldviews and social structures may seem to take on a more subjective and dynamic character, making change more possible (Bergmann, 2018; Stenner, 2013). The liminal phase can be thus seen as a “fertile chaos” (Adorno, 2015). Out of this chaos, a “gestation process” may take place, where the absence of structures is followed by an effort to replace them (Turner, 1986).

Liminality is a cross-disciplinary concept, used within many health-related research fields (Stenner, 2013; Stenner, 2017). For example, it can be applied to understand the experience of critical illness (Bruce et al., 2014), the experience of surviving critical illness (Blows, Bird, Seymour & Cox, 2012), and the experience of transitioning into a caregiver role (Gibbons, Ross & Bevans, 2014). In such cases, entering a liminal state can be unavoidable. However, the concept of liminality can also be used to understand activities that may be transformational (Noy, 2004; Stenner, 2013) and have been chosen
voluntarily (Stenner, 2017) such as long-distance walking.

Traditionally, undergoing transformations through traveling was associated with young people. However, it is now recognized that also middle-age and older adults experience transformations through traveling (White & White, 2004). Old age commonly includes people aged 65 and older, whereas middle-aged adulthood can be viewed as the period leading up to old age, from 55-64 (see e.g. Baars, 2015; 2017; Steger, Oishi & Kashdan, 2009). Walking attracts all age groups, including adults and older people (Muller & O'Cass, 2001), where it is one of the most popular forms of physical activity (Ory, Towne, Won, Forjuoh & Lee, 2016). Researching how transformations occur is important, especially among middle-aged and older adults. Late-life progression is often discontinuous and may include serious illness, loss of a spouse, declining physical health, or the ending of a formal work-life (Schröder-Butterfill & Marianti, 2006). Moreover, the relative and absolute number of older adults is increasing in Europe (van Campen, 2011; Wimo, Winblad, Aguero-Torres & von Strauss, 2003). Using liminality as a theoretical framework, it will be discussed how reflection processes on long-distance walking may facilitate a transformational process among middle-aged and older adults.

The aim of the current study is to examine how long-distance walking influences reflection processes. To do this, this study will answer the following research questions: how do middle-age and older adults experience long-distance walking? And how do these experiences influence their reflective process?
Method

Approach

This study applied an interpretative phenomenological research design with the aim of understanding the participants’ lived experiences of long-distance walking (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith, 2016). This approach consists of a hermeneutic, phenomenological, and idiographic aspect. The hermeneutic aspect of the approach builds on the assumption that interpretation, or hermeneutics, is an a priori structure (Eatough & Smith, 2017) Therefore, the researcher’s perception of the participant is always based on an interpretation. To facilitate the emergence of the phenomenon in focus and achieve a deeper understanding of the participant’s experiences, the researcher attempts to work with his or her understandings. In the phenomenological aspect of the approach, the focus is on the participants’ lived experience of long-distance walking. The researcher strives to identify the essential qualities of the participant’s experiences. Finally, following the idiographic aspect, the aim of the approach is to shed light on particular experiences of particular people, keeping attention primarily on the particular rather than on the general (Smith et al., 2009).

Originally developed within health research, the areas of sport and exercise are considered fertile ground for research using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), where the approach is increasingly being applied (Smith, 2016). Moreover, IPA is suitable when studying an area that is new or under-researched (Woolway & Harwood, 2019). Only little research has been conducted to understand the experiences of long-distance walkers (Crust et al., 2011), and specifically, regarding the experiences among middle-aged and older adults, the research is sparse.
Participants and sampling procedure

Nine participants were recruited for this study. Small sample sizes are typical in studies using IPA in line with the idiographic aspect of the approach, where the researcher aims to achieve a detailed understanding of each participant. Purposive chain sampling was used to get in contact with participants who had chosen to go on long-distance walking (Patton, 2014). Three people in the age group were asked whether they knew of people who met the inclusion criteria. Through this, five participants were referred to the project. The remaining four were referred through these participants. Using a purposive sampling method is recommended within IPA studies in order to ensure that participants have experiences relevant to the research question (Smith, 2016). The mean age among participants was 69, and with seven of the participants being women. Participants were included if they had experience with long-distance walking.

