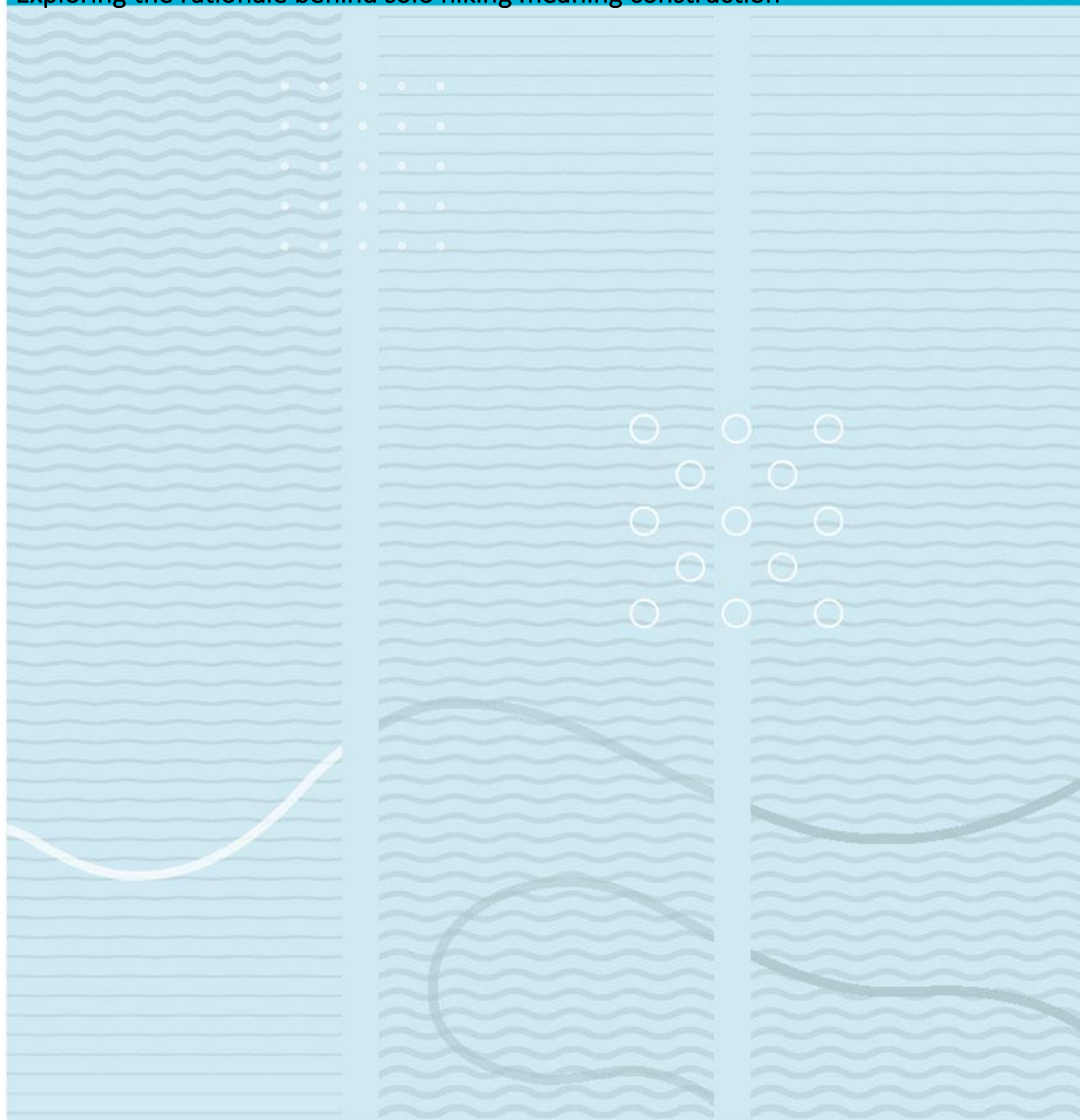


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## Why hiking solo?

Exploring the rationale behind solo hiking meaning construction



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This thesis is worth 30 study points

## Abstract

This master's thesis explores the rationales of why people hike solo, why it gives meaning to practitioners, and which key drivers there are for solo hiking?

Previous finding suggests categories of meaning constructions like for example "recreation purposes". Other findings to mention are "self-actualisation" as a key driver for travelling solo.

The thesis builds on seven interviews with people with experience in solo hiking who were recruited in the Swedish Facebook-group "Ensamvandring" (Solo hiking).

The method approach is based on Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, more specifically IPA, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, and conducted through semi-structured qualitative interviews.

The interpretation generated four themes regarding the rationales for solo hiking (no ranking):

1. Restoration, 2. Nature connection, nature experiences, 3. Freedom, 4. Spiritual, Existential.

Findings suggest that key drivers connected to the above-mentioned categories emerged through the data. These key drivers are *Spiritual nature connection and Mental restoration*. One could have the idea that physical exercise would be a rationale for solo hiking, but only one respondent mentioned that, and only in passing.

This research supports findings that hiking solo can be spiritual as well as restorative.

Further, it suggests that solo hiking has a role to play in meaning construction, personal development, and contemplation, and is a facilitator for existential reasoning for the individual. Findings can be valuable in healthcare as well as in tourism contexts.



# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1	Pilgrimage.....	8
1.2	Definitions of hiking.....	9
<b>2</b>	<b>Literature review .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1	Nordic context of hiking .....	11
2.2	Solo lifestyle and self-actualisation.....	13
2.3	The health factors.....	14
2.4	Urbanisation, globalisation and the need of slowing down .....	15
2.5	Summary of literature review .....	16
2.6	Outline view .....	17
2.7	List of tables and figures.....	17
<b>3</b>	<b>Issue – what this thesis wishes to highlight .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Method and theoretical approach.....</b>	<b>20</b>
4.1	Phenomenology.....	20
4.2	Respondents.....	22
4.3	Respondent presentation.....	23
4.4	Ethical considerations.....	24
4.5	Interview process.....	24
4.6	Analysis process .....	25
4.6.1	IPA – Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.....	25
4.6.2	Hermeneutic circle .....	27
4.6.3	Validity and reliability.....	28
4.6.4	Phenomenological approach and hermeneutic analyse .....	29
4.7	Discussion of method .....	30
<b>5</b>	<b>Results/Findings .....</b>	<b>32</b>
5.1	The Spiritual/Existential category .....	33
5.1.1	The Restoration category.....	34
5.1.2	The Nature connection category .....	35
5.1.3	The Freedom category.....	36
<b>6</b>	<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>45</b>

<b>8</b>	<b>References .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>49</b>

# Foreword

Sandsared, Sweden, May 2022

Henrik Erlingsson

Hiking alone is not a new phenomenon. Since ancient times humans have had an urge to walk in nature, exemplified by Severn (2019) describing pilgrimage. But the objectives for hiking alone are diverse and perhaps are changing over time. From pilgrimage in Christianity and Islam via exploring reasons and a more, considered contemporary, objectives like individual development, health reasons and restoration to be able to maintain work-life. What I am curious about, is if my respondents' descriptions reveal any pattern of the rationales for hiking alone? From a phenomenological approach, I want my respondents to thoroughly describe why they are hiking and what they gain from it? Phenomenology helps to put focus on my respondents and their descriptions of solo hiking. When analysing these descriptions with hermeneutic interpretation, I intend to gain more knowledge about what is creating meaning for them to hike solo. More of that will follow in the Method section.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Jonas Mikaelis at the Swedish School for Sport and Health Sciences for guiding me through this project and motivating me with his ideas and thoughts related to my master's topic. I would also like to thank my wife Erika, who patiently has supported me through the project, and through this whole master's programme. Without this support, I would not have had a chance to finish this programme. My informants have a great deal in this, too. Volunteering without the slightest hesitation, and contributing to my joy and motivation, their openness and descriptive approach deserve my gratitude.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Pilgrimage

Looking back in history for the phenomenon of hiking or walking, the concept of pilgrimage emerges as a common phenomenon throughout history. Pilgrimage is an ancient, traditional journey, often by foot, and for religious purposes.

Griffin & Raj (2017 p. 4) put forward a definition of traditional pilgrimage as followed: "The word 'pilgrimage' suggests that the participant is engaging in a journey to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion".

Pilgrimage has an ancient history, the Christian pilgrimage descends from times of the Old Testament celebrating the Jewish Passover Sinai desert in the Exodus from Egypt (Severn, 2019). This celebration was first in own homes but evolved to, as Deuteronomy tells, a town chosen by God. The first itinerant, later (10<sup>th</sup> century B.C) Jerusalem took this place after King Solomon had the Temple built there (Severn, 2019).

During The middle age, pilgrimage grew as a phenomenon when cathedrals and other big churches were built. Some of them hosted relics from saints, and the Church urged people to visit them to come closer to God or to have a ticket to heaven that way, visiting or touching these relics. In addition to this, Christian crusades rose as a new concept in medieval society (Severn, 2019).

