

Outdoors and Health Network

Society's relationship with the natural world and the role of the outdoors in health and wellbeing

Lead Research Organisation: UHI Millennium Institute
Contact: +44 (0)1463 273309
Email: info@outdoorshealthnetwork.co.uk
Web: www.outdoorshealthnetwork.co.uk



Pilot 2 – Research report

Using the Life Histories Approach to understand the development of outdoor preferences and practices

Authors:

David Uzzell, *Department of Psychology, University of Surrey*
Birgitta Gatersleben, *Department of Psychology, University of Surrey*
Emma White, *Department of Psychology, University of Surrey*

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Executive Summary

The potential for using the life histories methodology within the social sciences is one which is being increasingly recognised, given the rich and varied data it can produce. It is a methodology which enables not only an examination of behaviours and experiences in the present day, but also of the historical influences of these and the development of patterns of behaviour over the life course. This paper employs the life histories methodology in order to examine outdoor behaviours and experiences, and understand how they develop and change over the life course.

Five women were interviewed for the purposes of the present study, and thematic analysis carried out on the transcripts, identifying seven overriding themes (with a number of subthemes):

1. Attributes of the outdoors;
2. Types of outdoor activity undertaken;
3. Reasons for activity;
4. Experiences and perceptions of the outdoors;
5. Feelings towards the outdoors
6. Rewards of outdoor experiences
7. Origins and changes in outdoor use.

This paper sought to identify the type of information which could be gathered using this methodology and to discuss the potential of the methodology in future research. The first key strength of life histories lies in its potential to gather large amounts of very detailed information about a topic. The second, which we believe is fairly unique amongst retrospective methods of data collection, is the ability to examine the formation of particular behaviours, attitudes and practices and to chart their change and development across the lifespan. This is something which has significant implications for research on outdoor behaviour and which would help to more carefully guide outdoors-related policy. It also has potential in guiding intervention studies aimed at changing behaviours to those which are more outdoors-orientated and healthy. In this paper we suggest using life histories to further the findings of this pilot project in a one-year project examining outdoor behaviour, practices, attitudes and health benefits.



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OUTDOORS AND HEALTH NETWORK:PILOT 2

Using the Life Histories Approach to Understand the Development of Outdoor Preferences and Practices

Draft Report

David Uzzell, Birgitta Gatersleben & Emma White

Department of Psychology
University of Surrey
Guildford, GU2 7XH, UK
<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/>

Contact details:
Email: d.uzzell@surrey.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)1483 689430

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Life Histories Approach

The life histories approach is a form of oral history which has been used by historians since the 1950s and 60s to add personal narratives to the traditional historical discourse. It is an approach which is becoming increasingly popular amongst social scientists. The Oral History Society (2008) defines oral history as “the recording of people's memories. It is the living history of everyone's unique life experiences” which “enables people who have been hidden from history to be heard”.

The life histories approach examines memories and experiences across the lifespan to create a life story. Thompson (1988) suggests that oral history can be used to study previously inaccessible aspects of the family structure such as “the roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of boys and girls... courtship, [and] sexual behaviour” (p. 29). Similarly, life histories can be utilised within the social sciences in order to understand behaviours in the individual and the social and historical influences on these, adding in-depth information about behaviour change and development which is often missing from traditional psychological approaches.

The life histories methodology is distinct from other types of oral history in that rather than focussing on a particular event or place, it involves the recording of an individual's memories and experiences from across their lifetime. Howarth (1998) suggests that life histories form “the backbone of oral history work” (p.v). It can be used to examine everyday practices (both past and present), attitudes and values, and memorable experiences, for example, whilst providing the context of the interviewee's life. A life history interview typically examines the interviewee's family background, experiences of childhood, school, marriage, parenthood, and retirement (for older interviewees), and present day activities, although the topics are limitless within the bounds of the interviewee's guidance. The methodology can therefore create a detailed view of the interviewee, with much of the real-life complexity which often gets left out of quantitative approaches. Armstrong (1982, in Walmsley, 1995) also suggests that by examining several different life histories, themes can be identified which make “it possible to generalise... by showing that certain biographies have, for all the idiosyncrasy, some common elements” (p.185). The ability to identify commonalities and differences

between people, their practices, and their attitudes and values, makes life histories again particularly interesting for the social sciences.

Life histories permit the examination of the ways in which people remember and interpret their values, practices, and preferences, and how these have developed over time and why, against the backdrop of other historical data. This then allows us to understand how people have experienced and interpreted events and changes within their lives, in the context of broader societal developments. There are many times when, as social scientists, there is a need to build a picture of the past in order to understand how we came to be. For example, when looking at sustainable consumption patterns, there is a need to understand why people consume goods in the way that they do, and how sustainable and unsustainable practices are formed. Examining attitudes using traditional psychological approaches, which are often ahistorical in their underlying assumptions, means that while it is possible to identify individual attitudes, it is not possible to understand how they came in to being, the knowledge of which could help to more carefully guide policy responses.

There are several approaches to oral history, and life history more specifically. Some examine one event or time period in detail, some seek a sound bite, conducting a short interview to gauge an understanding of the voice of the people on a topic, and some study the wider cultural, historical and individual meanings of a topic. Alessandro Portelli is a prominent oral historian whose work fits more in to the third of these categories. His approach reflects the work of several other oral historians and is adopted by many in the field. Given the strengths of this approach and the clarity with which Portelli explains and summarises it, this paper will follow and examine his assumptions.

The epistemology and methodology of the life histories approach is a technique is quite different to those within more traditional nomothetic methodologies in psychology. But rather than seeing these differences as problematic flaws (since they do not often fit with our goals of representativeness and objectivity, for example), we would argue that an idiographic methodology such as a life histories captures the richness, complexity and multiple voices of the phenomenon under investigation. Methodological and paradigmatic assumptions which we believe to be particularly important within the life histories approach include:

1. **The interviewer is** not a passive listener or an impartial questioner, but is someone who is **part of the dynamic conversation** that is the interview. Alessandro Portelli (1997), for example, suggests that “people will not talk to you unless you talk to them, will not reveal themselves unless you reveal yourself”. He argues that it is important for the interviewer to offer some information about themselves, and to feel able to politely challenge what the participant says. For example, if some facts appear to contradict more established facts, then challenges can be politely made by saying “are you sure?”, “I’m not sure I agree”, or “I have heard other people tell this differently” (Portelli, 1997, p. 62).
2. **The life history interview rarely progresses in a linear way** from past to present, but often moves and jumps around according to theme under discussion. This should not be inhibited, rather allowed to progress as the participant wishes. Allowing the interviewee to tell what story they want to tell will make them feel that you are being more attentive, whereas interrupting them and/or directing the line of questioning away from their desired story may inhibit them later (Portelli, 1997). Similarly, Sypher, Hummert, and Williams (in Yow, 1997) suggest that interviewers should be “focussing the interview not on what is important to us in our lives, but what is important to our interviewees” (p.64). This means not only allowing them to follow their desired chronology, but allowing them to talk about things which may not appear to be entirely relevant at the time of the interview. If they are irrelevant, then these can simply be excluded from analysis, but if you cut the interviewee short, then you inhibit them on topics of interest to you.
3. Although the default in research is generally to automatically anonymise the participant, life historians often believe that **it is important to allow the participant to put his or her name to their story**. People often get a great deal of pleasure from telling their story, and many feel a need to pass this on to the next generation for posterity. Indeed, Thompson (1988) describes how oral history “helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence” (p. 31). Removing the name of the interviewee is to remove ownership from the story, as well as to remove a large part of the context of the story. That is not to say that anonymity should not be offered, but anonymity should not be the automatic assumption; rather individuality should be respected and the participant should be given the option to put their own name to their own story.

4. Life stories are very personal, and will often involve bereavement or distressing memories.

Although these are not always explicitly mentioned by the interviewer, these topics may arise naturally with the recall of other memories. It is important to respect the privacy of the interviewee, and not to push them into revealing information which they feel uncomfortable about sharing. On the other hand, Thompson (1988) and Portelli (1997) suggest that **we must not be afraid to ask certain questions**; the interviewee will pick up on our awkwardness, and it will make them feel uneasy. Thompson (1988) writes that historians “have come for a purpose, to get information, and if ultimately ashamed of this they should not have come at all” (p.31).

5. Within an oral history interview, it is also important to **ensure that the participant is able to tell their story in their own way**. Interviewees can be empowered to take control of the interview by, for example, telling them at the start that (a) we are interested in hearing their story in order to learn from them (which should be our goal); (b) they do not have to discuss anything they do not wish, and conversely are able to discuss anything of particular interest to them; and (c) that they can terminate the interview at any point (as stated by the ethical guidelines). This is important in providing the interviewee with ownership over their interview, something which can be built upon later by providing the interviewee with a recording of the conversation.
6. **Life history does not generally aspire to be “representative”** of the population, in that it does not seek participants to represent the average (Portelli, 1997). Instead, it tries to show a range of experiences, using people who may in actuality lie at the extremes of the population (Portelli, 1997). Portelli (1997) argues that this is important because it shows what could be, suggesting that it is often the case that the imagined possibilities resonate with people more. To an oral historian then, unrepresentative samples do not pose the same problems that are perceived in quantitative psychology, but can be highly valued (although many will still endeavour to produce a representative sample).
7. Portelli (2007) writes that “**Oral sources are not objective**... they are *artificial, variable, and partial*” (p.38). Indeed, subjectivity arises at various different stages in the interview: in what the interviewee chooses to disclose; in the information extracted (and chosen to be extracted) by the interviewer; through selective recall by the interviewee; in the relationship between interviewee

and interviewer which encourages or discourages certain disclosures; and in the way in which the oral source is interpreted. Trying to remove the subjectivity from the oral source is likely to destroy the richness of the data, since the story has been created that way for a reason, and it tells us a great deal about the interviewee's attitudes and beliefs (as well as the co-constructed nature of the source).