Long-distance walking

Regarding the definition of long-distance walking, several types of walking have been identified in research (Kay & Moxham, 1996), and there is currently no agreed-upon definition of long-distance walking. Long-distance walks can be defined as walks, which are 30 kilometres or longer, or lasting several days (Crust et al., 2011). Our study did not use a predefined understanding of long-distance walking but instead relied on participants' understandings, in line with the phenomenological approach. However, the participants’ understandings and experiences with long-distance walks corresponded to the definition used in the literature (see Crust et al., 2011). The experiences of the participants in this study were all based on the experiences of multi-day walks or multi-week walks, thus falling under the definition suggested in the literature. However, there was one exception, regarding one participant, aged 76, who walked up to 18 kilometres in one day but did not go out into multi-day walks (see Table I).
Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide was used as a flexible tool, as a stimulus to make participants talk while also allowing the researcher to probe areas of interest (Smith, 2016). The interview guide consisted of questions aiming at a) getting an understanding of participants’ background with long-distance walking, including how much they had practiced long-distance walking and what motivated them to go on these walks; and b) getting an understanding of their experiences during long-distance walks, and if they felt such experiences influenced their thoughts or feelings. Thus, the first question was, if participants could describe their background with long-distance walking: what walks they had been on, what they believed motivated them to go on these walks, and following this, what the word “long-distance walking” meant for them. After this, the interviewer went on to ask if they could describe, or elaborate on, experiences during long-distance walks. Participants were asked if there was a memory or an event from their life which they had thought about during the walk. Then they were asked if their thinking or feeling regarding this experience had changed during the walk, and if so, how. Interviewing was conducted with an interpretive stance of empathy as recommended in IPA (Rhodes & Smith, 2010).

Five interviews took place in the participant's own home while four were conducted via phone, due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The interviews lasted between 37-62 minutes with an average of 51 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author conducted the interviews.
**Ethics**

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants before conducting the interviews. Written consent was obtained from participants interviewed in person, while verbal consent was obtained from participants interviewed by phone. The study was registered at the University of Southern Denmark legal services for use with the Danish data protection agency (file number 10. 924) and The Regional Committees on Health Research Ethics for Southern Denmark (file number 20202000-36).

**Analysis**

In line with the idiographic component of IPA, each transcript was analysed on its own. Analysis was both a linear and an iterative process. Interviews were analysed separately, but to strengthen and deepen analysis, the researcher also went back to previously analysed interviews in light of themes from the remaining analysis (Smith, 2016).

The analysis followed the six steps when doing IPA, as outlined by Smith et al. (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure the validity of the findings in this study, interpretations were discussed between the authors in an iterative process, thus achieving consensus on the selection, understanding, and formulation of themes (Stiles, 1993). First, each transcript was read several times to allow the researcher to gradually immerse in the text. Then, as the researcher began to get a sense of the text as a whole, notes were made in the margin and highlighting specific parts of the text, which seemed important to the research question. Gradually, as the researcher became familiar with the text, he started differentiating between descriptions of experiences, and descriptions of how these experiences influenced the individual participant’s reflective process. Later a list was made, containing all expressions relevant to the participant’s
experiences of long-distance walking and influences on their reflection processes. This process first involved fragmenting the text. The emergent themes were developed based on these expressions, thus restructuring it anew, and were combined into superordinate themes, containing as much complexity as possible. These steps were completed with all interviews, one at a time. Finally, a full list was created, containing all participants’ experiences of walking, and how these influenced their reflexive processes.

Results

Through the analysis, four main themes emerged. In each theme, we first describe an experience of long-distance walking, and then how this specific experience influenced their reflective processes. The themes, which emerged, were: a) overcoming strain and achieving a sense of capability, b) simplicity in obligations and having the time to pursue emotionally difficult experiences, c) solitariness and reflection on oneself, and d) calmness and embracing thoughts.

Theme 1: Overcoming strain and achieving a sense of capability

Participants described how going on a long-distance walk meant choosing a straining activity that challenged them both physically and mentally. The strain became apparent in situations where there was hunger or pain, e.g. in the feet after walking for a long time, making it difficult to continue. Other straining aspects of walking long distances were related to primitive or uncomfortable sleeping arrangements in hostels or tents, or finding one's way in poor weather conditions.

[…] and the challenges that lie ahead, and handling them, when you are unable to find your way, or the weather turns bad, or that there is no place for you to sleep (participant 3)
The straining aspects of the walk often came unexpected, e.g. in the form of bad weather. However, all participants seemed to expect, that strain would somehow be part of the walk, and in fact, they chose the long-distance walk partly because of the strain associated with it.

