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## 'Everything we do will have an element of fear in it': challenging assumptions of *fear for all* in outdoor adventurous education

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# 'Everything we do will have an element of fear in it': challenging assumptions of *fear for all* in outdoor adventurous education

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## ABSTRACT

Challenge, adventure, and risk in outdoor adventurous education (OAE) have long been recognised as foundational components in the framing of valuable and transformational experiences for participants. Whilst the literature has identified the benefits of these types of learning experiences, what has remained largely absent is an interrogation of the emerging emotional effects surrounding the fear response. This paper presents the examined interrelationships of facilitator perspectives on fear and how fear influences the developmental potential for participants in OAE. Multiple-case study research interviewed four OAE facilitators and observed participants' experiences of fear-related practice through a caving activity. The findings demonstrate a distinct and complex tension between the intentional facilitation of fear and the diverse impact fear can have for participants. Two primary outcomes emerged: the historically situated assumptions of a *fear for all* approach are challenged, and fear was recognised to isolate and marginalise participants unable to successfully interact with fear.

## KEYWORDS

Fear; emotions; outdoor adventurous education; comfort zone

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, many different iterations of learning outdoors have emerged and been consolidated (e.g. outdoor development, place-based learning, and learning for sustainability). However, taking young people into adventurous learning environments has, in our view, remained an important cornerstone in the education of young people across global contexts. Drawing on the previous definitions of Ewert and Sibthorp (2014), Sibthorp and Richmond (2016), and Brown and Beames (2017), we define OAE as outdoor adventurous learning experiences (e.g. caving, rock climbing, coasteering) which are intentionally selected to invoke uncertainty in participants for the purposes of personal growth (e.g. resilience, character). This in turn generates a sense of challenge and risk, often (not always) resulting in participants experiencing a range of emotions, including fear. That said, we also recognise any definition of OAE to be in a constant state of flux and is open to reinterpretation and negotiation. Within this 'messy' definition, it is usually accepted that young people experiencing some level of fear is positive (e.g. building resilience as a result of exposure to these types of learning activities). We have noted that explicit reference to fear and its potential for adverse development has been largely unrecognised in the literature (e.g. Brown & Fraser, 2009; Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002), and, as we report on here, potentially too often in practice as well.

Much of the critiques on the use of risk, anxiety, and uncertainty in the literature suggests a re-examination of its place in OAE (Brookes, 2003a, 2003b; Brown & Fraser, 2009; Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005). We argue instead for an interrogation of how pedagogical approaches to risk and uncertainty

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may facilitate (either intentionally or unintentionally) oppressive emotional responses such as fear. Fear itself, as the emotion which results from experiences that involve perceived danger and uncertainty, is commonly interchanged with anxiety. However, Tovote, Fadok, and Lüthi (2015) caution against this conflation, acknowledging that whilst the neurological circuits associated with these defensive behaviours are largely processed in the same brain regions, fear and anxiety can be thought of as distinct, yet possess overlapping neural pathways and processes. We therefore chose to focus on fear as it is a primitive, universal, and complex human emotion, which often elicits numerous physiological and psychological behaviours (Tracy & Randles, 2011).

The ways in which participants in OAE comprehend, experience, and navigate their levels of fear is multidimensional and subjective. This is of critical importance if we are to sufficiently disentangle fear in OAE; no two participants will experience, express, and learn from fear inducing OAE activities identically. Despite the acknowledgement of this complexity, and its potential to influence experience in myriad ways, Jackson (2013, p. 185) acknowledged that 'fear and anxiety have been relatively neglected by sociologists of education'. This is indicative of a broader issue within contemporary OAE research and practice where it remains largely unclear how practitioners and researchers operationally define and utilise fear in order to achieve programme outcomes. We present a cautionary critique to the ways in which OAE may approach challenge and risk for personal development in order to encourage learners to walk with fear. To guide this thinking and research, we reflexively asked ourselves what is fear, how and/or why is it employed in OAE, and what is the impact on people who may have negative experiences of fear?

