‘I've never come out of the water wishing I hadn't got in’. A deductive investigation into the impact of Open Water Swimming on flourishing in middle-aged, middle-class British females

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Abstract

Open Water Swimming (OWS) has seen a considerable upsurge in participation in recent years. A range of wellbeing benefits through OWS have been reported. To date, qualitative investigations into the impact of OWS on wellbeing have been conducted using inductive methods and have examined subjective wellbeing.

The contextual model of wellbeing is a component-based model of flourishing, considered the highest form of wellbeing. The current study took a deductive approach to examining the ten factors of the contextual model in relation to how they are impacted by OWS.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine middle-aged, middle-class women who were regular, year-round open water swimmers. Template Analysis was used to analyse the interviews, informed by an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology.

The results identified 25 themes, grouped under four first-order

themes, along with four integrative themes that ran across the template.

The study supports the idea that OWS can facilitate flourishing in middle-aged, middle-class women. This work is the first of its kind to examine the impact of OWS on flourishing and provides new insights into the mechanisms underlying this relationship.

These findings may be of use to policy makers working in public health initiatives—particularly those seeking to encourage middle-aged women to become and remain active, as well as those promoting engagement with nature.

Keywords: Open Water Swimming, Qualitative, Nature, Exercise, Deductive Methods

Introduction

Exercise carried out within nature has been demonstrated to show a stronger wellbeing impact than either being exposed to nature without exercise or exercise alone (Brito et al., 2022). Several terms have been used to describe the activity: green exercise (Pretty et al., 2005), blue exercise (Wright et al., 2024), nature based outdoor activities (Coventry et al., 2021) and nature-based exercise (Bishop et al., 2023) are some of the more frequently used terms. This study will use the term nature-based exercise (NBEX).

Nature Based Exercise and Psychological Wellbeing

Studies examining wellbeing and NBEX have received increasing attention and noted differences in wellbeing when compared to non-nature-based exercise. Studies have traditionally examined a difference between indoor and outdoor exercise or a difference between wellbeing outcomes within urban built up areas and nature-based areas (Barton et al., 2016). Reviews examining the former suggest NBEX favourably impacts valence (intrinsic

attractiveness) and enjoyment, however no differences were found for changes in emotion, perceived exertion, exercise intensity and biological markers (Lahart et al., 2019). Differences observed through directly examining types of outdoor space, urban vs nature based, found large to moderate effect sizes for improvements in anxiety reduction, perception of fatigue, positive affect and vigour and a moderate effect size for depression (Wicks et al., 2022). Other review studies have examined a difference between exercising in nature compared to exercising in traditional indoor spaces such as gyms (Brito et al., 2022). The results suggest significant differences to wellbeing for positive affect within the NBEX group, while perceived stress was significantly higher for indoor exercisers. All of the reviews presented suggest participation in NBEX can support emotional wellbeing through engagement with the natural environment, a feature of ecopsychology.

Seasonality and Methodological Refinement

A perspective essay addressing how to enrich our understanding of NBEX (Bamberg et al., 2018), suggests examining the specificity of the exercise mode and examination of NBEX during all meteorological seasons. They suggest that NBEX is a generic term and the nuanced differences between specific exercises needs to be addressed. Further, they point to a bias within the literature of examining NBEX during the summer months and discuss how addressing this would be useful. Academic areas such as uptake of exercise, continued participation and mental health benefits of NBEX, as well as practical areas such as town planning and social prescribing could be usefully informed through a stronger understanding of the seasonal experiences of NBEX. They also discuss a dearth in qualitative research within NBEX, and that addressing this could give insight into how and why participants access wellbeing within such environments. Researchers further point to the importance of qualitative methodology use when

examining different environments to enable more impactful and better informed health promotion (Hitchings & Latham, 2017). Recent literature has addressed this to some degree and a series of studies since then have examined the wellbeing impact of NBEX from a qualitative perspective (Beale & Brickell, 2024; Bell-Williams et al., 2021; Bishop et al., 2023; Christie & Elliott, 2023; Denton & Aranda, 2020; Glackin & Beale, 2018; McDougall et al., 2022; Morris & Scott, 2019; Murray & Fox, 2021; Walker & Kampman, 2022). The qualitative approach has given researchers a chance to investigate how this form of nature engagement impacts the individual and offers insight into the pathways to enhance wellbeing. NBEX is reported within these studies as fostering a cathartic impact, a sense of community, positive pro-environmental behaviours, nature connectedness, a sense of contribution and a chance for the individual to gain perspective on life. To the authors' knowledge all qualitative studies to date directly addressing NBEX and wellbeing have taken an inductive stance, resulting in an atheoretical approach, thus making it challenging to build on existing wellbeing frameworks. Participants would likely not be aware of the components of wellbeing models and within an inductive approach researchers would struggle to discuss these while maintaining the methodological principles.

Open Water Swimming as an Embodied Nature Based Practice

Open water swimming (OWS) is a form of NBEX that describes swimming in nature based outdoor environments such as rivers, lakes and the sea. This form of NBEX offers an environment where swimmers are afforded the opportunity to reconnect with nature in a deeply embodied way. Immersion in natural water enhances sensory experiences and has been reported to promote feelings of unity with the environment (Murray & Fox, 2021). OWS has seen a rise in participation in recent years. Sport England's Active Lives Survey (Sport England, n.d.) indicated an 18% increase in open

water swimming participation compared to the previous year, with 408,000 individuals engaging in the activity at least twice in the previous 28 days of taking the survey. Interest in OWS appears to be rising with the term 'wild swimming' appearing in internet news articles significantly more in recent years, gradually rising year on year with 72 mentions in 2019 compared to 447 in 2022 (Sport England, n.d.)