During the Protestant Reformation pilgrimage declined due to Luther's influence and other factors, such as Henry VIII's dissolution of Monasteries in England. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, pilgrimage slowly increased again and in contemporary pilgrimage, the religious aspects are no longer the one prevailing rationale. Other, more generally spiritual reasons were more common and socially accepted (Severn, 2019).



## 1.2 Definitions of hiking

What is a hike? What is a hiker? What is a solo hiker? In previous research, it seems to be a spread of different definitions (Mau, 2021). What characterises a hike? Svarstad (2010) put forward a definition, although put in a Norwegian context.

“...Leisure trips conducted on foot during the summer and on cross-country-skis during the winter”.

Svarstad (2010) also states that in Norway hiking is an important part of friluftsliv (outdoor life) and that it is an appreciative activity, compared to consumptive activities like hunting and fishing. This definition is from a Norwegian narrative, where hiking culture can be considered important in society (Svarstad, 2010). A Swedish or Nordic context may not be far away from the Norwegian equivalent, although not to take for granted. Yet, Svarstad claims her research to be relevant and translatable to other countries (Svarstad, 2010 p 107).

Somewhat more leaning to tourism perspective, Nordbö (2014) defines hiking as

...is thus a vacation or holiday-related outdoor activity that consists of shorter or longer walks (from less than an hour up to many days) in natural and cultural landscapes, and often in rural areas. The aim of the walk might be pleasure, exercise, contemplation, or similar experiences. Nordbö (2014 p.383)

The aim of the walk seems important to both Svarstad (2010) and Nordbö (2014).

Stanley (2019) tries to define hikers:

Hikers are defined here as anyone walking – and often camping out along, and sometimes rock scrambling over – non-urban, non-paved trails for recreation rather than purely transportation. This may be for a few hours ('day hikers'), a few days ('section hikers'), or for weeks or months at a time ('long-distance hikers' or 'thru hikers', the latter of whom walk long trails such as the Appalachian Trail in a single hiking season)” (Stanley, 2014 p. 242).

One can conclude that the definition is quite open and diverse, and no single definition seems to be agreed upon among researchers. Mau (2021) states that there is no consensus on how to define a long-distance walk but found the most common definitions to be about distance (approx. 30 km) or duration in time (several days). Common is also the purpose of the walk, to be leisure.

Are there definition differences connected to “Hiking alone” beyond the obvious that “alone” adds a profound distinction or maybe a difference? Can it be so simple that you adopt a definition of hiking and add that the activity is supposed to be conducted alone? Or is the fact that you add "alone" a profoundly different activity compared to "hiking"? “Hiking alone” has no clear definition, it differs from previous research (Mau, 2021) and will not be defined in this paper. Why is that? This paper’s approach is phenomenology, inspired by Heidegger (Van Manen, 2017) where interpretation of the respondents’ descriptions of their lived hiking world is important. This is where the focus is and trying to define “Hiking” and “Hiking alone” is secondary. This is a way of trying not to make pre-assumptions about any concept or incept which is important in the phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 2017). The next section will treat some previous research related to hiking, solo hiking, and solo travelling.

## 2 Literature review

This section will highlight other articles and their way to try to illuminate why people go hiking or hiking and travel alone. First, the initial search work is described.

The literature search was done first in general terms like "solo hiking", "tramping" "hiking pilgrimage", and "spiritual walking". Then narrowed more to, like for example "key drivers hiking", "solo hiking key drivers phenomenology" "phenomenology of solo hiking" and "netnography friluftsliv" "netnography outdoor studies". The most significant papers will be described.

### 2.1 Nordic context of hiking

In Svarstad (2010) a grounded theory approach is used to analyse written letters from Norwegian hikers on the theme "their thoughts on their involvement in hiking". Their stories were analysed and three categories of meaning construction from hiking were found: a recreation category, a category of the simple outdoors discourse, and a belonging category. Svarstad's (2010) reasoning is rooted in the discourse of the "modern society", wherein this discourse hiking is considered a leisure activity. Particularly the lack of gender differences in Svarstads (2010) material is notable. Most letter-writers though were women.

Since Svarstad (2010) writes that much outdoor literature in Norway can be connected to the discourse of the simple outdoors, a fact that may influence the choice of categories, and most likely that discourse in the Norwegian society has influenced the writers in their lives and views of hiking. This influence from society might affect responders to write to connect to the simple outdoor discourse. Which one, Svarstad (2010) or the writers, who have been influenced more is hard to say, but Svarstad (2010) is probably more aware of the concept of a "discourse of the simple outdoors" than the respondents.

Svarstad (2010) consider hiking as a traditional outdoor activity but still states that respondents' letters reveal that their meaning-construction is highly connected to "the modern society in which they are produced" (Svarstad 2010, p. 96).

System rationality and modern life's demands on higher levels of labor can cause alienation. Alienation to what the individual gets out of work in form of needs and demands. Hiking can create links of belonging to both earlier culture and generations, and nature itself. In this way, alienation can be reduced and a sense of connection increases (Svarstad, 2010).

Svarstad (2010) suggests that this kind of study can be applied in other countries, with categorization following her article. At the same time, she states that the simple outdoors discourse is decreasing in Norway. Maybe it has decreased too much in other countries already, maybe beyond relevance? That may affect the relevance of conducting research connected to Svarstads' (2010) templates and coding. Although, this research may still be relevant, at least in a Nordic context, since Svarstads (2010) categorization may still be relevant there.

Thurfjell (2020) elaborates in his book "Granskogsfolk" (Fir Forest people) about Swedes identity as considered a nature-loving people. In this interview study which became a book, the Swedish researcher in religious history David Thurfjell elaborates how spirituality takes form in humans through nature. Thurfjell think it is interesting because the Nordic countries, and in particular Sweden, is regarded to be one of the most secularised countries in the world. He even claims that "Nature is the church of the Swedes" where one can have a spiritual dimension in life. As an example, Thurfjell writes about a survey in a national park, where every fifth visitor declared "experience a spiritual dimension" as a strong or very strong motive for visiting the national park. The largest subgroup related to the spirituality question were Swedish-born men 46-55 years old (Thurfjell, 2020).

Thurfjell describes devotion and veneration for nature to be prominent feelings from national park visitors. Nature as a place where to encounter the context of existence (Thurfjell, 2020).

## 2.2 Solo lifestyle and self-actualisation

In (Yang et al, 2021) a thorough mixed-methods investigation was used to find out motivations and constraints in the solo travel market.

Since households with people living alone have increased by 33% worldwide in the last decade (Klinenberg, referenced in Yang et al, 2021), in combination with more individualised lifestyles where you more often conduct activities alone, like travel for example. One in five people went on solo holidays in 2015 (Brown, 2015 referenced in Yang et al, 2021). This is one area of use how Yang et al (2021) claim this research is interesting for different stakeholders. It is a big and growing market, with growing solo travelling as well as growing outdoor holidays (Yang, et al, 2021). A conceptual model was used based on the theory of planned behavior. It is a market-oriented study with a focus on travelers (or consumers') behaviors and how decisions are made. According to Yang findings can be used for marketing strategies to make more individuals go travelling solo. Through a national survey in Australia Yang and co-authors got their quantitative data and their qualitative information was collected through interviews. Self-actualisation was the most significant driver for solo travel. Is it similar drivers for solo-hiking experiences? Self-actualisation contradicts Svarstads (2010) findings of a recreation category, a category of the simple outdoors discourse, and a belonging category and raises the question if it is different to travel solo by walking and travel solo in general terms? Maybe questions asked can determine which answers will be prominent? And regarding purpose, when you at the bottom line will find different results if you consider respondents as consumers or as humans? Or in other words as outdoor consumers or friluftsliv people? That might affect the way you pose questions and eventually what result you get.

Earlier research, like Bianchi, (2016) has found that solo travelers are motivated by social factors like flexibility and freedom to travel alone but also personal factors like experiences, escape, and bravery concerning the destination itself as a factor to appeal for travel (Bianchi, 2016). Freedom and independence are important factors followed by meeting new people and finding novel places, a study showed in 2019 (Abbasian, 2019 referenced in Yang et al, 2021).

## 2.3 The health factors

Mau et al, (2021), investigated long-distance hiking and mental health and found a positive relation. Mau conducted a scoping review where different studies were studied. 15 were quantitative, 9 were qualitative, and 2 were mixed.

Pilgrimage is one way of walking long distances. Mau discusses the differences and similarities, if the purpose is religious, as the traditional definition of pilgrimage is. It may also be non-religious and still be considered a pilgrimage. One difference is the purpose of the journey, where religious pilgrimage is conducted as an act of faith and that distinguishes it from the secular pilgrimage (Timothy, 2006, referenced in Mau, 2021 p.2). Trying to put a more modern and secular definition of pilgrimage; “A journey redolent with meaning” and may not in our modernity be religious but still have the function of dealing with existential crises (Timothy (2006) referenced in Mau et al, p. 2). Egan (2011) referenced in (Mau, 2021 p.2) put forward the notion that some long-distance walkers may choose to struggle to find conformity and strive to better mirror their wounded souls in their physical bodies. Through the physical struggle, they become “a wounded soul in a wounded body”.

