“Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.” Henry David Thoreau
Abstract

Every summer solo-hikers roam the wilderness in northern Scandinavia; across mountains and rivers; they are in awe of the nature. This thesis explores the question: What do they seek out there? It uncovers their aspirations and experiences with a phenomenological research approach. Sixteen solo-hikers were interviewed in-situ (northern Scandinavia, June to August 2014) to gain immediate insights into the phenomenon. The analysis derived four major experiential themes from their narratives: the solo, the nature, the physical and the inner experience. Accordingly, the solo-hikers seek an individual mixture of experiences often linked to their personal life-paths. The study suggests that the solo-hike is both a journey of distance and closeness. The individuals seek (a perceived, not spatial) distance to common life-spaces and make sense of wilderness as a place that is away. However, they speak about the solo-hike as an experience of closeness to their inner selves. The thesis links to key concepts in human geography (such as place, identity) and central discussions in tourism studies (e.g. solo-travel, travel motivations). Ultimately, it also offers a thorough theoretical discussion of adopting phenomenology in human geography.

Keywords: Solo-Travel, Wilderness, Hiking Tourism, Phenomenology, northern Scandinavia

Please cite as:

Contents

FOREWORD ................................................................................................................................. 1

INFORMING

AN INTRODUCTION TO PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHODOLOGY .................................................. 2
  What is phenomenology? ........................................................................................................... 3
  What can phenomenology do (or not do)? ............................................................................... 3
  What questions can be asked? ................................................................................................. 3
  What is phenomenological writing? ......................................................................................... 4
  What is Portraiture? ............................................................................................................... 4
  Which role do writer and reader take? ..................................................................................... 4
  Thoughts on writing ............................................................................................................... 5
THE STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS ......................................................................................... 5

APPROACHING

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC ............................................................................................. 7
  An Idea. A Question. ................................................................................................................ 7
  The Pre-reflective State .......................................................................................................... 7

FIELDWORK, FIRST FINDINGS & ANALYSIS ................................................................………… 10
  Setting: The Outdoors ............................................................................................................ 10
  The Geographical Scope: Northern Scandinavia .................................................................... 11
  Sampling ................................................................................................................................ 12
  Encounters ............................................................................................................................. 14
  Data Analysis ......................................................................................................................... 15
  Ethical Considerations ........................................................................................................... 15

INTERPRETING

AN INTRODUCTION TO INTERPRETATION .................................................................................. 17

DESCRIBING: CONSTRUCTING INDIVIDUAL PORTRAITS .......................................................... 19
  Ben ...................................................................................................................................... 20
  Madis ................................................................................................................................. 22
  Disa ................................................................................................................................. 23

THEORIZING: CONNECTING THE EMPIRICAL WITH THE THEORETICAL .................................. 26
  The Solo-Experience ............................................................................................................ 27
  The Nature-Experience ........................................................................................................ 29
  The Physical Experience ..................................................................................................... 33
  The Inner Experience .......................................................................................................... 35
  Modelling the Solo-Hiking Experience ................................................................................ 37

CONCLUDING: QUESTIONING THE ESSENTIAL .......................................................................... 41

FINAL REMARKS ...................................................................................................................... 44

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................ 46

ANNEX ...................................................................................................................................... 46
  Part I: On Form .................................................................................................................... 48
  Part II: On Content .............................................................................................................. 51

REFERENCES .............................................................................................................................. 53
List of Tables, Figures and Boxes

TABLE 1: SCHEME INTERVIEWEES & INTERVIEWS ................................................................. 13

FIGURE 1: INITIAL MIND MAPPING .................................................................................. 9
FIGURE 3: GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE .............................................................................. 12
FIGURE 2: PRE-DEFINING THE RESEARCH AREA ......................................................... 11
FIGURE 4: EXPERIENTIAL THEMES ............................................................................. 37
FIGURE 5: MODELLING THE SOLO-HIKING EXPERIENCE ........................................... 38
FIGURE 6: THE SOLO-HIKE AS A MOVEMENT BETWEEN TWO PLACES .................. 39
FIGURE 7: THE SOLO-HIKE ALONG THE LIFE-PATH ..................................................... 40

BOX 1: READER'S INVOLVEMENT: CAPTURING YOUR THOUGHTS ................................ 8
BOX 2: INTRODUCTORY STORY TO INTERPRETATION .............................................. 17
BOX 3: FURTHER RESEARCH IDEAS ............................................................................. 44
I was halfway through writing my thesis, completely bored of a topic I once loved, when I stumbled upon these words:

“Human science research is rigorous when it is “strong” or “hard” in a moral and spirited sense. A strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself.”

(Van Manen, 1990, p.18)

Courage. The word moved me, because it pointed towards something I had lost. It echoed what was wrong. In my pursuit to please, to do things the way I know they work, to get a good grade for my thesis, I had compromised away the integrity of my research and by doing so discarded any potential. I had an exemplary literature-methodology-results-discussion-structure, but within itself it was empty. It would not serve its purpose of lifting up my research; and the structure had flattened the content under its weight. Outer and inner form were in disharmony.

What followed were days of fear. Fear to start from the beginning. Fear to invent a form and then finally fail. Fear to confront criticism. But with the fear came also fire. I was burning again for my project, for the writing and the material to which I was dedicated. And there was this shimmery hope that if I succeed to do things right I could actually say something.

So, I nurtured my courage with these feelings to finally start from the beginning, make my own decisions regarding form as well as structure and weave my material into an original piece, which would give the message a genuine chance to unfold itself to the reader. And I told myself that I would rather fail with a way I could stand up for, than to produce a compromise I do not stand for.
An Introduction to Phenomenology as Methodology

How to depart from this promise to you (the reader) and to myself? How to pick up in form what I want to convey in content? As revealed by the title the topic of this thesis is: Out there – A Phenomenological Approach to Solo-Hiking in northern Scandinavia. The thesis consists of three main chapters to embrace this matter: Informing, Approaching and Interpreting. In the sections Approaching and Interpreting I draw a phenomenological line of thought to answer the question What do solo-hikers seek out there? Yet, before entering this discussion I argue that a brief introduction to phenomenology as methodology is crucial. Therefore, the section Informing stands before the core argument of the thesis and requests your patience for four pages of reading prior to entering the topical discussion. It reveals to you the foundations of the methodology of my work; what it requires and what it does. It informs, thus puts in form, your reading and leads up to the structure of this thesis.

An Introduction to Phenomenology as Methodology

For about one year now I have worked with phenomenology. It seemed to fit from the start. Fit with the question What do solo-hikers seek out there?; and the way of seeing and doing that developed with it. In the following, I build my introduction to phenomenology on two books that have informed my understanding and practice of this methodology.

The first and more influential one (for my work) is written by Max Van Manen: Researching Lived Experience (1990). His book is an “attempt to introduce and explicate a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research and writing.” (p.ix). It gives a comprehensive insight of what phenomenology can be (and cannot be), drawing from the great names whose work I consider crucial: Gadamer, Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Sartre, and so forth.

Van Manen does not focus on discussing their theories. He rather presents a methodology to inform a practicable method. And so he informed and inspired my research like a teacher at a distance. He has been an enlightening teacher asking: What is phenomenology? What are its possibilities? Which queries can be addressed? How do you reflect, interpret and write phenomenologically (with truly great emphasis on language, text and writing!)? What is the role of the reader? I will return to these questions in an instance. Ultimately, he has been a strict teacher; provoking me to think about what science is and should be.

I stumbled upon the second book the day I had decided to make some kind of individual portraits of the subjects of my research. Walking through the library the word portraiture caught my attention. I took the book out of the shelf, opened it and skimmed through the first page of the introduction: “blurs boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism”, “meaning and resonance”, “authentic and compelling narrative”. It fascinated me instantly because of genuine interest and because it could serve me. When I then spotted the word “phenomenology” I decided to take it home. I closed the book and read the title: The Art and Science of Portraiture by Sara Lawrence-Lightfood and Jessica Hoffmann Davis (1997). This

1 The distinction between Phenomenology and Hermeneutic phenomenology is complex and often blurred. I found insights on this matter in the article Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations (Susann M. Laverty, 2003). Yet, I do not aim to deepen this discussion in my thesis and perceive a certain freedom to draw from both schools of thought to develop an own methodology that is responsive to my question.

2 The reference to this volume reoccurred at multiple points of my reading on qualitative methods or of exemplary articles in my field, for example in The Coding Manuel for Qualitative Researchers (Saldaña, 2009) or in (Hermeneutic) Phenomenology in Tourism Studies (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).
work has similar themes to Van Manen’s book, but is even more of a *how-to manual*. The greatest gain for my project was literal: it taught me how to build individual *portraits* that are empiric and aesthetic.

In the following, I address: What is phenomenology? What can phenomenology do (or not do)? What questions can be asked? What is phenomenological writing? What is portraiture? And which role do writer and reader take? This entire part builds on Van Manen’s work and my synthesis as well as reflection on it. Therefore, he is not cited repeatedly after every paragraph, only when quoted literally; citations from other scholars are marked. The section on portraiture is derived from Lawrence-Lighfood’s and Hoffmann Davis’ work. These insights shall bring you towards a deeper theoretical understanding of phenomenology and allow an informed start into the reading of this thesis.

What is phenomenology?

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience or the *lifeworld*. It is a methodology that focuses on understanding and describing a particular phenomenon. According to Van Manen, a phenomenon then is a specific meaningful aspect of life. Phenomenology seeks to know *more* about this aspect and *approaches* it in a systematic way. It is this *systematicness* that distinguishes phenomenology from a *personal search for meaning in life* and makes it a true research method.

Others described phenomenology as the *study of the essence* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), the *search for in depth understanding of Being* (Arnold & Fischer, 1994) and the *study of the experiential and existential issues of being-in-the-world* (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

Phenomenology is complex since it is a science of the personal, the individual, which seeks to grasp the logos of the whole. According to Van Manen, the word *thoughtfulness* best characterizes phenomenology.

What can phenomenology do (or not do)?

“To do hermeneutic phenomenology is an attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the life-world, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explanation of meaning can reveal. The phenomenological reduction teaches us that complete reduction is impossible, that full or final descriptions are unattainable.” (Van Manen, 1990, p.18)

In the way Van Manen describes it, phenomenology differs in some aspects from other research. In its pursuit to approach the phenomenon, it recognizes that complete transparency is unattainable, but it is also this complexity that calls for our thinking in the first place. Thus, phenomenology strives to give a glimpse of reality or *closeness* to truth. Its goal is to deepen rather than flatten our understanding. It does so through description and interpretation, but does not give explanation or evaluation. There is nothing to be proved or disproved. Therefore, one will wait “in vain for the punch-line, the latest information, or the big news”; in phenomenology “it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary” (Van Manen, p.13). It stands for itself.

What questions can be asked?

Phenomenology asks: What is this experience like? It asks questions of meaning. It is interested in the nature of experiences and less in the factual. It seeks to discover what makes a certain phenomenon what it is and nothing else. Therefore, it does not solve problems nor

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3 *Lifeworld* is a typical term used in phenomenology. It refers to Husserl’s original understanding of *Lebenswelt* as the world of lived experiences.
seek abstraction. Yet, it gives deeper and richer insight into the question through description and interpretation. It is never a closed matter, but always remains in discussion.

A phenomenological question shall be approached without presuppositions in order to study it *freshly*, putting aside common and scientific knowledge. The question shall be studied in its context: the *lifeworld* (unlike experimental settings in natural sciences).

**What is phenomenological writing?**

Phenomenological writing is a trial to reveal the essence of the phenomenon to the reader. It wants to pull the reader towards the question, make her/him wonder and *nod* while reading.

The text aims to shape, inform and enrich. To achieve this effect a phenomenological text must have attributes such as convincing, empathic, oriented, strong or deep. The text uses anecdotes and metaphors to illustrate meaning.

Thus, the writing is more than a mechanical, summarizing exercise; it is a true act of *seeing*, highlighting and selecting. The writer asks: What does the whole convey? What stands out? What is essential? *Essential* means the aspects that make the phenomenon what it is and without it the phenomenon could not be what it is.

**What is Portraiture?**

Portraiture is a particular style of phenomenological writing and a method of qualitative research. It is introduced at this point, since I present so-called written *portraits* of the subjects further on in this thesis. It tries to capture the richness and dimensionality of narratives in a believable portrait. It seeks a balance between systematic empirical description and aesthetic expression. It does not aim to idealize, but intends credibility and realism. Lawrence-Lightfood states regarding her writing of portraits: “I blend the curiosity of a biographer, the literary aesthetic of a novelist, and the systematic scrutiny of a researcher.” (1997, p.15).

Whereas a positivist text hides the researcher, in portraiture the researcher’s voice is everywhere. Yet, this voice is restrained, disciplined and controlled not to overshadow the actor’s voice. The researcher is only visible as a witness and lays open the researcher’s own way of seeing.

A portrait is written to inform and inspire. It shall evoke feelings of familiarity. The text seeks to seduce readers to think more deeply about the phenomenon and to discover the *universal themes* by themselves. Further on in this thesis I will provide more details on this method and demonstrate my practice. There I also discuss matters of bias and researcher’s perspective.

**Which role do writer and reader take?**

These above sections give an understanding of the complexity and importance of writing for rigorous phenomenological research. It attributes the writer a central, creative and intellectual role. As Van Manen expresses it: “To write is to measure the depth of things, as well as to come to a sense of one’s own depth.” (1990, p.127).

In phenomenological research the interest of the researcher in the phenomenon is crucial (over the full length of time of the project). This interest often first rises from an ego-logical starting point, from a personal story. The researcher might use these own, easily accessible experiences as a starting point for the research and the writing. Yet, this is not done in a narcissistic way to trouble the reader with personal, autobiographical anecdotes, but to convince and gain interest through retelling these *possible experiences*.

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4 The term *phenomenological nod* refers to the idea that “good phenomenological description is something we can nod to, recognizing it as an experience we have had or could have had.” (Buysendijk in Van Manen, p.27).
The value of phenomenological research is to be heard or read, to convince and to question. It is there – in the confrontation with others – that the work comes into being. It is a relational act. Through reading the reader enters a dialogue. Thus, reading a phenomenological text is no passive act of receiving information, but a thoughtful, involved and intellectual process. The text discloses itself to the reader who can attentively decode the real thing, come closer to the essence. Through the text the reader can access experiences that she/he might otherwise have no own experience of or deepen the understanding of own experiences. The reader should ask questions, be sceptical, ready to learn and to develop interest. Ultimately, the reading of a phenomenological text invites true response.

Thoughts on writing
Before I introduce the question of this thesis to you I dedicate this small part to some own reflections on writing. I see writing mainly as a responsibility. Throughout the study people dedicated their time and trust to me; thus, for me working with the collected material is a highly ethical issue. I strive to do my best so that the material can stand out at its best. I would like to compare the writing with a mothering process; a truly responsible relationship to the material. Just like the caring mother the writer seeks to lift up the substance to its full potential. The material is like an infant and the writing process its maturing. There is doubt between the different degrees of freedom you allow on its way to unfold. Worries fill you that you might reduce it or keep it down. Pride fills you when you see that it is developing a life detached from you. Therefore, I interpret writing as a process of letting go – letting the material take its own shape with a motherly caution. It is those feelings of responsibility that pushed me to choose a form and tone for this thesis that really serves its purpose and that strives to be truly phenomenological.

A primary aim was to make the text open and accessible. Through simple language I expose the scientific process, give the reader the authority over scientific evaluation and permit true critique. Secondly, I argue that in this form nothing is lost regarding content and scientific validity. I believe that the science – the knowledge – lies in the internal content and not in the formal outside of a text. Therefore, I sought to construct an aesthetic, natural narrative in this thesis with the information woven into it instead of delivering pre-digested, straightforward content. It shall allow the reader to derive the content intuitively and not mechanically. Further, through its open form the text strives to appeal to and address the reader empathically from person to person (e.g. through the use of I and you) to be read with interest as well as mindfulness. In this way, it also makes itself accessible to a wider audience.

Finally, I find personal comfort and pleasure in this writing, since I now see harmony between inner and outer form. It allowed me to regain control and liberated me from the feelings of imprisonment I conveyed to you in the foreword.

The structure of this thesis
This thesis is not a summary of a phenomenological work; it breathes phenomenology in the sense that it fully recognizes the character of phenomena. It understands phenomena as complex meaningful aspects of life that we can recognize as something, reflect on them, collect insights and interpret; but we can always only get closer to an understanding never fully decode the phenomenon. Therefore, this thesis offers the reader an approach to the topic and possible interpretations of the studied phenomenon, but it does not deliver explanations for causality or draws final conclusions. Its power lies in making aware and in questioning. The thesis is structured as a progressing phenomenological line of thought. After this first part informed on my methodology and shaped your expectations, the following part (Approaching) introduces the idea, the question. Then, first thoughts are structured and the phenomenon
The structure of this thesis

delimitated. From there you can move with the researcher to the field, follow the process of data collection and gain some factual knowledge.

