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Older Adults' Engagement with Nature - and the Art of Qualitatively Studying it



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Defining 'old age' and avoiding ageism

Even though ageing is an inevitable part of life, *getting old, becoming old, growing older* and *being old* are socially constructed concepts that are not 'set in stone' but contestable, negotiable and highly subjective. As an example, Milan Kundera (n.d.) wrote about this issue as follows:

"There is a certain part of all of us that lives outside of time. Perhaps we become aware of our age only at exceptional moments and most of the time we are ageless."

Albeit we (or at least our bodies) might not be 'ageless', the idea of *living outside of time* has made researchers study not only chronological or 'objective' age, but also subjective age, making Montepare and Lachman (1989) suggest that subjective age generally differs from 'actual age', oftentimes making us feel younger than what birth certificates document our age to be.

Traditionally, constructions of ageing have accentuated loss, social isolation, dependency and passivity (Holstein, 1999; Walker, 2000), equating ageing with frailty and decline. However, as Katz and Marshall (2003:3) argue, ideals of ageing emphasizing independence, well-being, mobility, and active participation in life are currently replacing stereotypes of decline and dependency; making them conclude that these changes intertwine with "*market and lifestyle industries*" creation of "*an idealized culture of 'ageless' consumers and active populations*". Irrespectively of how ageing is constructed and whether it is presented by means of positive ideals or negative stereotypes, Katz and Marshall's (2003) discussion of changes in how ageing is presented exemplifies how ageing and what it means to be an 'older adult' are not as simple to define as it might seem. The fuzziness of these concepts becomes even more apparent when acknowledging the heterogeneity among the people we oftentimes label 'older adults' and that ageing is highly individual as well as taking new forms as we generally live longer.

Hamilton and Hamaguchi (2015:706) opine that "*age is more complex than a simple biological category*" and therefore, researchers should not focus on chronological age, but focus on "*the life experiences that give age meaning*" (Eckert, 1997:167). Age hereby becomes not only a matter of biological and chronological age, but also matters of functional health and social age (Counts and Counts, 1985). As chronological and generational boundaries become increasingly

blurred and indeterminate (Katz and Marshall, 2003) and as people often feel younger or older than their chronological age (Boden & Bielby, 1986; Montepare & Lachman, 1989), it is not always clear what is meant when referring to 'older adults' (Lazer, 1986; Gunter, 1998). However, several studies (e.g. Patterson, 2006; Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Alén, Losada and Domínguez, 2016) define older adults as people older than somewhere between 50 to 65 as this is the age where people 'start to become old', but defining what is meant by 'starting to become old' is complicated by both marketers' and researchers' portrayals of a 'senior market' comprised of 'the new ageing', presenting "*the post-human body and its life in postmodern life in time-fuzzy, demographic profiles*" (Katz and Marshall, 2003:8).

During the last 20 years, older adults have become more visible in media and advertising, albeit such visibility is "*with a focus on the youthful and well-kept look*" (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000). Increased visibility of older adults also characterizes tourism studies, although there is a strong tendency to portray older adults as tourists that either have delicate conditions or very actively participate in tourism. An example of the former type of portrayals is Massow's (2000) mentioning of older 'adventure tourists' as preferring 'slower paced tours' and 'not too many early morning departures' whereas Lipscombe's (1996) argument that the taste for new adventures might be even more intense when people grow older is an example of the latter type of portrayals. In recent years, these oppositional portrayals of older tourists are beginning to be replaced by more nuanced understandings; such as when Littrel et. al. (2004) distinguish between 'younger-at-heart' and 'older-at-heart' senior travelers. Nevertheless, tourism researchers have a strong tendency to portray older adults as a rather homogeneous group of tourists; i.e. as *one* segment or as a group comprised of a smaller number of sub-segments; hereby making generalizations about this large group of individuals to an extent where statistical generalizations can be criticized for stereotyping older tourists and their thought, feelings and doings.

Instead of defining older adults simply by means of chronological age, it might make more sense to look at relevant cohorts and already twelve years ago, Jang and Wu (2006:306) argued that "*the most rapid growth in the senior population will start after 2010, when the large post World War II baby boomers begin to reach age 65*". In the same vein, Clever and Muller (2002) opined that baby boomers prefer to be involved in more adventurous leisure experiences and Patterson and Pegg (2009:254) boldly claimed that "*in recent years, 'boomers' have demonstrated that they are willing participants in new and adventurous forms of leisure and are opting for more*

physically challenging and ‘adrenalin driven’ experiences”. However, using cohorts to define what it means to be an older adult should not make us ignore the “*extreme heterogeneity of the older segments of the population*” or make us forget that “*elderly people can be expected [...] to differ greatly from each other in terms of physical health, attitudes toward self and others, communicative needs, memory, judgment, and reasoning*” (Hamilton and Hamagushi, 2015:707). As this listing of heterogeneities points to, understanding who older adults ‘are’ calls for more relativistic ontologies and subjective epistemologies.

Based on forecasts projecting a growing population of older adults (65+) and a particularly rapid increase in the number of ‘very old people’ (85+), the European Union points to population ageing as “*one of the greatest social and economic challenges facing the EU*”. They further argue that challenges relate not just to longevity, but to ‘healthy life years’ expectancies (i.e. indicators combining mortality with health status and disability data), that “*provide an indication as to the number of remaining years that a person of a particular age can expect to live free from any form of disability, introducing the concept of quality of life into an analysis of longevity*” (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_in_the_EU_%E2%80%93_statistics_on_an_ageing_society).

The EU proactively promotes active and healthy ageing in order to increase the ratio of older adults that remains in good health and is free to be active (e.g. being free to be part of the workforce, do voluntary work, join social groups, develop new skills and/or participate in travelling and tourism). Hereby, the EU discursively casts ageing as being either more, or less, healthy and active, thus pointing to the heterogeneity in levels of activity, health and disabilities among older adults. Ageing is, nonetheless, often cast as a 1-2% decline in functional ability per year (<https://patient.info/doctor/disability-in-older-people>) and as shown by Irving (2005) and Butler and Derrett (2014:2), disabilities may make people “*live at the boundaries of what is possible with a particular body*”. Furthermore, disability is a complex phenomenon, depending on relations between an individual, his/her body and the society in which he or she lives. Therefore, the ‘disabled body’ should not necessarily be seen as permanently disabled (or ‘declining’ by a set percentage per year) as people subject to age-induced disabilities may experience recovery and rehabilitation, changes in general barriers for inclusion in society and/or may engage in new types of practices that allow them to live active lives with various age-induced disabilities. For example, people with age-induced reduced elasticity of the eye lens may experience various levels of vision

impairment. However, the societal exclusion following from such vision impairment may be reduced significantly with the aid of glasses, large-print materials, speech oriented software for smart phones, vision impairment exercise programs for falls prevention etc. – aids that may affect the boundaries of what is possible with a particular body. Thereby, vision impairment becomes not an inevitable effect of ageing, but an impairment that can be dealt with in different ways in order to reduce quality of life as little as possible. This means that an 83 years old person, who, at the age of 75, felt excluded from many everyday life practices due to age-induced reduced vision, may be able to engage in these practices after having learnt to use the different aids that are available – hereby contesting the idea that ageing can be defined as gradual decline taking its inevitable toll on people as they grow older.

Instead of using chronological or biological age as a determinant, what it means to be an older adult can alternatively be defined on the basis of measures of active and healthy ageing and/or the extent to which older adults are ‘in good health’ and are ‘free’ to be active. Furthermore, being an older adult can be defined by using retirement as a determinant, as “*retirement has come to be viewed from a life-course perspective and, in everyday life in the western world, as a central, institutionally created marker of entry into ‘old age’*” (Rudman, 2006:181). However, new forms of retirement (such as early retirement, late retirement, semi-retirement and re-entering the work force at an old age) as well as new types of retirees (including those taking up voluntary work or non-standard forms of employment) are emerging, changing retirement from a defined event to “*an increasingly ambiguous, diverse and individual process*” (Rudman, 2006:182) that is less tied to a particular age than previously. Another relevant determinant could be the extent to which older adults are able, or ‘free’, to engage in societal and/or leisure activities of their own choice. As discussed in the following sections, engagement with nature has proven to positively affect well-being as well as active and healthy ageing and therefore, this paper digs deeper into how older adults engage with nature and how such engagement qualifies as being ‘free’ to engage in activities of own choice.

Taking the above discussions into consideration, activity, health and disability levels of older adults are not only heterogeneous at an aggregated level, but also dynamic at the individual level. Therefore, it seems that research that attempts to grasp what it *means* to be an older adult and tries to move beyond simple presentations of older adults as either people with delicate mental and

physical conditions that exclude them from engaging in leisure activities or as healthy, active or even 'ageless' citizens is needed if we wish to better understand what it means to be an older adult.

As Patterson and Pegg (2009) argue, boundaries between tourism and leisure are becoming increasingly blurred – especially when it comes to more active and immersive experiences (such as being in and with nature). Acknowledging and respecting this blurriness, in the next section we look at research on older adults' engagement with nature, without discriminating between leisure and tourism activities; being locals or tourists; or being in nature in one's home environment versus in unfamiliar settings - unless the research we refer to explicitly deals only with either nature experiences 'at home' or 'away from home'.