Mau (2021) found that the relation was most consistent regarding emotional distress and the authors suggest that long-distance walking can be good to overcome “emotional struggle” (Mau, 2021). “In summary, long-distance walking might be a low-cost intervention to promote mental health” (Mitten et al, 2016). Mittens et al articles conclusion as well as Mau’s (2021) review can be related to the recreation category in Svarstads categorization. Health seems to be a common factor, especially when it comes to quantitative publications and studies that have a positivist approach. To be more specific, nature and hiking are "used" as a way of getting improved health. In Fredman et al (2016), authors describe the trend “Increased interest for long-distance hiking” illustrative by describing the trend as a tree. The roots or foundations for this trend tree nourish by globalisation, individualisation, self-actualisation, accomplishment, health, and spirituality. To some extent, this is later confirmed by Yang

who describes one of the key drivers for solo travelling to be self-actualisation (Yang et al, 2021).

## **2.4 Urbanisation, globalisation, and the need of slowing down**

Fredman et al (2016) also find the hiking trend to root from, or to be key drivers, of urbanisation, society-critique, and development of equipment. Threats can be the development of infrastructure in sensitive environments and strength is the strong community feeling in this sub-group. A focus on place and increased relation to nature are the leaves of the tree.

Fredman et al (2016) do not explain in what way globalisation nourishes hiking but reason a bit about urbanisation. More people living in urban areas may create a higher demand for nature activities but can also be a reason for people staying in urban areas as well (Fredman et al, 2016).

Then, if more people live in urban areas, the demand may as well decrease in the longer perspective?

Regarding urbanisation, Witte et al (2017) made some conclusions in a netnographic study of Chinese walking online communities. Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography in online contexts and is concerned with the study of online communities as phenomena (Kozinets, 2019). Witte et al (2017) claim that in a country with rapid urban development (as China), “nature and walking in nature, in particular, is viewed increasingly by the Chinese middle classes, who live in the major urban centers, as a way of slowing down and moving differently from the dominant logic of speed”. That may be translatable to any urban center, the contrast factor regarding the “dominant logic of speed” between city and nature would maybe be greater the bigger the urban center is, although there seems to be a lack of research regarding that.

When it comes to restorative effects from nature, maybe even eliciting meaning-creation with individuals, Naor (2020) finds that these can be important features. That nature can be adaptive to humans' needs, whether it is psychological or biological.

Nature can elicit a positive process for the individual by embodying, mirroring, and even confronting concretely and experientially, to make an individual discover new aspects of oneself and grow from that process. But how is that happening? Naor suggests that "...nature, elicit meaningful personal issues in concrete situations that call for complete physical and emotional involvement, providing an opportunity for a new awareness of self and, ultimately, profound change" (Naor, 2020 p. 879) and further cites (Berger & McLeod, 2006): "From this perspective, nature is not only a physical setting or backdrop for profound experience but is experienced as an "active agent" in the process of personal growth" (p. 879).

## **2.5 Summary of literature review**

Naors' (2020) take on nature as calling for complete physical and emotional involvement to elicit personal growth mentioned above is something that can be very positive for the individual. To have restorative effects, to gain a sense of belonging, as Svarstad (2010) writes, is of course positive too. A chance to have silence and calm from everyday life (Witte et al, 2017) and the opportunity for self-actualization during travelling solo are more examples of benefits mentioned in the literature. Examples of drivers or key drivers for travelling and hiking solo. Yang et al mention other reasons for conducting activities individually, like the fact that you do not have a friend with similar interests. A reason maybe not be considered a positive driver but still a driver to hike solo. Fredman et al (2016) mention accomplishment, health, and spirituality as roots of the increased interest in long-distance hiking.

So far, previous research talks about a lot of health effects of hiking, of societal factors like individualization and a chance for self-actualization, among other things of course. Hiking as a treatment facilitator is another thing. But solo hikers meaning construction and reasons to do hikes alone in a Swedish context seem to have a gap of knowledge and may be of particular interest having in mind Sweden is often considered to be one of the most secularized countries in the world (Thurfjell, 2021). Indeed, Svarstad (2011)



has done it in a Norwegian context. As it turned out to be after the phenomenological analyses, this thesis' findings of categories differed from Svarstads categorization, which makes these findings fill the gaps of knowledge, but we will come back to that in the result section.

## **2.6 Outline view**

Now, previous literature has been presented. Next, the research question will be outlined followed by a description of the method used. The result will be presented, a discussion about the result follows, and as a roundup, there will be a conclusion with suggestions for further research and an explanation of what this thesis brings to the table regarding solo hiking.

## **2.7 List of tables and figures**

*Table 1-1 Frequency of keywords related to a category, page 37.*

*Table 2-1 Key driver per respondent, page 38.*

*Figure 1-1. Categories of respondents' objectives for hiking solo, page 32.*



### **3 Issue – what this thesis wishes to highlight**

As described earlier in this text pilgrimage has historically been an important reason to walk long distances. Perhaps pilgrimage also influenced the phenomenon of hiking through to the contemporary version we have today, even though the purpose varies if we look at walking in a broad term?

Immersion in the natural environment has often been connected to positive effects on human health, as shown example in Svarstad (2010), Yang (2021), and Naor (2020). But there is more to it, and I wanted to investigate reasons to hike solo, what meanings are created through this activity, and explore why it has become so popular, with over 20.000 members of the Facebook group "Solo hikers" ("Ensamvandring") in Sweden. It sums up to my research question, which is formulated:

#### **What is the rationale behind solo hiking meaning construction?**

Sub questions: *How do solo hikers experience the phenomenon of hiking solo?*

*What key drivers are there for solo hiking?*

By examining this through semi-structured qualitative interviews with a phenomenological approach the intention is to find answers to my research questions with help from my respondents' descriptions of hiking solo, which are interpreted.

My epistemological position in this study is: try to involve, and communicate with people with experience of hiking solo, to get their subjective descriptions of their experiences connected to that.

## 4 Method and theoretical approach

In the following section objectives for the study design will be described. The underpinning philosophies will be explained, and the interview process presented as well as the process for the complete thesis.

This thesis is formed by employing the qualitative research design paradigm originated by Kant and Dilthey (Humberstone, 2020).

### 4.1 Phenomenology

This thesis' focus on respondents' experiences of their solo hikes. To learn about their objectives, reasons, and what makes hiking solo a meaningful activity for them. The approach was chosen to be phenomenology since the intention was to have the respondents thoroughly describe their experience, to make it possible to peek into their life-worlds of hiking and analyse and interpret it. To obtain descriptions of respondents lived world, their lifeworld, and interpret the meaning of the phenomenon, that is how Kvale (1996) describes the meaning of lifeworld (Kvale, 1996 p. 30).

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method (Humberstone, 2020). Husserl, known as the founder of phenomenology as a philosophy, wanted to look beyond the positivist tradition that made everything in this world measurable and quantified.

Husserl's way to do that was to acknowledge that humans' experiences exist and give valid descriptions which we can investigate scientifically (Humberstone 2020).

Heidegger, who was Husserl's apprentice stated, contrary to Husserl, that interpretation is essential to understand the meaning of being in the world, and possibility to go beyond mere descriptions to reveal hidden meaning, instead of what is stated (Cohen & Omery, 1994). Heidegger rejected Husserl's concept of pure descriptions with no pre-suppositions as impossible and put forward hermeneutic phenomenology which acknowledged human subjectivity as always present and considerable (Humberstone, 2020).

Thus, Moran (2000 p. 229) referenced in Shineborne (2011) contends that:

Phenomenology is seeking after a meaning which is perhaps hidden by the entity's mode of appearing. In that case, the proper model for seeking meaning is the interpretation of a text and for this reason, Heidegger links phenomenology with hermeneutics. How things appear or are covered up must be explicitly studied. The things themselves always present themselves in a manner that is at the same time self-concealing.

Since interpretation, following Heidegger was conducted aiming to understand the respondents' description of their lived hiking world (Cohen & Omery, 1994). How did they **experience** their hike? How did they **describe** their perceived reality in nature, I **interpreted** and **analysed** aiming to find the rationales of solitary hiking and understand why practitioners think it is meaningful?

Interviews were analysed through hermeneutic interpretation of respondents' answers, their key drivers for hiking, meaning-creation keywords, and respondent's subjective understanding of the phenomenon of hiking solo.

