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## Walking the walk: A phenomenological study of long distance walking

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Evidence suggests that regular walking can elicit significant psychological benefits, although little evidence exists concerning long distance walking. The purpose of this study was to provide detailed accounts of the experiences of long distance walkers. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with six long distance walkers. Data were transcribed verbatim before researchers independently analyzed the transcripts. Participants reported a cumulative effect with positive feelings increasing throughout the duration of the walk. Long distance walking elicited positive emotions, reduced the effects of life-stress, and promoted an increased sense of well-being and personal growth. Results are aligned to theories and concepts from positive psychology. Association for Applied Sport Psychology.

### Keywords

walking, phenomenological, walk, study, distance, long

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**Title: Walking the Walk: A Phenomenological Study of Long Distance Walking.**

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### **Abstract**

Evidence suggests that regular walking can elicit significant psychological benefits although little evidence exists concerning long distance walking. The purpose of this study was to provide detailed accounts of the experiences of long distance walkers. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with six long distance walkers. Data were transcribed verbatim before researchers independently analyzed the transcripts. Participants reported a cumulative effect with positive feelings increasing throughout the duration of the walk. Long distance walking elicited positive emotions, reduced the effects of life-stress, and promoted an increased sense of well-being and personal growth. Results are aligned to theories and concepts from positive psychology.

**Keywords:** Flow, personal growth, positive psychology, well-being.

Walking has consistently been reported as the most popular outdoor recreational activity in the United Kingdom (Kay & Moxham, 1998; Office for National Statistics, 2003). As well as being popular as a recreational activity, walking programs that are characterized by moderate levels of intensity have been shown to be among the most effective interventions when used to promote physical activity and adherence to exercise (Hillsdon, Foster, Naidoo, & Crombie, 2003). Regular walking of a moderate to vigorous intensity has been shown to benefit both cardiovascular and psychological health (Morgan, Tobar, & Snyder, 2010). Psychological benefits include improved sense of well-being, more positive (i.e., vigor) and less negative (i.e., tension, depression) feelings and mood states and enhanced self-esteem (Barton, Hine, & Pretty, 2009; Biddle & Mutrie, 2008).

Most walking research has evaluated the effects of programs on physical activity and health outcomes, and have employed walking to either treat mental (i.e., depression or anxiety disorders) or physical (i.e., cardiac rehabilitation) health conditions. However, in psychology in particular, focus has begun to shift away from simply treating or alleviating mental illness to studying and understanding positive human functioning and flourishing. Achieving good mental health comprises not only the absence of illness, but also self-satisfaction, independence, capability and competency, achievement potential and coping well with stress and adversity (Bird, 2007). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) outlined a new approach termed *positive psychology* which is not only concerned with genius and talent but also in understanding what makes everyday life more fulfilling and enjoyable.

The *positive psychology* movement has its origins in the work of humanistic psychologists, however contemporary *positive psychology* has emerged from the ideas of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) and is concerned with three important concepts. First, the *life of enjoyment* refers to savoring positive emotions and feelings. There is good evidence that regular physical activity (such as walking) can elicit positive changes in affect and mood states (Biddle & Mutrie, 2008). Fredrickson (2002) formalized a theoretical explanation of

how experiencing positive emotions can lead to broadened momentary thought-action repertoires (i.e., broaden-and-build theory). Fredrickson proposed positive emotions could create broader thinking, help to build personal resources and facilitate personal growth through positive or adaptive spirals of emotion. Substantive empirical support exists for the broaden-and-build theory (cf. Carr, 2004).

Second, the *life of engagement* concerns immersion and absorption in what one is doing. One important positive psychological concept associated with engagement is flow. Flow is described as an intrinsically motivating experience and altered state of awareness which typically occurs when high levels of skill are matched with high levels of challenge (Jackson & Csikzentmihalyi, 1999). Flow is characterized by feelings of effortlessness and absorption in a task, and tends to be associated with optimal experiences (Jackson & Csikzentmihalyi, 1999).

Third, the *life of affiliation* reflects how people derive a sense of well-being, belonging, meaning, and purpose. Positive relationships (i.e., marriage, friendship) have been associated with enduring happiness and well-being. Carr (2004) reports that having a rich social life and confiding relationships appears highly important to happiness, and suggests that close relations meet affiliation needs and provide social support. These central themes from *positive psychology* might be contrasted against most research that has focused on the role of walking in alleviating negative states or illness. Few studies have attempted to understand the experiences of walkers beyond health settings. It seems unlikely that the large numbers of recreational walkers who choose to walk do so only for health and fitness related reasons. As such, in the context of *positive psychology*, there appears to be a need to understand the experiences of walkers.