Being in and with nature

Much has been said and written about Quality of Life (QOL) and how different features of life determine well-being. However, general indicators of QOL, such as wealth; employment; environment; physical and mental health; education; recreation and leisure time; and social belonging, are rather abstract concepts that may do little to nuance understandings of what it *means* to be an older adult. Therefore, in this section we emphasize not general indicators, but individuals' embodied experiences of being in and with nature.

Individual experiences are situated in 'ordinary' landscapes and places of daily lives as well as in the supposedly more extra-ordinary landscapes and places, which we inhabit temporarily as we take on the role as tourists. Bergeron et. al. (2014:109) argue landscapes "*are shaped by the appreciations which people, either as a collectivity or as individuals, have of a specific territory*". So when the Best Destinations for Nature Lovers website (<https://www.europeanbestdestinations.com/destinations/best-destinations-for-nature-lovers/>) describes Samobor in Croatia as "*intact nature*" or Kietzbühel in Austria as "*a never ending nature*", they inscribe these places with certain nature-based appreciations, and so does a local resident at the Fanoe island, when she refers to Fanoe as 'the best nature habitat in Denmark'. Accordingly, the qualities of landscapes are not only derived from objective characteristics, but also from the more subjective appreciations individuals and societies attach to them. For example, the Wadden Sea national park might be marketed as Denmark's "*unquestionable most important nature reserve*" or "*a unique salt marsh and tidal flat area of international significance*" (<http://eng.nationalparkvadehavet.dk>), but it is through the appreciations of, and diversities in appreciations of and meanings about the area, held by residents and visitors, that this landscape is shaped and affects the QOL of both locals and tourists. This entails that landscapes are both conveyers of everyday life experiences and touristic experiences and it is through locals' and tourists' appreciations of, and engagement with, nature that nature takes on, and makes, meaning to people.

Tuan (1977) introduced the notion of ‘geopietty’, a concept that points to individuals’ bonding with nature as both consisting of bonding with nature in general and with specific places in particular. Hammitt et. al. (2004) follow up on this line of reasoning and argue that person-place coupling may develop to such levels that some places become ‘favorite places’. Furthermore, Schreyer et. al. (1984) discuss the dynamics of person-place bonding, arguing that people might start out as ‘novices’, but move towards becoming ‘experienced veterans’ as their bonding with a specific place evolves over time. Taking the notions of geopietty, person-place coupling and favorite places into consideration, it is imperative that researchers not only ask questions about nature in general, but try to dig deeper into the bonds and couplings that people make with specific places; whether this is a National Park or a specific spot that people keep coming back to. This is important as favorite places and specific spots may be more decisive for people’s nature experiences than their bonds with nature in general. For example, Kaveli et. al. (2008) argue that both frequency and length of stays in favorite places and frequency and intensity of physical exercise and activity in these places positively affect the quality of restorative experiences – and so does distance to favorite places. What Kaveli et. al.’s (2008) findings point to is thus that the restorative effects of nature are not only a matter of being in nature in general, but also a matter of which nature and landscapes, or more specific favorite places, we engage with and *how* we engage with them.

As part of the ‘mobilities turn’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006), sedentary conceptualizations of places are being substituted by conceptualizations pointing to far more complex people-place relations, anchored in embodied practices and processes (Crouch, 2010). Hereby, both extraordinary and more banal movements through landscapes shape place-based meanings (Binnie et. al., 2007) and the use of methodologies, methods and techniques that allow researchers to better understand older adults’ enactments of favorite places and place-based meaning constructions have the potential to both enrich research and empower older adults (Carpiano, 2009), hereby hopefully reducing the problems associated with doing inter-generational research as well as reducing the risk that researchers stereotype older adults. We return to the issue of embodied practices and relevant methodologies for studying such practices later in the paper. But first, we discuss bodily practices in the context of what it means to be older adults and what implications it has to coin ageing as successful, active and/or healthy.

In their seminal article, Rowe and Kahn (1987) argue that successful ageing consists of three components: (a) Freedom from disease and disability, (b) high levels for cognitive and

physical functions and (c) social and productive engagement. In subsequent sections, we introduce and discuss methods that may both empower research participants and allow researchers to better understand how older adults *engage* with nature and how *being in* the Wadden Sea National Park interrelates with older adults' abilities, functioning and positive engagement. We do so in order to accentuate older adults as people with abilities, skills and competencies that allow them to engage with nature, but may also feel restricted when it comes to immersion into nature. Cumming and Henry (1961) emphasized ageing as inscribed with gradual, inevitable and universal *disengagement*, an approach subsequently being heavily criticized by researchers taking into account the meanings older adults attach to their behavior, actions and practices (Hochschild, 1975). Instead of defining engagement as something that inevitably and gradually decreases as we grow older, drawing in relativistic ontologies, in this study we coin both engagement and disengagement as contestable and negotiable entities in flux; opening up for more nuanced understandings of not only levels of (dis)engagement, but also alternate ways of (dis)engaging with nature actively and passively.

In their definition of active ageing, the World Health Organization includes opportunities for health, participation and security and multidimensional definitions of active ageing emphasize participation of older adults in various domains of life; including leisure activities. For example, Houben, Audenaert and Mortelmans (2004 *in* Boudiny, 2013) include activities that require physical and/or mental efforts and that occur largely outdoors in their operationalization of active ageing. As another example, Avramov and Maskova (2003) include active participation in community life (e.g. volunteer work) and active leisure activities (e.g. hobbies, sports and travelling) in their definition of active ageing. However, as Clarke and Warren (2007:483) remind us, "*health, mobility and social interaction are not prerequisites for 'active ageing'*", as seemingly mundane everyday activities such as reading or completing a crossword may be considered to be rather active undertakings – especially by older adults. This line of reasoning is supported by Parker (1996:69), who points out it may be particularly problematic to focus on seemingly active leisure activities and exclude what seems to be more passive leisure activities when studying older adults as "*to one, an activity may seem active, to another passive*". For example, a physically very fit 85 years old may not consider a 15 minute walk on a clearly marked path as an *active* leisure activity whereas a 65 years old person, who has recently undergone major hip surgery may find the exact same walk to be a very active, and highly demanding, leisure activity. Boudiny (2013:1088) supports this claim by arguing that "*qualitative research shows that many of them [the older old]*

consider ‘ordinary’ activities such as reading, solving crossword puzzles and gardening as a more important indicator of their involvement with life than highly social or physical, ‘youthful’ activities”.

Based on the above examples, it is not only imperative that the young or middle-aged researcher brackets his or her own ideas of what it means to be active in a study focusing on older adults’ engagement with nature: It is even more important to acknowledge and fully respect “*the discontinuity and qualitative differences between the ‘ages’ of old age*” (Baltes & Smith, 2003:125) – including being sensitive to how ageing may imply that people search for, try out and sometimes habitualize (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) new ways of engaging with nature. In one of the trial interviews, two interviewees in their 70ties, living in the countryside, pointed to the importance of ‘getting out’ every day and how they now go for *more* (sometimes four or five), but *shorter* walks everyday compared to previously where ‘a walk’ would be longer and more demanding, but not necessarily something they would do every week, and certainly not on weekdays. What these two interviewees’ changes in habits indicate is not, we would argue, *less* engagement with nature, but instead changing practices that lead to new ways of engaging with nature. Therefore, below we dig deeper into older adults’ different ways of engaging with nature.

Williams and Vaske (2003:1) argue that understandings of places increasingly point to “*understanding the subjective, emotional, and symbolic meanings associated with natural places and the personal bonds or attachments people form with specific places or landscapes*”. Tuan (1977:6) distinguishes between space and place, arguing that space is undifferentiated, but becomes a place, “*when we endow it with value*”. In the same vein, Stokowski (2002) accentuates that places are more than geographical areas with certain physical characteristics as they are dynamic, fluid, socially constructed, contestable and ever-changing contexts (or even ‘actors’) that people enact and interact with. This means that when spaces are inscribed with a ‘sense of place’ (in Tuan’s, 1977, words ‘topophilia’), people form affective bonds with these spaces on the basis of the meanings, appreciations, significances and interpretations they attach to them. Kyle et. al. (2004) elaborate on the human-nature bond by suggesting that places are not only important to people because of their functional values, but also because they allow people to both express and affirm identity. This also means that any place “*has the potential to embody multiple landscapes, each of which is grounded in the cultural definitions of those who encounter that place*”. Accordingly, a world-renowned nature attraction such as Niagara Falls may, from a more objective perspective, ‘outdo’ any creek,

but to Judith Pleasant, “*my creek*”, which “*is flowing with speedy delight*”, making it “*the awesome beauty I always will seek*” (<http://www.authorsden.com/visit/viewPoetry.asp?id=108199>), may allow her to express and affirm identity in ways that the Niagara Falls cannot do. As a result, our aim is not to define functional or objective values of places, but to understand the affective bonds people form with nature in general and favorite places in particular. Furthermore, our exploratory interviews sensitized us to the issue that what people ‘do’ in nature is critical to the bonds they form with it. For example, research participants that would both go for a walk and a run in the same area, explained how their engagement with nature was much stronger when walking than when running, not only because a run is coined as a more ‘introvert’ experience, but also because the slower pace of a walk is simply needed in order to ‘truly see’ nature, regardless of whether this meant gazing at a scenic landscape from a hilltop or coming to a halt to gaze at the ants rushing around and bringing materials back to an anthill on a warm spring day; an anthill that seemed totally deserted depopulated during last weekend’s walk.

