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To cite this article: Benjamin C. Ingman (2017) Bigger experiences and the meaning of adventure, Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 17:4, 338-352, DOI: [10.1080/14729679.2017.1291356](https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2017.1291356)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2017.1291356>



Published online: 24 Feb 2017.



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Bigger experiences and the meaning of adventure

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ABSTRACT

This study is a phenomenological portraiture of an adventurer that explores the meanings of the adventure experience. Through interview and observation, I reveal four thematic meanings of the adventure experience for the research participant: solitude and camaraderie; escape; challenge; and living life. The implications of these findings for adventure education are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Adventure education;
adventure experience;
portraiture; phenomenology;
arts-based research;
meaning

It is 4:30 in the morning and I am already 100 feet off the ground. The full moon is almost bright enough to climb by, but the deep cracks of the wall swallow the light, so we climb by headlamp. My teeth chatter as I lean into the rock, desperate for reprieve from the steady wind whistling through my helmet.

Simon arrives at the belay and, while catching his breath, tells a quick joke to cut the tension he sees on my face. The darkness fails to conceal my misery. I am too cold to congratulate him on the fine pitch of climbing in the dark. We hurry through the formalities of establishing Simon safely on this small ledge as the wind swirls between us. My shivering now visible, Simon intervenes: ‘Do you want me to warm you up?’ ‘Yes.’

We share a functional embrace, trying to stay warm enough to keep climbing. Though the moonlight is bright, we yearn for the sun to rise and warm this cold desert sandstone. After an awkward five minutes of cuddling as we hang from the belay anchors, I start climbing up the next section of rock, hopeful that the movement will warm me. We climb on into the morning.

The sun rises and we make good time to the summit despite the wind, which now gusts at 80 mph. Simon appears from over the edge of the cliff, quickly pulling himself to his feet atop the tower. The wind howls beneath him as he stands on the summit. He sees me, grins, and yells over the gale with enthusiasm, ‘So good!’

Though this is an experience many would find traumatic, Simon is at home in such a position. He stands happily on the precipice, exposed to the elements, only a step away from a 500-foot vertical drop. He exudes confidence in the face of the void as the desert air whips around him. Simon is an adventurer.

Background

Adventure experiences have been celebrated for their educational (Berry, 2011; Mortlock, 1978, 1984), therapeutic (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012), recreational (Webb, 1999) and spiritual (Fox, 1999) values. Adventure experiences have also been critiqued as a reckless pastime of the privileged class (Roberts & Drogin, 1996) that embodies ‘masculine notions of conquest’ (Brown & Beames, 2016, p. 10) while overstating the transferability of outcomes therein (Brookes, 2003; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997). These varied and sometimes contradictory rationales concerning the meaning of the adventure experience raise questions about the use of adventure as a means of education. Indeed, the categorization of adventure as educational is often more a reflection of positionality

concerning educational paradigms than it is a statement of the merits of adventure. Therefore, adopting a broad conception of education—inclusive of the varied aims of education, such as self-actualization (see Rousseau, 1762/1979), growth (see Dewey, 1916), life (see Whitehead, 1929/1967), meaning (see Eisner, 1985; Phenix, 1964) or happiness (see Noddings, 2003)—may aid in identifying the educational virtues of adventure.

Knowing more about the adventure experience can help adventure education scholars and practitioners better understand how to capitalize on the beneficial qualities therein (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993) while mitigating the adverse costs associated (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012). This more comprehensive understanding can be achieved through diversifying the methods utilized to explore adventure experiences. Namely, the positivistic hegemony in adventure education (Davidson, 2001) may be corroborated with postmodern epistemologies (see Slattery, 1995) and methods (see Barone & Eisner, 2012; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to explore the research question: what meanings do adventurers ascribe to their adventure experiences? I investigate this question through a phenomenological portraiture of an adventurer, 'Simon'.¹ Through portraiture I am explicitly in search of the 'goodness' within the context of study, and aim to provide a portrait of the main actor or research participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Further, with a phenomenological lens (Van Manen, 1990), the scope of the study is focused on the meanings of the experience for the actor. Through this method, and in honoring a broad definition of education, this study contributes to the collective inquiry into the meaning of adventure for education.

To preview, in this work I provide an overview of the relevant literature on the topic and explain the methods utilized within this study before presenting findings through four themes: solitude and camaraderie; escape; challenge; and living life. I then summarize the significance of Simon's remarks, discuss how these findings intersect with the literature on adventure education and suggest a few new directions for inquiry.

