Articles

Hiking Alone: Understanding Fear, Negotiation Strategies and Leisure Experience

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This study examines the solo hiking experience, in particular the fears that solo hikers experience, the strategies they employ to negotiate these fears, and how the leisure experience is influenced by this process. The study used an exploratory design to examine these issues. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with men and women between the ages of 20 and 50. Results reveal five different types of fears solo hikers encounter including: the fear of getting hurt by another individual, the fear of accidental injury/life-threatening emergency, the fear of getting lost, the fear of wild animals and dogs, and the fear of the theft of belongings left in one's vehicle. According to study findings, five strategies were employed by solo hikers to negotiate objective threats and perceived fears including: avoiding perceived threats, modifying their participation in solo hiking, using aids or protective devices, expanding their knowledge or skills, and employing a psychological approach. Results from the study suggest that the solo hiking experience can be diminished, maintained, or optimized depending on the capacity of the participant to negotiate these threats and fears.

KEYWORDS: *Fear, gender, solo hiking, negotiation, flow, optimal experience*

Introduction

Women's participation in athletics and outdoor pursuits has increased 250% since 1977 (Women's Sport Foundation, 1997). According to the Foun-

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dation, the most popular women's fitness activities today include exercise walking, swimming, biking, aerobics and working out in the gym. Over 11 million women participate in hiking and backpacking. More women hike than play softball, basketball, tennis or golf (Cordes & Ibrahim, 1999). Despite the popularity of hiking among women, Chasteen (1994) found that 33 out of 35 women interviewed claimed they would never hike alone in the woods because they would feel isolated and vulnerable to attack by a man. These findings suggest that many women may limit their participation in solo hiking due to perceived fears. Trimble (1994), himself an avid hiker, explores the paradox of female socialization and relates what women have told him regarding their fears:

> Cultural barriers and fears keep many of our daughters away from the woods and the fields. Tomboys are acceptable only until they reach the threshold of adolescence. Then they are told they must climb down from the trees they love and act as a proper lady. At this point, young women begin to live within a paradox. They are taught to spend their time attracting men but they are also taught to fear violence from men. As a result women may crave solitude but many fear being alone on the landscape. Over and over, they tell me they feel vulnerable; they feel danger—not from the land, but from men. They fear violence and never quite forget about its most disturbing expression: rape. (pp. 60-61)

Because of fear of attack by a man, many women may forego the health and fitness benefits, the opportunity to be close to nature, the chance for personal renewal, and the experience of self-reliance that solo hiking provides. Other women negotiate these fears, adopting a mix of wary attitudes and proactive safeguards. They change their behavior or their mindset to make a place feel more secure (Whyte & Shaw, 1994). Finally, some women may experience little fear while hiking alone. They recreate freely in the out-of-doors, selecting places to recreate based on personal preference. But research suggests they are in the minority (Chasteen, 1994).

Women who experience fear while hiking solo are not alone. Men also talk of fears they experience while hiking solo. However, the type and intensity of fears that affect the male solo hiking experience have not been explored in the literature. Through an exploratory study design, this paper examines the type and intensity of fears hikers experience when hiking alone. In addition, the paper identifies the range of strategies solo hikers employ to negotiate their fears, feel more secure, and enhance their overall enjoyment of the solo hiking experience. Finally, this paper examines how these fears and negotiation tactics influence the leisure experience of solo hikers.

Fear, Negotiation Tactics and Leisure Experience

Research from a number of applied social science disciplines has shed light on how people experience fear in outdoor settings. In the leisure research field, research examining leisure constraints (Crawford & Godbey,

1987; Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997) and recreation conflict (Schneider and Hammitt, 1995) have explored how fears and coping behavior affect the leisure experience. Also, research examining women's roles and perceptions of leisure have contributed insights into how women experience fear in leisure settings and how these fears affect the quality of the leisure experience (Henderson, 1990; Henderson, 1996; Henderson and Bialeschki, 1993; Whyte and Shaw, 1994). In addition, important research contributions have been made by feminist researchers from sociological and geographical traditions in their study of women's fears and negotiation strategies in public places (Koskela, 1997; Lupton & Tulloch, 2000; Mehta & Bondi, 1999; Moore, 1994). Though a wealth of research has examined women's perceptions of fear, there is a dearth of systematic research examining men's fears in outdoor settings.

Fear and Hiking Alone

Leisure behavior researchers usually examine fear within a leisure constraint context. A leisure constraint can be defined as any factor which prevents an individual's participation in a recreation activity or limits the frequency, intensity, duration or quality of their leisure experience (Ellis & Rademacher, 1986). Leisure constraints have been classified into three types: intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Fear functions as an intrapersonal constraint since it reflects an internal psychological condition or emotional state that occurs within an individual. Scholars have distinguished between *formless* fear—a generalized feeling of vulnerability or perceived lack of safety—and *concrete* fear in which an individual anticipates a specific type of victimization (Keane, 1998).

In recent years, researchers have examined how specific leisure constraints differentially influence women and men (Henderson, 1990; Henderson, 1996). Henderson and Bialeschki (1993) found that women have numerous safety concerns including the fear of being physically harmed by another person. Specific to leisure settings, Westover (1986) explored men and women's perceptions toward three urban and suburban parks. Men and women perceived each park setting very differently in terms of personal safety. As a result, women tended to visit the parks in the daytime, whereas men felt at ease both in the day and in the evening. Also, Valentine (1989) described spaces within society where women may feel more vulnerable to attack. Specifically, large, open, and deserted spaces, including parks, woodlands, wastelands, canals, rivers and the countryside are viewed as more dangerous. Burgess (1998) identified several reasons why women view wooded enclosures as threats to their personal safety: woods are dark, visibility is reduced, and tall shrubs represent potential hiding places for assailants.