Although we do not wish to cast spaces as ‘empty containers’ stripped of significant and relevance, or ignore how physical environments feed into senses of places (Stedman, 2003), taking these matters into account, the Wadden Sea National Park is a very different landscape depending on not only the individual, who engages with it, but also how this individual engages with it. For example, a Dutch ornithologist may enact it as an especially rich natural habitat for birds whereas a 72 years old retiree, who has lived in the area his entire life, may define it as a place, where nature dictates man’s life as he recalls his childhood experiences with broken dikes and floods. Hay (1998) touched upon this issue in his study of sense of place as he found that respondents with the most profound sense of place had generational, social and cultural ties to the place whereas tourists and transients, characterized by more sporadic and temporary engagement with a specific place, were more inclined to bond with the place through emotional and spiritual ties. This does not mean that tourists do not seek to develop a sense of the places they ‘tour’. On the contrary, as Patterson and Pegg (2009:269) argue: “*Whether it is a wine tour to France or a hiking trip of the Scottish Highlands, the focus [of older tourists] will increasingly be on interacting with local residents and gaining an in depth knowledge about a local area*”. Notwithstanding, Hay (1998) points to long-lasting residency and ‘feeling at home’ as decisive for development of sense of place – something that would suggest that sense of place and ‘insidedness’ define local residents’ engagement with the National Park whereas these concepts have lesser relevance for tourists and their engagement with the National Park – even though tourists may bond with places they tour

through emotional and spiritual ties (Hay, 1998) and wish to gain in depth knowledge about the places they visit (Patterson & Pegg, 2009). These different levels of 'insidedness' are also a key reason why we do not restrict our studies to locals and tourists, but also include second home owners as this particular type of research participants may contribute with unique insights into the effects of residency on insidedness and 'feeling at home' in a certain nature.

That physical engagement with nature improves physical health has been documented by a wide variety of studies from many different disciplines (see e.g. Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich, 1984). However, engagement with nature has positive effects beyond wellness and physical health (Corkery, 2004; Mitchell & Popham, 2007; Russell, 2002). Many researchers have pointed to positive effects of being in nature (without necessarily being particularly physical active) – including increased well-being (Tarrant, 1996); higher levels of energy (Weinstein et. al., 2009), reduced stress (Ulrich et. al., 1991) and relaxation (Plante et. al., 2006). For example, Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) as well as Ulrich (1979) point to the restorative outcomes of nature experiences in the form of positive mood changes as well as changes from tension and stress toward relaxation. Furthermore, Weinstein et. al. (2009) opine that such positive effects depend on the level of immersion in nature experiences (i.e. whether people feel 'fully present' and not distracted from 'being in' nature). Takano et. al. (2002) add social health to the list of positive effects as nearby 'green spaces' make older adults more likely to form walking groups, which enhance their social and physical health. Other researchers that have pointed to the restorative effects of nature even point to encounters with nature as spiritual, or religious, experiences (Allcock, 2003; Ashley, 2007; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011).

Botton (2003:171) argues that landscapes provide travelers with "*an emotional connection to a greater power*", Short (1991) defines landscapes as 'refuges from modernity' and Heintzman (1999) coin nature as life-giving and rejuvenating. Furthermore, Weinstein et. al. (2009) argue that immersion in nature facilitates feelings of autonomy and freedom. As another example, Williams and Harvey (2001:250) point to nature experiences as facilitating feelings of flow, connectivity and immersion, where "*the usual distinctions between self and object are lost*". Sharpley and Jepson (2011:68), however, warn us that defining places as spiritual is to "*oversimplify a complex relationship*" between people (tourists) and place (the countryside) "*as relationships between tourism and spirituality is less evident than some would claim*". However, regardless of whether positive effects of 'being' in nature are mainly embodied or spiritual, Mayer

and Frantz (2004) point to both immersion into nature and sense of connectedness with nature depending on how much time people spend in it; hereby suggesting that Schreyer et. al.'s (1984) experienced veterans may find it far easier to have immersive nature experiences and/or to connect with nature than novices. Consequently, a study that seeks to dig into how older adults engage with nature should give voice both to those that engage much with nature and those that do not engage as much with nature, even if these people live next door to one and therefore, from a more objective perspective have access to the 'same' nature.

Studies from a wide range of research disciplines show that nature experiences can enhance health of not only individuals and communities, but also ecosystems (see Hansen-Ketchum & Halpenny, 2011 for a review). Weinstein et. al. (2009) conducted four studies that suggest that immersion in nature facilitates less self-focused values, orientating people towards higher degrees of connectedness and more focus on others or even feelings of love and care, relational mind-sets, less selfish decision-making and environmentally friendly behavior. They also point to living in more natural surroundings potentially leading to greater caring for others and conclude that their findings suggest that *"full contact with nature can have humanizing effects, fostering greater authenticity and connectedness and, in turn, other versus self-orientations that enhance valuing of and generosity toward others"* (Weinstein et. al., 2009:1328). As another example, Kalevi et al. (2008) argue that environmental education increases nature orientedness, hereby potentially making restorative experiences stronger. What is especially interesting is that Weinstein et. al. (2009) both point to 'living in more natural surroundings (a rather 'objective' measure) and 'full contact with nature' (an inherently more subjective matter) and therefore, it seems necessary to dig deeper into how much contact with nature older adults living in (or visiting) the same natural surroundings choose to have.

The authors referred to above not only study the positive effects for individuals from engagement with, and immersion in, nature, but also point to positive effects for 'others', communities and society at large. However, they tend to define nature as 'other to mankind' and valued for its worth for mankind (Mathews, 2006). As such, nature is seen as a resource that can 'do' various things for humans whereas the issue of what humans' engagement with nature can 'do' for nature is largely silenced. Brymer et. al. (2010) label such definitions of nature as anthropocentric and materialistic and remind us that a viable alternate approach is to define mankind as part of the natural environment. Pilisuk (2001) touches upon these issues by pointing to

nature providing an opportunity to experience being part of a larger natural ecology and Mayer et. al.'s (2009) research indicates that people, who feel connected to nature, are more likely to demonstrate caring by engaging in eco-friendly practices. A central aim of our research is to investigate whether it is reasonable to study not only *being in*, but also *being with* nature and whether a less anthropocentric approach might enable us to understand (or perhaps even engage research participants in) practices that have 'worth' not only for people, , but also for the National Park. In doing so, we draw in Steward and Hull's (1992) notion of communion with nature and how being in and being with nature may be cast as acts or instances of *sharing* or *giving back* – not with or to humans, but with or to nature.

Before turning to a discussion of methodologies that hold the potential to both empower older adults and to rely on less anthropocentric approaches, a brief discussion on discursive representations of older adults is needed. Katz and Marshall (2003:3) point to two, highly oppositional, discursive representations of older adults. The first (and previously dominant) discourse traditionally represented older adults by means of decline, disengagement and dependency. This discourse is increasingly being replaced by counter narratives of older adults that emphasize well-being and mobility as well as active ageing, successful ageing and healthy ageing. Hereby, two very strong, oppositional, discourses on older adults are constructed: One casting older adults as people with delicate mental and physical conditions that exclude them from engaging in leisure and tourism; the other casting them as healthy, active or even 'ageless' citizens. In order to not let our fieldwork be influenced too much by one of these discourses, it seems critical to give voice both to older adults that 'fit' the discourse of decline, disengagement, disabilities and dependency and older adults representing active, mobile and healthy ageing.

Rudman (2006:181) argues that "*retirement is undergoing structural and discursive transformations*" and although "*discourses about retirement do not determine how individuals will prepare for and act as 'retirees', they shape ideals for retirees and provide morally-laden messages that shape people's possibilities for being and acting*". The same, we argue, applies to the two strong and oppositional discursive representations of older adults and therefore, older adults' possibilities for being in and acting in the context of the National Park are shaped by both discourses of decline, disengagement and dependency *and* ideals of active, healthy and successful ageing originating. As a result, our study of older adults' engagement with the National Park not only seeks to deepen understandings of older individuals' engagement with nature, but also seeks to

shed light on how discourses on ageing shape older adults' possibilities for being in and with nature at a more general level. In doing so, we deliberately include older adults with mental and physical predispositions that make for disengagement with nature and older adults that engage extensively with nature.

What people say and where they say it

To start this discussion on methods and methodologies that seem particularly relevant when studying older adults' engagement with nature, this section is opened with a small piece of autobiographical research (or, if not research, then methodological pondering):

We have all been there; sitting around a table with our interviewees, the voice recorder(s) in place (and fully charged), the interview guide memorized so we do not risk a paper copy of it distorts the scene, very little or no physical activity being part of the script - apart from facial expressions, tones of voice, smiles and small-talk, shaking or nodding of heads, and the occasional hand gestures and general language of our seated bodies. And as the small talk peters out and we are eager to 'come down to business' as predefined by our interview guides; highly, semi or loosely structured as they might be, we hope that the interviewees will allow us to build rapport and take us on a journey through the experiences they have had, the settings they have been in, the sounds, smells, touches and tastes that mattered, the sights they have seen and the thoughts, feelings and actions that intertwined with the bodily experiences they have had somewhere very different from the situation we have placed them in. And as we prompt them to, for example, narrate their tour around a scenic landscape, I am probably not the only interpretive researcher who gets the feeling that something is not completely as it should, or could, be.

