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*A sea-kayaking journey in the Outer Hebrides Scotland – Dynamic Forms of Vitality, influences on wellbeing and Integrated Quality of Life.*

**Abstract**

This paper aims to explore interconnections of outdoor activities and subjective wellbeing by investigating sea-kayaking, dynamic forms of vitality and Integrated Quality of Life (IQOL) among a group of six outdoor education undergrad-students. The research was participatory and based on in-depth qualitative interviews, during and after a seven-day sea-kayaking journey in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland 2018. Method: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to identify sea-kayakers lived nature-experiences in an inductive manner. Findings: the encounter with forms of vitality in the sea-environment, influence embodied sensory perceptions and their emotional/affective states. Yet each situation and the responses they cause, appear highly subjective. This study suggests that sea-kayaking embedded in ecological-connections can improve vitality, subjective wellbeing, yet experiences also contain ambiguities and negative feelings. This complexity, however, contains constructive potentials and opportunities for the development of wellbeing and IQOL.

Keywords: sea-kayaking, wellbeing, outdoor recreation, dynamic forms of vitality, phenomenology.

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to contribute to the field of qualitative nature-based recreation and health research with a detailed phenomenological and inductive study of six sea-kayakers lived-experiences. It investigates forms of vitality, conceptualized within five aspects of experience: ‘movement, time, space, force and intention’(Stern, 2010, p.4) also referred to as vitality-dynamics onwards. This concept attends to the spatial context of the seascape and the interconnection with internal psychological, embodied experiences which can intensify during the sea-kayak journey.

This health related analysis of sea-kayaking draws on the concept of salutogenesis (Antonovsky 1996), asserting that enabling ‘resistance’, ‘resources’ and ‘sense of coherence’ are important parts of health and prophylaxis. The Integrated Model for Quality of Life(IQOL) similarly draws on humanist and existential health determinants that traditional medical practice and Quality of Life measurements have often eluded (Ventegodt, Merrick, & Andersen, 2003). Conceptually salutogenesis and IQOL are therefore complementary, as they define life-quality not merely by material, objective and biological factors, but equally by individual meaningfulness. Since lack of meaning is considered a root cause of many suicides and mental health crises in western societies, ‘meaningfulness’ is important to address not only in healthcare.

A humanist health perspective applied to sea-kayaking, offer insights for health professionals, experiential therapist, pedagogues and coaches working with wellbeing or development. It displays the multifaced ways that lived outdoor adventurous activities, interweave with psycho-social and embodied aspects of wellbeing and health. Examining sea-kayakers’ wellbeing from these criteria, we acknowledged the need for a critical approach, which capture a complexity of experiences, containing both positive and negative aspects. This ambiguity may challenge dominant discourses, that outdoor recreational benefits are mainly physical activity, pleasant views or either positive or

negative alone. Addressing experiences beyond these preconceptions, this study asks how sea-kayaking influences subjective wellbeing, effects of embodiment, vitality-dynamics and spatial qualities of a seascape. IQOL is used subsequently as a conceptual method of comparison and discussion.

### **Theoretical framing and positioning**

Antonovsky's (1996) salutogenesis and Integrated Quality of Life (IQOL) by Ventegodt et al. (2003), remain important humanist counterpoints to contemporary medicalized healthcare. Particularly in times of health crisis, rising levels of mental illness and lifestyle diseases the WHO Regional Office for Europe (2013), calls for integrative medicines. As was recognized by WHO (1946), the absence of disease or pathology in the 'biomedical perspective' is not adequately conceptualising health. It is a complex phenomenon, which also includes the consideration of outdoor environments (Mantler & Logan, 2015). Green and blue spaces health strategies include environmental and socio-economic policies (Tredinnick-Rowe, Taylor, and Tuohino 2018) and are increasingly recognized as public health resources (Mishra et al. 2020). Therapeutic qualities of landscapes are for instance seen to provide restoration, stress-decrease, physical activity and pleasant views (Foley & Kistemann, 2015; Westfalenlippe, 2011).

Wellbeing and qualities of water have been studied widely across the literature. Water is distinctly associated to 'wellness' in human history, having cultural, ritual, spiritual healing values (Tredinnick-Rowe, Taylor, and Tuohino 2018) or vitalizing, soothing, relaxing effects (Strang 2005). Yet, as Rogan, O'Connor, & Horwitz (2005) recognize, neither built or natural spaces can be said to be free of social and cultural meanings. Place involves complex and intimate human engagement with environments, more than mere backdrops for experience. The way in which nature in western

discourse has reflected dualist, individualized, romanticised ideas (Roberts 2011) however, seems sometimes uncritically reflected in blue spaces research. More research is needed to understand in more detail how outdoor spaces may enhance wellbeing and IQOL, including the perspective of embodiment.

