

Freedom on Water through Stand-Up Paddling: A qualitative study on physical bodily experiences and their influence on mental health

Pernille Wobeser Sparre^{1,2,3} & Elisabeth Bomholt Østergaard⁴

¹Blue Spirit Surf School, Denmark, ²Fysioterapeutuddannelsen, VIA University College, Aarhus N, Central Denmark Region, Denmark, ³Health, Care and Rehabilitation Aarhus Municipality, Denmark, ⁴Research Centre for Health and Welfare Technology: Programme for Mind and Body in Mental Health, VIA University College, Aarhus N, Central Denmark Region, Denmark.

Corresponding author: Elisabeth Bomholt Østergaard

E-mail: ebo@via.dk

Research Centre for Health and Welfare Technology: Programme for Mind and Body in Mental Health, VIA University College Aarhus N, Central Denmark Region, Denmark

Abstract

In Denmark mental disorders are the most prevalent disease, accounting for 25 % of the total burden of disease. This underlines the need of initiatives for prevention and treatment in which the role of physical activity and bodily experiences contains unexploited opportunities and obvious catches people's attention. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences from people with mental disorders doing Stand-Up Paddle (SUP) and to explore if and how the experiences influenced their mental health. Anthropological fieldwork including participant observation and qualitative interviews for three months in Denmark among eight people living with mental disorders, participating in a project called 'Freedom on water' including SUP. Empirical material was thematically analysed at first and secondly theoretically analysed with perspectives of Merleau-Ponty, Deci & Ryan and Csikszentmihalyi. Themes identified concerned social interaction, nature, mind-body connection, and experiences of success. The participants' mental health was affected positively by doing SUP. When fully concentrated, managing the (bodily) challenges on the SUP-board their rumination disappeared and they felt present in the moment. Forgetting oneself, flow, skills, coping mechanisms, self-confidence and positively social integration were strengthened. This study proves the value of including the physical body in initiatives for mental health.

Keywords: *Physical activity, Mental health, Mental disorder, Blue nature, Mind-body, Stand-up paddling, Flow*

Body and mind are inseparable and affect each other reciprocally (Bunkan, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 2009), and thus an intriguing question is to what extent it is possible to affect the mind and improve mental health through the body and bodily activities. Mental disorders are a striking and increasing burden of disease – both globally and in Denmark and everything indicates that this sad tendency will continue (Dansk Psykiatrisk Selskab, 2021). In Denmark mental disorders have become the most prevalent disease and account for 25 % of the total burden of disease (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2018b), and during the Covid-19 pandemic the prevalence of anxiety and depression among adults has tripled (Forenede Nationer, 2020). For the individual, living with a mental disorder is a heavy load with increased risk of death, several physical diseases, decreased quality of life and decreased functional capacity and working capacity (Folker et al., 2012). Furthermore people with mental disorders often confronts

with prejudices causing barriers for social integration and worsening of the symptoms (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2018b). Socio-economically mental disorders are also a heavy burden causing 50% of all long-term sick leave and 48% of all early retirement pensions (Folker et al., 2012). The above supports the necessity of initiatives for health promotion, prevention and treatment in the area of mental health and mental disorders (Dansk Psykiatrisk Selskab, 2021). In this area the role of physical activity and bodily experiences may constitute unexploited opportunities

It is evident that physical activity has a positive impact on lifestyle diseases which means reducing the excessive mortality and physical diseases overrepresented in people with mental disorders (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2018b). Practicing physical activity can carry away negative thoughts and symptoms, influence the mood positively and increase physical fitness, muscle strength and well-being (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2018a). Practicing physical activity

can reduce symptoms and increase coping among persons with depression and anxiety (Román et al., 2021). It seems that physical activity outdoors in nature makes more persistent well-being than physical activity indoors (Pasanen et al., 2014). A systematic review indicates that activities in blue nature (areas with lake, river or sea) are especially important for social and mental health with positive impact on self-efficacy, social relations and mood (Britton et al., 2020). However, there is still a need for further research in this blue area. An example of a 'blue initiative' in relation to mental disorders is surfing for veterans living with PTSD. A qualitative study has explored this initiative and found a positive effect on self-estimated well-being and an increase in the veterans' social interactions (Caddick et al., 2015). In addition to this the study discovered that the veterans' experiences of surfing gave them a break from their PTSD-symptoms because surfing required their full attention and presence in the moment. Another study on surfing evaluated the benefits of a six-week surf-program on the wellbeing of vulnerable people in the age 8-18 (Godfrey et al., 2015). The evaluation showed a significant and persistent increase in self-estimated well-being. These two studies indicate that the combination of physical activity, social interaction and 'blue nature' contains a potential to affect the well-being of people living with mental disorders in a positive way. Exploring the experiences based on this combination might give valuable knowledge about the benefits. This mind-body connection underlines the role of the body and bodily movements according to health promotion and treating mental disorders. A new Danish project "Freedom on Water" is just so focusing on physical activity in 'blue nature' (Dansk Surf & Rafting Forbund, n.d.). The project offers Stand Up Paddle (SUP) to people living with mental disorders. The main point is being in the present moment in nature through SUP. The aim of the project is not to heal, but to create a free space where the participants can strengthen their abilities to cope with their symptoms and daily life.