A number of studies have qualitatively examined the wellbeing impact of OWS directly on healthy adults. A thematic analysis examining the wellbeing impact of sea swimming on middle-aged women suggested sea swimming was: transformative, connecting and reorienting (Denton & Aranda, 2020). A study exploring the meaning of OWS among five year-round swimmers identified superordinate themes related to mental and emotional wellbeing. The authors discussed how OWS positively influenced participants' ability to destress, enhanced their perception of mental strength, and provided a way to psychologically detach from daily stresses by immersing themselves in a physical environment which was experienced in the present moment. They also point to 'connection', to the environment, to others and to their true self when discussing the meaning of OWS (Murray & Fox, 2021). Wild Water Loch swimming has been examined qualitatively in a mixed gender study (McDougall et al., 2022). The study reported five key themes: physical health, mental health, social health, place and risk. Authors suggested that Wild Water Loch swimming was a health enhancing activity within each of the first four themes. Risk was evident within the participant experience, whereby participants spoke of enhanced risk of Loch swimming compared to sea swimming. Various risk factors are associated with Loch swimming; e.g. other Loch users also were suggested as a feature of this form of OWS. OWS has also been examined in a former quarry in the North of England (Christie & Elliott, 2023). This rapid ethnographic study suggested there was a unique experience of

OWS that encompassed both hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing. OWS was experienced as a socially connecting activity and participants perceived differences within OWS and other forms of NBEX. Consistent with the general NBEX literature, all four OWS studies mentioned above utilise an inductive approach to data collection. Within this approach researchers are inherently unlikely to be afforded the opportunity to directly discuss the complexity of different wellbeing frameworks.

Flourishing As a Conceptual Framework for Understanding Wellbeing

Within positive psychology literature, wellbeing has been frequently examined (Hone et al., 2014). The concept of flourishing has emerged as the highest level of psychological functioning and wellbeing (Hone et al., 2014). Most NBEX studies have discussed wellbeing from the perspective of subjective wellbeing and often discuss the mental illness alleviation effects of NBEX. While positive affect is often discussed, limited attention is given to the eudemonic aspects of wellbeing (Burke et al., 2023). To the authors knowledge there is currently no primary research specifically examining the impact of NBEX on flourishing that utilises one of the established flourishing models. Authors have suggested that this would be of value to NBEX literature (Bishop et al., 2023; Geddes & Passmore, 2021). A study examining the impact of NBEX on autistic males (Bishop et al., 2023) points to how a deductive approach examining flourishing could be useful in enhancing the NBEX literature, stating:

> ‘It would be very interesting to build on the work of (Geddes and Passmore, 2021) who examined GE (green exercise) in relation to flourishing, perhaps a mode of opening up this forum would be a deductive qualitative piece around one of the major theories of flourishing such as Huppert and So (2013) conceptualisation of flourishing’. P126.

Several models of flourishing exist, usually following the concept of components/features necessary to experience the highest level of wellbeing (Hone et al., 2014). The conceptual framework (Huppert & So, 2013), is a 10 factor model for measuring flourishing composing of:

1. Positive relationships
2. Engagement
3. Meaning
4. Self-esteem
5. Positive emotion
6. Competence
7. Optimism
8. Emotional stability
9. Vitality
10. Resilience

The framework was created by examining internationally accepted criteria for the most common mental illnesses as defined by both the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), followed by defining the positive pole of each symptom dimension. This model then developed an operational definition of flourishing based on psychometric analysis of a representative sample of 243,000 Europeans. To be flourishing Huppert and So suggest that as the only feature expressly concerned with hedonic wellbeing, positive emotion, must be present and an individual must present with five out of six of the features of positive characteristics (emotional stability, vitality, optimism, resilience, positive emotion, and self-esteem), and three out of four of the features of positive functioning (engagement, competence, meaning and positive

relationships).

Rationale For the Current Study

This study responds to several limitations within the existing NBEX literature, including the lack of deductive qualitative research, the need for greater specificity regarding modes of physical activity, and the absence of seasonal diversity in most research. In particular, there is a seasonal bias, with the majority of NBEX studies conducted during the summer months—neglecting how engagement and wellbeing experiences may vary across the year.

Previous studies have rarely considered individual variation or examined wellbeing through the lens of established flourishing models. In response, the current study explores the impact of year round open water swimming on flourishing, focusing on a homogenous sample of middle aged, middle class females. To the author's knowledge, it is the first qualitative study to investigate flourishing within NBEX using a deductive, theory informed approach.

Methodology

Epistemological Position

This research was conducted from a transformative worldview epistemological perspective (Mertens, 2009), which holds that knowledge is situated, constructed through power-laden social contexts, and can be mobilised to promote inclusion and social change. This worldview informed both the selection of methodology and the commitment to honouring participants' lived experiences while interrogating broader conceptual models such as flourishing. It allowed for methodological flexibility in the service of empowering vulnerable participants' voices and producing findings with practical relevance.

Although often perceived as socially advantaged, white, middle class, middle aged women face distinctive vulnerabilities, including the psychological impact of menopause, the pressures of balancing intergenerational caregiving, and experiences of social invisibility (Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Lachman, 2015).

Participants

Nine participants met the inclusion criteria and self-identified as female, engaging regularly in OWS all year round for a minimum of one year, being 'middle aged', participants were aged between 39 and 59, and 'middle class'. Further to this all participants were white, this was not within the inclusion criteria but happened haphazardly through our recruitment process. Participants all engaged in OWS in a park in South London. The homogeneity of the sample is in line with that suggested for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) studies (Smith et al., 2022) whereby the principle of ideography within IPA can be adhered to. The sample size is slightly larger than that suggested for IPA (Smith et al., 2022) but is slightly smaller than that sometimes used within the Template Analysis (King et al., 2018). While there is no set guidance for sample size within Template Analysis it often uses larger sample sizes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The sample size was consistent with other studies using IPA methodology merged with Template Analysis (Brooks et al., 2015). Participants were pseudonymised, whereby a pseudonym was given to each participant prior to publication.