### *Embodiment and the outdoor experience*

Despite the frequent reference to a range of seminal psychological studies on the outdoors, human responses and affordances (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Gibson 1986; Tuan 1977), these are methodologically and theoretically less considerate of the body. An embodied phenomenology attends to the knowing body, humanism, the integration of the self and the physical worlds. According to Paterson (2009) haptic knowledges and sensuous disposition represent a being-in-the-world, is essential to experience and the meanings they represent. This has been found elemental in recent outdoor recreation studies, such as Couper's (2018) perspective on spatialities of being, and Allen-Collinson & Leledaki's (2015) exploration of sensory phenomenology in outdoors leisure studies. Brown & Humberstone, (2015) also recognized the body as elementary, in the ability to gain 'kinetic empathy' with places, which they suggested may be a strong indicator of sensory-attunement or wellbeing.

The seascape to Brown & Humberstone (2015), calls upon the corporeal, sentient, more-than-representational, as offering different ways to explore characteristics of sea-based forms of outdoor recreation. They argue, that by looking at the seascape 'as a mobile living energy, a phenomenological part of their being and becoming' (p. 188), and it opens a different way of understanding outdoor phenomena. Embodiment and multisensory perceptions of place are suggested as key-concepts, that capture how humans engage with sea-based experiences. This makes contextual

representations of sensory experiences ‘beyond words’ accessible, which are otherwise difficult to express comprehensibly (Pink, 2009).

Humanist psychology recognizes that emotional intelligence is a prerequisite for living authentically and seizing the full possibilities of being a person (Ryff and Singer 2008). Emotional intelligence Goleman (2004) asserted, is required in developing insight and excellence. Thus, emotions and sensations inherent in embodied experiences, may also influence the integration of knowledge, self-reflection, or the development of wellbeing.

The body-and-self-connection is dynamically involved in vitalization via intersubjectivity according to Stern (2010, p. 45). The theoretical concept on forms of vitality conceptualised as *movement, time, force, space and intention/intentionality*, discerns sea-based recreation, as lived space not merely as a background setting. Vitalizing effects of the presence of natural elements has been studied in a wellbeing context in outdoor recreation, but is not so well researched (Ryan et al., 2010). Dynamical forms of vitality can be recognized by descriptive terms like accelerating, fading, fleeting, weak, pushing, floating, relaxing, tense, pulsing, pulling, bursting, disappearing and so forth. They are closely related to the emotions that accompanies them, but are more precisely “the felt experience of force, in movement, with the temporal contour, and sense of aliveness going somewhere”(Stern (2010), p. 12).

Humanist discourses and Stern’s (2010) insights on forms of vitality may resonate with a range of themes brought up in previous outdoor adventure research, linking adventures to experiential qualities of wellbeing (Willig 2008; Kyriakopoulos 2011; Clough et al. 2016). For instance, how adventurous dynamic experiences in outdoor spaces, intersect with wider psycho-social and existential aspects of health and wellbeing. Yet as Willig’s, (2008) study recognized adventurous activities seems

notorious misfits to certain health imperatives. There is a considerable difference in how 'health benefits' are discerned, and as Chavez et al. (2005) and Mason and Holt (2012) pointed out, wellbeing, health are used indifferently across health research-disciplines.

Where objectivist and bio-medical approaches tend to confine health to scientific criteria, an integrative humanist approach, acknowledges human subjectivity, personhood, and lifeworld. These are seen as parts of what to a person is experienced as wellbeing or health. Antonovsky's seminal studies for instance suggested that people are more likely to stay healthy, overcome disease, cope with the stressors of life and maintain wellbeing, if 'meaning giving structures in life' are present. The changing understanding from *pathogenesis* to *salutogenesis*, implies a 'health continuum' rather than health as fixated conditions. A scale on which an individual, moves on an ease-disease scale, where both enabling and disabling factors exist. Enabling factors to health, according to Antonovsky, implied 'resistance', 'resources' and 'sense of coherence' (SOC). Where the SOC involves comprehensibility (cognitive), manageability (behavioural) and meaningfulness (emotional/spiritual). The IQOL by Ventegodt et al. (2003) similarly maintains that psychological and existential depth is required in conceptualising health and in research. It comprises both (1) subjective, (2) existential, and (3) objective determinants of life-quality, and thus argues, that a humility and respect for the richness and complexity of life is required.

The examination of how sea-kayaking enables or disables salutogenesis, meaning and life quality are therefore relevant perspectives in health research. Furthermore, insights of vitality may expand the understanding of sea-kayaking and wellbeing conceptually, to embrace embodiment and the dynamics of environments.