Method schemes were avoided since they will risk obscuring what I look for. Van Manen describes a way of trying not to be schematic and instead stick to the material itself, following a more phenomenological way, giving the material agency instead of a scientific method from outside, and to abstain from theoretical or polemical contaminations (Van Manen, 2007). Cohen & Omery on the same topic, claims that it is not consistent to have an outside theoretical approach guiding the study, since the "things themselves" is valued in phenomenology (Cohen & Omery, 1994), and Finlay thinks researchers should "refrain from importing external frameworks" (Finlay, 2011, p. 8).

And to keep in mind: Phenomenologists believe that the researcher cannot detach from his/her presuppositions, which contrasts positivist's view (Groenewald, 2004). The following quote on this theme is from Heidegger:

Our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and

popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves (Heidegger, 1962, p. 195 referenced in Shineborne, 2011).

The respondents, who they are, and how they ended up as respondents will now be explained as well as the interview process before we go into the analysis process. When these parts have been accounted for the findings are ready for being displayed.

## **4.2 Respondents**

Online digital video was used to perform the interviews. It was two reasons for that. First, at the time it was still restrictions regarding Covid 19. Secondly, the sample was picked from an online social media group, where respondents are used to having contact and updating each other digitally. In addition, it is highly cost-effective and easy to access. The interviews were semi-structured phenomenological interviews aiming for the respondents to describe their experiences in detail.

Groenewald (2004) relates to the issue of selecting participants when he writes: “Because Boyd (2001) regards two to 10 participants or research subjects as sufficient to reach saturation and Creswell (1998, pp. 65 & 113) recommends “long interviews with up to 10 people” for a phenomenological study...” (Groenewald, 2004 p. 46). A sample size of eight solo hikers was selected. After several defaults to appointments from one contestant, the sample size stayed at seven.

### 4.3 Respondent presentation

Here follows a presentation of the respondents with facts relevant to the study. To ensure anonymity they have been given a fictive name.

- Anna, 46, living in a big city, has been travelling a lot and hiking for decades. Like to hike regularly in everyday life.
- Bea, retired from work and live abroad. Have 12 years' experience in hiking. Do not spend nights on her hikes.
- Christer, in his 40's, lives in the countryside in the south of Sweden. Spend holidays hiking every year and likes to solo hike in everyday life as well. Hiking keeps him floating.
- David is 40 years, well-educated with many higher education credits. Enjoy connecting to nature and philosophical aspects.
- Erika, retired, living close to a big city and describes her solo hiking as a necessity. Very comfortable in the woods and nature overall.
- Fia, loves hiking despite the negative aspects there are with hiking solo. Loves nature as well.
- Gunilla describes lyrically her joy doing solo hikes in the Swedish mountains. The only respondent who highlights the joy of social meetings with fellow hikers on the trail.

## 4.4 Ethical considerations

Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the request for ethical clearance (Appendix 3). Requirements from the University of South-Eastern Norway and NSD were followed at every step of the process. Before participation, all respondents received an email with an information letter describing the research project and a consent form following these requirements (Annex). Participants agreed to participate in the project by sending the consent form in by email, and in the case, the technology did not work, the video recording started with giving the consent on film before the interview started. The respondents were informed about their right to withdraw at any time or not answer questions they did not want to. Data were recorded in the video call program Zoom and immediately after the interviews transferred onto the researcher's computer, where it was later transcribed and analysed. The collected data was kept on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. All identifying information was coded with fictive names e.g., Anna, Bea, etc. Some general information about respondents is in the finished text, but always anonymised by giving fictive names and explaining to the reader to understand the data related to hiking execution.

## 4.5 Interview process

After creating an interview guide, a pilot interview was conducted, recorded in the video meeting system Zoom. After this, some adjustments were called for. The order of two questions in the guide were changed and two questions were added to have the respondents talk more descriptive about the topic. The search for participants took place in the Swedish Facebook group "Ensamvandring" ("Solo hiking") and got eight participants within a few hours.

To have a good flow in conversation, and since both interviewer and interviewees are from Sweden, the interview language was Swedish. The transcriptions are in Swedish,



but the citations and extracted material is translated when transferred to the thesis. Every translation to English was made by the author.

Interviews were done from 9 to 24 of March 2022. Eight interviews were scheduled, and seven were accomplished, one was not due to repeated absence from appointments. At that stage, a second recruiting round would be less suitable due to timetable reasons.

Transcription of interviews was done manually by typing while watching the recording with the start/stop technique. Remarks about emphasized wordings and gestures to describe their words were done in the text by bold or cursive markings. Repeated wordings, for example, "so to speak" from the respondent were excluded, though they did not interfere with the meaning of wordings. Apart from that, transcription was made literally. In the following section, the analysing procedure will be described more in detail.

## **4.6 Analysis process**

Transcription was read initially to become familiar with the interview as text, to look for what they said more specifically, with what words related to descriptions and reasons to hike. When getting more familiar with the text, the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used.

### **4.6.1 IPA – Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

With origin from Ricoeur's (1970, referenced in Shineborne, 2011) distinction between two strategies for understanding meaning: a hermeneutics of meaning recollection, of empathic engagement, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, of critical engagement. These

approaches can lead to a better understanding of respondent's lifeworld and this thoughts from Ricoeur are the fountain for the emergence of IPA (Shineborne, 2011). IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Approach) is an approach to dealing with hermeneutic interpretation. It has three stages (Shineborne, 2011). The three stages are 1. Empathic analyses approach – to see respondent's lifeworld by putting oneself in their position. 2. Critical, questioning approach. 3. Analysis of small details extracting meanings from the text. Reading the interviews again, starting with IPA, starting with an empathic analysis approach (Shineborne, 2011), where the focus is on putting one in the other's position, trying to interpret meaning construction and objectives. Notes about possible categories were taken, was there a pattern in their descriptions? What similarities were there? What kind of differences?

Reading again, this time interpreting using a critical, questioning approach trying to, from a critical standpoint, question their reasoning of this subject. In this way, contradictions were noticed in their different statements and gave the ability to weigh their wordings to one another to find out what they meant, in phenomenological concept words; trying to find the essence in their words.

Similarities were marked continuously, and categories emerged by studying these marks. To make it clearer, texts were marked with different colors to highlight which category the word(s) or sentences belonged to. These words were quantified and grouped into categories.

Reading the material again concluded the number of categories to be four. The respondents' answers related to personal objectives and drivers for solo hiking could then be categorized.

The third approach in IPA, the analysis of small details in the text to extract meanings was used at this stage, also called Idiographic analysis with more in-depth information. The number of details varied in the material, but by focusing on these details psychological meanings appeared and could be interpreted.

By shifting from one perspective to another, from approaches 1 and 2, the focus is to extract and draw an interpretation of meaning from the interview texts. In that way, focus will be on the transcribed text instead of applying a theoretical approach from

outside the text. According to Shineborne, (2011), referring to Smith et al, (2009), this approach can be viewed as shifting, combining phenomenology and hermeneutics.

IPA requires a combination of phenomenological and hermeneutic insights. It is phenomenological in attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant but recognizes that this inevitably becomes an interpretative endeavor for both participant and researcher. Without phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen (Smith et al., 2009, p.37. referenced in Shineborne 2011)

#### **4.6.2 Hermeneutic circle**

Personal presuppositions from researchers' risk affecting the interpretation of answers as well as respondents' answers can be affected by them too, as well as their pre-suppositions. (Shineborne, 2011).

In hermeneutics, there are different interpretive principles. An important principle applies to the continuous back-and-forth process between parts and the whole, which is called the hermeneutic circle (Debesay et al, 2008). Based on an often abstract and intuitive understanding of the text, its parts are interpreted and based on these interpretations, the parts are put back in relation to the whole. These circular structures are to present the process of understanding that is made possible through an alternation between pre-understanding and understanding, and between understanding of parts and understanding of entirety (Debesay et al, 2008). Regardless of what type of interpretation of the respondents, through observation, in the interview situation, during transcription, and in the analysis of the interviews, it is thus one's preconception that underlies, which makes preconception a part of the hermeneutic circle (Debesay et al, 2008). The process of understanding takes place in the

hermeneutic circle. The circle metaphor symbolizes the context within which interpretation is constructed (Debesay et al, 2008).

Hermeneutic interpretation takes place on several levels. At one level, the researcher emphasizes the actors' interpretations. At another level, the researcher interprets the respondents' interpretations, partly based on presupposition as well as holistic understanding. This social-scientific interpretation, with its language and pre-understandings from sociology viewed in contrast (or complementary) with the actor's interpretation, knowledge, and language about the phenomenon, is called Giddens' double hermeneutics (Giddens, 1982). In this thesis, I have interpreted something that has already been interpreted by the informant, from our different perspectives, a fact to be aware of.

### **4.6.3 Validity and reliability**

In research, you are obliged to ask if the study and its findings and interpretations are valid and reliable. Validity is about if the research is accurate and measures what is intended (Kvale, 1996). This is affected by the researcher's choices for example choosing the research process and the presuppositions the researcher possess. Presuppositions of the phenomenon are important to reflect upon and be critically aware of, to avoid bias.

