Emotion, Space and Society 27 (2018) 52–59

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

Under water and into yourself: Emotional experiences of freediving contact information

Sara Malou Strandvad

Arts, Culture and Media, Faculty of Arts, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 34, 9712 GK Groningen, The Netherlands

"When you lie at the surface breathing my heart beats really fast: bum-bum-bum-bum-bum [sound of fast heart beating]. Okay, okay, relax. But once you are going down I think my mind gets blank, like, I don't think about anything. And I just relax. When I came here I thought I was gonna be really scared of the darkness because I've done it in places where it's really light and at -60 m you are like in the surface, and here it's not like that. But I think that helps you feel more relaxed. So, when you are at like -70 m you feel peace. I have, my mind tries to chase peace, tranquillity, love and blue. That's what I see when I go down." (Interview with Vertical Blue, 2015 participant, informant S).

Holding your breath for as long as possible under water. Swimming under water in a pool as far as possible while holding your breath. Diving deep into the sea and getting back up on a single breath. Classic challenges, known from children's play and tests of manhood, outlining the basic disciplines in the sport of freediving where divers explore how long or deep they can go underwater without assisting air. Current world records are static breath hold for 11 min and 35 s, 300 m underwater in pool with monofin, and -129 m into the deep (and back up) with monofin. Because of the obvious risk of drowning that arises when the human body is submerged into the aquatic world, freediving is often categorized as an extreme sport. However, in contrast to most other extreme sports that are defined by adrenaline rushes and acceleration of speed (Breivik, 2010), freediving is about the opposite: avoiding adrenaline because it consumes oxygen, and instead generating a calm, meditative, almost sleep-like state of being to be able to perform. Freedivers describe their experiences as a movement into a blissful, stress-free state of mind. In a famous quote, legendary Italian freediver Umberto Pelizzari suggests that: "The scuba diver dives to look around. The freediver dives to look inside." (Pelizzari and Tovaglieri, 2004: 137). With this statement, Pelizzari emphasizes that freediving is not a tour into the aquatic to see life under water. On the contrary, freediving is a bodily experience of travelling into yourself in the water, sensing how you feel when you are detached from life on land immersed into the aquatic element. As the international rule- and record-keeping body of freediving, AIDA, describes the sport on their homepage: "The true appeal of freediving is in the silence and calm it brings to people's hectic lives" (AIDA, 2016). For the post-modern practitioner freediving provides a sense of serenity and balance rarely experienced otherwise.

In this paper I look into freedivers' experiences of being under water. Similar to other water-based activities, freediving involves pleasures generated from the immersion into water, being in direct contact with this natural element, constituting water-human relationships (Anderson and Peters, 2014; Brown and Humberstone, 2015; France and Lawrence, 2003). Yet, for freedivers, diving is moreover about diving into yourself. In line with the findings of human geographer Elizabeth Straughan's study of scuba divers' sensuous experiences of water (2012), freedivers' haptic sensations of being immersed into water are coupled with meditative practices. Moreover, I will suggest that in the case of freediving, the meditative experiences of diving become intensified and can develop into spiritual oceanic feelings (Molchanova in Whelan, 2015; Parsons, 1998).

Recurently, freedivers emphasize the mental aspect of their sport, by which they mean two different things: a mentally meditative experience is the most pleasurable outcome of the activity, and mental control is a paramount requirement to perform well and diving safely. Hence, to make the underwater become a space of enjoyment, relaxation and also achievements; to become able to experiencing "the antithesis of terrestrial living" (Straughan, 2012: 24; see also Merchant, 2011, 2014), freedivers have to learn to act contrary to nature, not getting scared when situated under water unable to breathe, instead learning to enjoy underwater breath-holding. Inspired by sociologist Karen Throsby's study of becoming a marathon swimmer (Throsby, 2013, 2015, 2016; see also Becker, 1953), in this paper I trace how freedivers train to become able to generate pleasant experiences and become conditioned to enjoying the unpleasant and fearful. Learning to handle anxiety and moving beyond boundaries that you thought restricted the body allows for freedivers to experience the liminal, having potentially life-transforming experiences in the deep. By describing freedivers' experiences and how these are brought about, the paper contributes to the "new wave of thalassography" (Steinberg, 2014), challenging land-based thinking with stories of ocean encounters, thinking from the water, in this case from the underwater where humans strive to push their limits to experience a sense of harmony.