Kay and Moxham (1998) argued that recreational walking is a diverse and dynamic activity that is greatly influenced by social and environmental factors. Although there is evidence to support the physical and psychological benefits of walking and various other

forms of exercise and physical activity, it is also apparent that regular contact with nature and green spaces can promote physical and mental well-being (Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin, 2005). *Green exercise* refers to exercise or physical activity in the presence of nature (i.e., walking or cycling in the countryside), with a body of evidence emerging that suggests significant short- and long-term health benefits of engaging in physical activity in natural environments (Barton & Pretty, 2010; Pretty, Peacock, Hine, Sellens, South, & Griffin, 2007; Pretty et al., 2005). Barton et al. (2009) found evidence to support the psychological health benefits (enhanced mood and self esteem) of day walks in the English countryside. However, as Kay and Moxham indicated, various different subsets of walking exist, including the increasing popular activity of long distance walking which refers to either day walks of 20 miles or more or multi-day walks that typically follow designated long distance footpaths. In the context of the present research, long distance walking refers to a multi-day activity.

Little research has been directed towards understanding the experiences of long distance walkers. However, one recent case study did examine the experiences of participants who walked the 95-mile West Highland Way (Den Breejen, 2007). A two-stage quantitative approach was used to collect data. Firstly, 361 of 407 walkers who were approached at the start of the walk, completed questionnaires to examine expectations and initial motives. Of those who completed questionnaires, a sub-set of 25 were invited to complete an *in situ* diary questionnaire during the walk (only 15 diaries were returned). The *in situ* diary questionnaire contained a series of questions concerning variables such as feelings, focus of attention and enjoyment. Results showed that in choosing to walk the West Highland Way, participants wanted to (1) get away from the daily routine, (2) feel a sense of accomplishment, (3) relax mentally and (4) be challenged. Responses from the diary questionnaires revealed that walkers enjoyed meeting fellow walkers, felt close to nature, felt relaxed, enjoyed the scenery, experienced solitude and freedom, and the walk allowed time to think and reflect. Walkers generally experienced the end of the walk as a climactic high (Den Breejen, 2007).

The work of Den Breejen (2007) is important as it begins the process of understanding the experiences of long distance walkers. While the *in situ* diary method that was used provided some insights, it is evident that the quantitative approach only allowed a somewhat limited understanding of what is likely to be a complex subjective experience. In accordance with the recommendations of Dale (1996), to provide richer accounts of the experience of long distance walking, qualitative methods (i.e., in-depth interviews of participants) that focus upon the lived experiences of walkers are necessary. In particular, Dale highlighted the strengths of the phenomenological interview. This approach differs from other qualitative approaches as it doesn't include predetermined questions that emphasize researcher presumptions. Control resides with the participant who is viewed as the expert. Focus is on what the experience meant to the participant, and goes beyond a description of overt actions. According to Allen-Collinson (2009) phenomenology represents an attitude to research rather than specific methods and can promote a contextual re/consideration of physical activity experience and a deeper understanding of how it actually feels to be an exercising body.

The main aim of the present study was to provide rich, descriptive accounts of the experiences of long distance walkers. Previous studies of *green exercise* have provided good evidence of the acute effects of day walks in natural environments, but it is not yet known how the cumulative effects of continuous, long duration day-to-day walking, may influence psychological well-being. Very little is known about the experiences of long distance walkers, and the evidence that does exist has not provided a thorough account of the lived experiences of walkers. In the foundations of *positive psychology*, the present study aims to describe the psychological journey involved with walking a long distance footpath.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Six long distance walkers from the north of England (four men and two women) participated in this study. All participants were Caucasian and had completed a long distance

walk (minimum six days) within six months of participating in this study. The mean age of participants was 39.6 years ( $SD = 9.02$ ) with ages ranging between 26 and 50 years. These participants were selected because they were experienced day walkers (minimum of three years experience) who had just completed a long distance footpath. The duration of completed walks varied between 6 and 11 days, with the length of walks ranging from 84 miles (The Dales Way) to 192 miles (The Coast to Coast Walk). Although walking schedules varied, mainly due to factors such as walking speed, terrain, and availability of overnight accommodation, participants tended to walk between 12 and 18 miles a day. The present study employs a phenomenological method, with the two essential criteria for selecting participants being that the participants have experienced the phenomena being studied and were willing and able to describe their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to obtain participants. All prospective participants were briefed about the nature of the investigation and given assurances of confidentiality should they agree to participate. All those contacted agreed to participate, and gave written consent.

### **The Phenomenological Interview**

First devised by Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is an attempt to provide a completely empirical method that focuses on what an individual experiences. The phenomenological method is solely concerned with description of an event or object. In contrast to other qualitative and quantitative approaches, where interest is with why or how something happened, phenomenology is directed exclusively to describing what the experience was like (Nesti, 2004). With few previous studies attempting to understand the psychology of long distance walking, phenomenology would seem to be an appropriate method in enabling the collection of descriptive information that could lead to a clearer understanding of the walkers' lived world (cf. Nesti, 2004).

