Cardiff Metropolitan University

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B.Sc. (Hons) Psychology

Final Year Project

‘I feel part of a movement that is bigger than myself”; exploring the experiences of the fire spinning community and their connections to nature.

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Cardiff Metropolitan University for the degree of Bachelor of Science.
Declaration

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own independent investigation under the supervision of my tutor. The various sources to which I am indebted are clearly indicated. This dissertation has not been accepted in substance for any other degree, and is not being submitted concurrently for any other degree.

____________________ ______, Candidate
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Abstract

Modern living has bought with it greater pressures and stresses than perhaps ever before. Poor mental health and well-being is the result of such a style of living. Green care interventions have in the past highlighted the therapeutic and healing qualities of the natural environment on mental health. Past research has focused on the effects of embedding natural interventions alongside one's life. The fire spinning community are a collective of people who have stepped outside mainstream living to pursue a life that embraces intimate connection with the natural world, living and working with nature as a lifestyle. It would be valuable and interesting to explore what has been gained from their alternative lifestyle, where an activity that intimately connects them to the natural world is held at the centre of their lives. The aim of this study was to explore experiences of members of the fire spinning community. This study was of a qualitative design which used a semi-structured interview to explore four participant's experiences of fire spinning. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data, of which three overarching aims were identified: The importance of community, therapeutic/healing nature of fire spinning and the paradoxical nature of fire spinning. The subthemes within these were explored in depth. The most salient finding was the idea that fire spinning provides reconnection to the self, to others and the natural world, indicative of a spiritual realisation. The implications of these findings were that if movement arts that inspire fundamental unity became more involved within our way of life, they could act as a preventative measure against poor mental well-being which could change the way we live our lives, where a more conscious and connected society could emerge. Flaws of the study and future research are also discussed.
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Introduction
Modern living has brought with it many beneficial advances within the worlds of technology, science and engineering. The human race is undoubtedly advancing and striding forward, constantly achieving and creating. But at what expense is this achieved in the western world? Men and women of the present day are laden with the pressure to perform constantly in all areas of their lives with conditions like chronic stress, depression and anxiety disorders almost becoming the norm (Mcmanus et al., 2016) within mainstream living. This has become so apparent over recent years that copious amounts of research have gone into exploring the nature of such conditions and their relationships with aspects of modern living (Dill and Anderson, 1999; Olofsson, Bengtsson and Brink, 2003; Beehr, 2014). There has been a shift from research focusing on the biomedical approach of providing medical and psychological interventions as a 'cure' to mental health issues. Instead research is adopting a more socio-ecological stance towards well-being and mental health where the wider social context is being considered instead of the focus being on an individual in isolation of their environment and social context (Dishion and Stormshak, 2007). This approach focuses on positive psychology which looks at ways ill mental health can be prevented and interventions focused on improving well-being that are community based and actually embedded into our lives. The therapeutic utilisation of horticulture and animal assisted therapy has long been associated with places like hospitals and health institutions (Hassink and Dijk, 2006). But as the benefits have been increasingly recognised projects of this kind have recently moved much more into the community, in the forms of city farms, school allotments and shared gardens.

The term ‘Green Care’ is used to describe these types of interventions. There is an extensive research base for ‘Green Care’ which demonstrates the benefits of participating in nature based activities. This research covers a wide breadth of activities and populations such as therapeutic gardening, which has shown to increase feelings of social inclusion among dementia sufferers (DeBruin et al., 2015) and within homeless women who also reported feelings of stress relief from the oppressiveness of shelter life (Grabbe, Ball and Goldstein, 2013). Individuals suffering from mental health issues were also found to have high levels of involvement, spontaneity, mood improvement (Smidl et al., 2017) and better self-esteem (Wood, Pretty and Griffin, 2016). Working with animals in a natural setting has also shown to provide comfort, rebuild trust in others and help recover a positive sense of self with youth's who experienced troubled upbringings (Kogstad et al., 2014).

Attention Restoration theory (ART: Kaplan, 1995) helps provide an idea of why nature based therapies or ‘Green Care’ does have such a positive and beneficial effect on our lives. It
suggests that the cognitive attentional processes involved in daily life are largely involuntary and that natural environments provide a rest from the mental fatigue that arises from the intensive or prolonged use of directed attention that is required during daily life. This is one aspect of the nature world freeing up mental activity which otherwise would require directed attention, according to ART. It has been suggested that ‘certain localities have an attraction which gives us a certain indefinable sense of well-being which we want to return to time and time again’ (Jackson, 1995, p.157). This statement evidences the ART further and is well supported by research which highlights the preference for natural environments in terms of restorative quality, beauty and stress relief (Ulrich, 1984; Ulrich, 1994; Purcell, Peron and Berto, 2001; Hartig et al., 2003).

Other research has also demonstrated the difficulties of urbanicity which is thought to impose excessive psychological demands (Van den Berg, Hartig and Staats, 2007). This is a particularly significant finding within the research base. It suggests that the natural environment may be restorative and good for our mental health in general, not just within the form of green care for marginalised and stereotyped groups within society. This formulates the notion that there is a distinction between green care, a specific intervention, and the positive impact that being in a green environment and connecting to nature brings in general.

The therapeutic effect of nature can also be explained by Wilson (1984) with ‘biophilia’, the innate emotional affiliation to other living organisms. This may be described as ‘the call back to nature’, the pull that we feel to escape our normal lives to seek a sense of space, relaxation and beauty. Evolutionary theories such as these suggest that the therapeutic feelings nature stirs within oneself serves as an important adaptive function; psychological restoration. This kind of thinking has led researchers to believe that the untapped resource that nature provides is yet to be used to its maximum potential within public health services (Maller et al., 2006).