In light of Mobbs et al. (2019) conversation with leading neurologists, we define fear as a powerful emotion stemming primarily from neural circuits surrounding the amygdala, which affects other (primarily subcortical) brain regions. Fear is recognised as an inherently complex emotional state which can be triggered, for instance, by past events, certain situations, or the unknown. This often results in an eclectic mix of responses such as our fight or flight response or physiological responses such as sweating, an increased heart rate, and pupil dilation. As Mobbs, Hagan, Dalgleish, Silston, and Prévost (2015) describe, fear has been, and remains, a crucial survival mechanism that has been evolutionarily optimised to keep us alive. The complex neurological and ecological foundations of our fear perceptions and responses means a continuum exists whereby fear for one person may insight bravery and courage, and for another fear may insight terror and vulnerability. In addition, fear responses at the individual level will often differ depending on the given stimuli. For instance, it is entirely plausible that a participant may not experience fear when in water or tight spaces, but may experience fear when rock climbing or camping; the circumstances, contexts, and activities in which fear may develop are therefore unpredictable for both the educator and participant.

This paper presents the findings of a study, which explored how four OAE facilitators perceived and used risk, and in turn fear, in their practice in Scotland, alongside assessing the impact of fear on participants during an OAE residential caving activity in Wales. Emerging throughout the study was an underlying conflict between how facilitators approached fear and how fear framed the experiences of the outdoors for the participants. Whilst small in scale, the findings in this study replicate what the authors have experienced and witnessed in practice. In this sense, the study has raised new questions on the place, use, and impact of fear in OAE. To contextualise this research, we begin by exploring the existing cases *for* and *against* fear in the OAE literature.

## **Fear in outdoor adventurous education**

As we have explained, fear is a complex emotion, which emerges when an individual is presented with a fear inducing stimuli. Fear itself may be triggered by our past experiences, present emotional state, and other personal and interpersonal reasons (e.g. culture or social environment) which are mostly out of the control of the OAE facilitator. In OAE, fear can be thought to present both visibly and invisibly in participants. What we have noted is that the literature readily discusses experiences relating to uncertainty, challenge, and risk, yet the emotional responses to these experiences, such as

fear, is often avoided, omitted, or used interchangeably with 'uncertainty' (e.g. Brown & Fraser, 2009). We argue they are not the same. Whilst in many cases, 'fear' itself is not named, it is alluded to and is often the result of immersive adventure experiences which seek to challenge participants. The ways in which facilitators are taught how to support participants through fear is largely psychologically based (Brookes, 2003a, 2003b), and is absent of the necessary skill development that could be transferable to other situations beyond the OAE programme. It is important to state that we are not suggesting the removal of all fear inducing experiences in OAE, rather we encourage the reader to critique the case for and against fear, and consider how a participant's response to, and management of, fear might be better taught in OAE to ensure learning can be transferred to other fear inducing spaces.

### **The case for fear**

The end of the twentieth century saw the emergence of literature which began to recognise the place of fear to be a core element within the OAE experience. Mortlock (1984, p. 71) ascertained that the OAE participant must learn to 'control his (*sic*) fear' in order to access personal growth and achievement. Varley (2006), when paraphrasing Mortlock's (1984) nonconsecutive four stages of adventure, demonstrated how stages two and three (adventure and frontier adventure) desire participants to interact with fear and apprehension. When participants successfully engage with this process, 'the experience will become etched on the individual's mind, possibly forever' (Varley, 2006, p. 176). The importance of fear in OAE was echoed in Barrett and Greenaway's (1995) summary of research in outdoor learning where five critical ingredients were identified for the creation of a dynamic adventure environment; the first ingredient was to overcome a fear. When recognising the historical centrality of fear in OAE, the emergence of theories and models commonly employed in contemporary practice can be observed to purposefully enhance levels of fear in participants. Perhaps most explicit is the comfort zone model where enhanced levels of either real or perceived risks expose participants to increased fear levels which, in turn, place them outside their comfort zone where emotional dissonance is experienced and participants are considered best placed to access positive benefits (Brown, 2008; Gass, 1993; Luckner & Nadler, 1997).

These initial forays have been expanded upon and serve to reinforce the place and relevance of activities likely to invoke fearful responses in OAE participants. For instance, Goldenberg, McAvoy, and Klenosky (2005) discovered how overcoming fear enhanced participant determination and perseverance. Meanwhile, Harper (2017) noted in the Forest School context that incorporating outdoor risky play can result in children developing resilience and reducing phobia levels. This focus was further documented by Passarelli, Hall, and Anderson (2010, p. 128) whose participants (58 college students aged 19–22) 'reported drawing on strengths to face their fears of heights, water, bugs, and the general perils of the great outdoors' with one participant drawing on competitive strengths to 'overcome his paralyzing fear of heights in abseiling off a 150-foot cliff'; these forms of experience were considered to support developmental outcomes for participants. To fully access such benefits, Sheard and Golby (2006) suggest participants need to embrace mental toughness, hardiness, and self-control which, as they discuss, replicates the traits deemed desirable in military personnel. This notion of toughness in adventure was reinforced by Clough, Mackenzie, Mallabon, and Brymer (2016, p. 965), who stated the underpinning features of overcoming fear in adventurous physical activities 'act as a magnet for tough individuals and provide them with an opportunity to fully self-actualize'.

