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# Risk taking in Extreme Sports: A phenomenological perspective

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## **ABSTRACT**

Participation in extreme sports is enjoying incredible growth while more traditional recreational activities such as golf are struggling to maintain numbers (Pain & Pain, 2005). Theoretical perspectives on extreme sports and extreme sport participants have assumed that participation is about risk-taking (Baker & Simon, 2002; Breivik, 1996; Laurendeau, 2008; Robinson, 2004; Self, Henry, Findley, & Reilly, 2007). However, these theory-driven methodologies may reflect judgments that do not necessarily relate to participants' lived experience (Brymer, 2005; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Ogilvie, 1974; Weber, 2001; Willig, 2008). In this paper I review current risk-oriented perspectives on extreme sports and present research findings that question this assumed relationship between extreme sports and risk and thus reposition the experience in a hitherto unexplored manner. Risk taking is not the focus. Participants acknowledge that the potential outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident could be death. However, accepting this potential outcome does not mean that they search for risk. Participants argue that many everyday life events (e.g., driving) are high-risk events. Participants undertake detailed preparation in order to minimise the possibility of negative outcomes because extreme sports trigger a range of positive experiential outcomes. The study is significant as it followed a hermeneutic phenomenological process which did not presuppose a risk-taking orientation. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for a multitude of data sources including interviews (10 male and 5 female extreme sports participants, ages 30 to 72 years), auto-biographies, videos and other firsthand accounts. This process allowed this unexpected perspective to emerge more clearly.

**Key words:** risk taking, phenomenology, extreme sports

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, participation rates in extreme sports have grown exponentially far outstripping the growth rates of any other sporting activity (American Sports Data, 2002; Pain & Pain, 2005). According to Puchan (2004) involvement has 'been shown not to be just

a “flash in the pan” but a sign of the times’ (Puchan, 2004: 177). However, the exact nature of what constitutes an extreme sport is still unclear (Olivier, 2006). Activities requiring high level training, personal skills and commitment such as BASE-jumping and rope-free climbing are assumed to be in the same category as those requiring no participant skills or dedication and little prior knowledge of the activity such as commercial rafting and bungee jumping (Brymer, 2009b; Palmer, 2004; Wheaton, 2004). A similar ambiguity is found within the same sport; for example, in white-water kayaking manoeuvring a kayak down a grade-two rapid as defined by the universal grading system might be exciting but the results of an accident or mistake relatively harmless. The results of an accident or mistake at grade six, on the other hand, are most likely death ( Slinger & Rudestam, 1997).

Despite these ambiguities, there seems to be a widely held and theory-driven presupposition that extreme sports are synonymous with risk and participation tantamount to risk taking or adrenaline seeking (Baker & Simon, 2002; Brymer, 2002 Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Lambton, 2000; Olivier, 2006; Pizam, Reichel, & Uriely, 2002; Rinehart, 2000; Self et al., 2007). The focus of the risk-taking perspective is that extreme sports are undertaken as a need or desire to search out risky activities. The problems with this approach are: 1) some of the literature reveals characteristics and statistics that do not seem to fit with this traditional assumption about risk (Celsi et al., 1993; Soreide, Ellingsen, & Knutson, 2007; Storry, 2003); 2) a focus on risk has meant that other aspects of the experience have been largely ignored (Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2009; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Willig, 2008); and 3) theory driven perspectives do not seem to reflect the lived experiences of participants (Brymer & Oades, 2009; Willig, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to critique the assumed relationship between extreme sports and risk taking through data emanating from a larger phenomenological study on extreme sports. To do this the author focuses on participants of the most extreme of extreme sports, where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death (Brymer, 2009a; Brymer & Oades, 2009). Typical activities that fall into this definition of ‘extreme sports’ include BASE (Buildings, Antennae, Space, Earth) -jumping, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, big wave surfing, high-level mountaineering, and climbing without ropes or ‘free solo’ climbing. The reason for focusing on these activities is that if something does go wrong the outcome is most likely terminal.

