

A Photo Elicitation Study of the Meanings of Outdoor Adventure Experiences

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This study explored the meanings of participating in college-based outdoor programs utilizing an innovative research methodology. Individual photo elicitation interviews were conducted with 14 participants of a college-based outdoor program. Photographs taken by the participants during their outdoor experiences formed the foundation of the photo elicitation interview process. Photo elicitation provided a model for collaborative research where participants interpreted their photographic images and meanings for the researcher. Qualitative analysis of the interview data revealed three explanatory themes: spiritual connection with the outdoors, connections with others through outdoor experience, self-discovery and gaining perspectives through outdoor experience. Results of the present study paralleled previous research findings while suggesting further avenues of inquiry using photo elicitation.

KEYWORDS: *Outdoor education, adventure, photo-elicitation, meaning, phenomenology.*

Introduction

For me, when I adventure outdoors, I more easily sense my connection with the natural world. This connection energizes me, enthuses me, and enables me to keep moving ahead. Sleeping on the ground, putting my ear to the earth's chest, I hear her pulse beat through me. Paddling on the water, rising on the rhythm of the waves, I am rocked into inner peace. Hiking through the desert, feeling the furious heat, I am reminded of my absolute fragility. Climbing on the peak, pushing upward seemingly forever, I feel my crevasses of doubt fill with granite strength and resolve. It is hard to give words to the sensation of these connections and their meaning in my life. Adventure is both an inner and outer process.

(From author's field notes)

Helen Keller declared "that life is a daring adventure or nothing at all." What, then, is adventure? Priest (1990) claimed that adventure is a critical part of the leisure experience and that for an experience to qualify as an adventure, it must meet three criteria: the experience must be freely chosen,

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T. A. Loeffler is an associate professor in the School of Human Kinetics and Recreation at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Support for this study was provided in part by a SSHRC/Vice-President's Research Grant. The author would like to thank Liz Ohle, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Karen Warren, Hampshire College, for their invaluable assistance during this study.

be intrinsically motivating and rewarding, and have an uncertain outcome. Ewert (1989) stated that the outdoor adventure experience is made up of three components: an interaction with the natural world, a perception of risk or danger, and an uncertain outcome. Quinn (1990) further elaborated: "adventure lies deep within oneself, within the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual spheres of personhood" (p. 146), and that inner peace is a product of participation in adventure.

Kaplan and Talbot (1983) found that three benefits arose from outdoor experiences: increased relationship with the physical environment, increased self-confidence and inner clarity, and increased reflection and contemplation. They were surprised because they had "not expected the wilderness experience to be quite so powerful or pervasive in its impact" and they "were impressed by the durability of that residue in the human makeup that still resonates so strongly to these remote, uncivilized places" (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983, p. 201). Recognizing the dearth of research in the area, Ewert (1989) called for more scholarly investigations into the phenomenon of outdoor experience as well as the development of explanatory models for participation in outdoor adventure activities. Additionally, Patterson, Watson, Williams, and Roggenbuck (1998) suggest that future research use alternative methods to investigate the meaning of outdoor recreation experiences and the role of participant reflection in making those meanings.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the meanings of outdoor experiences using a new methodology. Specifically, this exploratory study used photo elicitation interviews to investigate the inner significance of outdoor experiences for participants. In these interviews, discussion between the researcher and participant was initiated and propelled by photographs (Harper, 2002). The photographs taken by the participants during their outdoor adventure experiences formed the foundation for the photo elicitation interview process.

By giving outdoor and experiential educators a better understanding of the meaning of the outdoor adventure experience, this study has both practical and socially relevant ends. With ever increasing participation rates, outdoor professionals are faced with increasingly complex management and programming decisions related to access to the outdoors, carrying capacity of outdoor resources, risk, and managing extreme adventure recreation activities (Jubenville & Twight, 1993). The present study provides a deeper understanding of underlying meanings of outdoor experience, and with such an understanding in place, outdoor and experiential educators may be able to develop innovative programs that meet the adventure needs of their clients in new and more satisfying ways.

Literature Review

Outdoor Experiences

The outdoor environment and outdoor experiences have the potential to engage the entire person. This engagement has been described many ways: as *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975); *peak experience* (Maslow, 1962); *fasci-*

nation (Kaplan & Talbot, 1983); *oneness* (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001); *topophilia* (Tuan, 1976); and *numinous* (Raffan, 1993). In discussing why people are drawn to climb mountains, Mitchell (1983) described a purposeful exploration of the natural world resulting in an intimate dialogue between the individual and the environment. He suggested that the "sublimity of mountain climbing manifests in two ways: as an environment to be experienced and as a medium for creative expression (p. 143)." Additionally, Mitchell described adventure as a state of mind.

Various exploratory models derivate the elements of the outdoor experience that contribute to such engagement. Ewert (1989) offered the *outdoor adventure recreation conceptual model* that combined social orientation and locus of control on one axis with risk and motivational factors on the other resulting in a linear relationship between the two axes. He described this relationship as ranging from introductory through committed engagement in outdoor recreation. Martin and Priest (1986) used axes of risk and competence to create the *adventure experience paradigm* used in interpretation of adventure experiences. They hypothesized that when participant expectations and resultants are in balance, the possibility exists for peak experience to occur. A peak experience is when an individual feels fulfilled, extremely satisfied and/or deeply happy (Maslow, 1962). Both of these models characterize the outdoor experience as a complex and multi-faceted interaction of risk, competence, social relations and the outdoor environment.