8. Memory recall is variable, biased, and often distorted. Accordingly, Portelli (1997) claims that "Oral testimony... is never the same twice" (p.39), and "even the same interviewer gets different versions from the same narrator at different times" (p.39). This is analogous to the Heraclitus problem: you can never step into the same river twice. But this is something which life histories embraces, by making use of what many may see as a weakness by aiming to **understand why memory has been constructed and recalled in that particular way.**

Life histories thus, are an exciting and rich methodology with paradigmatic assumptions which both challenge and correspond to the assumptions of other research methods within the social sciences. The present study will adopt these assumptions as far as possible in order to examine outdoor behaviours and experiences, a brief background to which will now be discussed.

1.2 Outdoor Experiences

The Outdoors and Health Network (OHN), who commissioned the current work as a pilot project, aims to "to examine the relationship between individuals' health and well-being and their use of the outdoors". This encompasses both physical and psychological health and wellbeing. The outdoors can be a useful environment to encourage exercise, which has numerous well-established health benefits, including helping to protect against coronary heart disease (Morris et al., 1980). Indeed, Bird (2004) finds that the current body of evidence points to improved life expectancy and a decreased level of health complaints, with the outdoors being a good environment in which to exercise, and supportive of activities conducive to sustaining long-term physical activity. Psychological well-being can also be improved through contact with nature. Although there are many theories to explain how the outdoors and contact with nature and green space can contribute to

psychological well-being, one prominent theory, the Attention Restoration Theory (ART; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995), can help to explain how this may occur and how people experience nature. The Attention Restoration Theory suggests that restoration is needed after a period of prolonged attention to a particular task, since this produces directed attention fatigue (Bell, Green, Fisher, & Baum, 2001). An environment which promotes restoration can be defined as “a setting such as a natural area or museum that can help people recover from directed attention fatigue” (Bell et al., 2001). Kaplan (1995) suggests that there are four features of an environment which make it restorative: 1) *Fascination*, which is where there is interest in the content of an environment, such as animals and hills (there is a soft-hard dimension of fascination); 2) A feeling of *being away*, whereby the environment “is physically or conceptually different from one’s everyday environment” (p. 17, Herzog et al., 1997), freeing them “from mental activity that requires directed attention support to keep going” (p.173); 3) *Extent*, whereby that environment must provide “enough to see, experience, and think about so that it takes up a substantial portion of the available room in one’s head” (p.173) and represent “a whole other world” (p.173); and 4) the environment should be *compatible* with the intentions and purposes of a person’s visit there. Green and natural areas, which often include these elements, are therefore often considered to be particularly effective in restoring attention (e.g. Hartig, Evans, et al 2003; Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Herzog, Black, et al, 1997).

There appear therefore to be clear benefits to being outdoors, in terms of both mental and physical health and wellbeing. In light of such research, there is a strong impetus to encourage people to use the outdoors more. DEFRA (2008), for example, created an action plan designed to increase the number of people from diverse groups using the outdoors, based on the "benefits to physical and mental health and well being that such access can bring" (p.3). In order to implement such programmes, the motivations behind outdoor use need to also be identified. Some have suggested that contact with nature as a child is an important factor in adult outdoor use. Ward Thompson, Aspinall, and Montarzino (2008), for example, found that the frequency of visits to green spaces as a child significantly predicted the frequency of visits as an adult. This effect was strongest for those who rarely visited green space as a child, where the likelihood of not visiting green space as an adult was even higher.

1.3 Aims of the Present Study

The present study will utilise life histories in order to determine whether the approach is useful in studying outdoor experiences, and what type of information it can provide. The secondary aim of the study is to provide some preliminary understanding of how women use the outdoors and why, what their experiences of doing so are, and suggest ways in which the outdoors may contribute to well-being, which will serve to propose avenues of interest for further research.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Five women aged between 40 and 60 years were recruited across Surrey and Kent, England. The women were chosen from this age group because it was anticipated that they would be mobile enough to regularly use the outdoors, would have a good variety of life experiences with which to discuss in the interview, and with grown-up children, they would be more able to choose present day outdoor activities for themselves rather than for their family. Interviewees were told that they would be taking part in a life history project run by the University of Surrey, examining how the outdoors affects people and fits in to their overall life story and experiences. Four women were recruited on the basis that they regularly undertook outdoor activities, including one of the following (designed to give a spread of outdoor interests and types of outdoor contact, although it was not possible to choose women who exclusively did one of these activities):

1. Gardening / working on an allotment;
2. Walking / hiking;
3. Visiting outdoor sites / gardens (e.g. National Trust, RHS gardens);
4. Running or dog walking.

The fifth interviewee was recruited on the criteria that she did not regularly undertake any of these activities, and had little interest in using the outdoors in these ways. The participants were recruited

through emails sent out to staff at the University of Surrey, to walking clubs, gardening clubs, and voluntary organisations in Surrey, and by approaching women in two locations in a town in Surrey: in a large park and in an urban shopping area. Potential participants were told that it was a study about their experiences of the outdoors and that the researcher would like to know about their life and how the outdoors fits in to it.

2.2 Design and Interview Schedule

Semi-structured life history interviews were conducted across a period of five weeks, between 6th January and 16th February, 2010. The interviews were conducted either in the homes of the interviewees or the office of the interviewer, and lasted between one and two hours each. The interviewer first asked the interviewee to sign a consent form, which informed them of their rights and acquired permission for the voice recordings to be used in publications and further work. The interviewee was given the option of remaining anonymous or of being named, as well as whether they would like their voice recording to be deleted, in which case the researchers would be allowed to work solely on a transcript of their interview. The interview was conducted according to the interview schedule (see Appendix), which was based on a schedule developed by Thompson and Lummis (2009) for the Edwardians Project. The interview schedule was not, however, a prescriptive one, but acted as more of a guide to help the interviewer focus on particular topics of interest. The interviewee played a large role in determining what topics they wanted to embellish and what structure the interview should follow.

2.3 Equipment

Interviews were recorded using an Edirol R-09 digital voice recorder and transcribed in to a Microsoft Word document by an independent transcriber not associated with the project.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was a process by which any data relating to the outdoors was identified and coded in to corresponding categories created using the qualitative analysis tool, MAXQDA 2007. Categories were therefore created in a bottom-up fashion, with the content dictating their location and proximity to various other pieces of information. These categories, or themes, were then grouped in to larger themes, incorporating all mentions of being in the outdoors and the related emotions, experiences, and memories.

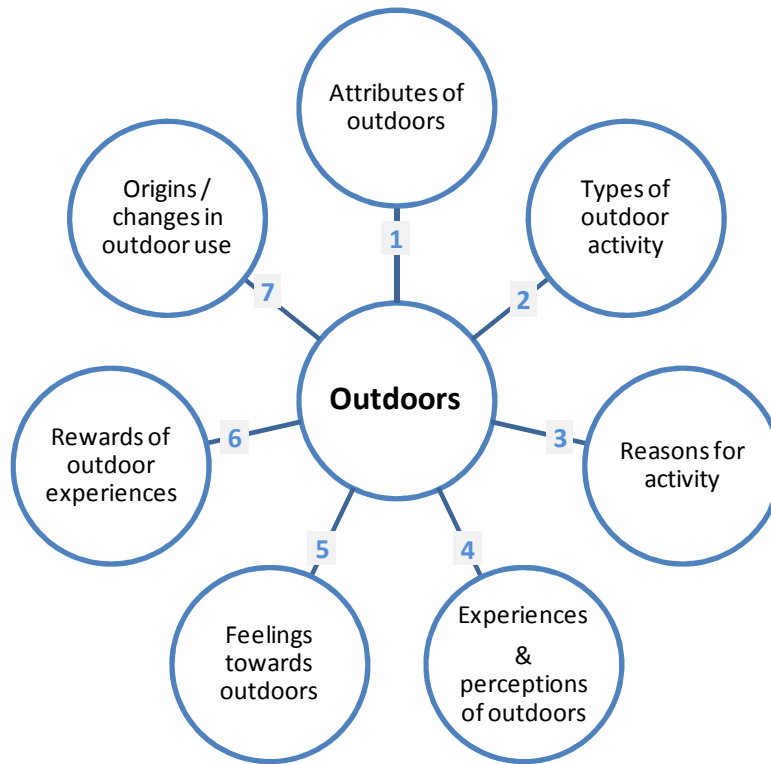
3.2 Themes

Many different themes were identified during the analysis, in what was a very rich data set, with frequent references to being in the outdoors (1128 mentions of various aspects of the outdoors were coded over the 5 transcripts). These themes were grouped in to the following overriding themes to describe the data: 1) attributes of the outdoors; 2) types of activity undertaken in the outdoors; 3) reasons for undertaking these activities; 4) experiences and perceptions of the outdoors; 5) feelings towards the outdoors; 6) rewards of outdoor experiences; 7) origins and changes in outdoor use (Fig. 1). The first groups relate more to the factual elements of the outdoors: how people use the outdoors and perceive it in its simplest form. The themes then move on to those which examine why people use the outdoors, and their experiences and rewards of doing so. The final theme examines how people have perceived the changes in their outdoor use over time; data which is attributable to the scope of the life histories approach. It is important to examine these various aspects of outdoor use, even the more factual and seemingly more intuitive aspects, in order to create a broader understanding of the lifespan of individuals, how these elements fit together, and how they have been included in the following discussion in order to show the scope of information which was gathered. Using some examples from the transcripts of the four most active outdoor users, each of the themes will be examined in turn and we will try to show how they fit in to the overall picture of the outdoors created by the interviewees. The fifth interviewee, who does not use the outdoors regularly, will be discussed separately given their unique perceptions and experiences of green space. We will also suggest some interpretations of the themes and areas which show potential for future research. It should be noted

that many of these themes overlap, although they have been placed in to discrete categories for the purposes of this exercise. It will not be possible to cover each theme in detail.

Fig. 1.

The seven groups of themes identified through thematic analysis of the transcripts.



3.2.1 Attributes of the Outdoors

The first group of themes identified focus on the various attributes of the outdoors mentioned by interviewees (Fig. 2). Attributes used by interviewees to describe the outdoors include: sky, fields, woods and trees, beach / sand / rock pools, water, plants, wildlife and other animals, and the seasons and weather. These attributes appear to be key not only in simply describing the outdoors, but in identifying the elements of importance to the interviewee and in structuring memories. For example, Liz talks about how much she enjoys skiing:

*“especially when you get the blue sky and it’s lovely and it’s all cold and it’s really nice....
when you’re skiing down and it’s a beautiful day and there’s scenery and everything, it’s just*

absolutely wonderful... [the] sensation of going down and having the wind in your face and sun. If you've got the sun as well, it's great."