1. Freediving as a leisure activity

Spearfishing and freediving to gather food has been known since ancient times. For example, the Ama women of Japan, the Haenyeo

E-mail address: S.M.Strandvad@rug.nl.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.02.007
Received 5 August 2016; Received in revised form 23 July 2017; Accepted 21 February 2018

women of Korea as well as the Bajan people of Malaysia have been picking shells and seaweeds, thus living from the sea for centuries (Rider, 2015). Yet, the sport of freediving is a recent phenomenon, which is often said to date from 1949 when an Italian fighter pilot announced that he would dive to 30 m and completed the task. From the outset, freediving became an extreme sport discipline par excellence, a task of daring to go deeper. During the 1950s and 1960s only a few men in the world competed to pursue greater depths, most famously the Italian Enzo Maiorca (1931-2016) and the French Jacques Mayol (1927-2001), whose rivalry was portrayed and turned into fiction in Luc Bessons legendary film *Le Grand Bleu* (1988). In 1962, Maiorca was the first to reach 50 m, disproving what scientists of the time had predicted would make the human lungs collapse from pressure. In 1968, the American US Navy diving instructor Robert Croft reached 70 m, collaborating with scientists to understand the physiology of freediving, discovering 'the mammal dive reflex' (that the heart rate slows down to conserve oxygen when humans are submerged in water) and the 'blood shift' (that blood vessels in the extremities contract, leaving a higher percentage of blood volume in the torso to protect lungs, heart and brain, when humans are submerged in water).

Mayol became the first to breach 100 m, diving on a sledge. Moreover, Mayol who was born in Shanghai, became a pioneer as he introduced Eastern techniques of yoga and meditation in freediving, which have since become central elements of the sport. Whereas freedivers had previously often been hyperventilating before diving, Mayol employed Pranayama yoga to relax through controlled breathing. With these techniques, freedivers became better equipped to avoid the most common reason for disqualification in competitive freediving: hypoxia and loss of consciousness during the last part of the dive or immediately after (Kurra et al., 2013: 120).

In the last decades, freediving records have taken a quantum leap and while the sport is still a minority sport it is growing steadily. AIDA informs that 2.382 freedivers were enrolled in educational activities under their organization in 2011, in 2015 the number was 6.883, and this growth is continuing. Today, freediving competitions are held somewhere in the world every week, equipment is produced specifically for freediving, and the sport is being used for promotion of different products (e.g. commercials for Nicorette and broadband in 2016). In line with this development, the number of freediving schools and operators have increased significantly, and the two globally leading commercial scuba diving providers SSI and PADI have launched freediving branches of their companies (SSI in 2010 and PADI in 2015). What this development underlines, is that freediving has become an economically profitable adventure tourist activity, which is starting to take a bite of the scuba diving market. Scuba diving composes a global leisure and tourist industry, which "is now a multibillion dollar industry and one of the world's fastest growing recreational sports" (Musa and Dimmock, 2012: 1). Whereas freediving is nowhere near these numbers, the development clearly reflects the general tendency for action sports to have a potential for commercialization (Wheaton, 2010).

In recent years, the spectacular and dangerous nature of freediving has also been portrayed by journalists in sensational accounts (Nestor, 2014; Skolnick, 2016), as well as in the series *Ultimate Rush* by Red Bull TV. Freediving constitutes an extreme sport of immediate fascination associated with mythological storytelling that resonates well with the discourse on heroism (Throsby, 2015: 158). Yet, stories of freediving also very often hint at daredevilry, echoing the well-known discourse on extreme sports as unnecessary, voluntary and self-indulgent high-risk activities (Obrador-Pons, 2007; Breivik, 2010).