For example, BASE-jumping is considered to be the most extreme of the parachute sports where participants jump from solid structures such as cliffs, bridges or buildings (Celsi

et al., 1993; Soreide et al., 2007). BASE-jumping is deemed more dangerous than other parachute sports because participants jump from solid structures that are generally lower than the recommended parachute opening height for skydiving and there is a chance that a participant may hit the solid structure from which they have jumped (Brymer et al., 2009; Celsi et al., 1993). Extreme skiing typically requires skiing down sheer cliffs where a fall results in the skier tumbling out of control (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997). Waterfall kayaking involves kayaking over structures rated at the highest grade on the international white-water grading system. The highest waterfalls, for example, are at least thirty metres high (Stookesberry, 2009). Big wave surfing takes surfers into waves over twenty feet tall, where even some of the most expert surfers have died (Warshaw, 2000).

### **Extreme sports and risk**

Risk is a culturally constructed phenomenon stemming from modern society's deep-seated aversion for, and obsessive desire to be 'liberated' from, uncertainty (Davidson, 2008; Fairlie, 1989). Risk was initially a construct used to understand outcome probability and magnitude in gambling (Creyer, Ross, & Evers, 2003; Davidson, 2008). As modern society has become fixated with safety, risk has gradually become a negative descriptor synonymous with the unacceptable face of danger and society's primary preoccupation about 'rendering it measurable and controllable' (Davidson, 2008: 6). Society has become so preoccupied with risk reduction that activities not immediately accepted by the majority are instantly labelled undesirable.

In sport, risk is about the probability of physical danger (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993). In extreme sports such as BASE-jumping, waterfall kayaking, extreme skiing, and big wave surfing this has been interpreted to mean very high levels of outcome uncertainty, a very high probability that something will go wrong, and a very high chance of death as the outcome (Olivier, 2006; Slanger & Rudestam, 1997). Typically participation has been judged as negative and deviant (Elmes & Barry, 1999; Pain & Pain, 2005; Self et al., 2007). Motives for participation in extreme sports are most often attributed to a need for the so-called adrenaline rush or because participants are crazy 'extreme dudes' taking unnecessary pathological and socially unacceptable risks (Elmes & Barry, 1999; Le Breton, 2000; Monasterio, 2007). Participants are most often portrayed as selfish, teenage boys 'fascinated with the individuality, risk and danger of the sports' (Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2003: 98). Media and advertising representations have mirrored these presuppositions (Davidson, 2008;

Pollay, 2001; Puchan, 2004; Rinehart, 2005). The assumption is that risk acts as a motivator for participants with little skill but a desperate desire to connect with the image of glamour associated with such sports. Why else would someone willingly undertake a leisure activity where death is a potential outcome?

### **Extreme sports and risk taking**

Theoretical perspectives on risk taking in extreme sports as defined in this paper have focused on psychological and sociological explanations. The main sociological theory that has been put forward to explain participation is 'edgeworks' (Laurendeau, 2008). Edgeworks explains extreme sport participation as being a social phenomenon that encourages a participant to voluntarily go beyond the edge of control (Lois, 2001). Psychological theories presented include type 'T' (Self et al., 2007), psychoanalysis (Hunt, 1996), and sensation seeking (Breivik, 1996; Goma, 1991; Robinson, 1985; Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Schrader & Wann, 1999; Shoham, Rose, & Kahle, 2000; Slinger & Rudestam, 1997; Straub, 1982; Zarevski, Marusic, Zolotic, Bunjevac, & Vukosav, 1998; Zuckerman, 2007).