Recent qualitative research has begun to examine the outdoor experience from the point of view of the participant. This research has demonstrated that it is possible to gain a rich understanding of the participant/environment relationship (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2002). Patterson et al. (1998) utilized a hermeneutic approach to study the nature of wilderness experiences. They found that such experiences were highly emergent, variable and contextual for each individual. They grouped the results of their study into four dimensions: "challenge, closeness to nature, decisions not faced in everyday environments, and stories of nature" (p. 431).

The outdoors has significant and profound effects on individuals in three main ways: inner exploration, group process, and close interaction with the natural environment (Ewert, 2000). Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson (2000) identified the following fundamental characteristics of a wilderness recreation experience:

1. Escape (from norms, everyday demands, and distractions)
2. Challenge and Survival (physical and mental)
3. New Opportunities (learning new skills)
4. Natural Awe and Beauty (connection to nature)
5. Solitude (isolation, time to focus, mental revitalization). (p. 422)

Having used mixed methodologies to study participants on a lengthy trip down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, Arnould and Price (1993) found that participants sensed a deeper connection to self, to others, and to the environment around them as the trip progressed. Visitors to Oke-

fenokee National Wildlife Reserve showed a greater focus on the environment and on themselves when they exited from the reserve than when they entered (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001). Pohl et al. (2000) suggested four transferable outcomes from women's participation in wilderness recreation: self-sufficiency, change in perspective, connection to others and mental clarity. As these studies demonstrate, outdoor participants value and make meaning from the connections they forge with the environment, with themselves, and with each other during their experiences.

At times, these connections are described as spiritual or transcendent. Smith (1996) suggested that outdoor programs have given little attention to how their programs impact the spiritual lives of their participants. He called for concentrated research effort in this area to further the field's understanding of its influence on spiritual development and the ways in which it can further such development through program design, delivery and philosophy. In one of the few studies done entirely in this area, Stringer and McAvoy (1992) found that spiritual development was an important aspect of outdoor adventure because it invites participants to explore the spiritual side of their existence. Participants in their study struggled to describe and explain the meanings of their outdoor experiences. Stringer and McAvoy (1992) suggested that, for their participants, spiritual experiences were shaped primarily by the most memorable moments of the trip. They also proposed that these "moments of intense emotion" were prompted by interactions with others and by interactions with the natural world (p. 17).

Photo Elicitation

Collier (1967) first described the photo elicitation interview. Photo elicitation has been used to conduct research in anthropology, education, community health, psychology, and sociology (Carlsson, 2001; Harper, 2002; Wang, 2003). Photo elicitation introduces photographs into a research interview thereby bringing images into the center of the research agenda (Harper, 2002). By doing so, it redefines the essential relationships of research through a reduction of the asymmetry in power between the researcher and participant because the interview focuses on the photographs rather than the research participant. (Carlsson, 2001; Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation is a collaborative process whereby the researcher becomes a listener as the participant interprets the photograph for the researcher. This process invites research participants to take the leading role in the interview and to make full use of their expertise. In some cases, this collaboration occurs at an even higher level when the research participants make the photographs themselves (van der Does, Edelaar, Gooskens, Liefing & van Mierlo, 1992).

Harper (2002) advocates the use of photo elicitation because images evoke deeper elements of human experiences than words alone. Collier and Collier (1986) suggested that photographs, when used in interviews, "sharpen the memory and give the interview an immediate character of re-

alistic reconstruction" (p. 106) and that "photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols" (p. 108). The emotional content extracted from and projected onto the photographs affords the researcher a greater understanding of participant's experiences than from the spoken or written word alone (Carlsson, 2001).

A photograph preserves a moment in time. Photographers, reflecting a successful advertising campaign, often refer to the act of photography as capturing a "Kodak moment." Photographs, then, are an emanation of a past reality (Cronin, 1998). Walker and Kimball-Moulton (1989) noted that photography is about time in that "the act of photography anticipates the future by ripping the appearance of a moment out of its time, creating a tangible image for the future of what will be the past" (p. 157). Some people use photographs as protection against time by using them as a "mooring for the evocation of past memories" (Cronin, 1998, p.73). Colson (1979) surmised "people take up photography at times of rapid change in their lives when photography is most clearly expressive of the wish to hold time still, to have greater opportunity to consolidate the ordinarily fleeting experiences of the moment" (p. 273). Cronin (1996), in a study of lay photographers, found that participants used photographs to document change and rites of passage in their lives.

Photographs are a reflection of the photographer's point of view, biases, and experiences. Both the photographer and the viewer of a photograph construct its meaning because both bring their social position, personality and personal history to the interpretive act (Harper, 2000). As well, the meaning of a photograph can change when it is viewed in different contexts (Becker, 1998; Carlsson, 2001; Schwartz, 1989). In this light, Cronin (1998) suggests that "the function of photographs is the creation and maintenance of meaning, and to this end a hermeneutic approach, [in research] which concentrates on the meaning woven around a photograph, is desirable (p. 77)."