The core work then lies in the third part: Interpretation. There, I deliver three ways to work with the material – three different interpretations. These shall allow you to take multiple perspectives of seeing. It is my response to the problem I depict with phenomena that we can only approach but not fully grasp them. Therefore, I give the material three different chances to unfold itself; three chances to get closer towards an understanding of the phenomenon.

The main text is accompanied by an annex, which is meant as a truly complementary element. There you will find a collection of material that taught me and inspired the thesis in form as well as content so you can inform yourself and make your own evaluations. This also lifts the weight of lengthiness from the main text; only crucial elements remain for the central argument, but it gives the interested reader a chance to read more of it.

Lastly, I thank you for entering this dialogue and wish you an insightful reading.
An Introduction to the Topic

Approaching

An Idea. A Question.

When I go to a party or I meet new people during fika, the Swedish coffee break, the conversation often goes the same way. We exchange names, and we observe who brought whom. And soon there is an intimate moment with the person closest to me, who asks: “What do you do?” It is a difficult question for me, since I study Human Geography with a focus on Tourism. Nearly nobody knows what that actually means, so I tend to say: “Tourism Research, I mean not tourism management with hotels and stuff, but research. I like to find out why people move or travel the way they do; what motivates them and what they experience.” “So for example?” the person tends to ask. And then I start to talk about this project, how I have been studying solo-hikers for one year now. “Solo-hikers?” “Yes, people here in northern Scandinavia that walk quite long distances, for many days, mostly just with a backpack.” ”Ah, like the guy from Into the Wild?” “Yes, more or less.” We laugh. And then the persons wonder how I found the insights on solo-hikers; they ask if I have sent questionnaires and I tell them a bit proudly: “No, no, I have also hiked, for three months actually last summer; and when I met somebody else who hiked alone I interviewed that person.” Then, a moment of silence follows; I can see it in their eyes as they grasp the scope and the idea of my project. And then immediately there comes a reaction. People intuitively position themselves towards the topic. “Oh my gosh, I could have never done this. I cannot stand to be alone.” “Wow, I want to do something like that so badly.” “Ah, I wonder how it is with hiking, I biked actually quite long distances by myself.” Then, they try to find out more, firstly about me: how far I walked, how it feels to be alone, if I was scared, if the trip changed me, what the best experience was. They want to hear some adventure stories. At this point usually a third or fourth person already joined the conversation. So, I talk about the mosquitos, which makes them laugh, I tell them about when I broke through the ice, which makes them feel the severity of such a trip, and I talk about the silence and peace in nature. Afterwards, they question me and ask about the others: “What about the others?” “How many did you actually meet?” “Why do people do that?” “How old were they and how many girls were among them?” They confront what they know with what I can tell them. And they refer me to some sources from their insights. We speak about movies, mostly Into the Wild but also Touching the Void, 127 Hours or they mention the one where the girl walks through the Australian desert, or where the guy bikes somewhere, was it Kazakhstan? “And do you know the new one, Wild from that girl who hikes alone in the US?” They ask: “Was it like that?”

The Pre-reflective State

“Was it like that? What is it like? What do people seek out there?” These are truly phenomenological questions that address a meaningful aspect of our lifeworld. They question what essentially constitutes the experience of solo-hiking.

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5 Since the reference to the movie and book Into the Wild reoccurs throughout the thesis I would like to give a brief insight for readers who are not familiar with the story. It is based on the real travels of Christopher McCandless who left his family and common life behind, hitchhiked through the US and ended up in the Canadian wilderness. First he enjoys the isolation and finds insights he was looking for; yet, when he finally discovers that “Happiness is only real when shared” and seeks to return, there is no way back over a high river in spring. He dies alone, poisoned from eating wrong plants. It is a movie of the search for meaning and coming-of-age.

6 These are both movies about surviving in the outdoors after near fatal hiking or climbing accidents.
It is also typical of a phenomenological topic that people feel concerned about and interested in. As the narrative above shows, the topic of solo-hikers in northern Scandinavia does not seem abstract or constructed to people. It is a matter that concerns them, makes them question and wonder. From my diary: “I have the feeling that I am not unique out here. I believe this search is something essentially human. It occurs to others. It holds a meaning.” And people want to know more about this thing, the phenomenon. They seek insights barely conveyable in the chitchat of a party or during fika, insights I try to deliver in this thesis. And they give me their email addresses so that I would send them my finished work.

As stated earlier, the phenomenological research process often departs from a personal (ego-logical) viewpoint. So, for me it started with the idea to hike alone. I remember these feelings: wanting to walk far and wanting to walk alone in the most remote area I could reach. Yet, from the beginning I was also sceptical towards these motivations. I wondered about my true aspirations and the purpose of the trip. And from the viewpoint of a human geographer I wanted to know what others do out there. How do others feel? Why do they walk alone? What do they search for? What do they gain? What do they experience? What is it like?

In this way my longing to hike transformed into a research project and my personal experience moved into the background. The question I formulated as my leading question was:

“What do solo-hikers seek out there?”

Phenomenologists argue that the departure from such a question into the research process is to become aware of one’s own pre-reflective, pre-theoretical attitude. Thus, by asking “What do I know (or believe to know) about the solo-hiking experience?” the researcher creates a certain distance to these presuppositions.

In Linda Finlay’s article Debating Phenomenological Research Methods (2009), one can read that opinions on how to deal with these first notions differ. Some scholars radically argue that phenomenological work shall be presuppositionless, putting aside all we think to know; this is sometimes referred to as bracketing (a term coined by Husserl). Others believe that this is humanly impossible; we are always biased by our background. Giorgi, for example, states: “Nothing can be accomplished without subjectivity, so its elimination is not the solution. Rather how the subject (the researcher) is present is what matters, and objectivity itself is an achievement of subjectivity.” (1994, p.205). They suggest we should rather become aware of what we think to know and confront it with the reality, test it, question it (e.g. Colaizzi, 1973; Gadamer, 1975). I choose this second path for my method, since it also acknowledges that through our intuitive notions we might already get some things right. In a later stage we can use these pre-reflections and confront them with the real insights gained in the field.

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Box 1: Reader’s involvement: Capturing your thoughts

If you would like to follow this process fully, I argue that this could be an appropriate point to halt your reading and try to capture your own presuppositions. Just below I present a mind map of my first thoughts on the topic. Yet, those aspects are not a given departure point; they were my departure point. If you are interested in doing so, I argue, it will enrich your further reading and allow you to realize the differences between your and my way of seeing; and increase your feeling of discovery and own thought.

In order to become aware of your own presuppositions you could ask yourself: What do I know (or believe to know) about solo-hikers? Do I have any solo-hiking or similar experience? What do I think are their aspirations? What would I guess to find out? Whom would I expect to encounter? What do I think it is like to hike alone? How would I respond to the central question at this point: What do solo-hikers seek out there?

Can you structure these ideas somehow? I suggest that you could even try to capture your thoughts on paper (e.g. through mind mapping/listing a couple of assumptions) or confront your position in discussion with another person. If you seek a starting point, I have collected some inspirational material in annex 2. I propose this exercise as a stage of phenomenological reading; yet, it is not crucial in order to follow the main line of thought.
I have asked myself similar questions, tried to organise them and created a mind map that initially directed my fieldwork. To capture the very first notion of solo-hiking, I turned towards my everyday knowledge: Thoreau’s texts, movies, own hiking experiences, stories. Secondly, as a student in human geography, I reviewed books and articles to enhance my theoretical knowledge, mainly regarding travel motivations. Accordingly, I interpreted (and still interpret) solo-hiking primarily as a touristic activity. Generally, the research process was neither purely deductive nor inductive, but drawing from theory and original material when it seemed appropriate and reasonable in order to answer the research question. Therefore, I present the reviewed literature together with the collected material further on in this thesis and not as a separate section. In this way I want to avoid repetition and show how essential literature and material lift up one another. In the mind map below you can clearly see that my background influences my terminology: e.g. escapism or place attachment. Yet, you can also recognize that I tried to conceive the depth of this form of travel: ideology of hiking, performance or meaning in life. The map does not reveal the main foci or assumptions to you. Though, there were a few major presuppositions. Firstly, I gave a high importance to the term wilderness and imagined people seek a wilderness experience in contrast to society, and define wilderness in a specific way. I hypothesised that northern Scandinavia represents an ideal level of wilderness regarding comforts and security. I further thought people’s ideology of hiking is strongly shaped by popular culture and they might seek to imitate something like the ideal hiker. Furthermore, I supposed the trip is embedded in the person’s life history; it could represent a moment of transition, reflection or search for meaning. Ultimately, you can see that I organised the ideas in three major themes: the individual’s relationship to the self, society and nature. Becoming aware of what I believed to know created some detachment from those thoughts. I could abstract from them and let them be on paper. I also printed this map and took it with me to the outdoors for my fieldwork. I suggest, if you have equally put some thoughts on paper, to keep them close and confront as well as test them throughout your reading, just as I did in the field: being open but initially guided by them.

Figure 1: Initial Mind Mapping
Fieldwork, First Findings & Analysis

From the pre-reflective state the phenomenologist moves into the field seeking to collect empirical evidence. How could the solo-hiking experience be practically studied? The word *fieldwork* truly captures its own meaning: the researcher goes out, becomes engaged and physically active. For this project it meant literally to go *out there* and to hike alone in order to encounter other solo-hikers. I thought this frame would give room for meaningful conversations (in-depth interviews) to explore their experiences, collect them like *experience-pieces* and put them later together to a greater picture. It was a very explorative work directed towards deeper understanding.

The following section elaborates on my choices regarding method: setting, geographical scope, sampling, encounters (data-collection), data analysis and ethical considerations. The decisions guiding the research process are briefly discussed and then directly linked with the factual information gained; for example when sampling is discussed, the factual findings on *whom? where? and when?* are presented in a table to give an overview.

Setting: The Outdoors

Firstly, you could question why it was decided to study solo-hiking in the outdoors. Were there no easier and more effective ways to contact solo-hikers? Here, I argue that the insights gained in the natural setting were much more profound. Other scholars have equally claimed that the best environment to study human experiences is the environment where these experiences occur (Chhetri, Arrowsmith, & Jackson, 2004). Thus, it was sought to encounter other solo-hikers in their *lifeworld*, on the path, at a campfire, etc. It was initially expected (and later proved to be advantageous) that people would have abundant time, willingness to talk and would be somewhat *loaded* with information. Besides, this way allowed meeting them as an equal, a solo-hiker, sharing their experiential world and building a trust-based relationship for the conversation.

In a similar study on hiking experiences, Roberson Jr. and Babic (2009) likewise carried out in-situ interviews and highlighted the benefits of the natural surrounding to capture the spirit of the moment. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) also emphasized the importance of the context as a source for understanding. This contrasts the positivist paradigm where context is treated like noise or disturbance leading away from truth.

Further, scholars also highlight possible constraints of natural environments. Indeed, the setting held a few challenges: mainly, every encounter was a surprise, thus there was an element of insecurity if, when and where I would meet people. I will get back to this aspect in an instance. Besides, the spontaneity of the encounters is demanding for the researcher. I called this *readiness to interview*, where the researcher copes with own needs (hunger, cold, fatigue) to always be prepared, fresh and sincerely interested whenever an encounter occurs.

This was the more challenging part of researching in the outdoors, however, it was rewarded when recognizing the value in the material and when even the interviewees pointed at the surroundings: “I mean look! The sun is shining now… it’s so good we are here for this.” (Disa)
The Geographical Scope: Northern Scandinavia

Where could solo-hiking be studied? Besides obvious external constraints, such as money as well as time, I based the geographical decision on the idea of relative remoteness. I pre-defined the area circled in red in figure 2, which comprises parts of northern Sweden, Norway and Finland. This area is remote in the sense of far off from the centre of Europe, less urbanised than other places and has one of the lowest population densities (grey colour in the map). Studying at Umeå University in northern Sweden, this area was also practically reachable and I had previous knowledge of its touristic structures as well as its reputation as a hiking region. Furthermore, I suspected that these regions would have a special appeal to solo-hikers since they are often referred to as Lapponia, the arctic or last wilderness of Europe. This would give a mystical frame to their experiences. However, I would like to stress that I interpret the latter mainly as social constructs and refer to them not neutrally, but from the hikers’ perspective.

The exact paths were chosen during the preparation phase and selected according to their length (preferably longer to have the chance for more encounters), reputation as hiking area and geographical distribution throughout the three countries. Figure 3 shows the predefined area from a closer perspective and location of the paths I hiked: comprising parts of the Kings Trail (Kungsleden) and the Padjelanta Trail in Sweden, trails on Senja and in Finnmark in Norway as well as one trail in Finland close to Lake Inari. As you then see in the third map all encounters took place in a relatively small part of the whole area: namely on the Kings Trail or very near to the latter in northern Sweden. This spatial aspect has affected the fieldwork tremendously. The data collection took place from June to August 2014. I encountered four solo-hikers relatively at the beginning in Sarek Nationalpark on the Kings Trail. Afterwards, for more than one month, during all hikes in northern Norway and Finland, I did not encounter a single other solo-hiker and generally very few (or even no) other hikers. Thus finally, I adjusted the route and returned to the northern Kings Trail to finish data-collection. Between Nikkaluokta and Abisko I was able to conduct twelve more interviews.

7 Nikkaluokta – Abisko is a popular route comprising parts of the Kings Trail and giving with the possibility to climb the highest mountain of Sweden: Kebnekaise (2106m).
Even though this spatial aspect is not in the focus of the study, it is a relevant result. One could wonder why this crowding occurs. I would suggest that the high profile of the Kings Trail, accessibility of information and level of comforts (huts, bridges, etc.) are possible reasons. Besides, the Kings Trail is with a length of more than 400 kilometres the second longest path in northern Scandinavia. Yet, this matter requires further research attention.

Sampling

Generally, sampling was relatively simple. Since the area was pre-defined, every person who hiked alone was theoretically a subject for the study (except day-trippers). I initially aimed for 5 to 20 interviews. Finally, 16 interviews with solo-hikers were conducted; then data-collection was stopped since it was perceived that the answers reoccurred and some saturation was reached. To speak in phenomenological terms: it was understood that more empiric evidence would not deepen the understanding of the phenomenon.

Table 1 contains some factual insights on the interviewees. Even though the average age was around 34, the middle-aged were relatively underrepresented (possibly according to their family involvement). Regarding age and marital status, there seems to be three major groups: people in their twenties and single, around age forty and single (except Magnus) and around age sixty and married (or divorced). However, with these small numbers one cannot claim representativeness for larger populations.

For most of the people it was their first longer hike alone (9 out of 16), and for three among them the first longer hike in general. Most people chose to sleep in tents instead of cabins. The row on occupation shows that they were all relatively highly educated. Furthermore, one might look at their nationalities and languages spoken. Here, my background helped tremendously, especially to approach Germans and French. I could conduct 10 out of 16 interviews in the mother tongue of the person. As you notice, nearly half of the interviewees were German and the second largest group were Swedes. Another observation at this point was the length of stay. All interviewees hiked between one week and a full month, with an average of fourteen days; this is an extremely long duration compared to other forms of tourism. I am going to address this aspect further on in the interpretation part.

The response rate was very high. Ultimately, all people I approached agreed to be interviewed (except a few who were in a hurry to catch a bus or train). Besides, seven other solo-hikers were not interviewed, since I was either already in an interview, too tired (after having conducted 2 or 3 interviews on the same day), or there was a language barrier. Interestingly, four people who hiked alone with a dog needed to be excluded from the study since they did not define themselves as solo-hikers (“I don’t hike alone”).

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8 The longest trail is the Arctic Trail, Nordkalottleden, with around 800 kilometres length; however, it is less renowned than the Kings Trail.

9 I considered all hikes that were more then daytrips longer hikes.

10 My mother tongue is German. Besides I speak English and French fluently. I have some knowledge in Swedish and exchanged some words with Swedes in their mother tongue, however my proficiency is not high enough to interview in Swedish, hence those interviews were conducted in English instead.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Mother tongue/ Interview Lang.</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Single/ relationship</th>
<th>Interview Date &amp; Length</th>
<th>Approximate Trip Length</th>
<th>1st longer hike alone?</th>
<th>Biwak/Tent/Cabin</th>
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<td>Estonian/ English</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Swedish/ English</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>unsure/'free'</td>
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<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Tent (Cabin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>34</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Swedish/ English</td>
<td>Employment/studies Environmental Sciences</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>02.07.14/40:00:00</td>
<td>10 days</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Tent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>German/ German</td>
<td>Rafting guide</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>07.08.14/66:01:00</td>
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<td>Tent</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>≈ 45</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>German/ German</td>
<td>Car mechanic</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
<td>German/ German</td>
<td>Student (school)</td>
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<td>German/ German</td>
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<td>German/ German</td>
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<td>German/ German</td>
<td>Student Environmental Studies</td>
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<td>Cabin</td>
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<td>German/ German</td>
<td>Student Law</td>
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<td>10.08.14/45:03:00</td>
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<td>≈ 27</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>German/ German</td>
<td>Student Environmental Studies</td>
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<td>Swedish/ English</td>
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Table 1: Scheme Interviewees & Interviews
Encounters

Rather than of data-collection, which has an objectified and dehumanized notion, I would like to speak of encounters. To me the word encounter captures the element of surprise and novelty that was inherent in meeting another solo-hiker out there. We met primarily as equals and the meeting was meant as a true exchange.