When considering the central role of fear in OAE's broader cultural context, an underpinning conceptual approach has emerged which recognises 'fear [as] a "friend" and ... fear can be experienced as transformational' (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013, p. 484). This perspective on fear has long been identified as a core programme element in OAE and, when successfully interacted with by the learner, is considered to result in increased psychological resilience (Beightol, Jeverson, Carter, Gray, & Gass, 2012; Ewert & Yoshino, 2011; Shellman & Hill, 2017) and character building (Houge

Mackenzie, Son, & Hollenhorst, 2014). It is here that Loynes (2003) writing on the hero's journey becomes increasingly stark as those students who have heroic OAE experiences develop agency and become 'the "authors" of their own lives' (p. 141). Jirásek (2020) also outlines how fear and risk focussed educational activities may be linked to religion, whereby awe (what we might recognise as a meaningful OAE endeavour) and trembling (a physiological fear response) represent the sacred and holy in the human experience.

What has become clear is that the place and use of fear in OAE is an historically situated concept which has shaped the formation of pedagogical approaches and assumptions in modern practice. This, developed largely from psychological literature, often necessitates one-on-one experiences, and is largely based on immersion in fearful situations with support, requiring the individual to develop and express resilience. However, OAE is often experienced in much larger participant groups with one or two facilitators, who, we argue, cannot be fully aware of everyone's fear responses; nor would we expect them to given the diverse nature of individual fear reactions. These contemporary approaches to OAE remain largely taken for granted, mostly in the absence of critique and clear pedagogical processes for learning and teaching how to deal with fear when it presents itself. We now outline the case *against* fear in OAE to paint a full picture of how fear can be employed, perceived, and felt.

### **The case against fear**

Much like the literature which documented the relevance and benefits of fear in OAE, literature which challenged the place of fear emerged simultaneously at the end of the twentieth century. Of note was Ewert (1986) who, through considering the fear-reducing techniques discussed by Rachman (1978), outlined four fear-reducing processes for students in environmental education programmes; these were systematic desensitisation, flooding, modelling, and rehearsal, once again based in psychology literature and practice. Three years later, Ewert (1989, p. 24) expanded further by stating 'treating everyone equally with respect to levels of fears does just about everybody an injustice'. Though seemingly transparent, the complexity of this quote was brought to life in Holyfield and Fine's (1997) paper on an adventure-based programme for adjudicated youth offenders. When explaining an activity called the 'Dangling Duo', the multifaceted nature of how individuals manage their fear levels emerged. As one participant shook and cried before, during, and after the activity, another embodied bravery and fearlessness and was applauded for their accomplishments. The peer-peer and facilitator-peer response to fearlessness in this scenario showed participants how they 'should' respond when fear arises, despite the absence of explicit learning on how to deal with their fear as it emerges.

The impact on participants unable to deal with their fear was problematised further by Estrellas (1996, p. 43) when stating that 'physical and emotional safety are jeopardized when transformation is dependent on a participant experiencing stress'. This was reinforced by Bell (2017), who, when critiquing Mortlock's (1984, p. 71) assertion that an OAE participant must 'control his (*sic*) fear', stated individual identities of value are lost if unable to conform to a normative adventure ideology where risk is embraced and fear is suppressed. Meanwhile, Zink and Leberman (2001), citing the work of Estrellas (1996), considered both risk and stress in OAE to be mediating factors that constrain rather than liberate the personal development of learners. This was reinforced by Leberman and Martin (2002), who suggested the mental discomfort associated with learners leaving their comfort zones inhibited peak learning experiences.

According to Preston (2014), fear-enhancing activities are indicative of broader cultural narratives in OAE. They considered how fast-paced and risky activities are often thought of as indispensable, and reinforce the defining characteristics of OAE. This has resulted in the normalisation of practice which, drawing on Waite (2007), has focussed on the outdoors as a space for challenge, for overcoming fear, and for personal development. Preston (2014, p. 182) argued this perspective has resulted in the 'pushed out of one's comfort zone' hypothesis, suggesting the persisting narratives of overcoming fear in OAE privilege only those who thrive in such environments.

