

The meaning of open-water swimming for adults in Ireland: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Purpose – There has been an increase in swimming in natural bodies of water as reported in personal qualitative accounts. However, limited academic research has explored the meaning of this occupation. Engaging with nature, exercising and being part of a community contribute to better mental and physical health. The purpose of this research was to explore the meaning that adults attribute to open-water swimming in natural bodies of water.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used phenomenological interviews to explore the meaning that five adults attribute to open-water swimming.

Findings – Open-water swimming contributes to meaning-making in many ways. Participants reported swimming as necessary for maintaining mental and emotional well-being and forming meaningful connections with the social environment, nature and their true selves.

Research limitations/implications – This study contributes to the understanding of the meaning of open-water swimming for adults in Ireland. Understanding the meaning of this occupation may add to the body of evidence exploring blue-space to promote health.

Originality/value – Open-water swimming is an occupation growing in popularity. This is the first paper to explore open-water swimming from an occupational perspective. This may provide an alternative perspective for viewing blue-space engagement and understanding the relationship between health, blue-space occupations and our oceans.

Keywords Open-water swimming, Meaningful occupation, Phenomenology, Blue-space, Well-being

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is growing interest in promoting blue-space for health and well-being (Britton *et al.*, 2018). Blue-space may be defined as outdoor bodies of water with the potential of promoting health (White *et al.*, 2020). There are ongoing research programmes: “Sea, Ocean and Public Health in Europe” (SOPHIE Consortium, 2020), UK Blue Gyms (White *et al.*, 2020) and “Nature and Environment to Attain and Restore Health” (Carlin *et al.*, 2017) – researching the health benefits associated with blue-space to inform policy-makers and practitioners to promote health for all. A systematic review exploring therapeutic interventions in blue-space found evidence supporting the direct benefits of blue-space engagement for mental health (Britton *et al.*, 2018) and qualitative research has shown that participation in “blue exercise” elicits feelings of achievement, mindfulness and connection with nature (Thompson and Wilkie, 2020).

White *et al.* (2020) propose a detailed model of the relationship between blue-spaces, participation and health/well-being. Although not written from an occupational science/therapy perspective, their model, based on a systematic literature review, shows how occupations are embedded in a

social and geographical context (Whiteford, 2009) with an important human-environment feedback loop during participation (Hocking, 2020) in blue-space occupations. The model by White *et al.* (2020) illustrates how blue-space occupations may take different forms, or hold different functions for participants (Larson and Zemke, 2003). People may participate indirectly (viewing the sea through a window), have greater or lesser proximity to blue-space in everyday life or have contact with the water for deliberate or incidental reasons (White *et al.*, 2020). This model includes an evidence-based exploration of the pathways by which engagement in blue-space occupations are proposed to lead to positive health outcomes and provides important evidence for the link between meaningful human occupation and health, which is a core tenet of occupational therapy (Wilcock, 2007).

White *et al.* (2020) propose three pathways or mechanisms by which health is influenced by engagement with blue-space: mitigation (reducing harm in the environment) instoration

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(improving physical or mental health) and restoration (recovery from stress). Krpalek *et al.* (2020) found that war veterans had improved occupational performance, reduced symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, stress and anxiety after occupational therapy-led scuba-diving. Participants transferred learnt skills like mindfulness into daily life, improving relaxation and family relationships. Also, the meaningful connections formed with other war veterans provided opportunities for sharing. The physical marine environment enabled pain relief through the experience of weightlessness. Buoyancy and weightlessness during scuba-diving was also reported by people with physical impairments (Carin-Levy and Jones, 2007). Immersion in water enabled freedom from impairments for participants – leading to an enhanced self-concept and improved confidence in their abilities. As in White *et al.*'s model (2020), these water-based activities promoted social connection with the “family” of fellow veterans (Krpalek *et al.*, 2020). Blue-space occupations have meaning for participants in terms of restoring well-being, physical health and social connectedness (White *et al.*, 2020).