Studies of the adventure experience

An adventure is 'a course of action which invites risk; a perilous or audacious undertaking the outcome of which is unknown' (Adventure, n.d.). There have been many studies of the adventure experience in outdoor contexts, which explore the experience of adventurers, the culture of adventure and the use of adventure for educational purposes. Although an exhaustive review of this literature is impractical in this study, an overview of several relevant studies grounds the study.

Scholars have inquired into adventure as both a societal and cultural phenomenon. Macfarlane's (2003) *Mountains of the Mind*, for instance, is a historical and autobiographical exploration of the allure and pursuit of mountains by people. He presented mountains as answering an imaginative need in the West to depart from the human-made world, as places where self-concepts are reshaped, and a 'sense of wonder' (p. 275) is awakened through sublime experiences (see also Dent, 2006). Zweig's (1974) *The Adventurer*, on the other hand, explores adventure from a hermeneutical perspective, delving into what adventure has been and has become through adventure literature. He positions adventure as an expression of the human condition that has been relegated as a cultural subset in the wake of domestication. Zweig notes that 'the adventurer's quest must be its own goal. ... [and] the adventurer's magnificence lies in the going itself' (1974, p. 252).

Although these works celebrate adventure, the culture of adventure has also been the subject of critique. The outdoor industry has been criticized for its culturally homogeneous composition as a predominantly white, male, privileged class activity (Norton & Hsieh, 2011; Warren, 2005). As Haluza-DeLay (1999) argued, the 'Wilderness is an elitist landscape—a privileged opportunity for only a few' (p. 136). Adventure has also been critiqued for commodifying places (Bell & Lyall, 2002) and experiences (Roberts, 2005, 2012), and as purporting hegemonic masculinity (Humberstone, 2000) and a problematic romantic relationship to nature (Hull, 2000).² Lynch, Moore, and Minchington (2012) have recently analyzed how these adventure cultures may manifest in

relationship to society across different countries, and others have continued to shape discourse to articulate the positioning of adventure in contemporary society (see Brown & Beames, 2016; Dymont & Potter, 2015).

Others have contributed to the literature of adventure experience through studying directly those who partake in these experiences. Csikszentmihalyi (1974) likened the experience of adventurers (among others) to flow—an optimal experience in which the demands of the immediate task match the capacities of the individual. As he explained, ‘On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3). This concept was further explored in Mitchell’s (1983) sociological study of mountaineers. To Mitchell, the criteria of flow were satisfied through the ‘mountain experience’, where ‘the climber’s concentration is heightened [and] focused on a narrower range of concerns—in space on problems literally at hand, and in time on the present’ (1983, p. 166). Discussing the value of climbing, Mitchell declared: ‘The reward of climbing is climbing itself. Reaching the summit is not the culmination of the climb but a waypoint marking the end of upward travel’ (1983, p. 155).

A seminal presentation of adventure in educational terms was Mortlock’s (1978, 1984) four stages of adventure. As he conceived it, the adventure participant was always in one of four stages: recreation/play;³ adventure; frontier adventure; and misadventure. In this model, the goal was the second and third stages, where ‘positive and satisfying human feelings’ (1978, p. 11) and the successful overcoming of difficult challenges reside. Mortlock (1984) presented the adventure experience as a means of development, vitality and happiness set in relationship with the natural environment. Priest and Martin (1985) united Mortlock’s stages of adventure with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1974) flow experience as a framework for the adventure experience paradigm, in which ‘peak adventure’ is the aim. Hopkins and Putnam (1993) similarly explain the adventure experience as one of growth through adversity.

These rationales of adventure experiences are supported with a substantial body of literature that has explored the outcomes of the adventure experience. Research has revealed that those participating in adventure programming may benefit from increases in self-efficacy, self-confidence or self-esteem (Berman & Davis-Berman, 1995; Ewert, 1983; Kolb, 1988; Sheard & Golby, 2006), empowerment (Shellman & Ewert, 2010), resilience (Beightol, Jeverson, Carter, Gray, & Gass, 2012; Neill & Dias, 2001), perception of peers (Gordon & Dodunski, 1999), attitude and academic achievement (Cason & Gillis, 1994) and subjective well-being (Durr, 2009). This research often utilizes correlational or quasi-experimental designs to discern results that may be generalized to similar adventure experiences and contexts.