Through exploring the cases *for* and *against* fear, a distinct tension emerges in the literature and in practice surrounding the place, use, and relevance of fear within OAE. On the one hand, participants experiencing and overcoming fear is considered a core component of pedagogical practice and OAE more broadly; one that has been successfully utilised for many years. On the other hand, fear, in the absence of knowing how to work with it when it emerges, is recognised as a debilitating and obstructive emotion, which constrains the capacity for learning and personal growth. This outlines an emerging fragility and poses the question; how does the suppression of emotions and the embracing of fear in OAE acknowledge, compliment, and prepare the emotional consciousness of the twenty-first-century learner to walk with fear?

## Research methods

In light of the above conflict, this research explored the perceptions of fear in practice from four facilitators involved in the delivery of OAE activities in Scotland, and the situated experiences of fear for participants taking part in an OAE activity in Wales. These two sets of data enabled a critical evaluation of both facilitator pedagogy and student experience, which has offered a small-scale evaluation of the impact fear can have in contemporary OAE. The two research questions that guided the study were as follows: Is fear present in this OAE context and, if so, is it intentionally employed by the facilitators? And, how, if at all, do fearful experiences impact learning and development for the participants in the study?

Given the friction present in the literature, a naturalistic multiple-case study (Stake, 2006; Yin, 1994) was employed to assess the place of fear in OAE. Initially, the study employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews with four facilitators from one OAE provider in Scotland, which extracted 'in detail [facilitator] experiences, motives, and opinions of' fear in their practice (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3). These facilitators were intentionally selected for inclusion in the study based on their wide-ranging experience, depth of qualifications, and ease of access for author A. The focus of the interviews was on both facilitator perceptions of fear and if/how fear was pedagogically employed in their practices. These four (two female, two male) facilitators deliver a six-month OAE programme for young people who may, for instance, experience mental health and wellbeing challenges or live in an area on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. The activities delivered range from both single day to expedition type overnight activities which include gorge walking, hiking, coastering, and canoeing. All facilitators were able to draw on years of experience, had relevant qualifications, and were involved in the direct delivery of OAE activities with their participants. The interview schedule was developed deductively from the literature which informed open-ended and flexible questions that also ensured the facilitators were afforded agency and opportunity to provide detail-rich descriptions (Schultze & Avital, 2011).

Whilst the interviews enabled deep and complex data to be collected, contextual data were deemed necessary to fully assess the impact of fear on participants. An observation of eleven participants aged 18–23 (seven female, four male) and two different OAE facilitators (one female, one male) from a different OAE organisation took place during a caving activity in Wales. These 13 participants were observed in a separate context to the facilitators in the interviews and were selected at random during a residential OAE experience. The residential centre delivers activities such as caving, gorge walking, rock climbing, and canoeing, with explicit programme outcomes including resilience and character development. The participants observed in the cave were completing an outdoor and adventurous activities module at an English university. Participants had a mix of previous OAE activity experience (from school and/or college) and came from a diverse range of backgrounds from across the United Kingdom. Caving was considered to support a naturalistic research environment where the merging of perceived risk, fear, and social interaction offered insight into the situated experiences of fear for these young people. Author A adopted a participant-as-observer role, which enabled full immersion in the caving activity, but was acknowledged as an external group member (Angrosino, 2007).

Following verbatim transcription of both sets of data, the data sets were separately coded through open (substantive), axial (theoretical), and selective (higher-order conceptualisation) coding cycles (Punch & Oancea, 2014). This led to the development of two codebooks (interview and observation) which informed the development of meta, micro, and abstract themes present in the data. To address the potential fragmentation and decontextualising of data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), the findings were presented through a process of re-storying. This recontextualised the storied characteristics of the data which better captured the subjective experiences and perspectives of the study's participants. The interview and observation data displays were then merged which 'discover[ed] ... new themes and overarching metathemes' (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 99). This cross-case conceptualisation was fundamental in fully answering the research questions whilst uncovering the interrelations and imbalances across the data sets. The interview data from facilitators is shared first as it provides contextual grounding for the interpretation of the observational data of participants. Together they demonstrate a tension in the study between the facilitation of fear and the individual impact fear can have on participants.