## **Methodologies and Methods**

### *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

The analysis of sea-kayakers' lived experiences is based on the qualitative and inductive approach Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as elaborated by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014). IPA lets the researcher investigate how the participants freely express themselves and seeks to avoid monitoring the research of health, based on predefined behavioral or cognitive categories and models. Rather, IPA allows the researchers to capture important details of the individuals' lifeworld, context and spatial characteristics.

IPA creates in line with humanist health discourses the opportunity to investigate the knowledge of sea-kayakers' lifeworld, their meanings and understandings of wellbeing. It is primarily committed to the rigorous analysis of cases and personhood rather than jumping to generalizations or claims for larger populations. It attempts to explore personal experience, perceptions of a given object or event, and identify patterns of meaning. IPA may indeed illuminate the embodied personal experience in the context of meaning, relationships, and the lived world and as connected to Merleau-Pontian (1945) body-phenomenology. The lens of phenomenology gives voice to the corporeal and sensory realm of subjective experiences, whereby sea-kayakers' may express a body-mind-world-unity, or experience of 'knowledge, being, and time' (Heidegger 1996) coming together. Also of how lived perceptions of the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962) emerges in conscious perceptions.

The outdoor context of sea-kayaking further brings in the relevance of eco-phenomenology. Thomson (2004) suggest, that eco-phenomenology's positive project seeks to restore meaning to the term the post-modern relationship to the environment.

Eco-phenomenologists he argues, hope to undercut and replace the conceptual roots of environmental crisis with ethical and metaphysical principles of environmental philosophy. There are however two distinguished forms, a transcendental or naturalistic ethical realism, respectively. Thomson (2004) maintains that, the transcendental realism can bring about a new understanding of our place in our world, by means of experience rather than ethical facts. ‘The power of experience’ signify, that involvement and experience often come prior to any objectification taking place. As recognizable in Lund's (2005, p.30) examination of walking in Scotland’s mountains:

“Our lives are not always lived in objectified bodies, for our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that end in objectification.”(Csordas, 1994. p. 7).

### *The Research Context*

The Sea-kayak journey took place in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, July 2018. It departed and returned to South Uist, after a paddling for seven days around and along Island of Barra, on the east-coast and others the west coast facing the North Atlantic Ocean. The group was nine kayakers in total, including six undergraduate outdoor students, two certified tutors and the first author of this paper. The trip was a part of a university’s up-skill programme and was facilitated with an Experiential Learning approach. The considerable openness, flexibility, reflexivity and responsibility required by this approach was seen to challenge participants to take ownership of their own learning and have an opportunity to influence the Journey. The theoretical implications of experiential learning and praxis are many (Roberts 2011), and beyond the scope of this paper to discuss.

### *Qualitative Interviews*

Qualitative Interviews followed a semi structured interview protocol based on the Standardized Open-Ended Interview approach (Turner, 2010; first authour). The

strength of this approach is that it allows the participants to fully express their viewpoints and experiences with minimal influence of the researcher's bias. One challenge is that participants do not always talk about the phenomena under investigation, despite the attempt to bracket presumptions, interviews were carried out with a certain level of anticipation of the research topic under investigation.

The interviewed students were 3 male and 3 females, aged 18-23, and interviews lasted between 20-35 mins. They were asked to report their most positive and challenging experiences. The word 'wellbeing' was not used in the questioning to avoid 'putting words in the mouth' of the participant, but to let the experiences emerge by the participants themselves. From the interviews, themes and sub-themes were inductively developed into a rich dataset, addressing how their experiences informed their wellbeing.

Braun and Clarke (2006) demarcated six steps that embrace the approach theoretically and methodologically; (1) the data were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were read a re-read to familiarize with the content; (2) interesting features of the data were identified systematically by generating codes across the dataset; (3) codes were collected into potential themes; (4) a thematic map was developed whereby the coded data, themes, and subthemes were compared within and between each set of categories to get an overview; (5) each theme was further refined in relation to the analytic context, where clear definitions and names were derived. This process sought to shed light the defined themes in relation to the research questions; (6) finally followed by writing up the thematic accounts based upon vignettes. The selection of vignettes aims to give the participants a voice, and intends to provide vivid, authentic and compelling examples, addressing the research question.

### *Ethnography and sensory ethnography*

Besides interviews, data were gained through field-research and ethnographic inspired analysis of the first researcher's lifeworld. To argument and extend the research, there are excerpts from the researcher's diary. The use of emplaced or sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015) furthermore, makes use of the sensory involvement and intersubjectivity of experiences as a source of knowledge. It was considered that the use of descriptive accounts of sensory experiences, thoughts, and reflections could discern aspects of the data-collection that were uniquely linked to context, space and place.