I collected mainly in-depth interviews and some selected observations (such as gestures, emphasis or characteristics), which were documented in fieldnotes. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. This allowed me to go back to the original wording in a later stage of analysis. As you see in table 1, the interviews had quite different durations (average: 45min). However, I argue, this did not impact the quality, in contrary it is surprising what can be said in 23 minutes. Regarding my capacities no more than three interviews were carried out per day.

The general aim with the interviews was to collect personal insights rather than statistical data and understand the meaning people attribute to the solo-hiking experience. In phenomenological terms: I collected individual experiences from the interviewees to later put them together into a greater picture. The interview had a conversational character where I both collected new material and also tested the conclusions made so far together with the interviewee. As Van Manen (1990) argues the participant becomes a partner for the research project, a negotiator of what is essential; and through each interview there is a forward movement towards deeper understanding. Thus, it is a productive relationship that builds on trust, empathy and intimacy. The researcher shares own stories to underscore the reflexivity of the relationship.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow a natural order and flow of talk (Pointdexter, 2002). In the first place, they were guided by the central question: What do solo-hikers seek out there? Though, the question was never pronounced aloud, it was present as my goal and led my curiosity. From there I started to cover the aspects that I initially captured in the mind map: e.g. Why do you hike alone? What does the solo-experience give you? Is this wilderness to you? How do you feel here in nature? Later I added a memo-card as another support. The card was a result of the first four interviews and the developed focus. It stated possible (not compulsory) questions and guidelines12. Generally, questions were open and rather complex from the beginning, since the subjects were quite self-reflective and did not need many questions to warm up. The interviews consisted of few key questions, which were then followed up throughout the conversation. Sensitive questions were asked towards the middle or the end of the interview. After each interview I captured the impressions in fieldnotes (e.g. place and date of the interview, details of the person, the most prevalent thoughts and observations). I also wrote a section on “What can I learn?"13 to reflect on my practice.

Each interview in its way helped to move forward towards a deeper understanding of the solo-hiking experience with its aspirations and lived practice. From the initial mind map, to an expansion of the latter, to the memo card and even to the writing process it was and is a constant process of overcoming, re-building and testing hypotheses.

11 The encounters occurred very naturally. Just imagine the way you would approach and greet another person in the wilderness. I observed that a certain exchange and advice is inherent in meeting somebody out there. Thus, the only difference was that I introduced myself as a researcher, proposed to sit down for a break and offered some coffee/chocolate to frame the interview.

12 Guidelines were for example: Create a calm moment for the interview! One question at a time! Think before you ask! Ask general questions!

13 There I highlighted for example, which questions were good questions or which mistakes I made and wanted to avoid later on. This learning process came very natural. Whereas I made typical mistakes at the beginning (e.g. interrupting the subject, asking two questions at a time, breaking silences), my skills developed along the research project and I could avoid the latter.
Data Analysis
As the section above shows, the analysis was not a terminated block occurring after the data-collection, but it was woven into it; the fieldwork was already part of the analytical process. Yet, once I had returned from the fieldwork, I worked two months on the transcriptions of the interviews in a very detailed way, e.g. mentioning pauses, laughs, repetitions, etc. The result was around 300 pages of textual material. In order to handle this amount of data, I chose the data analysis software Max QDA. The software allows researchers to organise their material in form of coding, theming, etc. to reach a certain level of abstraction. In order to consider the different possibilities to analyse the material I worked with Saldaña’s Coding Manuel for Qualitative Researchers (2009). For this project I found it crucial to keep the narratives intact and divide the text in rather larger pieces (couple of lines or maximum up to a third of a page). So, one could speak rather of theming than coding. Saldaña also specifically suggests theming for phenomenological studies. A phenomenological theme captures the different meanings of an experience. Let’s say, one major category of the present study is the solitude experience, then exemplary subthemes could be: solitude means to be alone; solitude means to encounter actually more people; solitude means to miss somebody to share the moment with; and so forth.

How were the themes developed? In a first analytical step, I began the theming deductively with themes derived from literature (wilderness definition, awayness from society, transformation period and others themes also initially captured in my mind map). Yet, it was noticed that the themes did not cover all aspects in the material, that the material had inherently another structure. Thus, I inversed the process and searched inductively for major themes in the material that would cover the fullness of both material and literature. In this way four major experiential themes were derived (introduced in the interpretation part of the thesis). Further many subcategories emerged inductively from the material. Sometimes the same piece of text was linked to two different themes. I also isolated quotes that highlighted the dynamics among the themes. Regarding language, I kept the texts in the original languages (English, German and French) and translated only selected quotes for the thesis.

Besides the work with the actual text I would like to underline the importance of phases for reflection. In the field there was no opportunity to analyse data on a computer or a similar device. In this way, it forced me to think holistically from the beginning. Then, before the analysis with Max QDA, I took an entire month to distance myself from the transcripts. I argue that these times for reflection deepened my understanding tremendously. Also, the on-going contact to some of the interviewees allowed me to control my interpretations throughout the process (e.g. in Skype talks).

Ethical Considerations
This brings me to the ethical considerations regarding the following three parameters: the material, the subjects and the researcher. In the introduction to methodology I have already argued for my ethical stance concerning the work with the material. As stated, I define this task as a responsible relationship in order to lift up and truthfully display the material. Secondly, the subjects are central to me. I asked their consent to interview and to record and use their first names in this thesis; also, all were above eighteen years old. I questioned myself whether it is ethical to approach them in this context, which questions are appropriate and what I could give back. Generally, solo-hiking does not seem to be an obviously problematic matter. However, I recognized that I spoke to the persons out there in nature and then left them again alone with their risen thoughts (especially regarding sensitive topics). Yet, some people expressed later on in emails that the interview enriched their own understanding of the experience and they enjoyed this deeper self-reflection.

The relationship with the interviewees did not end in the field. With all of them I kept an informative relationship; thus, I update them regarding my work progress. With some of them
this contact developed into a productive relationship since they would give me feedback via email or in Skype talks. Thirdly, some relationships developed into friendships. Furthermore, I found it ethically vital to make the thesis available to the interviewees, which was another argument for me to choose an accessible form and tone for the thesis. I have also given them the chance to read ahead and ask me for modification.

Finally, the project also affected me personally. As Van Manen (1990) stressed, the work can have a transformative effect. It surely contributed to my thoughtfulness regarding the topic and my learning as a researcher. Yet, I also got to sense my own vulnerabilities and limits.

This part on method has illustrated how the project practically worked – how the research question was translated into doing. It showed the general approach, the issues that arose and the solutions found. In this way, the section shall enhance your ability to evaluate my scientific work and give detailed insights on the method. The informational parts on the interviewees’ profiles (table 1) and the geographical scope (figure 2 and 3) shall give you a framework for your further reading and a context in which to place the interpretations that follow.
Interpreting

An Introduction to Interpretation

The King’s View

When the king got notice that he soon had to flee the country, he was filled with sadness and feelings of loss. It was neither his castle nor his people he was about to miss. Not even the noble dinners. What he would truly regret was the view from his window; this piece of landscape he could oversee. The feelings it provoked in him. Deep affection. This view of the landscape and nothing else.

So, before he left he called upon the best painters of his kingdom. He challenged them to draw his landscape, so that he could take a painting with him. He chose three among them, escorted them to his dormitory and requested a drawing of his landscape. Its beauty inspired the painters. Passionately they dedicated themselves for many hours and tried to capture what the landscape conveyed. Finally, they delivered extraordinary works and awaited the king’s judgement. Yet, when the king entered to look at the paintings he became furious. All three drawings of the landscape were so different. In his anger he threw them aside and asked the painters again. It is not difficult, he screamed, they shall just look outside, draw the thing; and he pointed towards the landscape.

The painters were disappointed and intimidated. They started anew to draw the landscape.

Yet, this time they drew it with all accuracy, so that the king would be content. When they finished, he looked at three nearly identical paintings of the landscape. He was pleased at first, paid the painters and sent them home. But the longer he gazed at the three drawings to decide which one to take with him, the more he realized how empty they were. They did not convey any of what the landscape meant to him – this thing.

In desperation he sank on the floor and to his hands fell the three discarded paintings. He looked at them anew; and than he saw it, the thing, in each of the paintings in different ways, also different from his own view but strongly visible. He felt overwhelmed and thought profoundly which one to choose to take with him.

When finally the day came to leave his kingdom, there were no fanfares. The carriage brought the king away from his people and he did not wave goodbye. Yet, he smiled, three paintings with him, carefully packed.

Box 2: Introductory Story to Interpretation (self-written)

In this story I tried to capture the role and character of interpretation. Metaphorically I write about the three painters that try to capture the thing, the essence of the landscape. The tale shows that this task cannot be fulfilled through an identical reproduction of the landscape’s physical attributes. Rather, the individual paintings (or interpretations) each have a legitimate value and capture a meaningful aspect of the phenomenon. Taken together, they can nearly convey what the king sees.

In the context of this thesis an interpretation can deliver a way to see or to capture the phenomenon of the solo-hiking experience. An interpretation can bring more closeness to truth or reality, but cannot deliver full disclosure. To address this problematic in phenomenological work I offer three different ways of seeing in this thesis. Just like the king’s paintings, they complement each other to gain a deeper understanding.

The primary interpretation is a descriptive account of the empiric evidence. Here, I worked with portraiture to capture not (yet) the essence of the whole, but the individual essence of
each interviewee and what they conveyed to me regarding the solo-hiking experience. In this part I present three of these narratives as examples, which give you a first insight into the material and create a deeper understanding of the aspirations and lived experiences of the individual hikers.

The second interpretation discusses the empirical material in relation to my field of study. In this sense it makes a connection between phenomenological claims and scholarly traditions in human geography. This part is structured along the essential experiential themes that emerged from the material and underscored by scholarly literature from human geography and particularly tourism studies. Ultimately, I systematize the whole in order to model the solo-hiking experience.

After disclosing firstly a narrative description and secondly a theoretical interpretation to you, thirdly, I would like to confront you with my interpretation of the solo-hiking experience. You can understand this part as a conclusion or synthesis of the topic, however it is my way of seeing. Thus, this part requires much scepticism from you; scepticism that you can build upon the insights gained throughout your reading. This attempt to question the whole awaits your thought and critique.

Through these three parts, I ultimately seek balance: balance between descriptive and interpretive elements, between original material and scholarly texts as well as between lighter and stronger interpretation.
Describing: Constructing Individual Portraits

This first part approaches the question “What do solo-hikers seek out there?” from the perspective of the interviewees. Here, I convey their personal answers: their search, aspirations and experiences. I chose portraiture as a method to capture these singular narratives. As stated above the aim of a portrait, as introduced by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997), is to grasp human experiences through thorough and aesthetical description of the empirical data. This part will allow you to get an insight into the collected material and to enter the lifeworlds of three individual solo-hikers – to get to know them. Since I believe all interviews were equally valuable for the research process, I simply chose to include the first three interviews from the field in this thesis; besides, these specific narratives demonstrate well the diversity of the interviewees (responses, personalities, sex, nationality, etc.). Thus, in the following I present the portraits of Ben, Madis and Disa as examples of solo-hiking narratives.

My form and tone were inspired by the portraits written by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot in The Art and Science of Portraiture (1997) and on her website (www.saralawrencelightfoot.com). Her work captures what portraiture is all about: an artistic, elegant way of writing and a description with scientific rigour as well as detail. The aim is to pull the reader into the situation and conversation; therefore, Lawrence-Lightfoot gives detailed description of the physical environment, the situation, the physical aspects of the person, the behaviour (gestures, tone, movements), the character and boundaries of the conversation (truthful? open? trustful?). This is not done to distract from the evidence, but rather to frame the knowledge that is conveyed. On her website one can review texts to compare with my work. This style is what I strived for; yet, I recognize my limits. Firstly, my descriptions are based on only one interview per person and sometimes observations of a few hours or days spent together; this implies a certain level of depth in understanding I could reach. Furthermore, English is not my mother tongue and I can undoubtedly not achieve the same aesthetic as Lawrence-Lightfoot. Yet, I claim her way of writing inspired me for the better. Similarly to her, I seek to frame the interviews by their context and vivid descriptions. Finally, I aim to establish a consistent voice and storyline throughout each portrait.

For the portrait writing I critically assessed my role as researcher and writer. As stated above perspective is crucial in portraiture. The researcher is central as a witness; yet, the own story lies in the background. This raises questions of bias, subjectivity and objectivity. Therefore, I show in annex 1 in which way I separate my story from the relevant material for the research project. For this sake I rewrote the encounter with Ben, but with my perspective of the encounter in the foreground (I suggest reading this part after the original portrait of Ben below to compare them to one another). With this exercise I hope to enhance your trust in my skills as a researcher to distinguish between professional and personal perspective. It shall again allow you to make evaluations of your own regarding the scientific rigour of this work.

Ultimately, the portraits have been sent to the interviewees to give them an opportunity to point out misinterpretations. Their feedbacks were rather positive: “Yeah perfect. It's funny to read looking back on it, but accurate.” (Ben) or “I think you have captured our talk and the atmosphere (tone, pauses, facial impressions) quite well.” (Madis).

In order to support your reading of this section you might turn again to the list of the interviewees and look at the facts gathered on each person (Table 1). While reading keep in mind (or at hand) your first thoughts on the solo-hiking experience. It can be questioned: Are the themes in the interviews the ones expected to arise? What is different? What is new? What was clear already? What surprises arose? As in the field the reading can at its best be a forward movement towards the central themes of the solo-hiking experience.
Ben Sitojaure. It is mid-June. I am in a cabin of the STF\(^\text{14}\). It is early in the season, so there is nobody around. No caretaker. No other hikers. Four beds, wool blankets, a warming oven, a wooden table; there is nothing more to wish for. My shoes dangle above the oven to dry. I have no idea what time it is; somewhere between afternoon and very late night. I have eaten because I was hungry. Now, I sit at the table and watch the outside – how midnight sun and harsh snowfall play with each other. I know the wind outside is strong and loud, but here inside it is completely quiet.

When Ben interrupts this silence my heart jumps and I nearly fall from the chair. He enters the cabin with noise and snow and wind. At first I see only his shiny yellow jacket and his beard. Then, I see somebody slightly younger than me. He looks friendly and sporty. What follows are twenty minutes (with still shaking knees and hands) in which I make space for him in the cabin while he hangs up his clothes to dry and takes out his stuff to cook. We talk continuously, but nothing too important yet. The things you talk about when you do not know somebody. He is from Melbourne, studies engineering and has just spent a year at the university in Stockholm.

It’s easy to talk to Ben, and when I tell him that I do research on solo-hikers in Lapponia he just affirms: “Oh, that’s me!” smiles and in this way invites me to turn on my tape recorder. He has this spontaneous tone and freshness even though he had walked the whole day, walked for many days already. And his eyes look tired, but they also convey his youth and the pleasure he takes from hiking. The room is filled with the noise of his cooking and his boyish Australian accent.

I notice quickly that he is a storyteller and he enjoys my listening. Mostly he tells adventure stories. He becomes the hero of the mountains, the slippery rocks and the snowstorms. He struggles under the heavy backpack. “Maybe over 25 kilograms.” he says, “Man, this first day I was struggling big time.” But the struggle is contrasted with his smiling. The severe elements of his story alternate with the light ones.

We speak about risk. He had already hiked alone in Norway and met the realness of risk. He had hit his head on a rock. “On the way up the hill, I slipped on this icy rock and than I just felt so sick and I definitely had concussion.” Alone in the mountains there is nobody to help you, no doctors, he considers. You should not fall asleep, better get out of there. “But that’s what I did.” (to fall asleep or “pass out”, as he says) He laughs again. His talk is bittersweet. And he laughs even more and speaks with dramatic tone about “this huuuge black eye” he had gotten. How swollen it was. How he felt looked at using public transport later. Anyway, once home he posts a picture of his face and this violet-bluish eye on Facebook. He comments: “Thanks for the good times Norway!” He gets seventy likes. Now he reflects it was “a good training-lesson”; but with all caution, the pleasure lies still in the challenge, the physical, how much you can really do, the limits.

While we speak he mentions “the arctic” again and again. It seems to fascinate him to really hike “in the arctic”. It is so mystical; the ground for his adventures. Partly therefore he hikes alone; he questions who would hike with him here. “I don’t know, it’s hard to convince people to come hiking, in like (pause) in the arctic, for three weeks, alone! All the people that I met on (university) exchange, anyway, most of them were pretty content on just drinking.” I wonder if in this matter he feels different from others. “I don’t know, I don’t wanna go with those people anyways.” Yet, I understand he is not a loner. I picture him surrounded by many friends, also very comfortable in social situations, but hiking is just not a part of his life that he can easily share with others. Especially in a deeper way that goes beyond playful Facebook entries and heroic anecdotes. He imagines the encounters when he would be back home. He

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\(^{14}\) The STF (Svenska turistföreningen) is the Swedish tourist association that handles for example the accommodation in hostels (Vandrarhem) or mountain stations as well as cabins along the trails.
says people would not understand what it is like to hike alone, to be here. “When they will ask me how it was, I will just say ‘good’.” I notice again his humour mixed with a partly serious message.