Several researchers have examined the fear of violence that women feel in public places (see, for example, Dubow, 1979; Ferraro, 1996; Keane, 1998; Riger, 1981; Van Vliet, 1983; Westover, 1986; Whyte & Shaw, 1994). Mehta

and Bondi (1999) contend that most research has interpreted women's fear of violence in terms of socialization theory in which gender identity and gender role are viewed as a direct consequence of exposure to and compliance with gender expectations. For example, Katz (1993) claimed that girls in the United States, unlike boys, are limited in their autonomy to explore the outdoor environment. Because of societal dangers such as child abduction and parental fears of accidental injury, parents sometimes restrict young girls' exposure to the outdoor environment. Limited exposure may contribute to a female population that is less familiar with nature, more fearful of outdoor settings, and less comfortable encountering unfamiliar individuals in outdoor settings. In addition, parental, societal and media warnings may instill a fear of being attacked in public places (Valentine, 1992). Media reports of women being attacked sensitize women to the possibility of being a crime target (Bynum & Puuri, 1980; Smith, 1985; Valentine, 1992; Westover, 1986). Fear can also be the result of previous experiences such as childhood abuse, domestic violence or rape. Thus, private violence can cause women to feel vulnerable to attack in public spaces. Researchers have argued that women live in an environment of socialized fear based on cultural mythologies of where single women should and should not be; what crimes they should fear; where and when they should be afraid; and who is safe and who is dangerous (Chasteen, 1994; Madriz, 1997).

In addition, scholars have debated whether women's fear of violence in public spaces is misdirected or exaggerated. Some researchers have found that although women are more likely to experience violence in private spaces such as their own home, they are more fearful of being attacked in public spaces (Pain, 1991). Other scholars identify what they call a "fear-gender paradox." Research indicates that although men tend to experience higher levels of assault than women, women tend to fear victimization more (Keane, 1998). Feminist researchers counter these claims by asserting that women experience a variety of acts of aggression, especially stranger harassment, that are not reflected in criminal statistics; therefore women's fears are neither paradoxical nor exaggerated (Macmillan, Nierobisz & Welsh, 2000; Madriz, 1997).

Fear and Negotiation Strategies

Women negotiate their fears in a variety of ways including avoidance and/or defensive behavior (Ferraro, 1996). Women who reported feeling a fear of violence often modified their participation in leisure activities by reducing their night participation, participating with other individuals, or changing the location where they participated in the activity. Mehta and Bondi (1999) examined how male and female university students negotiated instances of physical or sexual danger in urban space. They found that women actively resisted allowing the fear of violence to diminish their sense of autonomy; whereas men strove to maintain a position of mastery by representing themselves as physically adept and always "in control." However,

women in the same study adopted a variety of "sensible" behaviors to reduce the chance of physical violence such as not walking through the streets alone, carrying rape alarms, taking self-defense classes, and not dressing provocatively.

Research on visitors' subjective interpretation of recreation conflict (Schneider & Hammitt, 1995) also holds some potential in understanding the fears solo hikers experience and the negotiation strategies solo hikers use when encountering others. The authors developed a model of visitor response to outdoor recreation conflict. According to this model, a combination of personal and situational factors influence visitors' perceptions and responses to stressful conflict situations. Visitors engage in an appraisal process that can lead to specific coping behaviors when a stressful situation is encountered. The authors conclude that appraisal and coping behaviors can generate both short-term and long-term outcomes such as a diminished or enhanced visitor experience or displacement to another recreation area.

As an alternative to socialization theory, feminist scholars increasingly employ post-structuralist theories to explain women's fear of violence in public spaces and their consequent behavior (Koskela, 1997; Lupton & Tulloch, 2000; Mehta & Bondi, 1999; Moore, 1994). In post-structuralist theories, gender identity is viewed as neither completely socially prescribed nor freely chosen. Further, people function as agents capable of both resistance and compliance. For example, Koskela (1997) found that some women in Finland did limit their use of specific urban locations as the result of a fear of violence. Other women, however, engaged these fears, adopted specific mental or behavioral strategies, and actively resisted allowing their access to these urban locations to be delimited. Mehta and Bondi (1999) suggest that women "produce meanings and practices that are both dependent on (and shaped by) old meanings—and thus a part of the existing order—and re-imaginings of it" (p. 70). Creating new meanings and possibilities out of one's fears often involves conscious storytelling, memory negotiation and embedded dialogic exchange; that is, a process of internal negotiation between a dominant voice and a secondary voice that questions the main perspective (Lupton & Tulloch, 2000).

Fear, Negotiation and Leisure Experience

For the most part, research has not examined the interplay of fear and negotiation strategies in a solo hiking context. However, related research may shed light on how the leisure experience associated with solo hiking may be altered by perceptions of fear and the negotiation strategies employed. Some of the characteristics of an optimal solo hiking experience can be gleaned from leisure research focused on solitude and privacy in wilderness settings (Manning, 1999). Subjects in these studies scored high on scales associated with emotional release, personal autonomy, reflective thought, personal distance, and intimacy (Hammitt, 1982). Hammitt and Madden (1989) concluded that solitude in outdoor recreation can be broadly defined as "being

in a natural, remote environment that offers a sense of tranquility and peace-fulness that involves a freedom of choice in terms of both the information that users must process and the behavior demanded of them by others."

Leisure attributes such as freedom of choice, personal autonomy and reflective thought correspond closely to self-reports that identify the moti-vation of these engaged in solitary leisure pursuits. MacBeth (1988) exam-ined the leisure attributes of ocean cruisers; that is, people who sail the oceans solitarily for many years at a time. Ocean cruisers are described as searching for individual autonomy, fulfillment, satisfaction, and personal growth. A common theme articulated by the cruisers was autonomy and choice. Cruisers seek sailing opportunities that, "change their life space and lifestyle in ways that enhance their identity and sense of competence" (p. 217).