It is heavy, you are hungry, your feet hurt […], and I think that is like part of the package. Because if it was like an easy kind of vacation, then I would not have experienced the same joy (participant 1)

Participants in this study had various, and sometimes multiple, reasons for going on long-distance walks. Some had experienced the loss of a spouse and were trying to adapt to their changed circumstances. Others were processing more long-standing challenges in their private lives e.g. taking care of children with special needs. Some participants described that, with increasing age, overcoming physical challenges was an essential part of taking care of oneself. One participant described how she felt she maintained a level of control over the inevitable physical decline happening with age by going on long-distance walks. The walk provided her with a sense of capability regarding her physical condition. However, overcoming challenges also gave a more general sense of capability:

That achievement part of it also gives you a sense of strength, and it puts things in perspective, so those incidents, which you perhaps walk around pondering, may become less important, I think. Because you kind of feel that you find something within (participant 1)

Some participants interpreted their handling of the challenges as having a broader, or symbolic, significance.

[…] there is something very symbolic in that you have to find your way (participant 2).
For this participant, long-distance walks were laborious and painstaking. However, finding one’s way through the long trials of walking, put her in a meditative state of mind whereby she felt able to emotionally overcome personal struggles with feelings of shame and guilt. Some experienced a sense of capability when reaching some external goal. A sense of capability could emerge through the confirmation of one’s ability to overcome a challenge e.g. after arriving at a summit of a mountain.

And I really like walking in the mountains. […] the journey in itself of getting up and then down again, […]. It is like, I show myself that I can (participant 4).

One recently retired participant described how his decisions on ending the walk after a certain distance stood in contrast to his work-life which was greatly determined by the opinions of others. Thus, the sense of capability could also come from deciding on when to end the walk, based on a rationale of their choosing, e.g. their effort, rather than on some socially approved of distance:

It is best if you can manage up to 20 [kilometres] […] but if you cannot walk further, then this is what suits me […]. Maybe I want to walk 20, but if I cannot go more than 10, then that is that. At a time. Maybe I walk 10 in the morning and then 10 in the afternoon (participant 3).

Theme 2: Simplicity in obligations and having the time to pursue emotionally difficult experiences

The participants experienced the long-distance walking as a simple activity. The participants both experienced the tasks associated with the walk as simple. Also, they felt free from certain obligations
they would have had, had they stayed home. These obligations fall into three categories: related to social obligations, to engaging in society and to practical issues.

Social obligations were for example related to help caring for grandchildren. One participant, a woman aged 72, described how illness among the parents had given her a sense of responsibility for her grandchildren. This was both enjoyable, but also demanding, and going away on long-distance walks could be a way of legitimizing being unavailable. Similarly, other participants described how the long-distance walk could give a break from social obligations more generally, by functioning as a way of saying no.

There was a time, where I almost got involved in too many things [...] For that I have used those trips [...] because all those things which you can occupy your mind with, are not present [...] Perhaps it was just I who was unable to say no. But you also do not want to let anybody down (participant 3).

Also, being on a long-distance walk separated participants from the many obligations which society presented. Participants described how being home was automatically associated with taking part in society. By going on the walk, they were able to establish a distance.

[… there are so many things in our society which you just sort of slide into because you are part of it […] But when you are up there, going through the troubles, then it is about putting one foot in front of the other […] It becomes very simple compared to that enormous game (participant 2)

Finally, participants described how they felt free from practical obligations. On the long-distance walk, one participant described how he was unable to handle whatever practical obligations arose at home:
Perhaps your house is on fire, or something has happened. But you cannot do anything. You are where you are (participant 3).

Thus, on one hand, obligations from normal day-to-day life, both practical, social, and societal, were removed. Participants had fewer issues to manage or worry about. On the other hand, other obligations, connected to walking a long-distance, occurred. These, however, were perceived as simple.

It is a space, where you are carrying all that you have, and where you only move forward using your own feet. And where you live as cheaply as possible, as primitively as possible […]. It is a space associated with the simple life, removed from the everyday life (participant 1).

For some, walking long distances carrying only the essentials needed for living, felt like they were compacting their whole lives into a knapsack. Some felt they carried in their knapsack not only equipment but had also packed memories which they carried with them. This gave them a sense of carrying with them a more simple life:

[...] and that you walk around with your house on your knapsack […]. That you are walking there becomes the ultimate simplicity in life. You have all the things you have at your disposal right there in your knapsack (participant 2).

The simplicity associated with long-distance walking gave them a feeling of having freed up mental space. They felt they had time they would not have had otherwise, allowing them to spend more time to pursue emotionally difficult experiences.