However, he says, he truly wanted to be by himself, to experience solitude. The best is that he can walk in his own pace and the worst is not to be able to share the best moments. On his way here he had met and walked with others, he says. Some of them walked slower, some faster. I wonder why the pace is so important here; I assume that here you really don’t want to make compromises. Now he did not see anybody for days. I ask myself if this makes him so open and talkative with me, truly happy to be with somebody for a while.

Then, for him being here is also being away. “It’s nice to be away from all the sh… its not shit, but just society in general: like no Facebook, no phone, no email. It’s so nice just to be. And the four days I didn’t see anyone – it’s also a little bit lonely - but it’s mainly pretty nice just to be. The only other sign I have of human life is footsteps in the mud.”

As the conversation goes on, I think more and more that for me Ben impersonates the guy from Into the Wild. Or at least I see an imitation of the same aesthetic. He keeps a diary for the first time. He even put the soundtrack of the movie on his mp3 (just like me on a CD in the car). But finally out here, he says, the songs seem depressing to him. The books he took with him are: Gulliver’s Travels & Seven Years in Tibet. Is he (or are we) trying to imitate these adventures or get in the mood?

Then, we come back to speak about the guy in Into the Wild. Ben thinks about himself as “not that extreme”. He says he would get bored as well. He wants to be with others and do other sports like climbing. He wouldn’t like to live in the wild. And I say, but more in his tone: “And then it gets boring and dangerous. And then you die.” We laugh. We judge how badly prepared this guy was. We wonder if he cared about his life. We quote the message from the movie: “Happiness is only real when shared.” We like that. In our talk we seek anyway a distance to this guy who fascinates us but died. Ben says: “But it’s still nice to be by yourself I think. I mean solitude, definitely adds to it.”

Finally, we stay three more days together. We sleep in the cabins when they are open or in our tents. Walk in the same direction. Sometimes side by side. Sometimes at a distance. He is always very curious. Discovers everything with full excitement. We even cross two lakes rowing. Moments of true adventure on rough waters. We sit in the same boat. Feeling the limits of strength in our arms. Then we go our separate ways. He tells me this is yet another path. No cabins. Real Wilderness. His eyes shimmer. He walks into the forest with his yellow jacket. For three days he had been my brother. And I stand alone as he does not turn to wave goodbye.

The interview with Ben was the first I carried out. You see how the interview is partially led by my assumptions: the solitude experience, the contrast to society, the hiker’s ideology, and so forth. Yet, you can notice that Ben introduces new topics: the physicality of the experience, the risk, the adventure or the social surrounding. So, my task as a researcher was to stay open for these novel aspects, pick them up, test them anew with other interviewees and so on – this is what is meant by moving forward within the research process interview by interview.

In order to assess my perspective in portraiture I suggest reading Annex1 at this point, where I present the encounter with Ben anew with my perspective in the foreground.
Madis
Aktse. It is afternoon. I sit with Madis on the porch of the STF cabin. We hold coffee cups in our hands. From the side we can still hear the voices of the others. There are three of them. Three other solo-hikers. After quite some days of silence and solitude we all met here. It is a very social moment. They sit in the sunshine at a big table and share their food: nuts, chips, salami, cheese, and chocolate. In a while we can be with them again, but now it is time for us to talk. Madis looks at me with a wide smile, awaiting my questions. He has blond hair and clear blue eyes. He is Estonian.
I need some seconds to decide how to start the interview and I explain the purpose of the project while I think. I know why I wanted to talk to Madis: because I think he is different to me or Ben or the others up there. Yet, now I wonder in which sense. I had noticed that his way to hike seems very professional. He is surely not doing it for the first time. He has the right cooker, the right jacket, and the best food. And he is not as excited as the others, not as loud, not as talkative. He is calm. Maybe humble? Maybe just confident?
So, I start to ask what brought him here. And he responds with a story. Openly. Very personally from the beginning. He had planned the trip carefully for half a year. It was meant to be an active vacation in the first place, a chance to test his fitness. Then different things happened that made him feel that his life was “going downhill”. He speaks of “bad luck”. His laptop got stolen. His jacket got stolen. He failed a university course. “And then I lost a course mate… (pause) he died. Committed suicide as far as I know.” We stay silent. He looks into my eyes to see my reaction. He continues: “And then the trip became more this kind of coming to terms with the death of a friend and all the other bad things that had happened.” These events changed his goals. The way he puts it makes it sound as if solo-hiking can have a clear function. Which functions could it have? He says, it always has a different one. He is often alone in nature: for hiking, for mountain biking, sometimes shorter but often for several days. He concludes, that the purpose of each trip is different. Sometimes it is simply about finding nice natural places. We just need to look around; there are thousands of yellow flowers spread over the meadow. Other times, he says, it is about the walking itself. And it is also about the physical experience. He talks intensely about his bodily feelings and the liminality he perceives. “You simply push forward and it doesn’t matter so much what’s around.” “I seek the limit and see how far I can go (pause). Then sometimes I reach the point where I am unable to continue, simply.” “Like running a marathon. It’s a challenge! Try to make it to the end and when you get there you feel really great …” He seems proud and glad. Maybe he is different in the way that he knows already the many purposes a solo-hike can have. “Different experiences simply”, he says. Now, it is about coping with the sudden death of his friend. “That’s why I enjoyed this first week alone: think alone in the mountains and fight with the wind, with the fog, with the rain and with the snow…” It seems that fighting against these natural powers calms something inside of him. I wonder about this connection: the inner and the outer.
While we speak I try to test what I found in Ben: an element of a hiker’s ideology, a performance, a hero he looks up to. But I cannot find any of this in Madis. Instead he constructs his identity around his working life. “Work was my whole life” He is proud and he sees he can impress me. When he speaks about work and university he speaks quickly and restlessly. He worked as an engineer while he studied. I can barely follow how periods of working and studying overlapped and replaced each other. He is always multitasking, moving countries, doing more hours, flying somewhere last minute. He even missed his own university graduation for a work trip to China. He tells all this with a bitter smile that reminds me of an old person. And then he says: “that is why I feel old, because I have a lot of different experiences.” And I understand.
Thus, coming here is also a break for him. Away from what I call the serious life. Not being reachable. A chance to “clear the head”, “breathe” and find a “slower rhythm” where he only worries about the basics. And he recognizes: “I am still young so I wanted some … (pause) some more adventure.” He is twenty-five, like me.

A few times we speak about the solo-experience. For him it is something familiar. Being alone and independent is like a theme in his life. “I have always been somewhat I guess a closed person.” he says tranquilly. His mother says he grew up by himself. Already as a child he would disappear into nature. There were green spaces and forests around. He has always done it. By foot or by bike. I picture him alone in the forests; I can see that. How calm he is there. How he can be himself in nature. Out there he feels “calm, calm. I feel myself relaxed.”

I wonder how this fits into his life-choice for this powerful, intense career. And then again he claims he searches for stability: a home, a place to stay longer. This is something I can connect to: deeply searching for a place to remain, in a Europe that has opened all doors for us.

The pauses in our conversation become longer. We feel how the interview is slowly coming to an end. He knows I understood how his different motives are entangled. It is a combination of different experiences he searches for and the purpose can change over time. He also asserts: “I think it is staying in nature once in a while that helps you to enjoy everyday life more. Because when I return from the forest, I know how good water tastes, because I felt thirsty on my trip. And ‘cause I have eaten maybe not the best food I will enjoy cooking again. Otherwise I would get bored of it. It reminds me of the value of everyday comforts. That’s one of the reasons why I do it. You go out in the forest, in the rain and later you get back inside, wash yourself and then you feel so, so well.”

I have nothing more to ask. But we sit some more minutes, half silent. I reflect on solitude - it is not a major theme in my life. Then we go back to the others. Join their laughter, the telling of adventure stories. It is a very fun and social time before our paths separate again and we reach out alone into different directions.

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Disa

From the first instance Disa appears to be a powerful woman. Independent. Courageous. Strong. She is Swedish. 28 years old. A knife hangs at her belt and her skin is tanned. She has a characteristic face and her eyes are awake. Yet, here in nature she is also soft. She allows herself to be soft. Touching the plants, drinking the fresh water, sitting at the riverside. It is a celebration. We walk two days on the same path before we take the time for an interview. I see how she engages with nature. It’s a deep commitment to the moment, to the surrounding and therefore to herself.

We both have been looking forward to the interview: to speak more deeply then in a ‘hello’ or at dinner talk. To reflect profoundly on the hiking experience, the solitude. We fill our cups with tea, take some chocolate and carefully choose the place for our conversation. It is afternoon. The place is waiting for us. We sit down on a porch in wool blankets overlooking the river. The sound of the water flow accompanies our words. The warmth of the sun sets the timetable. Soon it is about to disappear behind the mountains. We are in Såmmarlappa and it truly feels like a first hour of summer after rainy days.

I begin to ask her about walking alone. It has many facets for her. She speaks calmly when she says: “to get some peace of mind” and “to have inner conversations”. With enthusiasm and louder she declares: “Aahh, this is so great. I am alone. I love this!!!” She feels her autonomy: carrying the backpack, taking care to be safe and fulfilling her own needs. And
then solo-hiking is about the pace; you don’t need to keep up with others. When you are alone nobody mirrors you. She says that comparing yourself to others is never good: not on the trail and not in life. She can put aside her competitiveness and the “wanting to be as good as somebody”. It makes her aware of who she really is. She speaks about the relationship of an individual to itself: “that’s the relationship we need to keep alive and good and healthy for the rest of our lives.” Therefore she is here, to take care of this relationship, to “recharge energies”, to get closer to her core. She says: “Now, I am hosting myself, I am like feeding myself… good food, fresh air, good water… medical herbs everywhere. You know I am hosting…(myself) I am building myself here.”

And she makes an interesting link: for her recharging energies means to be able to come back and give these energies to others. She works as a social worker with young girls, lives with them in a community and takes a responsible mother-role for them. She is always surrounded by people. “I am really, you won’t believe me, I am a really social person, like super-social.”

We talk about her background. “I’ve been a really angry young woman.” Through all types of experiences she tried to distance herself from this angry young woman: boxing, travelling, meditating. “I was trying all the drugs I could find. Like I was going to all the parties. I was travelling the whole world. (...) You know just to realize: ‘me-drugs?’ Life is pretty good anyway and this is what gets me high: a sunset….wherever we are now…in Lapponia. This is the real high in life. Here it’s a period where you explore, gather knowledge and you realize what you want to do with it and you come back.”

Many people would describe her as a hippie. To me her thoughts are intense and partly hippie-ish but honest. She speaks with her heart and does not think about a word before it leaves her lips. “We are free. We are human beings and we’re here on this planet to get experiences and enjoy all of this beautiful…everything…like these surroundings.” The search for experiences guided her many years through life; and still she is searching and defending her independence. She says: “I am a free woman. I do whatever I feel like.” I also challenge her and ask if we are not too egoistic in our search for the ever-new experience. I say: “Where does this experiencing, like ‘I am so positive, I am experiencing everything. I am free’ where does this egoism need to stop and we take responsibility?” We sink for a moment in silence as the downside of the beauty of our trip takes shape in our minds. I picture my boyfriend at home: alone, worried, left out.

We also speak about home and society. It never needs more than a word to give Disa ideas and let her express herself. About society she says: “It’s nice to get a break from it. I guess that’s a big part of it actually. I mean this stillness...” At home voices fill your head “lalallalalalala”, and here you can fill your head with the natural sounds instead “just listen to the birds, the sound of the wind and the sound of the pouring water.”

For her being here is a frame to get in touch with all these things. She feels very moved by this closeness to nature: “Yesterday I cried because everything was so beautiful.” Maybe she feels it is nearly a task now to engage deeply with the surroundings. It stands above the physical challenge. While she feels she could climb every mountain, walk any distance, she tells me now: “I’m like: I will try to do this as sloowly as I can and that could be a challenge for someone like me that is really wild and fiery...” She asserts we should ask ourselves: What happens to you while you hike? Do you find peace of mind? This is more important than the physical. I am impressed that she can think about slowness as a challenge – it challenges my mind so to say. Every day I think about the kilometres, the hours – doing more,
walking further. Instead she says: “I really wanted to challenge myself to sit, to meditate and just stare, you know, breathe!”

I feel we are getting tired. We have been speaking for long and exhausted our thoughts. I just lastly want to ask if this is wilderness for her. She says, it is a limited amount of wilderness or an amount that is good for us. Yet, she says we are not really in it. “Here we are not adapted to nature. We made paths, we have done this, we put wood there, we put bridges here, … we are making nature adapt to us.” Previously, she has had another experience where she walked with some Swedish tribes (as she calls them). They are “in the real wilderness”, they do not follow trails, move slowly and are more adapted to nature. I see which difference she means as we sit on the porch of the hospitable cabin in our blankets and with our hiking boots.

It is getting chilly as the sun sinks behind the mountains. The shimmering river suddenly becomes dark and cold. We laugh and joke as we are getting tired. Yet, she says seriously at the end: “I feel I am speaking my heart now and it’s really truth speaking. (…) because sometimes I feel words are a bit overestimated, but right now I feel there is a lot of beauty coming in it too. Describing this landscape and these feelings. It’s beautiful because it makes me realize things (pause) about myself and why I am here.”

These three stories show to which extent the singular narratives differ, but also how they complete each other. They illustrate different sides of the experiences and have different foci. Just looking at the solo experience, for example, it suddenly gains many more dimensions than the mere being alone: for Ben it is a challenge to hike alone and also there was nobody to hike with; for Madis being alone is something common; for Disa it signifies a contrast to a busy social life and is very precious. Besides, you discover implicitly that the solo-hiking experience can be more than being alone: there are encounters along the path. After their trips, the solo-hikers share the experience with friends and family at home; this social embeddedness also breaks the idea of an isolated experience.

I argue these portraits are the closest I can bring you to the original material. Thus, they shall build the basis for further reading. From the portraits you can draw conclusions not only regarding the solo-hikers and their experience, but also gain insights into the interviews themselves: how they practically worked and what I was able to do (or not do). Further, you can recognize the limits and the potential of the material. What does it have to offer? How to move on from these narratives? I claim a logical next step is to abstract from the individual perspective, unite the material and confront the sixteen narratives in a discussion to gather different perspectives on each theme, just as I began above with the solo-experience or the idea to be alone. So, the following part Theorizing: Connecting the Empirical with the Theoretical shows the multi-layeredness of each major experiential theme with its different facets gained from the material and connected to theory.
Theorizing: Connecting the Empirical with the Theoretical

Just as the heading states, this part relates the collected empirical material to theoretical knowledge in my field of study: human geography. In this way material and theory complement each other: the material is backed up by theory and the theory gains from the material. This also captures the dialogic nature in my research process, which was (as said above) neither fully deductive nor inductive, but drew from theory and original material when it seemed rational in order to answer the research question. So, this part is a compromise between phenomenological (pre-theoretical) claim and scholarly traditions in human geography aiming at a certain level of abstraction. Yet, the band between human geography and phenomenology is historically tight. In *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (1991) Cloke, Philo and Sadler speak about the emergence of human geography out of the critique of geography as mere spatial science. Some geographers wanted to rethink the discipline, address *real world problems* and take into account the complexity of human beings. The answer was the rise of new humanist philosophies drawing from phenomenology and existentialism to overcome positivist and reductionist ideals. In brief, these geographers argued that people should be considered more than dots on a map, but individuals with intentions and meanings that engage with their surroundings. Cloke et al. claim (1991, p.75): „It was at this moment, as the 1960s shaded into the 1970s, that humanistic geography *per se* came into existence (although it had to wait until 1976 for Tuan to dream up the name) and began to establish itself as a potent source of philosophical *critique* directed at spatial science and its behavioural offshoots.“ They state further, geographers, such as Anne Buttimer, Edward Relph, David Seamon or Yi-Fu Tuan, turned towards phenomenology and sought not only to critique, but also to complement traditional geography. This statement captures truly my own view of the role of the phenomenological approach in my work: to relate the theoretical and the empirical so that they truly complement each other. Just as I did for my work and in this thesis, Cloke et al. claim that phenomenological geographers need to find their own degree of commitment, their own *phenomenology*, so to say. As highlighted in the foreword it means that the researcher invents an own ontology and form somewhere on the spectrum between pure phenomenology and traditional human geography. This is the reason why this thesis focuses in many parts on clarifying the underlying ontology and methodology – since they are indeed *invented* for the concrete purpose of this thesis and need to be explicated as the appropriate ways of *seeing* and *doing*.