The general field observations were obtained from notetaking, diary, and conversations. When using ethnographic method and reflexivity, Hobbs (1993) asserted that the researcher is part of the social world which is studied, and contain a set of effects of the researcher. This was considered in the research process, in that any noticeable effects were made transparent. Informed consent and data protection measures were integrated in all methods.

### *First Author's reflexivity of the field experiences*

By being aware of the possible research biases and preconceptions that could influence participants journey, there was a careful consideration not to impose these onto others. Bruyn (1966) suggested that participant-observers consider that one ought to be interested in people as they are, not as they think they ought to be as some standard of his own. Several themes related to how the researcher's experiences could be seen to potentially influence their experience or in the interview. However, it is perceived that being there, provided a level of knowns or a mutual point of reference to the many shared experiences, to talk about and explore some aspects in more detail. Where it seems a possible limitation that participants did not so easily share vulnerability or struggles during the interviews, it is also possible that the positive

aspects may simply have felt more important or were more easily remembered at the time of the interview. Considerable challenges were associated with describing sensations or the sensory experiences, that participants often found hard to recall or express. For instance:

Michelle: '(...) When I'm in that sort of environment where it's just me in a boat at the sea, ehm, I just find it kind of like, I just feel very content, like I don't know what it is (...)you kind of just go with the waves, just.. I feel very calm all of a sudden, I can't describe it, there is no worry, it's just like no worry.'

Yet it is possible to discern aspects of sea-kayakers positive and enjoyable experiences in a broad experiential sense. Whilst inductive inquiry allows an open and unconstrained exploration of participants life-worlds, movements, and experiences, findings from this study may not be generalizable. We consider however, that including the diversity of themes in the health-related analysis is important, to help create a better understanding of the complexity of outdoor recreation phenomena in the future research. The following analysis ensued three consecutive main themes; 'the seascape, wellbeing and vitality', 'embodiment and wholeness of experience' and 'ecological awareness and self-reflection'.

## **Analysis**

### *The Seascape, wellbeing and vitality*

The spatial contexts at sea involves dynamic encounters which influence experience and wellbeing greatly. The changing *forces* in the sea-environment such as waves, shifting winds and tides are at times powerful, at other times subtle and gentle energies felt to be soothing, calming atmospheres. These opposites require the students to embrace both strength and weakness, positive and negatives, excitement and joy, challenge, fear and hardship. The embodied and psychological responses to dynamic experiences represent according to Stern (2010), psychic forces and counterforces,

which contains developmental implications. At sea, there are both productive/counterproductive forces and thus sea-kayaking contains ambiguous effects to wellbeing. A range of examples following, demonstrates how dynamic, two-sided but often complementary experiences emerge during sea-kayaking:

Carl: 'Yeh, there is two sides of it. There is the awesome side, which is when you get the big waves and you are getting thrown about (...) It's the excitement, it's the adrenalin, I love that part. but I also love the quiet and calm and looking about and that.'

The contrast and variety, the total calm of the sea to the wild tall waves, is a part of sea-kayaking that several participants relate to as a positive:

Peter: 'When it was a bit bouncy and rough... On the last day... it was a little bit of a rush, a bit sketchy. I like that. Just crashing through the waves and water and that, I like just the excitement of it (...).'

At sea the spatial dynamics of *movement* are in constant change, fluid and to some extent unpredictable. The contrasts at sea are large, and both challenging forces at sea are perceived enjoyable, as are calm pleasant moments. Subjective perception of the circumstances however varies:

Bob: 'The water sucks, I don't trust it, it didn't move properly you can't predict it properly (...) I'm not from the sea so I have a natural distrust towards it.'

The perception of fluidity and inability to predict movements in this example, seems to produce negative feelings, lack of control and manageability. The combination of skills, trust or a lack thereof, combined with each individual's ability to handle a variety of circumstances produce positive/negative emotions. The element shift going from land to the sea reflects an important spatial-psychological change from relative spatial and psychological stability into a fluid environment of flexibility, insecurity and total immersion, until the next landing.

Many examples show how vitalising effects of natural element of water seems to have a direct influence on wellbeing. For instance, reflecting sea-kayaker's feelings of

being alive or interacting with their sensuous capabilities, their responsiveness to deal with various aspects of the journey in a fluid, changeable open space of the sea:

Maria: I find the sea so calming(...) I think it is like the rocking, and like the little movements stuff and the waves and the like blue of the sea, and I love it when the sea is really clear and you can see the bottom and there is a whole like, other world you know what I mean (...).'

Michelle: '(...) When I'm in that sort of environment where it's just me in a boat at the sea, ehm, I just find it kind of like, I just feel very content, like I don't know what it is (...)you kind of just go with the waves, just.. I feel very calm all of a sudden, I can't describe it, there is no worry, it's just like no worry.'