The phenomenological interview is proposed to be the most powerful technique for obtaining rich and descriptive accounts of the lived experiences of an individual (Nesti, 2004)

and enables the participant, rather than the interviewer, to be regarded as the expert. Indeed, the participant is often referred to as a co-researcher in phenomenological studies. An unstructured approach characterizes the phenomenological interview which tends to be more like a conversation, with the interviewer posing an initial question and responding with subsequent questions that are directed by participant responses.

Consistent with previous recommendations for phenomenological interviews (cf. Dale, 1996), interviews of walkers lasted between 30 and 60 minutes with the average interview time of 45 minutes. For consistency, the first author conducted all interviews and essentially followed the principles of the phenomenological method proposed by Dale (1996). The opening question posed to all participants was “What was it like to walk a long distance footpath?” During interviews, follow-up questions formed part of the natural flow of conversation as is usual in phenomenological research. Consistent use of probes was applied such as “Can you tell me a little more about that?” and “Can you describe how you felt?” Probes were used to facilitate a deeper understanding of the participant’s experiences and to provide further elaboration.

### **Procedure**

Following ethical approval from a University Research Ethics Committee, the first author contacted each participant and made arrangements to meet and conduct the interviews. Interviews were conducted at the participants’ homes as this was deemed to be the environment where they would feel most at ease and likely to describe their experiences without reservation. Before the commencement of the interviews, participants were informed of their right to withdraw consent without penalty or prejudice. In-depth interviews combined with a comprehensive member-check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were selected as the most appropriate techniques. Interviews were recorded via a digital data recorder and transcribed verbatim. These methods were chosen to generate rich, descriptive accounts of the walkers’ experiences. In this study, member checking involved participants being provided with a full

interview transcript, and the interpretations of the research team. In accordance with Cresswell (1998), short meetings (approximately 20 minutes) were held between the first author and each of the participants to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts and to discuss the interpretations. Member checking is considered good practice in ensuring that a credible and authentic representation is presented, and a plausible interpretation is offered (Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003). Participants were given the chance to question interpretations and offer alternative explanations. This process allowed a more authentic representation of the participant experiences to be achieved.

One of the most important parts of the phenomenological method involves the use of bracketing. Although never complete, bracketing requires the researcher to “attempt to reduce their biases by a suspension of belief in everything that is not actually experienced” (Nesti, 2004, p. 41-42). Through bracketing, greater confidence in the authenticity of participant accounts can be achieved. In the present research, one way of reducing bias was achieved by using a research team who were not familiar with long distance walking. The use of a research team allowed a form of investigator triangulation (cf. Allen-Collinson, 2009) that offered a broader perspective on the text with the aim of critical evaluation rather than consensual assessment. Another reason for using a team approach was to avoid de-contextualizing the findings (cf. Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997).

According to Sandelowski (1995), an adequate sample size is one that permits a deep, case oriented analysis that results in a new and richly textured understanding. Closely tied to this is the concept of saturation, which reflects the point at which no new information is forthcoming. Towards the end of each particular interview, the researcher encouraged further contributions by asking, “Is there anything more you can add to further describe the experience of walking a long distance footpath?” before finally deeming that saturation had occurred (cf. Charmaz, 2006). Also, by analyzing each transcript in turn following interviews, the researchers were able to identify when the emergence of new information was beginning

to decline. Following the fifth interview a notable decline in new information was observed and saturation was agreed by the research team after the sixth interview.

### **Data Analysis**

In accordance with Dale (1996), the four authors separately and independently analyzed the interview transcripts to increase trustworthiness. Prior to analysis, a consistent process of data analysis was agreed by the research team, which reflected a flexible, inductive content approach in order to generate themes. The authors used an iterative process of data analysis and were mindful to allow the concepts and themes to emerge from the data. This involved immersing themselves in the data through multiple readings of the transcripts through the process of “indwelling” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), and the production of initial discovery sheets of key words, concepts and themes that emerged from the data. Independently, the authors provisionally grouped common concepts into categories. The authors compared their categories or themes and agreed on a number of higher order themes and general dimensions. There was a high level of agreement between researchers concerning the general dimensions, and where minor disagreement existed relating to sub-themes, the transcripts were re-examined and coding decisions discussed.

### **Results and Preliminary Discussion**

Data representation in the following section is congruent with recommendations on qualitative data representation (e.g., Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). Thus, in a process of thick description (Wolcott, 1994), it is intended to allow the data to speak for itself, and direct quotes have been used to emphasize participant voices. Participants tended to talk about three distinct phases of the walk. Firstly the pre-walk period (Table 1), that focused on planning and preparation, as well as pre-walk thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Secondly the walking phase itself was described (Table 2). Finally, the participants described the end of the walk and the immediate post-walk phase (Table 3), with particular emphasis on feelings and

emotions. The following section is divided chronologically to allow the context of experiences to be illustrated, and each participant is identified by a number.