However it is not just the therapeutic effect of nature that may have benefit for those who engage with green care interventions. Research suggests there is an important social aspect to green care farming where the beneficial effects of green space on mental well-being could be less related to mental restoration but more a result of the social interactions that take place (Dinnie et al., 2013). Much of the existing literature on green care recognises the beneficial effects that the sense of community brings (Elings and Hassink, 2008; Kaley, 2015).

The past research previously mentioned has focused on embedding a natural intervention into one’s life in order to provide relief from the stresses of modern living. However, the impact of connecting to nature as a central life focus is greatly understudied. There have
been few, if any studies exploring the lives of people who have wholly stepped outside of mainstream living and embraced a way of life which allows one to connect with nature. Instead of just undertaking a natural intervention to provide a break from the stresses of living, fire spinners have placed an activity that allows them to connect with nature at the very centre of their lives. The fire community are a unique and understudied collection of people who have utilised aspects of nature to provide them with an alternative way of life. There is much to learn from individuals who exist only within fire tribes who have accepted the call back to nature, leaving behind the mainstream way of living, to connect and experience living and working within nature in its entirety.

They are a community within themselves, a collective of people who have come together over the shared love of a movement art form. This art form is the manipulation of fire using an array of circus-type props. This is the way in which they are intimately connected to nature, through the medium of fire. This is a completely alternative way of living as for most fire spinners this is a lifestyle which is not at all just for fun, it provides them with the means to live and work with the natural world to create a more harmonious and free lifestyle. Fire spinners identify with the circus, and past circus literature has recognised the resilience, adaptability and the sustained singular identity of the travelling circus (Loring, 2007). Circus interventions have also shown to be therapeutic for autistic children (Seymour and Wise, 2017) who benefit from the environment of chaos. Literature exploring the healing nature of dance and movement arts has expressed the idea of the body and mind as being inseparable and that movement arts can help to ‘regain a sense of wholeness by experiencing the fundamental unity of body mind and spirit’ (Levy, 1988, p15). This concept of unity has been discarded in the 21st century, where many people of modern day living are feeling disconnected from themselves, others and the natural world. It would be interesting to further explore and elaborate on these notions in the context of fire spinning, both a movement art and an activity entwined with nature. It is necessary to explore what the fire spinners have gained from their life outside of mainstream society in order to recognise the potential that activities connecting us to nature have if they were placed more as the focus of one’s life where one has embedded their life within the natural environment. The aim of this research project is to explore the experiences of members of the fire spinning community and what pursuing fire spinning as a life focus has bought to their lives. It is also aiming to explore the reality of existing outside of mainstream society, pursuing a lifestyle where the main focus is on connecting with fire, an activity which allows one to intimately connect with nature.
Method

Design

The research study will be of a qualitative design using a semi-structured interview to explore the fire spinning experience. This was chosen as it allows flexibility with the research, rather than it being a fixed design (Robson, 2002). Forrester (2010, p236) explains that ‘the flexible nature of this design means that it is both legitimate and good to revise the focus of the research as it progresses in the light of new findings’. This is something that is necessary for this topic as it is a broad and largely unexplored area of research. It is also most appropriate for the aim of this research because it allows the participants lived experience to be explored, rather than an objective account of reality. This is essential if we want to study human awareness as it is really experienced. It is important to study people in context, analysing in detail how individuals make sense of, construct and describe their social worlds (Forrester, 2010). This research therefore employs an idiographic approach which emphasises the unique personal experience of each individual which aims to describe and interpret their perceptions and the meanings they give to their own experiences. Unlike most traditional research this approach places the participant and their experiences at the heart of the research. It allows the researcher to play an active role, aiming to take an insider’s perspective by getting closer to the participants personal world, developing a further understanding of what fire spinning is, how fire spinners live and what their experiences can tell us about alternative living and nature based interventions that are being undertaken as a way of life.

Quantitative methods would acknowledge these experiences exist but it would tell us nothing about them. Qualitative methodology within this research will allow detailed exploration of how these fire spinning individuals make sense of their personal and social world and allow exploration of what being a part of an alternative way of living has bought to their lives.

Semi structured interviews were conducted to explore fire spinners experiences in their own words.

Sample

Four participants were recruited through a personal contact using purposive sampling, in which participants were selected according to criteria relevant to the research aim. All members of the group who met the criteria were invited to participate in the research. The criteria states participants must be over the age of 18, have been fire spinning with a tribe for at least one year and who place fire spinning at the centre of their lives and within their future goals.

Eugene was a 26 year old male of white Irish nationality who has been fire spinning since
Johnny was a 24 year old male who did not state his nationality or ethnicity who has been fire spinning since the age of 17. Willow was a 22 year old female of white British nationality who initially fire span as a young child but only revisited the art to pursue as a life goal aged 20. Luna was 21 years old who also initially span fire in childhood from the age of 7 but started to pursue fire spinning as a life goal aged 18.