Brown & Humberstone (2015) suggest that, the openness and sense of freedom at the sea is reflected in individual and collective meanings. This may be seen where participants report positive, uplifting, freeing, appreciative and calming moments:

Camilla: '(...) you can look out at sea and there is nothing, it's just a line, I like that (laughs). (...) thinking about the world, how big it is, how much there is, I don't know, it just goes on.'

Michelle: '(...) you don't get to see that a lot, you just see nothing but the ocean around I just think that a quite calming view to see. (...) I think a lot of people it might find it quite intimidating cause you feel very small when you are out at the sea (...), I find it quite, ehm, just freeing (...).'

According to Bollnow (2011) a distinct feelings of endless space, vulnerability, or a 'sense of expanse' is part of nature atmospheres, that can impact the individuals entire sense of possibility and feeling of freedom, corresponding to a sense of inner expanse, an ultimately uplifting experience (p.87). Whilst this uplifting spatial phenomenon of atmosphere may appear, there are other aspects such as sensing the natural soundscapes and embodied movement of the sea- or landscapes, that appear influential to positive emotional responses, for example:

Michelle: '(...) I think especially when you are in those open spaces, (...) it's very few sounds but they make like quite a lot all together. Cause you can't hear like traffic (...) or anything like that, you get to focus on all the little tiny sounds, like the birds and the seals.'

Responses to soundscapes such as waves crashing on cliffs and tiny sounds of birds and seals bring about pleasant emotional and sensory responses. According to Böhme's

(2000) insights on nature atmospheres and Vollmar's (2004) analysis on ecological soundscape, these may facilitate the rediscovery of sensory and emotional capabilities.

The *space* often expressed as 'felt to be wide open', seemed to impact feelings of calm, head space or respite, freedom, escape and discharge of stressors and worries of everyday life. Both waves, kayak and body moment in numerous planes and the openness of the seascape seem to expand both the outer and the personal inner sense of space, movement, exploration, experience and reflection. These sensory involvements' in the seascape for instance, create feelings of calm, freedom, vitality or aliveness. However, this seems somewhat also constrained by the kayak and individual's skills and ability to manage the shifting environment.

Besides sea-kayaking it-self, other aspects of the journey and the qualities of place, space and the environment impacted wellbeing. The Outer Hebrides as a remote part of Scotland is an island-landscape and environment that offers the participants an opportunity to engage with and explore rural seascapes not common in everyday life. Remote camping and outdoor cooking, engaging with rural cultural life, pub visits in South Uist, arts and crafts, wildlife and natural life:

Peter: 'It kinds of bundles everything I like about the outdoors. (...) I love camping hiking, navigating everything like that, (...) the sea as well, it kind of chucks everything like that together, like seeing all those little remote places.'

Sea-kayaking also provided appreciation of life, as another example reflected:

Camilla: 'Yeh, I consider it (sea-kayaking) important, (...) it makes me think that I have chosen the right path in life and I would like to continue to do this more in the future. (...) (...) it makes me feel good. It makes me appreciate life.'

Various accounts make it clear that many different personal motives and intentions were involved and comprises a range of participant/professional *internationalities*. Paddling around the various islands for seven days, was not driven by hunt for food for survival, but by educational and recreational interest to explore islands, nature, sea-life, gaining

outdoor skills, and to socialize in an adventurous lifestyle. Importantly subjective perceptions differ, why emerging feelings, like/dislike distress/wellbeing from vitality-dynamics at sea, cannot be generalized for all.

### *Embodiment – the wholeness of experience*

Embodiment and dynamic movements during sea-kayaking, influence the individual phenomenological world and wellbeing. Corporeality brings awareness to the body, perceived movements, sensations, the felt level of capacities. The emergence of corporeality to the self, happens when movements of the body and being in the kayak become conscious. This is evoked by feelings of the waves rocking gently, gliding through calm water, paddling in the rough forceful waves up and down, or tides and winds.

There are often ‘mixed and ambiguous feelings’ occurring, which suggest that positive feelings co-exist with challenging and at times negative emotions:

Camilla: ‘(...) I guess I was better than I thought I would be (...) I didn’t want to fall behind so I just always tried to keep up (...) I think I worried more before-hand than I actually did on the water.’

Maria: ‘I think there was a couple of times when I knew the paddling would be pretty intense, the crossings yeh, when my shoulder was hurting and my legs were numb, and I’d hurt my elbow as well, I didn’t know if I would be able to actually do it, but I was fine in the end (...).’