Research exploring the personal experience of open-water swimming, as a particular form of blue-space engagement is limited. Ice-water swimming has been found to have a positive impact on mental health for Finnish swimmers (Huttunen *et al.*, 2004). Australian participants of informal swimming groups identified that the marine and social environments promoted healthy aging and were beneficial for well-being (Costello *et al.*, 2019). In Ireland, participants in a qualitative study found that immersions in the Irish Sea were linked with meditative factors and relief from arthritis and depression (Foley, 2015). Bathing in the Irish Sea off Dublin has a long history with a vibrant community of daily swimmers, around Sandymount, Dalkey and Sandycove (Colley, 2012). In the West of Ireland, “mini-tribes” of swimmers swim daily along the Atlantic seaboard (Kelleher, 2019). The experiences of Irish swimmers, and the meaning of this occupation to them, have not been explored from an occupational perspective to date. Understanding meaning as perceived by an individual is needed to clarify the true nature of an occupation (Persson *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, recognising the value of nature and place as influencing well-being presents an opportunity for health-care systems to seek meaningful, cost-effective services (Britton *et al.*, 2018). This study sought to understand the meaning of open-water swimming – an occupation with potential for therapeutic use.

Methodology

An interpretive phenomenological methodology was used for researchers to gather an understanding of the contextualised lived experience of participating in open-water swimming (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008) – understanding how the occupation is experienced. The Value and Meaning in Occupations (ValMO) model (Persson *et al.*, 2001) was used to develop some preliminary ideas about how meaning might be created through the experience of swimming. This model posits that occupations provide three types of value experience contributing to meaning; concrete value (the tangible outcomes of completing an occupation), socio-symbolic value (the

importance of the occupation as perceived by a person's experience and background) and self-reward value (the immediate benefit of occupational performance e.g. pleasure) (Persson *et al.*, 2001). In this way, the authors not only were led primarily by the participants' perspectives but also used theoretical and personal lenses to interpret meaning (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). The first author has personal experience of blue-space occupations that contributed to beliefs about the benefits of water-engagement for well-being. The second author has experience in using the ValMO model in occupational therapy interventions, as well as phenomenological methodologies. Throughout, a reflective journal was used noting any preconceptions, beliefs or new findings (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008) to document the researchers' “sense-making” (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, p. 11).

Sampling

Following ethical approval, participants were recruited purposively as per interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) guidelines (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). Posters were placed at frequently used swimming areas to access swimming communities, ensuring participants swam regularly. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling where participants refer information-rich cases in their social circles (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Participants expressed interest in this study by emailing the first author to arrange for interviews.

Data gathering and analysis

In IPA, the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant making sense of the experience (Smith *et al.*, 2009). The qualitative interviews included phenomenological questions such as “how would you describe open-water swimming?” and occupation-focused questions like “how does swimming shape your daily life or routine?” To facilitate self-reflection prior to the interviews, the participants were given the occupational value questionnaire (OVal-9) instrument – a tool developed from the ValMO model to help individuals express how an occupation is experienced (Persson and Erlandsson, 2010). Using this tool allowed the participants begin to verbalise the meaning of the occupation of swimming in ways they may not have considered e.g. by asking; “when you swim, are you expressing an important part of yourself?” The interview then encouraged participants to expand more broadly. In this way, the meaning of swimming was co-constructed. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Table 1 presents interview questions. Once transcribed, the transcripts were returned to participants for member checking to ensure data gathered was accurate. Participants accepted the transcripts and made no changes.

In keeping with the purpose of IPA, “to investigate how people make sense of their experiences” (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, p.8), the first author immersed herself in the data, analysing each case individually, listening to audio recordings and reading over transcripts trying “to step into participants' shoes” (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, p.11). A traditional method (pen and paper) was used and the preliminary stages involved formulating exploratory comments in the transcript margins. Exploratory comments analysed the ways that a