Materials
A semi-structured interview (SSI) schedule (Appendix A) was developed to suit the aims of the study. Two weeks were spent formulating the SSI schedule, during this time ten questions were created, tweaked and refined by spending time each day re-reading the questions. This was to ensure the questions were not too explicit but loaded enough to make clear to the participant what the area of interest is. The aims of the study were constantly referred to as a point of reference during this time to ensure the questions were an accurate reflection of what the study was aiming to capture. The advice given by Smith (2007, p61.) concerning the construction of interview schedules was also referred to during the development of this interview schedule which explains one should, ‘encourage the person to speak about the topic with as little prompting from the interviewer as possible. One might say that you are attempting to get as close as possible to what your respondent thinks about the topic, without being led too much by your questions’. Some examples of the questions are, ‘What do you feel you have gained from fire spinning’? And ‘How would you describe your way of life as a fire spinner”? The questions were informally trialled on friends and family to gain feedback about the ease of understanding what the question was asking. Prompts were also created in case the participant had difficulty understanding or answering the main question. A taping device was also used to record the interviews in order to transcribe them into verbatim transcripts. It is also necessary to note that Information sheets and consent forms were also materials for this study. The full interview schedule, annotated verbatim transcripts and the information sheet will be included in the appendix.

Ethical considerations
Ethical approval for this project was granted on 15th December 2017 by Cardiff Metropolitan University (reference number 9766). Fully informed consent was obtained from each participant who were reminded they had the right to withdraw at any time. Participant anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms of people and places and the participants names themselves. The information sheet given, provided support services details if participants experienced any emotional distress during the interview.
**Procedure**

Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions from the interview schedule, in the style of a semi-structured interview. The interviews took place in a neutral space which was convenient to the researcher and the participants.

**Method of analysis**

Thematic analysis (TA) is the chosen method of analysis for this research. TA reinforces the qualitative design and phenomenological methodology as it enhances flexibility in identifying, analysing and reporting patterns. Thematic analysis reports experience, meanings and the reality of participants and how these relate to a range of discourses operating within society. Braun and Clarke (2006, p9) suggest that TA ‘acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning of their experience and the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings’. Therefore, TA is a method which reflects reality and allows the researcher to disentangle the surface of reality. This is the most appropriate method of analysis for this research because the aim is to explore the experiences and realities of fire spinners and to observe how they make meaning of their own experiences, and how this relates to the wider social world.

The key reason for TA being selected for this research is because of the ‘coding’ aspect. Coding is an effective way of categorizing data in order to create a framework of ideas. It is suggested by Flick and Gibbs (2007) that this enables two forms of analysis; retrieval of all text coded with the same label, in order to combine passages that are examples of the same phenomenon, idea or activity. He suggests the second form of analysis that coding enables is it allows the researcher to examine further analytic questions like relationships between codes and the text that they are coded with. This is the type of analysis that needs to be undertaken with this research project as there is a large amount of data that requires these exact two forms of analysis mentioned above that coding with thematic analysis enables.

TA will magnify the understanding of how fire spinners engage with nature and how this benefits them, what effect living an alternative lifestyle has and what fire spinning itself has bought to their lives. The analysis will explore what individuals living a mainstream lifestyle can learn from alternative living and nature based interventions that are being undertaken as a lifestyle, not just an additional activity.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher familiarised them self with the data and identified items of potential interest by jotting down initial thoughts as suggested by Layder (1998) as creating ‘pre-codes’. Initial codes were then generated. Codes went through a three stage system; applying a descriptive code to each line, then forming either a categorical code or an analytic code, depending on the content of the specific line. This
helped the researcher to really engage with the analysis process, as suggested by Flick and Gibbs (2007). The analysis was undertaken manually until this point i.e by pen and paper. For the researcher, it encouraged a deeper engagement with the data, as suggested by Saldana (2015, p26). Thirdly, themes were searched for by organising codes and consideration was given to how these codes may combine to form an overarching theme. These themes were then reviewed and the construction of a thematic map began to identify the relationship between each theme. Finally, themes were defined and named, identifying the ‘story’ that each theme tells in relation to the research question, as detailed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recursive process.
Results

Four participants individually took part in a semi-structured interview which was recorded and transcribed verbatim. In order to analyse this data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as the most suitable analysis for this project’s aims. The analysis identified three overarching themes from the data; the importance of community, reconnection with the natural world and the paradoxical nature of fire spinning. Within these overarching themes a number of subthemes were also identified as seen in figure 1.

Figure 1.

Importance of Community

This overarching theme revealed how crucial community was within the fire spinning world. All participants almost continually referred to the community throughout the data. There were
two subthemes identified that conveyed the importance of community; identity and belonging/family.

Identity
This subtheme captures how becoming part of the fire spinning community allowed the participants to liberate themselves from societal expectations, collectively rejecting the societal pressure to conform to what they felt society expected them to be and to do. Instead, the fire spinning community enabled the participants to explore their identity and provide them a space where they could accept themselves for who they are, discarding the conflict that conforming to expectations can bring. The community gave rise to this because it was experienced by many of the participants as a safe space that provided an alternative to mainstream living that some participants felt a misalignment with.

Willow felt a misalignment between who she was and the musical arts theatre life that she had pursued since she was a child. Fire spinning provided alignment for her:

“I was having to imagine myself into this musical theatre role ...but I'm not here it's not me and then I found fire spinning...it was just like wow this works I fit this, I feel at home here”. (Willow, p.6, l.195-197)

This safe space enabled her to liberate herself from expectation and to solidify her identity at a time when she had lost her confidence in who she was due to mental health issues:

“It taught me to be a person again when I’d lost my personhood, it was a chance to be ok with myself...it was more like finding myself”. (Willow, p.6, l. 191-193)

“This group of fire spinners they didn’t know me...if I didn’t want to talk I was expected to be loud bubbly Willow, I could just be the girl who sat quietly and listened”. (Willow, p.3, l. 89-91)

This sentiment was echoed by Eugene and Luna, who even legally changed her birth name to her fire performance name:

“It had made me feel more me...I think I became closer to me than I ever felt was possible...I think I've gained a lot of self acceptance”. (Luna, p.7, l. 207-213).