The scene described above is the traditional stage, on which many of us try to take on the role as skilled academic interviewers and hope that the people on the other side of the table will happily, eagerly and successfully play the part as interviewees. However, as Carpiano (2009) argues, sedentary interviews delimit situational and contextualized thinking relating to interviewees' lived experiences of places as these interviews separate research participants from their experiences (ordinary or extra-ordinary as they might be) and practices located in specific contexts and places (Kusenbach, 2003). The problems inherent in doing sedentary interviews may be especially critical when studying experiences – an issue that has been demonstrated by several

researchers. For example, Lee et. al. (1994:205) concluded that “*people’s interpretation of leisure experiences often change[d] with the passage of time*” (Lee et. al., 1994:205). As another example, Steward and Hull’s (1992) study revealed that, when engaging in day-hike activities, participants’ understandings of their experiences fluctuated across time and space, thus pointing to a transitory nature of leisure experiences that may render sedentary interviews especially problematic when studying these experiences.

As more and more researchers take an interest in mobility (Sheller and Urry, 2006), the wish to replace the sedentary interview with something that better aligns with the experiences we hope interviewees will share with us inevitably grows. This has led to a growing interest in more mobile methods and especially in a growing use of techniques where researchers not only *talk*, but also *walk* (or drive or take the train or bicycle) with interviewees (e.g. Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Evans and Jones, 2011; Read, 2002). The rationale behind these ‘go’alongs’ is relatively straightforward: We simply hope that interviewees will offer us access to richer data, fuller accounts, more privileged insights into relations between place and self, and more bodily understandings of place-bound experiences when exposed to the multi-sensory stimulation of the place in question (Adams & Guy, 2007) than they will “*cocooned in a filtered ‘blandscape’*” (Evans & Jones, 2011:850) that is so often the stage set for the sedentary interview. So as we do ‘go-alongs’ (or engage in other hybrids of mobile participant observations and interviews), we hope to better understand how people understand, enact, inscribe, construct, perform and bodily relate to places. Being ‘on the move’ with research participants, we thus hope that interviewees are “*prompted by meanings and connections to the surrounding environment and are less likely to try and give the ‘right answer’*” so that we can generate data that are “*profoundly informed by the landscapes in which they take place, emphasizing the importance of environmental features in shaping discussions*” (Evans & Jones, 2011:849).

The advantages of go-alongs (in the form of driving, bicycling, walking interviews etc.) resemble the benefits of participant observations that have been pointed to by anthropological and ethnographical researchers for decades, and a wide (and growing) variety of research indicates that ‘the walking interviews’ (in its various forms) give access to richer understandings than conventional sedentary interviews. For example, through walk-alongs, Kozol (1995) gained insight into how children interpreted and navigated the South Bronx area abounded by hazards such as litter, drug activity and violence. Anderson (2004) did walking interviews to explore protesters’

concerns with developing landscapes whereas Spinney (2011) investigated cyclists' embodied experiences by means of mobile video ethnography. Carpiano's (2009) and Kusenbach's (2003) 'go-alongs' with people engaging in their daily routines 'captured' relations with places that are so habitualized that they are not too likely to surface in sedentary interviews. As another example, in his essay on the re-inhabitation of bodies and landscapes, Irving (2005) describes how the slow pace of one of his research participants, unintendedly, but highly effectively, communicated the interviewee's altered experience of time and space and hereby forced the researcher to recognize the otherness of the lived experiences of people with AIDS. In the same vein, Hitchins and Jones' (2004) walks with participants around gardens made verbalization easier and reduced the inclination to provide the researchers with the 'right' answers. Bergeron et. al. (2014) demonstrate how their use of 'go-alongs' allowed for the embedding of places in networks of significance that made sense to local residents based on values, intentions and desires. Furthermore, Butler and Derrett (2014:234) described how their use of walking interviews shifted the power balance of the research situation towards interviewees, afforded performativity, situated cognition and rendered their interviewees' disabled bodies visible through this embodied process. This led them to conclude that walking interviews have "*the capacity to extend and challenge the more common static interview*" as walking interviews accentuate embodiment.

Ingolf (2004:330) criticized the 'sitting society' and the bias of 'head over heels', "*for it is surely through our feet, in contact with the ground (albeit mediated by footwear), that we are most fundamentally and continually 'in touch' with our surroundings*", hereby paving the way for the walking interview as a more grounded approach to the study of what being-in-the-world (in its form suggested by Heidegger, 1962) means for older adults. Furthermore, as Bergeron et. al. (2014:109) remind us, understanding places is not merely a matter of 'being in' these places, but rather a matter of "*moving in and through*" places. Heavily influenced by Heidegger (1962), we aim to create knowledge on what being-in-nature (and being-with-nature) means for older adults and it therefore seems crucial to situate research participants in the nature they sense and make sense of, hereby also hopefully moving beyond conversations of engagement with nature generally and digging into engagement with specific nature contexts such as favorite places.

Eckert (1984:229) urges researchers to be aware of the difficulties when doing intergenerational research as "*the elderly, being the farthest from the experience of the young and middle-aged researchers comprise the age group that is most subject to stereotyping*". As an

example, a person with close to perfect vision cannot know what it is like to walk an unlit and bumpy path for a person with severe vision impairment; nor will the physical fit 32 years old researcher be able to fully grasp the anxiety of taking the first longer walk after a major hip surgery. As a result of such lack of deep understanding of effects of physical (dis)abilities, the younger researcher might unconsciously draw on stereotyping. The wish to reduce the likelihood of such unintended stereotyping is a key reason to do go-alongs and why go-alongs might be a particularly relevant method for a group of young and middle-aged researchers studying older adults and their engagement with nature.

Our exploratory research consists of a variety of research activities and the 14 go-alongs with 19 research participants discussed in greater depths later in this manuscript is but one of the research activities we tested during this phase. Another activity was a series of ten half-day nature-based activities, interviews and co-creation workshops with ten 55+ men, who were selected as research participants due to their being somewhat socially excluded, less mobile and/or lonely. After the first sessions with these research participants, the researchers became aware of how their preparations for interactions with these research participants had been influenced by stereotypic images of older adults; having had over-estimated these research participants' physical and mental health, abilities to socialize for half a day and physical abilities to be in, and move through, nature. On the other hand, the research participants that volunteered for the 14 go-alongs were contacted through a poster asking for +55 research participants, who sometimes (or often) took walks in the National Park area. In retrospective, it is hardly a surprise that the research participants included in the go-alongs were very physical and mental 'fit' (oftentimes walking faster than the younger researcher's normal walking pace), however, during the first go-alongs, the pace set by the research participants made the researcher extremely aware of her hitherto implicit and taken-for-granted presumptions about the bodily capabilities of both herself and older adults, leaving her no option but to scrutinize how deeply she was influenced by the discourse of ageing as decline as she was embarrassed by her shortness of breath as she tried to keep up with the most active and 'fit' research participants, who had no problems walking 10-12 kilometers in two hours while constantly talking.

Although the merits of walking interviews are often praised, few researchers have tried to dig into the weaknesses of such interviews. One noteworthy exception is Evans and Jones (2011:852), who used both sedentary and walking interviews in their study of a local community's attachment to a specific city district. Comparing these two types of interviews, they conclude that

“walking interviews tended to be longer and more spatially focused, engaging to a greater extent with features in the area under study than with the autobiographical narratives of interviewees”.

This indicates that walking interviews serve as a less productive mode when autobiographical narratives are key research objectives. As the present study not only tries to generate a better understanding of what it means for research participants to engage with the national park, but also seeks to dig into research participants’ autobiographical narratives on what ageing ‘is’ and what active/healthy/successful ageing means to them, Evans and Jones’ (2011) findings encouraged us to do interviews that both include a ‘walking’ and a ‘sedentary’ element. Furthermore, we relied heavily on Carpiano’s (2009) suggestion that, when studying how place may matter for health, go-alongs should be used in tandem with other methods.

The choice to include both walking and sedentary interviews in our study was further reinforced by both technical issues and weather conditions. As Mills et. al. (2010) argue, it is very likely that it will distort the interview process when interviewers try to film/record, walk and talk at the same time. A key challenge of doing walking interviews is that it broadens the scope of competencies, skills and capabilities researchers need. As none of the researchers involved in the present study are geographers or particularly ‘tech-savvy’ such potential distortion hindered our use of video as well as GIS, GPS etc. Furthermore, whereas sedentary interviews are usually characterized by a flow of conversation, Bergeron et. al. (2014:119) points out how their walk-alongs made them *“value certain moments of silence or uncommunicativeness between the researcher and the participant, as these allowed one to pause and gather thoughts”*. This shows how it would not only be an advantage to be tech-savvy, but the go-along researcher also has to tackle situations different from those that arise during sedentary interviews – such as embracing silences, moments of gazing (and catching one’s breath) and uncommunicativeness.