Table 1 Semi-structured interview questions

Research questions	Interview question	Rational	Prompts guided by OVal-9
<i>Research questions were guided by phenomenology – the meaning of this occupation to participants with some additional occupational therapy theory</i>			
1) How do participants describe open water swimming?	“How would you describe open water swimming?”	This explores a participant’s occupational narrative or life-story which helps to view an individual’s understanding of their experience of meaning over time (Christiansen, 1999). Occupational narrative lends itself to the unique experience of open water swimming.	
2) How do individuals perceive open water swimming?	“How is the experience of open water swimming significant to you?”	This helps to explore the occupational value of open water swimming for adults and gain an understanding of the unique experience	A necessary occupation? Expressing an important part of oneself? (Persson and Erlandsson, 2010)
3) How are participants motivated to engage in open water swimming?	“Why did you start open water swimming?” “What continues to motivate you to swim in open water?”	Motivation for occupation may be understood by examining an individual’s interests, sense of self-efficacy and values (Lee and Kielhofner, 2017)	
4) How does open-water swimming impact their daily life?	“How does open water swimming shape your daily life?”	Persson and Erlandsson (2010) view maintenance occupations as daily occupations that, by habituation become daily routines. Maintenance occupations are an expression of concrete values, like the development of capacities and skills connected to everyday routines	
5) How does the environment impact the experience of open-water swimming?	“Describe the surrounding environments of open water swimming” or “How do the surrounding environments such as the physical set-up and social context shape your experience?”	Interpretative phenomenology acknowledges the importance of context shaping personal experience of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Occupational therapy is concerned with the interaction between a person and their environment	Tradition, culture, family

participant talked about, understood and thought about the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). The IPA double hermeneutic approach meant trying to understand the participant’s perspective, but also searching for deeper meaning that the person themselves may not have been aware of (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). Themes were clustered based on conceptual similarities see Table 3, sometimes using metaphor as interpretation e.g. “I was in cold water this morning. There’s nothing you can throw at me now” [B] was labelled as “Armour”. The ValMO model was not used for the analysis – labels and themes were developed from the emic (participant) perspective in an inductive manner. Although it is impossible to bracket researcher perspectives completely, bias was minimised by having two researchers analyse transcript sections and discuss emerging findings and potentially alternate meanings. An audit trail (reflections and data analysis memos) established confirmability (Wolf, 2003) (Table 2).

Findings

More participants volunteered than could be interviewed for this study. The first six were interviewed and the remainder were contacted explaining that the maximum number of planned participants was reached. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) advise against large sample sizes in IPA. Instead, the focus is on creating an in-depth examination of a phenomenon.

Following the interviews, one person withdrew their data. The findings presented are from 5 adults (4 females, 1 male) with a wide age-range. Participants swam in swimsuits all year round, took quick dips in the water, or swam up to 2–3 kilometres. All participants swam for enjoyment, although some had competed in events. Participants swam on their own or in informal swimming groups. The data analysis process resulted in two overall themes, with several sub-themes (Table 3).

Mental and emotional well-being

Open-water swimming was meaningful to all participants as an occupation that helped mental and emotional well-being – viewed as important when dealing with the complexities of daily life. Participant E metaphorically discussed her need for open-water swimming to feel free:

It’s like a crutch and once you get used to it you cannot give it up. I personally get a stuck feeling without it and it just releases that feeling. So, it’s the freedom versus that stuck feeling [E].

Escapism

Participants found meaning in swimming as a means to: “stop the clock” [E] and escape the stress and complexity of daily life and return to simplicity:

Table 2 Sample of the data analysis process

Transcript section	Exploratory comments	Subtheme	Theme
"In our lives, it's all about the clock, and in the sea, you just take time out for yourself, stop the clock." [E]	No time constraints		
"A real elation and it lingers. It doesn't just stay when you're in there it keeps you going." [C]	Emotional benefits that last	* Emotional cleanse	
"It's just that kinda getting away, that break from the complexity of dealing with humans and everyday life. With swimming it's just like; here's a wave, here's another wave. The best thing about swimming is that everything in your head is gone." [A]	Getting away from the complexity of life and returning to simplicity	* Escapism	Mental and emotional well-being

Note: *Subthemes were created via co-construction – These were words or phrases that synthesised participants' interpretation of their experience of meaning in this occupation

Table 3 Themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
• Mental and emotional well-being	1 Escapism
	2 "A pure form of mindfulness"
	3 Mental strength
	4 Emotional cleanse
• Connection	1 A shared experience
	2 Immersions in nature
	3 The true self

"It's just that getting away, that break from the complexity of dealing with humans and everyday life. With swimming it's just like; here's a wave, here's another wave. The best thing about swimming is that everything in your head is gone" [A].

