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Swimming in a contained space: Understanding the experience of indoor lap swimmers

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic work, this paper explores the convergence of bodies, materialities and practices found at the indoor swimming pool – a space that has not often been the subject of geographical study, in spite of the fact that swimming is one of the most popular forms of exercise in countries such as the UK. The paper focuses on the “contained” nature of the indoor pool environment, examining the distinct experience this can create for lap swimmers. This focus is placed in the context of a broader politics of exercise, with an emphasis on the popularity and potential benefits of swimming, as well as less encouraging facts about participation and facility provision, suggesting that in order to encourage further uptake of swimming and preservation of swimming facilities the voices and experiences of regular swimmers should be considered.

1. Introduction

According to Sport England's 2014/15 Active People Survey, swimming is England's most popular sport in terms of participation – over 2.5 million adults went swimming at least once a week last year (*Active People Survey 9, Sport England, 2015*). This paper explores one environment in which this particular exercise activity takes place – the indoor swimming pool – with an aim to show how this environment might be researched not only as an important place for the pursuit or maintenance of well-being, but also as a tactile and meaningful site for everyday embodied experience.

The links between exercise and health are well rehearsed; as Herrick notes, “Regular physical activity is linked to a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, some cancers, and type 2 diabetes, and also has marked psychological benefits” (Herrick, 2009: 2349). Vigorous aerobic exercise has been shown to significantly reduce mortality (Arem et al., 2015; Gebel et al., 2015; Laukkanen et al., 2011), and one study (Chase et al., 2008) has even suggested that swimming might produce superior effects compared to other popular forms of exercise, while another suggests that swimmers may generally possess “enhanced physiological functional capacity, greater ‘wellness’, greater non-swimming activity and enhanced vitality” than non-swimmers (Stager and Johnston, 2004). The broader therapeutic potential of the aquatic environment has also been explored (see Becker (2009) for a review; also Becker and Cole, 2011; Foley and Kistemann, 2015; Parr, 2011), with immersion in water performing a range of rehabilitative functions, “from the treatment of acute injuries through health maintenance in the face of chronic diseases” (Becker, 2009: 859).

While this paper is not an overview of the state of swimming in the UK, it should be understood in the context of a broader politics of exercise and health. As Herrick writes, “encouraging the uptake of sport and physical activity seems to represent a relatively simple and politically attractive route by which to move towards certain economic, social, and public health goals” (2009: 2349), but it is not always so simple, and “an appreciation of the intrinsic value of space might also generate that sense of personal ownership or control over life and health that is so crucial to both physical and mental well-being” (2009: 2450) – in other words, paying closer attention to the spaces in which exercise occurs is important for developing a deeper understanding of what motivates and facilitates exercise and well-being more generally, as well as offering insight into what kinds of policy might help or hinder participation on an individual level.

As a site for exercise, the swimming pool also presents itself as a particularly interesting case study in light of critiques of the “new” public health (see Brown and Duncan (2002) for an overview). Such critiques suggest that the move towards an emphasis on “the social and political dimensions of population health” (Curtis et al., 2010: 329), and on “prevention rather than cure” (Brown and Duncan, 2002: 363), is associated with potentially problematic forms of regulation and social control, and with the emergence of “a disciplinary power that provides guidelines relating to how people should understand, regulate and experience their bodies” (Brown and Duncan, 2002: 365). This problematisation has been exemplified in Colls and Evans' (2009) work around obesity, for instance, which illustrates how health policy may place blame and responsibility on individuals in potentially detrimental ways (Colls and Evans, 2009). As discussed later in this paper, the pool

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would seem to be a place where both architectural and social structures reinforce these potentially problematic forms of regulation, from the imposition of rules in the pool itself, achieved via lane lines or signage, to the ways in which, as Evans, Allen-Collinson and Williams put it, “order’ and ‘civility’ are maintained through the mutual scrutiny of near-naked bodies” (2016: 6; see also Scott (2010)).

Moreover, while the act of swimming has a long history with military as well as medical and therapeutic origins (Orme, 1983; Parr, 2011; Sherr, 2012; Van Leeuwen, 1999), the history of the swimming pool itself in the UK has been linked specifically to issues of public health (Love, 2008). Its emergence can be traced back to the Baths and Washhouses Act of 1846, passed in response to growing concern over sanitation amongst Britain’s urban population; a subsequent amendment in 1878 formally “set out in law the ability of local authorities to construct or purchase covered (i.e. indoor) swimming baths” (Love, 2008: 57–58) and prompted “a wave of public building,” with new pools being constructed all across the country (Parr, 2011: 93). The provision of swimming pools in the UK was further linked to issues around public health and policy intervention in the 1960s and 70s, with growing concern over the cleanliness of Britain’s coastal and inland waters (Parr, 2011), combined with policy recommendations such as in the 1960 Wolfenden Report on *Sport and the Community*, which declared a need for more swimming pools to be built in order for the population to have appropriate access to facilities. Crucially, the report stipulated that these new pools should be built indoors: “the facts of the British climate,” the authors of the report state, “call for indoor heated baths, with the necessary equipment for ensuring the purity of water” (Wolfenden, 1960: 36).

