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Eric Brymer

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Extreme Sports as a facilitator of ecocentricity and positive life changes

ERIC BRYMER

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Abstract

Extreme sports and extreme sports participants have been most commonly explored from a negative perspective, for example the 'need to take unnecessary risks'. This study reports on findings that indicate a more positive experience. A phenomenological method was used via unstructured interviews with 15 extreme sports participants and other first hand accounts. The extreme sports included B.A.S.E. jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. Results indicate that participating in activities that involve a real chance of death, fear and the realisation that nature in its extreme is far greater and more powerful than humanity triggers positive life changes, and an eco-centric standpoint.

Keywords: *Nature, Eco-centricity, Death, Humility, Courage, Extreme sports, Risk-taking, Phenomenology*

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The extreme sport label has become a confusing umbrella term for a multitude of non-traditional leisure activities. Terms such as free sports, adventure sports, lifestyle sports to name but a few are all used interchangeably as if to describe the same type of activity. In this paper I take a narrow view on extreme sports and define them as leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death (Brymer, 2005). Typical activities include B.A.S.E., extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, big wave surfing and climbing without ropes. Participation in this type of activity is often considered to be about crazy 'extreme Dudes' taking unnecessary risks and having 'no fear' in their battle against nature (Le Breton, 2000), Why else would someone willingly undertake a leisure activity where death is a real potential?

Theoretical standpoints relating to sensation seeking (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Zuckerman, 2000), psychoanalysis (Hunt,

1995), neotribe or sub-cultural formation (Midol & Broyer, 1995) and masculinity (Pollay, 2001; Wheaton, 2003) have been employed to provide explanations and most often with a negative twist. However, there may be more to it, perhaps these definitions only work to an extent where the potential outcome is less terminal? Ogilvie's (1974) research lends support to this notion as he found that men and women extreme sport participants shared a variety of positive personality structures including above average intelligence, above average independence, self-assertiveness and forthrightness. This paper explores the notion that participation in extreme sports as defined by the potential for death actually results in positive life changes. In particular, the idea that participants battle against nature is transformed to one where nature takes a centric and meaningful position and the notions of 'no fear' and 'extreme Dude' are reframed as courage and humility.

Courage, in physical terms, is 'the ability to overcome the overwhelming fear of harm or death' (Lopez, Koetting O'Byrne, & Petersen, 2003, p. 186). Those modelling high sensation seeking behaviour and who demonstrate mastery, positive feelings and little fear in high-risk situations are regarded as fearless. Overconfident people feel little worry before a high-risk situation but have greater feelings of fear preceding further similarly risky situations. Courage is about facing fears and taking risks (Lopez et al., 2003). In this instance risk-taking is not pathological.

Humility is 'characterised by an accurate assessment of one's characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a forgetting of the self' (Tangey, 2005, p. 411). A humble person considers herself or himself to be part of a greater whole rather than the centre. Gerber (2002) argues that to be truly humble we must be in contact with something greater and more powerful, not just larger, than self. Nature, God or our own potential are examples of the greater concern.

Research in psychology provides some clues as to how such positive changes might come about. For example Emmons (1999) showed that a severely stressful event most likely in the form of trauma, tragedy or death drastically changes life. Maslow (1977) considered that severe events could result in deep positive personal changes. After Maslow's heart attack in 1968 he reported that his whole life was positively transformed as he had now experienced a death of sorts. This experience transformed his relationship to fear and triggered his desire to live every moment of everyday. He coined this new aspect the plateau experience (Krippner, 1972). Wong (1998; 2000) echoed such determinations and persuasively argued that by facing our own fear of death and death itself we become fully self-aware, life takes on a new, profound and positive meaning.

Transpersonal fields describe positive personal transformations after intense experiences of something greater than humanity. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) describe 'quantum' changes or epiphanies and find that the resulting personal characteristics include humility, spirituality, and personal growth. Philosophical writings

throughout the wisdom traditions note the potential of deep transformations that manifest themselves as core personality or life world changes (Hanna, 1993; Mohanty, 1972; Spiegelberg, 1982; Zaner, 1970; Zimmerman, 1986). Thus it would seem that events that allow us to experience the reality of something greater than humanity or that bring us nearer to the reality of our own deaths might trigger positive life changes. Being in nature as an extreme sport participant where death is a real potential might change the human tendency for anthropocentricity and replace it with ecocentricity and the realisation of true courage and humility.