As a conclusion of the above, you can understand this part as the core of the thesis, since it unites the theoretical and empirical to answer: *What do solo-hikers seek out there?* The part is structured along the four major experiential themes that emerged from the material: *the solo-experience, the nature-experience, the physical experience* and *the inner experience*. These themes are not meant to be exclusive, surely they overlap and interact; however, they were the simplest, most obvious categorizations emerging from the material during the work with the data analysis software Max QDA and periods of reflection. They highlight what the interviewees conveyed to me: that the search *out there* is a search for a combination of *different experiences*. Yet, I recognize another researcher might have put other themes in the foreground. In the following, I discuss each of these four themes in detail drawing from my original material and scholarly literature in human geography. The discussion explores the depth of each experience; yet, with a phenomenological perspective where the focus lies on the shared rather than the singular. Finally, I synthesise the whole in order to propose ways to model the solo-hiking experience.
The Solo-Experience

The solo-experience is an essential part of solo-hiking. It is solitude, isolation and feelings of remoteness that come to mind picturing a solo-hiker out there. Yet, I claim this first vision is very limited and the meanings of the solo-experience go beyond a mere being alone. This part addresses the multi-layeredness of the solo-experience: What is it like? What does it mean? What does it imply?

In its humblest interpretation, the solo-experience means indeed to be alone. There is a feeling of achievement for some interviewees when they realize that they are truly alone: “Aaah, this is so great... I’m alone, I love this!!!!” (Disa) or the apprehension how it finally feels to be alone: “It feels good!” (Oscar) “It’s a little bit lonely, but it’s also pretty nice just to be.” (Ben). As Claus points out solitude is associated with “Independence. Freedom. Calm (and) Self-reliance.” When they are not alone people sometimes perceive it as a missing element: “Here there are too many people, everything was too organised to feel the solitude.” (Magnus). This statement also points out how essential the solo-experience is to solo-hiking. Scholars argue that the solo-experience allows a deeper engagement, profounder experiences (Laing & Crouch, 2009) and a closer relationship with the surroundings (Wylie, 2005, p.239). Daniel speaks about these profound experiences: “What I have experienced now in five days, I would have never dreamed to experience in fourteen days!” He further argues how he engages with the surroundings instead of people: “How could it even get boring? You can always go on and there is another landscape.”

Yet, people are aware that their choice to be alone has its downsides. Daniel F says in a typical French expression: “Mais bon, c’est pas tout.”, meaning roughly: “Well, that’s not everything.”. Here he points out that the independence, freedom and other positive aspects of the solo-experience have their price and in turn there is nobody to share the experience with. Ben says: “This one night I had the whole cabin to myself, I am like ‘oh man’, I’d love to have somebody to share this right now.” or David acknowledges: “Sometimes I wished somebody would sit at my side.” Hiking alone means to have nobody to talk to or to share the good moments with.

Hiking alone means to be independent. “It’s just nice to be sort of independent (…) I can stop when I want and get up when I want.” (Ben) “It’s this wanting to be free, to walk as far as you want, to even make a break of an entire day – just this independence.” (David) The individuals can flow through the day, follow their instincts and emotions when to break, when to walk or to sleep. Company instead feels like a constraint compared to this freedom of choice. Mehmetoglu, Dann & Larsen, (2001) have also shown that independence and flexibility are main motivations to travel alone. The theme of independence and own pace reoccurred in nearly every interview. They argued that their own needs are central, that they can follow their integral rhythm (regarding distances, speed, breaks, etc.) and that they do not need to take care of others. “Now I choose on my own. I can do exactly what I want.” (Inge)

Being alone out there signifies more risk. Both scholars and interviewees point out that solitude and remoteness add actual risk to the journey (Laing & Crouch, 2009). In one study it has been shown that typical fears are: to get hurt by another individual, in an accident, by wild animals or the theft of one’s belongings (Coble, Selin & Erickson, 2003). Scholars point also at gender-specific risks (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Wilson & Little, 2005 & 2008). In general the interviewees were most afraid of accidents and did not mention fears of animals or other individuals. Inge says to avoid accidents when you walk alone “you don’t take as many risks or such difficult roads”. Ben’s story of slipping on a stone and hitting his head highlighted the realness of risk. The four interviewed women did not mention particular fears. These feelings of relative safety for both men and women could be related to the northern-Scandinavian context as well as to the particular trails and could be subject for further research.
The search for solitude is a response. “I wanted to do stuff by myself.” (Ben) “I think it’s mostly about this alone time, alone time.” (Madis) “I want to hike alone” (Disa) “I needed some alone time to think, to just be.” (Magnus)

Firstly, this perceived need for solitude can be the response to a very social life: “I am a really social person, like ahm, super-social (…) but it get’s a bit overloaded too (…) I really need this retreat. It makes me realize how much time I need to spend with myself to be able to be with other people.” (Disa) Secondly, it can be a response to family life “It gives me a compelling reason to actually do things which could be compromised away. (…) Being able to transform into a more social being adaptive to other people’s needs.” (Magnus) Thus, for both Disa and Magnus it is an opportunity to recharge for being more social after the alone time. Janina in contrast has a very particular way of reasoning: “In Germany I often feel very lonely. So I decided, why don’t I go where there are few people, than I would feel less lonely (…) Therefore, I was looking forward to solitude.” Thus, she seeks solitude to overcome feelings of loneliness. Ultimately, it can also be a response to people’s personality and to feel very comfortable on your own (e.g. Barbara, Madis). As Magnus states: “To go out, to be alone, I think that suits me.”

Solo-hiking as a response also implies a duality to common life, something momentary and special. People seek solitude because it is a choice and they soon will be back in a social environment. Like Disa says: “It’s been times in my life where I was thinking that I could live up here alone in a cottage in the forests. Eh, but then I realized that I really need people. And these later years I have been living with my friends and family.” Andreas also points out that it is a momentary challenge: “I think that was the biggest reason for me, to try how it is to be alone for longer, without people I know. And I was extremely curious for this experience. I simply saw it as a challenge.”

Hiking solo is not just a choice. Mehmetoglu, Dann & Larsen (2001) established that there are two major categories of solo-hikers. Firstly, there are hikers who deliberately choose to hike alone and secondly, those by default who hike alone because they do not have a companion for the trip. Some interviewees explain why nobody came with them; they state that other people have different interests and not as much time. Daniel F says: “They want to do plenty of things. One day here. One day there. I think they don’t take the time to admire the landscape. They want to do too many things.” Some mentioned also to feel older, more experienced or different from their peers (Janina, Jan, Madis). Jan states about his friends: “They were enthusiastic (for him to go hiking), but when I asked them if they would like to come with me, they were not so…(interested). They didn’t want to come for real.”

Furthermore, table 1 with all interviewees showed that the majority of them are single. As Daniel argues if you would be in a relationship you would typically hike together with your partner or make a compromise to choose a different form of travel. Thus, there is a link between being single and the possibility to hike alone. The interviewees who are married stated that they tried to hike together with their partners but “this is not her melody” (Inge) or “For my wife that’s nothing. She sleeps too hard (in the tent).” (Claus). Thus, solo-hiking and the experience of solitude are not always choices, but linked to the social situation of the individuals.

Being alone means to meet (more) people. None of the interviewees had an exclusive solo-experience; they all met people along the path and for some these meetings are a main reason to hike alone in the first place. They argue alone you meet more people than if you would hike with a friend or partner (e.g. Ben, Sebastian, Andreas). Scholars have stated that encounters are a main reason to travel alone (Mehmetoglu, Dann & Larsen, 2001). When I ask Daniel F what he expects from the trip, he instantly answers: “Landscapes and encounters!” Also for Andreas it is an integral part of the hike: “When my mates at home say ‘Wow, you travel alone’ I say ‘Fair enough, I start alone, but I am not alone.’ You meet
people from Australia, Norway, Sweden and this is not alone for me, but it seems they don’t understand. (...) You see, suddenly I am not alone anymore!” and he points at the scene as we sit, talk and have a coffee. Also Janina reflects on the encounter with me: “Oh, that just made me so happy. So beautiful!” Especially while resting or in the evenings people enjoy meeting others. Generally, people prefer fewer, valuable encounters with meaningful conversations to many anonymous ones. When there are very few people out there every meeting triggers a true exchange, while when there are many people the exchange might not go beyond a “hi”. As Claus says: “Now there are too many people here to actually meet somebody, I think.” From the talk during interviews and through observations I conclude that the encounters out there are very special; they seem to differ from encounters in home environments. Advice has a tremendous role. People are better listeners, trust others more easily, take generously time for others, seem genuinely interested and truly seek to help the other to achieve the best experience. The topics of conversation are various: paths (“wait, I take out my map”), distances, plants, mosquitos, the “most beautiful elk”, “hands full of blueberries”, gear, wet clothes, freeze dried food, books to read … To me this seems to be a resourceful topic for a future research project addressing encounters among solo-hikers in a more structured way than this explorative study offers.

In conclusion this part shows different facets of the solo-experience as they emerged from data and literature. Generally, scholars indicate that solo-hikers represent an important (and growing) number among hikers (30% on Appalachian Trail, US in 1999 (Kyle, Graefe & Manning, 2003); equally around 30% on the West Highland Way, Scotland (Den Breejen, 2003); around 10% on the Kings Trail, Sweden in 2003 (Wall Reinius, 2009)). Thus, the aspects above contribute to a deeper understanding of the experience and quest for solitude of this relevant group.

The Nature-Experience
We go hiking in nature. I tried to picture hiking inside of buildings, and sports like indoor walking came to mind, but I doubt anyone would define this as hiking. I tried to imagine hiking in urban settings, it seemed a bit absurd but possible. Yet, in most cases when somebody goes hiking they choose a nature setting and seek a nature experience. I argue this experience is determined by both the physical attributes and the constructed meanings of a particular nature setting. In the following I deconstruct the nature experience perceived by the interviewed solo-hikers in the northern Scandinavian context (particularly along the Kings Trail). How is nature felt? Interpreted? Enjoyed? In order to underscore this section, I will draw from scholarly texts on wilderness15. As a concept wilderness has been used for centuries to frame nature experiences and offers an extensive corpus of literature. I have considered naming this section “wilderness-experience”; yet, I prefer “nature-experience” as a heading since it is more neutral.

Nature means pureness and beauty. The interviewees hear “the birds chipping” (Ben), “the sound of the wind and the pouring water” (Disa) and they smell “the grass and bushes” (Inge). The water is perceived as clear and clean. “It’s a dream. You just go down there, take the water and it tastes fantastic!” (David). People describe the nature as awesome, wild, beautiful, gentle, green, paradisiac, wide, open and whole. They enjoy the contrasts between different landscapes. When I ask Oscar what he likes best he says: “I like the snow glaciers and high tall peaks (laughs)! That is it!” I ask: “So your favourite part is the tops, not so much the valleys?” “The tops and the valleys (smiles). All of it. It’s the contrasts.” They see animals and look at them with attention: “A bee just sat there, and I found it so beautiful.” (Andreas) Blueberries, mushrooms and the smallest flowers can trigger feelings of

15 Wildérorns in old English means “land inhabited only by wild animals” (Oxford Dictionary, 2010).
awe. During the interviews we cannot keep ourselves from pointing left and right at birds and reindeers, at sunbeams and water drops. “I find it so beautiful here, right now.” (David) When the pureness is interrupted or disturbed people notice it immediately as a negative element: a helicopter flying above, trash along the path or too many people around.

**Nature triggers feelings.** Disa says intensely: “I feel, I feel I get in touch with things.” She goes on and looks around: “Only I feel so humble under these great, great, great hills.” Daniel states: “I even sometimes look at a plant when I find it beautiful, then I look at it closely. I think we are more perceptive here.” Further on he says: “It is an incredible landscape. Yes, I mean it is sparse and on this part there are just rocks for kilometres. It is inhospitable so to say, but it is just impressive. (…) You feel so small.” Generally, people state to feel calm, relaxed and at peace.

**Nature is an idea.** Even though the interviewees mention many physical attributes of nature (mountains, clear water, animals), the understanding of a place as natural, pure, beautiful or wild is ultimately very subjective; also the feelings nature triggers within people are related to subjective interpretations. This argument occurs also in wilderness literature. More than a specific place or physicality, wilderness is said to be a subjective sensing (Nash, 1967; Wall Reinius, 2009). Additionally, people’s interpretation of a place as wilderness is historically and culturally embedded. Henri David Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold are often quoted as main philosophers that formed today’s (western) understanding of wilderness (Nash, 1967 & 1990; Oelschlaeger, 1991; Stowe, 2010). Besides there are numerous other writings (e.g. Goethe’s Faust, Ibsen’s Peer Gynt), pieces of popular culture (e.g. Into the Wild, Touching the Void) and practitioners (in Scandinavia for example: Fridtjof Nansen, Nils Faarlund (1993)) that have inspired our idea of nature.

**Nature is experienced as contrast.** “Life here (in nature) is so different, completely different and very relaxing, even though the things you do are tiring.” (Madis) People mention nature’s contrast to the city - “a really cold place” (Madis about Tallinn), to work life or real life. “It’s good to go away from normal life, all-day life, and to carry your equipment and get away from the city.” (Oscar) So, nature is away from things: from phones, Internet, email, TV or more generally: people, technology and society. Jan says: “I want to somehow be close to nature and far away from all this.” Scholars sometimes speak about awkeness, remoteness (Boller et al., 2010) or out-there-ness (Elands & Lengkeek, 2012). Imagining nature as a place in contrast to society, modernity, post-modernity, technology etc. has been discussed repeatedly in scholarly literature. One could speak about a perceived dichotomization of men and nature (Oelschlaeger, 1991). The nature-experience is then described as an opportunity to relieve the stresses of modernity (Fredman et al., 2012; Roberson Jr. & Babic, 2009) or “to shake off the village” (Thoreau in Nash, 1990, p. 37). Nature becomes “a symbol of the orderly processes of nature” (Tuan, 1974, p. 112) in contrast to the “real and imagined failings of city life” (p. 111). In the interviews I can find this type of societal critique. David says: “Hastiness and Speed. And when you turn on the TV in the morning you need to face so many negative things that happened somewhere. It interests me, but I can barely follow what happens everywhere in the world. It overwhelms me and scares me which horrible things happen. So I am happy not to hear these things for some weeks… Somehow our society is completely wrong.” He goes on to speak about the destruction of nature, plundering of resources, greed and consumerism. Janina highlights the anonymity, isolation and coldness of society. So, nature can serve as a contrast to these realities, a place seen as less harsh where things are still in their order. Yet, the interviewees stress that their journey is not an escape from society but rather a balance: “I don’t try to escape society. Because that is the wrong way (laughs),” (Andreas) or “Even if I enjoy the time now in nature, I also enjoy the advantages of civilisation when I will be back.” (Daniel) So, there is a relationality between
these perceived two places, and through their temporary movement people seek a balance, an ideal environment or “equilibrium that is not of this world” (Tuan, 1974, p.248). In Scandinavia this alternation between home-life and life-in-nature is deeply rooted (Gelter, 2000). The word friluftsliv captures this idea; it means literally free-air-life - an ecologically responsible life in the open air (Repp, 2004). In spare time, on weekends or during holidays Scandinavians might seek closeness to nature: simply making a fire, hiking, skiing, camping, etc. In their understanding the value lies in the depth, slowness, engagement and commitment to these activities rather than the extreme or excitement. As Raadik et al. (2010) state it is for many Scandinavians a lifestyle to turn towards nature. This is reflected during the interviews. The five Swedish people described the solo-hiking more than others (non-Scandinavians) as a lifestyle close to nature rather than an occasional trip.

**In nature time and place are experienced differently.** As people seem to perceive nature as a contrast to the home environment, they also make sense of time and place in a different way. According to the Dictionary of Human Geography place is a space occupied by a person or thing (Johnston, Gregory & Smith, 1994). Besides its objectivity it also holds subjective meaning (Entrikin, 1991). From a phenomenological perspective place comes into being through action and perception. People cope and engage with the environment (Being-in-the-world, Heidegger, 1962). As Gelter (2009) expresses it, time and place evaporate in nature-experiences. Or as Stegner states, wilderness is important for humanity as a timeless and uncontrolled part of earth (Stegner in Nash, 1990). The sensing of time as something to save, to invest in cautiously and to measure (Honoré, 2004)16 dissolves partly during nature-experiences. Instead it allows feelings of timelessness (Caulkins, White & Russell, 2006) without a fixed itinerary or schedule (Cohen E., 2003). Sebastian states: “That is what I really wanted, to spend the whole summer without any schedule.” Magnus says: “Now, I’ve got plenty of time.” And Daniel asserts: “It was so incredibly idyllic, so I stayed even the next days, because I don’t have any time pressure.” Experiencing nature means having no schedule, maybe not even having a clock and instead following one’s inner flow of time. The midnight sun in the northern Scandinavian summer intensifies these feelings of timelessness. In nature people can make sense of places in a different way. Firstly, there is a freedom to go and stay wherever it pleases: e.g. “I stay wherever I want.” (Oscar)17 Secondly, people can make places their own and give them meaning (McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998). Interviewees mentioned that by putting up their tent they felt that it became their place. Scholars argue that the slow movement through nature and deep engagement can create profound connections to the environment and to the path. The path has been interpreted as a holistic person-environment system (Hugo, 1999). Den Breejen (2007, p.1419) describes this as follows: “A long distance route transforms recreational walking into a multiple-day holiday, where the destination is the linear corridor of the path.” One of the longest trails of the world, the Appalachian Trail, has been portrayed as a “2150 mile-long linear cathedral” (Terry & Vartabedian, 2013, p.344). Thus, there is a high importance of place attachment and love of place (Topophilia, Tuan, 1974; Fredman & Heberlein, 2007; Stephenson Shaffer, 2004).