Those exploring type 'T' explain extreme sports participation as a positive means to live out a deviant personality trait (Self et al., 2007). Extreme sports participation is considered to be about a need for uncertainty, novelty, ambiguity, variety and unpredictability (Farley, 1991). Those espousing the psychoanalytic perspective (Elmes & Barry, 1999; Hunt, 1996) view extreme sport participation as a pathological and unhealthy narcissistic tendency (Elmes & Barry, 1999). In such cases participants would be 'denying limitations and vulnerabilities, rationalizing unacceptable behavior and feelings, overestimating abilities and accomplishments, and offering consistently self-serving explanations for successes and failures' (Elmes & Barry, 1999: 165). The sensation-seeking standpoint considers extreme sport participation as an inherent need for novel experiences and intense sensations obtained by taking physical risks (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Schroth, 1995). Participants are considered to be continually searching for new thrills and excitement in an attempt to alleviate boredom.

In summary, these sociological and psychological perspectives present an argument that personality traits, socialisation processes, and previous experiences work to compel a participant to put their life at risk through extreme sports. From these theoretical, risk-taking perspectives extreme sports participation is: 1) a need or search for uncertainty and

uncontrollability; 2) a pathological and unhealthy activity that results in self deception; and 3) a focus on undertaking an activity where death is probable for thrills and excitement.

However, while for some the initial motive to participate might be about the risk, thrills, glamour and excitement of these activities, there is evidence that suggests that motives change with continued participation (Celsi et al., 1993). For example, Slinger and Rudestam (1997) did not find any relationship between sensation seeking and experienced extreme sports participants which they suggested supported Breivik's assertion that 'maximising risk is not the goal of their activities' (Breivik cited in Slinger & Rudestam, 1997: 369).

Ogilvie (1974) found that experienced participants displayed low levels of anxiety, a strong sense of reality and emotional control. Participants exhibited self-responsibility and were deemed to be resourceful, energetic and adaptable. Men and women shared personality characteristics that included above average intelligence, above average desire for success and recognition, above average independence, self-assertiveness and forthrightness. Goma (1991) found that mountaineers demonstrated low neuroticism and high extraversion. Extreme individuals are also generally more relaxed and less governed by super-ego than the average population (Breivik, 1996; Magni et al., 1985). Perhaps not the typical personality characteristics of someone who would want to take irresponsible risks due to a pathological problem.

Any assumption that participants might take risks through overconfidence or overestimation of their abilities would also be erroneous (Brymer & Oades, 2009; Celsi et al., 1993; Pain & Pain, 2005):

It is one thing to risk overconfidence while making a \$2 lottery bet, where little is risked on the outcome, and quite another to trust your life to a potentially fatal and frightening behaviour without carefully weighing the outcomes. (Celsi et al., 1993: 17)

Pain and Pain (2005) wrote that extreme sport participants are careful, well trained, well prepared, and self-aware and prefer to remain in control:

Despite the public's perception, extreme sports demand perpetual care, high degrees of training and preparation, and, above all, discipline and control. Most of those involved are well aware of their strengths and limitations in the face of clear dangers. Findings of extensive research in climbers suggest that the individuals do not want to put their lives in danger by going beyond personal capabilities. (Pain & Pain, 2005: S34)

From this perspective participants are described as self-aware, careful, disciplined, and in control.

A focus on the desire for risk would also be hard pushed to explain why a person chooses skiing or BASE-jumping above surfing or mountaineering, an active choice often made many years in advance of participation (Celsi et al., 1993). If risk taking were the aim it is also questionable that participants would take years preparing and ensuring safety before undertaking their chosen activity (Ogilvie, 1974). Let alone six years to plan one BASE-jump (Swann & Singleman, 2007) or 14 years to plan one expedition (Muir, 2003). Milovanovic (2005) suggested explanations that focus on risk might be too simplistic and based on naïve non-participants' viewpoints of extreme sports as opposed to the experiences of participants themselves.

Studies have also indicated that extreme sport participants are not inclined to search for uncertainty or uncontrollability. For example, the study by Celsi et al. (1993) referred to numerous examples of well-respected extreme sport participants who considered that they participated well within their personal capabilities. The preference was to leave participation for another day if they felt that the limits of their control were being extended. Pain and Pain (2005) observed that athletes expend considerable time and effort to develop high level skills and a deep understanding of their particular activity and also undertake extensive planning. They deliberately become very familiar with all the variables including the environment, their equipment, and the weather.