Open-water swimming enabled participants to escape and take time for themselves. It was an occupation that was chosen just for them, away from the responsibilities of home and work:

"It's something that I'm doing for me. That break between home and work. Leisure is probably the wrong word" [A].

"In our lives, it's all about the clock, and in the sea, you just take time out for yourself..." [E].

"A pure form of mindfulness" [E]

Participants found emotional benefit in swimming as the physicality of cold water "jolts" [B] them into the present moment. The experience of cold meant that attention is forced into the present:

"I think I am more connected and more in the present. I think the cold water is refreshing. More in the present and I think it's good for me when I think a lot. I go there and it's more clear" [C].

Open-water swimming appeared to be an intense sensory experience that facilitated an "extreme meditation" [A] or "pure form of mindfulness" [E]. Being in the cold seawater feels like being "in survival mode" [E] and "you're forced to forget about everything else because your senses are coming at you." [A]

Mental strength

Participants explored the sense of achievement they felt after battling with cold waters. The sea provided a protective armour, allowing participants to feel "smug" [B], having the mental strength to face anything: "there's nothing you can throw at me now" [B]. Participant E discussed how "battling with the waves" enabled her to withstand emotional vulnerability:

"The sea definitely strengthened me personally... And I would tend to be quite an empathetic person. I could walk into a room and feel everybody's feelings. Whereas I think going in and out of the sea helps me to be stronger about that. So it's protecting yourself in a strange way" [E].

Open-water swimming was highly valued by participants because it helped them overcome mental health difficulties in the past;

"For mental health, I think it's really really valuable. And I would've had things like anxiety and stuff like that before and definitely, I've found that this has been the most helpful for me" [B].

And continued to be part of maintaining mental well-being:

"In [placename] it can be very dark during winter during the day and you can get a bit depressed [...] swimming helps a lot" [C].

Emotional cleanse

The sea appeared to wash away negative emotions, creating a "cleansed emotional state" [E]. Participant B imagined: "plunging into the water and just having it wash away" when she felt overwhelmed. This emotional benefit lasts with "intensity" [E] that influences the rest of the day:

A real elation and it lingers. It doesn't just stay when you're in there it keeps you going" [C].

"You get that feeling of, I want to say euphoria because it is! It's amazing during and after, and it lasts! Like you know I personally feel good for the whole rest of the day" [D].

Connection

Open-water swimming was experienced as a connective occupation – via participation, swimmers were connected to the social environment, nature and their true selves.

A shared experience

Swimming was a shared experience with a “sense of community” [B] experienced at the swimming site. Shared “lovely” banter among swimmers was experienced through helping strangers: “put on wetsuits” and “helping women put their bras on” to letting strangers know the mood of the sea, “oh its choppy out there.” [B].

The social environment was described as inclusive. Like [Foley \(2015\)](#) who noted that swimming, brings out: “all sorts” (p. 221), participant A reported that:

“There is every body shape, every age, you know everyone is down there. People coming from their cars and you see them hobbling down there and they get in and everyone is young in the sea! Nobody feels bad about their bodies, you just get changed quickly and nobody cares about what body part is shown!” [B].

There was a shared social identity among swimmers, something deeper than shared banter. This was experienced as unity and a common spirituality, even if people engaged in the occupation for different reasons:

“It’s very much a sense of oneness. Everyone very much clicks into what we’re doing as opposed to it being a big party [...] it’s a shared experience on a physical and spiritual level” [E].

“We go there for that same thing, to feel happier. But we all go for different reasons and there is meaning in that. That’s why it’s very special, we all feel that connection with people” [C].