### **Pre-Walk**

**Mixed emotions.** The pre-walk period was characterized by mixed feelings and emotions. In describing pre-walk experiences, participants tended to focus on the planning and preparation that had occurred prior to starting the walk. While this factor might easily be overlooked, this often meticulous approach does appear to characterize the amount that each individual had invested in the experience. Participants reported being apprehensive, anxious and concerned about various logistical issues, fitness, distance of the walk and potential bad weather. However, alongside such concerns, there was a sense of excitement and anticipation with participants looking forward to challenging themselves. As Participant 1 recalled, “It was a little bit of apprehension there but I guess just excitement and kind of, sort of not knowing what to expect and looking forward to the challenge really, was the main feelings.”

### **During the Walk**

**Positive feelings.** Participants tended to describe what was for them, an immensely enjoyable and rewarding experience. Enjoyment was derived from a multitude of aspects during the walk. Virtually all participants reported enjoying the physical nature of the challenge and the sense of testing their own resolve. There is much previous evidence to support the role of regular physical activity in promoting positive feelings and emotions (Mutrie & Faulkner, 2004). Walking was viewed as a pleasurable experience by the participants (e.g., *life of enjoyment*). Most participants also commented on the uplifting scenic beauty and wildlife that characterized the routes. The term *being close to nature*, was used in the present and previous work (Den Breejen, 2007) to describe this aspect of the experience. This connection with nature appears to reflect the *life of affiliation* and the meaning derived from being part of something larger and more permanent than oneself.

We got up to the top of there and you could just literally see all around the lakes. You could look over to Scafell. There was just a panoramic view of mountains, lakes and just amazing scenery and, erm... and I'd say in terms of like the one time that stuck out in terms of the walk was there. You just felt completely...it's clichéd but like on top-of-the-world really. It was just...it's an amazing experience (Participant 1)

Participants clearly articulated that some feelings changed as the walk progressed, and while enjoyment tended to characterize the whole walk, confidence and determination increased the further participants walked. There was general consensus that pre-walk concerns quickly began to dissipate and were replaced by a determination to achieve the goal of finishing as the participants became more aware of how their own capabilities matched the demands of the challenge.

I think the further you go on the more determined you become to finish it. At the start you're kind of...I'm fairly confident but I wasn't a hundred percent sure I'd finish, whereas by maybe day seven it was like well, there's no kind of way that we're not going to finish now, we've got to get through it. (Participant 1)

**Disconnect and reflect.** Participants reported feeling detached from more complex problems that exist in other areas of life and tended to contrast the experience of walking with work to describe a much reduced level of cognitive effort, and a release from responsibilities.

And I think during the walking, certainly you lose yourself in your walking. Work was a million miles away. Any problems were a million miles away err...you know, being in a demanding job where people are at you all the time, where you work indoors, it was lovely to not just get out and go walking for a few hours on a Saturday. To get up and know you are doing this every day, I felt better and better each day I walked. (Participant 2)

One participant reported being able to reflect upon and solve complex issues by having the time to think through the problems and possible consequences of alternative

solutions. Time to reflect in a relaxing environment appeared to elicit perspective taking and clear thinking concerning issues important to the participants.

When I'm walking along, I'll maybe think about work and in a relaxing environment like the Yorkshire Dales, I can be more reflective and maybe look back at work and analyze it erm... and try and sort of maybe think of ways where I could, thought process where I could look at work, try and analyze it and make, sort of think to myself where things could be improved for me personally erm...or generally with the job, any ideas or things like that. So I mean I try and think well maybe yes, well maybe I should take a different approach when I get back to work, and I can see maybe where I've gone wrong and things like that so I reflect about issues like work.  
(Participant 5)

Previous research (Den Breejen, 2007) found that two of the most important reasons for walking the West Highland Way were to get away from the daily routine and relax mentally. Switching off from technology and responsibilities was reported as a deeply relaxing and rejuvenating experience, which resulted in clearer thinking and a subjective sense of well-being.

**Task-Oriented Focus.** Participants reported focusing on and enjoying simple tasks such as planning breaks, route-finding, and even counting strides. Important relations were evident between this theme and the previous theme of disconnect and reflect. While being detached from everyday stressors was liberating for some, and allowed reflection, combining this with a focus and engagement with a pleasurable activity appears to have yielded a fulfilling and meaningful experience. At times, this task focus appeared to facilitate flow-type experiences. Participant 4 stated, "The decisions you have to make become easy compared to work and so I suppose it's about concentrating on simple things, enjoying the time rather than wishing you were somewhere else doing something else."