Prosser (1998) noted that the status of image-based research has been disproportionately low relative to word-based research and, therefore, that image-based research has been undervalued and under applied. Harper (1998) echoed this sentiment and suggested that photo elicitation interviewing is an underutilized methodology with nearly limitless potential. Given this potential, this study utilized participant's photographs to establish rapport, share in the narrative of the experiences, and to delve into the meanings of both the photographs and the experiences.

Method

Data collection and analysis for this study took place during the 2002-03 academic year. Data for this qualitative study were gathered using photo elicitation interviews with 14 participants of a college-based outdoor program.

Sample Selection

A pool of potential interview participants was generated by contacting outdoor program instructors, putting up posters, and by approaching potential participants at the end of their outdoor adventure experiences. Interview participants were selected using "criterion-based sampling" (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Potential participants were asked to fill out a short demographic survey to see if they met the criterion for inclusion: recent (during the current academic year) participation in a college sponsored outdoor program and having taken photographs during that experience. The sample attempted to provide a cross sectional representation of college students based on the following criteria: gender, age, year in school, outdoor experience, the type of outdoor activity, and trip length. Of the 14 students who were interviewed, seven were female and seven were male. They varied in age from 18-21 and ranged from first through fourth year students. The participants ranged in experience from beginner (started participating in outdoor activities within the current academic year) and expert (more than ten years of outdoor experience). They participated in backpacking, rockclimbing, whitewater kayaking, or sea kayaking programs varying in length from a weekend to three weeks. The shorter programs were introductory experiences while the longer trips covered introductory through advanced outdoor activities.

Data Collection Procedures

The author conducted interviews using a photo elicitation based interview technique. During the interviews, the participants and researcher examined and discussed the photographs, which the participants took during their outdoor trips. The interviewer asked the participants questions about their outdoor experiences including trip memories, the meaning(s) they ascribed to their experience, and the value of the photographs in explaining their experience. Rapport was quickly established in each interview because of the shared interest in the outdoors and photography. The interviews were approximately 45-75 minutes in length. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and ethical research procedures of confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, and right of withdrawal were followed as outlined in the study's ethical approval application.

Interviews were audio and video recorded. The video recorder captured both the interview conversation and the photographic images digitally for analysis and the audio recorder recorded the interview conversation. Five hundred and eleven (511) digitized photographs were downloaded from the videotapes into two software packages, Adobe Premiere and ACDSee for Mac, for analysis. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and downloaded into the software package NUD · IST¹.

¹NUD · IST is an acronym for Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing (Richards & Richards, 1991).

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher conducted an inductive thematic analysis using both the participant's photographic images and the interview transcripts. The interview transcripts were read repeatedly until categories began to emerge from the data. These categories formed the basis for a tree-like matrix coding system used to store and retrieve the interview and photographic data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The basic unit of analysis was a quote or photograph. A quote was defined as a statement made by a participant that expressed a single feeling or idea about outdoor experience. Each quote and photograph was compared and contrasted to previous ones and either assigned one or more existing codes or a new code was created for it.

The process of data analysis was aided by NUD · IST. Of the wide variety of qualitative data analysis programs, NUD · IST was chosen because it matched the researcher's needs in terms of flexibility, computer skills, database management, and anticipated analysis type (Miles & Huberman, 1994). NUD · IST is an index-based system that allowed the researcher to code data and store memos in a tree-like matrix (Richards & Richards, 1994). Once the data were coded, they were retrieved by a wide variety of Boolean, context, proximity, and sequencing searches. These features of NUD · IST allowed the researcher to shift the analysis to a deeper level and "break the data open" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 75) in order to constantly compare it to what was already known (Merriam, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Utilizing a NUD · IST feature entitled *system closure*, the researcher was able to code and store the results of such retrievals for further analysis and theory building (Richards & Richards, 1994). Additionally, NUD · IST afforded the researcher great flexibility to shift, change and revise the indexing scheme as meta-analysis progressed and the three explanatory themes emerged from the data (Richards & Richards, 1991). Finally, NUD · IST created a documented history for each node of the indexing system that assisted the researcher in auditing the research process (Richards & Richards, 1994).

In summary, data analysis began when data collection began; it was a "simultaneous process" (Merriam, 1988, p. 123). There was constant comparison between data collected, related literature, and emerging theory. In order to enhance internal validity in the present study, triangulation of analysis methods and data sources as well as peer review was used. At various points in the data analysis process, two other researchers analyzed randomly chosen interviews to establish the reliability of the coding system, the categories selected, and the interpretation of the data. The "Test Coder Reliability Task" in NUD · IST was used to compare the work of the secondary coders to the primary coder and sufficient agreement was found.

Results

The participants brought a total of 511 photographs to the interviews resulting in a mean of 36.5 photographs per participant with a range of 13-

87 photographs. Initially, the photographs were coded by content into 32 detailed categories. These categories were then collapsed into 12 categories for analysis (see Figure 1). Following this, the 12 categories were collapsed into 3 emergent photographic themes: outdoor activity, outdoor environment and people (see Figure 2).