How the fears experienced and the negotiation strategies employed by solo hikers diminishes or heightens their leisure experience can be inferred from research examining flow in leisure settings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Flow can be defined as an optimal or peak experience that occurs when the challenge of an activity is balanced by the skill of the participants. Csiks-zentmihalyi describes the following six characteristics of the flow experience: a merging of action and awareness, a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field, a loss of ego, personal control of action and environment, coherent demands for action and clear feedback, and an autotelic nature. For the solo hiker, then, a flow experience may occur when the objective and perceived challenges of the hike (i.e., terrain; length; climate; wildlife risks; perceived fears) are balanced with the skills (i.e., physical capabilities; experience; judgement) of the solo hiker. However, if the objective or per-ceived challenges of the solo hike exceed the skill of the solo hiker, then anxiety may ensue. For example, if a solo hiker is hiking in an area where several well-publicized physical assaults have occurred, this knowledge may lead to anxiety and loss of flow. However, if the solo hiker has taken a num-ber of sensible steps to negotiate this anxiety, such as walking with a dog or carrying "mace," he or she may experience flow in this same situation. This qualitative study examines the fears solo hikers experience, how they nego-tiate these fears, and how their leisure experience is influenced by this pro-cess.

Methods

This study distinguished between three related activities: walking, hiking and backpacking. Distinctions were made with reference to participant input. Walking, hiking and backpacking are defined primarily in terms of duration, although the setting in which the activity occurs, the equipment used in the activity, and the benefits derived from the activity vary for each. In general, a walk lasts for two hours or less. A hike, however, requires from two hours up to a day to complete. Backpacking involves an overnight trip consisting of two or more days. Participants emphasized that hiking and backpacking

occur in more natural environments, especially "the woods." In addition, both activities tend to involve the use of unpaved trails, although rail trails and trails in rural areas were both viewed as conducive to hiking. Hiking and backpacking were associated with the use of specialized equipment, including hiking boots or trail shoes and either a fanny pack, daypack or backpack to carry essential supplies. Finally, participants associated several beneficial experiences with hiking and backpacking, including exercise, stress relief, personal time, experiencing nature, "loving life" and "having fun." The focus of this study was solo hiking; however, participant perspectives regarding solo hiking and solo backpacking were intertwined. Most participants participated in both activities. In addition, in discussing their fears, negotiation strategies, and overall sense of mastery and accomplishment, participants frequently shifted back and forth between the two activities. Thus, this study examined solo hiking and backpacking, but not walking.

To examine the fears of solo hikers, one member of the research team conducted 20 semi-structured, 45-minute interviews with ten men and ten women of white Caucasian descent between the ages of 20 and 50. These interviews were conducted during two two-week periods in the months of April and October, 1999, in Morgantown, West Virginia. A pilot test of the interview questions was conducted with three individuals to refine the interview questions and sequencing. The final interview protocol included a mix of open-ended questions and hypothetical scenarios to which participants were asked to respond.

A snowball sampling procedure was used to recruit participants for the study. To begin the snowball sampling process, four participants (two women and two men) who were known to engage in solo hiking were selected from among the faculty and graduate students in the Division of Forestry at West Virginia University. Following the interview, each participant was asked to identify the names of other solo hikers they knew who might be willing to participate in the study (Bernard, 1986). The pool of study participants quickly expanded to include individuals residing in Morgantown who were primarily from the mid-Atlantic region and who had extensive solo hiking experience in diverse geographic regions. For both gender groups, three individuals in their 20s, four individuals in their 30s, and three individuals in their 40s were interviewed.

Four interviews with women and all ten interviews with men were conducted face-to-face by a female researcher. The remaining six interviews with women were conducted over the phone. All interviews, including the phone interviews, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that results would be kept confidential. No observable differences were noted between phone and face-to-face interviews. Subjects appeared to be comfortable with both procedures. Contrary to researcher expectations, phone interviews lasted longer, generally, than the face-to-face interviews.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the following hand-coding analysis procedure: (1) hand coding the data, (2) sorting the data into re-

lated categories, (3) analyzing categories to identify recurring patterns and themes, (4) clustering and specifying the range of participant fears, solo hiking experiences, and coping mechanisms, (5) making contrasts and comparisons, (6) subsuming particulars into generals when appropriate to do so, and (7) ensuring conceptual coherence (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neuman, 1994; Weber, 1990). To minimize researcher bias, all hand coding was cross-checked by two other researchers. A qualitative approach allowed researchers to explore the multiple factors that shape a process or a perspective including how these factors interact on a situation-by-situation basis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Weber, 1990).

Results

Twenty individuals participated in semi-structured interviews, including ten women and ten men. Table 1 provides information on participant demographics, hiking participation, and self-described level of proficiency. The large difference in the average number of annual hikes and solo hikes between men and women can be attributed to the fact that two of the ten women participants were not employed and thus had more time to pursue recreational hiking. Although the average age of both men and women participants was 34 years old, male participants had been hiking solo for 17 years on average while female participants had, on average, only been hiking solo for about ten years.

The hand-coding of interview transcripts revealed the psychological benefits participants derived from hiking solo, the types of fears participants experienced while hiking solo, how participants negotiated their fears, and how participant negotiation strategies influenced their solo hiking experience.

Psychological Benefits of Solo Hiking

Solo hikers in this study experienced many of the psychological benefits from hiking alone reported by others who engage in solitary leisure pursuits.