Protocol

The study was theoretically underpinned by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, an approach that examines the lived experience of phenomena. IPA is featured by three core characteristics; hermeneutics (the interpretation of experience), phenomenology (the philosophy of meaning) and Ideography (ensuring that individual experience is considered)

(Smith, 2022). IPA shaped the study design and data collection, particularly the emphasis on understanding participants' subjective experiences in both depth and context.

Template Analysis (King et al., 2018) was employed as the primary analytic technique. This was selected for its flexibility and structured approach to organising complex data, supporting the development of a coherent thematic framework across individual cases while retaining ideographic detail. The study did not use an a priori template; rather, interview questions were lightly sensitised, (Template Analysis refers to this as soft a priori themes) by the components of the contextual model of flourishing (Huppert & So, 2013), providing gentle scaffolding without constraining participants' discussions. Template Analysis was not used as an independent analytic method detached from IPA but was implemented within an interpretative phenomenological framework. In line with an abductive stance (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), our analysis involved a reflexive movement between participants accounts and sensitising theoretical concepts. This approach allowed us to remain grounded in lived experience while also interrogating how well the contextual model of flourishing illuminated these accounts. This approach has been described as legitimate when the analytic structure supports rather than replaces IPA principles (Brooks et al., 2015).

Prior to starting the research ethical approval was granted by the local ethics committee at the University of East London. The study was carried out in conjunction with the BPS code of ethics (BPS, 2018) core principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity.
Interviews were conducted by a female researcher; this was deemed important to try and ensure that participants felt as comfortable as possible to be their authentic self when discussing the impact of OWS on flourishing. Both researchers visited the lake prior to the interviews to find a place where the interviews could take place

within the park in sight of the lake and in a safe and appropriate area. Most interviews took place within the park but for participant convenience two interviews took place in different locations, one online and one in a local café. Interviews taking place at the lake were usually arranged around the participant swimming, five interviews took place prior to the swim, 2 took place after, this was led by the participant. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted for a total of 7 hours and 16 minutes with each individual interview lasting between 31 minutes and 63 minutes.

To ensure quality the authors utilised Yardleys four criteria of quality when using qualitative research methodology: sensitivity to the context, a commitment to rigour, transparency as well as impact and importance (Yardley, 2017). Sensitivity to the context was met by attending the lake informally, thus, attempting to understand the parameters of the activity. Significant effort was made to ensure that the participants felt as comfortable as possible, a female conducted the interviews at a time and place convenient to the participant. Rigour was demonstrated through following a process of analysis, this led to 14 meetings between the authors to ensure that the template was a meaningful reflection of the interviews. Authors made considerable efforts to be transparent in how we arrived at the template and followed the necessary process to ensure that the work was conducted in an ethical way. Finally, there was a clear need for the research which for the first time linked an established wellbeing model to OWS utilising qualitative methodology.

Analysis

Template Analysis (King et al., 2018) was utilised following the seven procedural steps set out in Tabari and colleagues (Tabari et al., 2020) of:

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Preliminary coding
3. Clustering
4. Developing the initial template
5. Modifying the template
6. Defining the final template
7. Using the template to analyse and interpret the data

The flexibility of Template Analysis allowed for a slightly more structured interview schedule than would normally be the case with IPA methodology. During analysis a bottom-up approach was utilised, whereby there was no pre organised a priori template, the template was created solely based on participant accounts. Both researchers familiarized themselves with the data through listening to the recordings, reading and re-reading the transcripts before making an early attempt to code the data, at this stage authors examined broad sensitising concepts, this was done independently. Clustering of the earlier coding then took place before an initial template was developed. The template was modified on several occasions to ensure that it reflected the content of the interview discussion, before both researchers reached agreement on a 'final' template where researchers felt there was a clear structure, themes were defined appropriately, and all relevant data was coded. Researchers met 14 times throughout this process to get to the point of defining the final template.

1. Proactive Self Care
    1. Reset [Emotional stability]
    2. Nature Connectedness
        i. Wildlife Connection
        ii. Seasonal Recognition
    3. Immersive Experience/Self focus [Engagement]
        i. Mindfulness
        ii. Body Awareness
        iii. Safety
2. Desirable Outcomes
    1. Positive Relationships [positive relationships]
        i. Alone but connected
        ii. Community Feel
            1. Mutual Interests
            2. Wider friendships
            3. A female environment
    2. Positive Emotions
        i. Optimism
        ii. Enhanced Vitality
        iii. Enhanced self esteem
        iv. Reduction in negative thoughts and feelings
3. Transferable Impact
    1. Coping with major life events
    2. Enhanced mental health and wellbeing
    3. Confidence in day-to-day activities
4. Integrative themes running throughout
    1. Positivity
    2. Menopausal symptom relief
    3. The Cold/Winter Swimming
    4. Positive comparisons to alternatives

Figure 1: The Final Template

Results

The Template Analysis resulted in three first order themes that were divided into lower order themes. The template also identified four integrative themes that spanned across the whole template. Findings are discussed below and numbered in accordance with figure 1.

1. Proactive Self Care

Proactive self-care refers to participants engaging in OWS for the purpose of wellbeing. This was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. This was described by Christine when she said

> *"you want to mend your parachute when everything's good. You need to practice so when you need it, it's there. Build the skill and have it there"*

Christine clearly describes engaging with OWS as a practice that enables her to be proactive in her wellbeing. This was a feature of the interviews.

1.1 Reset

All swimmers within the sample discuss a process that enables them to return to a more positive psychological state. Four participants used the term reset, this sentiment is epitomised by Lesley, and Christine who said:

> *"I get back to whatever I'm doing that day and I feel kind of more focused and switched on. And I feel like I kind of reset my brain a little bit" Lesley*
> *"You get in the lake, and it's almost like hitting a reset. So, you can't think about any of the things you were thinking about before you got in the lake" Christine*

The idea that participants could reset themselves through OWS ran

through all transcripts.