Reliability can be tricky in qualitative research since interpretation and presuppositions are present factors "built-in" in the research process. I acknowledge this in this paper. I encourage readers to be very cautious to transfer findings to other contexts. It is important to handle data carefully, do a thorough transcription, question my interpretation and work with a method (IPA) to ensure reliability.

#### **4.6.4 Phenomenological approach and hermeneutic analyse**

Phenomenology is both a method and a philosophy that studies different ways in which the world appears to us through our experiences. A phenomenological approach was chosen, aiming for this project to have respondents talk about their lived experiences and their relationship to the phenomenon - and thus gain insight into their lifeworld. (Kvale, 1996). The respondent's own experience is the important source. The phenomenological approach to answering the problem is based on the participants' own experiences, while the hermeneutic approach justifies their descriptions, and the further interpretation of these experiences. As the purpose of the study is to understand the participants' lifeworld of hiking solo in nature, the analyses in the study will be placed within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition.

Hermeneutics or the doctrine of interpretation aims to understand the meaning of a phenomenon (Kvale, 1996). How should we proceed to achieve understanding? In this case, it will involve interpreting oral language, reformulated into text. Hermeneutics places great emphasis on the researcher's presuppositions. In hermeneutic analysing, the researcher's interpretation will not only be based on the specific understanding established during the study itself but will be based on the more general pre-understanding the researcher has before the study (Kvale, 1996). This pre-understanding can include the researcher's own experiences and ways of looking at it. Hermeneutic analyses assume that all understanding is based on different types of preconceptions (Kvale, 1996).

“An interview interpretation is ready when the themes form a sensible pattern and form a coherent unity” (Kvale, 1996 p. 48). In this study, the formation of the four categories.

Kvale(1996), writes about how important it is to know the theme to analyse in qualitative interviews, or more specifically, the hermeneutic explication of the text.

“Conducting a qualitative research interview requires an extensive knowledge of the theme so that the interviewer may be sensitive to the nuances of meanings expressed and the different context into which the meanings may enter” (Kvale, 1996 p. 49).

In the following, findings will be presented. Categories, keywords and a analyse discussion of the findings before the thesis continues with a more extended discussion and ends with a conclusion.

## 4.7 Discussion of method

I know solo hiking through some experience, but I am not IN the subgroup of solo hikers. In that way, I can still see the phenomenon from the outside.

This study may have a weakness from a phenomenological viewpoint, since my "data" comes from participants who do not describe their experiences as they **are**, in the lived moment, but more from an analytical viewpoint, trying to recall their experiences and describe them “from their memories”. This I could avoid by asking my respondents to make their descriptions on their next hike, and then have their description “fresh”. But even that has its problems since the writing (or recording) itself turns the respondent's attention from the experience. Contradictive, the recall itself may be beneficial because their thoughts have had the time for reflection and processed to have even better “quality” as reflection. This could also be seen as a first interpretation. In addition, I think it is a strength to have the descriptions "served" in an interview setting because then, the spoken descriptions become more revealing of people’s emotions compared to written language. This can of course vary if the respondents are more oral or better at the written language but that is difficult to find out.

The categorising process may make comparisons more difficult but is more of a general issue in qualitative research (Kvale, 1996). My respondents have given these categories, which may not necessarily be the case with other respondents. Mainly, it is my

respondents' answers that I know of. It is common though, in qualitative research, to not be able to conclude from the sample (Kvale, 1996).

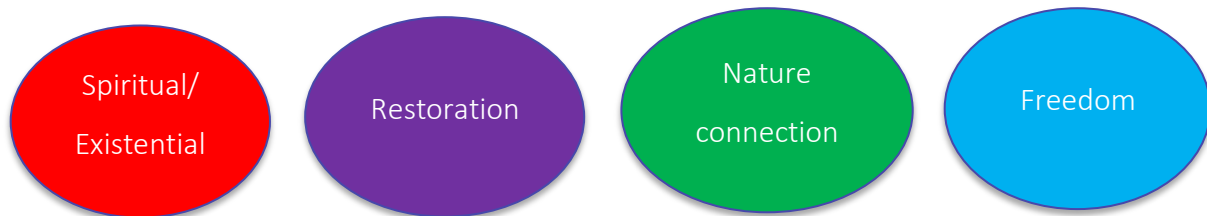
The categorisation is created through my interpretation of respondents' answers and descriptions, which may end up in another categorisation for another researcher with a difference in the interpretation compared to mine. This could cause a discrepancy in the results.

Phenomenology have although created an opportunity to encounter lifeworld of hiking. "Indeed, what makes phenomenology so fascinating is that any ordinary lived through experience tends to become quite extraordinary when we lift it up from our daily existence and hold it with our phenomenological gaze" (Van Manen, 2017 p. 812).

## 5 Results/Findings

The interpretive phenomenological analysis of the data showed that respondents answers belonged to four categories. These categories are claimed as this thesis key findings. As been showed in the method section, the four categories show the samples' objectives and drivers for solo hiking. The categories are here presented:

*Figure 1-1. Categories of respondents' objectives for hiking solo*





## 5.1 The Spiritual/Existential category

The most significant finding related to the research question “What is the rationale behind solo hiking meaning construction?” is the importance of spirituality in hiking solo. Respondent David had existentialism all clear to himself as one reason for him since he spent much time thinking about life when he is hiking. *“To be a human is to be part of nature”*, and *“Hiking is a metaphor for life”*, are examples of how he expresses that. But also, Fia: *“Come at ease with yourself,” “becoming a part of nature, still grounded in yourself”*, thinks that hiking gives her spiritual experience and a chance for self-development. All other respondents may not have the extensive language to describe this, but all of them touch upon it with some keywords revealing that they experience existential emotions/thoughts when they hike alone, for example, Anna: *“Hiking is soul care,” “Hiking is contemplative.”* Bea describes it to be in nature and *“Inhale everything worth something,”* and David: *“Hiking is a metaphor for life itself”*. This is the most significant category with thirty-two quotes from respondents and seemingly very important to two of them (David and Gunilla) but present with everybody.

“Contemplation” is the most common word connected to this category, and words and sentences formed with similar meanings, like *“soulful experience,”* meaning there is something profound in the hiking experience. *“Have time alone with your thoughts”* represents a need for peace, a need to elicit lengthy thoughts or presence. Presence here and now is surrounded by positive adjectives: *“Presence, heavenly presence.”* And indicates that the hike is considered something ‘real and concrete. *“Inhale” everything worth something*” is a beautiful quote indicating the great value and importance hiking is to the respondent.

Contemplation meaning from a dictionary: a calm, lengthy, intent consideration (Wordnet, 2022)

An extract from the interview shows Christer's reason how contemplation and, in his case, how it contributes to his creation of identity:

Interviewer: “Have hiking helped to get that crystallized?”:

*"It is like this on a longer hike: The first day I go through my work, economy, family situation, renovation, you name it, everything goes through in the head, and a bit into the second day it is as if the brain says: "I have no more now" "You have to fend for yourself". And then you just walk (smiles). Then it is quiet. And the feeling of it getting quiet in my head, it is so very strange. You are never silent, you always have that inner dialogue otherwise, you think about something, you relate to something. But the thing about just relating to putting one foot in front of the other is something completely different (pauses). And it has meant that with many tours like this, you have had time to think a few laps around and feel for a few laps. Without distractions, as it always will be. I can go here at home, just tonight I am by myself, and of course, I can think of things. But then I realize that the dishwasher needs to be emptied, I wonder if it does not need to be fixed a bit there and is it something on TV and so there are these distractions. You do not have that when you are out hiking. You have time to think clearly. It has definitely helped to get there, (to know what I am, authors clarification)*

You can read the whole list of keywords and short sentences in appendix 3.

### **5.1.1 The Restoration category**

Respondents relating to "Restoration" category talks about how solo hiking is their pause from daily life, their meditation, and their spot for mental restoration. Not so much about physical restoration even though one respondent talks about doing the opposite from work, where the brain is working, and the body is still. *"Having an energy boost"*, and *"Invigorating"* are some objectives. *"Hiking is essential for my mental health"*, Erika from south Sweden says. She also describes hiking *"...as a physical need for me"*. Interpretation of Erika's words indicates that she is now used to having these refreshing hikes and do not want to be without them, because hikes make her feel

good, and contain good health for her. She is retired and may have a strong focus on health because of that?

Two respondents mention earlier problems with fatigue syndrome and describe hiking solo as *“rehabilitation from that”* and *“the thing that keeps me floating”*. Hiking is then a breathing hole to have an essential pause from everyday life and get energy back.

*...but as soon as I get the opportunity I try to get out for longer periods and it is enough with two or three days but that I at least get a break, it is like mine... I usually say that it is my meditation and my wellness in one, it is like soul care in some way (Anna).*

Anna utters the concept of "soul care", which is apposite because it is not just about the body and physical benefits that one is looking for. "Soul care" could be relevant for the category Spiritual as well, but in this context, she speaks about it related to *“having a break”*, the relevance is foremost Restoration.