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences from people with mental disorders participating in 'Freedom on Water' including SUP, to explore if and how the experiences had an impact on their mental health and furthermore, to create knowledge for especially health professionals concerning the impact of bodily experiences on mental health.

The study uses the following definition of mental health as

a state of well-being with opportunities of using own abilities, coping with everyday life challenges and stress, being a part of communities and having the necessary psychological resources to cope with life (Sundhedsstyrelsen, n.d.).

Theoretical perspectives

Our theoretical perspectives are based on the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan as well as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Merleau-Ponty's theories contributes to a holistic understanding of the human being in which body and mind are regarded as one unified whole (Merleau-Ponty, 2009). Merleau-Ponty points that being one with your body, the body can function as an anchor to the present moment. The body then makes it possible to be fully present at the moment, free of thinking about the past and the future. Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) concerns motivation, well-being and psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002). SDT contains several minor theories and one of them is about three fundamental needs: autonomy,

relatedness, and competence, and they are all three important for our self-determination and well-being. Autonomy is about life and managing one's own life. Relatedness is about feeling connected to other people and being a part of a community. Competence is about the experience of success, creating meaningful results, and coping with tasks. According to Deci & Ryan these fundamental needs are essential and necessary for psychological growth, integrity, and well-being, and the more they are satisfied, the healthier the individual can be (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The theories of Csikszentmihalyi's concerns the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Flow is a condition in which you are so engaged in an activity, that you obtain forgetting oneself and everything else seems of no importance. In this flow you lose focus at the personal self, and exactly this gives opportunity and basis for development of the personal self through construction of skills and self-confidence. According to Csikszentmihalyi a premise for flow is a balance between the individual's skills and the degree of difficulty of the activity. More factors can contribute to flow for example intrinsic motivation, absence of external distractions and feedback. The theory of flow also contains so-called optimal experiences with a feeling of managing the moment. Over time these experiences can build up a feeling of managing of life.

In the discussion section we discuss our results using the theoretical approaches above, and we include new research (Caddick et al., 2015; Godfrey et al., 2015; Huus, 2021; Karg et al., 2020; Kehlet, 2021; Koushede, 2018; Pasanen et al., 2014) to emphasize and support the credibility and robustness of our results.

Methods

Design

We conducted qualitative anthropological fieldwork (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen & Reventlow, 2021) for three months in February, April and May 2021 in Denmark among eight women living with mental disorders, participating in a project called 'Fri på vandet (Freedom on Water)' and among two instructors from the project. Data from the instructors were primarily used supporting the discussion. We used participant observation and different types of qualitative interviews and we participated on the ground as well on the water. "Author", physiotherapist, carried out the participant observation and the interviews, and "Author", physiotherapist and Master in the Anthropology of Health, worked as a sparring partner during the whole process. Both authors have written this paper. The reason for using a qualitative research design was to explore the experiences from people with mental disorders doing Stand-Up Paddling (SUP), and to explore if and how the experiences had an impact on their mental health. Our perspective was phenomenological to explore and understand the participants' lifeworld (Kristensen, 2019). Participant observation provides a unique opportunity to enter into the spirit of and to understand the participants' lifeworld through participating, and exactly entering the spirit of and identifying oneself is a cornerstone in anthropological fieldwork (Dalsgård, 2010). Doing participant observation makes demands on the researcher by being both an insider and an outsider at the same time (Hovmand & Præstegaard, 2002). The anthropologist has to enter the world (field) to get to know it, be there, participate, observe, listen, feel, ask, be curious etc. to get to know it, and you have to step out and look at the world from the outside, both during and after the fieldwork, trying to understand as the basis for creating scientific knowledge