1.2 Nature Connectedness

Nature connectedness was recognised as a cathartic and stress relieving process. This was very clearly stated when Meadow said:

> *"Like you get in the water, and you have to kind of go sort of clockwise. So, you kind of go left. When you get to the top of that lake and you turn around there's a point where all you see is like the trees, the shrubs and you've got like ducks passing you and it's just, and the smell and the sounds is just like you feel like you just feel amazing" Meadow*

On describing nature connectedness Meadow was in awe of the nature she experienced while OWS, clearly a very positive experience for her. Many references were made to being at one with nature within the interviews.

While the general feeling was that nature connection was a powerful reason for engaging in OWS, this was not the case with all participants, this was clear when Summer stated:

> *"For me, it doesn't have to be green. In fact, I'm more comfortable probably in somewhere like Canary Wharf" Summer*

Canary Wharf is a financial centre in London that is densely occupied by modern office blocks within a former docks area which is used for OWS. Considerably less vegetation is present to the lake where all participants swim. Participants were not excluded if they swam in multiple venues. Summers' comment about not having to be green and being more comfortable within a built-up area may well point to

a more nuanced experience. This is still a natural body of water, but the surroundings are slightly different to that where all participants including Summer swim.

When analysed the interviews discussed a recognition of the different meteorological seasons and a connection to wildlife.

Within nature connectedness the analysis suggests different ways of connecting to nature:

1.2.1 Wildlife Connection

> *"Yeah, definitely. You know, like when you're there with the ducks, you know, you're kind of giving them space. Yeah, just like, you know, we're all we all share this" Meadow*

While nature connection through a wildlife connection was generally considered a good thing, there was some divergence here when Lesley noted:

> *"I swim here from September ish to may ish because of the duck fleas in the summer. I got bitten in mid May. And that was my last last swim till till I hear that they are gone because it's just it makes the days unpleasant" Lesley*

Lesleys comment was not typical of the interviews, but it does demonstrate individual differences.

1.2.2 Seasonal Recognition

A number of participants connected to nature through observing the changes that happen over the meteorological seasons. Emma mentions this when she states:

> *"Sometimes its blissful nothing. I love the lake because of the nature you can see the way things change through the year" Emma*

This comment was typical of the participant discussions.

1.3 Immersive Experiences/Self Focus

Immersive experiences and self focus refer to OWS participants being fully engaged within the activity to the point where nothing else was present with them while swimming.

1.3.1 Mindfulness

Participants reported being fully in the present moment, being nonjudgmental of themselves during that time and being fully focussed on the swim. Meadow epitomised this when she spoke of how she managed to put her Fathers passing to one side while she swam:

> *"My head is in the moment, I'm not thinking about anything else and that's what, that's why I kept going back as well because it was like, you know, my mind would just be like, you know, thinking about my Dad's death and did it. And then when I got in that water, like, I just didn't think about anything else like I don't, I don't swim thinking about what I need to do for work or and I Yeah" Meadow*

1.3.2 Body Awareness

Body awareness was clear throughout the interviews and was summarised when specifically referring to swimming in cold water, Emma said:

> *"Listening to your body, you are really in tune with yourself. A physical, natural being" Emma*

Bodily awareness was especially present in several of the participants.

1.3.3 Safety

A number of participants spoke about safety enabling an immersive experience. Several safety measures are in place at the lake where all participants swam. Lifeguards are always present, participants are expected to wear a tow float to ensure that they are visible to lifeguards, the water quality is measured, and action is taken in the event of the water falling below a standard. Participants discussed safety measures, something which is not always present in OWS. Participants viewed this as a mechanism that led to an immersive experience, this was discussed when Charlotte said:

> *"I've got other places I swim, like the river in Surrey, but I wouldn't have been there on my own. The good thing that this has allowed me to do is to feel safe to come here on my own. Don't need to know anybody else who's here but I know that the guys (lifeguards) are here things like that. So, this is enabled me to do it much more regularly. Yeah, because it is controlled" Charlotte*

Clearly, the controlled environment was welcomed and took away worry which appeared to facilitate immersive experiences.

2. Desirable Outcomes

Participants discussed a number of positive outcomes resulting from OWS. The template discusses these across two second order themes 'positive relationships' and 'positive emotions' and their associated lower order themes.

2.1 Positive Relationships

Relating well to others was discussed in several different ways. Some felt this by reporting that it was OK to not have a stigma attached to wanting to be alone while in a group, others discussed a community that was created through the lake.

2.1.1 Alone but connected

This was discussed when Charlotte said:

> *"I'm very friendly, but I don't want that, I like to better come and go as I like, but there's always someone to talk to and they're always chatty and it's always very friendly. So, I like it here. It's just got that sort of very low key. So, there's something nice about the venue here, as well as, as well as doing the swimming" Charlotte*

And when Emma said:

> *"It's friendly. But equally, you can have your solitude and your kind of personal time in the lake" Emma*

A powerful feeling of being able to be present but not having to make nor worry about making significant effort to be a part of an inner group is discussed by both Charlotte and Emma above, there is no pressure to take part in the social side but that added part of OWS at this venue is very much open to participants should they wish to take part.

2.1.2 Community Feel

A community feel was discussed in different ways. Summer said:

> *"it's just like this homely, caring kind community, it just feels naturally where I should be" Summer*

This was further broken down within the template into further fourth order themes.