### **Facilitator practices with fear**

The OAE facilitators in the study used fear as a core component in their practice, both as a tool and as learning. There was general agreement that through experiences of fear, the facilitators teach their participants to deal with and/or overcome fear. However, they acknowledged that all their participants experience fear differently, and their ability to overcome, manage, and deal with their fears was a key indicator of successfully completing their OAE programme. The four facilitators have had pseudonyms assigned to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality.

#### ***Fear as a core component in facilitator practice***

Fear was considered by the facilitators as a foundational component for personal development on their programme, 'literally everything we do will have an element of fear in it ... and then we up it (fear) by going let's go and jump off of stuff' (Harry). Emily expanded on this, noting those participants who do not want to face their fears 'need a shake-up', whilst Alex suggested fear 'is ... intentionally used by [the programme]'. Harry meanwhile described the importance of fear to the organisation, stating 'I have consciously connected the fear and the outcomes, and how much we use fear, I guess it is always there, ... I don't think our course would work in any shape or form without fear'.

#### ***Fear as a tool and as learning***

The discourse surrounding fear's application offered insight into the degree with which fear is intentionally employed, 'through every part of our practice, every part of our organisation, every part of our job ... and [we] definitely use [fear] as a tool' (Harry). The sentiment of fear as a tool was also shared by Alex, 'I think fear is a kind of tool, like it is a response that we've got and, in the development of young people, it is a tool that we use'. Claire noted that the programme is focussed on 'trying to create learning, and we use fear to help with that, ... if [participants] are put out of their comfort zone into their stretch zone quite a bit, they do get a considerable amount of learning from it'.

#### ***Managing and overcoming fear***

Three facilitators felt the word *overcoming* to be too severe, preferring instead to think of participants *managing fear*. They acknowledged how they try to encourage participants to construct 'management strategies for [fear]' (Alex). This process was noted as both complex and emotionally taxing as



'people often get quite angry and agitated because they are not used to managing that emotion' (Emily). However, Harry considered participants as *overcoming* their fears, and only realised that overcoming fear played a significant role in the programme during the interview. He acknowledged that 'all the breaking down the barriers [on the programme], I have always thought of that more as breaking down barriers to help people come [along], but I think now it is to overcome fear'.

### ***Fear reactions and impact***

Participant reactions to fear were considered by the facilitators to be completely unique and no two participants were thought to experience fear in the same way; 'I've seen it where people have lashed out, so, aggressive behaviour ... I've seen it where people have completely shut down and, I've just realised, I've seen it where people have walked away' (Claire). Alex also discussed the difficulty some participants have when interacting with fear; 'we definitely stumble a lot and it's part of the programme that some young people just don't want to face those fears'. Claire expanded on this, stating that:

If [participants] are like "if I don't come on the coasteering day, I can't continue with the course?", and it is like "yeah". It sounds harsh ... [but] to have [them take] photographs ... whilst we are doing the activity would be a huge benefit to the group.

The relationship participants had with their fears were identified by facilitators as a fundamental element in their continued participation in the course. Those participants who opposingly responded to fear were encouraged to take part as an observer, or through taking photos of others, and were less likely to complete the programme.

### ***Participant experiences of fear***

In contrast, the observed experiences of participants interacting with fear in the cave are shared as re-storied narratives where gender has been intentionally removed to maintain the anonymity of participants, and to allow their voices to be heard beyond cultural assumptions about gender, embracing bravery, and suppressing fear. These vignettes attend to the lived experiences of fear when participants interacted with the dark, with loss, with vulnerability, and with powerlessness. These rich narratives showcase not only the participant's experiences, but also the role of the facilitators in these experiences, and are presented without comment intentionally. Through engaging with these vignettes, we invite the reader to reflect on and, if necessary, conduct a critique of their own personal practice.

### ***'I am afraid of the dark'***

The group sit close to each other, the roof is low, the shadows are dark. 'Did you know, a cave is the only place where we can experience complete darkness?' the facilitator begins, 'let's all turn our torches off'. The group becomes agitated. 'Do we have to?' one of them asks, they are distressed at the prospect of darkness. Their eyes are wide and body language is tense. 'Ah, it'll be fine, we'll just do it for 30 seconds, it is a worthwhile experience' the facilitator replies, the torches eventually go off.