Other studies have initiated the project of exploring the meanings participants of the adventure experience ascribe to those experiences. For instance, through photo-elicitation of 14 participants of an outdoor adventure experience, Loeffler (2004) identified three themes: connection to nature; connection to others; and self-discovery. Similarly, Davidson’s (2001) case study of four boys participating in an Australian outdoor education course revealed three themes: enjoyment of challenge; challenge as a learned activity; and developing the capacity to enjoy life through intrinsic motivation. These studies reveal themes around how these experiences can take on significance, not only as they produce effects in the participants, but as cultivating an understanding of nature, challenge, self and life well-lived.

Other studies by Martin and Leberman (2005), Hastie (1992), Kalisch, Bobilya, and Daniel (2011), Brewer and Sparkes (2011) and Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson (2000) have also taken seriously the longstanding call to inquire directly into the adventure experience. These studies, coupled with the abundance of work that notes the positive outcomes of adventure experiences (Fletcher, 1971; Gass, 1987, 1990; Gass, Garvey, & Sugerman, 2003) and the various conceptual models which explain the adventure experience, find confluence in the idea that ‘There is an increasingly commonsense acceptance that adventure education is a “good thing” and that it works’ (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993, p. 63). While such a sweeping endorsement may be problematic, there

is general consensus that many have found value within these experiences, and it is this value which sustains curiosity of adventure for educational purposes.

But the necessity for more research remains. As Davidson (2001) stated, 'A need has been recognised to develop research that explore the "process variables" of adventure experiences instead of focusing on measuring outcomes' (p. 12). This call has been echoed in the recent call for proposals in the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* (Allin & Humberstone, 2015). It may be that a degree of departure from familiar epistemological conventions can be helpful in maturing conceptions of the adventure experience for educational purposes.⁴ As Eisner (1994) analogized, 'The kinds of nets we know how to weave determine the kinds of nets we cast. These nets, in turn, determine the kinds of fish we catch' (p. 41).

This study builds on the body of literature outlined here through an illustration of what these experiences mean to one individual. Through phenomenological portraiture, this study complements and corroborates what is known of adventure with an arts-based research method in the hopes of better understanding what adventure might mean for education.

Methodology

This study is a phenomenological portraiture of one adventurer. Portraiture stems out of the field of arts-based research methodologies in the qualitative domain of inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Eisner, 1985, 1998). It has been utilized as a methodology of educational research for decades (see Chapman, 2007; Lightfoot, 1983) and continues to grow into new disciplines (Cope, Jones, & Hendricks, 2015; Hackman, 2002). Portraiture is an attempt to 'combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor' (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). It is 'an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections' (1997, p. 9). Accordingly, I aim to identify the goodness within the participant's experiences and responses, primarily 'concerned with documenting how the *subjects* or actors in the setting define goodness' (1997, p. 9; emphasis in original). But this is not without criticality. Rather, 'The nuanced search for goodness is really a search for a generous, balanced, probing perspective. It is a search for the truth—or for the complex and competing truths that combine to shape an authentic narrative' (1997, p. 146).

Given the research question, which inquires toward the essence of an experience, I couple the methodology of portraiture with a phenomenological lens of inquiry (Seidman, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological studies address the meaning or essence of a lived experience; the aim is to develop some understanding of that 'universal essence' (Creswell, 2012, p. 58) of the phenomenon of study. Van Manen (1990) explains phenomenology as follows:

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

Through phenomenological portraiture, I attend to both the individual and the meanings he expresses in composing a representation that showcases his truth concerning his adventure experiences. Through these activities, and in uncovering the meanings of this experience for one, this work contributes to collective understandings of the meanings of this experience for many, mindful of the idiosyncrasy of meaning-making (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Marton, 1981; McLaughlin & Heath, 1993; Phenix, 1964; Uhrmacher, 2002). In turn, the findings presented in this study will find varying relevance for those involved in the field of adventure education through 'naturalistic generalization' (Stake, 1995, p. 85). As Eisner (1998) notes, 'referential adequacy is tested not in abstractions removed from qualities, but in the perception and interpretation of the

qualities themselves' (p. 114). The aim here is 'the sensing of the universal in the particular' (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 80).