**Flow.** Participants described being completely absorbed in the walk, on automatic pilot, where the exertion itself seemed effortless and when all sense of time was lost. These descriptions closely resemble what other researchers have termed flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihilyi, 1999) and seemingly characterize what positive psychologists term engagement. Despite some similarities in these accounts, there was little consensus concerning the amount of times during the walk that this state was experienced or the duration of each experience. One participant reported having a flow-like experience on most days while others reported this much less frequently and for shorter durations. These experiences are perhaps not surprising considering the challenge / skill balance and enjoyment that participants reported during the walk, with these two factors thought to be important prerequisites to flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihilyi, 1999). Sports related research has identified strong positive correlations between athlete engagement and experiences of flow (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Jackson, 2009). Other researchers have emphasized that task-absorption is essential to experiencing pleasure (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004). All participants reported difficulty in fully describing the nature of the experience.

It's something that's difficult to describe but like I said you're kind of solely focused on the task in hand and you kind of suppose... the time element as well, like you lose all sense of time when you are really focused on that one thing. Going through, I can't think of any other point in particular, but there are times when you are putting the stick down every four paces and going through. You're just solely focusing in on just one thing. You just lose everything else in your mind, completely. (Participant 1)

**Shared experience.** All participants reported walking with other people and meeting people during the walk, with these social interactions forming an integral and enjoyable part of the experience. These findings are consistent with Den Breejen (2007) who found walkers enjoyed meeting fellow walkers. Numerous different examples of interactions with others were reported. Participants emphasized the importance of the shared experience, the

camaraderie and the sense of fun that was part of the experience. The full complexities of these interactions are difficult to report concisely because of the vast array of reported encounters. However, it is important to note that the sense of shared experience was not confined to immediate walking partners, but included a community feel with regular contact between different walking parties who were attempting the same walk, at the same time, resulting in often good humored exchanges between groups, and the establishment of inter-group relations. The sense of meaning derived from these relationships is a central theme in positive psychology (i.e., *life of affiliation*) but is also consistent with the need for relatedness as posited in self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Mutrie and Faulkner (2004) suggest physical activity that occurs in a supportive group environment may be particularly valuable in eliciting positive social interactions and promoting life satisfaction.

There was a fantastic sense of camaraderie and shared interest even though you could meet a complete stranger, you could strike up a conversation and immediately you had something in common because if they were doing the walk they obviously had a shared interest. Erm...and that was lovely, meeting lots of different people  
(Participant 6)

**Challenges and disruptions.** Participants reported numerous challenges whilst walking. The most common included getting lost, poor weather conditions, sore feet and aching muscles and joints. Despite this, it became clear that such issues were regarded as an integral and important part of the whole experience that paradoxically provided greater meaning and a sense of personal achievement at the end of the walk. As Participant 3 stated, “at the end of the walk you were on such a high that you had gone through all that [hardship] and achieved it really...I think if there hadn’t been highs and lows, you know, you wouldn’t enjoy the highs so much if there wasn’t a few lows.” Previous work has shown challenging aspects to be key motives for long distance walkers (Den Breejen, 2007).

You know, that was when I was at the lowest point, getting lost, because you just...that's probably the hardest part of the challenge in a way. I think it just kind of saps all your energy, and all your kind of mental strength. But once you get through that you kind of well, at least we're on our way now. You don't get a sense of achievement from getting lost, you're kind of angry, and maybe that anger sets a bit of adrenaline off inside and you're kind of determined to carry on. (Participant 1)

**Overcoming the challenges.** In terms of overcoming the experienced challenges, participants again reported a number of different strategies and techniques. Some talked about how personal characteristics such as resilience, stubbornness, and self-confidence were relied upon when faced with challenges. Others talked about employing strategies such as visualizing getting to the end of the walk, and using humor to detract from tough situations. Some participants found inspiration from the scenery. Also reported was the importance of social support during tough times. One commonly reported strategy was to break the walk, and days of the walk, down into more manageable chunks rather than thinking about the amount of walking still to be done, especially on difficult sections.

I think in terms of getting through, erm...like I mentioned it was just a literal sort of setting yourself maybe a 10 yard challenge up the hill. Erm, and just focusing solely on that 10 yards and then once you got there, having a rest and setting the next challenge erm...up the hill. And that was kind of...I think we just needed to do that on kind of the mountain section parts of it. Just set yourself a real short challenge that you know that you can get to and then just go again after that. (Participant 1)

The coping strategies used were generally related to promoting or maintaining positive emotional states (e.g., problem focused coping, positive reappraisal) and have been found to buffer stress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). According to Tugade, Fredrickson and Barrett (2004) such strategies enable people to emerge from crises with closer relationships and a

richer appreciation of life. Furthermore, experiencing challenges has been shown to provide important opportunities for personal growth (Kashdan et al., 2004).