I turn on my watch backlight and glance at the time, it is pitch dark, how long would this last for? The facilitator asks for silence, I can hear one of the participants breathing erratically. 'Please can we turn our lights back on?'. This voice comes from the same participant who had just expressed their fear, they sound terrified, each soundwave fraught with increasing panic. 'Okay' the instructor replies, 'let's turn our lights back on'. Light returns, I glance back at my watch, we were in the dark for 121 seconds. I look around, three participants are hugging each other, locked in an embrace which looks just as powerful as the darkness that had consumed us.

### ***'Everyone will hate me'***

A narrow gap in the rock is our next activity. The participants must place their torso in a wedge, tilt their head sideways to avoid their helmet getting stuck, and are then lifted and pushed through. One participant is clearly nervous, 'can I go another way?' they ask the facilitator. 'Yeah, we can go back the way we came' the facilitator replies, indicating the narrow crawl we had just completed.

'But, what about all the way out, back to the entrance, can I do that?', they walk back and forth and are quickly becoming more distressed. 'Well', the instructor starts, 'if you want to leave, we all have to come with you, I can't let you go by yourself'. They shake their head, 'I can't do that, everyone will hate me'. They have now crouched down, and their unease is clear. After a while they stand, they do not look at either the instructor or I but announce they will try it. They place their head in the gap but quickly withdraw, head in hands they slump to the floor. We are now silent.

Again, they decide to look through the gap, but this time they put their head in and the facilitator picks their legs up. 'Go! Quickly, please!' they shout, terror clear in their pitch. The facilitator pushes and the young person is pulled through by another participant. The instructor and I look at each other, they puff their cheeks 'ooh, I didn't think we would get that one for a second'.

### ***'I feel vulnerable'***

'Okay, this is our next challenge' the instructor starts, 'all of you have to be up there (pointing to a narrow space on top of a ledge) in 60 seconds. I then want you all to crawl around, it is a little bit of a squeeze, and then there is a slide we can go down just over there'. 'Three, two, one, go!', the instructor begins their stopwatch and the group spring into action. Soon the group are all on the ledge, they all seem to have hit their heads in the rush to get into the tight space and are adjusting helmets and torches. 'Great work everyone, now crawl around and we can do the slide'. The group disappears, but one participant, who has been particularly quiet and apprehensive throughout the day, jumps back down to where I am standing.

'Are you okay?' I ask, they look flustered and turn away, their body language is negative, and they appear to be masking their vulnerability. They reply after a short while, 'oh, I have an injury, it is my knee you see'. This is the first admission of an injury and they have appeared injury free so far. The emotive stress they experienced, expressed through disengagement and sullenness, appears to have culminated in the teamwork challenge. I walk with them to the slide where they remain quiet and subdued as we watch the rest of the group. They stand a long way back and have hidden their absence well, and I am sure the rest of the group think they did the challenge. Whilst we progress further into the cave, they stay at the back with me, they look sad and have disengaged entirely from the environment, their peers, and the facilitator.

### ***'I feel powerless'***

'Okay guys, we have another challenge, this one is a bit of a squeeze', the facilitator indicates towards a narrow slit where participants must shuffle sideways down a short corridor. Once inside it is difficult to turn back. Participants ask lots of questions: 'what if I get stuck?'; 'will I fit?'; 'can I do this?'. One by one the participants go through until the final three are left, the first bends their knees and, after some hesitation, is in and the next steps forward. They have been perhaps the most scared so far, tears are already in their eyes, their eyes are huge. 'I have to do it don't I?', they ask the facilitator. 'You don't have to do anything, it is entirely up to you' they reply.

They look through the corridor, tentatively edging forwards and then disaster. They have not quite bent their knees enough and their helmet becomes trapped in the wedge. The participant recoils back out of the gap in less than two seconds and are on their knees, head in hands, and are clearly sobbing. 'Are you okay?' the facilitator asks, but they do not answer. With tears falling down their face, they go back to the entrance and squeeze through. The final participant follows, and

I return to the main cavern, to my right I can hear the melancholy echo of deep sobs. After a short time, they resurface, their cheeks are glistening amongst the torches, tears continue to fall from terrified eyes. Their friend has their arm around them, the facilitator and I have taken a step back. They are angry and upset. It is evident the impact fear has had in defining their experience with their previous confidence, self-worth, and character replaced by nervousness and embarrassment.

### **Challenging the *fear for all* approach**

The emotive power of storytelling has offered insight into the observed experiences of participants as they navigated their fear responses. In direct contrast to the facilitator's thoughts and values on the benefits of fear, historically situated assumptions of a *fear for all* approach in the practices reported on in this study have been challenged. In addition, through the emerging feelings of terror, no choice, vulnerability, and powerlessness, we discuss how fear, and a lack of skill development on how to deal with it, marginalised those participants who were unable to successfully interact with their fear responses.