TABLE 1
Solo Hiker Socio-Demographic Profile and Experience Use History

	Men	Women
Number of participants	10	10
Mean age	34	34
Average number of annual hikes	42	90
Average number of solo hikes	30	82
Average number of years hiking solo	17	10
Self-described level of proficiency	Advanced = 7	Advanced = 5
	Intermediate = 2	Intermediate = 5
	Beginner = 1	

Freedom of choice, autonomy, and personal control were important dimensions of the solo hiking experience. One male participant expressed the psychological benefits derived from solo hiking thus:

> It's a good chance to clear my head. I love to listen to the sounds without other human sounds distracting the natural sounds. I can go where I want to go and when I want to go. I can take my time or I can hike as fast as I want depending on my mood. I just really like the idea of walking in the woods where I can really just think and absorb all that's around me. (Man 7, p. 24)

Other hikers emphasized the personal control, autonomy, and freedom dimensions of the solo hiking experience by using phrases like "at my own pace" or "set my own itinerary" to describe the joys of solo hiking. One woman summed up her solo hiking experiences thus: ". . . having lots of fun, hiking up mountains, being outside, walking, loving life" (Woman 6, p. 25).

A number of participants in the study also explained that the solitude afforded by the solo hiking experience gave them time to reflect on important issues in their life. According to one male hiker:

> If you're hiking with family or friends you don't get that benefit from hiking which is not just reflecting on what's around you but particularly you get the chance to reflect [on] what's going on in your life. You sort through things and kind of clear your head, which revs you up so to speak. (Man 9, p. 43)

While some hikers in the study stressed the reflective value of the solo hiking experience, others focused more on how the solitude inherent in solo hiking allowed them to get closer to nature and "absorb" the natural environment around them. Participants described this phenomenon as a very relaxing, calming, and peaceful experience that led to personal renewal, a "revving of the engines," and even spiritual revitalization: "There's a spiritual quality to it because it refreshes me mentally and physically" (Man 1, p. 3).

Solo hikers interviewed for this study described many of the psychological characteristics associated with a flow experience. Personal control of action and environmental interaction were central components of their solo hiking experience as described above. Participants experienced a loss of ego and a centering of attention while hiking alone that allowed them to "absorb all that's around me" and "have no distractions." Participants described this "flow state" as highly rewarding, using terms like "refreshing" or "renewal" or "relaxing" to describe the emotional and physical rewards of solo hiking.

Types of Solo Hiking Fears

The solo hikers who participated in this study experienced five types of fear while hiking alone including the fear of getting hurt by another individual, the fear of accidental injury/life-threatening emergency, the fear of getting lost, the fear of wild animals and dogs, and the fear of the theft of belongings left in one's vehicle.

Fear of getting hurt by another individual.   Getting hurt by another individual was the most commonly mentioned fear among participants. Specifically, men and women participants expressed the fear that a male individual—always a male individual—might hurt them while they were hiking alone. When asked how he would react to an encounter with another man while hiking alone, one man indicated that his response would vary depending upon whether the other man was perceived as a threat:

> Usually I'll size him up if it seems like he's a threat in any way. That's always on my mind. But, usually, it's more like "Hey, how are you doing?" and I won't feel threatened by him. But I'm always aware, when I see someone, of who that person [is] and what that person represents. [He is] someone who's invading my space on the trail in a way. (Man 7, p. 23)

Appearance, behavior, group size, and duration were the main factors that influenced how threatened participants felt by an encounter. For example, one woman emphasized personal appearance and behavior as factors: "If I passed two men who looked . . . you know, it depends on what they look like. If they look like outdoors people, then, I mean, who cares? But if they've been drinking all day then you get nervous" (Woman 3, p. 29). Another woman indicated that in an encounter with two men, her fear level would be determined by the way in which the men regarded her. Specifically, she indicated that if they were "too focused on me," that would be a cause for concern (Woman 7, p. 23). If someone encountered on the trail had the appearance of not being an "outdoors" person, or if he engaged in suspect behaviors, such as drinking or excessive scrutiny, participants responded with a heightened fear response. But group size and the duration of an encounter also influenced participant response.

For several participants, the fear of getting hurt by another individual was not based solely upon actual trail encounters. Rather, the *possibility* of an encounter with someone who might cause harm elicited a fear response. This was most clearly expressed in relation to the threat posed by hunters:

> In the places where I hike alone I always think about running into people that, you know, might hurt me. Especially this time of year, [there's] the fear of hunters. For a person hiking alone that's a fairly big one. I think about that a lot, particularly now. Even before deer season there's squirrel season, and [there have been] several close calls [while] hiking. That's another kind of constraint, just a concern about a hunter who might be too near. (Man 9, p. 43)

The fear of being hurt by a hunter was the only non-gender specific aspect of the fear of getting hurt by another individual; although, admittedly, most hunters are male.

Fear of accidental injury/life-threatening emergency.   Participants also feared that they would suffer an accidental injury or a life-threatening emergency (such as hypothermia or dehydration) while hiking alone. For a woman participant with extensive hiking experience, her fear of accidental injury or life threatening emergency was conditioned by a previous bout with hypothermia. She viewed hypothermia as her "greatest danger" (Woman 9, p. 8):

> I got hypothermic twice where my tongue got numb, my fingers got numb, and
> the blood wasn't in the extremities. I take more clothing [now], I take enough
> [so that] if I had to spend the night out I'd have a sweater. A couple of times
> I have considered taking a cell phone; because, when you are far out and you
> trip on a rock and you sprain your ankle, and you get hurt . . . I am more
> concerned about that. Another thing is that I take water pumps. (Woman 9, p.
> 10)

Male participants frequently mentioned a fear of accidental injury or life-threatening emergency. One man was afraid that a rock might get loose, causing him to slip, fall, and break a leg (Man 4, p. 17). Another man expressed a fear that he would take a nasty fall and twist an ankle (Man 2, p. 9). When asked what factors he took into consideration while hiking solo, one man replied that he always considered weather conditions, topography, time of day, and the feasibility of rescue operations, including self-rescue. He indicated that he was always mindful of the "distance from any type of reasonable rescue if I were to become self-injured, you know, [where] self-extraction [was required]." The man went on to explain that, "These things are not preeminent in my mind, but they are always there" (Man 8, p. 33).