Although Clark and Emmel (2008) suggest that weather influences walking interviews, this issue has largely been silenced in the literature. One noteworthy exception is Carpiano’s (2009:269) mentioning of it being a limitation of his study, that he did not conduct walk-alongs during the winter, as this would have provided insights into how research participants *“make use of their local space amidst inclement weather”*. Our interviews were done in a national park located on the western coast of Denmark. The climate in Denmark is cold in winter and mild in summer and clouds, humidity, rain and wind are predominant. Furthermore, the western coast and the small islands are windier and more temperate than the mainland and Copenhagen, which is in

the eastern part of the country. As it was imperative that our research should not paint a 'rosy' picture portraying only how research participants engage with the national park 'on a sunny day', we chose to do interviews throughout the year and under extremely varied weather conditions. The attempt to not only let our research cover 'sunnier days' is supported by Vining et. al.'s (2008) finding that the experience of being in nature and connecting with nature is dynamic; changing from day to day depending on both the individual experience with nature and the 'accumulation' of nature experiences over time. This was an issue that became highly evident already during our very first interviews as research participants' spatial foci and engagements with specific features of the landscape had a strong element of seasonality and the dynamics of the tidal area, making interviewees express their feelings and experiences in ways such as "but if you had come along a month ago, when the weather was really rough, the experience would have been completely different" or "but now the tide is at its highest, so later today what you meet out here is something else than what we see know". Although we would have liked to do walking interviews in all types of weather conditions, the first interviews were done in January, February and March and during this period, when weather was 'really rough' (i.e. heavy rain or snow, or extreme wind), some of the interviewees kindly asked if we could either reschedule the entire interview session or skip the walk, whereas other interviewees reduced the length of the walk in case of e.g. very windy or foggy weather. In these situations, the sedentary interview was longer and length of the walking interview was reduced significantly (in the most extreme situation, where light snow turned into a blizzard 10 minutes into the go-along, the entire walk was reduced to a 30 minute walk). As mentioned previously, the research participants that volunteered for go-alongs were generally very active and went for walks in the area several (mostly around 5) times a week whereas the group of men participating in the ten interventions did not normally go for walks in nature. A very interesting difference between these those groups is that the first group enjoys, praises and relates to the unique dynamics of the Wadden Sea caused by seasonality, tides, daily weather conditions etc., making them accentuate how the landscape is "never the same" and that one "never knows what I will be met by today or tomorrow", while the second group had more static understandings of the national park, with one particular participants often arguing that he "had seen it all before". Tentative as it is, this difference does point to go-alongs being particular relevant in order to investigate and comprehend more dynamic engagements with nature, where nature is not only a predominantly 'static' stage for allowing for certain human performances and practices, but an actor with whom

human actors relate repeatedly but in a transient manner, constantly making and re-making a connection with nature.

Bergeron et. al. (2014:110) define the 'go-along method' as consisting of "*an on-site interview, which can be conducted on foot (walk-along), by bike or by car (ride-along)*". Furthermore, they argue that participants should lead the walk or drive, hereby being empowered by their acting as 'tour guides' while researchers actively embrace mobility to relate, in-situ, with real life embodied situations as they tour the landscape with research participants (Hein et. al., 2008). In the same vein, Carpiano (2009:264) defines go-alongs (covering walk-alongs, ride-alongs or any combinations of these) as involving "*interviewing a participant while receiving a tour of their neighborhood or other local contexts. In this regard, the researcher is 'walked through' people's lived experiences of the neighborhood*". When being contacted, interviewees were directly asked to 'take the researcher along' on a walk. Furthermore, they were told in advance that the purpose of the interviews was to get a better understanding of how they 'use' and engage with nature. All interviewees actively used these cues to take on the role as a tour guide. However, the levels of confidence (or lack of such) with which they took on this role varied considerably; from some interviewees having spent considerable effort in advance on planning 'just the right tour' to a few anxiously asking the researcher whether she would prefer another tour than the one they had in mind. Furthermore, the research participants spending most time walking (and oftentimes also running or bicycling and sometimes horseback riding, fishing, hunting, gathering herbs, berries, mushrooms etc.) in the National Park were generally most comfortable taking the lead during the go-alongs whereas research participants spending less (but still much) time in and with nature were exhibiting lesser confidence in acting as tour guides.

In conclusion, the amount of competencies researchers need when doing walking interviews is substantial: Not only does the researcher (as in sedentary interviews) need to keep in mind the purpose of the study, ensure that all relevant theoretical aspects are covered, act as a skilled and emphatic listener, ensure that conversation flows, take notes, handle recording devices etc., she also has to be able to go-along both psychologically and physically with participants actively inhabiting the place in question, take (mental) notes and pictures (an activity that was heavily reduced and oftentimes skipped altogether during our go-alongs; simply because it negatively influenced the natural 'flow' of the walks), embrace moments of silence, follow the guide's directions (in a few instances, nudging less confident research participants to feel confident

as tour guides), drink in the sights pointed out by participants, embrace the embodiment of the interview situation, physically keep up (or pace down) with participants, follow the rhythm and pace of walking of participants (some of which were in far better physical shape than the researcher), and prepare for the subsequent sedentary interview session – all while in motion and exposed to the weather conditions and landscapes setting the stage for each unique walking interview.

Bergeron et. al. (2014:120) enthusiastically write about how “*the slow movement through the places and the more direct exposure to the various sensory stimuli made for a more immersive experience and resulted in more detailed accounts of specific places*”. However, walking interviews is not just slow movement through places – in our case it also entails drives to and from the national park, walks following the participants’ pace, pauses where participants share their enactments of the nature and favorite places and express their place-bound values, shifts back and forth between movement, pauses and moments of uncommunicativeness – as well as very bodily practices such as putting on hiking shoes and clothes appropriate for the weather conditions, getting into a car, getting out of the car, bringing and turning on recording devices (which, by the way, may not function at low temperatures), cameras, water bottles and the ‘right mindset’ to the landscapes to be toured, getting back into the car, getting out of the outdoor clothing, shifting from the outside conditions to the in-door stage of the sedentary interview in the researcher’s or the participants’ homes (including making cocoa, coffee or tea and either serving or being served a hot or cold drink, lunch, cake etc.), all pointing to the walking interview as much, much more than simply ‘hanging out’ with participants.

Empowering Interviewees and Rendering Visibility to the Body

As Eckert (1984:229) argues the experiences of older adults are likely to be the farthest from the experiences of young (or in our case; middle-aged) researchers. So firmly seated in the comfort of an (arm)chair, how can we as researchers think that we are able to immerse ourselves in the interviewees' nature-based experiences, deeply anchored in seasonal, spatial and salient relations with nature as well as in the performativity of the (ageing) body as they are? One way to fight the tendency to stereotype the study participants far(the)st from the experiences of the researcher is to try to counter the power imbalances that characterize the traditional interview situation - as Carpiano (2009) did when he argued that 'go along' interviews lead to greater equality as interviewees become research participants more than interview subjects.

In order to empower interviewees, a deliberate choice was made to simply ask them to take the researcher for a walk (and also a drive, in those cases where the research participants would normally get into their car to go for a walk) they would have taken without the researcher being present. In their reflections on the use of walking as an interview method in a study of prospective outcomes of injury, Butler and Derrett (2014:6) describe how their interviews "*represented a burden*" for participants and were "*physical tiring for the respondents*". Furthermore, Gibson (1979) points to the importance of affordances in the form of 'action possibilities' latent not only in the environment, but also in agents and consequently depending on these actors' capabilities. Accordingly, all activities (including 'taking in nature' during a walk) have their own sets of affordances that interrelate both with sense of place, enactments of 'self' and relations to other actors (including nature itself). By letting the interviewees set the route and decide on the length and difficulties of the walk, interviewees were both empowered by their role as active tour guides and were free to set the pace, rhythm and route for the walk in ways that resonate with the capabilities of their bodies and minds, hereby hopefully reducing the likelihood that those with disabilities are 'silenced' in our research. Furthermore, as our research is done in a dynamic nature, the research participants' superior knowledge on affordances anchored in daily weather conditions as well as time of year and day also added to empowerment (occasionally making the research participants politely pointing to the researcher wearing too much, too little or simply the 'wrong'

clothing and footwear). As mentioned previously, as our go-alongs, to a large extent, depends on older adults' participatory self-enrolment, we did expect, and experience, an over-representation of both physically and mentally 'fit' research participants as well as people prone to engage more extensively with both nature in general and the National Park in particular. However, what we had not expected was to be taken on tours lasting hours with research participants, who were 20 to 30 years older than the researcher, but who nonetheless walked considerably faster than the researcher would normally do.

It should also be noted that walking interviews cannot fully mirror the experiences participants have in their everyday (or touristic) relations with the national park, as they can never be "completely spontaneous" due to the "obtrusive presence of the researcher" (Bergeron et. al. 2014:120). Some of the research participants emphasized the sociality of walking with others; others preferred the tranquility and solitude afforded by walking alone; but most of them both walked alone and with others depending on wished for experiences and types of relatedness (in)forming each walk. The researcher's presence is particularly likely to be obtrusive for research participants, who would predominantly enjoy walking alone whereas the presence of the researcher might be less obtrusive in case of sessions mirroring more 'social walks'. When, during the sedentary interview session, differences between walking alone (or with one's spouse or a close friend) and more 'sociable' walks were discussed, many interviewees directly pointed to the walk-along as resembling the latter and being fundamentally different from the former, hereby pointing to the drawbacks of go-alongs when the purpose is to study solitary nature experiences and immersion in nature that requires that one is not sociable. As an example, one of the research participants, living on the mainland and thus accessing the shoreline when she mounted the dike, told how she would sometimes turn left; talking a walk south into a more 'wild' and secluded part of the shoreline; other days she would turn right, walking north having a larger city in sight and meeting more people. As the interviewee elaborated on this issue during the sedentary part of the interview, she contemplated that "although I've never thought about this before, it is the mood of the day that determines which way I go: If I need to be alone and reflect on life, I go into the wild, but if I'm more sociable, I'll turn right and do the other walk". Finally, research participants who both liked walking alone (or with their spouse or a close friend) and more 'sociable walks' pointed to the pace of individual walks and walks with their spouse being significantly faster than the pace of very sociable walks – including the walk-along. Walks taken in pairs would thus often both include more

talkative and social sections and sections in which the two of them would walk fall silent, walk faster and almost forget about their companion walker.