But the experience is not the same for her when she is skiing indoors because of the lack of these various outdoor attributes:

"I took the kids up last year... to the Snow Dome... but that's not quite the same. It's a bit tame and it's a bit artificial. Still quite cold... [but] you just sort of go up and then you come down! [laugh] I mean, it's like that in the mountains as well, but there's a bit more to it."

For Lindsey, the woods near her childhood home played a central part in her use of the outdoors: they were a place to play with her brother and friends, a place to walk with her parents, and a place to experience excitement and danger (the woods were also used by the military). Many of her early memories of the outdoors are therefore structured around this feature of the outdoor environment:

"[My home] backed onto woods, so we used to go out and play in the woods... I remember I wasn't allowed in without my brother, who was three years older. And... there was lots of trenches dug, so that was great 'cos you could build camps in the trenches by pulling lots of branches and things over the trenches and you'd do camps. And the woods went a long way: I think they reached all the way down to another housing estate... So there was a bit of a rival, you know, thing going on: 'Now, these are our camps!'... And it really stands out in my memory."

In addition to the way in which these attributes of the outdoor environments serve to structure various memories, they also serve to create a more restorative environment by holding fascination (as in the ART; Kaplan, 1995). In this way, environmental attributes such as sky and mountains serve to create a soft, effortless attention, used to create perspective and reflection, whilst being aesthetically

pleasing: *“just puts things in perspective, walking. Big sky and, you know. Think it’s brilliant”* [Lindsey]. There appear to also be more specific elements of the outdoors which hold fascination for these interviewees. Take, for example, the toadstools described by Lindsey:

“... there was one really good spot near the lake where these amazing toadstools grew. I don’t know what they’re called, but they’re about yay big... And they were red with white spots... And they were always there... and we used to go back to look for them again.”

The toadstools were something which really held her interest and kept her returning to that area, structuring her activities at the time and some of her memories of childhood experiences. It is in talking about the woods, where the toadstools were located, that she remembers these objects, illustrating the importance of limiting the number of structured, direct questions in the life history interview, and allowing the participant to discuss their memories in their own time, as they emerge.

Other attributes of the outdoor environments which appear to hold importance for the interviewees, and act to determine activities and their regularity include the weather and seasons. The seasons feature heavily in the transcripts, with interviewees describing their patterns of behaviour in response to the seasons and fluctuations in weather, and in many cases celebrating these and the changes to their environment that those bring. Chandra, for example, went to pick bluebells with her family at when they were in flower, and talks about being in tune with the seasons:

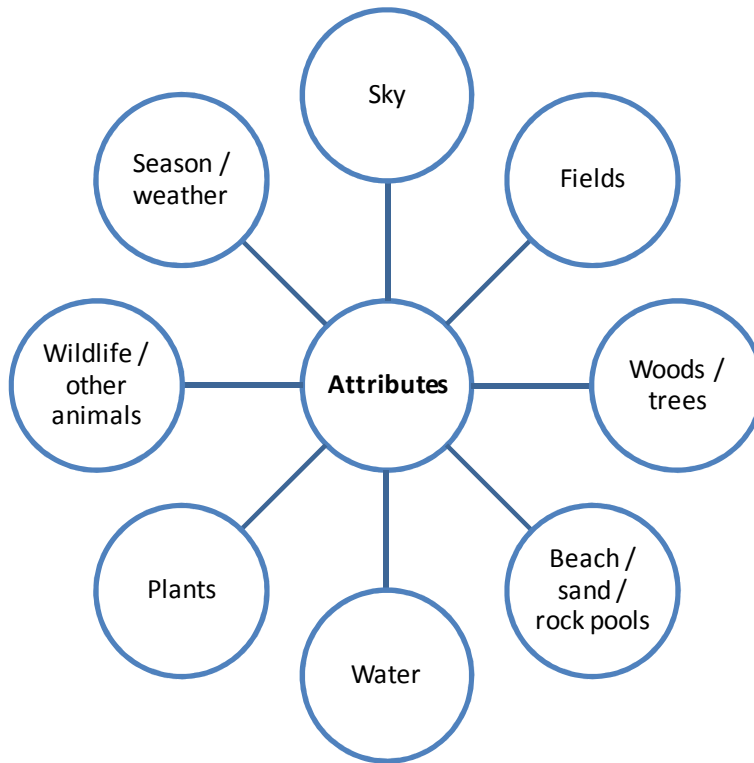
“And then there’d be bluebell wood walks when we were picking bluebells for something or other... I guess, some kind of purpose, but it was all just part of natural routine. You know, kind of the rhythm of life... events of the season.”

The various attributes of the outdoor environments described by interviewees then provide not only a clue as to the types of environment that they experienced over the life course, but are also used to structure memories and describe fascination in a potentially restorative environment. As we have seen so far, these attributes are also linked to the types of outdoor activities conducted by

interviewees and their motivations and rewards for being in the outdoors; aspects which will be discussed later. The identification of these valuable attributes appears to have come from allowing the interviewee to control the course of the interview and which subjects they wanted to discuss, since this allowed them space to develop and describe their memories of the outdoors. By encouraging the interviewees to describe the environments in greater detail this also helped them to elaborate on the descriptions of these environments, producing these rich attributes.

Fig. 2.

The various attributes of the outdoor environment identified by interviewees.



3.2.2 Types of Activity

The interviewees discussed several activities in which they were involved over the course of their life to date. These are listed to indicate the variety of activities associated with the outdoors (Table 1). One of the most interesting activities discussed by interviewees is play, and they provide useful details of how it is constructed in the outdoors, and the way in which it affords contact with the various elements of the outdoor environment. This is something which appears to have held great

significance in childhood, which is also enjoyed into adulthood (often through their children), and something which was frequently achieved whilst on holiday. Lindsey, for example says of her holidays (in the UK):

“I would have rather have been on the beach, I think. I mean, looking through rock pools and things like that. And scrambling up rocks... That was the first thing we did whenever we got on the beach, was to go exploring, you know. And then we’d come back, have something to eat, build a sandcastle, go and jump in the waves, come back. Then the tide would start coming in – build a dam, you know. And get buried, as well!”

For Lindsey, play is something which therefore allowed her to explore the environment and afforded contact with the water, sand, and wildlife in the rock pools. Her experiences of play in the woods near her home, mentioned earlier, also afforded contact with various outdoor elements, as well as being a platform to socialise and act out rivalries and friendships. What is also interesting is the way in which the outdoors can be used in a seemingly spontaneous way for some, which Chandra appears to have enjoyed as a child:

“Dad was very much somebody who’d get in the car and say, ‘Come on, we’re going!’ And we’d get in the car and we’d go and then we’d walk somewhere that we’d never been before but he knew as a boy.”

The value of spontaneity also extends to those activities which are without the structure of organised games. For example, Liz says of her childhood recreations:

“it was all unconstructed. It was just what you did with your friends; it wasn’t sort of like piano on Mondays and ballet on Tuesday and, you know, being taken to play with somebody on another day, which I’ve seen happen with my children a lot more. It’s sort of people are – you know, children are sort of like fully booked.”

Liz appears to almost condemn the way in which outdoor activities are so structured in the present day, harking back to the spontaneous play which she enjoyed as a child. This type of cross-generational comparison emerged several times during the analysis, as well as in previous life history research conducted by the present authors (e.g. White, Uzzell, Rätzkel & Gatersleben, 2010), and appears to be a prominent feature of life history work, one which was particularly clear when discussing the types of activity undertaken. These comparisons are, however, very subjective, but are useful in understanding social norms. Similarly to Liz, Lindsey appears to actively dislike using the outdoors in a constructed way:

“I’m not much of a joiner... I think I just don’t like organised `stuff`, really. I think I’d just rather do things by myself. Or with people I choose to do it with, rather than with an organised group.”

Unconstructed activities and play therefore seem to form an important part of the outdoor experience. Walking appears also to have been a key way in which to experience the outdoors, and something which was mentioned by all interviewees. It holds significant historic and present-day value for them, with many memories and experiences revolving around walking. The experiences of walking were, however, not always positive ones:

“I used to hate going out for walks at the weekends! Yes! [they laugh] And when we went on holiday it was always like getting dragged round churches and out on walks!” [Liz]

“I used to hate walking in those days. It was a family joke that I hated walking. And I always blame it on the fact that when we were in Wales, whenever we went to Wales it rained. So I wasn’t too fond of Wales. And we had to walk to this waterfall, and it seemed like miles and miles to me. And when we got there, at the bottom of the waterfall was a dead sheep! [laughs]

So that kind of summed up my attitude to walking: that you'd walk and walk and walk, and all you'd get for your trouble was a dead sheep! [they laugh]" [Lindsey]

However, Chandra and Annette also discuss very positive memories related to walking in adulthood, and it does seem that for these four interviewees, walking is viewed more positively in later life when they are able to choose this activity for themselves rather than have it chosen by their parents:

"I paid for myself to do a charity challenge walk [in China]... I upped and left. Didn't know anybody. Arrived at Heathrow airport, thought 'What am I doing?' And we went walking on the Great Wall... at some points you felt like you were on top of the world and there was nobody else there... couldn't believe the sight. It was absolutely fantastic! Just fantastic!... it was just sort of turning to autumn and so the colours were brilliant. It was just incredible."
[Chandra]

"I was very happy to have a dog... partly because I loved walking and it was just the perfect excuse to actually just go trekking off across the fields on your own." [Annette]

Table 1.

Types of activity undertaken by interviewees in the outdoor environment / discussed by interviewees.