Method

This paper is part of a larger hermeneutic phenomenological study of the extreme sport experience. The findings discussed here are only part of the larger phenomenological description.

A variety of data sources were utilised including participant interviews, video, biographies and autobiographies sourced from a multitude of countries such as Australia, Europe, U.S.A., India, China, Taiwan and Nepal. The interview participants, 10 male and 5 female athletes age 30 to 70 years, were carefully chosen a) for being an extreme sport participant, as defined earlier, b) for their ability and desire to unravel the extreme sport experience and c) for being outside the age group typically discussed in the literature about alternative sports. The extreme sports included B.A.S.E. jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. Participants of alternative, lifestyle or sub-culture sports that did not fit the definition as outlined above, including surfing, skiing and so on at a level where death would not be a major consideration, and sports such as skateboarding and BMX were not included. Participants were chosen for the sake of the phenomenon (Van Kaam, 1966) and for their ability to explore the experience, not for their knowledge of the phenomenological framework.

The author conducted focused conversations with all 15 extreme sport participants ei-

ther face-to-face or by phone. One question guided the interview and analysis process: 'What is the extreme sport experience?' Or to put it another way, 'How is the extreme sport experience perceived by participants?'

The first stage of the interview analysis involved listening to each tape immediately after undertaking the interview (Amlani, 1998; Ettling, 1998). The second step involved repeatedly listening to and reading individual interviews and transcripts. Each individual tape/transcript was listened to, read and thematically analysed as a separate entity though all transcripts were revisited as themes became more explicit. Both formal and non-formal understandings of potential themes were continually questioned, challenged and assessed for relevancy. Questions such as; 'What is beneath the text as presented?', 'Am I interpreting this text from a position of interference from theory or personal bias?', 'What am I missing?' guided the intuiting process.

Both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interviews were considered. Interesting phrases were highlighted and any relevant non-verbal considerations were noted. Accepting Steinbock's (1997) argument that phenomenological descriptions are not about reproducing 'mere matters of fact or inner feelings' (Steinbock, 1997, p. 127), these notes were reconsidered in terms of potential underlying thematic phrases or meaning units (DeMares, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). A similar interpretation process was undertaken with video, biographies and autobiographies.

All emerging themes were assessed to determine potential connections. Certain initial thematic ideas were grouped and further defined. These second order themes were considered against the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. This whole process was repeated again and again, testing the assumptions, until interpretations seemed to gain some solidity and form. The reviews were then assessed against the words of those participating in an attempt to expose what might be a more appropriate understanding of the extreme sport experience.

The following quotes illustrating the themes have been taken from a variety of

sources. Where the source is a direct participant quote we have include initials only.

Results and discussion

Extreme sport participants directly relate their experience to positive personal changes. The following quote from a professional extreme kayaker illustrates this point; 'Kayaking has changed my life, it has taught me who I am. Going to rivers changes who you are in a positive way' (Luden cited in Heath, 2002, p. 1).

Participants report that these changes are permanent, instant and unexpected. Schultheis (1996) changed as a result of one mountaineering event. McCairen (1998) was transformed after one whitewater expedition. Bane (1996) changed following one windsurfing session. Jacobs (1998) experienced a transformation after one extreme kayaking experience. This instantaneous transformation is articulated by one interview participant (a professional and experienced medical doctor) who was persuaded to take part in a single event as an adult of 28 years despite initially thinking that undertaking such activities was crazy and tantamount to a death warrant.

I really felt like I was out of my depth. I was seriously challenged and a couple of times I did think, 'I am going to die?' but I didn't. At the end of the day I had an epiphany because I did not die but I really enjoyed it, a whole environment that I never imagined existed was opened to me. My life has been radically altered by that choice by that day. I can trace my change of path to that day, and I might not have gone. I just went to work and this guy said, 'Hey do you want to do this on the weekend?' and I didn't know that my life was about to be turned totally on its head on the weekend (GS, B.A.S.E. jumper mid 40's).

A woman B.A.S.E. jumper put it this way: I've been meditating for years and running for years so change was coming slowly, you could see progress but I had an explosive change in a short period of time so it was a catalyst for explosive growth (HS, B.A.S.E. jumper, early 40's).