### **Fragmenting historically situated assumptions of fear**

In OAE's broader cultural context, we have seen in the literature how the employment of challenging activities is likely to invoke a fear response in participants. Whilst acknowledging the small-scale nature of the study, we have seen how a one-size-fits-all approach to fear can be considered a core facilitatory component, which framed both facilitator practice and participant experience. This research has reaffirmed how the development of activities purposefully designed to instigate fear are thought of as irreplaceable components within activities designed to stretch and develop participants, a 'central pillar' even (Brown & Fraser, 2009, p. 64). Much like Brymer and Schweitzer's (2013) claim, the study found the employment of fear to be a friend, which was considered critical in the development of a transformational outdoor experience for the participants. So critical was fear in facilitator practice that participant failure to engage with fear often resulted in participants attending as observers and/or dropping out of the programme. What emerged as a central facilitatory assumption was a reliance on participants to express bravery in order to succeed, in the absence of clear skill development to directly deal with fear. Further, as previously discussed by Clough et al. (2016), fear in this study's context reinforced the need for participants to embody toughness but, as stated by Alex, 'some young people just don't want to face those fears'. There may well be many personal reasons and situations that prevent participants from 'facing' fears, one of which may be the absence of skills to do so (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002).

It has been nearly 40 years since Mortlock (1984) claimed OAE participants must tame their fears to access personal growth and development. This study's findings have demonstrated in the years hence that it is plausible that some fear-focussed approaches continue to be employed and, as is the case here, relies on participants taming and/or overcoming their fears. Most remarkably, the quote from Ewert (1989, p. 19) that fear in OAE is 'based on the shotgun approach, [where] everyone gets the same blast despite who they are or what they are' succinctly captures the outcomes from the present study. Whilst acknowledging the historically situated nature of writing such as this, the distinctiveness of the fear for all approach in this study recognised the domination of fear and the expression of stoicism from young people as a necessary precursor to success.

This, in a sociocultural and educational landscape significantly different to that of 40 years ago, does not account for the intersectional diversities, such as (but not exclusively) gender, race, and sexuality, in our increasingly globalised and technological societies. Further, in light of the significant benefits natural spaces and places have offered us during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Lemmey (2020) for a UK-based study), it is important to reflect on what forms of nature-based experiences will matter most to, and carry most relevance for, young people in a post-pandemic environment. However, as data was collected pre-pandemic, we cannot comment on ways forward other than

demonstrating how the facilitators in this study recognised fear as a critical and irreplaceable ingredient, which aligns with Barrett and Greenaway's (1995) call for fear in dynamic adventurous environments.

### ***Illegitimate and marginalised participation***

In the four narratives, how participants felt fear, expressed their fear, and negotiated with their fear varied considerably. However, despite fear interaction differing significantly across the study sample, the data highlights the potential for privileging some responses to fear over others, resulting in illegitimised membership in the learning community and marginalised participation as a result of being unable to successfully negotiate fear inducing stimuli. Returning to Preston's (2014) work, the data reinforced their argument by recognising acts of bravery in the cave instilled a sense of elitism in participants. Those who were able to engage with their fears frequently completed activities first, were engrossed in the physicality of the activity, and received positive reinforcement from facilitators.

The four participants in the narratives were unable to master their fears, which resulted in the development of a participatory hierarchy where those immobilised by fear were observed to have subsidiary forms of experience. Across both sets of data, messages of invalidation from facilitators and peers were transferred to participants unable to move through their fears. For those participants in the cave, this resulted in purposeful disengagement, expressions of terror, and reductions in confidence. This serves to extend upon the narrative provided by Jirásek (2020, p. 3), who, when describing a 10-metre-high wooden beam activity, suggested 'some people retreat, maybe with a feeling of frustration, as the edge is too frightening', yet others are able to 'break through' and tame the territory. In light of this, our data called on us, as researchers and practitioners, to reflect on whether these forms of fear-based experiences are meaningful, and to what extent new territory was tamed in the cave by those participants immobilised by fear. We continuously asked ourselves these two questions: Was the amount of fear present appropriate? How do programme facilitators manage the fear levels of participants?