Activities	Activities (Continued)
Spontaneous / unconstructed use	Camping
Play	Skiing
Sitting / lying / eating outdoors	Roller skating
Picnics / BBQs	Horse riding
Visiting parks	Swimming
Gardening / visiting gardens / producing food	Running
Visiting historic houses / sites	Cycling
Walking	Beach / seaside activities

Visiting farms	Organised sport
Brownies / Guides	

3.2.3 Reasons for Activity

The interviewees gave various motivations for being in the outdoors, which ranged from a desire for exercise, to mark a particular occasion or to fit in with routine, a desire to simply be in the outdoors, to socialise with others, using it whilst on holiday or school trips, and other factors, such as parental bribery with sweets (Annette: *“my dad always used to buy us sweets! [they laugh] So we was bribed!”*)! But it is interesting to note that the reasons for using the outdoors appears to not be an exclusive one and that there were usually dual purposes to outdoor visits. Perhaps more than one reason was necessary to create a threshold for motivation to use the outdoors: a supposition which may be clarified by further research. For example, Lindsey describes going for walks both for the exercise and for the restorative effects of the outdoors: *“it’s partly for exercise. I think probably that was the overriding initial reason for doing it. But now it’s just to think and to get things in perspective.”* And Chandra describes using the outdoors to socialize with friends as well as to escape the pressures of everyday life:

“Sometimes that’s a good way to get to talk to friends who... you know, you’re always distracted by children or something else that’s happening... So we do, we regularly try and get dates in the diary during the year where about five of us get together and just walk, either for a whole day or we’ll book a weekend and we’ll go away, so that we’re away from everything else, which is good.”

The social aspect of outdoor use does appear to have been an important factor for interviewees across their lives; from childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood. Building on a previous comment from the interview with Lindsey, she talks about how she enjoys walking, not only for the restorative aspects of the environment, but *“‘Cos it’s great for women, walking, I think, ‘cos*

you talk and talk and work through all, you know, loads of counselling comes from it". Lindsey also talks about the contradiction of needing to be alone and yet the joy at being with others:

"I think I needed to get away as well. So the solitude, although that sounds daft 'cos I'm saying I'm by myself in the house, but it's a different kind of solitude when you're out in the open. And I actually then have met people that I would never have met before. Because the only thing in common is that we have dogs. And you see people. Sometimes you don't see them for three months and then you see them again. Some people you see a bit more regularly. And there's nobody that I then see outside of dogwalking, but there's kind of acquaintances and people who I have chats with and things. So it's opened up a completely different life, in a way."

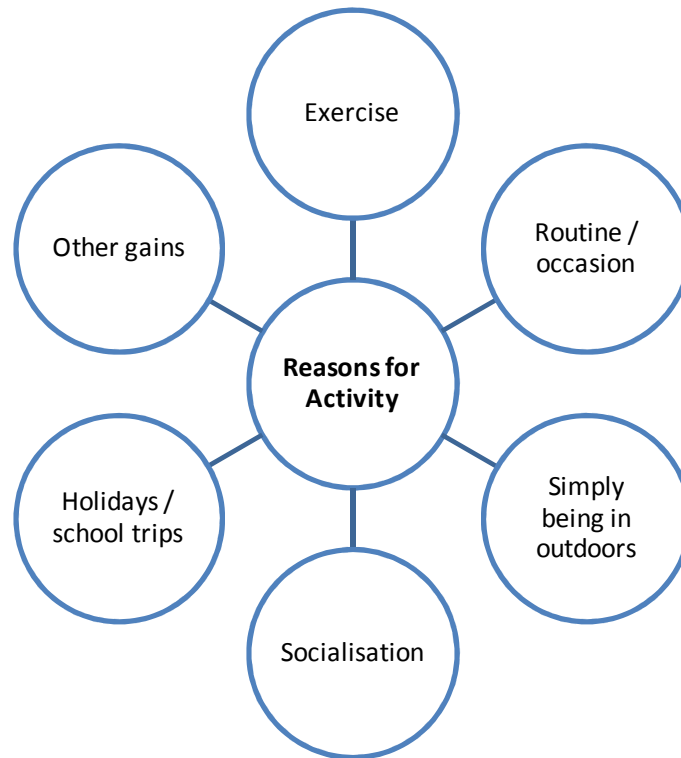
Using the framework of restoration, it is apparent then that her need to be alone and to exchange the solitude of her home for that of the outdoors, may well represent her need to be away from her everyday environment, and so is not necessarily the need to be without other people. Indeed, her enjoyment at spending time with other dog walkers who are not associated with her everyday life is entirely compatible with her need to be away, and provides a platform for socialisation, which she has said is often lacking due to the fact that she works at home. Socialisation for Lindsey is therefore something which may be both a primary motivation (the first quotation), as well as secondary bonus (previous quotation). For Chandra, socialisation is also sometimes a key motivation for using the outdoors: *"there were always lots of extended family – cousins and friends and, you know, we'd all meet and go walking on that particular day for that particular purpose"*. And for Annette, walking was a good opportunity to spend time with her father as a child: *"I really enjoyed them [the walks], I loved it! I mean, you know, 'cos my mum was at home with us, and my dad obviously worked. And so it was an opportunity to spend time with him"*.

Another interesting reason for outdoor use is that it holds the dual value of being part of the routine and a setting for special occasions. Routine use of the outdoors was particularly obvious with the case of those who own a dog, for the necessity of providing its daily exercise. Lindsey also

describes how her family went for a walk every Boxing Day, although it appears she often refused to go: “...*I wouldn't go for a walk on Boxing Day because we had to*”. Holidays such as Christmas and Easter appear to be particularly associated with routine for these participants. With the exception of Lindsey, Christmas does not appear to have been a time for using the outdoors much, but Easter does appear to be an important time for the outdoors for Chandra and Lindsey. Chandra, for example, describes how “...*at Easter we would always go on Good Friday walking with family and friends in quite a big group to pick primroses for the church service that was going to be on Easter Sunday*”. And Lindsey says: “*Easter holidays in particular we used to go and stay on my aunt and uncle's farm. So I used to help feed the orphaned lambs and all that kind of thing*”. Talking about family, friends, and occasions, as in many of these examples, elicited some of the most detailed descriptions of outdoor activities. Indeed, this demonstrates why it is crucial not only to ask questions about the topic of interest in life history interviews, but about broader subjects relevant to the interviewee, such as events, school, and friends.

Fig. 3.

Reasons given by interviewees for activities undertaken in the outdoors.



3.2.4 Experiences and Perceptions of the Outdoors

The interviewees described some very positive experiences of being in the outdoors, perceiving it as peaceful, beautiful, interesting, a platform for creativity, enjoyment, and the release of energy, and a place to be free and away. In line with previous psychological research which suggests that being in the outdoors is an important way to feel connected to nature (e.g. Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989), interviewees also described the joy at this perceived connection. For example, Chandra says that her reason for exercising is that it provides “...a sense of freedom and aloneness, but connected with nature sort of thing”, and says that her ideal holiday would be:

“Probably somewhere very remote, possibly solitary, possibly on my own. And somewhere wild, just where you are completely in touch with all the elements that are going on round you, whatever it is. Whether it’s wind, rain, sun, you know, you’re just kind of part of it”

Interestingly, two interviewees (Lindsey and Chandra), also felt that being in the outdoors was a way to feel connected to history. For example, Lindsey rejoices at treading the same paths as her predecessors living in the area:

*“walking around here, you can walk from the other end of Alton right through into Chawton, and you do have a feeling like you – when you see *Pride and Prejudice* and the women are walking between the villages, you’re thinking: ‘That’s probably where they were walking,’ you know, ‘cos it’s walking in these really old green lanes, they’re called. And they probably were there then. So I often think, ‘Oh, Jane Austen might have walked along here!’”*

Another joy for Lindsey at being connected to history is the way in which the outdoors allows her to be away from modern life, another of the subthemes here, which perhaps serves to enhance the perceived restorative properties of the outdoors:

“I think that’s part of the joy of it, is kind of getting away from modern life as well. And so that’s why it’s quite good for your mental health: because you’re getting removed from all that stress and strain and it’s just walking and taking in the scenery, really.”

In fact, Lindsey gives quite a good definition of the restorative properties of the outdoors in this short excerpt; identifying the idea of being away from the source of the directed attention in a place which affords fascination and compatibility with desired activities, as well as away from stress (e.g. see the ideas of Ulrich on stress and restoration in Ulrich, Simons, Losito, Fiorito, Miles, & Zelson, 1991). It would perhaps be interesting to examine further the awareness and understanding of the health benefits of the outdoors in future research, and use the life history approach to examine outdoors-related coping mechanisms to various stressful or distressing life events. Similarly to Lindsey, Chandra also enjoys the outdoors because of its historical context and inherently ancient nature, and the way in which it can be used to escape certain modern day indicators of human activity:

“there’s an old hill fort... you turn up a hill and you just get to the top and you can see for miles. You can actually see as far on a good day as the sea... And then all around you is just pretty much greenery. There’s very – you can’t really see much in terms of housing. So. And it’s kind of ancient and connected to history.”

Of the other outdoor experiences of the interviewees, the way in which it provides excitement, adrenaline and enables exploration, seems to be particularly important for some. For example, Liz says that she likes skiing because *“I love the feeling that you’re out there, you’re free. You’re a little bit on the edge – well, I am.”*, and Chandra enjoys sports because *“It’s the energy! It’s the kind of release of energy.”* She describes this release of energy as being particularly important after the pressures of work:

“...when I was playing hockey it was much about the energy release. You know, if you’ve been in an office all week, just getting out there into fresh air and being able to really whack the ball or – fantastic! Good feeling!”