Evidence to support this notion that extreme sports may not be about risk has come from a statistical comparison between the death rates of motorcyclists, BASE-jumpers and climbers (Storry, 2003). Storry (2003) found that in the UK the death rate for climbers was 1:4000 which compares favorably against motor cycle riding where the death rate is 1:500. Soreide et al. (2007) undertook an analysis of 20 850 BASE-jumps in Norway over 11 years and found that the death rate was 1:2317 and while the injury rate was high they were in the main linked to sprains and bruises. Perhaps then, as Storry (2003) recognised, the tendency to focus on theories that search for labels involving 'risk' and/or 'thrills' is entirely missing the point. That is, extreme sports are not necessarily synonymous with risk and participation may not be about risk taking.

In summary, the traditional theory-driven perspective on extreme sports has assumed that participation is just about risk and risk taking. Studies have set out to explain this

phenomenon as either sociologically or psychologically determined. Participants are said to be self-deceivers searching for thrills and uncertainty. However, there is also indirect evidence that reveals that these assumptions may not be completely accurate. For example, death rates are lower than more socially accepted activities such as motorcycle riding, some personality characteristics seem to indicate that participants are stable with a strong sense of reality, and more recently writers are presenting images of control and discipline. This study outlines an analysis of firsthand accounts as a means to critique the presupposition that the extreme sport experience is about risk and risk taking.

## **Method**

In this paper the author examines those findings from a larger hermeneutic phenomenological study on the extreme sport experience that explicitly shed light on the relationship between extreme sports and risk taking. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach opens up a multitude of data sources such as interviews, biographies, autobiographies, and video or in fact any source that might help explicate the experience in question. The phenomenological perspective aims to return to the experience as lived and provide a detailed description of a phenomenon based on the structure and meaning of an experience (Laverly, 2003; van Manen, 1997). Rigour is achieved, to some extent by suspending or 'bracketing' pre-existing suppositions about the phenomenon before undertaking interviews or interpreting texts (Hanna, 1993; van Manen, 1997); a particular necessity when exploring a minority activity such as extreme sports (Brymer, 2002; Dennett, 2003). The findings presented in this paper are particularly significant because as part of the 'bracketing' process the researcher avoided presupposing that the extreme sport experience was centred on risk taking. Careful analysis of the firsthand accounts of participants themselves allowed this unexpected dimension to surface.

## **Participants**

Data sources included interviews with 15 extreme sport participants (10 men and 5 women aged 30 to 75 years old) and video, biographies, and autobiographies about extreme sport participants sourced from all over the world, including India, China, Taiwan, and Nepal. Extreme sport participants were chosen based on the following criteria: a) they participated in sporting activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death; b) they were outside the age group typically discussed in the literature about



alternative sports; and c) those interviewed were prepared to unravel and reflect upon the extreme sport experience.

The extreme sports included BASE-jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering, and solo rope-free climbing. Participants of alternative, lifestyle, or subculture sports that did not fit the definition as outlined above, including surfing, skiing, skateboarding, and so on at a level where participants ran minimal risk of death were not included. Interview participants were chosen for their experience as extreme sports participants, that is for the sake of the phenomenon (Van Kaam, 1966) and for their willingness to explore the experience, not for their knowledge of the phenomenological framework.

## **Procedure**

In the first instance the author conducted focused conversations with extreme sport participants, either face-to-face or by telephone. One question guided the interview process: 'What is the extreme sport experience?' The final phenomenological structure was revealed through a detailed process where each individual tape was listened to, transcribed, read, and thematically analysed as a separate entity. 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 relevance. 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?', and 'What am I missing?' guided the analytical process and reflection.