2.1.2.1 Mutual Interests

There were times when relationships were strengthened as a result of an involvement within OWS. Kerry felt this when discussing her personal relationships:

> *"It deepened the bond between me and my husband because we're not people that have hobbies" Kerry*

She went on to discuss encouraging her stepson to take part:

> *"we persuaded him (to go OWS) he didn't want to it was a little bit about come on just try it because his anxiety was so bad and we've heard it can be good for anxiety and it and it helped with anxiety and then as he's developed it and got to really love it it's really developed a bond between him and his Dad and me and him that probably wasn't there before" Kerry*

2.1.2.2 Wider friendships

Some participants did describe connecting with and forming meaningful relationships through OWS. Meadow said:

> *"I wasn't looking to make friends or be part of the group. So, then I joined this Whatsapp group and actually like I've met the*

> *most like lovely women through this. So, I've made a couple of really good friends, you know, so that was for me. It was something that I wasn't expecting. And so that's something that happened, you know, through coming here. I can see. Yeah, yeah. And we've since like, we've been on a swimming holiday together. And yeah, so it's been like, yeah, it was really unexpected, but it's been really nice" Meadow*

Despite not looking for friendships they came as a by-product of being around the environment.

2.1.2.3 A female environment

Participants described the environment and the forming of strong bonds as being gender specific. Participants within the study were all female and there were several mentions made to this within the interviews. This is evident within Summer's statement:

> *"I can, you can clearly see that there is a huge community that goes with it. And one day when I don't have a job, I would really like to get more into that. So, you can, particularly for women, you can really see women connecting with other women, women in this swimming space. Because I think what it allows you to do is be together in that in that nature space" Summer*

Discussion about an informal and gender specific support group is evident within the statement above and something that was discussed directly and implied throughout the interviews.

2.2 Positive Emotions

Positive emotions were a feature of the semi-structured interview schedule, and participants report clearly experiencing positive emotions resulting from OWS. Both Kerry and Lisa are very clear about this in their statements:

"Its just a bloody joyous thing to do" Lisa

"A lot of open water swimmers say it's not just about the act of swimming, but it's the joy it brings and it is joyful". Kerry

2.2.1 Optimism

Several participants discussed optimism in line with a feeling that they were going to do things that when outside of the OWS environment seemed to them unrealistic. Summers statement below epitomised this:

> *"You know, my optimism after I've swam is like yeah, I'm gonna swim the channel next weekend. Or it probably makes me overly optimistic. Because you're like, Yeah, I can, I can, I can do it all. And then you know, it's kind of like this distance between the end of swimming and kind of going to wherever your next place is, like reality kind of comes back in again. But it's it's still bubbles away there in the background" Summer*

Others discuss how OWS helped their optimism across the different seasons and how they were not fazed by moving through the seasons.

2.2.2 Enhanced Vitality

Participants describe having more energy as a result of OWS. Christine was very succinct with this when she said

"I'm defo more energised the more I do it (OWS)" Christine

Summer discussed how the enhanced energy resulting from OWS transferred across into other health behaviours when she said:

> *"it feeds into your your whole vitality because I eat better and then I exercise more. And then I put in my next swim because I'm like, I need more of this in my life. You kind of snowball over and over and over and over and over"* Summer

There was considerable reference to OWS leading to other healthy behaviours.

2.2.3 Enhanced self esteem

Participants discussed how self esteem was related to functionality as opposed to aesthetic changes. Emma said:

> *"So in terms of self esteem, yeah, you've got that kind of, it's your, I think your body is doing something, where it's about what it can do and achieve rather than how it looks" Emma*

Self esteem seemed to be clearly derived and drawn upon from the healthy position of the participants functionality.

2.2.4 Reduction in negative emotions

Participants discussed OWS taking away some of the negative emotions and thoughts that they occasionally experience. Christine said:

"Relationships are not really impacted, I'm just less grumpy" Christine

Summer discussed it in the light of a concern of not being able to partake when she said:

"I will do it forever. And if I can't I do get irritated right" Summer

3 Transferability

Running throughout the interviews was a view that the experience of OWS had a positive impact on participants when they were away from the lake above and beyond that described earlier within the template. This was nicely put by Lisa when she said:

> *"It sets you up for the day" Lisa*

3.1 Coping with major life events

Several participants describe how OWS had an impact on how they coped with major life events, such as health (physical and mental) issues and bereavement. Lisa describes this in terms of a cancer diagnosis commenting:

> *"So I had breast cancer about 18 months ago. And swimming here in the lake didn't save me, it was surgery that saved me, but that was such a huge part of my healing process, right. Even when things were like, not great. I mean, I didn't have to have chemo or anything like that I just had a mastectomy, no treatment other than that, which I was very fortunate, so but it was just times like that, it was just like, I just need to not talk to anybody, I just need to go and be me again, that was kind of proving to me what my body was capable of" Lisa*

Clearly, Lisa valued the opportunities provided by OWS to get away from the diagnosis and the stresses of the situation. Others described how OWS played a role in coping with bereavement.

3.2 Enhanced mental health and wellbeing

Many of the participants discussed how the process of OWS assisted them with betterment of health outcomes. Summer mentioned this in

both a physical and a mental health context within her comment:

> *"So I feel much more physically powerful. And then the more physically powerful I feel the more that breathes into being mentally powerful. So, you I definitely, I have swum, I'm in a stronger, much stronger place mentally and physically for the whole day" Summer*

Others discussed OWS in the form of stress management and how the enhanced mental health through OWS allowed them to recognise when symptoms of poor mental health were beginning to arise.

3.3 Confidence in day to day activities

Many of the participants describe how OWS enabled them to feel more confident about their general activities. Kathy talks about this indirectly when she said:

"It makes me happy in adverse weather conditions, it reminds me that I have grit" Kathy

Lesley refers to being:

"More focussed and switched on at work" Lesley

There was a clear link within the interviews between OWS and feeling more able to be effective in day to day life.