### **End of the Walk**

**Bittersweet feelings.** There was a general consensus that the end of the walk was characterized by bittersweet feelings. All participants reported feeling a sense of achievement bound up with positive feelings and emotions. Finishing the walk was an intense emotional experience for all, with pride, satisfaction and joy commonly reported. All aspects of the journey, especially the challenges and difficulties encountered, are reported as making the end of the walk more fulfilling. Participants reported an initial burst of positive feelings that was short-lived for some, but most reported a more sustained and deep sense of satisfaction well beyond the end of the walk. Fredrickson (2002) suggests that emotions such as contentment lead to savoring current life circumstances and integrating these circumstances into new views of the world and self. According to Participant 2, “I would say in terms of setting aside things like having children and getting married, which are different things, in terms of doing something for me in my life that is the best thing I have ever done.”

The bittersweet feelings expressed described how joy was tempered by feelings of sadness and a sense of loss brought on by the thought that the walk had ended. This withdrawal response appeared to reflect a change in focus as the goal of completing the walk was achieved and the reality of returning to more common routines and responsibilities became more central. In simple terms, the artificial bubble had burst.

There was a feeling that I didn't want it to end that I was really happy being engrossed in what we were doing and the thought of going back to normal life was less appealing. Perhaps real life had been on hold for a while and I quite liked that feeling of escape that the walk gave me. I did feel very emotional on the last day and once or twice I did have a tear in my eye and that surprised me because I wouldn't consider myself...and others I don't think would say I was emotional. It felt like a really big

achievement to me and something that I was really proud of and it had taken a lot of planning to make it happen. (Participant 4)

In agreement with Den Breejen (2007), participants experienced the end of the walk as an emotional high point. However, there were conflicting reports of how long the positive effects of the experience lasted, ranging from a few minutes to months afterwards.

**Sense of well-being.** Participants reported a subjective sense of well-being at the conclusion of the walk which included an overall feel good factor, psychological well-being (clear relaxed mind, positive attitude, mentally refreshed), physical well-being (increased feelings of fitness) and social well-being (new and enhanced personal relationships). Mutrie and Faulkner (2004, p. 152) highlight evidence for the “feel good function” of physical activity that exists both during and after being active. Findings suggest regular physical activity can promote positive changes in variables such as subjective well-being, affective states, stress, self-esteem and self perceptions (Biddle & Mutrie, 2008) through a variety of mechanisms (i.e., psychosocial, biochemical etc.). Present findings also appear consistent with theoretical explanations of the restorative effects of regular contact with natural environments (cf. Barton et al., 2009).

I just come away and have a positive frame of mind. My head is completely cleared of issues; it relaxes me, I'm enjoying it, and you know, it's a stress-buster it really does completely take the stress away, which is fantastic, so you can feel relaxed, chilled, stress-free...enjoy! It's almost a drug in that respect... very much a sense of well-being. As I said, usually by the end of it, physically and mentally I feel very, very good and on top of my game, which is quite surprising and I really did find that. I really felt as good as I've ever felt in my life really. (Participant 5)

**Personal growth.** What the participants gained from the experience might best be termed personal growth. Participants reported a variety of enhanced self-perceptions which included self-esteem, self-efficacy and more global self-confidence. Previous studies

concerning *green exercise* have reported significant differences in self-esteem scores for visitors just arriving as opposed to leaving national heritage sites (Barton et al., 2009). Confidence was the most commonly reported outcome and for many, but not all, this confidence was transferred to other areas of life, and reflects personal growth from overcoming a difficult challenge. According to Mutrie and Faulkner (2004), increased physical capacity (through regular physical activity) allows individuals to feel more confident in their ability to do everyday tasks by providing a more positive perception of the physical self. Participant 3 stated “I think having achieved something like that [the walk] makes you realize that you can achieve beyond what you think your capabilities are.”

The whole experience prompted many of the participants to reappraise aspects of their lives and to gain a sense of perspective (i.e., generating new meaning). The experience of completing the walk, which was challenging and difficult for all, has since been used as a baseline from which to judge other life challenges. The result is that day to day problems were often down-graded in perceived difficulty due to more positive evaluations of individual capabilities to overcome challenges.