What we observed on the ground was the requirement for participants to embody an archetypal adventurer identity, whereby narratives of bravery and overcoming risk and adversity foregrounded the caving experience. By presenting fear in this study as a mediator of participant struggle, it has been established that the fear for all approach became an inequitable pedagogical strategy, especially when individualised emotional and physical dispositions were unaccounted for; the individual participants' previous fear inducing experiences were not known. In answering our two previous questions, the data indicated that, in this case, the amount of fear present was inappropriate for *some* students, and that this was largely unacknowledged by facilitators in the instance observed.

The data has indicated that facilitators anticipated a participant's fear response to be predictable and non-discriminatory which reinforced the dominant fear for all approach. The multifaceted nature of fear responses present in the cave questioned the basis of these assumptions, and brought into question the efficacy and inclusiveness of personal growth and development when the participants were encouraged to learn through distress and apprehension. It is here we felt that Loynes (2003) hypothesis on the heroic participant in OAE being able to rewrite their individual narratives was worth revisiting. What the data have demonstrated is that not all participants were able to positively rewrite their narratives or express heroic forms of participation. This may well have reinforced the negative experiences of the participants. Whilst the facilitators commonly aligned with the perspective that fear and bravery act as a mechanism for participant growth, the data has questioned who is able to access the benefits of a fear-focused OAE. How did the personal lives of the participants in the study impact their ability to access these 'benefits of fear'? The findings we have reported on question to what extent fear constrains opportunity for meaningful learning and engagement to emerge. Clearly, with our discussion focussed on the narratives from just four participants aged

between 18 and 23, the generalisability of our findings need to be treated with caution. However, to return to our definition of fear, the complex, subjective, and messy nature of fear-based experiences will inevitably result in unanticipated and multifarious responses for all participants; it is this which emerges in our data. It is therefore important to think of a young person's fear response as on a continuum, which can range from flourishing and development through to floundering and withdrawal. This diverse range of experiences and their associated impact is, we feel, worthy of further enquiry.

## Final thoughts

The significance of fear in framing participant learning and development is as salient now as it has ever been. By investigating the place, use, and impact of fear, this study has placed an emphasis on reconsidering why, and in what ways, fear can underpin practice and influence experience. This study has challenged the significance of models such as the comfort zone model (e.g. Brown, 2008) and Ewert's (1986) psychological approach to supporting participants through fear. Whilst models and theories such as these remain useful, we contest the extent to which it is appropriate to methodise these theories for practice (Mahon & Smith, 2020). Whilst we have been limited by the size and ages of the study sample, we have begun the process of asking whether the risk + fear = growth hypothesis remains relevant within the complexities of the twenty-first-century sociocultural landscape, and in what ways.

The study has discovered a gulf between what fear was assumed to offer by the facilitators, and the truly divisive nature of fear for participants in the cave. This has raised broader questions concerning whether these findings are representative of broader practice and, if so, whether contemporary OAE ideology in its current form provides a suitable set of principles from which to underpin twenty-first-century OAE. What we have seen is that where fear remains a central pedagogic tool, and is exploited in the pursuit of growth and development, it is plausible that young people are wading through their fear-based experiences without the necessary skills to interpret, learn, and grow from them. Without these skills, we argue that the transfer of learning from one fear-based experience to another is largely absent. We suggest that even if we are to embrace the neurological, physical, and social differences present in all group members, the use of fear as a pedagogical tool needs to be re-examined. Explicit ways of learning and teaching how to deal with fear are required so that all participants might emerge with transferable skills for walking with fear, within and beyond OAE programmes. Such an approach would encourage participants to learn to *walk* with fear, rather than *overcome* or *deal* with fear because, as a natural and primitive neurological and physiological response, it is fear which protects us from harm.

In conclusion, the following questions have emerged from this study: Should fear remain a central tool in OAE facilitation of learning in the outdoors? What messages and understandings about our natural spaces and places does a *fear-for-all* approach portray? How might we go about teaching individuals and groups how to walk with fear whilst increasing transferability of skills to other situations/contexts? How compatible are messages of taming and overcoming fear with recognising our interconnectedness with the natural world and the climate and ecological climate crisis we find ourselves within? This paper has expanded the ongoing conversation on the role of fear in OAE. Subsequent papers may seek to explore fear with other age groups, or to share ways in which OAE learning experiences can be created in ways that directly address fear. In so doing, the benefits of real and perceived risk can emerge in ways that teach individuals and groups how to walk with fear, drawing on transferable skills that encourage deep and meaningful connections to the earth where people can *flourish fear free*.

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