“(Being part of the fire spinning community) taught me about social pressures, social norms, taught me how to be myself”. (Eugene, p.5, l.146-145)

The participants were able to develop a strong and stable sense of identity and acceptance of that identity, rooted in something bigger than themselves.
Belonging
This subtheme captures the salience of feeling part of a community for the participants, where they could feel as if they had found their place in the world within a collective of people that shared the same values and visions as themselves. The sense of not feeling alone but belonging to something and feeling connected following experiences of dejection, loss and solitude were expressed by the participants who conveyed the idea they had found a family and a support network following a struggle:

“Many of them (fire spinners) will tell you a similar story as to I have is that they may have spent a lot of their life...feeling kind of dejected and not necessarily connected to the rest of society”. (Johnny, p.2, l. 65-67)

“I've had lots of loss in my life, parents died...I thought I’d have more family there to support me but that didn’t really happen...through doing fire at festivals I’ve just found an amazing group of people who I can trust.” (Eugene, p.6, l. 197-202)

Luna also echoed this:

“You do it (life) so long, go rogue wolf...so long on your own and then suddenly you hear how nice it sounds with others and you’re excited for that”. (Luna, p.18, l. 578-580)

This provided the sense that the community is tightly knit like a family with a strong sense of unity, connected via similar experience and visions in which the participants are dedicated to each other, in order to support each other to achieve personal and group goals:

“We are very close, to be able to understand and empathise with each other’s inspirations and see each other’s visions you have to be connected”. (Luna, p.9, l. 282-283)

“One mind is great but four minds can really come together and make something greater...it’s a unity thing, it’s a friendship thing... it’s a shared love of an art form” (Willow, p.9, l. 288-295)

There was the sense that it is not just the immediate community that bought feelings of belonging and unity but also acknowledgement of the global community:

“When like you meet another fire spinner even if you don’t know each other...you are already friends in a way, so to me there’s like a fire tribe which is like the one tribe, the wider community in which we are all connected.” (Johnny, p.7, l. 220-223)
“I feel small and I feel part of a movement bigger than myself”. (Luna, p.11, l. 344)

Luna expressed how she has been enabled to gain perspective on her own life. Her use of the word ‘movement’ was interesting as it implied that the fire spinning community was not just based around a hobby, but that it was more of a subculture, one that has goals, visions, opinions and beliefs of its own, it is a way of life in itself.

The implications of these findings in relation to the research aim highlight the salience of having a sense of community that represents a support network where the broad connecting undercurrent for the community appears to be rejection and instability. This support network was underpinned by similar experience, visions for the future and the shared love of fire spinning which, as demonstrated, provided feelings of unity, value of the self and a sense of finding ones place in the world. There was the sense that living as a part of this tight knit community as a way of life is similar to engaging with part time communities within mainstream living where the connecting undercurrent for all is a sense of societal rejection. By being part of a community one feels accepted, especially if the connecting undercurrent for all is of the same nature. These findings hold paramount value for society at this time, where there is gross disconnection from each other for an abundance of reasons, stressful and overwhelmingly busy work lives to name but one.

**Therapeutic and meditative nature of fire spinning**

This overarching theme captures the therapeutic and meditative aspects of the act of fire spinning itself and what the benefits of partaking in it are. Two subthemes were identified that demonstrate this theme; Expression/rescue and awakening/awareness.

**Expression/rescue**

The practise of fire spinning was experienced as being a therapeutic tool for expression by all participants. There was the sense that physical movement helped relieve mental stress, providing an expressive channel for negative and sometimes positive emotions which was experienced as crucially important in inspiring and maintaining positive mental well-being:

“Finding this stuff and reconnecting with movement and my body…it really gave me something to pour myself and my energy into that was creative as opposed to destructive’. (Johnny, p.2, l. 51-55)

This sentiment was echoed by Willow;

“The fire spinning itself was a channel for all the turmoil that I was going through…I was quite self-destructive and I think it was a safe way to channel that”. (Willow, p.3, l. 93-98)
Eugene had a similar experience of the therapeutic nature of learning moves and tricks which helped relieve his anxiety. There was the sense that this in turn encouraged feelings of self-confidence and self-belief:

“The achievement of doing things which you didn’t think you were able to do (relieved anxiety)...it basically taught me that I can do things” (Eugene, p.3, l. 70-79)

Luna expressed this idea but focused on using movement as a tool to channel positive feelings;

“You could be overwhelmed with happiness, you just want to move and extend that energy that you’re holding in and let it be free”. (Luna, p.4, l. 123-125)

The therapeutic channel for expression of thoughts, feelings and experiences was identified as being of central importance to the participant’s experiences. There was the sense that experiencing fire spinning as a therapeutic and expressive channel instigated a striking life transition which some of the participants felt rescued by:

“It pulls you out of that kind of state of mental physical stagnation...its learning to dance again”. (Johnny, p.6, l. 202-203)

This sentiment of rescue was echoed by Willow:

“It came to me...It found me at a time of my life when it was just what I needed”. (Willow, p.2, l. 53-53)

Fire spinning started a transition that reformed their lives by introducing this expressive focus:

“Fire spinning was really like this massive whirlwind which picked me and my entire life up in this really kind of crazy and beautiful way”. (Johnny, p.3, l. 96-97)

**Awakening/awareness**

‘Flow state’ was mentioned by all participants, experienced as a meditative state. The participants described it in a way indicative of a kind of spiritual awakening in which a meditative state was reached, which allowed one to intimately connect with the self and allow realisations and a kind of positivity to flow:

“(Spinning fire) allows you to tap into this kind of mind-set, you begin to understand the nature of flow...and how that’s really the optimum state of no thought.” (Johnny, p.4, l. 124-127)
“(fire spinning helps you to) look at your own failings, not as failings… you start realising your fuckups aren’t really fuck ups…it’s all about rolling with your fuckups and making it part of the dance”. (Johnny, p.4-5, l. 135-136 & l. 143-145)

Luna echoed this sentiment:

“Therapeutic meditation flow, you don’t actually think you just move and that is a really nice way to quieten down your mind”. (Luna, p.4, l. 118-120)

“(it bought) More self-awareness, I listen to my body more, I listen to my thoughts”. (Luna, p.6, l. 201-202)

The participants had learnt how to become passive observers of themselves, enabling a state of living that is more aware, more conscious and provides self-acceptance. This way of existing has been long forgotten and slowly replaced with the practices of our modern society; ones that could be considered as shallow, materialistic and egotistical where little regard is held for such ways of living. Holding fire spinning at the centre of their lives has cultivated a conscious way of life that the participants felt had greatly improved their lives and states of existing:

“Fire gatherings they’re always conscious events…one trace left is, just feels like damage to not only the earth but to yourself.” (Luna, p.16, l. 519-523)

Their experiences overwhelmingly illustrated the highly therapeutic and meditative aspect of fire spinning which was experienced as healing and a tool for cultivating a higher awareness of the self and of the nature of life. Their experiences embodied something that is spiritual with a nod towards Buddhist practices. From holding fire spinning at the centre of their lives they have been able to implement a style of living that is aware, awake and conscious in day to day living which allowed them to regain a sense of wholeness.

Reconnection to the natural world
This overarching theme encompasses the reconnection with the natural world that was a common theme for all participants. Three subthemes were identified within this: back to the roots, unity with the natural world and fire/nature; the companion.

Back to the roots
This subtheme captures the sense that holding fire spinning at the centre of their lives had allowed the participants to ‘strip back’ to a way of living that is more primitive, simplistic and ultimately free of the stresses that living a mainstream life brings. There was a strong sense of appreciation for the natural world throughout the data, in terms of recognising nature as
being their first place of existence and that engaging with fire is almost a way of honouring this and getting back to a more simplistic life:

“You’ll find satisfaction spending 6 hours on your own spinning with a stick (a fire prop)” (Eugene, p.7, l. 232-233)

“you are performing with nature… you have to respect it…respect the fire respect the flame…because that’s where you’ve come from”. (Luna, p.16, l. 532-534)

“I want to build a fire, I want to tend to it and to me there’s something that is almost primeval about that, it’s like hard-wired into our genes, into our ancestry of humans...all this kind of connectivity, to every other human before us”. (Johnny, p.10, l. 330-334)

Luna explicitly detailed the importance of stripping back to our roots and the kind of implications this has for the rest of society:

“That (human unity) is definitely something that we’ve come far from and I think we’ve lost that in a sense with technology and money...back in the day you think about kind of, you know, people working together as a unit because that’s how you survive”. (Luna, p.14, l. 445-448)

There was the feeling of wanting to rediscover ways of living that the participants felt have been lost.

Unity

This subtheme encompasses the feelings of unity with the natural world, in which the participants experienced unity to be rewarding and supportive. They spoke with joy and positivity at being united with the natural world and that in itself appeared to be the benefit of uniting with the natural world:

“You’ll feel more connected to the ground, and you’ll get this kind of earth feeling, elemental feeling”. (Eugene, p.9, l. 294-295)

“It was just so raw…I felt really connected to the earth” (Willow, p.15, l. 495-496)

“You want to be around as much life as possible and that is what nature holds essentially, it’s getting rooted, it’s getting grounded, its holding yourself to something that has always been there”. (Luna, p.16, l. 512-514)

There was the sense that for some participants connecting with the natural world through fire spinning as a lifestyle provided feelings of restoration:
"now we surround ourselves by 90 degrees...square buildings, square cars...it’s all very angular whereas when you go out into nature it’s not like that...(fire spinning) is a means to encourage you to explore nature". (Eugene, p.11, l. 344-350)

"Having come from London and suddenly being opened up into this big world of trees... (and) being able to breathe". (Luna, p.15, l. 488-489)

There was the sense that turning their backs on mainstream living and putting fire spinning at the centre of their lives provided feelings of unification with the natural world which in itself was experienced as beneficial because it bought innate feelings of ‘rightness’ that needed no further explanation of why uniting with the natural world was beneficial. The realisation of this ultimate connectedness between all things living was a constant underlying theme to all of the participants experiences, mentioned here and thus far.

Willow expressed the understanding that her partnership with the natural world bought:

“I really felt all the elements inside me...all these elements coming together...and for that short moment of time me at the centre of it”. (Willow, p.15, l. 474-479)

“It was an understanding of we are all, all of us are the elements combined” (Willow, p.15, l. 482-483)

This unification with the natural world was another example of the realisation of connectivity for the participants, which was enabled because they had placed fire spinning at the centre of their lives. They had been provided the opportunity to intimately connect with the natural world in a way that simply is not offered in mainstream living.