Main actor: Simon

The research participant in this study, 'Simon', is a 27-year-old, white, married, heterosexual, agnostic man. He is enrolled in an accelerated nursing program, and works part-time as a commercial window washer. He is an excellent technical rock climber, with notable ascents including The Nose of El Capitan, Ariana of Long's Peak and many other climbs up to 5.13+ in difficulty. He bears a prominent jaw-line beneath a well-groomed beard, and typically wears his shoulder-length hair pulled back behind his head. He carries a laid back disposition, speaks clearly and thoughtfully, and smiles easily.

I selected the research participant based on his experience with adventure (purposeful sampling) and my personal relationship and history with him (convenience sampling) (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). We have climbed many faces and peaks together. Although my relationship to Simon may raise concerns, having a personal history with the participant/actor also expedited the rapport-building process and aided in fostering the environment of trust and honesty that is critical to portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Further, knowing firsthand the kinds of adventurous experiences with which Simon engages was an additional reference to contextualize his responses.

Data collection

I conducted four interviews with Simon: the first three were structured on Seidman's (2006) phenomenological interview series in which participants: place the experience in personal context; describe the experience in detail; and derive and articulate the meanings of the experience. A fourth interview was conducted to review, explore and validate themes identified through preliminary data analysis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes. All transcription was performed by me immediately after each interview.

I also collected observational data of Simon while engaged in an adventurous experience with him climbing three desert towers in Utah, USA (Castleton Tower, The Rectory and Sister Superior). The nature of the activity prevented collecting data via fieldnotes, and therefore observations were recorded through photographs, videos and headnotes (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011).

Data analysis

Analysis was conducted with a commitment to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) five modes of analysis in portraiture, with attention to: repetitive refrains; metaphors; rituals; triangulation; and patterns. I analyzed data while in the field to direct further data collection, largely in the form of adapted interview questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Upon the completion of data collection, I reviewed the three interviews to identify 13 codes. Further analysis of the content within these codes revealed four themes (see [Appendix A](#)).

I utilized several techniques to maintain credibility through this process of analysis. I constantly referred to the data themselves for meaning, exercised reflexivity concerning my own biases and perceptions with peers (Barone, 2001) and validated and amended thematic findings through reviewing them with the research participant as a form of member-checking (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Because it is the actor's story which I hope to portray, that the story makes sense to him stands as the central mechanism of validity (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

A note on limitations

As a white, heterosexual man, Simon is of the cultural in-group in terms of adventure. Accordingly, the meanings he ascribes to the adventure experience are couched within this cultural background (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seidman, 2006) and therefore may have varied application to individuals of other backgrounds or worldviews. The aim here is not to purport Simon's truth as preeminent, but to explore and illustrate his version of truth in the hopes that this portrait reveals aspects of the adventure experience for educational purposes.

This study may also be critiqued for embracing the search for goodness as adorning rose-colored glasses and championing a romantic conception of adventure (see Hull, 2000). Much as others applying the lens of the critical theorist will find systemic inequities, cultural imperialism and other areas for improvement, those applying a lens of portraiture will find value and areas on which to build. Both perspectives are necessary for a nuanced understanding of adventure, and what it may contribute to education.

Finally, as a phenomenological portraiture, all findings outlined here are the result of my inquiry as artist/researcher in pursuit of these questions. Critiques that these findings are subject to my proclivities and sensibilities are critiques of the methodology itself. As I have noted, diversifying the methods utilized to inquire into adventure will result in a more robust understanding of what adventure can mean for education. To my knowledge, this is the first use of portraiture to contribute to these ends.

Findings

The methods outlined resulted in four themes: solitude and camaraderie; escape; challenge; and living life. Although these themes are interrelated, I review each separately and include reference to excerpts from my interviews with Simon for referential evidence before discussing the broader significance of these ideas. Further, in the tradition of portraiture, I aim to balance the empirical with the aesthetic through provision of an artistic rendering of Simon's meaning-making process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997):

Simon shifts apprehensively in the seat of my truck, admittedly an odd place to conduct an interview, but a functional and authentic setting for exploring adventurous experiences. He appears relaxed and comfortable, answering my questions slowly and thoughtfully. His unabashedly long pauses stand in stark contrast to his carefully enunciated responses. His answers reek with authenticity, and come across with authority. Simon is an adventurer in every sense of the word, and his reflections of adventure stem from hundreds of experiences, encompassing broad conceptions of adventure: from that of expert climber thousands of feet above the ground, to child running through the woods at night.