Experiences like this suggest, how challenges by participants were often followed by sense of accomplishment and reward. Where an easy and comfortable calm sea is enjoyable, rapid changes in weather and wave conditions throw challenges at people and out of their comfort zone:

Bob: ‘(...) when we were in very, very rough weather and very tall waves that was very stressful and I didn’t like it. (...) Well, it could have gone a lot worse (...) I stayed close to Peter ‘cause I know he can swim’

Researcher: ‘At a stage of continuous vomiting and I realized that I was at a point of no return. (...) I could not seem to recover momentum nor physically or mentally due to seasickness. (...) Later these ‘survival’ dimensions of the journey, confronting the unpredictability and forces of the sea, became a

reminder of the little things in life that matter. These then seemed to become more valued and joyful.'

Commitment through challenge are ubiquitous to overcome mental or physical constraints, which may facilitate personal development and resilience. Being at sea and actually 'doing it' were seen to elude negative thoughts, self-doubt, fears and anxious anticipations. The contrasts and ambivalence between conditions highlight both rewarding and severely stressful moments.

A range of accounts seem to suggest how sea-kayaking can create a space of respite, allowing an unconstrained sensation of being-in-the-world. 'Being in the world' according to Heidegger (1996) relates to our directedness and intentionality's with the available knowledges of being we possess. In the same way that, diving opens up a certain phenomenological underwater universe, of movements and sensations (Merchant, 2011) or sailing certain embodied spatiality's of being (Couper, 2018), sea-kayaking may facilitate other states of being. Varley's, (2011) work has highlighted the liminal quality of sea-kayaking experiences as chiefly countercultural and deeply reinvigorating. Miles & Wattchow (2015) similarly asserts, that the departure from the land and return, marks an important spatial-psychological change. A different state of being thus may exist when in communion with the sea, than on land.

Involvement of vestibular sensations in numerous planes, is for instance why sea-kayaking may enable people with spinal cord injuries (Taylor & McGruder's, 1996), or that water-based recreation are inclusive spaces to bodies of difference (Foley & Kistemann, 2015). However, other aspects of being on an adventurous journey also seem to influence perceptions on 'time, being and knowledge'. Such as a distance to ordinary life, a different way of attending to time and space (Becker 2015), which seem to offer participants opportunities dwell, reflect, being explorative and to expand on embodied knowledges:

Peter: 'I just think it's just good sea-kayaking. I feel like... definitely good for your health and well-being. Especially in terms of (...) it gets you time to clear your head. Not even clear your head, like you don't even have anything going on, it's just kind of, it just takes you a bit out of normal life (...) And, it's just nice to live in that moment and just appreciate what you do, you know.'

A space to pause, enjoy the moment, may provide new insight or perspectives to emerge:

Peter: 'I enjoyed it all a lot, but there were moments where you just stop and sit and think. Time to process. A bit of time to process everything, (...) just a little bit of space you know. Everything kind of stops and you just think, ah this is sweet.'

According to (Peter Becker, 2013, p.16), on the adventurous journey, time is determined by concrete experiences and the real course of events, following the rhythms of nature rather than linear clock-time. *Time* seem to be perceived as cyclical and processual rather than linear and clockwise, when participants report 'time standing still', following the rhythms of the sea, their bodies in action. Such distance in space and time away from stressors, seems to provide an opportunity for a participant to feel calm:

Michelle: 'I think I can see it being a bit of an escape, yeh. (...) you can just go out into the sea and kind of get perspective again and feel calmer again, like when you're feeling very stressed and like everything is getting on top of you, (...) it's just good to get out of those situations and like just kind of clear your head, just get everything back together.'

In a developmental sense sea-kayaking may thus negotiate time and individual agency differently. As a way of being-in-the-world, this may enhance or develop ways of being, such as being calm or becoming more curious or explorative:

Carl: 'It's the environment being there and me wanting to find all its' little secrets, (...) it's a two-way interaction, it always is. Yeh, it's me looking out at little nooks and crannies and seeing what it's trying to hide.'

This opportunity of combining exploration and curiosity describes a distinct quality of sea-kayaking and the seascape:

Carl: 'It would be completely different if it was a sterile environment (...) (with) nothing to see, nothing to explore nothing to find. It would just be putting the paddling strokes in, yeh it's the diversity of the environment.'

Sea-kayaking seems to involve a degree of freedom beneficial for world and self-exploration. This however may require an experiential learning approach, to allow flexibility, reflective practice and participant freedom. For instance, that required skills for journeying safely, monitoring weather and tidal movements, reading maps and making a bearing and navigating becomes integrated and embodied part of the journey.

### *Ecological Awareness and Self-Reflection*

Empathy and empathetic connections is an emotional form of intelligence that was described by sea-kayakers, about relationships of self, others and the world (Humberstone 2013; Gruenewald 2008):

Camilla: 'Yeh, because you're in it, like when you see seals and things like that (...) I look at all that and I think is beautiful and I want to keep it like that I don't want to destroy it (...) it makes you appreciate it lots more (...)'

