

2004

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Recommended Citation

Loeffler, T. A. (2004) "Focusing In: Using Photo Elicitation to Explore the Meanings of Outdoor Experiences," *Research in Outdoor Education*: Vol. 7, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/reseoutded/vol7/iss1/14>

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FOCUSING IN: USING PHOTO ELICITATION TO EXPLORE THE MEANINGS OF OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES

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Ewert (1989) states that the outdoor adventure experience is made up of three components: an interaction with the natural world, a perception of risk or danger, and an uncertain outcome. Quinn (1990) believes that adventure "lies deep within oneself, within the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual spheres of personhood" (p.146), and that inner peace is a product of participation in adventure. In a similar vein, Darst and Armstrong (1980) include the concept of meaning in their definition of outdoor adventure: "all pursuits that provide an inherently meaningful human experience that relates directly to a particular outdoor environment"(p. 3).

This exploratory qualitative study utilized photo-elicitation interviews to investigate the inner significance of structured outdoor experiences for participants. Photo-elicitation provides a model for collaborative research in that the researcher becomes a listener as the subject interprets the image for the researcher. In the present study, photographs taken by the participants during their outdoor adventure experiences formed the foundation of the photo-elicitation interview process.

A photograph preserves a moment in time. Photographs, then, are an emanation of a past reality (Cronin, 1998). Some people use photographs as protection against time by using them as a "mooring for the evocation of past memories" (Cronin, 1998, p.73). Collier and Collier (1986) suggest that photographs, when used in interviews, "sharpen the memory and give the interview an immediate character of realistic reconstruction" (p.106) and that "photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols" (p. 108). This innovative and collaborative approach to the research contributes greatly to the existing literature and knowledge related to the phenomenon of outdoor adventure.

Data collection and analysis for this study took place during 2002 and 2003. Data for this qualitative study was gathered using photo-elicitation interviews with 14 participants in a college-based outdoor program. Interview subjects were selected using "criterion-based sampling" (Patton, 1990, p.176). The sample attempted to provide a cross-sectional representation of college students based on the following criteria: gender, age, year in school, outdoor experience, type of outdoor activity, and trip length. They ranged in age from 18-21, ranged from first through fourth year students, and had participated in backpacking, rock climbing, whitewater kayaking, or sea kayaking programs. The trips varied in length from a weekend to three weeks. The author conducted all of the interviews using a photo-elicitation-based interview technique. During the interviews, the subjects and the researcher examined and discussed the photographs that the subjects took during their outdoor trips.

During and after data collection, an inductive analysis was conducted using both the subject's photographic images and the interview transcriptions. A coding system was generated to initially code the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During and after initial coding, the process of

data analysis was aided by NUD•IST software. Of the wide variety of qualitative data analysis programs, NUD•IST was chosen because it matched the researcher's needs in terms of flexibility, computer skills, database management, and anticipated analysis type (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The subjects ascribed many meanings to their outdoor experiences. The meanings that emerged from the data were grouped into three explanatory themes: spiritual connection with the outdoors; connections with others through outdoor experience; and self-discovery and gaining perspectives through outdoor experience.

Spiritual Connection with the Outdoors. For many of the subjects, the outdoors is a place to find stillness, calm, and peace. The outdoors is also a place where the participants can connect to a sense of a higher purpose or power. The out-of-doors inspires a contemplative mindset where they are drawn to ask themselves "larger" questions. Participants frequently drew upon the words "awe," "beauty," and "spiritual" to describe the deeper connection they felt to the divine and the natural world as a result of being on outdoor trips. For some participants, this spiritual connection is the key component of why they go outdoors. At times, the subjects were able to be very articulate about the spiritual meanings of their experiences and, at other times, they struggled dramatically to find words to describe such meanings.

Connections with Others through Outdoor Experience. Many of the subjects chose to spend time in the outdoors because of the connections they were able to make with others during the experience. They identified the outdoors as a unique container for developing friendships and discussed how the outdoor environment invites and requires people to work together and support each other. The outdoors was also thought to help the subjects develop skills for maintaining their connections over time.

Self-Discovery and Gaining Perspective through Outdoor Experience. Many of the participants identified outdoor experiences as providing opportunities for self-discovery and gaining perspective. The outdoor environment provided occasions to experiment with different ways of living and being, as well as chances to look at life from new vantage points and vistas. For many of the participants, being in the outdoors gives them access to a new range of metaphors with which to describe and understand their lives. For some of the participants, there was meaning in a sense of renewal or clarity that came from participating in an outdoor program.

The interviews showed that the meanings of outdoor experiences were varied, interrelated, and hard to describe, somewhat like the colorful beads in a kaleidoscope that change pattern with a slight twist of the barrel. Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson (2000) identified the fundamental characteristics of a wilderness recreation experience as the following: escape, challenge, new opportunities, natural awe, and beauty and solitude. In the present study, similar characteristics of the outdoor experience evolved regarding participation in a college-based outdoor program. Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson (2000) also found four transferable outcomes from women's participation in wilderness recreation: self-sufficiency, change in perspective, connection to others, and mental clarity. Again, these are comparable to the meanings and themes found in the current study with both female and male subjects.

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

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Support for this study was provided in part by a SSHRC/Vice-President's Research Grant. The author would like to thank Liz Ohle, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Karen Warren, Hampshire College, for their invaluable assistance during this study.