Almost half (46%) of the photographs brought to the interviews were of the environment in which the participants traveled. Using their cameras, they sought to capture images of mountains, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, sunsets and various forms of flora. The rest of the images they captured were split between images of the outdoor activity they were pursuing (25%) and the people with whom they pursued the activity (29%). They photographed themselves, their friends, their group, and their leaders.

The participants, using these photographs as springboards for discussion, ascribed many meanings to their outdoor experiences. Data analysis of these meanings yielded a tremendous amount of information and the following results do not incorporate all themes that surfaced from the data. Three themes that emerged repeatedly from the data were: 1) spiritual connection with the outdoors, 2) connections with others through outdoor experience, 3) self-discovery and gaining perspectives through outdoor experience.

Spiritual Connection with the Outdoors

For many of the participants, the outdoors is a place to find stillness, calm and peace. Richard described this feeling “being outside, I really feel like a creature of the universe when I am out on top of the mountain or in

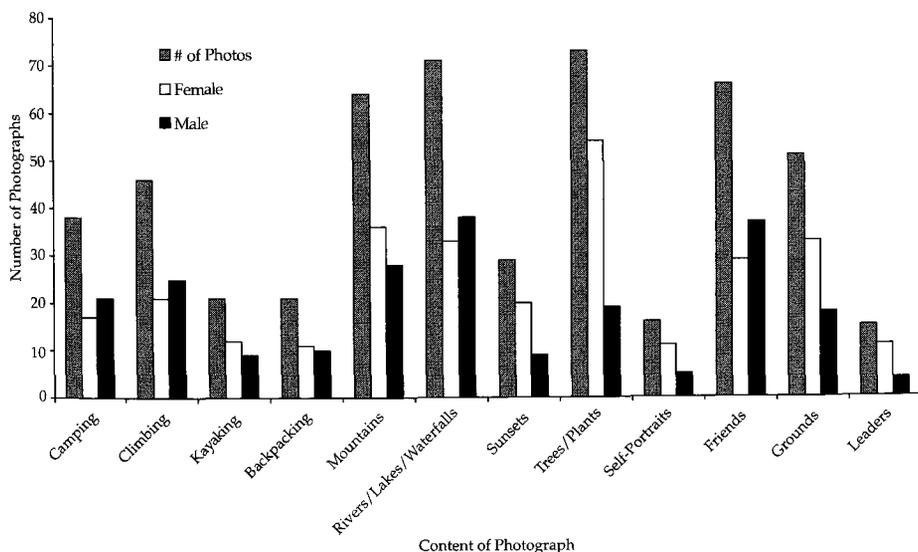


Figure 1. Number of Photographs by Content Category

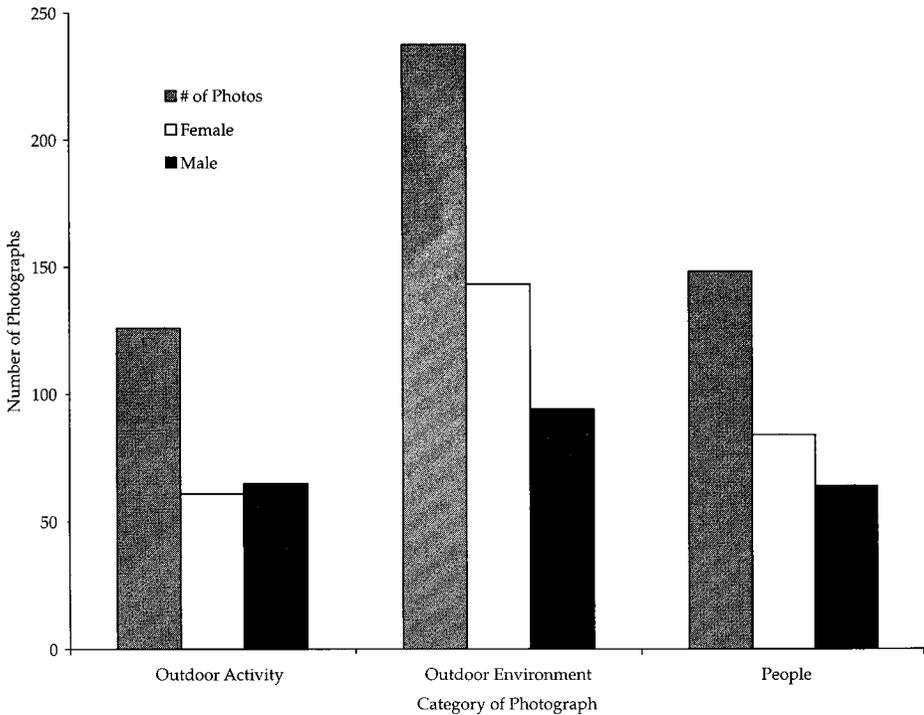


Figure 2. Number of Photographs by Photographic Theme

the woods. Surrounded by trees and quiet, solitude and peacefulness.” Brian mentioned this same state of peacefulness while explaining why he had taken a picture of a beautiful view high in the mountains,

This one shows nature at its beauty . . . You just stand there and you can think about anything you want, you could write poetry, it’s just so very peaceful and relaxing . . . I try to be one with nature . . . I try to imagine myself just being peaceful, and not having a care in the world.