Ingold (2004) articulates how the feet represent how humans' propel the body within the natural world and cast nature as a medium through and in which the body moves, whereas the hands are vessels that allow human beings to cast nature as a surface to be modelled, rearranged and transformed. Hereby Ingold (2004:332) points to reasons why modern life is characterized by a 'head over heels' bias, but he also opines that walking is a highly intelligent activity as he continues:

"This intelligence, however, is not located exclusively in the head but is distributed throughout the entire field of relations comprised by the presence of the human being in the inhabited world".

Ingold (2004) hereby criticizes the 'sitting society' (which certainly also manifests itself in researchers' extensive use of sedentary interviews) for its separation of thought from action and mind from body, arguing that these separations are fundamental to the groundlessness of our society. Bourdieu (1984) reminds us of the muteness of culturally embedded practices and uses the concept habitus to, among other things, describe how we all have embodied 'feels' that allow us to navigate in social environments. The intelligence inscribed in walking is very likely to be a practice that is muted (or silenced) by the sedentary interview, but may be more accessible through walking interviews where both the researcher and research participants are situated in the midst of the 'national park habitus', hereby giving more direct access to the groundedness of lived experiences and assemblages of nature-based activities that give meaning for the research participants. Furthermore, as the intelligence of walking is not only a matter of thought, but also of 'being in' nature, researchers should be extremely carefully not to trust verbalizations to properly present the lived experience of engaging with nature.

At the surface, walking seems to be a straight forward matter of simply moving at a regular pace by lifting and putting down one's feet in turn. However, as levels of healthiness as well as existence of impairments and disabilities vary greatly across older adults, walking is not a capability to be taken for granted. Furthermore, due to the existence of age-induced impairments and disabilities, at least some older adults are likely to have experienced how the 'abilities' of their

bodies change over time, making performativity and embodiment particularly complex notions during this life stage. As Butler and Derrett (2014:7) show, walking interviews entail physical activity that “*renders the body visible in ways that do not occur if it remains seated*” hereby making the body present and “*drawing attention to the differences between the bodies of the interviewer and the participant*”. One thing we had not considered initially was how the body of the researcher as well as the researcher’s nature skills and competencies (and lack of such) were rendered visible during our research. As an example, one session was scheduled for a day in February where the weather forecast said the weather would be acceptable and where the sun was shining when the researcher started the drive to the research participant’s home. Having arrived at the participant’s home, it started to snow and 15 minutes into the walk, the mild snow changed into a blizzard; not only making us shorten the walk, but also putting the researcher in the unfamiliar situation of borrowing a pair of sweat pants and wearing these during the sedentary interview; the soft humming of the dryer handling her soaked jeans being the background music for this interview. As another example, a March interview was rescheduled as the first session was cancelled due to an ice storm making it too hazardous to drive to the island, where the research participant lived. And as we meet on one of the first days with plus degrees and massive snowmelt, the research participant insisted that the researcher took off her hiking boots and borrowed his wife’s wellingtons; a kind insistence the researcher was extremely thankful for as some parts of the paths we took turned out to be covered by up to 20 centimeters of water. Finally, even though we were fully aware of the problems of doing intergenerational research and thought that we were too well-prepared and professional to engage in acts of stereotyping older adults as being ‘less fit’ than younger people, it was not only a surprise, but also a welcomed reminder of the subtleness of stereotyping, to bodily experience how some research participants were physically more fit than the researcher and set paces of walking speedier than the researcher’s normal walking pace. As mentioned previously, apart from the physically fit people that volunteered to do go-alongs, we also did ten half-day tours with a group of people, who do not engage much with nature during everyday life. The first of these tours were done in March, where the Danish weather can be quite unpredictable and can vary from rain, snow and wind to mild and sunny days. Weather substantially influenced these sessions as plans were changed from e.g. looking for amber at a cold and extremely windy beach to a guided tour in pine tree plantations sheltering us from the wind; much to the relief and appreciation of the participants.

In conclusion, the walking interview is more than ‘the sum’ of walking and talking, as it “*offers a method of making the body present to itself and to others and grants access to lived experiences that are ordinarily taken for granted*” (Butler & Derrett, 2014:7). Carpiano (2009:265) points out how “*the go-along draws from – yet complements – two other qualitative methods used commonly in health research for studying place: field observation and interviewing*” as it “*may serve as a means of enhancing the contextual basis of qualitative research conducted by those unable to commit the time and resources necessary for traditional ethnographic research*”. To exemplify the richness and thickness of data such enhanced contextual basis provided for, during one of our exploratory walk-alongs (a tour taken with two women - one very active and rather ‘fit’ 77 years old woman; the other a less active 67 years old smoker), the walk-along made the differences between these two women’s paces of walking and bodies very present – with one walking fast, the other coming to halts and the researcher being ‘stuck in between’ these different paces and styles of walking.

Research participants were asked to discuss all the different things they do in the National Park and generally, the more active and ‘fit’ research participants were, the more things do they do in the National Park; reducing walking to but one of the ways they ‘are’ in and relate to nature. To exemplify this, one interviewee in his mid-sixties both fishes and hunts; another interviewee cycles whenever she has the chance; a couple in their mid-sixties harvests oysters and collects berries, herbs and mushrooms; some research participants do horseback riding; others enjoy taking visitors for a walk, sharing their knowledge and appreciation of their favorite spots and routes; some go for runs as well; and one couple sometimes brings along their sleeping bags, defining listening to the wind and watching the stars as an experience, where one is truly immersed in nature. All of these examples point to our study’s over-representation of walking as a way of being-in-nature and suggest that go-alongs could also be defined as harvesting-alongs; fishing-alongs; nature-sleep-overs; horseback ride-alongs etc.; methods that could potentially sensitize researchers to the plethora of others forms of being in and being with nature that are habitualized by research participants.

Healthy conversations

A key advantage of go-alongs is their ability “*to examine a participant’s interpretations of contexts while experiencing these contexts*” (Carpiano (2009:265), enabling the researcher to study how place matters for people’s health and well-being. Wiess (1994) reminds us that interviewing is an opportunity to learn and consequently, whereas the traditional sedentary interview allows “*for the researcher simply to be verbally ‘led along’ by the respondent only in terms of discussion, the go-along allows for being led along a spatialized journey as well*” (Carpiano (2009:267). So when an interviewee, for example, explains that being in nature allows for one to “*walk on it*” (i.e. a phrase used to express how walking allows for the same kind of contemplation that we have in mind when using the phrase ‘I’d better sleep on it’) – the researcher’s understandings and interpretations of this statement is different, and potentially more nuanced and informed, when being with the interviewee in the context that enables such experiences than when doing a traditional, sedentary interview. As a result, taking part in, and being guided through, a spatialized journey hopefully enables the researcher to better understand interviewees’ embodied and performative experiences in nature as well as the feelings evoked by these experiences.

Although we, during most sessions, ended up doing something that is best described as ‘walk-alongs followed by talks’ (as we included both an unrecorded walking/talking session and a recorded sedentary interviewing session in all sessions), the walks immensely informed the subsequently sedentary sessions and interview transcripts are littered with expressions such as “*as the walk we did today*”, “*as we talked about during the walk*”, “*where we saw ..., that’s one of the favorite spots*”, “*as I showed you*” etc.; making the walks what gave substance and meaning to ideas and thoughts voiced during the sedentary sessions. Furthermore, references made to the walks also allowed for the researcher to gain insights into the different routes that research participants take when using ‘their nature’ and how route decisions are sometimes made *en route* (e.g. when windy weather makes them prefer some routes over others or when, depending on weather conditions and ‘the shape of the day’, they decide to extend or shorten walks by turning left or right). Some walks are more planned from the outset and this especially goes for the shortest walks (e.g. “*when we only have time for a half hour walk*” or “*the short route I pointed out while we were walking that’s the one we call our ‘evening walk’*”) and the longest walks (e.g. “*then we might agree to make a tour*

out of it and go all the way out to ..., because it has been too long since we've been there”), whereas many others walks are subject to a continuous flow of decisions depending on time, weather conditions, how many other people are in the area, shape and mood of the day etc.).

Reading the above, one might enact older adults' nature experiences as only anchored in place-bound practices. However, experiences are not merely place-bound, but also depend on the discourses that cast older adults and their nature experiences in certain ways. Rudman's (2006:181) analysis of Canadian newspaper articles' discursive constructions of 'retiree' subjectivities made her conclude that:

“The personal ‘freedom’ promised with the idealized life practices is ultimately illusionary, because they oblige older people to resist or defy ageing through relentless projects of self-reflection and improvement, self-marketing, risk management, lifestyle maximization and body optimisation”.