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: 127), these notes were reconsidered in terms of potential underlying themes, expressed or implicit, or meaning units (DeMares, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). A similar interpretation process was undertaken with video, biographies, and autobiographies.

Thematic ideas were grouped and further defined. These second-order themes were considered against the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. This entire process was repeated again and again as the phenomenological description materialised. The phenomenological description was presented to all interview participants with a request for comments and verification. As part of this process the relationship between

risk taking and extreme sports emerged as an important theme that framed the phenomenological structure (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

## **Results and discussion**

Traditionally, theoretical perspectives on extreme sport participation have assumed a direct relationship to risk taking. From a social standpoint participants are seduced by the glamorous image of adrenaline and risk to voluntarily go beyond the edge of their control. From a psychological viewpoint participants are either adrenaline seekers fulfilling a need for uncertainty, novelty, ambiguity, variety, and unpredictability or they are pathological with unhealthy, narcissistic tendencies. Essentially, the traditional notion presupposes that participation in extreme sports is about:

1. a need for thrills and excitement obtained by taking physical risks
2. an unhealthy activity based on self-deception
3. a need to go beyond the edge of control and certainty.

However, these perspectives are theory-driven and do not necessarily take into account the experiences of participants (Brymer & Oades, 2009; Willig, 2008). The aim of this paper is to question the assumed relationship between risk and extreme sports by presenting an alternative perspective as explored through firsthand accounts of participants themselves.

The following quotes illustrating the relationship between risk taking and the extreme sport experience have been taken from a variety of sources. Where the source is a direct interview participant quote, the participant has been identified with initials and a brief description.

### *On risk and danger*

Marilyn Olsen (2001), in her book exploring the lives of women who participate in so-called risky sports, interviewed Lynn Hill an extreme climber who had proved herself top of her field on numerous occasions. As with most participants who take their activity to a level where death would be the most likely outcome of a mismanaged error or accident, she does not like the 'extreme' label due its perceived relationship to danger and risk.

Extreme to me means doing something that is dangerous and risky. And that was never my motivation as a climber. The reason I climb is more about learning about myself as well as the sense of partnership with my climbing partners within the natural environment. It has nothing to do with how dangerous it is. (Hill cited in Olsen, 2001: 59)

In this quote Hill claims that learning about herself and developing partnerships with others in the natural environment are more appropriate reasons than a desire for risk.

While those interviewed for this study were not explicitly asked about risk or the tag 'extreme sports' many also explained that the extreme sport label is inappropriate because the activity is not undertaken for the risks. For many participants in this study activities that society takes for granted such as driving or crossing the road are far more dangerous. For example, JM stated that:

You know some of the biggest risks I face are on the roads because really you know the most dangerous thing I encounter are people . . . . (JM, male mountaineer, early 40s)

In the interview with JM he continued to explain that he feels more in danger when walking city streets at night than he does when undertaking an expedition.

I don't feel like I'm putting my life in any greater danger going on an adventure whether it's climbing Mt Everest or walking across the desert. But I do when I get out on the road. So we face risks in our lives every day and I don't really draw a big distinction. I do feel safer when I'm in the natural world. I do feel safer when I'm on the Arctic Ocean or in the Himalaya than I do out in the home environment when I'm driving around . . . . (JM, male mountaineer, early 40s).

Here JM explains that he feels more comfortable and safer in the natural world because he is in more control of his situation.

Glen Singleman and Heather Swann (Singleman & Swan, 2008) a husband and wife BASE-jumping team described how safety is of paramount importance which requires that participants follow particular rules.

Both of us are concerned for our safety every time we do a jump, and that concern is what keeps us safe. We follow the rules, we have done many years of training and for us safety is the highest priority. (Singleman & Swan, 2008)

TB (male BASE-jumper, late 30s) also explained that while the potential alternatives might be socially acceptable they are also perhaps the biggest risk of all:

. . . try my hardest to manage all risks and reduce the chance of making a mistake. I certainly don't want to sit at home and watch television and grow fatter than I am, doing nothing.