(Dalsgård, 2006; Hastrup, 2009, 2010b, 2010a). Another reason for using participant observation is in recognition of the great scientific value of catching more than words, namely the nonverbal communication, the non-spoken body language (Tang Nielsen et al., 2006), and finally and not least to catch and include the bodily experiences of the research worker herself (Dalsgård, 2018). Several anthropologists emphasize bodily experience, embodiment, corporeality or inclusion of one's own body as fundamentally important for the researcher regarding understanding, empathy, identifying one self and making sense (Baarts, 2020; Csordas, 1990, 1994; Dalsgård, 2018; Jackson, 1989; Wolputte, 2004). The fact that the anthropologist by participating is her own informant, also derives very important knowledge (Hastrup, 2004), among other things to make the following interview more empathic, and participant observation facilitates establishing of a mutual understanding and frame of reference as a valuable basis for the following interviews (Tang Nielsen et al., 2006). In anthropological fieldwork it is common to combine the participant observation with interview because the participant observation permits practical experiences, while the interview gives insight in the remembered experiences, reflections, language usage etc. (Dalsgård, 2006). A problem often mentioned in connection to fieldwork in one's own community is if it is possible to the 'native' anthropologist to create a necessary distance to the participants and the field. At the same time it is often assumed that the 'native' anthropologist is able to contribute with more authentic knowledge than the non-native anthropologist (Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 1998, s. 40). We observed the phenomenons as open minded as possible and led the phenomenons lead the way putting our own preunderstanding in parenthesis (Kristensen, 2019). In that way the phenomenons and the empirical material were superior to the theory. The theoretical analytical perspectives were selected after finishing the data collection. We participated in activities on the water and on the ground around the club house and we interviewed and observed both on the water and on the ground. The sessions on the SUP-board typically carried out for two hours each time. The numbers of participants varied from time to time, typically five participants and two instructors each time. Using participant observation, we observed how the participants acted, interacted, and related to the surroundings. During the SUP sessions we varied between active participation and complete participation (Spradley, 1980). At the active level "Author" performed and experienced the SUP activity herself and contemporary with this she observed the others at a distance. At the complete level she interacted with the participants and joined the community. In this way "Author" experienced the phenomenon herself through her own body and had to relate to the activity, the surroundings, and the community as well as the participants.

The very first observation was unstructured (Dalland, 2017) in order to get to know the new field with an open minded approach to the phenomenon and to the empirically object (Hastrup, 2010b). The following observations were more structured (Dalland, 2017) focusing on the analytical object, situations and actions related to the research question (Hastrup, 2010b). Observations and interviews were combined to supplement each other (Hovmand & Præstegaard, 2002). Unformal interviews were chosen when suddenly a chance arised and field notes then were noted as soon as possible. This type of interview was also used to build up relationship and if the participants did not want a formal interview (Bernard, 2006). The semi-structured interviews were based on an

interview guide in the form of a mind map (attachment 1). Two semi-structured interviews with two instructors from the project took place on Skype (attachment 2). This material contributed to an understanding of the project from another perspective. It was used in the discussion part and was not a part of the primary data collection. During the fieldwork and the whole process, "Author" continuously made field notes in her logbook concerning work process and preunderstanding, to be able to relate to her own changing preunderstanding and its influence on the research process.

Preunderstanding

By explicating preunderstanding, you increase the ability to release yourself from the preunderstanding (Malterud, 2017). Listening to the lapping of waves against a board moving on the water, while concentration is maintained on keeping the balance and coordinating movements. "Author" has enjoyed this several times herself, and her preunderstanding therefore was influenced by her own experiences with the phenomenon. As an example, she has experienced great pleasure being on the water. She has got an adrenaline rush by feeling the power of water and nature. This made her feel like she was part of something much bigger in which the worries of everyday life diminished. Our preunderstanding was also affected by the fact that we are physiotherapists and by public debate. In our perspective there is an increased need for interventions helping people with mental disorders, and we assume that physiotherapists with their bio-psycho-social approach and with the body as a core point have great competences in contributing to this area.

Entering the field

The project 'Freedom on Water' takes place on ten locations all around in Denmark. To recruit participants "Author" reached out to the project manager of 'Freedom on Water'. The manager contacted instructors in several different SUP clubs and asked for their participating in this study. Subsequently the manager reported which club wanted to participate. A letter with information about the study was distributed to the participants through the instructor. The participants in the superior project 'Freedom on water' were aged 18-60 and they all lived with one or more mental disorders. We looked for both men and women and we chose not to focus on age in our study because we were interested in the phenomenon and in people's experiences. Eight women living with mental disorders, participating in 'Freedom on Water' agreed and they were the primarily participants. Two instructors from the project were secondarily participants. On average the participants attended ten sessions on the SUP-board from August 2020 to June 2021 interrupted by a break in the wintertime.

Data collection

While a great part of the fieldwork took place on water it was not possible to make field notes on the way. Field notes from observations and unformal interviews were noted on paper shortly after finishing the participant observation. Later the same day the field notes were written more coherent on a computer. An example of part of field notes is illustrated in Danish in attachment 3. Semi-structures interviews were recorded with an iPhone and were transcribed in full length including pauses and repetitions. During transcription, persons, places and diseases were blurred according to protect anonymity (Kvale, 2018). One of the interviews was not recorded or transcribed while the participant did not want that. Field notes were made instead. During all interviews, observations concerning body language and nonverbal

communication were noted as valuable knowledge that could either strengthen or weaken the statements. The transcribed texts were read contemporarily with listening to the recordings to ensure reproduction and preservation of the original meanings (Kvale, 2018). Reading the transcriptions led to a living over again resulting in new reflections and perspectives supplying the basis of the data analysis (Malterud, 2017).

Thematic analysis of the empirical material

Our perspective was phenomenological, putting the preunderstanding away in parenthesis and later on we interpreted the empirical material with preunderstanding and theory inspired by hermeneutics (Martinsen & Norlyk, 2011), and we made a thematic analysis of the empirical material (interviews and participant observations) according to Malterud's four steps (Malterud, 2012, 2017).

