

Taking a health promoting perspective on Danish lifesaving culture

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The objective of this master thesis is to investigate whether a development of a Danish lifesaving culture in general can promote health, including changes in the population's knowledge, behavior and attitudes towards swimming and water safety. Drowning accidents are the second most accident-related cause of death in Denmark (1). We find that there are three major reasons for this: the Danish population's poor swimming proficiency, the lack of a lifesaving culture and, last but not least, the lack of interest in lifesaving eligibility from the government. We apply the phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics as a scientific theory fundament (2). Our study is qualitative and we carry out observations (3) in swimming clubs and on that basis, we perform nine interviews with informants who have knowledge on the subject of lifesaving. Our research task is characterized by a mixture of reflective practice and case study(4) based on the organization TrygFonden Surf Lifesaving and Danish Swimming Federation.

Results / Evaluation

The work is evaluated through: Meaningful coding – communities of practice, learning, progressive Phronesis and practical qualifications (5, 6). Meaning condensation – what should a Danish lifesaving culture consist of / criteria for when a culture is created. Meaningful interpretation – responsibility for water safety / swimming safety, attitudes to swimming proficiency and how the implementation of practical steps is to be done. We have met our objective by defining a Danish lifesaving culture and how it is articulated and made apparent in the Danish population. To some extent a Danish lifesaving culture exists, but it is very fragile and fragmented and restricts itself to being an operational culture. TrygFonden Surf Lifesaving's operative part is an emergency regime, while the informative part rates through wider dissemination, prevention and education of the population. The future priority must be on the educational part of surf lifesaving as the acquisition of knowledge and practical skills promotes a more sensible behavior in and around water.

Discussion

The greatest challenge is that the field of lifesaving is new, therefore, the cornerstone of this research is the empirical work. Because of the lack of relevant literature, we have compensated by making a sufficient number of interviews. The literature in this area is limited to manuals and therefore is not of academic nature. The research has external validity (7) because it produces new knowledge and can be transferred to lifesaving abroad and in relation to development of other sporting cultures. Including health promotion (8) in relation to lifesaving can give people an understanding and awareness of the coast and make people able to translate knowledge and practical skills into action (9). That is to master safe interaction in and around water for oneself and others. Because of the extent of the research and the time limit of nine months we have had to make selections continuously throughout the process. The full extend of the research is better suited for a Ph.D. We would then involve other important Danish surf lifesaving services to get their opinions about the matter.

Conclusion

To improve the Danish lifesaving services internal competition is needed. Lacking coordination, structuring and exchange of experiences is a significant part of the problem. Surf lifesaving is a seasonal phenomenon and therefore only a fragmented part of the consciousness of the government and the Danish population. Not prioritizing the restoration of swimming pools and the devaluing of practical measures such as school swimming lessons has contributed to deteriorating public swimming proficiency. Finally we lack knowledge about mammalian behavior and movement in and around water. With this knowledge and the development of a Danish lifesaving culture, it is our belief that we can prevent many fatal drowning accidents.

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