### 5.1.2 The Nature connection category

Respondents have different interests and needs connected to nature. Description of nature is often described with words like beautiful views, enjoyment in nature, and how they enjoy the silence and tranquility in nature. Further, descriptions of how it is *“to enjoy the little special things, like a water drop on a leaf,”* as Fia does, and the emotional description of how *“vast the Swedish mountain range is”*, like 'Gunilla does, are categorized here in the Nature connection section. The Nature category is not the most prominent one. Respondents are indeed fond of nature but analysing how they speak about their solo hikes bring forward that nature is not the key driver, yet still important. It is more important to reflect and be contemplative on the hike, and even restoration

seems more important as well. Conclusions about this are hard to draw. Most descriptions, and where importance show in emotions and talks with fervor, are the Spiritual category. Important to note here is that nature can have a crucial significance, but either it is taken for granted and not valued by the respondents to be most important **or** the interview questions may not have drilled into the matter sufficiently. But note, that many of the words, phrases, and descriptions below coming categories "Freedom" and "Spiritual, Existential" have their background in nature, and could in another categorization end up below "Nature."

One section where Fia speaks about a natural phenomenon shows the importance:

*But it was completely unexpected now when I slept last time, the ice sang something so incredible! I have never heard ice roar like it did last night. It was plus degrees when I got there, then it sank below zero and then the whole lake oscillated. It was like thunder, then you heard how it hissed. If I'm out, I'm not going to say I'm disappointed if I do not see a salamander or some old squaw but it's very fun when I do and I can, in that I can also enjoy a drop of water on a conifer, it does not have to be so spectacular stuff, but I look for little special stuff in every hike.*

Silence is of course important, as well as the beauty of nature, and that is highlighted in the interviews as well.

### 5.1.3 The Freedom category

Freedom is important to several of the interviewees and two of them use the word when asked to with one single word describe solo hiking. But also, statements show respondents feel that sometimes other people are a problem, either for disturbances, or even to be offensive. The avoidance of that, to be able to be in a place where no one or very few people are through solo hiking, is referred to as this category. An extract from an interview with Fia shows this:

Interviewer: What is the reason you want to continue hiking by yourself?

Fia: *“Because it is entirely on my terms. I do not have to compromise with anything.”*

A clear statement related to freedom.

Further, self-reliance is noted here, as self-reliance is, from the interpretation analysis, a freedom indicator. The way Erika and Gunilla talk about self-reliance indicates that it creates freedom to be able to walk further, see new places, feel content and free about knowing how to deal with nature, the equipment, and so on.

*... just that thing that the forest is not dangerous, not in the dark either. To discover that can give a sense of wellbeing” (Erika) “I am fully content in nature and never scared. That is, not ever. I am not afraid of the dark and I think it is, means a lot in the first years, in forests outside our town, when I was with dad at first, and then by myself. I learned to trust my skills, I always felt confident, always have” (Erika).*

*I feel confident with myself in a way that I maybe didn’t do before, before I started to get out”, continuing ...” I think it is huge freedom, to be capable, or what to, there is no good word in Swedish. I think self-reliance is a very good word in English, I feel free in it. (Gunilla)*

Category	<i>Spiritual/Existential</i>	<i>Restoration</i>	<i>Nature connection</i>	<i>Freedom</i>
Driver Frequence	32	24	20	19

Table 1-1: Frequency of keywords related to a category (all interviews).

Individually, respondents' descriptions on what gives them meaning in solo hiking, my findings through IPA, interpretative phenomenological analysis via hermeneutic circle that included empathic analysis as well as critical/questioning analysis ended up in **key drivers per respondent**. This is a conclusion based on their statements, how they speak of solo hiking when it comes to emotions, meaning construction, and significance to them as an individual. Finally, an evaluation was conducted weighing views, meanings, and emotions together to make key drivers visible. The figures illustrate all respondents analyse results. Every respondent's answer except one is leaning toward a single category.

In the right column in table 2 respondents' "one-word" description of a solo hike, is condensed into one word.

Respondent	IPA Interpretation	Category	Respondents' "one-word" description of solo hiking
Anna	Mental restoration	Restoration	Soul care
Bea	Invigorating	Restoration	Enjoyment
Christer	Self-discovering	Spiritual	Freedom
David	Explore Self	Spiritual	Existential
Erika	Mental Restoration	Restoration	Necessity
Fia	Nature Love/Simple free life	Freedom/Nature	Contrast effect
Gunilla	Spiritual nature-connection	Spiritual	Freedom

*Table 2-1 Key drivers per respondent*

## 6 Discussion

My intention in this thesis was to search for answers to what objectives and drivers there are for hikers to hike solo? In what way does it give meaning to find one's way in nature by yourself? How do hikers experience this phenomenon?

Findings, such as spiritual reasons for hiking, are mentioned by most respondents but seem to be especially important for two of them (David and Gunilla) in their way of constructing comprehensibility of this world and the self. Mau et al, (2021) state that long-distance walking may have a therapeutic effect, and that works as a motivation to do it. It seems to be common among hikers to think about meanings in life and the individual's place in the world. Williams (2010), referenced in Mau et al (2021) mentions the growing evidence of spirituality and good health, both in protective, preventive aspects but also in a healing manner to illness. Spirituality in the meaning of searching for meaning, purpose, and meaningful relationships (Mau et al, 2021). Findings in this thesis suggest confirming Mau et al (2021) and Williams (2010) earlier findings.

As respondent David, in his forties, from west Sweden puts it:

*“But it (hiking) made me realize the interplay with the self, to put oneself in a larger context and gain perspectives to my own life. It has deepened the existential part of hiking, to hike alone, in a very distinct way.”*

Another example from David makes us attentive to his thoughts regarding what it is to be a human being: *“...something about being a human being, that means being a part of nature, that it is our natural state.”*

Related to spiritual issues, findings in this thesis underline Thurfjells (2020) statements that spirituality connected to nature experiences seems to have a prominent role in society in Sweden today. A statement possibly transferable to other Nordic countries to some extent, due to cultural similarities

There are more examples in the text where it seems like hiking solo extracts thoughts about what it is like to be a human being in this world.

Gunilla, in her forties from a large city, put it this way:

*I think it is about to be in silence, with myself, to be able to be oneself without disturbances, think thoughts through, you think very differently I*

*think when you are hiking. Thoughts are unbroken and wander, and may continue, without anyone else to disturb.*

Both Gunilla and David mention the movement itself as something sensational. Gunilla: *“There is something in movement which does something, to be moving all the time, it does something to you...”* David: *“When you are in movement something very good is happening inside you, both physically and mentally...”*

Christer speaks about hiking as an activity that *“feels like me.”* *“...this is more like been taken form with age, sounds like I am...still, you are middle-aged, and it starts to crystallize what is me and what has earlier not been me.”* To summarize, it is about contemplation, the "silence in your head" when doing a hike solo in the wilderness. In Christer's case, it helps him understand himself and his identity-creating process. And suddenly it is easier to understand that hiking solo is a big and important thing, not just a walk. *“Indeed, what makes phenomenology so fascinating is that any ordinary lived through experience tends to become quite extraordinary when we lift it up from our daily existence and hold it with our phenomenological gaze”* (Van Manen, 2017 p. 812).

Bea, a semi-retired woman describes the benefits of hiking solo: *“You can decide where, you can decide for how long time, you decide tempo, you decide stops, you are boss completely”*

Christer, describing his hike in a remote vast mountain area: *“That **total** silence, tranquility...**unbelievable! Inspiring!**”*



Gunilla on why she hikes alone:

*I think it is about, I am self-reliant, I master it, I can do it. I can manage a lot of unexpected events, I can...be self-reliant. I trust myself in a lot of different situations which I did not ten years ago, and I have developed hugely. I feel confident about myself in a way I maybe did not before I started to get out".*

*"... self-reliance is a really good word in English, I feel free in that*

Self-actualisation was the most significant driver for solo travel, according to Yang et al, (2021). Self-reliance may be considered linguistic close to self-actualisation or at least it is concepts that fertilize each other. Anyway, I argue that, to some extent, this thesis confirms Yang et al (2021) in this matter that it is a driver for travelling alone and/or hiking solo.

Bea on one of the reasons she is hiking: *"You are relaxed, switched off, turned off, disconnected."*

Naor (2020) wrote that Nature can elicit a positive process for the individual by embodying, mirroring, and even confronting concretely and experientially, to make an individual discover new aspects of oneself and grow from that process. This touches upon the Restoration category but I think also from the Spiritual category. Many descriptions from the respondents indicate, like Naor (2020) put forward, that Nature is an "active agent" in the process of personal growth."