Fire/nature; the companion

This subtheme captures the specific relationship between fire/nature and the participants and what importance this held for them. An intimate partnership was described through most of the participant’s accounts where fire and the natural world were experienced as a supportive companion and a comforter that bought inspiration, empowerment, and confidence to the participants. It was experienced as healing in this way:

“(fire spinning is) a means of feeling empowered...a lot of my life I’ve felt quite weak as a person.” (Luna, p.3, l. 73-74)

“I want to resemble something like fire”. (Luna, p.4, l. 113)

This sentiment was echoed by Willow:
“something about the nature of fire in itself really aligned with what I was going through...I kind of sympathised with the danger and the fury of fire...I found some kind of really nice harmony with the element.” (Willow, p.2, l. 43-46)

Willow’s personification of fire provided the sense that fire was supportive like a friend or a companion, which understood what she too was going through. Fire had supported the participants through a period of healing by being perceived as a friend. This too was echoed by Luna whose use of personification of the natural world illustrated a picture of companionship, relieving feelings of isolation:

“It feels like it’s not just you...the wind it has its own sort of mind...you can hear the trees sort of rustling...It feels like you’re making music”. (Luna, p.5-6, l. 163-171)

“Is that healthy to feel more alone amongst people...or less alone amongst no one in trees?” (Luna, p.16, l. 509-510)

Participant’s experiences of reconnecting to the natural world through fire spinning bought realisations of connectivity, which was a common theme that underlies most experiences the participants explored during their interviews. There was an overwhelming sense that experiencing an intimate connection with the natural world, through it being perceived as a friend or connecting to it in a more primal way, inspired the realisation of the fundamental unity of all things living which was experienced as therapeutic because the participants were enabled to feel part of something bigger than themselves. This intimate reconnection to the natural world perhaps is not experienced by many people living within mainstream society because there simply is not time to try to realise the intimate connection that exists. Perhaps, because much of mainstream living is characterised by little time away from working and much time spent amongst the grey manmade structures within cities, there is no invite to intimately connect with nature and begin a journey of spiritual realisation.

The paradoxical nature of the fire spinning lifestyle
This overarching theme recognises the paradoxes that existed within the fire spinning lifestyle. Two subthemes were identified: opposing spheres and freedom vs uncertainty.

**Opposing spheres**
This subtheme captures the sense of there being two opposing spheres within the fire spinning world; the business and performance world and the community and practise world. Eugene made the business and community distinction:

“We’ve got two fire tribes...you’ve got the community aspect...meet up and hangout...then you’ve got another tribe which like, I run a business...we are just a
collective of people who go around festivals and do shows and get paid for it”. (Eugene, p.4, l. 124-135)

Johnny echoed this sentiment:

“The fire tribe is very much our community...(but his performance troop is) more in a context of a professional performance setting...which we are all trying to make a life living from”. (Johnny, p.7, l. 218 & l. 234-236)

Willow and Luna however focused more on the distinction between the performance world and the practise of fire spinning that was just for them and not anybody else. There was the sense that once becoming a performer there is more pressure, stress and a constant pushing of the self compared to just being able to relax, experience flow and focus on the personal feeling of spinning:

“You have a different mentality when you become a performer...I’m very conscious of fire spinning always because I’m constantly thinking about how I can get better ...and what I can do for the next thing (performance)”. (Luna, p.7, l. 226-232)

“Before performing without the boys (the tribe) I really only had to focus on the feeling...of what fire dancing is and what it means to me”. (Luna, p.20, l. 649-652)

This sentiment was echoed by Willow:

“Realising a fire show is so much more than get up, spin fire, leave, you know there’s towel’s to worry about and risk assessment and water”. (Willow, p.11, l. 362-364)

Willow explained the performance world is something that is very much for others and a means to live and survive. But it was the community world where she performed at festivals where she felt most comfortable, free and happy:

“(The corporate world is) the world that pays well, when I’m performing at festivals the two things I love come together, it’s the people...and I get to be doing what I love...and that’s why the emotional spiritual reward is that much more”. (Willow, p.14, l. 439-444)

Opposing spheres in the fire spinning lifestyle provided the sense that there was a great difference in experience and feeling when the participants use fire spinning as a means for work. There appears to be a dampening of feeling, the therapeutic and personal experience of fire spinning is almost forgotten and replaced with pressure and the stresses of being able to entertain others and to survive economically.
Freedom vs routine

All participants quite extensively discussed their alternative lifestyles in comparison to mainstream lifestyles. Whilst these accounts are perhaps generalisations of mainstream living, they still provide insightful detail into what alternative living brings and what its downfalls are. The benefits were spoken about in terms of freedom from routine in which they can travel:

“Not really being tied to anywhere just like travelling around and having a certain sense of kind of freedom”. (Johnny, p.8, l. 261-262)

“when they go home it’s down time from their normal job...if your spinning you move around quite a lot...I have a chance to see my past in context...by being in new places”. (Eugene, p.8, l. 255-261)

There was the sense that alternative living with fire spinning is unrestricted and liberating. However this freedom was experienced as coming at a cost, where participants spoke of the general uncertainty of the lifestyle:

“It’s temperamental because obviously I’ve got no fixed abode”. (Eugene, p.7, l. 206-207)

“That’s the problem with living so freely...your welcoming things (work) to come your way, whether they do or not is very different”. (Luna, p.13, l. 414-415)

“You’re not gonna be necessarily living life worry free because you always have that financial side”. (Luna, p.13, l. 433-435)

Stability was something they desired but the paradox is they cannot achieve this by living a lifestyle with so much freedom.

This provided the sense that alternative living is not as idyllic as perhaps perceived by others, there were still worries and struggles that are consistent with worries and struggles experienced within mainstream living.