In terms of exploring, this is something which is not only valuable in childhood (e.g. *“That was the first thing we did whenever we got on the beach, was to go exploring”* [Lindsey]), but also in adulthood:

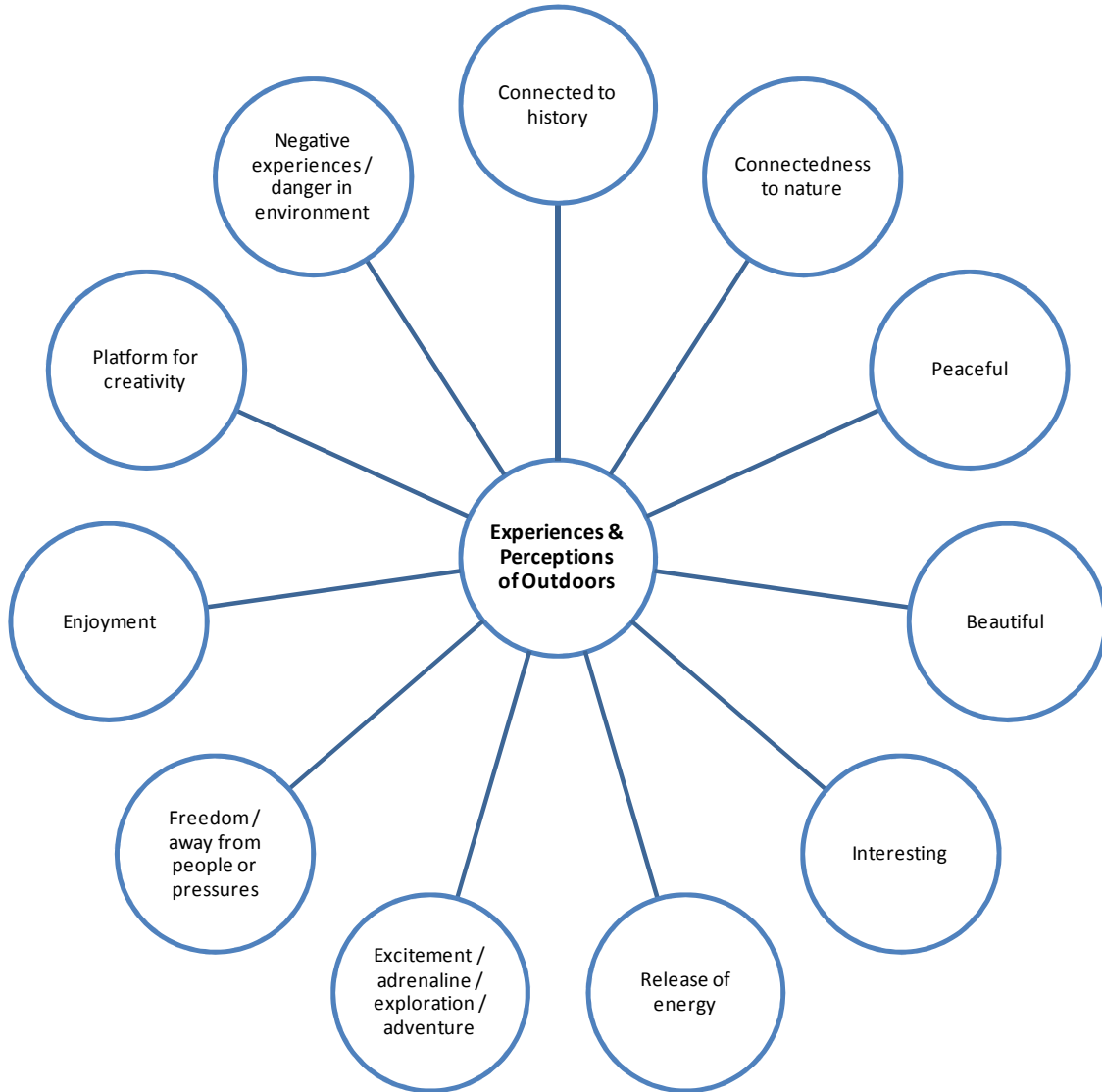
“But I’ve done other things where I’ve not gone with the girls. And I’ve done some trekking in places like China and Thailand, which is quite adventurous for me and quite exciting. And I like excitement, I like adventure, I like challenge.” [Chandra]

The data gathered here again reflects a variety of experiences and perceptions of the outdoors, many of which warrant further investigation, in particular the feelings of connectedness to history, excitement and exploration, and in the understanding of negative experiences of the outdoors and how these affect outdoor use (discussed later), which are likely to lead to new avenues of research. As we

have also seen in the present research, life history interviews are likely to add to understanding of established concepts such as connectedness to nature and attention restoration.

Fig. 5.

Interviewee experiences and perceptions of the outdoors.



3.2.5 Feelings Towards the Outdoors

The interviewees identified various feelings and attitudes towards the outdoors, including a feeling of appreciation of the outdoors, a need to be in it, and that it is a treat to be there. They also articulated a sense of loss at changes to the outdoors and an ambivalence, fear, or dislike of the outdoors (this last theme is discussed later). Lindsey, for example, was saddened at the loss of the mushrooms that she used to go looking for: “...*I think there’s a housing estate built there now, which is sad*”; and she is currently fighting against a supermarket development “*Because once it’s gone, it’s gone, you know*”. The need to be in the outdoors was something which was particularly interesting, given the implications for outdoor use. This need is demonstrated best in the following quotes:

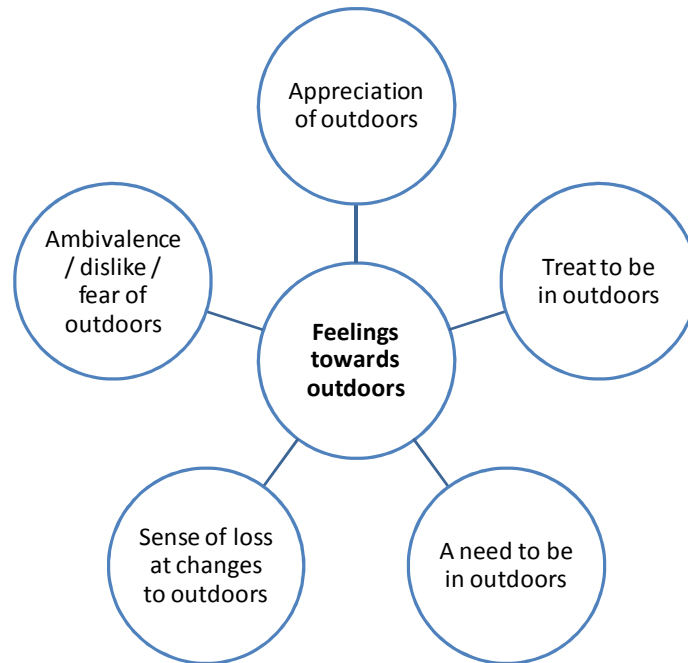
“...I like doing the park every day because I see it changing through the seasons. You know. And there’s wonderful trees up there and things... as you get older, you know, you do change and you start to rely on things like that... I think it was something I knew I needed to do. Working from home, and once the children were at school longer hours, I did start feeling that I was kind of trapped in the house.” [Lindsey]

“...the outdoors has always played sort of quite a significant sort of part in my life. And if – if – like my, you know, poor old mum at the moment can’t really get out very easily, I think that would – if I was in that situation I’d hate it. I really would miss it, big time.” [Annette]

The need to be in the outdoors for these women appears to be associated with a need to be ‘alone’, away from their usual environment, daily pressures, and family: perhaps then the women are therefore recognising the restorative properties of being in the outdoors. As well as this, there is a need to view the landscape and the various attributes that they have, providing fascination and aesthetic qualities, further enhancing restoration. But a need to be outdoors is also in line with theories such as the Biophilia Hypothesis, which suggest that there is an “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1984).

Fig. 6.

Interviewee feelings towards the outdoors.



3.2.6 Rewards of Outdoor Use

Interviewees believed that being in the outdoors provided rewards and benefits. They believed that it created perspective and a place to think, promoted restoration and relaxation, improved health, and helped in times of difficulty: *“I had a brief time where I was on antidepressants, and I found walking was great. Really helped me.”* [Lindsey]. This was also the case for Chandra:

“playing hockey was good for me when things were difficult in terms of marriage break-up. Having that regular knowledge about being away from all the other stuff – work, kids, you know – and being completely absorbed in an activity where you have to think about just about that”

Additionally, the outdoors seems to be a good platform through which vivid memories were created and recalled. This was discussed briefly earlier, in relation to the attributes of the outdoors

triggering and structuring memories. Lindsey, for example, has “*vivid memories of the snail races*” in her garden. For Liz, the outdoors also holds strong associations with her mother working in the garden and teaching her about plants:

“...my mum did quite a lot of gardening, and she taught me a lot about – I don’t know, just names of flowers and bushes... I just remember sort of being out in the garden and Mum would be doing things and we’d be talking, and she’d show me things. And I used to love digging up potatoes with her”

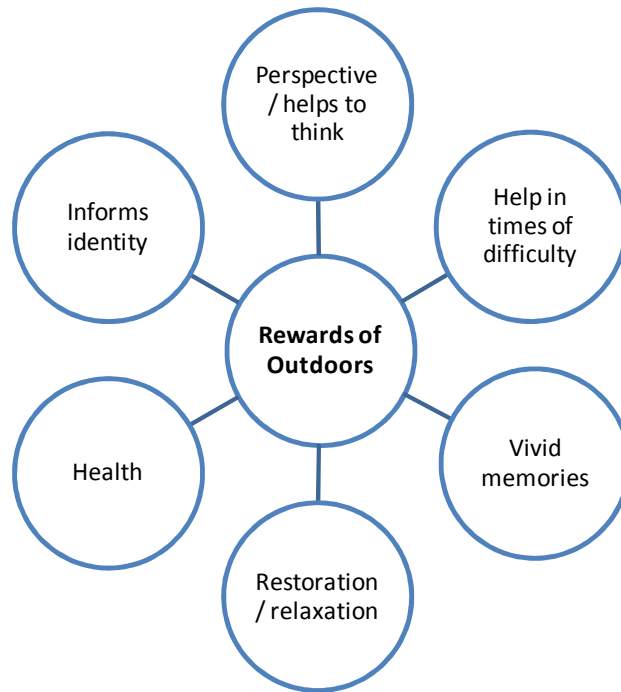
When asked whether this experience helped her with her gardening today, Liz responded:

“Yes, especially with my mum. ‘Cos, you know, [tearful] everything I see I remember her, you know!.. I miss her a huge amount. But it’s a nice way of sort of feeling that she’s with you.” For her then, being in the outdoors and gardening with her mum formed strong and happy memories, which are triggered again by revisiting and thinking about similar environments and activities. We have discussed this within the theme of rewards because this is something which is clearly very positive and highly valued by her.

Being in the outdoors also seems to help to inform identity, which we again believe is a positive factor for these interviewees. Annette, for example, claims that she is “*a born again gardener*” and says “*I think it must be in m’ genes! [laughs]*” because her father is “*a very outdoor type of person. He loves gardening and he loves sport*” and her “*... grandparents were also sort of quite outdoor people as well*”. This concept of being an “outdoor” person is an interesting one, and a way to identify the commonalities between herself and family. This is apparent too in some of the other interviews, where interviewees claimed to be like their family members and suggested that their outdoor interests must be “in the genes” (described earlier).