Rudman's conclusions are part of the aforementioned wider discussion of how discursive representations of older adults have changed from the 1960s' representations of sickness, social isolation, decline, disability, dependency and passivity towards contemporary discourses emphasizing opportunities, activity, freedom, health, productivity, liberation and self-reliance (Andrews, 1999; Holstein, 1999; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Rudman, 2006; Walker, 2000). This does not, however, mean that the discursive representations of older adults originating from the 1960s are irrelevant or 'outdated' and below, we discuss two dimensions of these 'older' representations that are particularly relevant for our study; i.e. the issues of social isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, as our exploratory research both included walk-alongs (characterized by over-representation of active, healthy, productive and self-reliant research participants) and nature-based sessions with a group of research participants closer to the 'older' discursive representations of older adults, the issues of social isolation and loneliness deserve to be discussed briefly.

Wenger et. al. (1996) defines social isolation as the objective state of having minimal contact with other people, whereas loneliness is the subjective state of negative feelings associated with perceived social isolation. Social isolation is thus defined as an objective measure whereas measurements of loneliness rely on more qualitative and subjective assessments (Shankar et. al.,

2011). This does not, however, mean that high levels of social isolation will automatically lead to high levels of perceived isolation, nor that people who define themselves as socially isolated are lonely. On the contrary, Shankar et. al.'s (2011) extensive literature review points to relationships between social isolation and loneliness as being weak to moderate, hereby pointing to some people feeling lonely even if they are not that socially isolated, while others may not feel lonely even if they have minimal contact with other people.

One reason for weak relationships between social isolation and loneliness could be the simple fact that the state of being alone (whether objectively being alone or feeling alone) is not negative *per se* whereas the state of feeling lonely is laden with negative feelings. As an example, popular phrases such as 'I'm all alone, but I'm not lonely' accentuate the negative connotations of loneliness and the neutral, or even positive connotations of 'being alone'; such as positive effects of solitariness and isolation (pursued by choice) in the form of reflectiveness stripped from social contextuality; existentializing moments; moments of revelation and reflection; mental 'flickers' of clarity; personal ipiphany; productive solitude; contemplation; calmness etc. The group of men that participated in the 10 half-day trips was tested using different scales and measurements and they all scored highly on loneliness whereas the go-along research participants had high levels of contact with other people and did not express feeling lonely. The go-alongs with very active, healthy and self-reliant research participants, who enjoyed walking alone, accentuated the positive aspects of solitariness and how *individual* walks foster reflectiveness, clarity, contemplation, calmness etc. – some research participants even pointing to such walks enabling them to tackle difficult life situations and decisions. To these research participants, nature walks had restorative effects and several of them pointed to a nature walk being something they did before they (semi-)retired if work-related situations were hectic, stressful or they needed to make difficult decisions.

Another possible reason for weak relations between social isolation and loneliness is offered by Cornwell and Waite (2009), who argue that particularly for older adults, social isolation needs not lead to loneliness as these older adults expect, and prepare for, changing social networks as they outlive their spouses and contemporaries (i.e. reduced contact with other people is simply seen as a 'fact of old life'). In regard to this issue, many interviewees referred to this being an issue for their parents, not for themselves and some also pointed to organized group activities (including guided tours and hiking holidays) as activities through which one 'meets new people'. However,

what studies of isolation and loneliness point to is the danger of elevating social isolation to a negative state and/or to define solitariness as loneliness. Nevertheless, researchers such as Shankar et. al. (2011) and Iliffe et. al. (2007) point to the existence of linkages between social isolation and loneliness for older adults and Wenger et. al. (1996:351) conclude that “*social isolation appears to predispose older people to loneliness*” while Wilkes (1978) argue that loneliness is *the* main problem associated with old age.

Although Wenger et. al. (1996) argue that the existence of social isolation and loneliness in old age may be over-estimated and Freeman (1988) argue that social isolation and loneliness might only be prevalent among the ‘very old’, other studies (e.g. Halmos, 1952; Sheldon, 1948) point to these two issues as problems associated with old age. Furthermore, Wenger et. al.’s (1996) literature reviews make them point to close associations between, on the one hand, social isolation and loneliness and, on the other hand, poor health, loss of mobility, mental illness, depression etc. – although they also argue that there are no clear causal relationships between these two sets of variables; indicating that social isolation and loneliness can both be predictors and outcomes.

Reasons for social isolation and loneliness are manifold and, for older adults, include, poor health, loss of mobility and physical as well as mental disabilities, relocation (moving), retirement and bereavement (i.e. being widowed and/or outliving one’s contemporaries). Wenger (1983) found that loneliness is most common amongst older adults living alone and Wenger et. al. (1996:336) argue that even though those living alone are not necessarily socially isolated, “*nearly all those who are isolated live alone*”. In the same vein, social isolation is more common among those widowed (Wenger et. al., 1996) and most intense during early widowhood (Sheldon, 1948). Looking across our interviews, there are some noteworthy differences between those living with a partner and those living alone, but there were also too many commonalities to make any generalizations in regard to this issue.

An issue that is important to address is that even though most researchers define loneliness as *the* subjective state of negative feelings associated with perceived social isolation, Weiss (1973, 1993) points to loneliness being more complex. In particular, he points to loneliness including both emotional isolation (in the form of absence of a reliable attachment figure, such as a

partner) and social isolation (in the form of lack of social integration and embeddedness). In doing so, he points to an emotional dimension relating to the more qualitative aspects of social relationships and a social dimension relating to more quantitative aspects of such relationships. Although general studies of loneliness do not point to significant gendered differences, using Weiss' (1973, 1993) two dimensions to measure older adults' levels of loneliness, Baarsen et. al. (2001:129) identified a notable difference between the loneliness experienced by older men and older women respectively. This made them conclude that "*the social items seem to be less extreme for men, whereas the emotional items seem to be less extreme for women*" (p. 129) and "*bereaved persons are especially vulnerable for emotional isolation rather than social isolation*" (p. 133) – a finding particularly true for older men. Focusing on these findings, in the following section we discuss potential reasons why older men might be especially prone to experience loneliness in the form of emotional isolation.

Much has been said and written about homosociality and (hegemonic) masculinity (e.g. Bird, 1996; Kimmel, 1990). The purpose of this section is not to offer a comprehensive account for this research area, but to introduce a few dimensions of homosociality and masculinity that are especially relevant in order to understand particularities of older men and loneliness. These issues are relevant as some researchers argue that men are lonelier than women (Mullins & Mushel, 1992), that social isolation is more extreme for older men than for older women (Dibner, 1981) and that men are especially prone to experience emotional isolation (Baarsen et. al., 2001).

Bird (1996) argues that men incorporate both socially shared and idiosyncratic meanings of masculinity in their constructions of gendered identities and Connell (1992) and Messner (1992) point to some of these meanings being representations of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, Kimmel (1990) points to the existence of both normative and non-normative masculinities and Bird (1996:127) opines that "*although individual conceptualizations of masculinity depart from the hegemonic norm, nonhegemonic meanings are suppressed due to perceptions of 'appropriate' masculinity*". Hegemonic masculinities are relevant to address because "*masculinity studies argues for powerful links between homosociality and masculinity; men's lives are said to be highly organized by relations between men*" (Flood (2007:3). It is quite likely that Flood (2007) over-emphasizes the importance of men's homosocial relations and silences the relevance of hetero-social relations, however, if there is a kernel of truth in Flood's (2007)

statement, this means that homosociality is central to men's identities (a claim supported by e.g. Aboim, 2010; Coles, 2009; Flood, 2007; Walker, 1988; Nayak, 2003).

Lipman-Blumen (1976:16) defined homosociality as "*the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex*" whereas Bird (1996) sees homosociality as referring to social bonds between persons of the same sex, and more broadly to same-sex-focused social relations. Bird (1996) finds that homosociality forms and maintains hegemonic masculinity, which is characterized by, amongst others, emotional detachment and competition. As for emotional detachment, this is seen as withholding expressions of intimacy as expressions of feelings are enacted as revelations of vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Cancian (1987) further points to the rules based on ideals of emotional detachment underlying homosocial friendships to such an extent that these rules are taken for granted making men's talk center around 'things', not feelings as this signifies strength. Competition, on the other hand, supports identities grounded not in likeness or cooperation, but separation and distinction (Gilligan, 1982). Hereby, competition facilitates hierarchy in homosocial relationships (Bird, 1996:128), suggesting that "*masculinity conceptualization is itself a form of competition*". Although dimensions of hegemonic masculinity in the form of emotional detachment and competitiveness may empower men and enable them to construct 'doable' identities, they may also restrict men's from forming meaningful and intimate bonds with others. Thurnell-Read (2012:252) discusses this issue and concludes that "*needs for others might be read as disrupting masculine ideals of autonomy and independence*".