Sometimes the fear of accidental injury or life-threatening emergency was directed toward others, not oneself. One man indicated that his main fear was that his *dog* might get hurt; though he was concerned for his own personal safety as well:

> I have hurt myself, but not severely. [There's] nothing that really makes me
> fear being alone. My fears are more with my dog because he's been hurt before
> and I've had to carry him . . . Um, thinking about it more, I [guess] do have
> a fear of getting hurt. (Man 6, p. 14)

Fear of getting lost. Several participants discussed their fear of getting lost in relation to their navigational abilities. For example, when asked to rate her hiking ability, one woman replied: "Well, I have hiked for several years. I would say I'm in the middle somewhere. I'm not good at reading a map and I could get lost somewhere out there" (Woman 7, p. 21). Another woman responded, "As far as taking less difficult trails, yes [I do that] too. As far as navigational trails—it's difficult to navigate [and] I'll get lost. When you've got a group to support you it's a lot more comforting. But there is a challenge in going out by yourself" (Woman 3, p. 28). This same woman reflected on her tendency to get lost almost philosophically, as a given:

> As far as hiking goes, I don't hike any different with my friend [than I do by
> myself]. I have a big tendency to get lost. I do that a lot when I'm with someone
> else; I do it a lot when I'm alone. Being lost doesn't always bother me. I feel I
> can always find my way back. It really bothers me when I have my kids with me,
> but when I'm alone I'm fine. (Woman 3, p. 31)

One male participant traced his fear of getting lost to an experience he had when he was 19 years old: "I got lost [once] and I was probably going through the first stage of hypothermia. I was 19. I was a boy. But other than that, [I haven't had any negative experiences while hiking solo]" (Man 10,

p. 28). Years later, this experience still exerted a strong influence on how he approached solo hiking:

> I don't know, this might sound silly, but if you had a place [where] you could pay a $25 [deposit] to have a tracking device put on you . . . There are bear hunters who have hound dogs with trackers on their collars. If the dogs get away, they have [tracking equipment] in their truck and they can track the dogs. I thought to myself, I got lost that one time and that getting lost thing always stuck in my head. Maybe sign something out and you can get tracked down if you're by yourself. (Man 10, p. 29)

Fear of wild animals and dogs. Some participants feared that a dangerous wild animal, such as a bear or snake, or a domestic animal, such as a dog, might hurt them while they were on the trail. One participant indicated that being alone tended to accentuate her fear of wild animals: "When I see bears with friends, it's not as creepy as when I'm by myself. It's exciting and yet kind of scary" (Woman 3, p. 31). Another woman indicated that she experienced two main concerns while hiking alone: the fear of being hurt by a person and the fear of being hurt by a bear.

> Interviewer: Do you feel any concerns that affect your experience while hiking?
>
> Woman: A fear of being hurt by an oncoming person or a bear . . . Snakes don't bother me, you just stand there and they will go away.
>
> Interviewer: Have you ever run into a bear?
>
> Woman: No. [But] I've seen their markings on the trees. (Woman 5, p. 13)

Although some of the participants expressed a fear of attack by wild animals or dogs, two men indicated that they were "cautious" about wild animals, but not necessarily "fearful."

Fear of the theft of belongings left in one's vehicle. A few participants expressed a fear that while they were on the trail their vehicle would be broken into and their belongings would be stolen. One participant expressed a belief that his physical belongings were more vulnerable than he was himself:

> I feel the only major preventative measures I would take would be to back into the trail with my car, secure it, put things out of sight. I don't feel physically threatened on the trail, but my physical belongings are vulnerable, more than my personal safety. (Man 7, p. 24)

Negotiation Strategies while Solo Hiking

Participants negotiated their fears of getting hurt by another individual, accidental injury or life-threatening emergency, getting lost, wild animals and dogs, and the theft of belongings left in their vehicle in various ways. For example, participants employed the following strategies to negotiate their fear of being attacked by a man while hiking alone: hiking with a large dog, examining the appearance of the person(s) approaching them, trying to ascertain the possible intent of a person(s) approaching them, looking be-

hind them after passing a man on the trail to observe the man's behavior, stepping off the trail to avoid confrontation, hiking faster, keeping encounters brief, and having keys or other objects accessible for defensive purposes. Although participants tended to articulate the same fears, the strategies they used to negotiate these fears were wide-ranging. In general, the strategies participants employed can be grouped into five categories: (1) avoiding perceived threats, (2) modifying their participation in solo hiking, (3) using aids or protective devices, (4) expanding their knowledge or skills, and (5) employing a psychological approach.

Avoiding perceived threats. Participants negotiated some of the fears they experienced while hiking alone by avoiding perceived threats. One female participant acknowledged that she would step off the trail and hide behind a tree to avoid an unwanted trail encounter. Similarly, in response to the question, "What would you do if you encountered a whole group of guys on the trail?", one male hiker replied succinctly: "Deviate" (Man 8, p. 34). This participant also employed avoidance behavior to reduce the threats associated with wild animals or potential vandalism. For example, he confided: "I try to take into consideration the environment I'm in, and say there's a mountain lion, I would most likely not go there" (Man 8, p. 36). Similarly, he indicated that "If I pull into an area that has a potential [route] that I plan on hiking for the day, and if there's a lot of people racing around at that particular spot, I may not [hike there] just because of the fear of vandalism" (Man 8, p. 35).

Participants acknowledged that the complete avoidance of perceived threats was not always feasible. When avoidance was not an option, participants frequently attempted to limit the duration of a trail encounter by quickening their pace. In response to a question about how he would react to meeting a group of guys on the trail, one man replied: "Guys tend to feel more emboldened to do inappropriate things when they are in a group . . . If they look like they have the potential to be unruly, I would definitely say "hi," but I'd have the tendency to blow by. Hiking is a bit trickier than biking [because] you are going past someone more slowly" (Man 9, p. 45). By keeping encounters brief, participants negotiated their fear of getting hurt by another individual without resorting to complete avoidance or ceasing to participate in solo hiking.