In contrast to sponge fishers, shellfish divers and others making a living from freediving to collect and hunt, freedivers make the dive itself the primary aim of their activity. With this focus on the dive itself follows an absorbing focus on sensations during diving and attendance to ways of improving the dive, whereas sponge fishers and shellfish divers have traditionally maintained a routine of diving and have put up with the injuries this may entail (Allen, 1972; Bernard, 1967; Plath and Hill, 1987). As a leisure activity, freediving may be characterized as a serious leisure pursuit that is based on specialist knowledge, skills, and training, which participants acquire, develop and progress over time in a manner that resembles building a career (Stebbins, 2007). Yet, for some participants, the pursuit of freediving creates a continuum of activities that are continued into paid work, converting the hobby of freediving into making a living, most often by working as an instructor. For these freedivers who work to provide safety for others as well as instructing them and documenting their dives, freediving begins to compose a routine activity where attention is not on inner sensations of diving, but turned outwards towards the affairs of facilitating other peoples' dives.

2. Theorizing freedivers' experiences

In recent years, a growing number of studies within the fields of anthropology and human geography have turned attention to water, particularly seawater, as a specific element which humans explore and interact with (Anderson and Peters, 2014; Brown and Humberstone, 2015; Helmreich, 2007, 2011; Mack, 2011; Merchant, 2011; Straughan, 2012). By turning attention to human-water interactions, these studies go beyond theorizing about the abstract concept of water, advocating for an empirical approach pushed into the sea.

As anthropologist John Mack argues in *The Sea: A Cultural History*: "Much writing about the sea, of course, employs the idea of the sea as a metaphor" (2011: 25). Similarly, anthropologist Stephan Helmreich illustrates how water has been mobilized as a theory machine, first romantically in early ethnography, then as a crucial materiality in maritime anthropology, and finally, in today's social theory, as a figure of globalization highlighting fluidity, flow and circulation (2011). In making these readings, Mack and Helmreich suggest doing something more than using water metaphorically, which often reduces it to a uniform category. When outlining an alternative strategy, they both suggest concentrating on empirical investigations of the multiple meanings of the sea.

In emphasizing an empirical approach to studying the sea, Mack and Helmreich propose moving to the sea – not just standing on the shore gazing at the sea, but literally getting onto or into the sea. As Mack writes, ethnography "has rarely reported on the experience of being on the seas; instead, to the extent that reference is made to the sea at all, it has almost always focused on the implications of being close to the sea, of having a relationship to it, not actually of being *on* it" (2011: 23, emphasis in original). Doing what Mack advocates, Helmreich's fieldwork has been carried out amongst marine microbiologists, tacking between the web, the lab and the sea (2009: 19). In the article "An anthropologist underwater", Helmreich delivers a first-hand report on a dive in a three-person submersible, focusing on his experiences, particularly the immersive soundscapes of being underwater, describing himself as "probably the first anthropologist to join the research submersible *Alvin* on a dive to the ocean floor" (2007: 621).

While Helmreich is probably still the only anthropologist who has been submerged to the seabed, a number of human geographers have paralleled him in going to the sea and writing about their encounters with water. Particularly two recent collected volumes illustrate this trend: *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean* (Anderson and Peters, 2014) and *Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea. Embodied Narratives and Fluid Geographies* (Brown and Humberstone, 2015). Both volumes put emphasis on the lived experiences of interacting with water and suggest addressing the sea as a place with "character, agency and personality" (Anderson and Peters, 2014: 9). *Water Worlds* begins from the premise that our everyday life is entwined with the oceans, even though often in ways which are invisible to most of us. Accordingly, the authors suggest that human geography should begin challenging land-based thinking and "start thinking *from* the water" (Anderson and Peters, 2014: 4, emphasis in original). To do so, some of the contributions in the volume depict the authors' own experiences of being on and in water: driving