At step one we read the transcribed empirical material, made a general impression, and came up with these preliminary themes: SUP as physical activity, experiences of success, social interaction, a break from rumination for the mind, and nature and water.

At step two we identified empirical material for each theme (example in table 1).

Table 1: Step Two	
Theme:	Empirical material
Social interaction	"It means a lot to be a part of a group, in which we are all similar. We all fight with something. A lot of us have taken early retirement, why we now can call ourselves colleagues."

At step three we condensed the empirical material at each theme to get the essence of each theme. We expressed the essences by synthetic quotations consisting of several compiled quotations and observations with equal essence (example in table 2).

Table 2: Step Three	
Theme:	Empirical material
Sub-group: experience of support and acknowledgement	"It has been pleasant to be together with somebody who knows that you can have a bad day, without necessarily giving an explanation. Probably I would not have started SUP if it had been in a normal organization."

At step four each theme was re-contextualized to an academic text. The final themes were:

- Social interaction: "We're all in the same boat";
- Mind-body connection: a break from rumination;
- Nature as a floating room; A Sea of Experiences for Success.

After the empirical analysis we made a theoretical analysis based on the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan as well as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. There are many different ways to include

theory, and we were very conscious about the balance between the empirical material and theory, letting the empirical material step forward without too much theory and not letting the theory overrule the empirical material as for example underlined by Wolcott, Bundgaard and others (AU Studypedia Centre for Educational Development, 2022; Bundgaard & Overgaard Mogensen, 2018; Høyer, 2011; Wolcott, 2001).

Ethics

Experiences and benefits of participating in activities on water and with SUP when you have mental challenges and disorders have not yet been fully explored which emphasizes the relevance of this study. In a holistic mind-body approach there are potential unexplored benefits for people with mental disorders combining suitable challenging (bodily) activities, outdoor nature, blue nature and social activities in order to influence mental health positively. By mail our study was approved by The Central Denmark Region Committee on Health Research Ethics, Skottenborg 26, DK-8800 Viborg, Denmark. According to Danish law interviews are not notifiable (National videnskabetisk komité, 2020). Through an instructor employed by the project 'Freedom on Water' we gave all the participants written information about the aim of the study, the method, anonymity and our professional confidentiality, and the participants then gave written informed consent (Hardon et al., 2001). Within starting participant observation and interviewing, "Author" introduced herself and deepened the aim of the study, the carrying out of the fieldwork and opened for questions. Through this she ensured an extra time that the participants were sufficient informed. After this, the participants gave additionally verbally informed consent, and then the data collection was started. Our study complied with The Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). We anonymized the data and names of the participants to protect individual confidentiality (Hardon et al., 2001; World Medical Association, 2013). The project 'Freedom on Water' by 'Dansk Surf og Rafting Forbund' is unique and the only of this kind in Denmark, consequently it is impossible to hide. However, the project is placed at ten locations all over the country and the precise location is anonymous, therefore it does not affect the protection and anonymity of the participants. We have cut out places, names, ages, diagnosis etc. We refer to participants as 'people with mental disorder' using people-first language (Snow, 2006; World Confederation for Physical Therapy, 2017; Østergaard, 2008). The aim is to emphasize a holistic perspective, to signal superior importance of the person rather than the disease, by describing that the person *has* a disease, and not *is* the disease (Hardon et al., 2001).

Results and analysis

The analysis identified themes concerning social interaction, nature, mind-body connection, and experiences of success which all together formed a holistic picture of the participants' experiences from 'Freedom on Water'. Linked with earlier mentioned theories the results indicate that experiences through the body have influenced the participants' mental health in a positive way.

Social interaction: "We're all in the same boat"

Several participants described how "Freedom on Water" offered them a constellation which included support, understanding and consideration, and they emphasized the great significance of this. In addition to this, two participants highlighted that they did not think that they

ever would have tried SUP if it was at a 'normal' club. The observations showed multiple examples of how the participants interacted and supported each other. An example of this was when one participant tried to get from sitting on her board to standing. Meanwhile another participant was motivating and complimenting her. The participants experienced relatedness, support, and acceptance which according to Deci and Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 2000) can create a foundation for change of behaviour and lead to increased autonomy. The participants' experiences of the social aspect in 'Freedom on Water' was in line with fulfilment of the psychological need relatedness, which can lead to increased well-being and social health (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The social aspect was also a contributing factor to facilitate the participants' experiences by creating a frame in which they had the courage to get out and learn a new skill and develop competences.

Mind-body connection: a break from rumination

Having full focus on an activity through the body gave the mind a break from rumination. SUP as an activity, required the attention of the present moment as well as one's full concentration on the activity. One of the participants described:

P2: "I still need to keep my full focus on balancing on the board because otherwise I'll fall in the water. But this gives me a break from other thoughts. And that is nice. A couple of hours without anxiety – that is worth its weight in gold. So that is what SUP can do for me – make me forget my life situation, as on the water I'm just me. I'm not the one who's on early retirement or the one with the diagnosis or the burden for the society. On the water I'm just me."