For TB the essence of the extreme sport experience is about learning everything about the constraints of the activity in order to be confident about participating.

. . . learn everything possible about the sport; learn about weather conditions, learn about wind, learn about what wind does in and around buildings and structures and cliffs, etc. so you know what you can do and what you can't do.

In summary, participants of extreme sports interviewed for this study do not consider that they undertake the activity for risks or danger. Contrarily, socially acceptable activities such as driving are considered less controllable and therefore more appropriately about risk.

### *On thrills and adrenaline*

Participants in this study reported that extreme sport participation was not about a search for adrenaline or thrills. In fact the experience was described as a deep sense of relaxation and mental and emotional clarity. For example, JM a male mountaineer in his early 40s explains that the perception that he undertakes mountaineering for thrills is not appropriate. From JM's perspective the outsider's focus on thrill is entirely wrong: 'Most people label people like myself as thrill seekers or risk takers. The person who is labeling me is way off course.'

Michael Bane's (1996: 24) reflections on his own extreme sport experiences were succinct and to the point:

Much of the early research on risk concentrates on a phrase I am coming to hate, thrill seeking. I am not sure what this means, and it doesn't seem to me that the researchers are that far ahead.

Bane also wrote that, 'We continue to think of risk in terms of *rush*. As if adrenaline is the entire experience. And is such a cheap experience worth having?' (p. 25). Yet Bane clearly felt that his experience was worth having as he spent years exploring extreme sports as is demonstrated by the remainder of the book.

MG (male extreme climber, late 40s) was quite clear that he did not get the adrenaline rush so often spoken about and described the feeling as 'a heightened state of relaxation'. EJ (male BASE-jumper, early 70s) also spoke about thrills with particular focus on the assumed relationship to an adrenaline rush. He explained that in his early career he had what he called an adrenaline rush which almost resulted in his death:

I've had situations where I've had tunnel vision and it cuts your brain off as well, where you can't control it . . . .

I nearly died actually in California on one of my early jumps where I got tunnel vision. I became obsessed with one thing and obliterating everything else . . . and I was screaming towards the ground . . . .

. . . you know, I forgot all my training, I was obsessed with getting these twists out . . . .

. . . when I started getting this ground rush, I cut away, I went back into free fall at four hundred feet, you know, which is a suicidal thing to do, suicidal, because I had problems with control, you know, I forgot all my training, because of the adrenaline, probably. And they reckon I hit the deck at the point where the parachutes blossom, you know. They reckon I hit the ground at fifty mile an hour and what saved my life was a million to one chance. There are these flood canals, they're about twenty-foot deep; I hit right on the edge of that . . . .

EJ went on to explain that this experience did not resemble the usual BASE-jumping experience which he explained involved mental and emotional clarity and feelings of being totally relaxed. SB (male extreme kayaker, late 30s) also clarified that the experience was the

opposite of tunnel vision: 'I'm also fully aware of everything else that is going around me. It's almost the opposite of tunnel vision.'

Theoretical perspectives that assume a risk focus would expect participants to report a desire for thrills and the excitement emanating from adrenaline. However, participants in this study seem to be refuting the desire for thrills and hinting at an experience of relaxation and clarity.

### *On death and self-deception*

GS a BASE-jumper (mid-40s) was clear about the void between the typical perspective and his own understanding of his chosen leisure pursuit:

. . . they all think we're being irresponsible towards our children . . . putting your life at risk . . . yet you know the irony of that is that well there are many ironies here . . . here are sort of philosophical and intellectual ironies . . . you know that life is 100 per cent fatal condition . . . everyone is going to die . . . you have to die . . . you know . . . and one of the problems of this society is that we don't pay enough attention to that fact . . .