Fig. 7.

Perceived rewards of being in the outdoors.



3.2.7 Origins / Changes in Outdoor Use

The life histories approach is particularly useful for illustrating how various practices and behaviours are adopted and changed over time, given the way in which it tracks these over the life course. This is especially apparent in the present research, in which interviewees discussed their outdoor experiences at various points in their lives, volunteering perceptions as to how these had changed, as well as explicitly discussing changes in response to direct questions by the interviewer at the end of the interview. These direct questions were useful in getting the interviewees to clarify their perceptions of change. It was important to leave these questions to the end, by which time they had broached the subject in their own words and on their own terms, so identifying this change themselves rather than being alerted to it by the suggestion of the interviewer. This adds validity to the idea of change across the life course, and highlights the importance of allowing the interviewee to guide the interview process.

Changes in outdoor use and the emergence of new behaviours were perceived to occur in response to the stage of life, changing from childhood through to adolescence, and again as transitions are made into adulthood and parenthood. Change in outdoor use also seemed to have occurred in response to various life events due to a shortage of time and the expense incurred by particular activities, the location of the home and the proximity to the outdoors, prior experiences with family, and the removal of certain barriers which had previously prevented that behaviour. Four of the most prominent subthemes will now be discussed in more detail:

1) *Stage of Life / Life Events*: An example of perceived changes in outdoor use over the life course can be taken from the interview with Liz, in which she talks of changes across her life, the most recent of which being due to her current independence to and desire to choose her own outdoor activities now that her children are older:

“I think I’ve used it [the outdoors] differently, ‘cos I’ve gone through different phases of my life.” ... “Well, when I was little I used to play outside and everything, and now I suppose, you know, I’ve sort of settled down and I’ve got.. Well, I’ve been through the years with the children and doing things out of doors, and now they do all their own activities ‘cos they’re grown-up. So I suppose it’s for, you know, for us.” [Liz]

This provides support for the selection of interviewees who had older children in the present study, as they would be more able to choose their own activities. Several of the interviewees mentioned a very prominent change in outdoor use from childhood to adolescence. All four had used the outdoors to a large extent as children, but they described using it much less as they moved in to adolescence and young adulthood; this was often the period at which they went to university or moved away from home. For example, Annette discusses a change in her outdoor use upon entering her first job, which was in an urban location:

“[I] did a lot of socialising in London sort of after work, and going to the theatre and doing stuff like that. So that’s probably a time in life where in actual fact I didn’t particularly miss not having the countryside around me”.

These differences in outdoor use and perceptions are attributed in part by some of the interviewees to a change in attitude towards the environment at various life stages:

“I like doing the park every day because I see it changing through the seasons. You know. And there’s wonderful trees up there and things that I would have laughed at when my parents had said to me when I was a child to look at. But actually as you get older, you know, you do change and you start to rely on things like that.” [Lindsey]

2) *Removal of barriers*: In research examining sustainability and environmental behaviours, it has been shown that one way to encourage individuals to change their behaviours to more desirable ones is to remove the barriers to these behaviours (e.g. Schultz, Oskamp, & Mainieri, 1995). There were some possible examples in the present research of the effect of removing barriers to outdoor behaviours. In this example, Annette discusses why she began growing vegetables, attributing it not only to a desire to do so, but because there was an existing vegetable plot in her new garden, although disused:

“...when we moved into the house there was a sort of plot. Most of the garden’s sort of lawn, but there was one sort of patch that looked like it had been a vegetable patch. So I just suggested that we kind of treat it like that and see what grew.”

Having the outline of the vegetable patch therefore seems to have further encouraged her to adopt growing vegetables outside her new home. Although it is not possible to determine what her course of action would have been without this inducement, it does tell us something about the reasoning in adopting new behaviours. This type of finding, which we believe emerged due to the

open nature of the life history questioning in which interviewees are encouraged to discuss rather than simply answer a set question, is something that is likely to be of use in understanding how desirable outdoor behaviours can be encouraged.

- 3) *Location of Home and Proximity to Green Space*: The proximity to the outdoors appears to be a key factor in determining outdoor use and activity type among the interviewees. Being close to the outdoors seems to encourage outdoor behaviours, perhaps removing the perceived barriers to going outdoors. For children, it also appears to afford an easily accessible area for play:

“We had quite a nice house. It backed onto the river. Dad owned some land. We were out a lot, really. We were very close to the local recreation ground. We cycled round the village. I think we had quite a lot of freedom, really, as kids. Probably a product of the environment we lived in and I think the fact that most people knew most other people. But yeah, we were out probably more than we were in. Played tennis a lot. Just – and went down to the river and kind of built things, like built dens! You know, fished for minnows in, you know, jam-jar pots and just – yeah, out and about, really.” [Chandra]

It does not, however, need to be a green or rural environment to afford outdoor activities such as play (although these environments may be more enriched); Lindsey, for example, describes playing in a car park: *“...there was a car park that was always empty in the evenings, and we used to go and play tennis, you know, with an imaginary net there and do rollerskating there as well.”* But being close to green space does seem to be particularly valued in adulthood, often determining the choice of home: For example, Annette says: *“We had quite a long list of criteria [for our house]! [giggles]... Mike was very, very keen to be somewhere fairly rural... It’s got lovely views out over the back across the countryside. So it feels as if it’s rural”*.

- 4) *Experiences with Family*: Early encounters with the outdoors and the attitudes and behaviours of parents to the outdoors appear to have greatly influenced the interviewees. For these four

interviewees, their parents appear to have been strong role models for outdoor behaviour and actively encouraged outdoor use. For example, Liz greatly enjoys skiing, something which her parents and grandparents were also fond of:

“I don’t know if there’s a ski gene, but my Swiss granddad... used to love skiing... and my dad used to do skiing and go on skiing holidays. So I really loved it as well. And then my older son quite enjoys it”

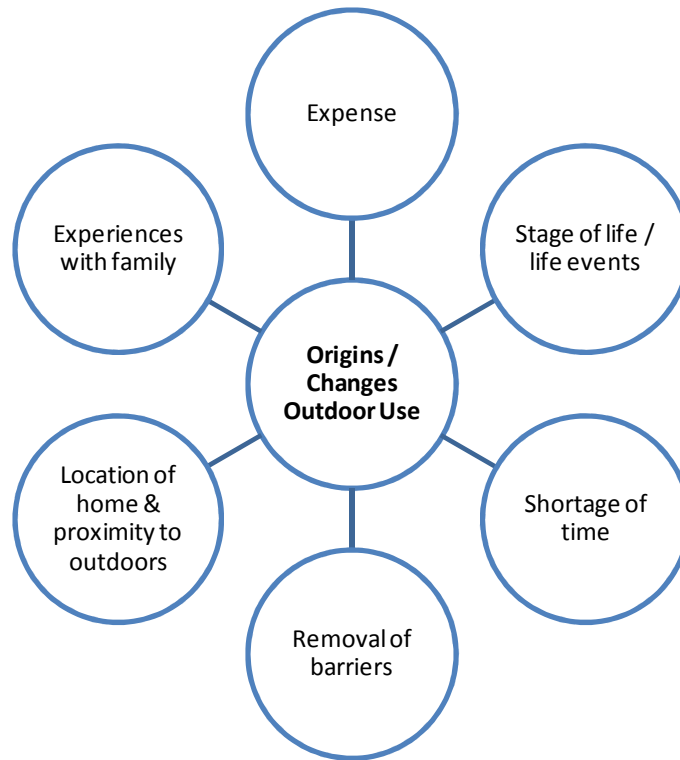
Similarly, Chandra talks about her father’s preference for quiet outdoor locations, and how that is similar to her own current preference:

“And I would definitely say my father’s influence was: ‘We don’t want to be where everybody else is.’... And I’ve definitely inherited that gene, whatever that is!... So he would much prefer to be outside and away from other people, so much more rural countryside, seasidey, that kind of thing.”

And Annette, as an adult, preferred a seaside environment which is where many of her childhood experiences of the outdoors occurred: *“my memories of childhood holidays were of seashores and being on beaches, and things like that. And so we always tended to sort of gravitate towards places with beaches.”* This appears to be in line with the findings of Ward Thompson, Aspinal, and Montarzano (2008), since her use of the outdoors as a child seems to be related to the number of times she uses the outdoors as an adult. In addition, Annette seems to use this type of outdoor environment, where she had several childhood experiences, more than other types of outdoor environments. The development of particular landscape preferences based on childhood experiences is something which would be interesting to investigate further in future research, and life histories appears to be a useful methodology for doing so.

Fig. 4.

Origins of outdoor use and reasons for changes which have occurred over the lifespan.



3.3 Dislike and fear of the outdoors – negative experiences and their consequences on preference

Until now we have focussed our discussion on the experiences and perceptions of the four interviewees who regularly used the outdoors, given the commonalities between them and the ability to generalise across the themes. We now discuss the outdoor perceptions of the fifth interviewee, Deborah, who had very different experiences of the outdoors and currently holds an active dislike and fear of open green space. We will also touch on some of the previous themes in order to understand her dislike of these environments and why this may be the case. In her interview she clearly detailed her experiences of being in the outdoors and her emotional state when in such an environment, making several key points which can help us to understand why she reacts differently from our other interviewees:

“I don’t look at the countryside with any pleasure, really. I think if – I feel that if I was ‘out there’, you know, I’d find it a bit intimidating – all the trees closing in, and all the, you know,

the expanse of space. But there's nobody there, and I think I would get lost. Or there's no pavements; you can't walk anywhere. I think I'd feel very vulnerable. So I always think of the countryside of, you know, me being there on my own lost somehow. Not that that's ever happened to me, but I don't know why, but I just think it just makes me feel uncomfortable in a way that if I was in a city I'd feel more in control and I could cope... I don't like the fact there's no pavements and it's miles to the nearest 7/11 and... [they giggle]... It's a bit eerie and creepy, I think, the countryside"