The complete focus on the present moment can be linked with the theory of Flow by Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) because the participants experienced a balance between challenges and skills, as P2 described to be challenged yet in control, a clear goal which was to stay on the board as well as immediate feedback as one will fall in the water if one were to lose one's concentration. Through full focused bodily experiences, P2's self-perception was changed from a negative self-perception to a focus on herself in the present moment. According to Merleau-Ponty the body can create access to a new self-perception through movement (Merleau-Ponty, 2009). The participant, quoted in the above, further explained that the break from rumination gave her a feeling of freedom which she did not experience elsewhere during her daily life. Several participants mentioned that they experienced a feeling of freedom and a break from rumination during SUP, but they also explained that these feelings often disappeared when they came back on land. Through the body and the physical demands, the participants were able to gain control over their thoughts which underpins the connection between body and mind. In the participants' descriptions it appeared that they felt connected with the present moment through their body. The body is regarded as an *anchor to the now* because the individual is at one with the body and thereby fully present (Merleau-Ponty, 2009). Our body is the closest we can come to the present (Olesen, 2002), *the body is the present's place*, and from its position in the present, the body can (re)establish contact to our mind, bringing the mind back to the present (Østergaard et al., 2022).

Nature as a floating room

Nature as the setting for the physical activity has been creating the frame, but also giving the participants the possibility of sensory experiences. When floating on water the distance between the participants naturally increased and decreased due to weather conditions and the current. This gave the participants the option to choose whether they wanted to keep a distance to the other participants or if they wanted to actively seek social interaction. One of the participants described how it was difficult for her to be around a lot of people, but the water as a setting gave her the possibility to float by herself and at the same time remain in the same setting as the other participants. Several participants described nature as an important element in their experiences. For instance, one participant compared her experiences on the water with walks in nature where she said: P4: "The physical distance to the shore gives another kind of calmness where everything slides more in the background which makes it harder for the thoughts to wander". She added that being on the water was in some way like traveling far away which she experienced as a break and free space from everyday life. The water as a frame for the activity, also offered a dynamic room, due to changes in weather and nature. Some participants explained that the water in that way gave them a new experience each session. In general nature is considered as a significant factor for the participants' experiences and has strengthened their experiences of the body as an anchor to the present moment in which the possibility of flow experiences and mind-body connections have been possible.

A sea of experiences for success

When living with a mental disorder the chance to experience the feeling of success can be of great impact. To learn a new skill, which requires strength, coordination, balance, and concentration in the present moment, has been a success for several of the participants. One participant described: P1: "SUP has given me great victories in my 'new' life with mental vulnerability. I can feel that the old me peaks through and that's a huge boost in my self-confidence". An observation supporting this quote is when one participant succeeded in moving from sitting on her knees on her board to standing on her feet. When she got to her feet, she told me that today is a victory because her diagnosis did not win. Several of the participants described that they never thought they would be able to learn SUP. One of the participants told me about her first experience with SUP:

P2: "The first time I tried SUP was on a stormy day, but I didn't even notice. The instructor helped me and suddenly I was standing on the board - it was crazy. The feeling of being on the top of the world made all diagnosis and bad thoughts disappear right there."

This quote can be linked with experiences of *autonomy* and *competence* (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The participant described the feeling of being in control of her life in contrast to the diagnosis controlling her life which can be interpreted as increased autonomy. This experience also showed how the participant managed to master the situation and thereby developed new competences. Two participants told "Author" about episodes where they fell in the water and how these situations were of great significance for them. One described that when she fell off her board, she managed to stay calm and not panic which made it a good experience for her. The other participant

mentioned that she was scared to fall off her board, but when she fell, she experienced that it did not make her anxious. The experience reminded her that it is often the mind which is blocking the possibility of new experiences. This relates to the mind-body connection in which bodily experiences can be used as a tool to break fixed patterns of thoughts. The above shows that several of the participants increased their self-confidence and coping mechanisms through experiences of much more than mastering an activity (SUP), namely success on SUP and by this, success and victories in life and a feeling of being on top of the world. Whether these experiences of success can be transferred to other aspects of life, one of the participants said that she had become more self-confident when it comes to trying new challenges in her life. The fact that several participants had bought their own SUP and wanted to continue the activity after the project is finished can be seen as motivation to maintain the activity. These findings suggest that the participants' experiences from 'Freedom on Water' can have a positive impact on the mental health in the long run. The desire to continue SUP suggests that the experience is intrinsically rewarding which is also one of the characteristics of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