Gruenewald (2008) (p. 317) argues that ecological reinhabitation can be empowering and increase consciousness of place. From the experience of the researcher, kayaking felt to provide a profound immersion and connection:

Researcher: 'The movements through the water was felt immediately as powerful forces. Shapes of shells, crabs and seaweed, the many shades of blue caught the eye (...) but only fraction of what would be there in this huge world underneath. The smell of salty sea and air, seaweed and something indescribable. It seems now more clearly comprehended hoe this big blue beyond pleasantness contains knowledge that is lived.'

Experiences of the sea were by many participants linked to a concern for the environment:

Michelle: 'I think we were quite lucky with the beaches and places that we camped cause they were all like very clean and the water was very clear (...) but on one camp site there was quite a lot of just random stuff floating around (...)Yeh, you don't want to ruin such nice beaches.'

This parallels with other studies that express similar attitudes (Gurholt 2014; Dykes and Miles 2018; Miles and Wattchow 2015), suggesting that outdoor experiences like sea-kayaking, can be a powerful experiential tool in environmental education and for self-exploration:

Carl: '(...) a lot a lot of buoys and fishing nets which are dragged out, plastic lots of bottles, lot of stuff out there (...) but it's nothing different to me than to see plastic and rubbish in a park, it just shows that it is an issue all around.'

Possibly, engagements with the sea reaffirms that both the quality of the environment and ecological-aesthetics (Böhme 1993), is mutually linked to wellbeing and the quality of experience. Although there is no indication directly that participants feel unwell in the presence of litter or polluting fish farms, they sense and recognize the negative impacts these may have because of being there themselves:

Maria: '(...) I think being on the sea, kind of reaffirms what I already know (...) seeing all the fish farms as well makes me sure of the reasons that I turned vegan.'

Maria: 'I think it is very hard in a lot of outdoor sports to find somewhere where you feel like that (...) Everest which is supposed to be the biggest and hardest mountains to climb, still it is completely littered from the thousands of people (...) It (sea-kayaking) feels a lot more clean in a way, more pure. This week I've had a lot more interest in the sea, I think, it really does intrigue me (...)'

Littering issues reflect the way in which many contemporary adventurous in 'hyped destinations' have become unsustainable due to the mass tourism (Musa, Higham, and Thompson-Carr 2015). The Outer Hebrides as 'wild places' explored by sea-kayak are distant from urban areas or mass tourism sites, seems comparably traceless and untouched. This was important to most participants. Wilderness sea-kayaking although suggested as a relative sustainable practice (Irving Oxley and Brown 2003), that does not create lasting alterations to environments, may be an issue to consider in future outdoor recreation research.

## **Discussion**

The main research question of this study asks how vitality-dynamics express themselves in sea-kayaking, and influence on wellbeing? Dynamical forms of vitality frames sea-kayaking as a phenomenologically distinct way of experiencing aliveness, existential meaningfulness, change, development and embodied learning at sea.

Vitality-dynamics distinguish determinants of wellbeing as both bodily, spatially and psychologically anchored. Vitality-dynamics is a source of multi-sensory responses like; seeing, hearing, sensing, energies, movements or ecological atmospheres. It is evident that embodied sensations of vitality during sea-kayaking have direct psychological impacts. For instance, psycho-dynamic changes in moods facilitated by dynamics at sea, such as the 'calm rocking sea' becomes soothing and uplifting. This was reported as counteractive to stress in everyday life and liked to a respite full space and time. Sensations of the body evoke sensory capabilities, moods and vitality, which are often expressed as subjectively meaningful experiences. The feeling of being part of the sea itself possibly facilitate an 'inner expansion of space' or connects internal and outside worlds. Yet, although dynamic forms of vitality may be experienced corporeally as personal meaningful experiences, they may be hard to articulate and contain contradictions (Stern, 2010, p.45).

Corresponding to Antonovsky's concept of salutogenesis, the development of 'resistance', 'resources' and 'sense of coherence', and elements of IQOL, are likely to be intensified during sea-kayaking. Sea-kayaking seem to facilitate wellbeing or development differently from other contexts of 'normal life' in a number of ways. Challenge and contradictions for instance is as an unavoidable existential human condition yet is likely felt more intensely at sea.

The co-existence of dramatic, uncomfortable or critical situations, alters the need to cope, find strength, confront themselves, both own resources and weaknesses. This can be positive to wellbeing because participants gain a greater sense of confidence in their ability to overcome challenges, knowing their boundaries or managing contradictions. Kayakers describe, the satisfaction of becoming well-versed and mastering the interplay of the waves, but also feeling challenged, stressed and out of

their comfort zone, cold wet or seasick. In situations like this, co-participants and instructors often admit to vulnerability, fears and anxieties. A shared interdependence also surface, where commitment to helping each-other seems alter empathetic abilities.