As with TB and JM above, GS also considered that the real risk was to be found by following the socially accepted norm. GS explains that as death was a certainty, the real risk was ignoring this fact and as a result missing out on opportunities because of fear. GS went on to explain that he would not undertake BASE-jumping if he thought that he was putting his life at risk. However, according to GS to reach this point takes a considerable amount of training and discipline. He explained that when he was first interested in BASE-jumping he obtained formal qualifications in parachute physics in order to become fully aware of the constraints involved. GS considered that success was dependent on knowledge:

. . . good intellectual grasp of all of the technology they're using and the environment they're going in to and the situation that they're putting themselves in and their own physical and mental limitations and that's how you get to be a successful adventurer otherwise you get to be hurt or dead and that's not where the satisfaction is, being hurt or dead. (GS, BASE-jumper, mid-40s).

Here GS also suggests that would-be adventurers who do not have the required knowledge would most likely end up hurt or even dead. In fact, there was a perception from several

interview participants that the perceived link between extreme sports and risk taking was an attractive motivator for many with limited or faulty knowledge and that the most likely outcome for these would be death or severe injury.

I mean there are so many skiers that are just willing to do anything it takes to make a name for themselves and to feel good about themselves, including jumping a hundred-and-fifty foot cliffs and you know, they either don't know what they're doing or they have a sense that they're not gonna get hurt. The only way out of this kind of addiction I think, is either death or enough injuries that you finally wake up. (KK, female extreme skier, mid-30s)

HS (female BASE-jumper, late 30s) supported this by pointing out that undertaking an extreme sport takes great discipline and also suggested that those who do not have such discipline would not last in the sport:

. . . you know people tend to get weeded out of the sport by the rigours, by the discipline of what you have to do. Because if you're not disciplined about it every time . . . it's not a sport, you know, where you know 90 per cent of the time I will pack it right . . . it's a sport where you have to pack it right 100 per cent of the time, where you have to launch right 100 per cent of the time, where you have to be able to control malfunctions 100 per cent of the time . . . because you know 99.5 per cent of the time still gets you hurt or dead.

However, these perspectives cannot be explained by considering that extreme sports participants are somehow denying or unaware of the potential downside of their chosen activity. Extreme sport participants know that the slightest mistake could mean death (SB, male extreme kayaker, late 30s). There is no illusion as to the seriousness of the potential consequences:

There are no second chances. (EJ, male BASE-jumper, early 70s)

So, for example, the big thing in BASE is safety, so you've got a potential problem analysis you go through; you know — these things might kill me, this is what I'll do to prevent that from happening. (TB, male BASE-jumper, mid-30s)

. . . if we . . . got something wrong, then death would have been imminent (JM, male mountaineer, mid-40s)

There's no choice but to realise that if you get this wrong you will be dead (BM, female extreme mountaineer, mid-30s).

As one extreme skier so colourfully put it:

Imagine if every time you missed a basket, somebody would shoot you in the head (KK, female extreme skier, mid-30s).

Participants in this study are clearly aware that if a mistake or accident in their chosen activity is not managed effectively the result is most likely death. To prevent this outcome participants report that they undertake to learn about their chosen activity, the specific environment, and their own physical and mental capacity. In this way, the potential for an undesirable outcome is minimised.

#### *On control and uncertainty*

For those participating in this study the notion of being in control is of primary importance. Participants were clear that they were not in search of uncertainty or a desire to go beyond the edge of their control. Participants explained that if they did not feel in control they would walk away and that participants need to be disciplined and undertake high levels of preparation for each event.

TB, a BASE-jumper (male, late 30s), was quite clear that he was not comfortable about being labeled an extreme athlete due to its connotations of recklessness and being out of control.

I hate the word extreme too, because its overused, it's got a connotation of recklessness, lack of control. It's got a connotation of unnecessary risk taking and although in my life I have taken unnecessary risks like we all do; you know, we all jaywalk or we all drive 10 k's over the limit or we drive when tired or do something like that or travel to some third world country where there's an uprising. But no, I certainly don't want to be put in that category.