Modifying their participation in solo hiking. To negotiate the fears they experienced while hiking alone, participants sometimes modified the time of day when they hiked alone, the location where they hiked alone, the manner in which they hiked alone, and even whether or not they continued to hike alone. For example, to negotiate their fear of an accidental injury or life-threatening emergency, some participants limited the distance they traveled from home, decreased the distance they hiked from a road, or eliminated off-trail hiking when they hiked alone. Still other participants modified their behavior by decreasing the risks they took on the trail. Specifically, one participant indicated that he would sit down and shimmy across a log instead of walking across it when crossing a stream. Another participant explained

that he might not cross a stream or camp near a stream if he were hiking solo.

One woman reminisced fondly about her childhood experiences of hiking in the woods. As an adult, however, she was reconsidering her participation in solo hiking:

Woman: Well, back in [the town where I grew up] there's woods. I used
             to go there by myself a lot, all up through there—even in ele-
             mentary school. . .

Interviewer: So you've been hiking alone all your life until recently. Would
             you ever consider doing it again?

Woman: Well, it depends on when and where. If it were in the day, I would
             do it. If it's after dark, no way. (Woman 5, pp. 11-12)

Although this woman was willing to hike alone under certain circumstances, her fears prevented her from *backpacking* alone: "I wouldn't go backpacking alone. I would be scared" (Woman 5, p. 15).

Using aids or protective devices. Participants relied upon aids or protective devices to assist them with routine solo hiking activities, equip them for emergency situations, and enable them to respond to threats with the use of force. The use of maps and marked trails were the main "aids" that participants relied upon during routine solo hiking situations. One participant indicated that he usually stuck to designated trails when hiking alone, unless he had access to a really good map. He also preferred trail systems that were not only well-marked, but had signs placed at strategic locations that outlined the entire trail system and provided handy "You are here" reference labels:

> I personally have a poor sense of direction. I have to pay attention to where I
> am going to see where the trail goes. [I prefer] better marked [trails] like the
> system at the arboretum [that allows] you to get a snapshot of where you are
> in the trail [system]. That might make some people, including me, a little more
> comfortable. (Man 4, p. 19)

Similarly, one woman negotiated her fear of getting lost by hiking primarily on clearly-marked trails:

> Since I go alone, I go on trails that are well-marked. I don't like trails that are
> heavily utilized by others. Every once in a while I take a sort of sketchy detour.
> I usually take maps with me, [but] I am not the best map reader. I am con-
> cerned about getting lost so I tend to stay on the marked trails, you know, the
> blazed [trails]. . . . (Woman 9, p. 8)

In general, female participants were not knowledgeable about map and compass techniques and often relied on a male companion for navigational assistance:

> You know, I'm more careful in terms of navigation. When I'm with somebody
> else, I tend to rely on their skills. It's easy to get talking and not pay attention
> to where you are . . . when you are [alone] you don't have that safety factor. If
> I'm out with my husband, oh heck, I'll climb any peak or whatever, but I don't
> feel that my navigation skills are as advanced as his are. [That's] just because
> I've been lazy and I've been following people. (Woman 2, p. 31)

This tendency, however, limited female participant's ability to obtain the full range of benefits associated with solo hiking.

Participants relied on other aids and protective devices to equip them for an emergency situation. Some participants negotiated the fear of accidental injury or life-threatening emergency by taking extra food, water and clothing. Others packed more first aid supplies. One man frequently left an itinerary with his parents or in his vehicle to help pinpoint his location if he became injured on the trail and required rescue. However, because he seldom stuck to his planned route, this strategy proved ineffective:

> I'm cautious about getting hurt. Most of the time I'll leave where I'm going to go with my parents or in my truck. But I never end up going where I say I am. So if I fall off the cliff, no one's going to find me, not right away. (Man 10, p. 27)

Participants also used aids and protective devices to negotiate their fear of wild animals and deal with animal-related emergencies. An important "protective strategy" that emerged from discussions with participants was modifying one's behavior based on an actual or potential wildlife encounter. One woman indicated that she would be quiet and stand still if she encountered a snake. Some participants indicated that they would make extra noise to reduce the likelihood of encountering a bear. For example, when asked whether she used any defense mechanisms when hiking alone, one woman responded: "No, I can't think of anything. Although, I make a lot of noise when there are bears around. There are a lot of bears around Snowshoe [Resort] where I sometimes hike" (Woman 4, p. 19). Another woman relied upon her dog or a noise-making device for protection: "When I hike at my house I hike with my dog—a huge German Shepherd. When I hike out West I am more afraid of bears so I take bells with me" (Woman 3, p. 27).

Participants used protective devices to respond to a potential threat with force. One man explained that in West Virginia hiking trails frequently parallel private property boundaries, increasing the risk of possible encounters with hostile dogs and necessitating a wary attitude. This participant indicated that he was always prepared to grab a rock or stick to scare hostile dogs away:

> A lot of places where I hike alone, especially in West Virginia, are on private property or adjacent to private property. I'm always thinking about dogs. I'm always ready to grab a rock or a stick or something to scare the dogs away. That's what I think about most. (Man 9, p. 43)

Similarly, another man relied exclusively upon his hiking stick for protection:

> I'm always aware of where I am on a trail and aware of my surroundings— natural and human surroundings. Often when I hike I'll bring a hiking stick, generally for support but also in case I see snakes or something along those lines. But as far as bringing something [to use] against humans or animals, no, I don't bring a gun or mace or pepper spray or anything like that. (Man 7, p. 22)

Only one participant acknowledged carrying a chemical spray. However, this participant used pepper spray only when biking, not hiking. She reasoned

that dogs posed a bigger threat to cyclists than to hikers due to their ten-
dency to chase moving vehicles. None of the participants acknowledged car-
rying a gun or other weapon while hiking alone; although one participant
admitted that he had considered applying for a concealed weapon permit
so that he could carry a handgun for protection while hiking alone.