Unlike the other interviewees, the isolation that the countryside provides is not restorative to Deborah, but creates a feeling of loneliness and alienation. There is a clear sense of fear of this type of outdoor environment; a fear of getting lost, of being on her own, of being away from conveniences. The fact that there is not even the familiarity and reassurance of pavements leads to disquiet. The outdoors is typically seen as a social good and there is invariably a high degree of social desirability amongst the public to say they like the outdoors. Even where there has been research (e.g., Bixler and Floyd, 1997) demonstrating a high expectancy of fear, a high disgust sensitivity in natural phenomena (e.g. highly disgusted by spiders), and a greater desire for modern comforts, this is usually related to a lower preference for wilder versus manicured park environments rather than a dislike of the outdoors *per se*. Much less research has been undertaken on fear and dislike of all outdoor environments. For Deborah, it is an environment of which she has little experience and is clearly uncomfortable in; she feels more at home in an urban environment with people and visible human influence:

"I feel less vulnerable in cities, because I think you're always close to a tube station, train station, bus route, you know, shops, and there's always people around... if I was walking around at night I would be more comfortable walking on a city street than a country road. I just felt it was more interesting, more me, and I felt more – safer, weirdly enough"

There are many clues as to the possible reasons for this, although it is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss them all (something which demonstrates once again the depth of information

which can be gathered and strengthens the case for using life histories). But we would like to focus on two of these factors. First, each of the other four interviewees had encounters with green space in childhood through various means, the most common of which was with family. But Deborah seems to have had few outdoor experiences as a child. She reports going with her family to watch her father play sports at a weekend, of playing in scrubland with friends, and of going on seaside holidays, but her experiences of green space appear to be limited to these activities, and she did not describe doing activities such as walking, as did the other interviewees. She attributed this to family income, the social norms of her community at the time of her childhood, limited access to outside spaces, and restrictions imposed by her parents:

“...we weren’t the kind of family that parents would take us swimming or do. I don’t know, I don’t think it was common in those days. I mean, there was nowhere to go, for a start, and my dad was too busy doing what he wanted to do to take us any[where]... So no, they never took us anywhere.”

Secondly, her experiences of being in the outdoors were often negative ones. Although she says of her dislike, *“I don’t really know where it comes from, really, ‘cos I never had any horrible experiences or anything”*, her memories of visits to the outdoors often seem to have had negative associations. For example, Deborah talks of feeling pressured to go outdoors to watch sport:

“I come from a very sporty family. My father’s very into sport, and he was a sort of semi-professional footballer. (Really!) Yeah. And he used to play cricket... So every weekend we were dragged to XXXXXX Cricket Club, where we had to go and watch him playing cricket. And in the football season we were dragged to the football club and we had to hang around while he was playing football. So that’s given me a lifelong dislike of all things sporting, I’m afraid!”

Additionally, she says of this:

“Oh yeah, there was no taking part, no. We just had to [watch].. Well, my mum made the sandwiches, yes, which even as a small child I resented. I could see, even as a small child, that was wrong: that my dad was there enjoying himself and doing what he wanted to do while she was slaving over a tea urn and making sandwiches. So that was quite – I was quite conscious of that from a very young age. So that me feel quite resentful, ‘cos I was quite protective towards her and felt she was being ill-used. And so that made me hate the whole thing.”

Deborah’s experiences of discomfort in the outdoors and her lack of extensive contact with green space are interesting because they shed some light on possible reasons for not using the outdoors. The life histories approach open up opportunities to explore and reveal the range of contingent factors which would not readily be revealed through surveys or even straightforward interviews. One gets a real sense in this quote from Deborah that the context of everyday life and the relations between family members had a significant impact not only on Deborah’s feelings for her family and her childhood experiences but how these coloured her subsequent life experiences, activities and environmental preferences. The fear of green space and the experience of having little contact with the outdoors as a child is something which is likely to be experienced by others in the general population, and given the implications for outdoor behaviour, is something which clearly warrants further investigation.

4. General Discussion

The present study had two aims: to determine whether the life histories approach is useful in studying outdoor experiences, and what type of information it can provide; and secondarily, to provide a preliminary understanding of how women use the outdoors and why, what their experiences of doing so are, and suggest ways the outdoors contribute to well-being. Seven themes were identified within the interview data, with a number of subthemes, which covered: 1) the attributes of the outdoors; 2) the types of outdoor activity which were undertaken; 3) reasons for doing these outdoor

activities; 4) experiences and perceptions of the outdoors; 5) feelings towards the outdoors; 6) the rewards of outdoor experiences; and 7) the origins and changes in outdoor use through the life course. The data is very rich and varied and can therefore tell us a great deal about outdoor use, creating a very detailed picture of how these women use and experience the outdoors, as well as how they have experienced it in the past. The interviewees also frequently discussed the implications for health and well-being at using the outdoors, something which was discussed within this paper as relating to the ART, but which could tell us a great deal about how the outdoors contributes to well-being across a number of dimensions. The life histories approach therefore has great potential within this type of research.

Additionally, we have found that if you allow the interviewees to control the pace and progression of the interview, rather than asking structured questions of them, then this provides them with the space to recall memories which they may not have seen as salient if they felt that the interviewer only wanted a specific response to the question. Although it may feel as though the interviewee is diverging from the subject and going off-track, these divergences seem to create the richest data. Portelli (1997) often mentions gaining the most interesting information when being led by the participant away from the line of questioning, even though he felt frustrated by the detour at the time of the interview. Creating a relaxed conversation, where questions appear naturally within the topic discussed by the interviewee is crucial for this type of methodology. The interview schedule used within the present study was a useful guide for the interview, and the questions selected seem to be appropriate. It may appear unnecessary to ask questions which are not directly related to the subject of outdoor use, but asking about other events and experiences often threw up memories about the outdoors which may otherwise have not been given. And as was seen in the last interview, environmental experiences and the type of exposure one has to the outdoors can be heavily conditioned and coloured by family relationships. Similarly, asking about the family will often throw up related memories, as well as providing useful demographic information. Interviewees in the present study, for example, talked about their memories of a particular event or the routine of undertaking an outdoor activity on a particular day (e.g. Christmas and Easter), which would never have arisen if they were not asked about such seemingly unconnected experiences.

4.1 Future Research and Potential for Life Histories

The OHN is primarily concerned with understanding the links between health and well-being and the use of the outdoors. Issues of health and well-being related to outdoor use were frequently mentioned by interviewees in the present study, showing that it is a useful methodology by which to examine these issues. But in addition to this concern was the need to establish how the outdoors is used, why, and how greater outdoor use can be encouraged, so that greater health and well-being may be promoted. Throughout the results and discussion section of this paper, possible avenues of future research have been identified. While one might examine the origins of outdoor behaviours and practices, as well as the changes which these undergo over the life course, using traditional psychological interviews or through quantitative measures, these will not generate the richness of the data here or have the explanatory power. Longitudinal research may be the ideal for studying changes over the life course, but this is expensive, time and labour intensive. Life histories, however, offers an inexpensive, retrospective methodology which provides the opportunity to study change and origins at various stages of the life course. Although some criticise the way it relies on subjective interpretations of experiences and events, this should not be seen as a fatal flaw, but rather we should embrace the subjective nature of the material, as Portelli (1997) does, and use it to understand how people perceive and construct their experiences of the outdoors over their lives. Deborah, for example, talked about how the parents in the area in which she lived as a child tended not to take their children out on trips to the countryside. It is not possible to verify this, but what is important is not so much whether this was the case, but that she believed it to be so, and that she held a social norm which told her that this was the case. This methodology is therefore more than capable of telling us about the formation of outdoor practices.

The life histories approach also offers us insights and explanations beyond the immediate. Indeed, for a full analysis and understanding of how people come to be where they are one should situate the accounts within the larger social and cultural context of people's everyday lives. Time, for Portelli (1991), has a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. He conceptualises these quantitative and a qualitative dimensions as two axes. Time has a horizontal dimension which represents the

accumulation of life experiences - a temporal plane that stretches from our past into our future. But time also has a qualitative dimension and reflects the multidimensionality of our lives and the context in which our lives are lived. Within any one moment or period many things will be taking place with different meanings, experience and significance. Portelli suggests that there are three vertical strata which are related to space:

- The Institutional - the sphere of politics, governments, unions, national and international historical context, ideology. Its spatial referent is the nation and the world
- The Collective – the life of the community, the neighbourhood, the workplace; natural disasters and rituals and traditions. Its spatial referent is the town, neighbourhood, workplace,
- The Personal - private and family life, the everyday life of individuals – births, deaths, marriages. Its spatial referent is the home.

A full account of peoples ‘history’ of how the outdoors is used, why, and how greater outdoor use can be encouraged, so that greater health and well-being may be promoted, would set the analysis in this larger vertical context too.

One particularly interesting aspect of outdoor experience and behaviour which emerged in the present study was the way in which some of the interviewees recalled positive experiences and attitudes of the outdoors and used it regularly for leisure and well-being, whereas another interviewee held more negative associations with the outdoors, in particular with open green space. Understanding negative experiences and their associations with an adversity to visiting that type of environment is valuable in determining ways to reverse or prevent such a pattern of behaviour, and so it would be useful to study this further using life histories. But at the same time, there is a distinction to be made between an ambivalence to green space and associated activities, and a fear or dislike: fear and dislike provoke many descriptions of the experiences of such an environment, whereas ambivalence to aspects of the outdoors seemed to produce less discussion in the present study.

We deduced from the data gathered in the present study that it is the lack of positive encounters with green space which may in part contribute to reduced use in later life. It may be important to determine how frequent users came to use these environments in the way they do. It

would not, for example, have been possible to suggest the effects on Deborah of reduced contact with the outdoors without comparing it to those who had had the opposite experience. For future research, we would therefore suggest that life history studies focus on the origins of outdoor use and changes over the lifespan, a strength of the methodology, to further examine those who use it regularly and who have had negative experiences or hold a fear of it.

Based on these considerations, we would suggest the following outline for a potential research project, using the same procedure and interview schedule as the present study:

1) Aims: To better understand:

- how the outdoors is used, experienced and perceived;
- how uses, experiences, perceptions and attitudes of the outdoors are developed and change over the life course, situating the analysis in the horizontal and vertical analytical frameworks suggested by Portelli;
- how a fear and/or dislike of the outdoors is manifested and experienced;
- how the outdoors contributes or is perceived to contribute to health and well-being.