Secondly, there was the feeling that there was little distinction between work and living, which was expressed as being unstable and exhausting by comparing it to a mainstream lifestyle:
“It becomes that I’m actually always working...yesterday I was about to go and have fun and this woman called me like ‘I need you for a gig’ and it’s like there’s no you time”. (Willow, p.12, l. 367-370)

“you don’t get the kind of serotonin release of clocking out at the end of the day”. (Willow, p.12, l. 380-381)

“The two are very much distinguished from each other (work and down time in mainstream living) where as for us it’s kind of like everything is rolled up into one...living and surviving is a creative as opposed to having real stable, solid ground”. (Johnny, p.9, l. 297-300)

Here the participants appeared to feel as if they had to sacrifice a part of themselves in order to survive economically doing what they are passionate about. However Willow expressed her thorough pride in achievement by living an alternative lifestyle:

“When you do manage to survive on nothing but your self-employed work (as a fire spinner) it is absolutely incredible...the reward factor is so much better than...your everyday Joe kind of job”. (Willow, p.12, l. 387-390)

Perhaps the benefit of alternative living is that it is hard, there isn’t the same security and stability as there is in mainstream living and that is what makes it feel so good. Achievement in fire spinning as work appeared to be experienced as more fulfilling because the participants had managed to achieve in the face of doubt and from taking a risk. Alternative lifestyle with fire spinning represented freedom for the participants, something that in some sense is sacrificed when living a mainstream lifestyle because there are certain rules and boundaries that have to be adhered to. There is the sense that the fire spinning lifestyle is off the radar as it were, by which the participants can create the kind of world they want to exist in.
Discussion
This study was aiming to explore the experiences of members of the fire spinning community in order to gain insight into what living an alternative lifestyle is like, where an activity that intimately connects them to nature is at the centre of their lives. This was inspired by the large research base that demonstrates the benefits of the natural environment and of green care interventions. To explore the fire spinner’s experience of fire spinning was to develop an understanding of what fire spinning, an activity that intimately connects them to nature, has bought to them as a way of life. The findings overall suggest that being part of the fire spinning community and engaging with fire spinning itself is greatly therapeutic and becoming part of this community ignites a life changing transformation. Living an alternative lifestyle with fire spinning at the centre of it is hard work but greatly rewarding, in which the participants appeared to have a more intimate connection with nature, which was therapeutic and healing. Yet this finding that fits with the aim of this study actually sits within a larger concept that was found to be more significant to this study. The most compelling and most extensive finding was that fire spinning was experienced as tool that allowed the participants to experience the fundamental connectivity of everything, not only all forms of life but of the mind, the body and spirit. Holding fire spinning central to their lives allowed them to reconnect with themselves, others and nature which developed this understanding of the essence of ‘wholeness’. Connectivity was an underlying theme that accompanied most of the participant’s experiences and most of the subthemes reflect this. In short, what the fire spinners have gained is, a family, a sense of belonging, to be in touch with themselves, others and the natural world and the understanding of the connectivity of these three things that allows them to live whole, spiritually awake and conscious lives.

Previous research identified the beneficial effects of the natural world on mental well-being (Purcell, Person and Berto, 2001; Hartig et al., 2003; DeBruin et al., 2015; Smidl et al., 2017) which can be explained by the theory of biophilia (Wilson, 1984). This current research study is somewhat in line with these previous findings. Some of the participants experiences fell in line with the theory of biophilia (Wilson, 1984) in that a sense of ‘stripping back’ to where we as humans started, aided mental well-being in the therapeutic environment of the natural world. However it was more the experiences of fire spinning itself and being part of the fire spinning community that was beneficial to mental well-being and less about the innate therapeutic effect the natural world has. Instead of just an increased connection to the natural world as a way of life being the central theme to the fire spinner’s experiences, it was more the experience of unity, of a sense of wholeness with themselves, others and the natural world that fire spinning had bought them that was most salient. These findings could lie in the area of somatic psychology which takes a “holistic approach to therapy and healing
that embraces body, mind, and spirit” (Hartley and Hartley, 2004, p1.) challenging the modern day notion of the dualism of mind and body. The connectivity of the mind and body in terms of emotional expression was something first recognized in the world of psychology by Freud (1923) and Reich (1949) and that integrating the two could be therapeutically beneficial. The theory behind this stems from the premise that “body movement reflects inner emotional states and that changes in movement behaviour can lead to changes in the psyche, thus promoting health and growth” (Levy, 1988, p15). In essence, the expressive nature of movement arts allows alignment of body and mind which is experienced as therapeutic, where the transformation of the individual through say, the medium of fire spinning, becomes the focus in the therapeutic relationship (Payne, 2003). The feeling of unification of body and mind and this being a therapeutic experience via fire spinning can be explained by the theory of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), something all participants detailed experiencing. Flow represents the dynamic order between the struggle of order and disorder in conscious life. The experience of flow integrates the self because all the senses are focused on the same goal which creates a harmonious experience. Afterwards, one feels more internally ‘together’ than before, but also with respect to others and to the world in general.

The fire spinner’s experiences have conveyed the benefits of alternative living, the therapeutic nature of expression and flow arts, the benefits of the unifying experience of the body and mind, the salience of having a sense of community, and the benefits of an intimate connection with nature. What it has provided is a window in which clinicians, therapists, doctors etc. can glance through and realize the paramount importance of unifying the mind, body and soul not just for those experiencing mental health issues, but even for the mentally ‘healthy’. The fundamentality of unity of the mind, body and soul for experiencing mental well-being demands to be taken seriously here as a powerful tool for healing, through the medium of movement arts. These findings provide evidence for the power of flow/movement arts within a space of acceptance, in cultivating a sense of wholeness with the self, others and the natural world. Clinicians and others in positions of care could utilize these findings for development of new treatments that focus more on this holistic approach of fundamental unity in treating things like stress, depression and anxiety. In this aspect, this research project further evidences and supports the large research base that already exists with dance/movement therapy within clinical settings.