Discussion

Discussion of methods

Data collection

A qualitative research design doing fieldwork with participant observation and different types of interviews was appropriate as it allowed us to experience the phenomenon ourselves through our own bodies and relate to the activity, the surroundings and the community as well as to the participants. By being our own informant, by including our own body and participating together with the participants in their usual surroundings both on water and on the ground, we succeeded in putting ourselves in the participants' shoes, and we felt we were 'taken in'. As emphasized as a great strength by Baarts (Baarts, 2020) we became full members, like *natives*, by being familiar with and enjoying being on the water including SUP. By doing the same thing at the same time and 'together' we exchanged experiences and understandings on the SUP-boards both in the moment on the water and afterwards on the ground which led to an in-depth participant observation. Helle Bundgaard experienced something like that, when she did her fieldwork in India among traditional patta chitra painters to get insight in patta chitra painting and local estimating as good quality (Bundgaard, 2010). When interviewing without painting herself, she only got evasive answers. She changed her methodological strategy and began as a trainee and therefore began painting herself together with the other painters for 18 months, and then she was 'taken in'. By doing the same thing at the same time and 'together' they exchanged experiences both ways which led to an in-depth participant observation (Bundgaard, 2010). Getting bodily experiences ourselves led to an embodied understanding of the participants' lifeworld which made the following interview more empathic. The shared experiences on the water brought a safe and secure starting point for the interview and functioned as a unique basis for elaborating meaningful questions and dialogue, and the participants were very open minded in telling us about their experiences. In other words we succeeded in *getting into the field* by being present, participating, curious, observing, questioning and empathic, and at the same time we succeeded in

observing the field from the outside by being conscious about our preunderstanding, writing down observations and impressions from the very beginning of the fieldwork, as recommended by Pedersen to counteract being too much integrated in the field causing possible narrowing observing new elements (Pedersen, 2018). This method triangulation strengthened the method (Hovmand & Præstegaard, 2002; Pedersen, 2018). Handwritten field notes were made as soon as possible after the sessions on the water, and later on, on the same day more detailed and structured notes were made on the computer. In that way observations and impressions were recalled and remembered successfully. The participant observation method provided insight in the unspoken and embodied knowledge such as facial expression and body language *during* the actions on the water. By writing down field notes all through the research process, our preunderstanding, ideas, reflections and possible theories were explicated and made aware and therefore separated from and comparable to the empirical results (Malterud, 2017). This is also supported by discovering new themes during the research process (Malterud, 2017). Our preunderstanding according to being physiotherapists and enjoying moving on water has probably influenced the research questions and the participants' answers in a direction focusing on physical activity, blue nature and bodily experience direction rather than for example on medication or nutrition. According to the aim of this study exploring experiences and bodily experiences on mental health, we consider that the influence has been appropriate.

Data analysis

By completing the four steps of Malterud's thematic analysis (Malterud, 2017) methodically, the empirical material was thorough and carefully analysed and assigned a high priority in itself, even before adding the theoretical analysis. The phenomenological approach strengthens the holistic perspective (Kristensen, 2019), and an openminded holistic approach was also achieved and strengthened through not choosing theories for the analytical process until after finishing the empirical data collection.

Using theory triangulation with three different theoretical and analytical perspectives strengthened the internal validity (Hovmand & Præstegaard, 2002) and made a holistic view of the participants' experiences. Theories of Merleau-Ponty underline the importance of including the body in the treatment of mental diseases. Theories of Ryan & Deci made it possible to identify the psychological needs of the participants and relate them to their mental health. The flow-theories of Csikszentmihalyi contributed to understand the meaning and importance of forgetting oneself and of giving the mind a break from rumination, as the participants experienced on the water. The theories of Csikszentmihalyi overlapped both the theories of Merleau-Ponty focusing on the body as an anchor to the present time, and the theories of Ryan & Deci regarding flow as a phenomenon through which the psychological needs can be fulfilled. Using the theories above has contributed to uncover important factors illuminating the mental health of the participants. The theoretical approach possibly could have been deeper, but by consciously avoiding this we believe that we have protected the empirical material, letting it step forward from the theory and not letting the theory rule or overrule the empirical approach.

Adequate description of preunderstanding and methods for data collection and data analysis have provided methodological transparency and thereby methodological quality (Hovmand & Præstegaard, 2002; Malterud, 2017). The data collection reflects the explored phenomenon,

which strengthens the validity (Kvale, 2018). Choosing not to focus on age means that we do not know the age of the participants. We believe that the age was subordinate, when we were interested in the phenomenon and in people's experiences. A wide spread of the participants' age could possibly influence the external validity as well as several other factors could possibly influence on mental disorders. Despite potential coherence between age and mental disorder, it is not the focus of our study. We looked for both men and women, but even though we tried, we didn't succeed in recruiting male participants. Eight women living with mental disorders agreed in participating. The fact that all participants were female, on the one hand weakens the external validity, but on the other hand it also strengthens the external validity by leading closer to saturation of data.