4 Integrative Themes

Running across all of the first order themes and across most of the lower order themes were integrative themes. The importance of these themes should not be understated, they were a feature of the interviews which afforded valuable insight to our understanding of

the participant experience.

4.1 Positivity

Positivity has been mentioned earlier within the template. Across all of the different themes across the complete template there was a clear positivity to OWS, especially OWS at the common venue. Lisa put this very succinctly when she said:

> *“Everybody's smiling when they walk around the lake” Lisa*

Kerry was more detailed when she said:

> *“I've never had a bad swim, I've never come out of the water wishing I hadn't got in it, even when it's horrible, but I do. I say I always have a positive experience in the water and I always come out with some positive effects afterwards, but there are many swims where you feel joy and I mean joy and you feel joy for ages afterwards” Kerry*

The positivity was evident throughout the sample with no evident divergence.

4.2 Menopausal symptom relief

Frequently cited within the interviews were connections between OWS and the menopause. This ran across many different areas of the template. A number of the participants spoke of how the symptoms of menopause were positively impacted by OWS. Charlotte commented:

> *"Over the last five years of menopause and I've had quite a few procedures, you know, surgical procedures and things like that. So, I think that I think probably, I would have reacted to things*

> *more extremely. Whereas, I think this has given me that sort of sense because I think I'm getting some sense of calm in every week, that I think it sort of brings me down a bit. So, I'm not I'm not reacting from here (points to her body). Yeah, I'm reacting from here (points to her head). Charlotte*

In the same statement Charlotte went on to say:

> *"So, I think it has made me sort of more emotionally stable" Charlotte*

Charlottes comments reflected the view of several of the participants about how menopausal symptoms that were experienced by most of the participants were positively impacted by OWS.

Lisa refers to a belief that OWS will help her when she eventually experiences menopausal symptoms.

> *"I haven't got any bad physical menopausal symptoms, but so many women do. And it's really fucking hard and there's not enough acknowledgement. Yeah. Don't talk about it. No. And actually the fact that you can kind of get in the water and just take all of that pressure off your body in whatever way is just It's a pleasure" Lisa*

Kerrys comment below when discussing how she experiences the menopause refers to OWS giving her back control:

> *"I know the way I'm behaving if all I'm trying to do is keep it under its not good, but I can go for a swim and I come out feeling like a normal human being" Kerry*

Participants made frequent reference to how OWS helped them to

control the menopausal symptoms that they experienced.

4.3 The Cold/Winter Swimming

Swimming in the winter was constantly referred to in a positive way. As seasoned OWS, participants consistently spoke highly about winter swimming. Charlotte said:

> *"I think there's definitely something about the cold water. I really like" Charlotte*

Sometimes the reset discussed earlier within the template appeared directly related to the cold. Emma mentioned this:

> *"Like when it is very cold. You can't think about anything else, but you're totally in the present. So, it's very grounding. And it's like your space" Emma*

The cold temperatures were mentioned in terms of increasing levels of positive emotions. Meadow comments:

> *"I got in whilst there was actual ice in that lake, you know, if I can do that I can do anything" Meadow*

Earlier in the statement Meadow linked OWS to resilience.

4.4 Positive Comparisons to Alternatives

There was a sense among the participants that OWS was the best form of exercise for them. Many references were made to a difference between OWS and swimming in other forms. Kathy reflected this when she said:

> *"So I really enjoy swimming. But I really don't enjoy swimming*

> *pools. You know, the I feel claustrophobic. I don't like the chemicals, they react with my skin, my eyes. And as soon as I go into change rooms, I feel like I'm in a sweat box" Kathy*

Others made a comparison to other types of exercise. This was clear when Meadow said:

> *"you wouldn't do a workout at the gym, you know, come off the treadmill, and someone else is getting on you go. Oh, that's great. Yeah, you're gonna really enjoy that" Meadow*

There was a clear sense from the interviews that participants had chosen the right form of exercise for them and that they had made an informed decision.

Discussion

Flourishing and Open Water Swimming

The study explored how OWS with a group of nine middle-aged, middle-class women from the South of England impacted flourishing, the structured wellbeing concept that refers to the highest level of psychological functioning and wellbeing (Hone et al., 2014). The bottom-up approach to the analysis and remaining true to the IPA methodology both allowed for a detailed examination of the interviews and a thorough exploration of the participant experience while discussing the link between OWS and flourishing. The 10 components of the conceptual model of flourishing (Huppert & So, 2013) were all discussed within the transcripts and positively associated with OWS. A mapping exercise of the features of the conceptual model and where they are positioned within the template can be seen in table 1.

Component	*Direct Link*	*Indirect Link*
Positive Relationships	2.1, 2.1.1, 2.1.2, 2.1.2.1, 2.1.2.2, 2.1.2.3,	
Engagement		1.3, 1.3.1, 1.3.2, 1.3.3
Meaning		2, 2.1, 2.2 and 3.1
Self Esteem	2.2.3	
Positive Emotion	2.2, 2.2.1, 2.2.2, 2.2.3	
Competence	3.3	
Optimism	2.2.1	
Emotional Stability		1.1, 2.4, 4.2
Vitality	2, 2.2	
Resilience		2, 3.1

Table 1: The 10 Components of the Conceptual Model Mapped to The Final Template

The analysis did reflect components within the conceptual model of flourishing, we describe it within our own understanding of the participant experience, e.g. immersive experiences are very similar if not the same as engagement. Other components of the model were less direct and references to a deeper value to OWS than purely the act of OWS itself, e.g. several references to women supporting women and multiple references to the community that is created around the swimming could all be interpreted as 'meaning'. In addition, resilience while not labelled as such would appear to fit well around desirable outcomes and coping with major life events.

Previous literature suggests NBEX supports: positive emotions (Crust et al., 2011) the importance of nature connectedness (Jorgensen et al., 2020; Olafsdottir, 2013), the importance of the community (Morris & Scott, 2019), immersive experiences (Brymer et al., 2021) and positive relationships (Glackin & Beale, 2018).