Christer talks about solo hiking as the thing "that keeps me floating", something that indicates that work is very important to him. So important that he allows it to take so much energy from him that hiking is necessary to get him restored, or in his words "keep him floating". It is surprising to me that restoration has this relatively big role in solo hiking, where all respondents mention it as a factor describing their drivers for hiking.

*What kind of environment am I in? Try to read nature and listen to it...to me, it is about turning the perspectives correctly, and see one's smallness in*

*the larger, but also one's place...in the great system of nature, which we are a part of. That makes me, I think I get my priorities right, and see myself in the larger whole, to learn the language to relate to nature, in a way.*

David's words indicate both nature's wonder, but also existential thoughts are raised when hiking.

Fia describes what I interpret as her love for the simple outdoor life in nature:

*I can still be rapt over green moss, swirling water, or a sunset or, so that enjoyment, a kind of visual enjoyment, I still got it, and it is constant" and "...I can be delighted by a water drop on a fir needle, it does not have to be spectacular stuff, but I look for small, special things on every hike.*

Returning to Svarstads (2010) categorization, where "the simple outdoor discourse" was one category. Fia seems to prefer this but is not highlighted by other respondents. This love for simple outdoor life seems to be profound for Fia, together with her preference for small wonders in nature and her wanting to have a contrast to everyday life. Because she had horrific experiences out hiking too, as in sexual harassment, it makes her very aware of safety issues. But she hikes anyway, which indicates her love for hiking is profound and that she will not allow anybody to destroy that. Regarding other obstacles to hiking solo, respondents mention the risk of getting injured. Every one of them seems to be aware and has calculated that risk. In some cases, it affects their hiking to adjustments to a safer hike than originally was planned.

Svarstads categories "recreation" and "belonging", earlier described in the literature review, seem to be subordinate according to these findings. The category of "Restoration" does not correspond with Svarstads (2010) "Recreation" since it is two different things. "Recreation" is about leisure activity with synonyms like pleasure and entertainment and "Restoration" is about restoring oneself physically and mentally, a kind of "reset button". "Belonging" category, connecting to the ground and culture, Svarstad (2010) rose concerns about how relevant that category would be. I can state that in this thesis it is not relevant, only highlighted shortly by David.

Is it important to have a distinct definition of hiking and solo hiking? From one perspective the definition may be subordinated. Like respondent Anna says, *"I think you can be allowed to define that by yourself if you are hiking or not"*. And that is an opinion you can have sympathy for, hiking is partly about freedom and if you define it, you will also exclude people or groups of people telling them that "this is not hiking", "this is hiking". Then you will lose some freedom in the hiking concept. And there is a risk that you lose hikers. Scared away by strict definers. Or simply not attracted to hiking anymore, maybe because of less attraction to other concepts, like "promenade" or "strolling"? From a researcher's perspective though, it may be of importance to define it. It will then be easier to conduct comparable research, at least in the positivistic paradigm, with comparisons between different quantitative studies for example, and in that matter, make progress researching hikes and hikers. It may even be beneficial for qualitative research projects in this area of study. And a wide definition that includes many people may work just as well. The importance may be to be more aligned in research, not to have a specific definition as possible. Anna highlights when she started to call her excursions a hike: *"At the beginning (of her hiking) there was always a goal. I would not have called it hiking. I started to do that when I did not have a target to reach, to see something, it was now about the whole journey"*. I interpret this as she started to define it as a hike when she gave the hike an intrinsic value. The whole journey, the walking itself, is the purpose. Anna continues: *"I think hiking is when you think that it is hiking, I think you can be allowed to define that by yourself if you are hiking or not."* Continuing with other aspects of definitions, or more correct, semantics: I consequently used the term "solo hiking" in this text. It has a slightly different tone compared to "hiking alone", which in translation may be closer to the Swedish term "ensamvandring". "Alone," "ensam" in Swedish indicate more of a feeling, that you feel lonely, compared to solo, which is more of a positive description, more focused on independence and free will to be on your own. I acknowledge that this is subjective, but it is my relation to these words and an explanation of how and why I used "solo" in this text. It has, in addition, to do with my respondents' hiking descriptions. Bea tells us her

feelings: *“That is my experience, that I do not feel lonely in nature. Nature becomes my companion, too.”*

## 7 Conclusion

I intended in this thesis to search answers for which are the key drivers for solo hiking, or as in traditional phenomenological terminology would be referred to as the essence of solo hiking. Why do people do it? Why is it such an old phenomenon reaching from ancient times via rituals and pilgrimages to self-exploration dealing with the meaning of existence, to a more invigorating view on why hiking? To conclude something from this material would be to remark that there are similarities and differences. Four categories emerged: Restoration reasons, Nature, Freedom, or Spiritual reasons. These categories of rationales for solo hiking can be used by tourism companies specializing in hiking, to be able to adjust offers for solo hikers and to better understand the hikers' objectives. Further, understanding how restoration works could be used by health care providers to adjust treatments for example. In psychology, a consciousness of mental restoration and spiritual searching, where nature seems to be a facilitator would increase value for tourist developers, health workers, and psychologists.

Further research would be beneficial for knowledge of how universal this thesis result is? Quantitative studies with the above-mentioned categories as a possible foundation may give those answers. Further research with a phenomenological approach more focusing on extensive details in respondents' descriptions would give more in-depth answers to why spiritual and existential rationales seem to be proportionately important.

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## **9 Appendices**

Appendix 1. Interview guide

Appendix 2. Information letter

Appendix 3. List of keywords

Appendix 4. Assessment from Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD)

## **Appendix 1:** <Interview guide for the project Why hiking solo?>

Interview guide for the project «Why hiking solo? »

**Topic:** What makes solo hiking meaningful?

**Ethics:** Interviews will be conducted online and recorded with both sound and video. The respondent consents to the use of the interview during the project time (until 2022-06-30). The material will be handled with confidentiality. Recordings will then be destroyed. In the interview transcription all interviewees will be anonymized.

**Research question:**

“What is the rationality behind solo hiking meaning construction?”

Interview guide:

Start with age, gender, residence, occupation?

Describe my intention to make my respondents talk about, describe their experiences, feelings of, state of mind, to freely speak about their interest in solo hiking. Questions below can be seen as back-up questions, to make respondents talk more. Ideally, question number one would be enough, although I realize our dialogue will probably make more out of the interview.

1. Describe your experience with hiking overall, is solo hiking the only way you hike or do you hike with others as well? How long duration or distance? Do you travel or do it in your home area? (Views on hiking definition)
2. Please tell me about your experience with solo hiking.
3. When you started hiking, what was your purpose with it back then? Is the purpose the same still? (Follow up: Why do you do it?)
4. Use one word to describe solo hiking! Why did you choose that word?
  
5. How would you describe a solo hike?
6. In what way is it meaningful to you to hike solo in nature?
7. Tell me/describe your latest solo hike experience (Thoroughly)

8. Describe your state of mind before and after a hike. Why and how do you think that is?
9. Describe negative aspects of solo-hiking. And positive?
10. This thing you get out from solo-hiking. Can you get that from other things in your life? Why not? /Which one? If not, can you imagine something that would, but you did not try yet?
11. Do you prefer a certain kind of landscape (to hike in)?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding solo hiking?
13. Extra: Tell me your views on sharing your solo experience with others? (Like facebook-groups)
14. Extra question: Sell in the concept of solo hiking to me! Why should I do it (more)? (What do you get out from it?) (Nature/Culture – what do you look for/attracted to)

#### **Justifications for the interview guide:**

I intend to start with some general questions about the respondents' relationship to hiking solo. The first question works as an “ice-breaker” or “grand tour” to learn about the respondent and get him/her to get comfortable and open up.

The set of questions are rather wide and open, which intend to make the respondent to speak freely and tell us more.

Open-ended questions are used to encourage rich descriptions. To minimise that I ask the questions, I would like the respondent to feel comfortable and lead the conversation. If not, I have of course prepared some follow up questions.

The questions are constructed to open up issues as the interview unfolds. The closing question invites the respondent to fill in any gaps that may not have been covered during the interview.

## Appendix 2

### Are you interested in taking part in the research project "Why hiking solo"?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to *Explore the reasons behind solo hiking*. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

#### *Purpose of the project*

*The purpose is to learn more of hikers' objectives and reasons for hiking solo. It is a master's thesis of 30 credits in the Nordic master of Friluftsliv programme that will be conducted January to June 2022 and will include approximately 6-10 interviews. Main objectives: what makes solo hiking meaningful? And to get answers why go hiking solo in nature?*

### Who is responsible for the research project?

*The University of Sørøst-Norge, Faculty of Humanities, Sports and Educational Science is the institution responsible for the project.*

### Why are you being asked to participate?

*The sample has been selected through inquiry in Facebook group "Ensamvandring" where participants were asked. A criterion is to hike solo regularly in nature (at least 3 times). The Facebook group have more than 20000 people and from the list of interested, voluntary written in my Facebook-post, you have randomly being chosen to participate.*

What does participation involve for you?