Discussion of results

The potentials of the body

All themes arised from the empirical analysis and together these themes constituted a holistic view of the participants' experiences from 'Freedom on Water'. Based on the definition of mental health as a state of well-being with opportunities of using own abilities, coping with everyday life challenges and stress, being a part of communities and having the necessary psychological resources to cope with life (Sundhedsstyrelsen, n.d.), our results indicate that all the participants had experiences which influenced their mental health positively. Some of the participants also received other forms of treatment, which have to be considered having an influence on their mental health too. Our study has identified individual experiences and profits. Some participants emphasized the social aspects, others were more concerned about the experiences of and the intimacy with nature. These different individual experiences reflect that the participants in different ways and degrees fulfilled their psychological needs according to belonging, autonomy and competence leading to increased well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The participants experienced a break from rumination, they performed a challenging activity, and they were motivated to do it. This indicates that they experienced flow, however, it can be questioned if the break from rumination instead was caused by distraction. On the other hand, this is also interesting as distraction is a tool used in cognitive therapy where the patient learns to divert negative thinking through physical activity, social contact etc. in order to help the patient gain further control over emotional reactivity (Young et al., 2014). Thereby distraction could also be seen as a positive influence on mental health. The question is if the participants' experiences have potentials for a long-term influence on mental health. The participants in our study experienced that they became free of rumination and the feeling of control of thoughts disappeared after some time when they were back on land. However, the fact that the participants experienced not only mastery, but a more comprehensive feeling of success indicates that the experiences have potentials for mental health not only limited to the moment. According to the theories of Csikszentmihalyi such optimal experiences will gradually over time build up a feeling of management and control of creating one's own life (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Pasanen also found that physical activity outdoors in nature made more persistent well-being than physical activity indoors (Pasanen et al., 2014). All this indicate that the experiences will have a positive influence on mental health in the long term. Killingsworth and Gilbert discovered that spending more time in the present moment leads to greater happiness, and one of the keys to happiness lies in simply

redirecting our attention from mind wandering and distraction to what's happening right here, right now in the present moment (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Finally, there is a need for more research to explore the long-term influence.

Supporting our results, a larger study with 15 male combat veterans (aged 27-60) found that the veterans experienced a break from their PTSD symptoms when they were surfing (Caddick et al., 2015). The veterans experienced the break positively as an opportunity to focus at the moment without disturbing thoughts from the past, and this was regarded as increased mental health. Another large qualitative study with 84 vulnerable young people with mental disorders (aged 8-18), who participated in a six-week surfing intervention (Godfrey et al., 2015) also supports our results. The participants experienced a boost of well-being, and the intervention resulted in a significant and sustained increase in well-being. One year later, 70% of the clients regularly attended a surf club and many had become trained as session volunteers. Increased well-being was assessed by the parameters; emotional, social, and physical well-being, robustness, and self-worth. The study pointed out that involvement in positive leisure activities is a key for young people to develop resilience and social and emotional skills (Godfrey et al., 2015). The fact the 70% of the clients regularly attended a surf club or had become volunteers one year later, supports that Freedom on Water also could have a long-term influence if the participants kept practicing the activity. It would be interesting to investigate the participants' compliance one year later. The transferability of these two studies (Caddick et al., 2015; Godfrey et al., 2015) is debatable, while surfing is another form of activity than SUP, and while the target groups are different from the participants in our study. Despite these differences there is still a transferable identity according to increased well-being and to the framework for the bodily experiences, while both studies point to the social aspect as an important factor. The debatable transferability emphasizes the relevance of our study and of the need for further exploration in future studies. The holistic perspective on body and mind has contributed to understand the importance of experiences of bodily movements for people with mental disorders. Experiences with and through the body had a positive impact on the participants' mental health. As well as supported by the chosen theories, this is also supported by the high level of positive backing from participants and instructors through the whole fieldwork. They all expressed that the study had great importance. Supporting our results the evidence based concept "ABC for mental health" (Koushede, 2018) emphasized that it means to do something actively (A), to belong and do something together (B) and to do something meaningful for example to learn something new and give oneself a challenge (C). Exactly these three ingredients were pointed out in this study. The participants were active together, they were challenged and they learned new skills and experienced meaningful success. The concept supports that these three ingredients can promote mental health.

Referred to above, initiatives like 'Freedom on Water' have great potential as a supplement to treatment and prevention of mental disorders. According to Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 2009), body and mind are closed connected, in fact inseparable, and consequently it makes sense that the participants felt better mentally because of their bodily experiences. The experienced break from rumination is emphasized by the understanding of the body being an *anchor to the now* (Merleau-Ponty, 2009), that *the body is the closest we can come to the present* (Olesen, 2002) and *the body is the present's place* (Østergaard et

al., 2022). In this perspective, the experiences presumable not only influenced their mental health but more likely health in general. According to the assumption based on the theory of Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 2009) – that 'I am my body', that body and mind are 'one thing', that there are no two things to separate, they cannot be separated from each other – body and mind will influence each other and in other words the effect can go either way. According to this, the experiences most likely have influenced the participants' physical health too. Using the body as a key to increase mental health underlines the relevance of this study. In 'Freedom on Water' there was an interaction between the surroundings in the form of nature, the body in action and participation in a social and physical activity. Currently there is a rising focus on using nature as an alternative place for rehabilitation, prevention, and health promotion. Supporting our results, the results from a Danish physiotherapeutic project 'Active in nature' for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes showed that 69% of the participants experienced increased well-being and quality of life (Huus, 2021). Several of the participants expressed that they forgot their disease when they trained in the nature. Also supporting our results, another study, compared outdoor training in nature with indoor training, and emphasized the positive influence of nature on mental health (Kehlet, 2021). The study pointed out an important advantage of nature being dynamic and unpredictable, making ongoing initiating of new activities much more possible – like in our study, nature was constantly shifting from time to time with the dynamic elements of wind and weather resulting in constant new demands to the competences of the participants and giving them new experiences every time (Kehlet, 2021). Outdoor training in nature often focuses on areas on the ground and in a forest. This study contributes to extend training in nature to include areas with water. Denmark has lots of large areas with coasts and lakes which opens unexpected opportunities for bodily challenges and experiences on, in, and near water.