Within OWS studies that have been conducted from a qualitative perspective that directly examine wellbeing (Christie & Elliott, 2023; Denton & Aranda, 2020; McDougall et al., 2022; Murray & Fox, 2021) all discussed wellbeing from an atheoretical position of subjective wellbeing. The idea of allowing the participants to talk for themselves and discuss their own perception of wellbeing is valuable and has added insight to our understanding of the impact of OWS on wellbeing. However, the current study while maintaining a transformative worldview, through allowing the authentic voice of a vulnerable group to be heard, has linked all 10 components of the conceptual model to OWS in a controlled environment with middle aged women. The deductive approach allowed for direct questions around concepts that may not have been at the forefront of swimmers' minds who may not have a conscious awareness of these features within a one-off interview. The interviews suggest that OWS does impact the features of the conceptual model and therefore flourishing as defined within the model (Huppert & So, 2013). It did facilitate positive emotions; all features of positive characteristics and positive functioning were mentioned positively within the interviews as a result of participation within OWS. The findings suggest OWS has the potential to enable flourishing within middle aged, middle class women. While a number of studies have alluded to different features of flourishing, this study is the first to address the full conceptual model in relation to OWS (or any form of NBEX) directly.

Menopausal Symptom Relief

Not mentioned within the literature previously was the impact of OWS on the menopause. At no point were participants asked about the menopause. However, the menopause, and menopausal symptom relief were discussed on multiple occasions. To the authors knowledge no study has examined OWS or NBEX and its impact on menopausal symptoms. Literature has examined the impact swimming on menopausal symptoms but studies have generally

focussed on physical changes rather than wellbeing (Wong et al., 2019). Recent research has begun to examine cold water swimming in relation to its impact on perimenopausal symptoms (Pound et al., 2024), this study examined cold water swimming by examining outdoor swimming in unheated conditions (of which OWS would be included), a bespoke survey concluded that perimenopausal symptoms were alleviated through cold water swimming. The current study both aligns with and builds on this view. It also identified the cold as a feature that led to flourishing within a middle aged female group. The idea of nature connectedness identified within the current study leading to flourishing was an additional factor that may lead to menopausal symptom relief. While the current study does not suggest a causal link this area is worthy of further investigation. The current study included a more specific type of cold water swimming, OWS, where participants drew comparisons between swimming outdoors in lidos and within nature based conditions, participants spoke favourably about the OWS form.

Research looking to enrich our understanding of NBEX (Bamberg et al., 2018) suggests that an understanding of NBEX specifically across the winter season is required. This study and other literature (Pound et al., 2024) appears to be pointing to a stronger wellbeing impact for middle-aged women while swimming in the autumn and winter months in the South of England. Studies appear to suggest that OWS may offer unique benefits. Further research is required to tease out the nuances both between groups and physical activity type. It would be interesting to investigate the impact on menopausal symptom relief while partaking in other forms of physical activity, e.g. guided nature walks and to examine flourishing in different groups of open water swimmers e.g. middle-aged men where participation rates are slightly lower.

Limitations

The current study is not without its limitations. As a qualitative approach rooted in an ideographic philosophy, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) does not aim for generalisability in the traditional sense. Instead, it offers a detailed, nuanced exploration of individual lived experience, with the potential for theoretical and applied transferability. The homogeneity of this sample, middle aged, middle class women engaged in year round open water swimming in the South of England reinforces the importance of situating the findings rather than extending them to wider populations.

Every effort was made to facilitate meaningful discussion, in that a female interviewer conducted the semi structured interviews. Interviews were conducted where possible in sight of the lake, and interviews were conducted at a time convenient to the participant. This study did not match the sample within the research team, perhaps a full insider approach would have led to more meaningful insight, and a more expansive view on issues such as menopausal symptom relief from OWS. Interviews were conducted over the summer months and despite discussing year round swimming this may have influenced recall of swimming during other seasons, this could be addressed by future research utilising Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) (Farr & Nizza, 2019) and conducting interviews at several time points across the year.

Conclusion

To conclude, OWS does appear to be a potential mechanism to facilitate the 10 components of flourishing as defined by the conceptual model (Huppert & So, 2013). The current study offers some insight into the pathways by which OWS is able to do this within a sample of middle aged and middle class women. A natural progression of this research would be to examine the impact of OWS

on the menopause and menopausal symptoms directly. Additional insight into how other forms of physical activity influence flourishing and to examine whether the impact on flourishing is apparent across different groups would all be useful to understand this area further. Investigating the gender balance whereby there are considerably more females participants compared to males might be another aspect that acts as a pathway to flourishing. Results from this study are potentially relevant to policy makers working within public health initiatives looking to take a proactive approach to encouraging women to start and maintain physical activity, especially OWS.

Critical Reflexivity

Physical activity in nature has always been something I've enjoyed, especially during pivotal life moments such as challenging periods, impactful experiences, and moments of extreme joy. Immersing myself in nature during such times has had a profoundly positive impact. For example, during grief, I often found myself unconsciously drawn to walking along a beach, reflecting in a non-critical way. Similarly, during joyous occasions, like when I proposed to my wife, I was intentionally immersed in nature, down on one knee in an area of outstanding natural beauty following a short hike. This personal connection has fuelled my curiosity about similar experiences in others and inspired my strong desire to understand these pathways, both for personal growth and to help others enhance their lives.