Adventurous encounters contain the potential to learn the integration of ‘wholeness’, because positive and negative aspects of the journey and impacts to wellbeing co-exist. Whilst the seascape opens up the ability to feel good about life and self, it also at times narrows or oppresses the sense of possibilities and wellbeing. Embracing these contradictions during sea-kayaking, can be empowering to the realization of life quality, because ‘feeling alive’ is a quality in itself. But also, because it may improve the ability to cope with future, challenging situations resourcefully and resiliently in other aspects of life. On the level of IQOL the deep subjective, existential aspects and the superficial objective phenomena in life may be brought up, recognized or reorganized. Personal struggles of wellbeing in everyday life for instance, may be temporarily diminished or put into perspective. Or when life is turned up-side down, (sometimes literally) everything may be perceived differently, appear more chaotic or become balanced, depending on the cultural conditional situation and the individual context. Opposites and challenge if they are adequately managed therefore are not detrimental to health.

Ambiguity exerts a constructive potential for human wellbeing and development, that may be used psycho-dynamically though sea-kayaking. According to Stern, (2010), in psychology or developmental work energy, power and dynamic forces in motion, can be understood like ‘change in process’, which is the opposite of static. This insight means that forces at sea may facilitate developmental processes and expand personal capabilities. This may resonate with Brown & Humberstone (2015) that the

seascape can be understood as corporeal, sentient, living energy, that becomes part of 'being and becoming'.

The dynamics of psychic forces and counterforces with their resultant experiences may possibly create a new or different history of subjective and sociocultural meanings. Within the shared embodiment by sea-kayak, each individual negotiates aspects of IQOL and cope with their wellbeing more intensely. The degree to which sea-kayaking journey interweaves with participants' 'resistance', 'resources' and 'sense of coherence' constructively, suggest a salutogenetic potential. Vitality-dynamics at sea and the inherent ambiguity imply, that sea-kayaking adventures are more than exercise or the experience of risk or thrill. They are part of the co-creation of a meaningful adventurous lifestyle, perhaps a salutogenetic culture. Yet, to what extent lessons learned and coping with ambiguity transfer to other aspects of participants life from this study remain unknown. This could be an interesting examination in a future study as well as establishing greater statistical significance, how sea-based activities enhance salutogenesis and IQOL.

Whilst conditions of sea-kayaking share many similarities with other sea-based activities, Dykes & Miles (2018) reminded, that the rhythm of movement and speed are unique sensations in a kayak that comprises a distinctive shared embodiment. The kayak is assembling body and sea in a unique fusion as if one were part of the sea itself. Notably, embodied and experiential skills in sea-kayaking, seem to include ecological, geographical, and technical competence, which were part of Inuit cultures originally (Whitridge, 2004, p.221). As a sea based form of travel it allows going long distances, exploring and experiencing a variety of environmental and cultural landscapes.

Whilst experiences within sea kayaking have a personal development potential to participants wellbeing, it mutually seems to contain a potential to influence

ecological awareness and connectedness, as Gruenewald's study (2008) suggested. It may be that because sea-kayaking uniquely provides lengthy embodied connectedness to the sea, a more profound connection and understanding of the human interconnectedness with the sea-environment is possible. Thomson's (2004) insights on eco-phenomenology and the transcendental perspective of lived experience and mind-body-ward unity, may therefore be a valuable perspective in future outdoor recreation research.

### **Conclusion**

This research examined how sea-kayaking influenced subjective wellbeing and considered more closely the effects of embodiment, forms of vitality conceptualized as: 'movement, time, space, force and intention'. Vitality-dynamics provides a lens through which, embodiment and inter-subjective phenomenon can be examined. The theoretical framework based on humanism, intersected the health perspective of salutogenesis and IQOL, suggested that sea-kayaking can enhance resilience, resources, a sense of coherence and meaningfulness in life.

The lived experiences of the seascape through sea-kayaking are phenomenologically distinct, but mutually positive and ambivalent states of being. This vitalizes bodily senses, feelings of aliveness, meaningfulness, interdependence and empathy amongst participants. Both the seascape and sea-kayaking journey contains constructive and contradictive potentials for the development of personal wellbeing and IQOL. It is, however, highly subjective how experiences are perceived and managed. Sea-kayaking adventures can be a beneficial part of health prevention and intervention strategies focusing on a humanist and salutogenetic perspective. Careful planning and the appropriateness of interventions, however, should be taken into consideration.

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## Data availability statement

Data is kept by the University of Cumbria, UK.

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