However these findings could even be utilized in the development of school curriculums in which flow/movement arts could be a therapeutic activity which allows children to access a mental space of relaxation and meditation. This has the potential to be a preventative measure against poor mental well-being. If children could experience the unification of mind
body and soul from a young age and be taught that engaging with practices that facilitate this is just as important as getting up and going to work every day then perhaps great social change could be achieved in the way that we live our lives. Whilst this is perhaps an overly-ambitious statement at this stage, it is valuable to identify the potential that this research area has if it were to be further explored and further evidenced. The findings have shown that living a life that is heavily focused on practices that enable one to become more aware, conscious and connected to the self, others and the natural world is greatly beneficial to mental well-being where the stresses of modern living are almost completely left behind. The findings are informative of what could be achieved for mental well-being if more conscious practices started to be an integral part of living, from which a conscious and connected society could emerge.

A flaw of this study lies within the research title itself. The aims of this project were far too broad, something that was not obvious at the time when this project first began. It was only after analysis of the data that it was obvious that there were far too many concepts, experiences and ideas to provide a full analysis of, so, much of the data was omitted or not discussed sufficiently. This could also be due to the nature of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) where salient experiences may have to be ignored because they do not fit into a conceptual box e.g. an overarching or sub-theme. However because of the meagre research base around alternative circus-type communities a broad research aim was required in order to deduce the broad and important experiences in order to allow future research to home in on perhaps one aspect of the findings like ‘importance of community’. The importance of community was an area that did not receive sufficient exploration in this study even though it was frequently mentioned by all participants. This was due to the overwhelming number of experiences that were identified as salient, so it would be interesting and beneficial for future research to further explore importance of community. What would also be interesting to further explore is the importance of feeling connected to the self, others and nature. This study highlighted the benefits and importance of experiencing this fundamental connectivity through movement arts, something that has been recognized in previous psychological literature and research as greatly therapeutic and healing (Levy, 1988; Leseho and Maxwell, 2010; Koch and Fischman, 2011), yet there is surprisingly little theory established to explain or understand it. Future research could focus on extending the theoretical understanding we have of this concept in order for it to be taken seriously within the psychological world.

To conclude this research project explored the experiences of the fire spinning community. The main findings identify movement arts as an expressive tool for cultivating a consciousness or a spiritual awakening in which the fundamental unity of body and mind is
experienced, providing therapeutic and healing consequences and an understanding of the connectivity of the self, to others and the natural world. The salience of community for healing and the benefits of transforming one’s life through the medium of spiritual-like practices were also greatly reflected. The implications of these findings could have great benefit for clinical psychology in which treatments could be influenced by the therapeutic aspect of these findings. These findings could also be the start of an area of research that evidences ways of living that inspire greater mental well-being as a way of life, instead of exhausting ourselves to the point of mental and physical breakdown with current modern living, where hopefully a more conscious, connected and healthy society can emerge.
Reflexive statement
Qualitative research does not claim to be objective, it recognizes the subjective meanings and values that a researcher brings to their studies (King and Horrocks, 2010). It is not something to be avoided but rather a resource that contributes to understanding the research itself.

I thoroughly enjoyed undertaking this research as it is an area of which I am passionate about and have been involved in myself. Having engaged with fire spinning practices myself, I could have perhaps imposed my own feelings about what fire spinning is to me onto my participants. This is something I found difficult during the analysis, in which I had to regularly re-read the transcripts so as to ensure I did not impose my own experiences and entangle them with the experiences of the participants. The participants were people that I know personally which was actually beneficial to the study because it aided rapport between us, creating an environment where the participants felt relaxed enough to talk at length and comfortably divulge personal information and sometimes tough, emotional subjects that they perhaps would not have if it were a stranger. However after one particular interview I felt very disheartened about my project as it seemed as if the participant had not provided me with much data to explore as they had answered questions in a way that was not even relevant to the question. But when it came round to the analysis I was pleased with myself as an interviewer because I had managed to steer the participant in directions which did provide relevant and sufficient data.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A

1. Can you tell me a bit about fire spinning
   - what is it? Is it easy to learn? Definition?

2. What was it that first drew you to start fire spinning?
   - Inspirations, first memory of spinning, what was the attraction?

3. Why do you fire spin?
   - what affect does it have on your life? How does it make you feel? What goes on inside your head whilst you are spinning? What environments do you spin in?

4. What do you feel you have gained from fire spinning?
   - How does it benefit you?

5. How does fire spinning fit into your everyday life?
   - How has it changed your life? How has it affected you as a person? What experiences has it given you?

6. Explain to me what a fire tribe is.
   - Tell me a bit about your own fire tribe. What do you do? What purpose does it serve? How does being within this tribe affect your life and who you are? What does it bring to your life?

7. How would you describe your way of life as a fire spinner?
   - How do you think this way of living fits into the mainstream society, if at all? Is it a way of life in itself? What are the negatives and positives of living this way? In what way is living like this different to a more mainstream way of living?

8. As a fire spinner, in what way do you feel connected to the natural world, if at all?
   - Does spinning enhance this connection? Are they linked? Can you give me an example of this from your experiences?
9. Thinking about your fire spinning experiences, what value does the natural world have for you?
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