You kind of have the time to give yourself the time to [...] go deeper (participant 9)

The simplicity and the time this freed up allowed other thoughts and feelings to arise. One participant, a man aged 72, described how he came to think about his son. In contrast to everyday life, on the walk, he
got a chance to think about the importance, and of the requirements for maintenance, of the relationship. Participants described how the long-distance walk provided the time for thoughts and feelings, which would otherwise have been difficult to get in touch with.

You get the feeling that you have all the time in the world. And in fact, you do […] And then some things become easier to bring forward […]. Because it does not just come up. As I said, it has been lying down there for many years. It has almost taken root completely (participant 2).

Some described that the detachment from their usual obligations made them worry less, freeing up time to focus on other matters in life.

Well, there are many things, which you cannot do anything about when you are out there. And then there is no reason to walk around worrying about them […]. It is not to run away from something, but it provides you with the opportunity for reflection, and it provides room for other things than what I have to do today, with obligations and so forth. They are not there with you (participant 3).

Theme 3: Solitariness and reflection on oneself

For several of the participants, the long-distance walk was a solitary experience. The experience of solitariness arose in cases where they walked alone, but also where they walked in small groups or pairs. The solitariness stood in contrast to home life, which for some implied always being in a social context.
If I decide to walk alone, then I have those hours to myself. And I can think about anything […]. But when I am home, then I am home, because there is something I have to do, or something I want to do, or I engage in some social context in some way (participant 4).

For others, however, there was a sense of solitariness both on the walk and at home. A woman, aged 70, who had been widowed, described how being alone at home was coupled with an expectation of being productive or engaged, often leading to feelings of guilt. Being alone on the walk, however, was different, and not associated with the same sense of urgency but rather with a greater sense of relaxation. Some participants also described how the walk was associated with a feeling of being alone, and at the same time belonging. Participants could feel a sense of belonging both to people they walked with or to people having walked the same path.

In fact, it is very lonely to walk […]. But then again, belonging, you can say. To belong matters a lot. And you do, when you walk in places where so many others have also walked (participant 2)

Importantly, being solitary was not perceived as a negative, or necessarily positive, aspect of the walk. Rather, it was seen as a useful aspect of the walk.

[…] when you walk and typically walk alone […] a lot of reflection came out. I should probably have had even longer […] but I did get to have some good walking days where I walk like inside myself (participant 5).

The solitariness of the walk made them reflect on their own lives. One participant, a man aged 78, described how he took stock of the life he had lived. He described how he went through memories from his life, simultaneously emotionally processing the life-changing event of losing his wife:
when I walked alone there were some situations where many thoughts went through my head [...]. Went through some of the life that we had together [...]. And that… that is also part of it […] because you feel like you are all alone on the pilgrimage (participant 5)

Some walked in small groups or pairs. They still experienced the walking as solitary and used the walk to reflect on themselves, even though other people were present.

But I can walk with my friend, and then we both walk alone if you see what I mean […] Because you can do that. We do that a lot. And we are actually good at it (participant 7).

Other participants, who walked in pairs, agreed on the norms of interactions to provide the space for reflection on themselves.

I am especially interested in the thing about walking in silence. So that, when we walk, it is part of our schedule, when we walk in silence. We make sure always to walk in silence for a couple of hours per day […]. Because we each have as a goal to get in touch with something inside of ourselves, which is usually not so easy to get in touch with (participant 1)

**Theme 4: Calmness and embracing thoughts**

Participants’ experiences of the long-distance walk was characterized by calmness. Participants associated this calmness to sensory perception, e.g. sounds. One participant described that among the most memorable experiences she had had while long-distance walking was situations where the only sound she could hear was the sound of the wind. She described how she enjoyed sitting, away from
populated areas, listening to nothing but the wind. Another participant explained how the silence she experienced provided a break from the noise of everyday work life:

I have a full calendar [...]. I am a nurse. Intensive care. Lots of technology [...] and lots of noise, sounds from machines [...]. So for me, it is very relieving to be in places where there is silence, being free of all the sounds which I can feel stresses me. It stresses all people (participant 1).

The calmness was also related to other aspects of nature. One participant felt that the lakes and rivers she passed while walking had a particular effect on her. The mirroring effect of water and the openness in terrain associated with this gave her a sense of looking at herself coupled with having a larger perspective. Thus, by relating to nature she felt she was also relating to a part of herself. This gave her a sense of calmness:

Interviewer: What would you say you got out of walking?