The indoor pool, then, is a purpose-built exercise environment with a strong public health-oriented history; following critiques of “new” public health that problematise “new forms of governance, regulation and social control” (Brown and Duncan, 2002: 364) it emerges as a particularly interesting and self-contained site for a study of the exercise experience. However, as outlined in the next section of the paper, there is still relatively little literature about the embodied experience of swimming laps indoors, and now is the time to address this oversight. For while the benefits of swimming – both for individuals and for larger communities – form the basis of an argument for the need to publicly value the swimming pool as a site for exercise, so too, perhaps more pressingly, do the less encouraging facts: that in spite of it being England’s most popular sport, participation in swimming is actually declining (Active people survey 9, Sport England, 2015); that in 2014, 45% of primary school pupils in England were unable to swim 25 m unaided (School swimming census, ASA, 2014); that in recent years “public swimming facilities in England have generally suffered from underfunding and need constant maintenance and repair, placing many under threat of closure” (Pools Swimming Design Guidance, Sport England, 2013).

Statistics, moreover, tell only part of the story. As Gordon and Inglis note, “[s]wimming pools are supremely tactile locations” (2009: 15), and this tactility colours swimmers’ experience and perception of the pool. This is important both in terms of the pool’s relation to health policy and in terms of understanding and communicating embodied experience more broadly; as Foley and Kistemann point out, “Bodies have material, discursive and imaginative components linked to physical and mental health” (Foley and Kistemann, 2015: 160), and embodiment has become a key facet for exploring “how we feel – as well as think – through the body” (Davidson and Milligan, 2004: 523). Paying attention to the sensory experience of exercise, particularly in relation to the spaces in which it takes place, thus has the potential to reveal its therapeutic possibilities for the (various, diverse, and individual) bodies who engage in it (see for example Foley and Kistemann (2015), McCormack (1999), Straughan (2012), Throsby (2013)). To move towards an understanding not only of why people do or don’t swim in pools, but also why and how we should understand and value the pool, then, involves a consideration of this experience

and perception on a very everyday, individualised, sensory level – for at the pool, “We touch, we grab, we brush against a range of surfaces with our bare feet and hands. We hear sounds, muffled and echoing, soft and hard. We detect odours, natural and man-made. The quality of the light changes at each turn. Space and water, intimacy and anonymity we share with complete strangers; at once both part of a communal experience, yet locked within our own private worlds. And because each and every one of our senses is so powerfully assailed – whether we swim with vigour or simply splash for fun – our reactions to the qualities and faults of the building are that much more intensely felt. As a result, to swim in an indoor pool is, in effect, to subconsciously test and to value the building at every level; its design, its services, its upkeep, its very functionality” (Gordon and Inglis, 2009: 16).

This paper therefore suggests that, given the popularity and potential benefits of swimming for exercise, and the pool’s role as a site for this exercise, a consideration of the everyday experience of swimmers in this environment is needed in order to be able to more fully understand and promote its value. Drawing on interviews with and observations of regular lap swimmers, the paper seeks to highlight the contained nature of the indoor pool, and the specific experiences and emotional/mental states such containment may produce. In the next section, this research is therefore situated within literature on the exercise experience, with particular attention paid to indoor versus outdoor environments.

2. Indoor and outdoor swimming environments

Recent work on the exercise experience has focused on a variety of endeavors, including running or jogging (e.g. Cook et al., 2015; Howe and Morris, 2009; Latham, 2015; Lorimer, 2012; Qviström, 2013, to name a few), cycling (e.g. Spinney, 2006, 2009), walking (Doughty, 2013), and surfing (e.g. Anderson, 2012, 2013, 2014; Evers, 2006, 2009). But while these forms of exercise can happen in various kinds of environments, some both indoors and outdoors (runners, for example, may run inside on treadmills, while cyclists may do spinning classes or turbo sessions), much of this work continues to focus on exercise occurring outdoors. This body of literature reinforces the idea that the lived experience of exercise is worth consideration in terms of an interplay between environment, practice, and the human body. But it’s also somewhat limited in scope: environments, particularly for exercise (think, after all, of gyms, yoga studios, climbing walls, basketball courts, squash courts, to name a few) are often contained, deliberate, architectural spaces.

To this end, some studies have looked more explicitly at how indoor and outdoor exercise environments are experienced in comparative perspective. Butryn and Masucci’s (2009) examination of cyborg athletes’ experiences in more technologised indoor settings versus outdoor “wilderness” environments, for instance, revealed a tendency amongst those athletes surveyed to experience “the indoor world, in part, as deficient in relation to their sporting experiences outdoors in the ‘real world’ on their ‘real’ equipment” (Butryn and Masucci, 2009: 301), viewing indoor activities as “less meaningful” (Butryn and Masucci, 2009: 300) or “somehow essentially dissimilar” (Butryn and Masucci, 2009: 300) to their outdoor equivalents. Eden and Barratt’s (2010) comparison of angling ponds and indoor climbing walls, meanwhile, suggests that “the indoors-outdoors dualism is more complicated than the simple distinction of having a roof or not” (Eden and Barratt, 2010: 492) since both ponds and climbing walls “provide similar indoor norms by reducing unpredictability, increasing convenience and comfort and providing entertainment safely” (Eden and Barratt, 2010: 492). Hitchings and Latham’s (forthcoming) study of indoor versus outdoor running, these issues around control and predictability also surface, with indoor running respondents explaining their tendency towards the treadmill, for instance, in terms of concerns around “personal control and predictable experience” (Hitchings and Latham, Forthcoming: 9).

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