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16 In his book Slow (2004) Carl Honoré advertises life in the right speed. His work is half lifestyle-guide and half detailed analysis of time in modern society. He argues that modern men live a cult of speed. There is an obsession for efficiency, timesaving and punctuality. Due to the transition from natural time to clock time, people lost the possibility to do things when they felt natural and instead follow a schedule. According to Honoré this puts enormous pressures on modern men and takes away necessary time for the mind to rest. One could deduct that today’s quests for slow food, slow tourism and other slow movements are connected to these realities of time.

17 In the Scandinavian context the every-man’s-right (Swedish: Allemansrätt) grants access to the outdoors (even private ground) for everybody (Bostedt & Mattsson, 1995; Raadik et al., 2010; Sandell & Fredmann, 2010). It allows people for example to camp freely or light a fire.
This contrasts the realities of place in modern society where scholars describe a *placelessness* (Relph, 1976) or the existence of *pseudo-places* (Thrift, 1996) that are homogeneous or eroded and people cannot relate to them as they might in nature by truly engaging with them. As Sebastian describes it: “It’s a great way to travel and you see a lot. What you experience is always very intense. And everywhere you have the freedom to just stay where you want, or walk as far as you want and you somehow become one with nature.” Places become their own and places let them be; it reminds me of the famous quote of Goethe: *Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich’s sein!*.

**Nature and wilderness are understood in relative terms.** As stated above, nature and wilderness are foremost subjective ideas. People sense them on a scale ranging from the most urban to the wildest place. Thus, when the interviewees seek to make sense of the surroundings they speak of “wild enough” (Disa), “not as wild” (Andreas), “a close-wilderness-experience” (Daniel), “gentle wilderness” (Andreas), “more wilderness” (Oscar) or “real wilderness” (Inge). They notice that the wilderness is compromised by elements of civilisation: huts, trails, other comforts or the mere presence of people. Thus, there are different levels of wilderness that people perceive and then feel to have a freedom to choose among. As Nash (1967, p.1) points out each person can have a different sensing of what might be the ideal level: “one man’s wilderness may be another’s roadside picnic ground”.

Wall Reinius (2009) made a similar finding in her study. She established that hikers understand wilderness in relative terms and compare different areas to each other. Inge for example compares the Kings Trail with the Sarek National Park: “I mean sometimes I am in Sarek and for me that’s more real wilderness. But I enjoy walking on Kungsleden and Padjelantaleden as well. But I think it’s good that you have different, let’s say, *levels* (...) Now when I go alone I lower my level a bit.” Also Highham (1998) describes wilderness as a continuum with different *levels*.

Thinking back to the three maps with the geographical scope of the study (figure 2 and 3), the *crowding* that occurs along the Kings Trail can also be linked to the idea of different levels of wilderness. The comfort and safety along the trail together with a relatively untouched nature seem to represent an appreciated level for many people. The other areas where I hiked to encounter solo-hikers were in comparison extremely empty even though they were also *naturally beautiful*. I relate this emptiness to the lower level of comforts and safety (paths less well marked, some paths without huts, less information available). This raises questions for tourism planners and providers: Which comforts and facilities are appreciated while leaving the freedom of wilderness (already pointed out by: Boller et al., 2010; Hall & Page, 2001; Kyle, Graefe & Manning, 2003)

Ultimately, with the perception of levels comes also the dream for people to reach towards a *higher level* in the future. Daniel says: “Maybe later I wanna do something bigger. Especially Canada or Alaska!” And Magnus states: “I haven’t yet, but I would like to go alone out in the real wilderness.”

In conclusion, the interviewees perceived nature (or here concretely the trails of northern Scandinavia) as a place to go to. As Sebastian states the option to experience nature is essential to him: “I cannot imagine not having the possibility to make these tours, to come here.” For people nature symbolises a temporary refuge from everyday realities and offers a different experiential world. I argue that this experiential world or natural setting hosts the other three major experiences – the solo, physical and inner experience – like a framework. I will get back to this argument for the modelling of the solo-hiking experience. Yet, let’s firstly look at the other two remaining experiential themes.
The Physical Experience

Hiking is physical. We move our body. We feel our feet. Yet, hiking is unlike other intense sports more accessible to people regarding skills or costs (Raadik et al., 2010). In its basic idea it is just a more committed walking and a very natural way for humans to move. Thus, it is no surprise that it has been described as one of the most important recreational activities (Chhetri, Arrowsmith & Jackson, 2004; Kay & Moxham, 1996). In the following the physical experience is disclosed in its dimensionality: What is it like? What does it mean? What is its benefit?

The experience of hiking is bodily. People feel their presence and movement through space. As Disa says: “You can feel your breath, you can feel your feet, you can feel the movement of your body. (...) It’s a lot about the walking, huh?” The physical experience can reach from mere feelings of being in moment and place to feelings of tougher struggle. Yet, as David pointed out: “It’s always as hard as you make it.” Thus, the physical struggle is a choice. Some choose to engage in it fully, whereas for others the physical experience lies in the background. As Inge suggests this could be a matter of age: “I mean some younger people and younger guys, they are very much about, let’s say, competition. You should walk that far in as short time as possible...” In the interviews this proved partially true: younger people were more attracted by the physical challenge and compared themselves with others; older people were more laid back; yet, it cannot be generalised and there were contrary examples.

The physical is experienced as a challenge. It is about “challenging myself” (Ben), “pushing myself” (Disa), “competing with myself” (Madis), “endurance” (Daniel) and “not to take it soft” (Inge). People seek, look forward to and enjoy the physical challenge. They fight with the natural elements: “with the wind, with the fog, with the rain, with the snow...” (Madis) Claus asserts: “Rain! (we laugh) Rain is the worst!” The terrain challenges them: “much up and down and lots of stones” (Inge) When it gets hard they need perseverance: “That day my boots were so saturated it didn’t even matter if you were in the water or not. So you are walking through like rivers and there is water coming up to your knee and I was like: It doesn’t matter. I just wanna get to the hut. Just keep going. Fuck yeah!” (Ben) People sense the weight of their backpacks, their muscles and pain. Annika says: “I felt the backpack won!” They realize they took too many things with them: “Shit, the backpack is again too heavy.” (Andreas) They speak about pains: “You feel how the backpack gets lighter every day and you get used to the pain (laughs). But my hips hurt extremely!” (Janina) Or as Daniel describes it: “It is exhausting, I wasn’t aware of that before. So, when I lie on my camping mat in the night I barely find a position where my body stops hurting: the legs with sore muscles, the hips from this stupid belt, the knees hurt, the shoulders from these straps, everything hurts! (we laugh)” Thus, the physical is a challenging experience; yet, it is a chosen one. And the physical struggle is compensated by positive feelings that often arise when reaching the goal. As Oscar describes it when he reaches the top of Kebnekaise: “I’ve walked there the whole day, come up and see the view.” And his reward lies in this moment, just in the view. Others mention to feel “humble” (Disa), “proud” (Inge), “so, so well” (Madis) or simply “pretty nice” (Ben) through the physical engagement.

The physical experience is an encounter with limits. Madis describes how you push yourself to the limit, reach points where you are unable to continue and realize your boundaries. Disa describes the feelings of drive and liminality: “coming out here to test your muscles, your abilities and kinda really like that, like arrr (makes strong noise), arrr, you can feel it, you are pushing through, you are like ahhhh!” The physicalness of solo-hiking can again be seen in contrast to every-day life. David states accordingly: “I feel in daily life you never go until your limits, I mean your physical limits, so I wanted to do something physically exhausting, where you meet your natural boundaries.”
Even though hiking might not be perceived as the most dangerous outdoor sport, the interviewees know that risks are real (as stated above in the description of the solo-experience). Madis states: “If you go off trail, you are alone and something happens, then there is no way to help it.” Ben says about climbing Kebnekaise: “If you fall off you are dead.” In about half of the interviews people spoke about serious situations that could have ended with death in the worst case, but finally only taught them a lesson. They claim to be more careful now. They encountered a limit and recognize risks in retrospective: “Now (afterwards), I think it was a bit too risky.” Daniel; “Yes, once I walked through a river, but that was kinda a mistake.” Daniel; “That could have been bad…” (Ben) or “On the path there was a wet stone and I fell before I could think. I lied on the stomach and thought ‘ok maybe you gotta be more careful.’” Barbara Tuan (1974) questions this behaviour. He argues that people who have very little experience with nature (as for many of the interviewees it is the first longer (solo) hike) suddenly engage too harshly or riskily with nature. He doubts if they are prepared enough.

Especially older or more experienced people might be more able to recognize their limits. Daniel F says: “I am careful when I walk alone. I stay on the trail or if I walk off trail I look out if it’s dangerous. If it doesn’t work I return. (…) You need to know when to stop.” Also Inge, after he fell and got slightly hurt, decided to return: “I felt it was enough.”

In outdoor literature it has been argued that people have an individual optimal experience when their abilities match the context. This is referred to as flow-experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), which lies between feelings of anxiety and boredom. In a first interpretation this could mean that people play with and welcome these boundaries or brief moments of liminality as well as anxiety. Secondly, it could also mean that beginners do not know their limits well yet and at times pass them without wanting to.

**Adventures and performances build on the physical experience.** Gyimothy and Mykletun (2004, p. 957) argue that all types of touristic activities that combine elements of “escape (from the ordinary) and quest (for the novel and different)” can be interpreted as adventures. The individual perception of adventure seems to lie again in the right level of pleasure and fear (Fletcher, 2010; Laing & Crouch, 2009; Walle, 1997). Adventure is thus an interplay of competence, insight-seeking and risk (Martin & Priest, 1986; Weber, 2001; Walle, 1997).

Most of the interviewees express that their trip signifies an adventure for them and the physical is especially highlighted in their adventure stories. Risky situations often serve as the basis for these stories and become enriched with laughs and self-irony. This confirms the study of Gyimothy and Mykletun (2004) who noticed that in their narratives “subjects are constantly flicking back and forth in their descriptions of extremely playful and extremely serious situations” (p.784). Accordingly, Inge tells: “It was very steep. And it had rained. And then stones everywhere. And then I fell. And … I mean I was just a little bit hurt, but it could have been worse.” I asked how he felt. “I mean the first thing is that you lie still and try to feel if anything is broken (laughs) and than I noticed it was just my glasses that were broken (laughs).” Daniel tells: “So I walked straight up the mountain and I needed to go through some kind of swamp and so the shoes were completely soaked and the mosquitos followed me (…) there was a bit of desperation.” Then he states self-ironically: “Sometimes I tell myself, what the hell of a beginner am I?” There is also a bit of bragging: Disa acknowledges: “I was bragging to the guy I met on the bus in Kvikkjokk like ‘Who needs a gym when you can carry 23 kilos 150 K’s, man!’ (she imitates a lower, manly voice, we both laugh)”. When I speak to Barbara I notice her completely bluish-violet knee and ask her about it. She says coolly: “Oh that? That’s from when I fell. Just a souvenir.”

Ultimately, facing risk alone can have a metaphorical dimension. The hikers might find an attraction in the symbolic fight for survival, where they are heroically pitted against nature. Accordingly, also prestige could be a motive, since they might receive admiration for their bravery alone in the wild from peers (Mehmetoglu, Dann & Larsen, 2001).
Besides, I noticed that they mention many heroes in their stories (e.g. outdoor heroes: Cheryl Strayed, Bear Grylls, Christopher McCandless) and one could assume that they partly seek to imitate these adventurers (Cohen, 2003; Pedersen Gurholt, 2008; Repp, 2004).

The telling of adventure stories could be seen as an exploitation of the solo-hiking experience. Scholars generalise: “Tourists are performers.” (Noy, 2004, p.115; also: Edens, 2000; Hyde & Oleson, 2011; Schechner, 2006; Stephenson Shaffer, 2004). Gyimothy and Mykletun formulate this issue as follows: “Pleasure has become duty and the quest is to collect tailored, identity-forming experiences. A visit to extreme destinations or the accomplishment of extreme leisure challenges may bring about higher status, esteem, and respect from everyday peers.” (2004, p.874). Others state they might seek societal merit, self-promotion (Pearce, 2005), a personal record of achievement (Munt, 1994) or an enhanced image (Lyons & Wearing, 2008).

I do not dare any conclusions on this matter regarding the individuals in this study. If an act is staged or genuine is a question that needs more thorough investigation. The matter could be subject for future research. Yet, recently a hotspot was installed on Kebnekaise, so people can now log on to wifi on the mountain peak, take a ‘selfie’ and share it on Facebook. Maybe this is an indication?

This part has discussed the physical experience as essential to hiking. It is not hiking without a movement of the body through space. It is a challenge and its attraction lies in testing limits. It can be interpreted and retold as an adventure. Some of the quotes already point toward the last experiential theme: the inner experience, which is closely linked to the physical experience.

The Inner Experience

The fourth and last experiential theme is the inner experience. I claim that it is the most complex to grasp: you cannot point to it or touch it. Its verbalisation is limited to the depth of understanding of the latter. Thus, more than to resolve the inner experience in detail, this section can show that there is indeed an inner experience for many of the interviewees and that it represents for them an essential part of the solo-hiking experience.

The inner is a reaction to the outer. The three other themes have shown that they are related to the inner: e.g. nature could make people feel calm, solitude could make them feel independent, the physicality of the experience could make them feel strong. Solnit expresses these relationships poetically: “walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord” (2001, p.5). Also Disa describes the relation between bodily and inner feelings: “You can feel your feet, you can feel the movement of your body, you can do all these things, you can meditate as you walk.” This is a reminder of a renowned Latin aphorism, which highlights the depth of the outer and inner connection: "A sound mind in a sound body" (Mens sana in corpore sano).

An inner experience means reflection. Scholars have argued that solo-walks in nature can be an ideal frame for reflection (Mehmetoglu, Dann & Larsen, 2001). The interviewees tell how the solo-hiking experience gives them both time as well as the mindset for true reflection. Many keep their thoughts in diaries. Magnus reasons: “In day-to-day life you very seldom have the time or mindset that gives you the possibility to think about those things. (…) Here, I can enjoy lifting my eyes and seeing the nature, being able to wander away in my mind…” Jan explains why his head feels freer in nature: “Here you have less…(distractions). I mean you can see a lot, but you don’t need to deal with as many things.” Annika says it simply: “You empty yourself a bit. You get perspective.”

How the reflection works is quite obscure to people. Commonly the interviewees tell that they think about very simple things during the day (the path, the next break). Some say with a little
disappointment they wanted to address bigger topics in their minds, but finally don’t think as profoundly about them as they expected to. Daniel for example tells: “When I sat at this beach I thought ‘Now it would be the perfect moment to think about the big things in life.’ But then nothing came to my mind and you cannot force yourself either. I just thought about stupid stuff, this and that, everything and nothing.” He further says: “Yet, I have the impression, that I learned a lot, but I cannot really point out what it is.” He is not the only one; also others mention that they feel more calm and orderly in their minds without knowing how. Somehow without thinking directly about topics “it helps anyways” (Annika).

David wonders how it can be that in solitude he does not think about the topics that concern him. He tells me that he had just been at a music festival full of people and distractions and there he could not keep himself from thinking about his concerns, but now in nature they feel more calm and orderly in their minds without knowing how. Somehow without thinking directly about topics “it helps anyways” (Annika).

Terry and Vartabedian (2013) argue that one might be at a transition point in life such as changing jobs, moving or being recently divorced. In many interviews people spoke about these types of transition points: some more severe (death of a friend, separation from a partner or lack of self-confidence) and others in a more practical sense (between studies, jobs or residences). Some people directly state they seek to overcome life-events on the path, try to take decisions or look for answers. Others state the opposite and say it is not the place to think. Yet, all seem to see a function in their trip.

The inner experience has a function. This argument can be found in popular culture, in the interviews and scholarly texts: it is said that a solo-hiking experience with the thoughts that arise during the journey can bring us mentally further, empower us, make us overcome difficult periods in life, help through phases of transition or help us grow up. Terry and Vartabedian (2013) for example argue that one might be at a transition point in life such as changing jobs, moving or being recently divorced. In many interviews people spoke about these types of transition points: some more severe (death of a friend, separation from a partner or lack of self-confidence) and others in a more practical sense (between studies, jobs or residences). Some people directly state they seek to overcome life-events on the path, try to take decisions or look for answers. Others state the opposite and say it is not the place to find answers or take decisions. Yet, all seem to see a function in their trip.

For some it functions as empowerment. They realize they wanted to do it and now they really managed it. Annika says: “It’s good for my confidence.” Janina states: “What I try to get here is some self-confidence simply, so that I prove to myself what I can do. Yes, exactly.” Furthermore, Daniel asserts: „Finally, I am here and manage everything and it’s simply a good feeling to have managed it on your own!”