Expanding knowledge or skills.   In general, participants felt confident re-
garding their knowledge of first-aid and their ability to respond to animal
encounters. One participant learned from his past mistakes not to overesti-
mate his abilities, be physically ill-prepared, or fail to bring enough water.
Another participant allocated pre-trip planning time to familiarizing himself
with the specific threats he might encounter in remote locations: "I may
read up on an area and its potential threats, be they grizzly bears, snakes, or
canyons and flash flooding. I prepare myself for that" (Man 7, p. 25). Unlike
the other negotiation strategies participants employed, as participants took
steps to improve their navigational abilities, they experienced corresponding
gains in their sense of achievement and mastery: "So, when I am [alone] I
take more notice of where I'm going and I'm looking back more and decid-
ing on the way back and things like that. Maybe it's a bit more stressful, but
[it's] also a bit more rewarding at the end when you're done" (Woman 2,
p. 31). This negotiation strategy has the potential to transform fears such as
getting lost or being attacked by wild animals—which could function to con-
strain behavior and/or diminish the overall solo hiking experience—into
opportunities to expand one's capacity and demonstrate competency. One
female hiker revealed the powerful effect that expanding knowledge and
skills can have upon the solo hiking experience:

Interviewer: What is it that you like best about hiking alone?
Woman: The feeling of accomplishment. The time that I hiked the trail
                in Yosemite and it was a 2-night backpacking trip. I got back and
                it was just, 'Wow!' I did that myself without anyone helping me
                navigate or make decisions about cooking or make decisions
                about bears or anything like that. I did it myself. (Woman 6, p.
                27)

Employing a psychological approach.   For most participants, their fear of
being attacked by another individual resulted in a heightened awareness of
the details of any encounter with someone who was perceived as a potential
threat. For example, one woman indicated that she would respond as follows
to a man coming down the trail toward her: "Well, I would keep my eyes
open and say hello. I am probably very aware and [would look to] see what
he is doing after we pass" (Woman 6, p. 2). This heightened awareness was
an active phenomenon, characterized by a "sizing up" of those encountered
on the trail and a thoughtful response to perceived threats. For example, in
addition to hiding his belongings carefully in his car, one participant pur-
posely withheld personal information from those he encountered on the trail
to minimize the risk of his car being broken into at the trailhead:

Sometimes [people you meet out on the trail] ask what state you're from and
how long you're going to be in [the wilderness]. Say it's for 3-4 days. Say it's
October 18 and I'll be heading out on October 21 . . . then they can say, "He's

from [Texas]. He's got [Texas] plates on his car. He won't be back for three days, let's break into his car." (Man 7, p. 24)

Participants provided insight into the psychological process they employed to negotiate potentially negative trail encounters. One man indicated that encountering a man who "looked out of place" on the trail did not cause him to be afraid per se; rather, it forced him to shift his focus from his internal thoughts to his external environment:

Interviewer: Do you feel any constraints that might affect your experience when hiking?

Man: Uh, people that look out of place. People that I just get an uh-oh, bad mojo feeling about. . . .

Interviewer: How does that alter your experience?

Man: It causes me to shift my focus from a personal one to an environmental one. (Man 8, p. 33)

The potential power of the psychological approach was revealed in this dynamic: the participant, often through a process of internal dialogic exchange, drew upon psychological resources to address a perceived threat that was to some degree beyond his or her control. For example, when asked how she would respond to an encounter with a large group of men, one woman's response indicated that she felt she had limited resources to ensure her safety. Nevertheless, she expressed a willingness to draw upon the internal resources she had at her disposal:

Interviewer: What if it were two guys?

Woman: I would make eye contact, say "hello." But that would depend on if they made me nervous.

Interviewer: What would make you nervous?

Woman: Um, if they were too focused on me.

Interviewer: What if it were a whole group of guys?

Woman: Hope for the best. . . .(Woman 7, p. 23)

Several participants explained that they tried to maintain a positive attitude toward human nature: "You have to think the best about people hopefully" (Woman 2, p. 29). Participant efforts to think the best about people were significant since none of the coping mechanisms they adopted could guarantee their safety on the trail. Their efforts to maintain a positive attitude, however, did not meet with consistent success. This necessitated an ongoing or iterative process of internal dialogic exchange:

Most people are out there doing what I am doing—hiking in the woods. My daughter is sometimes scared of the woods and I tell her that anyone that is out there is probably doing the same thing you're doing . . . I always try to feel that way, but there are times when, you know. . . . (Woman 2, p. 29)

Participant comments also revealed an interesting *reversal* of the psychological process outlined above. Two women indicated that they were not afraid of being hurt by a man on the trail. These women also acknowledged that this attitude might be "foolish" (Woman 9, p. 8) or "ignorant" and "misin-

formed" (Woman 10, p. 33). Thus, when fear was absent, through a process of embedded dialogic exchange, women entertained the possibility that their fearlessness was, in fact, unwise or unfounded.

Participants recognized that using a psychological approach (like the other coping mechanisms) had limitations, even drawbacks. That is, to the extent that internal reflection and heightened awareness interfered with enjoying the experiential aspects of solo hiking, it detracted from the overall leisure experience. For example, one man indicated that instead of dwelling on all the things that could go wrong, he tried to immerse himself fully in the solo hiking experience:

> I try not to [think about it.] Because once you start thinking about it, [that is,] all the things that can happen to you, your mind will start playing tricks on you. So, I just try to go with an open mind. I try to just listen and feel what's going on around me. (Man 1, p. 3)

Thus, for most participants, an important solo hiking challenge, perhaps the most important challenge, was to negotiate fears while maintaining enjoyment.