I think in terms of other aspects of life, it makes those...you've got something to compare those to. To make them seem easy almost. Like for example, doing an essay or something now, erm...although it seems like a bit of a challenge it's, I like to try and compare it to times on the coast to coast. It was a real hard trudge and you're kind of like, well I got through that. However many words this essay is, surely I can manage to do that as well. In other things as well, I just think it goes through to work and all aspects of your life really, it does improve you as a person, definitely, doing a challenge like the coast to coast it really does. (Participant 1)

### **General Discussion**

Participant accounts of walking long distance footpaths followed a consistent narrative. Combining two of the phrases used by participants helps to capture the nature of the

experience; in essence, it was a *journey of self-discovery* that occurred within a *bubble*. The *bubble* represents a world of natural beauty and wildlife which is suitably detached from the stresses of modern life. This *bubble* existed for the duration of the walk, while participants were fully engaged, and included close personal friends and relations. Whilst in this *bubble*, participants reported an immensely enjoyable and mentally rejuvenating experience (i.e., the *life of enjoyment*). The detachment from everyday demands provided time and space, not usually available, for introspection and reflections about important aspects of life that often led to reappraisal. Indeed, these accounts are consistent with previous work that found long distance walking resulted in high levels of enjoyment and relaxation while providing time to think (Den Breejen, 2007). However, the walks were characterized by cycles where participants switched between quiet spells of introspective reflection, to focusing on the task (such as route finding) and to the social interactions that were reported as a vital and enjoyable part of the shared experience. Importantly, some feelings tended to change as the participants progressed beyond the early stages of the walk. Reported increases in confidence and determination correspond to a perceived balance between the challenge of walking the long distance footpath, and the capabilities of the walkers themselves. Participant reports of task immersion and feelings of effortlessness appear consistent with conceptualizations of flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) and reflect high levels of engagement (i.e., *life of engagement*). Paradoxically, difficulties encountered during the walk (e.g., getting lost) were often recalled as times that amplified the positive feelings experienced at the end of the walk.

The end of the walk was deeply significant and meaningful for all participants with most capturing the final moments of the walk with photographs that would help in reliving the experience at a later time. There were three main outcomes described which were: bittersweet feelings; sense of well-being; and personal growth. The bittersweet feelings referred to joy and sense of achievement mixed in with a sense of loss and withdrawal as the realization that a return to the responsibilities and demands of everyday life was imminent (the *bubble* was

about to burst). This type of exit phase has previously been reported in studies of outdoor recreation (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001). Participants also reported a sense of well-being that encompassed physical, psychological and social aspects, but was perhaps most consistently characterized by having a clear, relaxed mind. There is evidence that physical activity can lead to improvements in cognitive functioning and reduce anxiety, with runners reporting clearer thinking following physical activity (see Biddle & Mutrie, 2008). Past evidence from testing the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2002) has suggested that experiencing positive emotions (such as joy) can undo the lingering after effects of negative emotions (i.e., anxiety). Although most research has focused upon testing physiological variables (see Tugade et al., 2004) it is likely that positive emotions can undo psychological processes such as stress.

The experiences of participants were generally consistent with previous work concerning long distance walking (Den Breejen, 2007). However, the outcomes described in the present research (bittersweet feelings, sense of well-being, and personal growth) provide a more comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits of long distance walking. Participants were consistent in reporting how the challenges, and hardship encountered during the walk (e.g., poor weather, getting lost, soreness) actually helped to make the sense of achievement more powerful and intense at the end of the walk. In choosing to attempt a long distance footpath, participants were stepping into the unknown (e.g., experienced day walkers but not in terms of multi-day walks), outside of personal comfort zones, and as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) emphasize, when people do something that stretches them beyond what they were, positive feelings result, offering the potential for personal growth.

Consistent with Den Breejen (2007), scenic beauty was important to understanding the perspective of walkers. The natural environment was an important source of enjoyment and it should be noted that completed walks included arguably some of the most dramatic and wildest places in the United Kingdom. Positive psychologists suggest awe and an appreciation

of beauty is a character strength that helps people feel connected to the larger universe (Carr, 2004). Recent research has suggested that the combination of physical activity and exposure to natural surroundings is particularly efficacious in promoting emotional well-being (Barton et al., 2009). The implication is that in combination, exercise or physical activity and nature are more potent than either alone. At this time, more evidence is needed to substantiate such claims, but present findings suggest both aspects were important in terms of enjoyment. Some participants reported enjoyment from route finding and working as part of a team to achieve common goals. One participant emphasized how enjoyable the experience was because of having no desire to do anything else at that time.

One notable finding from this research concerns the comparisons made between long distance walking and day walks. While day walks were considered enjoyable and relaxing, the sense of well-being and achievement derived from completing a long distance walk was heightened. One participant described building up credit in relation to mental well-being while another described feeling better and better each day. This finding appears consistent with both theoretical explanations and extant research concerning positive emotions. Tugade et al. (2004) emphasized how positive emotions can accumulate and lead to broadened patterns of thought and facilitate the development of personal resources (i.e., resilience). Accounts of walkers suggest a cumulative effect that is not likely on a single day walk. This finding contrasts with recent evidence that reported large initial benefits from short engagement with *green exercise*, and then diminishing, but still positive returns through longer engagement (Barton & Pretty, 2010). It is possible that the sustained enjoyment of long distance walking provides an opportunity to switch off from the pressures of modern life, become absorbed in a simple yet challenging activity that provides opportunities to spend quality time with friends and family, and provides time to reflect and make sense of issues of relevance to each individual. Weekend day walks, however enjoyable, are often completed with the imminent demands of the forthcoming week in mind.