Immersion in nature

Nature connection was experienced through open-water swimming. This moved between appreciating the subtle changes in nature to submerging underwater and ultimately feeling “a part of it” [D, E]. Participants connected with the temporal environment of nature – cycles of daylight, seasons and weather. Participants enjoyed the variety they experienced with the changing moods of the ocean:

“It makes you really in tune with the very subtle changes in nature like the subtle changes in the seasons...after really heavy rain the sea around [placename] is more brackish, it’s less salty” [B].

“Every day is different. It satisfies my variety need...which is why it soothes me [...] There is such excitement in it. You will have the really clear calm seas which are incredible, and they’re not boring [...] but they’re not as exciting as the wild ones. So, the personality of the sea becomes your friend in a strange way” [E].

Engaging with the sea provides them with perspective that extends beyond the connection with nature and is symbolic to life itself:

“Open water is very much life itself. It’s bigger than any of us and it was here before us and it’ll be here after us. I think it’s a very meaningful connection. My enjoyment of nature is in open water” [E].

“I think it puts any concerns or worries that I have into perspective because you’re this tiny person in this vastness that is connected to everything and I think that’s very soothing and calming” [B].

Swimming in open water facilitated a deeper connection in comparison to walking in nature. When immersed in water, participants felt they were “part of it” [D, E].

“That’s probably my primary love for swimming. There is something about being in the actual water... You can go for a walk in nature and you’re in nature but you’re still somehow separate from it, but when you’re in the water you’re like actually in the experience more” [D].

You’re throwing yourself into nature and when you’re underwater, you’re a part of it” [E].

This feeling of immersion was linked to feelings of buoyancy, weightlessness and ultimately, freedom:

“It’s very different to being in a forest. A very different feeling of groundedness. I think the forest is a very physical groundedness. Whereas I think the buoyancy and the weightlessness of the water lends itself to a certain feeling of freedom, which I think is the ultimate happiness” [E].

The true self

Most participants had childhood memories of water, paving the way for strong identities associated with open-water swimming in adulthood, where participants reported feeling most comfortable with themselves. Participants reflected on: “the real stand out memories as a kid” [A] by the beach, engaging with water. These memories were “summer associated” [B] and did not always involve swimming:

I grew up in the midlands. There was always that thing that I associated with holidays rather than something I’d associate with routine. I was always drawn to the sea, but it was definitely more summer associated” [B].

Being an open-water swimmer from childhood was a strong part of personal identity for many – the self was fully actualised in the cold water:

I swam in the summertime in a cold river water pool, and I used to swim three times a day...that was my fun and my life as a child” [E].

“One hundred per cent, I’d say I’m most at peace and most with myself in cold water” [D].

“I guess I just feel very comfortable with myself in every way. I feel most like myself when I am in the water” [B].

Even taken up as a new occupation, open-water swimming had the potential to connect the person to their true self:

“I’ve only started sea swimming in the last few years...it brings me back to myself. After all the years of living in life, through the ups and the downs and the highs and the lows much of it makes me feel like that child again. It kind of awakens the child within. Or myself, “the self”” [E].

Participant E described this transition in life with the metaphor of a “butterfly”; from the freedom of childhood, to the responsibilities of adulthood to finally a “*new resolve*”. This resolve strengthened with immersions in cold water that ultimately enabled meaningful life engagement:

I’ve given enough to mothering and wifing (sic) and working and living and parenting everybody. Then a new person emerges...that’s when the courage and the butterfly came and it was an awakening...It was definitely a new resolve, a new awakening and a different person. It was a transition... Now it’s just a part of me, of who I am and who I need to be and what I do. It’s my thing. It’s part of my purpose, whatever that is I don’t know” [E].

Discussion

Open-water swimming was perceived by participants as a deeply meaningful occupation, providing experiences of concrete, self-reward and socio-symbolic occupational value that contributed to meaning ([Persson et al., 2001](#)). However, the experiences of these participants can also be understood under some of the headings proposed by [Roberts and Bannigan \(2018\)](#) in their metasynthesis of occupational meaning. Open-water swimming provided a sensory experience, associated with being present, immersed in nature and connected with a personal and social identity.