As mentioned previously, the aim of this section is not to contribute to the wider debate on what masculinity and masculine identities are, or should be. However, as some studies point to loneliness and isolation being especially prevalent among older men, while other studies of older adults and loneliness identify no such tendencies (some even pointing to older women being more lonely than older men), we argue that these conflicting findings could be a result of how we measure loneliness and whether we measure both emotional isolation and social isolation. For example, older men could be particularly vulnerable to emotional isolation due to lack of 'deep' emotional relationships with reliable attachment figures (originating from deficits in qualitative aspects of relationships inherent in hegemonic masculinity's emotional detachment and competitiveness) whereas they might be less likely to experience social isolation (as hegemonic masculinity may not affect quantitative aspects of relationships negatively). Furthermore, linkages

between physical health and social isolation and loneliness are well-established. For example, Shankar et. al. (2011:382) argue that “*increasing isolation was associated with [...] low physical activity*” and “*individuals who were lonelier were more likely to report low physical activity*”. However, as both social isolation and loneliness can be countered by means of interventions (Challis, 1982; Freeman, 1988), nature-based interventions trying to counter social isolation and loneliness in older adults might also positively affect physical and mental health and/or prevent age-induced disabilities. It is exactly for these reasons that the more interventionist part of our study focus on older men, who do not engage much with nature and experience social isolation as well as loneliness, hereby hopefully enabling us to shed light on relationships between, on the one hand, social isolation and loneliness and, on the other hand, nature-based physical activity. Furthermore, the inclusion of this group of research participants hopefully helps us not to let our mindset become too inspired by the dominant discourses of active, healthy and successful ageing – an issue discussed in further depths below.

As mentioned previously, contemporary discursive representations of older adults emphasize opportunities, activity, freedom, health, productivity, liberation and self-reliance (Andrews, 1999). Although these contemporary representations of older adults might be defined as ‘positive’ as they emphasize healthy, active and/or ‘successful ageing, discourses are never ‘just’ positive or negative. This relates to the fact that discourses are not innocent as they generate boundaries for what can be known, thought and said in a specific time and place and hereby shape conditions for being and acting (Fairclough, 1992). What is particularly relevant to keep in mind is that contemporary discourses on ageing could significantly reduce the possibilities for being and acting as older adults. For example, Rudman (2006:181) argues that discourses on retirement “*oblige older people to resist or defying ageing through relentless projects of self-reflection and improvement, self-marketing, risk management, lifestyle maximization and body optimization*”. As another example, ‘positive ageing’ discourses “*dissociate ageing from disease; present activity as a key to health and happiness in later life; and emphasize the possibility of expanding mid-life and postponing old age*” (Rudman, 2006:184). Hereby, positive ageing discourses set ageing apart from physical and psychological degrading of body and mind; healthy ageing discourses dissociate ageing from disease and disabilities; active ageing discourses set ageing apart from passivity originating from age-induced decreasing bodily and mental capabilities; and discourses of ‘agelessness’ cast older adults into the role as people that should manage ageing, or even postpone

old age. Dominant discourses consequently cast older adults as individuals that should remain youthful and active, plan and manage active lifestyles and engage in various lifestyle and consumer-based projects – all with the purpose of offsetting, ‘fighting’ and postpone ageing (McHugh, 2000). Combined with the neo-liberalistic calls for individualism, different ways of being an older adult become legitimized or de-legitimized (Rudman, 2006). In order to not (de)legitimize certain ways of ageing, in this project we follow Rozanova’s (2010:213) call for research that does not prescribe how older adults *should* age, but tries to “*understand and describe how different people make meaning of their lives as they age*”. This means that we – by also paying attention to the complexities inherent in issues such as social isolation and loneliness – do our best to not be too inspired by contemporary discourses on ageing, but also acknowledge the potential explanatory power of relevant concepts and issues pointed to by ‘older discourses’ on ageing.

The fact that our research both includes go-along with very active older adults, who profoundly appreciate being in and with nature *and* interventions with a group of older adults, who are less active and have far weaker ties with nature, turned out to be far more important than we had thought from the outset as these two groups of research participants are positioned very differently in relation to the two oppositional discourses on ageing and what it ‘is’ to be an older adult. It also sensitized us to one of the most critical problems with go-alongs: The risk of over-representation of nature-loving and caring older adults with the energy, competencies, skills and capabilities necessary to volunteer to take researchers on a journey through their favorite nature spots and routes.

Social Engagement and Sociality

Whereas the section above included discussions of social exclusion and loneliness, this section digs deeper into the issues of social engagement, social inclusion, sociality and sociability. The reason for this is that an issue that emerged during the first, exploratory go-alongs was the sociality inherent in some older adults' engagement with the National Park. Research participants emphasized their walks and bike-rides in the National Park as solitary practices that allowed for privacy, solitude, seclusion and 'time for reflection' (i.e. the positive effects of 'being alone' that are silenced when delimiting 'being alone' to loneliness). However, research participants also pointed to sociality as an important dimension of some of their engagements with the National Park; e.g. when they take a walk with their grandchildren or friends. Research participants' more social engagement with nature not only relates to 'go' with socially significant others (such as family or friends), but also to more casual encounters with other visitors in the area. These more casual encounters were evident on the go-alongs as research participants would acknowledge the presence of other visitors, saying hello and quite often engage in brief acts of small-talks about the weather, fauna and flora, the tide etc. with other guests in the national park. Consequently, it is imperative to acknowledge and respect the two-sided nature of research participants' engagement with the national park; i.e., on the one hand, the solitary nature of some engagements and, on the other hand, the highly social character of others. This claim is supported by Korpela and Ylén's (2007) argumentation that engagement with natural 'favorite places' differs depending on whether people visit them alone or with friends and/or relatives. Notwithstanding, as illustrated by, for example, 'the social turn' in tourism studies, sociality underlies much of what we do as humans as we seek to bond with socially significant others; need intimate proximity with family members and friends; and wish to spend quality time with these socially significant others in order to strengthen and maintain social ties.

More than 60 years have passed since Simmel (1949:254-255) introduced the concept of *sociability* and he argued for the relevance of this concept as follows:

"To be sure, it is for the sake of special needs and interests that men unite in economic associations or blood fraternities, in cult societies or robber bands. But,

above and beyond their special content, all these associations are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others.”

In a Danish context (characterized by an abundance of more or less informal associations and volunteer work), people unite in a welter of associations. And a key difference between our two groups of research participants is their engagement in local associations, clubs, volunteer work etc. One of these associations is Dansk Vandrelaug (DVL - loosely translating into ‘the Danish Walking Association’) and an older adult acting as tour leader and guide within this association argues as follows when describing these walking tours (<https://www.dvl.dk/bliv-medlem-form/52-for-medlemmer/turlederen/turlederportraet/185-turlederportraet5> - translated from Danish to English by the authors):

“Those aged 60 and above are really humming. Many use the DVL walks to get healthy. They might have had hip or knee surgery or have had cancer. Others might feel lonely after a divorce, deceases or because their children live far away”.

As exemplified by this older adult tour leader, to participate in DVL’s organized walks might relate to special physical needs (i.e. being or getting healthy and/or recovering from surgery or illness etc.) or special interests (in the physical activity of walking in itself or in the areas covered by a walk). However, in line with Simmel (1949), participation in these tours might also be a means to associate with others and resolve one’s solitariness into togetherness and union with others. Consequently, it is imperative to keep in mind that older adults’ engagement with the National Park might both be a matter of individual engagement and a matter of such engagement being the glue that allows for sociability to unfold. Simmel (1949:259) further argues that sociability reveals itself in whether we communicate about content or engage in sociable conversation, or in his words:

“The decisive point is expressed in the quite banal experience that in the serious affairs of life men talk for the sake of the content which they wish to impart or about which they want to come to an understanding - in sociability talking is an end in itself; in purely sociable conversation the content is merely the indispensable carrier of the stimulation, which the lively exchange of talk as such unfolds.”

Obviously, go-alongs is an inter-personal and social experience where the mere presence of the researcher accentuates the social dimensions of engagement. This means that the researcher should be aware of the fact that this method is likely to emphasize sociality and inspire what Simmel calls 'sociability talking', hereby potentially silencing dimensions relating to solitude, separateness and social isolation that is pursued by choice.

Boudiny (2013) opines that meanings of social engagement may change during old age and the old-old may shift from being part of large social networks towards emotionally close relationships. Using Weiss' (1973) two-dimensional approach to loneliness, this would mean that the oldest adults' may do more to counter emotional isolation than social isolation, a line of reasoning concordant with the idea that the oldest adults' enact reduction in quantitative dimensions of social relationships as an inevitable consequence of outliving one's contemporaries. This means that it might especially be 'the young old' that would benefit from facilitation of social contacts by providing local facilities and activities that foster a sense of community (Bowling, 2005) whereas 'the old old' may have little interest in, or need for, interventions encouraging sociability. This also points to another critical factor when doing go-alongs as our initial reliance on self-enrolment lead to an over-representation of research participants aged 60 to early 70ties and lack of research participants younger than 60 (i.e. the so-called 'young old') as well as older than mid 70ties (with our sample including none of the so-called 'oldest old').

Organized walks, such as the ones arranged by DVL as well as go-alongs seem to qualify as the type of contacts and activities pointed to by Bowling (2005) as fostering a sense of community and therefore it is imperative that the researchers acknowledge that our choice of methods may, at least to a certain degree, silence engagement with the national park that predominantly relates to seclusion and solitariness. Moreover, our choice to do go-alongs might also qualify as a reason why we had severe difficulties to include the 'oldest old' in our sample. Furthermore, as the interventions that are conducted as part of our study are group-oriented, these interventions are more likely to reduce loneliness in the form of perceived social isolation than perceived emotional isolation. Finally, as both the interventions and our go-alongs are inherently social in nature, our study may very well silence the positive aspects of 'being alone', hereby over-emphasizing loneliness and its negative effects.

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