2) Participants:

- Twenty people who use the outdoors regularly (with a focus on green space), doing a variety of activities;
- Ten people who fear or dislike green space;
- From a variety of ethnic backgrounds, rural and urban locations;
- From two age groups, in order to examine how the outdoors is perceived at key life stages: Young adults (16-25 years) and adults aged 40-60 years who have grown-up children.

4.2 Difficulties in Using Life Histories and Lessons Learned

Whilst life histories was clearly a strong methodology for collecting this type of data, there were undoubtedly drawbacks to using the approach; both the approach of oral history in general, and Portelli's conception of the approach. Allowing the participant to guide the interview meant that what was discussed by the interviewees was not always relevant, as discussed earlier. Indeed, there was a

lot of information which was not of use in this paper. This meant that it took longer to arrive at information which was of direct interest to the study. Given that each interview takes a relatively large amount of time to conduct, this was an expensive addition in both the time and resources of the interviewer, and in the increased time for transcription and analysis. As argued earlier, this technique was clearly useful in producing detailed and varied data, but this benefit must be weighed up against the cost implications.

Another, more fundamental problem with life histories is the reliance on subjective data and the inability to examine the 'facts'. Whilst subjective interpretations are very powerful in their ability to show what people believe to have happened, thereby telling us a great deal about the attitudes, values, and social norms of the individuals, they cannot tell us exactly what happened and when, given that memory is so unreliable. This need not be seen as a problem as long as this is stated, but some might be tempted to make unsupportable claims or find the lack of concreteness limiting. It is, however, possible to combine the subjective interpretations with 'hard facts' from sources such as medical records, which may provide additional useful information about health at given points in time.

Another problem lies in the way in which Portelli encourages the interviewer to become part of the interview process and to make it more like a conversation than a one-way interview. This creates interviewer bias, in that the interviewer is likely to analyse the interview differently in the light of this new relationship, compared to if the interviewer had maintained greater distance. Another type of bias which could arise when the interviewer has more interaction, and when the interviewer expresses interest in a particular topic mentioned by the interview, is that of demand characteristics. Demand characteristics occur when the interviewee tries to tell the interviewer what they believe they wish to hear. This is hard to detect, and could be a greater problem than interviewer bias in this research. This is especially the case when recruiting participants based on the fact that they either like or dislike the natural outdoors, given that they are likely to try to fulfil this role in the way in which they describe the outdoors.

5. Conclusion

Within this small pilot study, a large amount of information was gathered in order to understand how the outdoors is used, why those outdoor activities are chosen, the various attributes of the outdoors which are considered important to interviewees, their experiences and perceptions of the outdoors over their lifespan, their feelings towards the outdoors, the rewards that they perceived to come from using the outdoors, and how particular patterns of outdoor use as well as attitudes and practices were established and changed over time. Some might argue that this methodology provides considerably more information than is usually acquired from a typical psychological interview, and undoubtedly more than can be gleaned from quantitative research such as a survey (although this methodology has its own advantages over life histories). And indeed, despite the criticisms which can be levelled at the approach, it certainly provides different kinds of information and richer information. The method benefits from the relaxed, conversational style of these interviews suggested by oral historians such as Portelli (1997). Life histories are particularly unique in the way they allow us to examine changing social practices as well as individual behaviour and attitude change over the lifespan within a historical context. This permits us to take account of key life events such as moving away from home, having children as well as the larger cultural, economic and political forces which colour the canvas on which we live. This is a very promising methodology, which has a great deal to offer the OHN in examining how and why we came to use the outdoors in the way we do, and how the outdoors is experienced by and benefits (or is detrimental to) people.

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Appendix – Interview Schedule

1. Family Background

- a) What is your full name? Where were you born? When? What is your birthday? Are you married? Have you ever been married? In what year were you married?
- b) How many years did you live in the house where you were born? Was it in the town or the countryside? Was there much outdoor space? Did you have a garden? Where did you live then?
(CONTINUE FOR ALL)
- c) How many brothers and sisters did you have?
- d) Where did your father come from? What was your father's occupation?
- e) Where did your mother come from? Did she have any jobs before she married? Did she work after she was married? Did she have any casual or part-time jobs? What did she do after that?
(continue for all jobs) If your mother worked after she had children, who looked after the children while she was at work?
- f) What type of schools did you go to? When did you start? How long were you there for / at what age did you finish school? What school did you go to after that? How did you get to school – did you walk?

IF WENT TO BOARDING SCHOOL / INSTITUTION.....

2. Institutional Homes for Children and Boarding Education

- a) Type of school/institution. Number of children.
- b) How old were you when you went? For how long?
- c) How often were you allowed out (walks, church, visits to home or friends)? Were you allowed home at weekends? Where did you go? What did you enjoy most about being away from the school? Where was your favourite place to go?

3. Home / School life & Holidays

I'd like to ask you about your experiences of the outdoors at home and school when you were a child; the time up to when you left school.

- a) When you were a child, were you allowed to play outdoors? By yourself? With other children?
With family?
- b) Did you go for walks? By yourself? With other children? With family?
- a) Did your father or mother have a garden / grow vegetables and fruit? Did you help tend to them?
Did you enjoy helping?
Did they keep any livestock for family (hens, pigs, goats)? Who looked after them? Did you help?
Did you enjoy helping?
- c) Did your family have a dog? Did you ever walk it? Did you enjoy that?

- d) Did you go out berry picking?
- e) Did you go on school trips? To where?
- f) Were you part of any school clubs? Were you in the brownies, or girl guides? How long were you in the brownies / guides for? Did you go camping? Did you go on trips to the countryside? To where? Did you enjoy that? Did you get any badges? What for?
- g) Did your parents take you on holiday? To where? Were holidays in the town or the countryside? How did you feel about these holidays? Which did you enjoy most? Can you tell me about one of your happiest memories of being on holiday?
- h) Did you go on day trips to the seaside?
- i) How did you spend your birthdays?
How did you spend Christmas Day? (PROMPT: church, visiting relations, special meal)
- j) How did you spend your weekends?
- k) Did your parents attend a place of worship? How often? Were they religious people?
- l) I'd like you to think back now to your first memories of being outdoors in green space (for example, the park, being in the countryside), can you tell me about one of your earliest memories of being in such a place? Who were you with? Did you enjoy being in that place? What did you do there? [prompt: walk, picnic]

4. Home Life after Leaving School

- a) I'd like to ask you about your life at home after you left school. Did you continue to live at home? For how long?
- b) IF LIVED SEPERATELY: Did you live alone or share with anyone? Can you describe the house? Was it in an urban or rural location?
- c) Were you working at this point?
- d) How did you spend your weekends as a young woman? Did you go for walks? Do outdoor activities? Spend any time outdoors?

5. Work

Now I should like to ask you about your first full-time job.

- a) What was that?
- b) How did you get it? (Through parents?)
- c) What exactly did you do in this job?
- d) How did you feel about the work? Did you like it or dislike it?
- e) How long did you do that job for?
- f) Did you do any other jobs after that?
- g) How did you get to work? [Walk, drive, bus, train]

6. Marriage

- a) At what age were you married? How old was your wife / husband?
- b) How did you meet your wife/husband/partner?
- c) Where did he / she come from? [rural or urban]
- d) What was your wedding like? What was the venue like?
- e) Tell me about your first house together. Who picked it out? Where was it? Why did you choose that house in particular? Was it in a more urban or rural location? Did it have a garden? Who looked after the garden? Where was / is the nearest green space?
- f) How long did you live there?
- g) Did you enjoy living there?
- h) Where did you live next? And after that? [again: Who picked it out? Where was it? Why did you choose that house in particular? Was it in a more urban or rural location? Did it have a garden? Who looked after the garden? Where was / is the nearest green space?

7. Parenting

Did you have any children?

IF YES:

- a) How many?
- b) How old are they?
- c) Did you take them out for walks, picnics, other outdoor activities when they were young? Did you spend much time outdoors with them? How did they feel about that? Can you tell me of a particular memory of being outdoors with your children?
- d) What would you do on the weekends? What activities did you / they do?
- e) Did you take them berry picking or anything like that?
- f) Did you have a garden? Did you / they spend time in the garden?
- g) Did you have BBQs?
- h) Did you keep any pets? Who walked the dog? How did you / they feel about that?
- i) How did you take your children to school? [walking, bus, car] Was it an enjoyable journey?
- j) How would the children spend their birthdays?
- k) How did you spend Christmas when they were young?
- l) Did you ever go away for a holiday? For how long? Where? Did you all go (wife; husband; children)? Did you stay in more rural or urban settings? Did you do any outdoor activities while you were away? Where did you / your family most enjoy going on holiday? What type of holiday did you / your family most enjoy? Can you tell me one of your favourite / happiest memories from a holiday?

8. Present Day

- a) Thinking to the present day now, do you spend much time outdoors?
- b) What kind of activities do you do? [e.g. walking, extreme sports – skiing, visiting National Trust properties, visiting gardens, walking the dog, walking to work] How do you feel when you are [...activity...]? How long have you been doing that (activity) for? Do you usually go on your own or with others? And with whom?
- c) Have you ever tried any ‘extreme sports’? Like white water rafting, or skiing? How many times? Did you enjoy it? Would you do it again?
- d) [choose from following] Can you tell me where your favourite place to get away from it all is? [away from stress, when need a break, some space] Where do you go if you have to deal with a very negative or stressful life event? / Has being in the outdoors ever helped you to cope with a difficult life event? [period of difficulty / depression, or bereavement] Where do you go when something positive has happened in your life? Do you find that being in the outdoors is relaxing?
- e) If you imagine it’s a lovely warm, sunny weekend day, where would you be most likely to go and what would you do? Would you go on your own or take someone with you?
- f) And if it was cold or raining, what would you do then? Where would you go? Would you take someone with you?
- g) Do you go on holiday often? Where do you usually go? Where is your favourite destination? Why do you enjoy going there? Would you prefer to take a holiday in the countryside or more in the town or city?
- h) Do you think that the way in which you use the outdoors has changed over time? [prompt: use it more or less now; do different activities in the outdoors now] Why do you think that might be?
- i) Do you enjoy being in the outdoors? Do you think you get more or less enjoyment from being in the outdoors nowadays than when you were younger? Why do you think this might be? [if change has occurred] When do you think your opinion of being outdoors changed? And why?