The outdoors is also a place where the participants can connect to a sense of a higher purpose or power. The out-of-doors inspires a contemplative mindset where they are drawn to ask themselves deeper or more philosophical questions. Richard described this state of being while showing the researcher a picture of trees reflecting in a lake,

It is only in the past couple years that I’ve really begun to think about these questions. Spirituality or what the world means . . . you can’t really come up with the answer . . . but when I am outside, I just know things are right . . . that the world is a beautiful place and it is good ultimately.”

Participants frequently drew upon the words ‘awe’, ‘beauty’, and ‘spiritual’ to describe the deeper connection they felt to the divine and the natural

world as a result of being on outdoor trips. Graham selected a photo of a sunset and said,

It is hard trying to explain the religious sense in nature. And you can use all the words like wonderful or awe but it is hard to really find the poetics that I think describe nature in words. It is more like communing with the land and this sense of awe that you get . . . it is kind of spiritual.

For some participants, this spiritual connection is the key reason why they go outdoors. Lisa expressed this viewpoint while pointing to a picture of a summit view,

When you get out there away from people in that hugeness that is out there. I would never pass up a chance to go backpacking or just being out there. They are most amazing experiences of my life . . . something I couldn't live without.

At times, participants were very articulate about the spiritual meanings of their experiences and at other times, they struggled dramatically to find words to describe such meanings. Graham said "it is the hardest thing to capture the real feeling when you get on top of a mountain." This difficulty, in finding words to describe the meaning of their experiences, was echoed by most of the participants at some point during their interview.

Figure 3 provides a representative photograph of this theme. Photographs coded into this theme were tranquil landscapes, close-ups of natural items, and sweeping views of nature. Participants aimed to record the beauty and calmness of nature. This photograph captured the outdoor activity (sea kayaking) along with the stillness of the water. It signified the sense of serenity and symbolized a deeper connection to the environment in which the trip took place.

Connections with Others Through Outdoor Experience

Many participants chose to spend time in the outdoors because of the connections they were able to make with others during the experience. They identified the outdoors as a unique container for developing friendships. This container is distinctive in their lives because it provides a distraction free environment, which allows for the pursuit of shared goals within a common experience. Mike chose a photograph of a group cooking dinner together and discussed how the outdoor environment invites and requires people to work together and support each other. "On trips such as this there is camaraderie. Most of the best memories might not be the actual event but being with the people . . . it builds common experiences." Liz described the meaning of outdoor programs as learning to appreciate other people and learning to share space and resources. She held up a photo of the group and said, "I just thought it taught us so much about ourselves and just how we interact with people."

Some outdoor activities required that participants place their lives into the hands of others. This co-operative dependence and shared experience of risk were meaningful aspects of the outdoor experience that participants



Figure 3. Representative Photograph of Theme One: Spiritual Connection with the Outdoors

mentioned frequently. Brenda explained that rockclimbing required people to work together in a cooperative way in order to get both people to the top. Justine held up a photo of her friend rockclimbing and spoke about it this way,

It was about making good friends . . . it works really well for me to make friends by doing an activity with them. Being in a situation where there is a high risk and lots of cooperation needed and you help people and they help you. It is hard for me to find that kind of a connection when I am not outside and I'm not risking my life and putting it in someone else's hands.

Ross highlighted that having outdoor experiences with his friends helped them develop skills for maintaining their connections over time. He showed a series of pictures of his friends on various outdoor trips, "being with good friends in the outdoors really means a lot to me. I feel like having to make decisions with each other (in the outdoors), even simple ones, is important for staying friends." Richard summarized by saying,

I really like to remember the special experiences I've had with people in the outdoors . . . sharing that experience that I get with other people. If you are

with somebody and you get on top of a mountain and you are looking out, you don't even have to say anything. You both know what that means, you know . . . the outdoors brings us together and gives us something extra. Once you spend a week with somebody outside, you may not like each other in the end, but you know, you've got something real with that person.

Figure 4 illustrates the theme of connection with others. Friends and traveling companions formed the backbone of images in this category. Pictures often documented friends carrying out activities of daily living (i.e. cooking, camping) as well as special significant moments of connection. This photograph was shot in celebration of an intensely physical challenge just sur-