This study emerged from a desire to better understand the specific wellbeing pathways associated with a particular type of nature-based exercise (NBEX) within a specific group. My interest in open water swimming (OWS) stems from multiple factors. Firstly, I had access to participants through a connection with the company managing the lake where the swimmers swam. Secondly, I observed an increase in participation in this form of NBEX, which intrigued me. While my day-to-day work as a sport and exercise psychologist gives me a

skewed view of exercise uptake, since those around me tend to view exercise positively, I was struck by the growing popularity of OWS despite the apparent discomforts, such as colder water temperatures. Despite this, I had not encountered anyone who initially spoke positively about trying OWS, making the increasing participation rates all the more compelling. On initial observation, the activity seemed to have a significant impact on participants' moods.

From my own research and a broader review of NBEX literature, I noted that many studies explore the relationship between NBEX and wellbeing inductively. For this study, however, I chose to use an existing model to structure interview questions more directly, while still adhering to the principle that participants should lead the discussion, and researcher influence should be limited to the semi structured interview framework.

My research approach often favours insider perspectives, but this study posed challenges as my academic networks did not readily offer an insider interviewer. To address this, I prioritised selecting an interviewer who was both female and interested in the intersections of exercise, wellbeing, and nature. On reflection, this choice may have influenced the results.

JJ, the selected interviewer, proved to be exceptional. Her ability to establish rapport, remain non-judgmental, and engage deeply with participants was remarkable. Listening to her interviews often gave me goosebumps, and I believe her skill was a major factor in the study's success.

JJ's background was also beneficial. As a middle class woman from a professional background, she faced very limited social barriers in facilitating interviews with the participant group, all of whom were professional women established in their careers. Power dynamics

often play a significant role in researcher-participant relationships, but in this study, it may have been the reverse, JJ's identity likely put participants and herself at ease during the interactions. The interview quality supports this, as participants were forthcoming about sensitive topics, such as menopause.

I wonder if I as a man in my 40s had conducted these interviews, topics like menopause might not have been mentioned. Research supports this, suggesting women are generally more comfortable discussing sensitive health issues with female researchers. Furthermore, the lack of discussion around menopause in similar studies conducted by male researchers reinforces this notion. While to my knowledge this study is the first to link OWS and menopausal symptom relief, on reflection examining women within this age group it should be no surprise to me that menopause was discussed so frequently.

To mitigate bias, both JJ and I analysed the interviews. While some advocate for a "critical friend" role, where the interviewer solely analyses the data with support from a colleague, I firmly believe in the value of a collaborative analysis. JJ and I brought complementary skill sets to the study: JJ, as the interviewer, naturally developed impressions of developing themes; I, with 20 years of experience as a psychologist and expertise in qualitative research, brought an analytical perspective grounded in NBEX. Together, our collaborative approach enriched the analysis and led to more meaningful insights than either of us could have achieved alone.

Although some might critique this as "small q", research leaning toward a post-positivist framework, our intention and outcomes aligned with the transformative worldview. The combination of our distinct skills allowed us to maintain a rigorous and authentic analysis. While more time-intensive, this method ultimately

produced richer insights.

Throughout the analysis, we reported both convergent and divergent findings, a key feature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). However, upon reflection, my strong belief in the value of NBEX may have unintentionally limited our exploration of divergent themes. For instance, one participant mentioned avoiding the lake due to fly bites at certain times, and another indicated that nature was not a significant factor in their wellbeing experience. These points could have been probed further.

It feels overly reductionist to claim that OWS "facilitates flourishing" without examining individual-level variations. Had our own "eco-self" perspectives been more neutral, the interviews might have better explored why certain aspects of nature were not important to some participants. Despite the attempts to ensure that the analysis was a thorough and meaningful representation of the participant experience we may have implicitly focused on themes of connection to nature without sufficiently exploring moments of disconnection or neutrality towards the natural environment. This oversight could limit a fuller understanding of how OWS influences wellbeing across diverse individual experiences. Moving forward, having an awareness of our own ecological self within future research could lead to explicitly designing questions that explore participants' nuanced relationships with nature. Semi structured interviews could discuss moments of disconnection from or ambivalence toward natural environments, alongside connection and flourishing. Perhaps this might be true of the interviews within the current study where on reflection there were opportunities to explore these nuances. This enhanced awareness would allow researchers to explore a broader spectrum of experiences, capturing not only the facilitative aspects of OWS but also potential barriers or neutral elements that shape individual pathways to wellbeing.

Alternative or complimentary qualitative methods may allow participants to explore the same concepts in a different way where there is less impact of the researchers eco-self. Techniques such as eco-mapping where participants are encouraged to produce a visual representation of their relationships with relevant concepts might provide an additional layer of information where negative responses to nature are more obvious and less susceptible to researcher bias.

Ultimately, by incorporating a more deliberate focus on the ecological self, future studies could provide a more holistic understanding of how NBEX and OWS influence wellbeing, including the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways people relate to natural environments. Having an increased awareness of the bias that comes with our own eco-self, combined with techniques such as member checking, post analysis with an openness to adjusting where necessary as well as employing reflexivity throughout the whole research process, e.g. through techniques such as journaling, may well be useful to mitigate bias within the interpretation and go some way to ensuring that the participants diverse experiences are fully represented.

This research has clear relevance to ecopsychology, examining the interrelationship between human wellbeing and the natural environment (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012). The findings highlight multiple dimensions of nature connectedness among participants, including embodied encounters with wildlife, heightened awareness, engagement with seasonal change, and the restorative qualities of immersion in natural settings. These processes operated as mechanisms that supported both flourishing and mindfulness, illustrating the reciprocal benefits of engaging with nature through OWS. Moreover, participants described transferable impacts, whereby time spent in outdoor water enhanced their day-to-day life. The more positive outcomes associated with OWS, compared to indoor pool based equivalents, demonstrate the distinctive role of nature contact

in shaping psychological wellbeing. In this way, the study contributes to eco-psychological debates by evidencing how structured, physical activities in nature can foster deeper human nature relationships alongside individual flourishing (Jordan, 2014).

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Pia Philbey of PTP Coaching for her proactive help within the study.

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