Discussion

Results from this study demonstrate that in discrete situations, certain fear and negotiation behaviors can constrain or diminish the optimal solo hiking experience. Psychological benefits such as personal control, freedom of choice, and autonomy were diminished as participants both psychologically and behaviorally grappled with objective threats and perceived fears. These findings are consistent with flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In these situations, the objective and perceived challenges exceeded the ability and skill of the solo hikers to negotiate the encounter, resulting in anxiety and loss of flow. Three negotiation strategies in particular—avoidance, modifying participation, and the use of some aids/protective devices (i.e., those designed to inflict harm to others, but *not* including hiking with a big dog or using a map)—tended to have a neutral or negative influence on the solo hiking experience. Results from the study also suggest that the leisure experience was not always the primary consideration. For example, certain needs took precedence over the quality of the leisure experience, including survival and not getting hurt or assaulted. Therefore, in many instances, the use of these three strategies may be the prudent, even optimal, response.

While the optimal solo hiking experience was diminished in certain situations, results from this study also suggest that as participants negotiated objective threats and perceived fears they often were able to maintain or even enhance levels of leisure and flow. Two negotiation strategies in particular, increasing knowledge/skills and using a psychological approach, displayed a greater potential to enhance the overall leisure experience. Participants gained a sense of mastery and achievement by developing skills (such as map reading, compass reading, orienteering, first aid, and strategies to minimize the risks associated with animal encounters) that enabled them to

meet the challenges encountered in solo hiking situations and maintain high levels of flow and leisure.

One psychological approach mentioned in the feminist literature that study participants employed was to cultivate a sense of "at-homeness" in remote areas and diverse environments. Koskela (1997) found that women study participants gained a sense of courage as a result of knowing their environment, routinizing the space around them, and feeling at home there. One female hiker interviewed in our study experienced many fears while solo hiking; yet, she maintained a high level of solo hiking participation by hiking primarily in areas near her home with which she was very familiar.

The psychological approaches participants employed to negotiate fear in a solo hiking context varied from maintaining a wary attitude (which could have negative impacts if the hiker were "too wary" or anxious) to cultivating a heightened awareness of others and one's environment; from engaging in a process of reasoning (Koskela, 1997) to pursuing "embedded dialogic exchange" that is, an internal interaction between a dominant voice and a second voice that questions the dominant perspective (Lupton & Tullock, 2000). With reference to the following quote, one could make several observations:

> Most people are out there doing what I am doing—hiking in the woods. My daughter is sometimes scared of the woods and I tell her that anyone that is out there is probably doing the same thing you're doing . . . I always try to feel that way, but there are times when, you know. . . . (Woman 2, p. 29)

For this participant, reasoning through her fears was not a clear-cut process. She engaged in an ongoing internal dialogue to convince herself to act courageously. She attempted to empower her daughter by conveying positive messages. Sometimes her reasoning was more effective, sometimes less so. But without this internal reasoning or dialogic process, it is likely that her fears would have held sway and her solo hiking participation would have ceased. Without this internal dialogue she would have foregone an opportunity to view others in the most favorable light possible, thus, perhaps, diminishing her own humanity.

Among the solo hikers interviewed in this study, both men and women experienced one or more fears. In addition, four out of the five fears identified were experienced by both men and women solo hikers. A fear that belongings left in a vehicle would be stolen was unique in that it was mentioned by men only. Men and women tended to experience fears differently, however, and emphasized different coping mechanisms to negotiate their fears. As a group, women tended to be more constrained by fear. They feared attack by a man more than anything else while hiking solo. Women also engaged in more avoidance and defensive behaviors to negotiate their fears. Women often attempted to avoid potential negative encounters by carefully planning their travel route or by hiding off-trail when a stranger approached. Women also engaged in defensive behaviors such as hiking with a big dog or holding their keys in their hands. Men, on the other hand, tended to be

less constrained by fear. They primarily feared accidental injury or a life threatening emergency. Men engaged in more preventative behaviors to negotiate their fears. Men tended to take extra precautions to prepare for adverse circumstances; for example, they might take a well-supplied first aid kit or topographical map with them on the trail. They also mentioned leaving itineraries with friends or family members or in their parked car. Finally, men sometimes took extra care to secure belongings left in their vehicle.

Conclusions

This study explored how men and women solo hikers experience and respond to the fears they encounter while hiking alone. This study contributes to an expanded understanding of fear and the solo hiking experience in three ways. First, results identified specific fears solo hikers experience while hiking alone. Second, study results examine the negotiation strategies men and women used to address their fears. Third, results explore how fear and the strategies used to negotiate fear influenced the overall leisure experience. Study results suggest that while men and women experience some of the same fears while solo hiking, they may experience these fears in different ways and to different degrees. They also tend to emphasize different negotiation strategies to address their fears. Additional research is needed to further specify these differences.

Henderson and Bialeschki (1993) found that the fear of being hurt by another person prevented women from experiencing a sense of total freedom in leisure activities. Freedom and autonomy are indeed essential aspects of a quality leisure experience. However, in the leisure constraints literature there is an almost unspoken assumption that being unconstrained and experiencing complete freedom is the ultimate goal. Results from this study suggest that for those who hike alone in remote areas, experiencing some level of intrapersonal constraint (i.e., fear) may be more realistic in that it reflects an awareness of potential threats. Further, among solo hikers who experienced a "manageable" level of constraint (given their physical abilities, knowledge, and psychological capacities), frequently the leisure experience was optimized and flow was achieved. By negotiating the fears they experienced while hiking solo, many participants obtained desired psychological benefits and maintained a high-quality leisure experience. In some cases, however, negotiating fear represented a struggle to preserve the human qualities that participants valued in themselves. For these participants, the constraint of fear actually served as a catalyst, leading to increased self-reliance, increased trust in others, and ultimately, increased courage.

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