Bane (1996) wrote that his first extreme experience left him feeling better than he had ever felt prior to it. The feeling was so powerful that it triggered a total life transformation and a quest to re-explore the experience which would:

take me places I've only imagined. It will allow me to reach out and touch ... something. Something desirable, something mythical (Bane, 1996, p. 5).

The experience transforms life in general. A surfing participant interviewed for this study put it this way:

That's what I mean when I say 'that buzz', I mean I might die in bed. I'll probably try and remember those things and I'll just go, 'Yes', I'm ready to go, see you later', because nothing can upset you when you think of those things (TR, Big wave surfer late 40s).

TR reported that years later this experience provided the strength to get through a divorce he described as the 'worst moments of my whole life' (TR, Big wave surfer late 40's).

Like I said, I think it just makes you a better person, makes you more content, makes you realize more what life is all about and the pleasures in life (TR, Big wave surfer late 40's).

Bane (1996) wrote:

Extreme sports change people who participate in them. While a bungee jumper might feel a certain rush of immortality, the other extreme sports offer something far less tangible and far more rewarding (Bane, 1996, p. 9).

So it would seem that participants describe positive life changes emanating from the extreme sport experience. One example of a positive change response is that participation at such an extreme level teaches humility (Ahluwalia, 2003; Breashears, 1999; Muir, 2003; Spence, 2001). For Gonzales (2003) this humility is analogous to the Zen philosophy of open mindedness, essential for successful participation in extreme environments. Bane reflected on his initial intentions and described his experiences as:

I came to risk sports looking for Indiana Jones. Or, at least, someone like him.

Some part and parcel of our mythology, cowboy or samurai, riding the edge jaggies for all their worth. Instead, I found a group of puzzled people with a tiger by the tail, interested not so much in mythology as in touching and holding an experience as ephemeral as spider silk, ghostly as morning mist over Montana river ...

There is, I think now, even more to the edge than the ephemeral feeling. It has its own time its own space. The edge has its own gravity, like a great dark star on the edge of the known universe. We approach the star only with the greatest of caution, because its gravity has the power to rip away our preconceptions, our sure knowledge of the way things are, to let us see the way things might be. The dark star has the power to give us back our feelings, sometimes in exchange for our lives.

I have never met anyone who has stood, however precariously, on the flanks of a great mountain, or who has been, however, briefly, to the dark world at the edge of the abyss, and not come back changed. Changed how? More humble, perhaps, more aware of the fragility of life (Bane, 1996, p. 232).

A B.A.S.E. jumper put it this way:

Well for me its about accepting that you're mortal and that you're very vulnerable and that you're like a piece of dust really or a leaf in the wind. When you accept that then the power of one day becomes more than just of paying lip service to an idea, does that make sense? So self-possessed in that you have accepted that while you're like a leaf in the wind you can also make a difference and you can also explore parts of yourself that you had no concept of even being there (HS, B.A.S.E. jumper, early 40s).

These quotes illustrate the power of the natural world and connotations of releasing control or surrendering to something greater and exploring parts that were previously outside of awareness.

Jacobs (1998) a double PhD (health psychology and education) and kayak explorer underwent his transformation as a consequence of one extreme kayak event. Essentially whilst on a river expedition he found himself in the midst of a flash flood and a river that turned from grade five to grade six. In Jacobs's words:

I had changed. I found myself to be more forgiving and more patient; reflection replaced reaction more often than before. My hard logic more readily made room for intuitive considerations, something I had seldom given much notice. I no longer thought of truth as something definite and unyielding but as something woven into both sides of an issue (Jacobs, 1998, p. 17).

Bane (1996) wrote that the extreme sport experience had changed him spiritually 'I am struck with how far I've gone, both literally, in miles, and spiritually in my head' (Bane, 1996, p. 107).

Laird Hamilton (Williams, Hamilton, & Kachmer, 2001), an internationally renowned pioneer of extreme surfing, considered that he developed an appreciation of life and living through his experiences of the natural world as something greater than humanity; a realisation that changed him emotionally, physically, cognitively and spiritually. Reaching the highest point on earth also seems to be a prolific instigator of so called spiritual transformation (Ahluwalia, 2003; Benegas, 2003; Chiow, 2003; Weare, 2003). Breashears (1999) explained the relationship as one akin to a facilitator:

If ever there was a mountain that can temper human arrogance and teach humility, it's Everest. Whatever name you want to give it, the Nepali Sagarmatha, or the Tibetan Chomolungma – the Mother Goddess, or the British surveyor-general's name, Everest, the mountain is a massive living presence that changes everyday. With the terrible winds of 1986, it seems that Everest was intent on showing us how fragile we truly are (Breashears, 1999, p. 171).