- *If you chose to take part in the project, this will involve that you participate in an interview. It will take approx. 45 minutes. The interview includes questions about hiking, hiking solo, nature, and your experience of this. Your answers will be recorded electronically»*

## Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

## Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

- *It is I, Henrik Erlingson and my supervisor in this project, Jonas Mikael, who are the only persons that will have access to the personal data.*
- *I will replace your name and contact details with a fictive name. The list of names, contact details and respective fictive names will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data.*

*Participant's citations in the thesis will be anonymized as well as personal information such as gender, age, etcetera.*

## What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end 2022-06-30. *Digital recordings, personal data and other information that can be linked to you as an individual will be destroyed and/or removed permanently at this date.*

## Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and

- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

-

### **What gives us the right to process your personal data?**

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with *The University of Sørøst-Norge* Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

### **Where can I find out more?**

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- *The University of Sørøst-Norge, Faculty of Humanities, Sports and Educational Science* via *Kirsten W Houe, Kirsten.W.Houe@usn.no*
- Our Data Protection Officer: *Paal Are Solberg, The University of Sørøst-Norge*
- Data Protection Services, by email: ([personverntjenester@sikt.no](mailto:personverntjenester@sikt.no)) or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,

Project Leader

(Researcher/supervisor)

Kirsten W Houe

Student

Henrik Erlingson

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## Consent form

*Consent can be given in writing (including electronically) or orally. NB! You must be able to document/demonstrate that you have given information and gained consent from project participants i.e. from the people whose personal data you will be processing (data subjects). As a rule, we recommend written information and written consent.*

- *For written consent on paper you can use this template*
- *For written consent which is collected electronically, you must chose a procedure that will allow you to demonstrate that you have gained explicit consent (read more on our website)*
- *If the context dictates that you should give oral information and gain oral consent (e.g. for research in oral cultures or with people who are illiterate) we recommend that you make a sound recording of the information and consent.*

*If a parent/guardian will give consent on behalf of their child or someone without the capacity to consent, you must adjust this information accordingly. Remember that the name of the participant must be included.*

I have received and understood information about the project *Why hiking solo?* and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

to participate in *interview*

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. *2022-06-30*

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(Signed by participant, date)

### Appendix 3

Words may occur more than once since they are listed from respondents' answers, in every appearance.

*Spiritual, existential keywords*

*Soul care*

*Contemplative*

*Time alone and your thoughts*

*Contemplation*

*"Inhale" everything that is worth something*

*Identification of who I am*

*Contemplation*

*Discovering your inner self*

*Hiking's intrinsic value*

*Find creativity through hiking*

*Contemplation*

*Find one's smallness*

*Learn "nature's language"*

*Improve relation to nature*

*The self in a wider context*

*Soulful experience*

*"To be a human is to be part of nature"*

*Meaning in movement-good for whole human*

*Hiking is a metaphor for life itself*

*Wonder of nature's complexity – Religious thoughts*

*I can sit and just gaze*

*We are from nature*

*Escape my apartment in adolescence*



*Something in movement, thinking long thoughts and move makes you come at ease with yourself*

*Contemplation*

*Infinity*

*Vast landscape*

*Become a **part** of nature, still grounded in you.*

*Presence, heavenly presence*

*I am absolutely not religious, **but**...almost religious experience*

*Everyone I met fulfilled of nature and that day that we shared.*

*Genuine meetings with others (hikers)*

*Restoration keywords*

Below you see all keywords/drivers respondents highlight connected to the category "Restoration": In total 23. Some of them resembles each other

*Pause*

*Meditation*

*Healthcare*

*Invigorating*

*Energy-boost*

*Rehabilitation*

*Restoration*

*Keeps me floating*

*Hiking away the anxiety and fatigue*

*Stress fades away*

*Hiking is essential for my mental health*

*Hiking is a physical need for me*

*Recreation, relaxation, escape to some extent*

*Thinking until thoughts are ready, unbroken thoughts*

*Shorter hikes, to have a break*

*Nature connection keywords*

In total twenty quotes, words connected to Nature experience or describing connection to nature in some way.

*Smell, listen*

*Experience nature*

*Beautiful impressions*

*Views, experiences*

*Connection with nature*

*Stop and listen*

*“Taking in” nature*

*My heart beats for fir woods and bogs*

*Hiking alone makes closer nature connection*

*Enjoy nature*

*Be rapt over green moss, rippling water, or a sunset*

*Enjoy silence and visual enjoyment*

*Incredible ice singing, like thunder and then fizzle.*

*Enjoy small special things, like a water drop on a leaf*

*Silence*

*Exploring new nature*

*Wonderful in good weather*

*Beauty of nature, just sit and watch*

*Changes through the day in the landscape*

*Vast*

*Freedom keywords*

*Left alone, in peace*

*Avoid people (who disturbs my experience of nature*

*All decisions by me*

*Want companion*

*Own decisions all the time*

*Total silence, Tranquility*

*Attentive to details (nature)*

*Like Walk offtrack*

*Feel completely safe, never afraid*

*No need to compromise with anything*

*Don't like the idea of arranged friluftsliv*

*There are beautiful and ugly nature*

*Nobody is disturbing*

*Self-reliance*

*Beyond rush and noise*

*Here and now, mindful*

*All decisions done by you*

*It never stops being fantastic, despite wind and blisters*

*Have an experience to myself*

# Assessment

Print

## Reference number

721738

## Project title

Why hiking solo? Exploring the rationality behind solo hiking meaning construction

## Data controller (institution responsible for the project)

Universitetet i Sørøst-Norge / Fakultet for humaniora, idrett- og utdanningsvitenskap / Institutt for friluftsliv, idrett og kroppsøving

## Project leader (academic employee/supervisor or PhD candidate)

Kirsten Wielandt Houe, Kirsten.W.Houe@usn.no, tlf: +4735952757

## Type of project

Student project, Master's thesis

## Contact information, student

Henrik Erlingson, henrik@realeco.se, tlf: +46705499336

## Project period

04.03.2022 - 30.06.2022

## Assessment (1)

### 03.03.2022 - Assessed

Our assessment is that the processing of personal data in this project will comply with data protection legislation, so long as it is carried out in accordance with what is documented in the Notification Form and attachments, dated 03.03.2022. Everything is in place for the processing to begin.

SHARE THE NOTIFICATION FORM It is mandatory for students to share the Notification Form with their supervisor (the project leader). To do this, please tap the "Share project" button in the upper-left corner of the form. Within a week, your supervisor must accept the invitation. In case the invitation expires, you have to repeat the procedure.

## TYPE OF DATA AND DURATION

The project will be processing general categories of personal data until the data specified in the notification form.

**LEGAL BASIS** The project will gain consent from data subjects to process their personal data. We find that consent will meet the necessary requirements under art. 4 (11) and 7, in that it will be a freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous statement or action, which will be documented and can be withdrawn.

**PRINCIPLES RELATING TO PROCESSING PERSONAL DATA** Data protection services finds that the planned processing of personal data will be in accordance with the principles under the General Data Protection Regulation regarding: - lawfulness, fairness and transparency (art. 5.1 a), in that data subjects will receive sufficient information about the processing and will give their consent - purpose limitation (art. 5.1 b), in that personal data will be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes, and will not be processed for new, incompatible purposes - data minimisation (art. 5.1 c), in that only personal data which are adequate, relevant and necessary for the purpose of the project will be processed - storage limitation (art. 5.1 e), in that personal data will not be stored for longer than is necessary to fulfil the project's purpose

**THE RIGHTS OF DATA SUBJECTS** As long as the data subjects can be identified in the data material, they will have the following rights: access (art. 15), rectification (art. 16), erasure (art. 17), restriction of processing (art. 18), data portability (art. 20). NSD finds that the information that will be given to data subjects about the processing of their personal data will meet the legal requirements for form and content, cf. art. 12.1 and art. 13. We remind you that if a data subject contacts you about their rights, the data controller has a duty to reply within a month.

**FOLLOW YOUR INSTITUTION'S GUIDELINES** Data protection services presupposes that the project will meet the requirements of accuracy (art. 5.1 d), integrity and confidentiality (art. 5.1 f) and security (art. 32) when processing personal data. If you are using a data processor in the project, the processing must meet the requirements under the General Data Protection Regulation arts. 28 and 29. To ensure that these requirements are met you must follow your institution's internal guidelines and/or consult with your institution (i.e. the institution responsible for the project).

## NOTIFY CHANGES

If you intend to make changes to the processing of personal data in this project it may be necessary to notify NSD. This is done by updating the Notification Form. On our website we explain which changes must be notified:

<https://www.nsd.no/en/data-protection-services/notification-form-for-personal->

data/notify-changes-in-the-notification-form Wait until you receive an answer from us before you carry out the changes.

FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT Data protection services will follow up the progress of the project at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded. Good luck with the project!