One size doesn't fit all

Not everyone will be enthusiastic about activities on, in, and near water. However, it is quite conceivable that other types of physical activity in nature will have the potential to make similar results. As an example, a randomized controlled trial compared two intervention groups for people with depression. One group did climbing combined with psychotherapy, another group did home-based physical activity (Karg et al., 2020). The participants who did climbing and psychotherapy reduced their depression symptoms much more than the other group and they also achieved increased self-esteem and coping strategies compared to the other group. Furthermore, there are lots of various mental disorders in various degrees, why probably not all people with mental disorders are able to or can profit by participating in activities on the water like in 'Freedom on water'. A limitation in transferability of our study may be not distinguishing between the mental disorders among the participants. Maybe activities on the water can influence mental health differently dependent on the specific diagnosis. However, our results indicate that the participants had similar experiences independently of their different diagnosis. Consequently, we consider our spread and non-specific focus on mental disorders as a strength because it indicates that the experiences can be beneficial regardless of diagnosis and degree of severity. The above also supports that projects like 'Freedom on Water' are considered as a supplement and not a substitute

for present forms of treatment. Furthermore, when we are all different individuals, there is no 'one-size fits all' model, and this supports the need for different intervention types for people with mental disorders and not only one solution.

From another perspective

Two instructors from the project both expressed that they experienced that the participants developed new skills and competences, and that they managed much more than they at first thought they could. Both instructors had the impression that diagnosis and symptoms came to a distance or disappeared on the water and that the participants developed a presence in the moment which contrasted to their daily life where diagnosis and symptoms took up a lot of space. The instructors were connected to different localities of 'Freedom on water', indicating that not only the participants on the specific location for this study had profited from the project.

Overall, the results from this study contribute with relevant knowledge about the great potentials including the physical body affecting mental health positively in people with mental disorders.

Limitations

Although the study has great relevance, the main limitation of this study is the small sample size consisting of eight women, which limits the generalizability. There is still a need for further research in this blue area including a need for more research exploring the long-term influence.

Conclusions

By participating in 'Freedom on Water' including Stand-Up Paddle, eight women living with mental disorders got physical, mental, and social experiences on the water and in nature together with like-minded people, and they experienced that their mental health was affected positively. They experienced having a free space without rumination which strengthened their abilities to redirect their thoughts and focus from wandering negative thoughts to what is happening in the present moment. Self-confidence, positive attitude towards oneself, intrinsic motivation and social integration were increased. When investigating their experiences, it was found that a balance between the participants' abilities and the complexity of the activity was of great importance. This balance between the participants' abilities and the complexity of the activity allowed the participants to be present in the moment and experience success which was made possible by nature, physical activity, and a supportive group as the frame. Our study proves the value of including the physical body and a holistic approach in initiatives for mental health. The combination of physical activity, social interaction, 'blue nature' and success contains a potential to affect the well-being of people living with mental disorders in a positive way.

Perspectives and future research

This study underlines the importance of health care professionals being conscious about the value of including the physical body and a holistic approach in initiatives for mental health – health promotion as well as prevention and treatment. Recently the Danish government has made an ambitious goal to raise the psychiatric area. A new report points out that the psychiatric area is lacking research and development in initiatives while the mental health is on a

downward spiral. The report emphasizes that the need to improve this area is greater than ever (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2022b, 2022a). We believe that a holistic approach including mind-body connection is contributing with new knowledge to this area. Also, the spread in the diagnoses and severities in our study shows that initiatives like 'Freedom on Water' and stand-up paddling potentially could benefit other target groups with decreased mental health. There is a great focus on improving mental health for kids and young people with decreased well-being. Therefore, it could be relevant to explore the effects for this target group. This study suggests that stand-up paddling is a promising candidate for the development of future mental health interventions incorporating blue nature exposure and bodily activity, as well as other activities requiring one's full concentration on the activity and of the present moment as well balancing between challenges and skills. There is a need to explore the effects of 'blue nature' and thereby the possibilities of creating new blue initiatives. This study contributes to extend training in nature to include areas with water and to develop future mental health interventions incorporating blue nature exposure and bodily activity. Denmark has lots of large areas with coasts and lakes which opens unexpected opportunities for (bodily) experiences on, in and near by water. Finally, the findings from this study suggest that stand-up paddling will have a positive impact on the mental health in the long run. Further research is needed to assess the long-term impact in this area.

Conflict of interest statement

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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