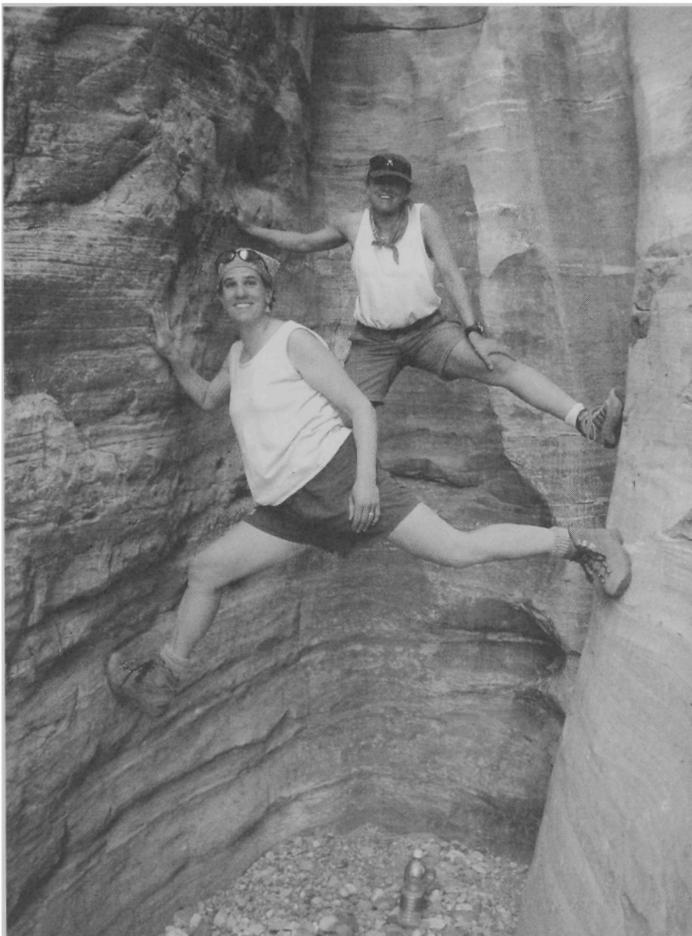


Figure 4. Representative Photograph of Theme Two: Connections with Others Through Outdoor Experience

mounted by the group. These two friends actualized their celebration through this intentional (i.e. set-up) photograph of this slick rock waterfall.

Self-Discovery and Gaining Perspective Through Outdoor Experience

Many of the participants identified outdoor experiences as providing opportunities for self-discovery and gaining perspective. The outdoor environment provided occasions to experiment with different ways of living and being as well as chances to look at life from new vantage points and vistas. Richard illustrated how the outdoors invites him to live tangibly. He picked out two photos, a summit view and a view of his campsite.

I really like the self-reliance you have to have in the outdoors. You have to be paying attention. It seems to bring a quality in my life of really living in a concrete way, instead of the abstract way that we live in college and in society through ideas.

Graham, holding a photograph of himself climbing, realized that getting to the top was a process of learning about himself. He described it this way.

I was in awe and invigorated on this climb. You get to the top and you know you definitely didn't conquer anything. You get to the top and it is more about yourself. It's much deeper than the adrenaline.

The outdoors is an optimal environment for invoking a change in perspective because it offers a change in routine and an escape from daily life. Richard appreciated how "climbing mountains puts everything into perspective," while Jenn recognized that when she was outdoors her problems didn't matter as much. Mike placed meaning in the immediate feedback he receives while in the outdoors.

You just get out there and do it and be on your own. You kind of test to see what you are made of and how you handle certain situations when things go wrong or things go great.

For many of the participants, participating in the outdoors provides them access to a new range of metaphors with which to describe and understand their lives. Brenda, holding a picture of herself rockclimbing, was able to articulate this very clearly.

I think climbing gives me a lot of perspective on life. There is so much in climbing where you will be working on a climb and realizing how it completely relates to the rest of your life. When I am trying to explain things in life, most of the time now, I am using climbing or paddling metaphors . . . so for me, being outdoors really makes it easier to understand how other things are going on in my life. When situations get really complicated I think of it as this is the crux move of what I am doing, and once I get through this crux move of the climb, I'll be okay.

For some of the participants, there was meaning in a sense of renewal or clarity that came from participating in an outdoor program. Graham pointed out a photograph of his tent in early-morning light and said; "I think when we go outdoors we find a sense of home. We find a renewed sense of like

what our lives used to be like.” For Rayne, this discovery came as connection and understanding while participating on a group night hike.

I was really excited to go and I was already kind of in the flow of the trip and this night I had a really amazing night of feeling connected to the earth and feeling like I understood people and how we are supposed to live in the world.

Figure 5 represents photographs of self-discovery. Pictures in this theme were often self-portraits or portraits of a participant taken by someone else. Often these photographs captured moments of peak experience, closure, or new perspective that were gained on the trip. This photograph was shot at the end of an eight day backpacking trip and captured the connection with self that came from the surmounting of the physical challenge of climbing out of the Grand Canyon. In turn, the climb out of the Grand Canyon symbolized graduating from college at the end of long climb of four years.

Using Photographs to Summarize the Meaning for Participants

At the close of each interview, participants chose 3-5 photographs that most represented the meaning of the outdoor experience for them. A content analysis of these photographs grouped the photographs into four broad



Figure 5. Representative Photograph of Theme Three: Self-discovery and Gaining Perspective Through Outdoor Experience