Participants found meaning in swimming as it enhanced their experience of instant “presence”. [Foley \(2015\)](#) compared the experience of swimming in open water to meditation – focusing

on body, breath and the present moment. Being intensely present is closely linked to occupational meaning (Roberts and Bannigan, 2018; Reid, 2005). Participation in occupations that are the correct balance of challenge and skill creates a sense of involvement and awareness like mindfulness, called occupational presence (Reid, 2005). Presence was amplified for these participants by the cold water sensory experience which “jolts” them into the present moment. Sensory experiences of the physical marine environment, including feelings of buoyancy and weightlessness of the sea were also related to well-being for the participants in Krpalek *et al.* (2020).

The natural environment played an important role as participants experienced a deep connection with nature. Connecting with nature was the “primary love” for participant D to swim in open water. People have also described being “part of nature” (Sonntag-Öström *et al.*, 2015, p. 611) while in a forest. However, findings of the current study contend that a deeper connection with nature is experienced when submerged underwater: “you can go for a walk in nature and you’re in nature [...] but when you’re in the water you’re actually in the experience more” [D]. Connection with, or immersion in nature, is one of the primary factors influencing the relationship between blue-space occupations and health (White *et al.*, 2020). Potentially, people find meaning in these activities either as personality traits or identity (that they are more connected to nature in general) (Capaldi *et al.*, 2014) or that, again, the sensory experience of light, sound and changing patterns of the sea are a factor (Bell *et al.*, 2015).

Open water seemed to provide a context for participants to connect with their true selves and formulate an identity through swimming – “it became part of who they were and how they defined themselves” as other explorations of occupational meaning have found (Roberts and Bannigan, 2018, p. 391). Participants in this study developed potential in childhood through engagement in water occupations and, continuing to engage with water in adulthood, fulfilled their occupational potential – supporting the belief that “it is through doing that one becomes” (Fidler and Fidler, 1978, p. 308). Through engaging with water, participants formulated an occupational identity consistent with their values. Sometimes this involved shedding societal expectations and continuing to develop as an occupational being: “I’ve given enough to mothering and wifing (sic) and working and living and parenting everybody [...] now it’s just a part of me, of who I am and who I need to be and what I do. It’s my thing. It’s part of my purpose” [E]. As Wicks (2005) describes, this individual created a new occupational identity, with the repetition of “I” and “my” emphasising autonomy and choice in this process.

This study adds the lived, personal experience of open-water swimming to the strong evidence base for the therapeutic benefits of blue-space engagement (Britton *et al.*, 2018). Occupational therapists in all areas of practice could consider using (or advocating for access to) the natural blue-space resources of Ireland in therapeutic ways, whether that is facilitating water-based leisure for people with physical disabilities (Carin-Levy and Jones, 2007), maintaining the health of older adults (Costello *et al.*, 2019) or helping people overcome PTSD (Krpalek *et al.*, 2020). Creating, supporting, or facilitating service users access to communities of swimmers

in Ireland, such as Snamhai Sasta (O’Donoghue, 2021), could also promote engagement in this occupation with high potential for health and well-being.

Limitations

The use of purposive and snowball sampling meant that participants might have been particularly vocal about their engagement in open-water swimming. The use of a single recruitment site means that findings reflect a microcosm of open-water swimming in Ireland, reducing transferability of findings. Observations, diary entries and multiple interviews may have added depth to findings and account for the experience of subjective change over time.

Conclusion

This study found that open water provided participants with a context necessary for creating meaningful engagement contributing to a process of fulfilling occupational potential and constructing an occupational identity. Open-water swimming was elevated above a “leisure” [A] occupation to one that was embedded in “who I am” [E] and enabled individuals to have immersive sensory experiences – facilitating presence and contributing to well-being. These adults found meaning in swimming, as it promoted mental and emotional well-being and connection with others, nature and their true selves.

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Further reading

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