Participant: I would describe it as more calmness [...]. Humans are part of nature (participant 2)

One participant describes how she chose the walk, not because she was motivated by covering long distances or completing a walk in a certain time, but rather because it provided an opportunity for her to slow down. Choosing the slow way of moving of walking was important for her, as it provided her with a sense of inner calmness.

How can you silence your thoughts? [...] in a way it feels right to walk and to feel that inner calmness that I can get [...] through a slow life (participant 1)
This calmness of the walk was related to embracing the thoughts that would emerge during the walk. One participant felt the calmness enabled her to give full attention to the thoughts:

I think that you kind of have that calmness to […] devote yourself to the thoughts which you have at that moment. And you do not get disturbed by anything else (participant 9).

Embracing the thoughts also meant for some participants embracing a sense of uncertainty in that they did not know what the thoughts would involve:

You cut away all that you hide behind and spend your energy on, so that which actually matters comes up. And you cannot escape it. Because there is nothing else you can do but to walk and then think the thoughts that come up (participant 1).

Some associated this uncertainty to a sense of losing control:

It is both a physical and a mental process. Not being afraid of something going wrong […] surrendering yourself, to let happen what needs to happen. You know, to stop having so much control (participant 7).

**Discussion**

The current study examined how middle-age and older adults experienced long-distance walking, and how their experiences influenced their reflective process.

The participants described that the walk was experienced as a *straining* activity; they felt hunger and pain, had difficulty finding both places to sleep and the correct routes. Overcoming these straining aspects of the walk made them reflect on themselves as capable, not only in the context of walking but
also in their lives generally. Overcoming the strain thus got a broader significance for the participants, where it became symbolic of one’s capabilities in overcoming challenges related to e.g. setting boundaries. The walk was also experienced as a *simple* activity, both due to a reduced number of obligations and as the tasks on the walk were simpler, e.g. managing their food or water supply. By not having to manage complicated obligations, participants got an opportunity for reflection, which they would not otherwise have had. The simplicity, for example, gave time to process issues related to social relations, or other matters, which was usually overlooked in the context of their everyday obligations.

Also, the participants experienced the walk as a *solitary* activity, both when they walked alone, in pairs, or in groups. Participants described how they would usually be part of an active social life, whereas, on the walk, they would not be participating, and not get distracted, by social engagements. This made them focus more on themselves and memories from their own lives. Their reflections could for example be about habits or about the importance of having, and difficulty losing relationships. Finally, they experienced a sense of *calmness* during the walk, which made them embrace the thoughts that came up underway. Some felt a sense of uncertainty or losing control over one’s thoughts while walking, but in light of the slowness of walking and quietness of nature they felt more secure embracing this.

It was beyond the aim of this study to examine whether the participants’ reflections actually led to their lives being transformed (Stenner, 2017; Turner, 1986). However, their reflection processes are in several ways similar to descriptions of being in a liminal phase. Like in a liminal phase, participants described being in a space of uncertainty and ambiguity. They described embracing whatever thoughts would emerge during the walk. They did this although being uncertain as to what the outcome of this process would be, with one participant relating it to a sense of losing control. Moreover, participants’ descriptions of being solitary and separated from usual social obligations correspond to the liminal removal of expectations and rules of daily social life. The test or trial-like aspects of being in a liminal
phase was also present during the walk, as the walk was both physically and mentally straining.

These findings illustrate how going on long-distance walks may be similar to entering the fertile chaos of liminality (Adorno, 2015). The uncertainty, unpredictability, and the loss of structure illustrates how participants, compared to their everyday lives, walk out into a mentally chaotic situation. Simultaneously, participants describe how their accomplishments during the walk made them see themselves as more capable in life. Replacing older views of oneself with new and more positive ones can be seen as an illustration of how long-distance walking is also a fertile ground for personal development.

Overall, these findings suggest, that long-distance walking may facilitate a process of personal transformation. However, it should be mentioned, that the concept of liminality is still debated, which may have implications for this study. Liminality has been applied within a range of disciplines (Bergmann, 2018), and it has been argued that using the concept too broadly risks making it imprecise (Rowe, 2008; Turner, 1974). Using liminality to understand long-distance walking may be applying the concept outside of its intended scope. It has been proposed, that modern, recreational activities, including different forms of sport or exercise, should not be viewed as liminal. Instead, the experiences of a modern long-distance walker should be considered liminal-like, or liminoid. Liminoid experiences are different from liminal in that they are more a result of individual choice, rather than socio-cultural necessity (Turner, 1982) and importantly, do not result in actual transformation. Rather than being part of an actual transformational process, they are more appropriately understood as breaks from normality, or playful as-if experiences (Thomassen, 2009).