Theme 1: solitude and camaraderie

Running throughout Simon's responses were notations of the cognitive and physical space surrounding these experiences, which were categorized by a sense of remoteness or distinct separation from normal social life. Simon uses the term 'solitude' to describe this necessary element of the adventure experience:

I guess the big piece of adventure is the solitude. Or just having like a couple other people there doing it with you. ... You know, you're out there alone, and I really liked that.

Although solitude, and being 'alone' in some sense, is an important element of the experience, also important to Simon was the idea of brotherhood or camaraderie. He notes how different adventure experiences and different degrees of solitude and brotherhood can facilitate varied feelings and meanings:

I've had really great adventures with other people where you have more the brotherhood or camaraderie, but I've also had adventures by myself, and they're distinctly different. ... I've had some solo adventures that were

extremely meaningful to me. And, you know, maybe they're just different. Like some of those solo adventures ... You know, they're close to ... well ... I'd say they are spiritual in a lot of ways.

Simon identifies the inherent spiritual nature of solo experiences in the wilderness. But feelings of solitude did not necessarily stem from being alone. To the contrary, Simon noted the importance of sharing the experience with others and, in turn, noted a form of group solitude. To Simon, these experiences of aloneness can be shared experiences; the group is together, but as a group, they are alone in the wilderness. Although solitude and brotherhood can be considered in paradoxical tension, for Simon they are not contradictory. In his own words:

Even if you are doing adventures with other people, solitude more pertains to being away from, like, pressures and so forth: societal pressures; tasks that you have to do for a job; or just sort of those connections in the network you formed. You're not around an overwhelming number of people, and you're not subject to pressures and expectations. The few people that you are there having these adventures with are allies. They are part of your team and you're working toward the same thing. Those could be seen as contradictory, but I don't see them that way.

In this light, being alone together is an experience that facilitates a kinship among those sharing the adventure; a kind of brotherhood facilitated through the shared purpose and shared objectives within the group. Again, in his own words:

Because you go through these *big experiences* with people, it brings you together. It's like shared experience, and it's important experience. And you're working toward a communal goal. It's a brotherhood-like thing. That's important to me. (Emphasis added)

This community of solitude is not only in physical remoteness, but also a form of mental hiatus. For Simon, the setting serves not only as one of enjoyment in its own right, but also an evasion from the stressors of life; solitude is the destination for escape.

Theme 2: escape

Simon discussed at length the notion of escape as a central tenet of his adventure experiences. In fact, he was able to trace the idea of escape all the way back to his earliest adventures—running through the woods at night as a child:

I always liked to be outside at night, so I'd always run around at night with other people. ... Running through the woods is just sort of a romantic way, in my mind, of escaping.

Escape continued as an aspect of adventure experiences for Simon in secondary school as well:

We'd ditch school and go climb for a day and no one else would be around ... [and we'd] have the day to be outside, kind of just running around in the woods, basically.

To this day, Simon continues to see adventure as an escape from the stresses and demands of everyday life. 'It's not like when you're at home and you're stressed because you're getting pulled in eight different directions', and therefore it serves as a physical and mental respite from everyday responsibilities. In this light, adventure, for Simon, is as much an opportunity to escape civilization as it is a chance to escape his own mind. He finds this rare form of consciousness through preoccupation in an activity that not only facilitates a kind of distraction, but also demands his full attention:

It's a chance for us to get away, you know, [from] the stresses of what we have going on right now, and just think about the various relatively simple kind of linear things we have to do. ... So yeah, it's a very needed break from everything right now.

This opportunity to escape is among the most important things about these experiences for Simon. When asked broadly about the significance of these experience for his own life, he responded:

I think they're significant to me in a lot of other ways ... for many different reasons. You know, to get away from my normal life stressors. That's important, that's significant. ... Climbing, to me, is a way to maintain health. It keeps me physically, mentally fit in a lot of ways.

Simon also noted how the form of challenge in adventure was, to an extent, the vehicle of escape:

You have a very concrete task with very tangible steps toward it. And that's *all you do*, like you're focused on it 100 percent. (emphasis in original)

The adventure experience not only physically removes Simon from his normal social spheres, but the demands of the experience require his full attention in the present; a physical and mental escape made possible through challenge.