Besides the trip can function as a step in growing up. Jan says: “Yes, it’s the first time I hike alone and the first time I am alone abroad. (…) The occasion for this trip was my 18th birthday. (…) And I didn’t wanna do anything boring at home, but go somewhere exciting. (…) I think this experience is good for me.” Also scholars suggest that the journey signifies a period of growing up or rite de passage between childhood and maturity (Pedersen Gurholt, 2008; Stephenson Shaffer, 2004; Turner, 1973). Besides, the trip can also be seen as a way of delaying the responsibilities associated with adulthood (Riley, 1988).

Thirdly, people experience that they refill their inner energies. This recreational aspect has also been depicted by scholars (Cohen E., 1979; Kaplan, 1995; Roberson Jr. & Babic, 2009). Inge says: “I love walking in the mountains like this and for me it is recreational. I recharge
my batteries, both physical and psychological ones.” Andreas mentions: “And I always think that it gives me more energy, than the energy I invest. (…) It’s a big gain in energy. (…) Such a tour is relaxation, pure relaxation.” Magnus says: “I mean even though life is good it is not always good and then you need memories to recharge from.” Finally Janina and Disa also state clearly that it is about bringing this energy home: “And then I return a bit more relaxed and enriched to society and I can be again myself. Warm and caring. (…) So finally, I don’t only do it for myself, but also for being with others.” (Janina) and “So, what I wanna do is to recharge – with love and light and happiness – and then go there and that’s what I wanna present to the world, that’s what I wanna share.” (Disa)

This section has shown that the solo-hiking experience can move things within people. Yet, I argue one should still be sceptical towards expecting a change, answers or empowerment. David expresses this: “I think you cannot expect that it will change you. I am rather sceptical, when it’s about people in a difficult phase in life: somebody who got fired, the wife left or somebody died. There are so many similar stories and I doubt if walking really. Difficult to say, but at least you should not expect that the trip helps or changes you. And if it does, maybe you don’t even notice it. (…) I am really sceptical if you find answers when you might not even know the questions. I think that it is true that you learn a lot here, but you don’t even know what.” Thus, in conclusion the inner experience can trigger much thoughtfulness or fulfill a function for people’s life-paths, but if it functions in the way it is hoped for or expected is disputable.

Modelling the Solo-Hiking Experience

In order to synthesise this part, I sought to model the solo-hiking experience. In general, the above interpretation has shown that the interviewees searched for a mixture of different experiences, which are captured in the four experiential themes. Other scholars have argued that tourism generally represents a search for different experiences (Tung and Ritchie ; 2011). In a study on hikers Roberson Jr. and Babic (2009) had similar results regarding the experiential themes. They researched hiking experiences (not only solo-hiking experiences) in a Croatian mountain region and found five major experiential categories: Nature and being outdoors, mental benefits, physical benefits, interacting with others, and interaction with self. If we exchange ‘interaction with others’ for ‘solo-experience’ and merge ‘mental benefits’ and ‘interaction with self’ into ‘inner experience’, the results are equal to the ones in this thesis. Roberson Jr. and Babic did not go as far as to organise the experiential themes in relation to each other. Yet, this is what I wondered about: How are these themes interrelated? How could one model the solo-hiking experience? In the following I suggest in four figures how the solo-hiking experience could be modelled based on the results of this study. As a first step towards a model I pictured the four experiential themes as a departure point:

![Figure 4: Experiential Themes](image-url)
From there I moved around pieces, let them overlap, looked for key-sentences in the material, discussed arising models with interviewees and finally developed this model, trying to keep it as simple and explicit as possible:

![Figure 5: Modelling the Solo-Hiking Experience](image)

At first you might notice that the nature experience, represented in green, lies under the other experiences. As discussed above nature is a frame for hiking and so also the nature-experience is the very basis when it comes to modelling the full solo-hiking experience. Thus, the nature-experience is both an independent theme as well as it permeates the other three. The nature-experience then links directly to the physical experience as it gives the individual a frame to move within and an environment to interact with. Further, as shown through the material the inner experience is strongly triggered by the physical experience. This is again a reminder of the expressive title of the article in annex 2 – “Everything hurt, except my heart” – that in the end, there stands a rewarding inner experience in walking through nature and facing physical struggle. It also reminds me of a stone that lies at the beginning of the Kings Trail; there it is written: “Den längsta resan är resan inåt.” (The longest journey is the journey inwards – a quote from Dag Hammarskjöld).

Yet, what is it then about the solo-experience that makes it stand apart in the model? In this way, it expresses that the solo-experience is like a *spice* to the general hiking experience. As highlighted through the interviews its main function is to intensify the other experiences: “Solitude definitely adds to it!” (Ben). And it adds to all the other three experiences, therefore it is pictured alongside them. Also scholars have pointed out its purpose in making the experience and feelings more intense (Baerenholdt & Granås, 2008). Besides, by organising the solo-experience at the outer side of the solo-hiking experience, we can also seek abstraction from it. We can lay our hand over it and look at a possible general model for hiking-experiences.

This model is on the one hand the very result of this study as it shows the solo-hiking experience in a simple, unambiguous way. On the other hand, it needs to be the start for critical evaluation, discussion and renewed testing in the field.
Furthermore, I have developed two more figures that model the solo-hike as a movement through space and time. The first one (figure 6) shows the solo-hike as a movement between two places. This picks up on the perceived dichotomization of man/society/city and nature/wilderness as repeatedly discussed by scholars. As described before, people interpret these like two different or distant environments. Annika says “On the track you get a lot of distance from real life.” Then, the solo-hike is a movement between those environments: they go away from the home-environment, collect the experiences they seek in the nature-environment and then return. This way of picturing the solo-hike also gives an image to the nature-environment as a different experiential world, another lifeworld.

![Figure 6: The Solo-Hike as a Movement between two Places](image)

The last figure (7) adds one more dimension to the picture: time. The figure shows the solo-hike as one form of movement or holiday along the progressing life-path of an individual. You see how different trips along the life-path have different perceived distances from common life-spaces. I drew the solo-hike with a very great distance and a long period of awayness – this is of course only one possibility and maybe an exaggerated interpretation of the importance of the solo-hike within the life-path. Yet, there were cues in the material that led to this picture. You remember the average length of stay of fourteen days of the interviewees. I did not find data that states the common length of a holiday, but from hotels we know that they often struggle to have overnight stays of more than one or two nights on average. Thus, two weeks is an extremely long holiday period and could mean that people put high importance on these trips. Besides, I pictured the solo-hike with a greater distance to common life-spaces than other holidays, because most interviewees interpreted it that way: that it is indeed very away, different, etc. Yet, this perception is quite subjective and builds on the interviewees’ testimonials who came mainly from urban environments; for other people a trip to New York could trigger possibly greater feelings of distance. This model could be a starting point for further research if one would seek to focus on the individual solo-hikers and their interpretations of the trip. It could be questioned how far away they feel on a certain scale, how important the trip is to them, … Additionally, differences between the hikers background (city/non-city) could be studied regarding these perceptions of distance.
Finally, I included a possible triggering life-event to the life-path, which relates to suggestions of different scholars and is also mirrored in the material, for example in Madis story.

Figure 7: The Solo-Hike along the Life-Path

Ultimately, these figures summarize crucial elements of the interviews, providing illustrations of the solo-hiking phenomenon and material for further debate.

In brief, the part *Theorizing: Connecting the Empirical with the Theoretical* has shown a second way to work with the material. Taking a phenomenological stance (in order to create more closeness to the solo-hiking phenomenon), I drew from scholarly literature and original material to discuss the matter thoroughly. It has been suggested that the solo-hiking experience consists of four major experiences: the solo-experience, the nature-experience, the physical experience and the inner experience. The individuals might seek and experience these to different extents, but their presence is essential to the full solo-hiking experience. Yet, it could be questioned to what extent these findings are specific to the study-context in northern Scandinavia. Finally, the models synthesise the discussion and give a starting point for debate or further research.

The statements in this part are quite descriptive and universal, seeking to display the shared, the phenomenological (e.g. *The physical experience is an encounter with limits* or *The inner is a reaction to the outer*). Yet, I argue a phenomenological line of thought does not end with *seeing* and *recognizing*. Our minds go beyond accepting information and tend to question what we know. Therefore, the next and last part of interpretation concludes the phenomenological line of thought with a glimpse beyond material and literature – raising critical questions and considerations regarding the solo-hiking phenomenon.
Concluding: Questioning the Essential

I have called this part “Concluding” since I seek to conclude the line of thought that pervades this thesis. Yet, already the introduction on methodology informed that in phenomenology one would wait in vain for a punch-line or the big news, rather it can raise awareness and question. Thus, in the following I am questioning the essential. What does this finally mean? What is it pointing at? How could we interpret it?

If you think back to your very first thoughts on solo-hiking – Have they changed along the reading? Which aspects stand out to you? What would you address in a conversation? In the following I briefly lay out my thoughts in order to question what the solo-hiking experience is essentially about. I am asking more critically this time: “What do solo-hikers seek out there? Really, what do they seek? And what does it mean?” However, here I disclose my way of seeing developed throughout the study. Therefore you should approach this part with more scepticism and evaluate it with your own thoughts. My aim is not to convince you of the arguments, but rather to give arguments that are worth discussing further.

About Walking

Disa asserts: “It is about the walking, it’s a lot about the walking, isn’t it?” You pack your backpack and go ahead. Hundred, two hundred, three hundred kilometres. The walking is tiring. You feel your shoulders, your feet, your back. It’s exhausting. You push yourself walking through the rain. You stumble. You walk through ice-cold streams. What for? What do we expect? Do we do it for the walking itself? Maybe not. Maybe we use the walking like an instrument or a medium to reach what we really want? Do we expect that it fulfills a function. “Everything hurt, except my heart.” - Is that a promise?

It is all over popular culture. The tale of salvation through solo-hiking: stories of a daughter who lost a mother and overcomes the grief, stories of the drug addict that reconnects to herself, and stories of the man who lost his job and finds new confidence. What is if the heart does not stop to hurt? And if it’s not such a dramatic story, it is tales of calm, relaxation, empowerment and self-knowledge. What if we do not reach it? What if the walking does not function in the way we expect? What if Janina comes home and still feels lonely? Or what if we come back and the effect is already gone? Daniel F tells such story. He explains how he feels overwhelmed and filled with sadness after every hike when he returns home. Having seen all beauty in nature, feeling calm and empowered, he returns into the life from before - the life where he does not have a partner. Everything remains the same.

However, we keep these tales alive. We say the path is the goal. Is it? Do we do it for the walking? Are we critical towards our expectations? Does it function? Is it about the walking?

Into the Wild?

Commodification – this is a buzzword in tourism literature. The travellers claim to seek an authentic, true experience, but then choose a compromise. The solo-hikers specifically might have a wilderness-ideal in mind: complete remoteness, isolation, etc. Yet ultimately, they might end up choosing a commodified experience that contains only cues of their wilderness-ideal. As discussed in this thesis they aim for a certain level of wilderness or level of comfort and safety.

At the moment I am working on a comparative study with a British researcher. She has collected narratives from hikers in the Himalayas. We argue that her hikers chose a much lower, easier level than my hikers. Their luggage was carried, they slept in huts, there were toilets along the path, they walked in a group, they did not walk as many kilometres, and so
forth. The interesting aspect is that our material (the narratives) are in fact similar. People from both studies speak of adventure, feelings of awe, remoteness and wilderness. So, I need to revoke my initial assumption that northern Scandinavia represents an ideal level of wilderness for solo-hikers. It might do so for some, but truly everybody has their subjective right level to reach feelings of into-the-wild (however far or close they might be from the actual wild). Just as Nash stated: “One man’s wilderness may be another’s roadside picnic ground.” (1967, p.1)

**Risks**

It is her first solo-hike. She goes and gets gear. New **Lundhags** boots. A backpack from a friend. Some clothes from Décathlon. She got her stuff together. Now she feels prepared. But is she? I would argue maybe not. Maybe advertisements suggest that good gear prepares for the trip, but that is just one component. We need to be prepared for taking responsible decisions. When after days of walking she reaches that river – deeper and faster than usual – she is scared, but she knows on the other side is just one more day to get out to reach food and shelter. The way back would be four days. She wonders if she should cross. Desperation, frustration, indecisiveness. How prepared is she for such decision? When half of the interviewees spoke of risky situations – situations that could have led to death – one could wonder what that implies. Is not their search a very egoistic journey? What does it mean? I ask critically: Should we not care more?

I attended a conference on adventure tourism where James Raffan, a scholar, adventurer and author, held a keynote on: **Introducing risk to our lives.** What he meant was not the deathly risks, but the smaller ones. We should let children climb trees, we should let them hit their heads with a hard ball and let them fall at times. He claimed that we lack the more gentle risks in our lives and when we finally reach out for the greater ones we are not prepared. It is the same argument I picked up in the discussion above, when Tuan (1974) reasons that we tend to engage to harshly or riskily with nature without having gone through stages of preparation. Thus, how well prepared are we for taking risks? What does it mean if we take these risks? Which message do we communicate with our search?

**Performing**

I remember when I walked and did not see anybody for hours or sometimes days. You walk completely alone and you are unobserved. When you then spot a person at the horizon something strange happens: you become aware of your body through the eyes of the other, how you walk and what you look like; you immediately sensor your behaviour. As some interviewees stated: hiking alone means to be unmirrored, to be authentic and unreflectedly yourself. Then again there is a controversy when we sabotage these moments of solitude and unobservedness. Even in complete solitude we might introduce ourselves to elements of performance. We might take pictures with the intention of showing them to friends and sharing them on social media. Therefore we might put ourselves in the scene and change our behaviour to get a certain picture. We might already start to formulate the words of the adventure stories in our heads. We might take an extra turn just to say we have been there, done that. Thus, are we ever alone? What is performed, what is authentic? How much of the solo-hike comes from us and how much is done for a cause or a message? What do we seek?

**A critique?**

Ultimately, I argue that the solo-hike is a critique in itself. The decision to go out there tells something about the here – our daily lives, modern society, our structures. As the interviewees say they seek a distance to all of this. Some address directly how wrong they
believe the society is and how frustrated they are with its realities. Like scholars argued they come to nature as a refuge, another place, a place that is sane and whole, where things are still in order, where they can feel close to nature and engage profoundly with it. The interviewees tell how they also get closer to their inner selves. Thus, I conclude that the solo-hike is a journey of distance and closeness. Through the distance to common life-spaces we ultimately seek closeness to nature and ourselves. What does that mean? Is it not a profound critique of our society? Does it not imply that in *real life* we lack the things we find *out there*? Calm, time for reflection, solitude, empowerment, engagement with nature, self-knowledge, and the many other positive aspects the solo-hike might give. Do we need to go *out there* to find these? Should these simple things not be part of our daily lives? How do we experience societal realities where these are marginalised? A conservationist like Muir could question: Are not the physical advancements and modern progress of our society only small compared to the loss of sanity and wholeness we have experienced (Muir in Oelschläger, 1991)? What does it mean to go *away*?

This part with its questions shall allow you to scrutinise the essential elements of the solo-hiking experience: Is this what it means or is it yet something else? It is these persistent questions of meaning that make phenomenology what it is: a study of a meaningful aspect of life that will not be fully grasped and questions that never become a closed matter. Yet, I argue this full part on interpretation brought more closeness to the solo-hiking phenomenon. Like the king’s paintings the three sections complement each other: the first interpretation brought you to the field and closer to the individual narratives; the second delivered a way to work with the material, delved into scholarly discussions and discussed the essential elements of the solo-hiking experience; and ultimately this third part aimed at questioning the latter and deepening our understanding of the phenomenon.

In conclusion the three parts have shown that the interviewed solo-hikers in northern Scandinavia sought a mixture of different experiences. They sought experiences to distance themselves from real life: e.g. the nature experience as a different lifeworld or the solo-experience as a contrast. Furthermore, through distance they ultimately sought closeness to themselves. Accordingly, their forward movement along the path was also an inward journey that held a function for the individuals. Thus, seeking something *out there* led to finding something *in here* (in themselves). Therefore, I argue the solo-hike finally presents itself to us as a journey of distance and closeness.

Ultimately, the question: *What do solo-hikers seek out there?* remains open for discussion and further study. Yet, maybe the answer is partly in the question itself: the solo-hikers indeed seek something – different experiences – and it is not only the *what* but the *seeking* that is central. The intentionality of the solo-hike itself makes it fascinating and worthy of thought.
Final Remarks

Concluding Contentwise
In the two core parts Approaching and Interpreting this thesis has discussed what essentially constitutes the solo-hiking experience in the northern Scandinavian context. The reader followed the research process from the initial questioning, through the fieldwork and to ways of interpreting. Rather than the pre-interpreted, it delivers a full overview of what the material had to offer – narratives, a link to the theoretical and new questions – so that readers can draw their own conclusions from this thesis.

The scholarly reader can link the findings to her or his field. Firstly, the thesis contributes to central concepts in human geography (e.g. place, identity) as it describes for example solo-hiking as a movement between two places, the wilderness construct as dichotomized from common life-spaces or the hike as an identity-constructing activity. Secondly, it focuses particularly on tourism aspects: e.g. solo-travel, nature-based tourism and outdoor experiences. Furthermore it links to psychology (travel motivations, social behaviour, inner well-being) and broad sociological themes (leisure, environment). For scholars this thesis shall contain answers, but also impulses for further research. Throughout the text I have pointed out several matters that deserve scholarly attention. Here below I lay out three concrete ideas that I find particularly relevant. Ultimately, I argue that the phenomenological approach of this study inherently implies that a main outcome are new questions.