Research does illustrate how contemporary long-distance walks are influenced by modernity. In the case of the pilgrimage, the connection to established religious traditions has diminished whereas now, the emphasis among walkers is more on individual autonomy and self-development (Reader, 2007).
However, this article suggests that attempts at specifying the usage of liminality transcends distinctions between modern and pre-modern activities. Long-distance walking appear to both have modern elements but can, at the same time, stand in contrast to modern life.

Participants in this study described how slowly finding one’s way, in a calm setting detached from technology, and relying solely upon one’s physical strength stood in contrast, and posed an alternative, to the usual complexity in modern life. Going on long-distance walks was thus a break from modernity. Similar findings have been emphasized elsewhere. For instance, the search for authenticity and meaning, partly behind the current popularity of secular pilgrimages, is for many an alternative to a materialistic and alienating modern daily life (Frey, 2004; Lean, 2009). Long-distance walking may, therefore, be viewed both as part of, and as a breaking away from modern life; as a modern activity, and as an old activity practiced in opposition to modernity.

This study also extends the research showing that not only young people go through transformational processes during travelling. Young people may be at certain life junctures, e.g. completing university, and use travelling to address what the situation requires of them (White & White, 2004). The middle-aged and older adults who participated in this study also addressed situations, which required personal adaptation. During the walk, their reflections revolved around both recent, and challenging life-changing events, e.g. the loss of a spouse, and also on more long-standing issues e.g. regarding bringing up children with special needs. Through the walk, they felt able to focus on themselves and take stock of their lives or attend to significant memories, which they felt they had overlooked.

Regarding practical implications, this study shows how long-distance walking among middle-aged and older adults influences reflection processes. These may be part of a process of personal transformation, which can be helpful when confronted with life-changing events. However, whether to recommend long-distance walking for middle-aged and older adults who are in a vulnerable position
ought to rely on an individual evaluation. For example, the participants in this study did not see the solitary aspect of the walk as negative. Rather, it was seen as useful for their reflection process. Thus, the solitary character of the walk did not resemble loneliness (Tillich, 1959), most commonly defined as an aversive state characterized by a discrepancy between the desired and actual quality of one’s social relations (Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Jakobsen, Madsen, Mau, Hjemdal & Friborg, 2020). However, disconnecting from one’s usual social network may be useful in some people’s transformative process but may also be an overwhelming experience for others e.g. after having lost a spouse. Further research into the association between social isolation and how this may, or may not, turn into loneliness, is warranted. These findings may also be viewed in light of the cultural context of this study, taking place in Northern Europe, assumed to have more individualistic family traditions compared with more collectivist, southern traditions (Daatland & Lowenstein, 2005). Going on long-distance walks may be viewed as an expression of individual autonomy (Reader, 2007). However, in line with studies on intergenerational solidarity, this study identified that a combination between aspects of independence and responsibility was present. In this study, participants described how their walks helped them engage in e.g. helping with grandchildren, but in a way, which to them seemed a more constructive way, where they also took their own needs into consideration.

Conclusion

This study showed how long-distance walking influenced reflection processes among middle-aged and older adults. Through the concept of liminality, these findings illustrate how long-distance walking can facilitate a reflection process with transformational qualities, making it potentially helpful, or perhaps even therapeutic. With regards to the practical implications of this study, understanding the potentials of
long-distance walking is relevant as middle-age and older adults can be confronted with several life-changing events and are at risk of worsening mental health if these are not managed properly. This extends our knowledge on the variety of uses which physical activity may have among midlife and older adults, and thus provides a relevant input to policies focusing increasingly on physical exercise among older people (see e.g. WHO, 2010).

However, it can be discussed whether it is beyond the scope of liminality to study an activity such as long-distance walking. This article suggests that attempts at specifying the usage of liminality transcends distinctions between modern and pre-modern activities. Long-distance walking appears to both have modern elements but can, at the same time, stand in contrast to modern life. Regarding implications for research, this study adds to the limited literature on long-distance walking. Importantly, it illustrates how long-distance walking may be regarded as a valued and beneficial activity regarding mental health, though it’s meaning has changed from being mainly religious, to revolve more around autonomy and self-development.

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Availability of data: Research data are not shared due to privacy and ethical reasons.
References


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Table I: participant characteristics