Theme 3: challenge

Simon spoke at length about the importance of challenge in the adventure experience. Initially he characterized the simplistic nature of the challenges, noting the concrete goals and linear process by which those goals are completed. Reflecting on our objective, to climb several desert towers in a day, Simon outlined the simplicity of our task: 'Like, climb tower one. That entails, *this*. Do the thing. Come down. Live. Climb tower two. Eat some food. Drink some water' (emphasis in original).

Although challenges in adventure are often characterized as physical tasks, Simon also noted the mental difficulties associated with these experiences. Again, reflecting on our objective:

With testing ourselves, it's a physical challenge for me to go out and climb five towers. Which feels good, you know, [I am] into exercise as a release. But then it's mental challenge because it's a lot to think about. Climbing 20 pitches, to do all that hiking, to be run-out in the desert, [and] it's not my most comfortable style of climbing. So, all of that, and all the learning that goes along with that. And I think testing yourself and the linear challenge kind of go together for me because I'm a really goal-oriented person.

Seemingly in an entirely different vein, Simon noted how he has always been a curious person, and explained how adventure experiences satisfy many of his curious sensibilities. Initially, he noted how his curiosity manifests as a desire to see new places and environments:

[Adventure] satisfies a lot of my curiosity. I was always extremely curious growing up. I'd crawl away as soon as I could, just to check things out. ... I always have to check things out. This is a great way to do that. It takes you to a lot of different places and you get to see a lot of really cool things.

But Simon's curiosity is not only for seeing new places. It is primarily an intrapersonal curiosity, impossibly intertwined with Simon's notion of challenge:

It's a curiosity not just for what's around you, but like, what your limits are, so what's internal too. So if you're really exerting yourself, you can see. You can test how far you can really go or can push yourself. That's a form of curiosity, to me, too. How functional my body can be to me. Where do those limits lie? And that's really cool to find, and exceptionally cool when you move beyond what you thought you were.

Simon defines a challenge as when 'it's difficult to the point that you might not be able to do it'. Implicit within this definition is the notion of uncertainty and, in the context of adventure, risk. Simon derives further meaning from this inclusion of risk in adventure: 'Like if you take risk, it's helping you connect to that experience.'⁵

Simon's understanding of these challenging experiences is further complicated by other requisite conditions of the challenge, and how engaging in these challenges relates to his life outside of adventure. As he explained, 'I can't have the experience or adventure dictated to me, I need to make it my own.' Through ownership of the challenge therein, the adventure experience can serve as an allegory of trials in life. Again, Simon explains:

It's sort of a really small, distilled version of learning and struggling with bigger things than life. Like, we plan out this trip, we have our objectives, you set those goals, and then kind of like, prepare for them ahead of time. And then you get to this trip and you try to accomplish them. It's kind of like, pass-fail.

...

It's like a test of how much you worked, and how much you lived up to those goals, and how much you learned along the way. I think for me I derive a lot of accomplishment or satisfaction from these experiences.

In summary, for Simon, the challenge must come from some intrinsic source, it involves some element of uncertainty, the task is usually linear and concrete, and the challenge tests him both mentally and physically. This testing satisfies his curiosity of personal agency, and the activity of working toward and through these goals is an allegory for trials outside of adventure. Although Simon's conception of challenge within the adventure experience is complex, he summarizes his feelings of challenge simply:

I guess above all else, anything worth doing is hard, in my mind. If it's just easy you can forget about it, it's forgettable. I like testing myself.

Theme 4: living life

Simon's responses to this point have clarified three major meanings ascribed to the adventure experience: it has elements of solitude and camaraderie; it is an escape; and it is a challenge. A fourth and final theme relates to the more ontological meanings he ascribes to these experiences: that these experiences are meaningful in their own right. In his own words, the adventure experience 'makes me feel like I'm living. Otherwise I'm just kind of sitting.'

Elements of this 'living' were noted when recalling images of the adventure experience. Simon identified images of the natural landscape as salient not for appreciation of nature as something outside of himself, but as an interaction. As he put it: 'You can feel the magnitude of it beyond just pictures.' Also, later: 'The environment sort of surrounds you, you notice your place in it ... I guess the more aware you are of your environment, the more you connect with it.' In this regard, the natural environment is seen as one of interplay, rather than a passive observation or appreciation. Simon notes that interaction with the natural environment renders these experiences memorable and therefore significant. He elaborated on this idea of memorable and meaningful experiences in adventure, introducing the concept of novelty as a reagent for memory:

The goals are unique, the outcomes are unique, and so the experiences are unique. ... So when you do a big trip like that, or an adventure, and you notice all these things that are new and novel, it makes the experience more memorable and perhaps meaningful, in my mind.