Participants reported reflecting upon important issues within their lives, which in turn helped to promote reappraisal and clearer thinking. Also, through the process of reflection, individuals can become internally motivated by perceptions of being in control, which in turn can influence their future behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants reported both increased determination to finish, and evidence of improved cognitive functioning. One participant reported that the enjoyment of walking in such an environment reduced levels of stress, and facilitated a broader analysis of work related problems that aided in the generation of alternative solutions to problems. This account and others correspond with theoretical perspectives that suggest positive emotions can broaden attention and allow individuals to be more tolerant, open to new ideas, and more creative than usual (Fredrickson, 2002). This is in contrast to negative emotions that tend to promote more narrowed thinking (Isen, 2000). While the present study did not formally test the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2002), the reported accounts of walkers are consistent with Fredrickson's theorizing, and indicate personal growth, although caution should be urged with drawing any firm conclusions from this evidence. However, future researchers may be encouraged to test this theory within a sample of long distance walkers, given the reported results.

### **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge that the accounts given by participants in this research were based on retrospective interviews. While the time between completing walks and interviews being conducted was five to seven months, there is potential for selective recall, especially given the associated enjoyment and achievement aspects reported by participants. It is possible that focus on the overwhelming positive experience has led to some of the negative aspects of the walk not being fully reported. It is also clear that any experience of walking will be influenced by uncontrollable factors such as weather conditions and this can impact on reported accounts. This research provides descriptive accounts of a very small number of walkers and should not be generalized to a wider population of walkers. Also, it should be

acknowledged that the sample was mixed in terms of gender, experience, and age. It is quite possible that differences might emerge in the experiences of walkers based upon these and other personal characteristics. Finally, while the research team has offered an interpretation of the data, any such interpretation is subjective and as such readers are also able, and are invited to draw their own conclusions from the data (Morrow, 2005).

### **Recommendations for future research**

It is hoped that this study will help to encourage further research into the increasingly popular pursuit of long distance walking. The present study, along with work by Den Breejen (2007) offers a start point from which knowledge can develop. There is a need to determine if experiences of men and women differ and whether there are specific outcomes related to gender. In the present work, participants were all experienced day walkers but most had only completed one or two long distance paths. As such, the role of experience needs to be given further consideration as experience may be identified as a moderating variable. Future researchers also need to understand more about how long the positive outcomes reported at the end of walk actually lasts and to provide further understanding of how the outcomes and experiences relate to different forms of walking (i.e., day walking). There is also the need to understand how long distance walking compares with other recreational or leisure activities as the reported outcomes from this study may be due to periods of time away from stressors that might equally be achieved with other pursuits. In particular it would be interesting to focus upon outcome measures such as enjoyment, relaxation and cognitive functioning following equal periods of time engaged in long distance walking as opposed to continuing everyday work routines or while on a beach holiday. This would allow the effects of long distance walking to be more accurately compared. Long distance walking might also provide an appropriate setting in which to study positive psychological concepts such as flow in more depth. Such work could help to verify and expose key facilitators or disruptors of flow given that flow appears to occur during long-distance walking.

## Conclusion

Although this study is exploratory, results suggest that long distance walking can elicit positive emotions, undo the effects of stress, promote an increased sense of well-being, and personal growth. When first asked to describe the experience, all participants commented on how enjoyable it had been, and most reported the walk as one of the best experiences of their lives. Responses of participants can readily be aligned to the key features of positive psychology. In terms of the *life of enjoyment* walkers reported savoring the time spent walking and the feelings and emotions that were encountered throughout and after the walk. So much so, that a sense of sadness and loss was encountered at the end of the walk. Participant accounts were heavily laden with references to the social encounters that occurred during the walk. This included experiences shared with walking partners, as-well-as meeting and interacting with fellow walkers who were attempting the same walk at the same time. This small walking community appeared to engender a sense of belonging and the time spent with close relations, friends or partners clearly reflects the *life of affiliation* that has also been central to understanding positive psychology. Finally, the *life of engagement* concerns being absorbed or immersed in what one is doing, and participants recalled numerous occasions during the walk where flow-like experiences occurred.

It is important to note that the present findings also appear consistent with other theoretical approaches within psychology. Perhaps most notably, results closely resemble aspects of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) with the enjoyment of the experience for its own sake, indicative of intrinsic motivation. The participant's own choice in undertaking the walk, the importance of relationships and social interaction, the sense of achievement in completing the walk could easily be aligned to SDT concepts such as the need for autonomy, relatedness and competence. When these needs are satisfied, as found in the present research, well-being is expected to be optimized.

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