TB went on to explain that if he felt there was a chance that he might die from a particular BASE-jump he would walk away from the site and return when conditions were favourable. In the interview TB explained that putting his life at risk is not the focus and that the opposite is closer to the truth. Extreme sports are undertaken because the participant enjoys life.

I don't and most people who do these activities don't [do it for the risks]; they do it because they enjoy living.

SB an extreme kayaker (male, late 30s) made it clear that he did not kayak over waterfalls because of a desire for uncertainty or risk:

. . . that's not really how I lead my life, to see what happens. I like to have a good knowledge of, or a good idea of what is gonna happen before it actually does. I wouldn't throw myself off a waterfall to see if I'd come out at the bottom.

In this quote SB explains that he prefers to have a good knowledge of the outcome before embarking on a particular waterfall ride. Later in the interview SB narrated a few experiences as a way of highlighting that if he thought that he was taking a risk or that some aspect of the experience was not going to plan he would walk away and return when he felt he was capable of a successful outcome. In one of these narrations he told how he returned ten years later:

When I was a kid I saw a lot of falls that I always thought I'll come back and do one day and I was pretty well aware that I was improving and learning so quickly at that stage that I wasn't ready for it but I probably would come back another day and that those falls would wait . . . and I actually came back 20 years later to one of the falls, no, 10 years later, that's right; 10 years later to Swallow Falls in North Wales, to run that for the first time. (SB, male extreme kayaker, late 30s)

Later in the interview SB explained that he exercises control over everything within his ability.

Yeah very important controlling what is happening there; everything from the equipment I use right the way through to well . . . I'll exercise as much control as I possibly can with the exception of walking around the parts around the edge of the waterfall to get to the bottom.

Here SB explains that being in control is paramount. He went on to explain that he was confident in his ability to choose the correct line down the waterfall, ensure that his equipment was appropriate and ensure that he was properly physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared. For KU (female extreme skier, late 30s) maintaining control in such extreme environments was fundamental to the experience and led to a general feeling of empowerment.

The traditional focus on risk taking suggests a desire to participate in an activity where outcome uncertainty is paramount. However, participants in this study suggest that outcome uncertainty is not part of the experience. Preparation and control seems to be so important that in many cases an activity is postponed for years until the participant has developed the skills required for a particular experience.

### **Summary**

The traditional theoretical perspective on extreme sports participation relates the experience to risk taking and views involvement as based on pathological self-deception or an unhealthy search for thrills, danger, uncontrollability, and uncertainty. Conversely, participants in this study describe an experience that is different to the traditional risk-taking focus. According to participants in this study, extreme sports are not about the search for risk or the need to take risks. That is, risk taking is not the experience. After all, just because an extreme sport participant does not back away from the possibility of undesirable outcomes it does not mean that they are chasing risks. Participants of extreme sports acknowledge that injury and death are possible and undertake to learn about the task, the environment, and their own capacity in order to curtail such unwanted events. Participants interviewed for this study consider that they prefer to be in control, do not consider that they are recklessly searching for danger, and are well aware of the potential downside. Extreme sports participants are quite clear that they do not search for risk and that many socially acceptable activities are inherently more dangerous.

While it is not the aim of the phenomenological perspective to generalise to populations or generate theoretical standpoints, this perspective might have connotations beyond just the

relationship between extreme sports and risk taking. For example, while there may be participants who undertake extreme sports for risks and thrills this may not be the norm. It may be just that some who are searching for risks see extreme sports as an outlet. A more complete understanding of those who participate in extreme sports might lead to some more precise insights.

At the same time, the focus on certain activities being risk-oriented may be more of a function of a modern morbid aversion to risk or obsessive desire to be 'liberated' from risk (Fairlie, 1989). The construct known as 'risk' has always been a part of life; it is only relatively recently that the lack of certainty and the need to control our surroundings has been boxed as a construct and labelled, let alone labelled as something deviant. This research reveals that extreme sports participation is not just about a desire to take risks, indeed the extreme sport experience might be a function of many factors that have been overlooked because of the focus on risk.

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