And I was certain that in exploring the terrain of the mountain, we were really

exploring a far more mysterious terrain – the landscape of our souls (Breashears, 1999, p. 242).

Participants experience nature as central, greater and more powerful. As Arnould and Price (1993) briefly pointed out, the nature-human relationship seems to be one where the immense power of nature acts as a pointer to our inner beings. Lynn Hill, the climber, also noted an exploration of her inner nature:

It's all about learning to adapt totally to the environment you're in. I think it provides the perfect opportunity for learning about what makes you tick. When you're that involved in the external world, you can really explore your inner nature (Hill cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 66).

Thus participation at a level where death is a potential outcome, where the external is clearly more powerful, aids learning about the internal which in turn teaches humility.

Breivik (1996) found that Himalayan climbers were less anxious than the general population and more courageous on a continuum spanning fearlessness, courage and overconfidence. Whilst extreme sport participants may feel generally less anxious, they do feel heightened pre-event anxiety or fear (Robinson, 1985). For Schultheis this experience was as if 'possessed by something between panic and euphoria, dread and ecstasy' (Schultheis, 1996, p. 7). In the words of one B.A.S.E. jumper:

You can't even begin to try to make somebody who hasn't done it understand how frightening, how exciting, how peaceful and beautiful that sensation is (TD, B.A.S.E. jumper).

Far from approaching the task without anxiety and stress, participants feel extreme levels of stress or fear. The great waterfall kayaker Corran Addison poetically recalled preparing, and eventually succeeding to kayak over an extreme thirty metre waterfall in France.

So there I stood in France that day, my bladder ready to explode, It's not like I really needed to go – after all I had just been to the bathroom only minutes before, but somehow nature had come up with a little extra, and for some unknown

reason, there was some urgency in the matter. But there I was, the pillar of strength, feeling rather embarrassed about the fact that for the third time in as many minutes I needed to take a piss. Not exactly what you would expect to be the great deliberation in my mind at that time, what with the task of surviving a 30m waterfall at hand, but the biggest debate seemed to be whether to once again unzip my fly, thus delivering the testimonial to those about that I was paralysed with fear.

Which brings us to the bit about being paralysed. Now it is one thing to be paralysed with fear, but the unfortunate result of such a condition is the very real possibility of permanent paralysis following a botched line because the fear within was too great. It takes a very special mind to be able to put that fear aside (Addison, 2003).

Participants do experience fear. Fear is a constant companion that requires great psychological skill to overcome. Far from assuming the typical notion of flight, fight or freeze associated with the rush of adrenalin, participants are able to remain calm and focused on their performance. To freeze in the face of fear would be to invite injury or worse (Addison, 2003; Meyer, 2000).

In reality participants committed to extreme sports regard the 'no fear' adrenaline junky unfavourably. As pointed out by a B.A.S.E. jumper:

The trouble with B.A.S.E. as it gets more well-known is it starts to attract extremists, people who want that edge thing, that sort of high risk adrenalin are coming across and they're dying (TD, B.A.S.E. jumper).

To participate at an extreme level a participant must balance the natural state of fear with knowledge based on personal capabilities and technical expertise. It is only when this balance is achieved that the magic that Schultheis (1996) alluded to begins.

Extreme sports participants feel real fear, are fully aware that death might occur but are also aware that powerful positive psychologi-

cal experiences are probable. It takes courage to participate when fear is so predominant.

Conclusion

Extreme sports are leisure activities where a mismanaged accident or mistake would most likely result in death. Participants are fully aware of this potential. Participation brings one in contact with nature at its most extreme and involves real fear. Nature is experienced as being powerful and central. Far from being about crazy 'extreme Dudes' taking unnecessary risks and having 'no fear' in their battle against nature these factors trigger positive, lasting changes such as courage and humility. Being in nature at this level transforms the human tendency for anthropocentricity and replaces it with ecocentricity.

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ERIC BRYMER

School of Human Movement Studies
Queensland University of Technology
Victoria Park Road
Kelvin Grove QLD 4059, Australia
e.brymer@qut.edu.au