### Box 3: Further Research Ideas

**Introducing a Gender Focus:** Firstly, solo-hiking could be studied with a gender focus. One could seek to study gendered constraints and fears. Likewise, one could look at the social construction of wilderness – Is it not historically mainly defined through male narratives and by male heroes? Nowadays western women have similar possibilities to men regarding fitness, vacation or income. How do women then identify with and make sense of wilderness? Are they telling new tales of the outdoors? This study would address the interplay between the constructions of place, identity and gender, as for example discussed by Massey (1994).

**Place-making in Wilderness:** Place-making is a central concept in geography and in this second study I would propose to investigate place-making with a stronger theoretical orientation. During this project it was found that place-making in the wilderness is rather particular. The solo-hikers easily felt attached to a new place and made places their own. I would like to look at these concrete processes. Where do they put up their tents? Which place acquires a meaning to them? Why? Methodologically I have the idea to equip them with maps where they mark places for breaks or overnight stays – afterwards the concrete intentions could be discussed in an interview.

**Performing the Solo-Hike:** This thesis has shown that elements of performance can be part of the solo-hike: taking the right picture for Facebook, imitating one’s heroes, partly staging the experience. However, whereas the existence of elements of performance seems obvious, the actual construction is very blurred. What is authentic/staged? Who is it done for? Which different types of solo-hikers do we encounter? Do they perform in the same ways and to the same extent? How do the hikers communicate their experience to social groups? If we picture the solo-hike as a movement between two places (as in figure 6), we can also imagine the social embeddedness of the experience: hikers comes from a certain social background with their preconceptions, constructs and expectations, go to the wilderness and return bringing new stories. The study would address these social dynamics.
Tourism practitioners might look at this thesis from another angle. Destination managers, regional planners or tourism firms in northern Scandinavia might seek more practical links. I believe this thesis offers many valuable insights for these readers: e.g. regarding findings on desired levels of wilderness and demand for comforts as well as safety. One obvious contribution is the finding on crowding along Kings Trail and the relative emptiness of the other areas. From there tourism practitioners might look for options to spread tourists more equally in order to distribute revenues and impacts on the environment among regions; they might e.g. enhance the availability of information about other trails or provide new infrastructure. However, I recognize that even the concentration of tourists could be strategically aimed for; I question if it could even lessen ecological impacts and add value.

If you read this thesis out of personal interest, as one of the interviewees, another student, a friend or the person I promised over fika to send this thesis to, I hope you found the insights you were looking for. So that this thesis contributed to a fuller picture of the solo-hiking phenomenon and your first thoughts shifted as well as expanded; and that your curiosity in this matter became rather stronger than satisfied.

Concluding Methodologically

This thesis also allowed the reader to following the full research process informed by a phenomenological paradigm. Thus, besides the topical content it gave insights on working with phenomenology. I needed to define what it means to work with phenomenology and translate its philosophy into a practicable method for this concrete project, as well as defend it as a way of seeing and doing for a thesis in human geography. It required inventing an own form and tone that would display the material fully, truthfully and profoundly. It challenged my view on science and made me aim to make my work accessible to a wider audience.

As a result, I argue in its form this thesis is more of itself, not less. It comprises the crucial theoretical discussions in my field (human geography), but it is also a statement in philosophies of sciences and research ethics. It lays open the scientific process involving heart and thought, and displays research as both a rigorous and creative process. Through its openness it finally gains in credibility and unseals itself for true critique.

In the way I negotiated between a phenomenological ontology and a human geographical stance, I give an example of dedicating oneself fully to the research question. I saw this project as a committed process building on methodology and theory that served its purpose; finding a way through. I do not consider the thesis to be perfect, but it displays what the material had to offer and what I could share without bending the truth. So, it exposed the facets of a full phenomenological line of thought to bring the reader towards a deeper understanding of the solo-hiking experience as it was revealed to me along the paths in northern Scandinavia.
Acknowledgements

I have hiked more than 800 kilometres to fulfil this quest and to investigate: What do solo-hikers seek out there? However, I would lie if I said it was not also for myself. This trip has been a true journey. Letting me grow. Being transformative in solitude and company. I am grateful to the people I met along the path. They have helped me through the interviews to make sense of it. Some accompanied me to the end when they read these very sentences.

I am thankful to my parents who taught me courage and supported silent days without signal of my well-being. My mother has been the most knowledgeable preparing me with light equipment and advice. My father accompanied me on this trip and research like no one else: being truly enthusiastic for every message from out there and being the critical philosopher questioning my research.

To my partner I am grateful for his trust and the freedom that reigns our relationship. Grateful he would support my awayness and stand the weight of having a crazy girlfriend.

I am thankful to my teachers. Firstly, to Jenny-Ann Brodin Danell who supported me in the very first months of building the project and encouraged me. Further, I am thankful to Dieter Müller who accompanied my research with always open doors and ears. Ultimately, I owe the greatest thanks to Doris Carson as my supervisor who has shared my enthusiasm and trusted me, but has also been the critical reader and tireless commenter I needed.

I am grateful to you, the reader, for your interest and patience. Only in this dialogue does the work come into being, since the ultimate goal of a phenomenological study is to be read and to be discussed. Therefore I invite you to foster the exchange; share your thoughts or critique.

Finally, I am only content with the thesis to a certain degree. Having read theory and literature, having spoken to the individuals in the field and having been out there myself for three months I recognize that I got indeed only closer to an understanding of the solo-hiking experience; yet, there are still parts of the phenomenon I cannot see or describe. Thus, the thesis is ultimately also an invitation to deepen your own sensibility towards this topic: to become interested in the accounts of solo-hikers in literature or movies, sceptical towards theoretical categorisations and curious of the actual experience. “Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshed him.” (Henry David Thoreau) Reach out. Let yourself refresh. Walk. Engage. Think.
Annex

An annex is a place for additional material. Thus, here I include material, which I believe is truly complementary. Yet, its reading is in no case compulsory or crucial to follow the main argument of the thesis, but it might bring the interested reader from the desk to the sofa; and from a mere following to a deeper evaluation of form and content. The annex is structured along these lines: Part I: On Form and Part II: On Content. The first part underscores my formal choices and comprises a writing exercise. Part II: On content includes pieces of reading that I collected as an inspiration for the reader.
Part I: On Form

Annex 1: An Exercise on Perspective in Portrait Writing

In portraiture the researcher is everywhere, “as an instrument of inquiry, an eye on perspective-taking, an ear that discerns nuances, and a voice that speaks and offers insights” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p.13). Yet, the researcher’s voice is a “premediated one, restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled” (p.85) to not overshadow the interviewees’ voices. The researcher’s presence serves as a source of understanding. Thus, through laying open one’s own subjectivity, the portrait gains in objectivity. In the portrait of Ben, for example, you can see in which way I seek to present my thoughts as possible interpretations or analytical departure points. Yet, they are evidently visible as my thoughts: “I wonder if in this matter he feels different from others.” or “I picture him surrounded by many friends, also very comfortable in social situations” or “I think more and more that for me Ben impersonates the guy from Into the Wild.” Through clearly marking these as my thoughts the reader has the freedom to embrace my interpretations or to take them as a departure point to develop an own assessment. In either case, this writing style enhances the thoughtfulness and credibility of the portrait.

Objectivity then means for the researcher to stay “true to the object” (Van Manen, 1990, p.20), to remain faithful in description and interpretation. Besides, the researcher’s subjectivity is crucial to perceive the object in its depth and richness. A valid portrait is thus a question of the right perspective.

In my portraits I seek to achieve this balanced perspective where I stay in the background (to observe, ask and interpret with my subjectivity); and so try to lift up the true (objective) narrative of each person.

As one example I show in the following how powerful perspective is. In this exercise I retell the encounter with Ben, yet this time from my own perspective. This exercise highlights how focused the original portrait actually is on Ben and in which way I restrain my thoughts. In the following it becomes clear that in the portrait of Ben my perspective of the encounter lies truly in the background and my fears and hopes are even invisible.

An Encounter with Ben

Sitojaure. It is mid-June. For one day I have been trapped here. A huge lake lies ahead and my trials to cross it with the little rowing boat failed. The wind creates waves with white caps and there is no chance to move forward with such a small boat. Fear to drown. I feel desperate. There is nobody around. I knocked on all the doors in the Sami-village. It is empty. It is too early in the year.

So, I sit in the open hut. I made it cozy and warm. My shoes dangle above the oven to dry. I try to be patient. Maybe somebody is coming. Maybe the wind ceases. I stare outside the window and watch the height of the waves. Try to measure them with my eyes. They are still invincible. I observe the harsh wind bringing flurries of snow. It must be loud outside. Yet, inside it is silent. The hours pass without me knowing an exact time. My stomach feels empty but today’s food is gone. I read some pages in my book to distract myself.

When Ben interrupts this silence my heart jumps and I nearly fall off the chair. He enters the cabin with noise and wind. I see a shiny yellow jacket and a young guy with a beard wrapped in it. As my eyes meet his I feel relieved; he looks friendly and kind. My heart jumps again when I realize he can help me cross the lake, and he can be the first person to interview. I am euphoric. He puts down his backpack with noise and goes back outside to take off his shoes. Secretly, I lift his backpack. I need both arms. It is nearly double the weight of mine. I
feel proud of my minimalism. I put it back down and start to create some space for him in the cabin.

Back inside he hangs up his clothes to dry and takes out his stuff to cook. He also seems happy to see me and we start talking. He tells me he hadn’t seen another person in days. We get to know each other quickly. Ask the things that you ask when you do not know somebody. He is from Melbourne, studies engineering, has just spend a year at the university in Stockholm. I tell him that I am German from Berlin. He loves the city. Yet, I study here in northern Sweden. He even heard about Umeå. And I tell him that I do research on solo-hikers here in Lapponia. I am a bit nervous how this first interview might go, but he just affirms: “Oh, that’s me”, smiles and in this way invites me to turn on my tape recorder. That was easy. He prepares his food while I ask questions. I notice that this is a bit too messy as an interview situation and partly distracts us. Next time I will do it differently. Maybe just over a cup of tea. Yet, his food looks tasty and makes me a bit envious. Now I understand the difference of weight of our backpacks. When he offers some chocolate I first don’t dare to take any, but than those two pieces are just heaven.

He is a storyteller and impresses me with his adventures. Hiking alone in Norway he had hit his head on a stone, passed out in the mountains and got out by himself. He tells me about this “huuuge black eye” he had gotten and the reactions of the people in the train. I say: “Fuck, you must have looked like a gangster.” We laugh. I feel I need to keep up with his stories and tone and tell him how a friend of mine slipped off Kebnekaise. Just where the big drop is. “A friend of mine fell off. Exactly that part.” I’ve got his attention. He asks: “And what? What happened to him?” I explain: “Like one side is really deep and the other side is less deep, right? And he fell of the less deep one.” Ben: “And was he ok?” I answer: “Yeah, yeah. He got stuck and then he walked up again. But if you fall down the other side I think you would be dead. Or that’s what he’s telling.” Ben knows this part of the mountain and affirms: “Yeah, it looks like one way if you go off and don’t stop yourself you are gone for sure.”

And so we exchange stories. Most of the time I am more of a listener and fully awake. He always mentions “the arctic”, which surprises me. I did not think about the fact that I am hiking in “the arctic”. Then, he speaks a lot about the physical aspects of hiking. The longest he walked in a day was 27 kilometres. It challenges me. I wonder in my mind, how much I could do. Could I not walk 45 km in a day? Or 50 km? He also speaks about the advantages of solitude, about keeping the own pace. I can fully relate to this. Out here I want to make my own decisions. Even in difficult situations, like now with the lake, I don’t mind to be alone. It shows me who I am. I could scream and get angry and cry if I wanted to. But finally I need to face situations, overcome fears by myself, take responsible decisions. It is a lesson. It makes me strong. Here I decided against risk, decided to wait for calmer waters or for a person to help me. It makes me proud to act responsibly towards myself.

Ben seems to feel a bit similar. When we speak about the guy from Into the Wild, he says, that he sees himself as not that extreme. And we wonder if this guy cared about his life. We celebrate the solitude and its romantic ideal, but we want to get home safe. Share our stories.

When I asked most questions I could think about and feel us getting tired, I turn off the tape recorder. I am glad with this first interview. I got many insights I was looking for. But still I have a lot to learn as well. Before we go to bed we decide to keep an eye on the lake during the night. When the waters are calm we cross, whatever the time might be.

We crawl in our sleeping bags and soon he starts to breath calmly. After a short while I get up again to take notes of the interview. I am scared I might forget something and my mind is still awake. I sit down at the table. There is some light falling in sight, but the midnight sun does not break through the clouds. When I finished writing I check again on the waves. I do not see calm waters, but the waves are lower. I search the courage insight of me. The water is dark. “Ben?” I ask carefully into the room. As if he was waiting for this call he jumps out of bed and looks outside. He says: “Let’s go!”
And so we cross the lake together. In the midst of the night. With full arm power. It is still scary and still wavy, but after two hours we make it. We stay three more days together. Cross a second lake. Then, Ben insists to row alone. I know he pretends in his mind he is alone in the boat. He is proving to himself that he can do it by himself. I understand and just watch the surroundings. He also makes it after one and a half hours. He is exhausted.

So, we walk many kilometres, sometimes side by side, sometimes at a distance. When our paths separate I feel a little void. For three days he had been my brother. And I stand alone as he does not turn to wave goodbye. But there is also this euphoric feeling, anticipation: I am alone again. My feet are ready. Let’s go!

The difference in perspective in this exercise is very obvious. You can see that there are some common elements to the portrait of Ben, but here the narrative focuses clearly on my story behind the encounter. Taking the right perspective is to me the crucial aspect that makes portraits scientifically valid and distinguishes them from literature.
Part II: On Content

Annex 2: An Inspiration

It was quite tough to decide which pieces of reading or pictures to include as an inspiration. You have your own fingers to google and your own minds to decide what interests you. Thus, I will only refer two sources to you. The first is an article by Cheryl Strayed “Everything hurt, except my heart” (a reference to the book and movie Wild). This heading immediately captured my attention since the sentence grasps so well what it is all about for some solo-hikers: the relation between the inner and outer and finding a relief through the walking (even if not everybody’s story is as extreme as Cheryl’s, the protagonist of the story). To me the paragraphs on each mile capture very well the diversity of experience during a solo-hike, when desperation and laughter are sometimes just seconds apart.

A second recommendation is the short film Made in Iceland by Klara Harden (accessible on vimeo.com). She portrays her solo-hike through Iceland. She tells the story with little words and in much image. Yet, it is a very gentle, careful and thorough image she draws that discloses many crucial elements of the experience to us: joy, awe, struggle or fear. Ultimately, the landscapes resemble those in northern Scandinavia.
I’d never cried so much, or suffered so truly. On the trail, my feet are bloodied and blistered, my toenails so sore, I will lose six of them by the end. The flesh on my shoulders rubbed raw and calloused by my backpack. My muscles and joints ache from the relentless exertion. My whole body trembles with exhaustion by the end of each day. But if it is worth it because nothing hurts inside. The sores that compelled me to take the hike are present but surmountable, like every mountain on the trail. The only way over them is to go one step at a time.

THE FUNNY MILE
Just when it seems I’m getting this hiking thing down, my boot goes sliding off the side of the mountain. It’s actually gone. Knocked off in a misstep so unaccountable to a place so irrelevant, that I toss the other one over the side of the mountain too. (One boot is useless without the other, after all.) I construct a pair of temporary hiking boots out of duct tape, socks, and a cheap pair of sport sandals I’ve brought along. As I walk, the tape unravels and flaps comically beneath me. I tape it and tape some more in a desperate effort to keep my makeshift boots intact. Finally, I give up and walk with a stream of silver tape running behind me, laughing all the way.

THE ACCEPTANCE MILE
Then there came a mile during which I came to accept the simple truth: that I could live without my mother, even if I was sad to do so. I could have a happy life, even though she was taken too young. I could forgive myself for things I’d done wrong. That I didn’t have to be sorry. I only had to move on.

THE FINAL MILE
On day 94, I walk feeling so many emotions I can’t even identify them all. Sorrow and gratitude, Relief and exhilaration. Uncertainty and clarity. Together, they create a feeling I can only describe as joy. I did it. I got here, to the Columbia River, which forms the border between Oregon and Washington state. I savour each step, nostalgic for the trail already, for everything I lost and gained and learned. I ache to have every mile that came before the final one imprinted itself on my mind forever. I take the final step and put my hand on to the bridge that is my end point. I don’t cry, though I feel a deep welling of emotion. I stand and look at the river below, knowing that there are so many things I don’t yet know about my hike. At this point, I know only this. I took my first step searching for a way to become the person I wanted to be, and I finish it having found her. She wasn’t someone else. On every mile, she was me.

Wild is in cinemas from 16 January. Cheryl Strayed’s Book of the same name (Atlantic Books) is out now.

@CHERYLSTRAYED
References