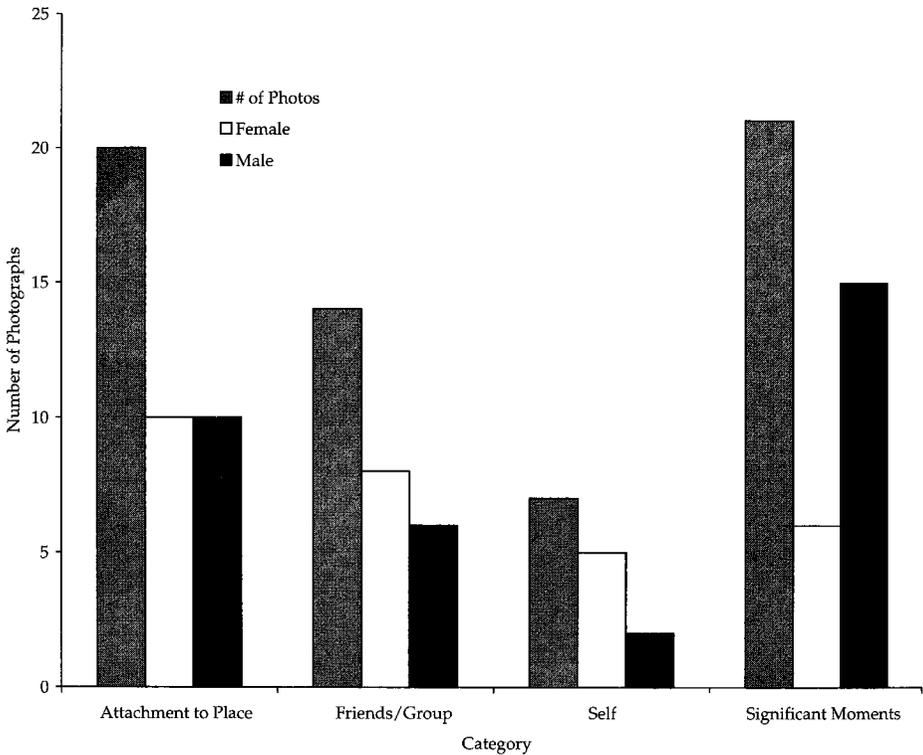


Figure 6. Number of Photographs by Summary of Meaning Categories

and emergent categories: attachment to natural place, friends/group members, self, and significant personal moments (see Figure 3). Approximately one-third of the photographs (32.2%) were placed in the attachment to place category, another third (33.8%) in the significant personal moments category, one-fifth (22.5%) in the friends/group category and the remainder in the self category (11.2%). The participants' choice of these types of photographs to represent the meaning of their experiences paralleled the themes that emerged during data analysis of the interview transcripts.

Discussion and Implications

The Strathcona-Tweedsmear School disaster in 2003 and the publication of James Raffan's book (2002) *Deep Waters: Is the Adventure Worth the Risk—The Lake Timiskaming Canoeing Tragedy* focused intense scrutiny on outdoor education programs. Given the tragic deaths of children in both disasters, outdoor educators and researchers have been asked to explain the benefits, risks, and nature of their programs. Indeed, it seems that in many programs there has been a trend toward riskier and riskier pursuits, which can result

in such disasters (Cloutier, 2003). By deepening our understanding of what makes outdoor experiences meaningful to participants, we may be able to design programs that can foster spiritual connections, connections to others, and connections to self while minimizing actual risk.

The data from the present study suggests that meanings of outdoor experiences were varied, interrelated, and hard to describe. While this study contributes to a growing body of knowledge revolving around the meaning of outdoor experiences, in the end, it provokes more questions than it answers. The present study replicated results from previous studies (for example, Arnould & Price, 1993; Patterson et al., 1998; Pohl et al., 2000) while utilizing a new methodology, photo elicitation. We know from this study and past ones, that connections to self, others and the environment form the foundation of outdoor experience, however, there is still a great deal unknown about how or why these critical elements function in this way.

Using participants' photographs during interviews aided in building rapport, provided image-based metaphoric reflexive opportunities for participants, and provided a secondary data source (i.e. the photographs) for data analysis and triangulation. Outdoor participants are involved in an act of meaning making. Through their outdoor experiences, they are seeking new stories with which to organize and understand their lives (Patterson et al., 1998). Using photographs as a memory trigger sharpened the participants' ability to tell narratives of their experience and to reflect on them. The present study was based on the assumption that photographs are most often used to capture moments of intense emotion, connection, and celebration (Carlsson, 2001).

Each photograph acted as a memory anchor for the participant as he or she recalled the moment of the photograph, its intention, and the affective context surrounding it. Having that anchor set against the passing of time freed the participants to describe the meaning of their experiences. Similar to Stringer and McAvoy (1992), most participants acknowledged the inadequacy of words alone to convey the essential nature of their experiences. As a result of this ineffability, the participants used photographs to capture and preserve the sense of awe, mystery, beauty, tranquility, solitude and peace that their outdoor experience invoked within them. Using these photographs in the research enabled the conversation to proceed to a deeper level of understanding and meaning between the researcher and participants. Similarly, Carlsson (2001, pg. 126) reported "photographs are superior in their ability to convey experiences compared with spoken and written words only."

Analysis of the participants' 511 photographs revealed similar themes to interview data. The content analysis coded the photographs into three general groupings: outdoor activity, outdoor environment and people. Likewise, when participants were asked to select photographs that most represented the meaning of the experience, the images they chose were grouped into four categories: attachment to place, friends/group, self, and significant personal moments. These results can be situated within the first three stages of

Priest and Martin's (1986) model. The participants were most often moved to photograph, and therefore assign value and meaning, to their experience during exploration and experimentation, adventure, and peak adventure stages.