Because they are novel, they are engaging, memorable and significant. This engagement in the experience inspires a wide range of emotions:

There are times where you feel really alive and super happy. Some of the best times of your life. Too, there are times when you are afraid or really miserable.

Simon recognized how emotional engagement both branches from, and serves as an active element within, the experience. Speaking of fear, he explained how this emotional engagement facilitates full attention or full presence:

[Fear] can make you really focus on the situation. If you're scared, it can bring you to the present. You're extremely present with what's happening at that moment. Or at least that's how I deal with it. ... You're usually not that plugged into what you're doing at any given moment. And so you're engaged in your senses, your perceptions. It just makes you very, very, very in tune with what's happening.

Simon repeatedly reflected on the value of these experiences as they serve to constitute his own life, and believed that his lasting memory of these experiences is evidence of their significance:

'When we were climbing, I remember what we did, and I'll remember that for a long time.' Indeed, weeks after our trip Simon could still recall episodes of the adventure, including how he felt and what he experienced with vivid detail:

I can still remember how it feels. ... Like, how tired I was. Or how the rock felt. The texture of the rock. How much it hurt when you had to dig into painful jams. ... Yeah. Yeah I'd say those [memories] stick with you.

A final excerpt distills the importance of these experiences to Simon, who ultimately discloses that these 'bigger experiences' are the very point of living:

Simon: It's a new novel experience. And that's important. It's kind of like ... how life seems to go so fast. ... When you have those new experiences, that's how you make little chunks of your life more memorable. So just having those, that's the point. Is to have those experiences.

Ben: It's the point ... It's the point of what?

Simon: *It's the point of life.* The rest is the day-to-day, mundane. I eat, live, work, pay rent and stuff. Like you do those [things], they're important, but that's not the goal. That's not the point. *I focus my life toward those bigger experiences.* (Emphases added)

Discussion: adventures as big experiences

The discussed themes, although presented separately, are perhaps more interrelated than they are discrete. For example, in the following quotation Simon ties the goodness within the adventure experience to presence, solitude and escape:

There's no expectations there, there's no pressures, you're just kind of alone, you're very present. You know what's happening in the moment is what's important. Your mind's not dwelling on other things. Which feels great.

Simon's tendency to see the experience holistically, and not as thematically disjointed, and the ontological perspective offered through some of Simon's responses (such as 'It's the point of life' and 'I focus my life toward these bigger experiences') may push the field in new directions. Simon describes the size of these experiences, not in relation to common metrics, but as a descriptor of significance. He speaks to the amount of space these experiences occupy in his mind and life, and by measures of personal importance and meaning, to Simon, adventures are enormous.

Although the aim of this inquiry pertains to what meanings adventurers ascribe to the adventure experience, Simon's responses also address the question of why he engages in these experiences. This explanation of what drives him toward adventure situates the adventure experience as a focal point in his life and worldview. In other words, among Simon's many answers to questions of meaning was simply the value of these experiences per se. For Simon, the answer to the question of 'What?' is 'Yes'. This transition from the synnonetic to the synoptic realm of meaning (Phenix, 1964) reifies that these experiences, for some, are pursued for their intrinsic worth. This shift and the other meanings Simon ascribes to adventure have implications for contemporary rationales of the adventure experience for educational purposes.

New directions for adventure education

Illustrating the meanings ascribed to the adventure experience better positions adventure education scholars and practitioners to articulate the educational value of these experiences. Through phenomenological portraiture, this study has been one such effort to characterize the meanings ascribed to the adventure experience with a broad conception of education. The findings outlined both support previous studies in adventure education scholarship as well as suggest a few new directions for adventure education.