Male participants chose photographs of significant personal moments (i.e. peak experience) to represent the meaning of the experience more often than did female participants while females chose images of self more often than male participants (see Figure 3). Given the small sample size and differing number of photographs chosen (i.e. participants were asked to choose between 3 and 5), one cannot infer statistically significant differences in these results but some interesting questions arise from these findings. Do male and female participants make meaning from or place value on different elements of the experience? Do female participants choose images of themselves to assist in overcoming socialization messages about their participation in outdoor activities (i.e. Warren, 1996; Henderson, 1996; Loeffler, 1997)? These questions could be addressed in future research using a larger sample size and specific probes related to why participants chose specific images as representations of meaning.

Photography enabled participants to identify peak or significant moments during and after the experience. It aided in the visual and emotional memory of the experience and it captured a greater level of detail than the participants could retain by themselves alone. Paralleling Colson (1979), participants generally took a greater number of photographs when an experience was new. They exhibited a strong desire to capture every nuance of the excitement, intensity and learning of the new activity or environment. Participants drew on these photographs as proof to themselves and others that they did indeed participate in or succeed at some activity (i.e. climbing a peak, running a rapid, cooking a meal over a fire). They rely on the photographs in times of stress or lowered self-esteem to remind themselves of the powerful and moving times they had while outdoors. Given the power of photographs to keep the outdoor experience alive long after it has been completed, it is recommended that outdoor educators embrace and facilitate student photography during the outdoor experience.

Limitations of the Study

In designing the present study, the author initially planned to send participants into the field with cameras with the assignment of photographing elements of the experience that would be meaningful to them. This would have involved the participants in an intentional, directed search for meaning. This plan was abandoned because the author thought it would be unethical to affect the participants' experiences by introducing the photographic stimulus. The fundamental nature of the experience would be changed by such a treatment condition. Instead, the author chose to recruit participants once they had already participated in an outdoor experience thus leaving the initial experience fresh and untouched by the research process.

This choice solved the ethical problem of impacting the participants' experiences with the research but of course, created others. Program participants who did not take photographs during their experience were excluded from the study. It is possible that they might have assigned different meanings to their experience, that their memories of the experience would function differently given that they did not take photographs, and that the act of taking a photograph may inherently change the nature of the experience (whether or not the photographic task was assigned or freely chosen). For example, some of the participants in the study talked about times when they consciously chose not to take photographs. There were times they didn't want to live through their viewfinders choosing, instead, to rely completely on their memories.

Research on family photo albums tells us that some elements may be left out from photographic records. Miller (1999), in examining family albums, discovered they tended to focus on the highlights of family life such as birthdays and weddings. McCoy (1999) found in her research on wedding albums that there were set events captured in each album such as cake cutting and gift opening. She asked the question, what went unphotographed? The author was thus impelled to ask the same question, what goes unphotographed in the outdoor experience?

What events go uncaptured because of the challenging environment, the limitations of the equipment, or the nature of the activity? What moments get lost from memory because they don't fit the master narrative of *the glorious outdoor experience*? It is uncommon in a marketing brochure for an outdoor program to see pictures of unhappy, tired, or sick individuals. It may be that outdoor participants seek to replicate the kinds of images that drew them to the experience in the first place. Participants were asked if there were any pictures they were unable to capture during their experience. Many expressed a wish to have more pictures of themselves. They also spoke of the disappointment in a photograph's ability to represent what they had seen in their mind's eye and what they had felt in that moment. Some realized they wished that had taken a picture in hindsight (after it was impossible to do so.)

In designing future studies of this sort, the researcher recommends that a larger sample size be used to allow for statistical treatment of photographic data, that the design encompass more of "what cannot be captured or what is not being captured" photographically, and that the impact of photography on the experience itself be investigated.

Conclusion

As far as the researcher was able to discern, this was the first study of outdoor experience to utilize photo-elicitation during data collection. Photo-elicitation proved to be a powerful research tool. Photo elicitation provided a model for collaborative research because participants interpreted their photographic images and meanings for the researcher. The researcher was

able to access some of the profound meanings of the participants' experiences since participants used photographs to capture moments of intense emotion, connection, and celebration.

The research described in this paper explored a visually based approach to studying the meanings of outdoor experience. It differed from past research because it utilized both photo elicitation interviews and content analysis of photographs to capture and investigate participants' experiences in the outdoors. Qualitative analysis of the interview and photographic data revealed three explanatory themes: spiritual connection with the outdoors, connections with others through outdoor experience, self-discovery and gaining perspectives through outdoor experience. By deepening our understanding of what makes outdoor experiences meaningful to participants, outdoor programs can be designed that foster spiritual connections, connections to others, and connections to self while minimizing the actual risk to which participants are exposed.

Findings of the current study paralleled previous research findings and suggested new directions of inquiry that could be investigated using this approach. Ewert (2000) suggested that researchers explore new ways of capturing experiences other than traditional pen and paper tests. This study answered that call successfully and as a result, it is recommended that photo elicitation receive further use in investigations of outdoor experiences.

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