Some of the findings revealed in this study—such as challenge, solitude and camaraderie—are prevalent in the adventure experience literature (see Bunyan, 2011; Davidson, 2001; Ewert, 1983; Haluza-DeLay, 1999; Hastie, 1992; Kalisch et al., 2011; Loeffler, 2004). This study adds a personal

perspective to these themes through Simon's explanation of what challenge means to him, and why he perceives challenge as a critical element of the adventure experience. Simon similarly adds fresh perspectives on solitude and camaraderie, and his perception of the two together—rather than as separate components of markedly different experiences—is a new bend on these concepts. Solitude and camaraderie are often noted in the adventure experience, but they are seldom viewed in conjunction or as non-contradictory. This may stand as a call to evaluate what is necessary to facilitate feelings of solitude (Bobilya, Kalisch, McAvoy, & Jacobs, 2005) and the role solitude can play in facilitating camaraderie in adventure education.

Other themes presented in this study, such as escape and living life, are less prevalent in the literature of adventure education, and this study further maps the terrain of these more ontological meanings. Simon's notation of full presence shows strong similarities with what Csikszentmihalyi (1974, 1990) identified as flow experience, and the inclusion of escape as a central aspect of the experience for Simon may compel revisitation to Darst and Armstrong (1980) and Pohl et al. (2000). Future research may also explore the desire or outlets for escape in other contexts, countries and cultures. Further, the extent to which an experience of flow or escape may be considered an educational experience is a topic worthy of exploration.

More broadly, the meanings Simon has outlined are predominantly focused on the experience itself, rather than on the outcomes of the experience. These 'bigger experiences', for Simon, seemingly supersede any outcomes that they might produce. This perception is in tension with the contention that adventure experiences should be considered educational only on the grounds that they produce outcomes outside the immediate experience (see Bailey, 1999; Berry, 2011). However, as I noted at the outset, the relationship of the adventure experience to education depends on the paradigm of education espoused by those drawing this connection. If education is considered solely as a preparation for future living, such as career and college readiness (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016), rationales of adventure education will focus on the attainment of knowledge or skills toward these prefigured ends. Conversely, if aims of happiness (see Noddings, 2003) or meaning (see Eisner, 1985) are considered viable educational pursuits, then those dimensions of the adventure experience will receive attention in adventure education accordingly. Hence, an interrogation of how adventure education scholars and practitioners define education may also prove a productive line of inquiry. To me, it seems that adopting a broader conception of education will more readily allow educational virtues to emerge through the adventure experience.

In conclusion

In this study, I have provided a portrait of an adventurer, Simon, and the meanings he ascribes to his adventure experiences. This portrait challenges the notion of conceptualizing adventure experience in purely utilitarian terms: as a means to ends outside the experience. The adventure experience may not only facilitate growth or positive outcomes, but may also stand as an experience worthy of pursuing in its own right. This brings seminal rationales for the adventure experience (see Macfarlane, 2003; Zweig, 1974) back into the fold of adventure education discourse. As Ullman (1947) noted of adventure experiences, they are among 'those rare and precious human activities that [we] perform for their own sake, and for that alone' (p. 29). Also, as Dewey (1916) contended of education, 'living has its own intrinsic quality and ... the business of education is with that quality' (p. 51).

The meanings ascribed to adventure will continue to transpire idiosyncratically, and the corresponding educational value of these experiences will be personalized in accordance. But to Simon, adventure is the engagement in an authentic challenge removed from the constraints and responsibilities of society, often in partnership with a select few individuals, and these experiences are the very point and purpose of living in that they are memorable and meaningful. To simply

consider these experiences as a means to ends would be to misinterpret something fundamental about adventure: these bigger experiences, in Simon's words, can be 'the whole point of life'.

Notes

1. Pseudonym.
2. Brymer and Gray (2009), on the other hand, liken the relationship between the extreme sports athlete and the natural environment as akin to a 'dance'. As they explain, athletes in their study 'described their experiences as being in harmony with nature and suggested that the natural world provides a context for self-learning' (p. 146).
3. Mortlock (1978, 1984) changed the name of this stage across publications of this model.
4. The contribution of qualitative methodologies to the development of knowledge has been acknowledged in both sport and exercise science (see Gratton & Jones, 2010; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) as well as education (Eisner, 1998).
5. See West and Allin (2010) for a more thorough exploration of the meanings of risk in this context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Appendix A. Codes and themes

Code	Theme
Escape	Escape
Brotherhood and camaraderie	Solitude and camaraderie
Solitude	
Common purpose	
Challenges are linear, simple and concrete	Challenge
Challenge is physical and mental	
Testing self through adventure	
Challenge satisfies curiosity	
Risk and uncertainty	
Experiences that are memorable	Living life
Being in the present moment	
Experiences with nature	
Living life	