

A Qualitative Exploration of the Significant Life Experiences of Pro-Environmental Outdoor Adventure Education Practitioners: A Pilot Study.

Research Project Reflection Paper

The purpose of this reflective paper is to critically review the process of conducting a small-scale research project. The chosen area of research being an exploration of the Significant Life Experiences of pro-environmental outdoor adventure education practitioners. I have chosen to take a phased approach to this reflection, pausing in turn, to reflect upon four distinct phases of the project. Firstly, starting with the research design phase where the epistemological alignment of the methodology was aligned with the identified phenomena to be studied. Secondly a critically reflexive lens shall be turned upon the data gathering phase, with a critical reflection of the interview process. Thirdly, this reflexive scrutiny has also been cast upon the data analysis and interpretation phase, with particular attention placed upon the transcription of data prior to the generation of themes. Lastly, the final phase of the research process, reporting the findings, has been used as a concluding opportunity to identify how and/or whether the research questions have been answered. Notably where possible, the vital ethical considerations made have been incorporated into the discussion.

As an outdoor adventure education practitioner, I found the work of Mees et al (2021) intriguing, as it echoed my opinion that for outdoor education practitioners reflecting upon their decisions, experiences, and actions becomes somewhat second nature. Fortuitously, this has been highlighted in a recent study by Porter and Couper (2021), where an autoethnographic pedagogical approach, was proposed as a reflective methodology to determine the pro-environmental awareness of outdoor education students. A study sharing similarities with the pilot study being discussed in this paper. Having a preference as a practitioner to favour “Experiential Learning” (Kolb, 1984) as pedagogy for my practice. I found myself relying upon the experiential nature of this research experience to reflect upon my actions. Leading me to view the phases of a research project as being a veritable minefield of possibilities to stumble into the trap of introducing bias into the research process. To confront this, I have where possible looked to identify myself as a “research instrument” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 303). Navigating the complex terrain of research whilst striving to find a level of equilibrium. Balancing in one hand the acknowledgement that I am an essential data gathering tool, whilst in the other, the subjectivity (Olive, 2020) to be self-aware of my influences both positive and negative upon the research process (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011).

Research design phase

As this project was designed it was aligned with a qualitative research methods paradigm. An approach deliberately aligned with previous significant life experience research methodologies (Tanner, 1980; Chawla, 1999; Ewart, 2005; Howell and Allen 2019; Wigglesworth and Heintzman,

2021). Chawla (2006) identifies the predominantly qualitative approaches of significant life experience research as being fit for purpose when its “interpretive powers” (Chawla, 2006, p. 360) are steered towards exploring the experiences attributed to the development of environmental behaviours. A stark contrast to the preceding environmental education research base, predominantly being of quantitative nature (Marcinkowski, 1993). Critically however, whilst being an advocate of significant life experience research, Chawla (2006) outlined an issue regarding the validity of a fundamental component of the research field. “Research into significant life experiences is only as valid as the autobiographical memory on which it is based” (Chawla, 2006, p. 363). Stating that to ensure validity, a researcher must be prepared to skilfully create a positive research environment, capable of facilitating the disclosure of appropriate life events accurately, in depth and related to the line of enquiry. The methodological approach of utilising semi structured interviews is commonplace in qualitative research (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011; Silverman, 2013; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Telford, 2020). Ethically I was aware that the methodology of exploring the phenomena by conducting interviews, that deliberately requested participants to disclose retrospective events could lead to the disclosure of sensitive information, that may be distressing for the participant or may be of a nature that I would not feel qualified to witness. Germeten (2013), experienced similar ethical considerations when walking the thin line between being an interviewer or becoming a therapist, whilst conducting life history research with a cohort of adults with severe learning difficulties. Consequentially this ethical consideration did not come to light during any of the interviews. However, I felt comfort in the knowledge that the informed consent form had clearly identified to participants that they could halt the interview at any point. Additionally, that the intended line of questioning in the interview framework would help provide the structure to elicit appropriate responses. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), confirm this approach to be appropriate, particularly as such questions “have to be negotiated and worked out in relation to the specifics of the situation” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p. 235-236).

Data Gathering Phase

To successfully explore the phenomenon, it was necessary to recruit four participants, who were both active outdoor adventure education practitioners and who aligned their outdoor educational philosophy with being pro-environmental. As the field of significant life experience research was evolving, Tanner (1998) confronted the research field with a paper indicating that many emerging studies were not studying the right subjects. Somewhat alarmingly, considering my research design was based around such educators, he indicated that environmental educators would not be the ones to save the planet. Tanner firmly held the belief that it would be “informed, responsible, environmental activists who will do so” (Tanner, 1998, p. 400). Reading this paper, and its somewhat inflammatory

words, whilst doing a preliminary background literature review, I found myself instantly on the defensive and somewhat offended. However, it led me to a pivotal realisation.

I am an outdoor adventure environmental educator. In that instant the concept of reflexivity struck home. Am I starting out on this research journey from a stance riddled with bias? Even more so, am I subconsciously pursuing this line of inquiry to justify my own values, beliefs, and personal agenda? I looked to the literature in search of justification. In doing so it was possible to identify that a perfect storm could form. When pursuing attention focusing adventurous activities, they can take you to dramatic natural locations, immersing you in the splendours of the natural world (Roberts, 2021). Supported by a commonly held viewpoint (Hill, 2012; Eigenschenk, 2019) that outdoor adventurous activities present a wellspring of learning opportunities, with the capability to promote the development of pro-environmental behaviours. Critically, however, the storm is yet to reach its full potential. Prince (2017) identifies outdoor adventure educators as being key in constructing and nurturing such educational adventurous experiences. Without an environmentally focused outdoor adventure educator present, vital powerful learning opportunities may be missed, and the resulting catalyst for change lost. So, surely it is imperative for us to understand the fundamental experiences that have contributed to an outdoor adventure educator evolving a pro-environmental attitude, coupled with the knowledge and motivation to educate and inspire others. To enable us to better understand how we adapt our pedogeological approaches to hopefully nurture a greater density of pro-environmental practitioners in the sector.

“It is normally expected that participants’ voluntary informed consent to be involved in a study will be obtained at the start of the study” (BERA, 2018, p. 9). Two different versions of a plain language and consent letter were created and sent to the two participant groups. Humberstone and Riddick (2020) clearly outline the ethical importance of informing your participants of the projects purpose, its risks, and benefits along with the vital knowledge that they could opt out of the process at any point. I entered the data gathering phase confident that the research information letter had done this. However, whilst critically reviewing the transcriptions with a reflexive lens. It was possible to note that I may have been too vague or not expressed the intent of the research project in plain language effectively. Displayed in figure 1, are the notes made whilst manually transcribing R1’s interview.

Figure 1:

I1: *Well, moving on a little bit from that, then. Now in your current work, how much of that work do you feel is to do with encouraging people to adapt or change their environmental behaviours.*

R1: *Oh, good question. {Long pause....}*

{Research issue – this seemed to catch R1 off guard – it seemed R1 was not expecting questions regarding environmentalism}

This lack of clarity may have come from my not wishing to reveal too much of the intentions of the project to the participants, in an attempt to not skew the results. Mukungu (2017) identifies the importance of gaining informed consent whilst also expressing the intent of the project in plain language, to ensure participants are aware of what the project entails. Fortunately, having transcribed this interview before contacting the next participant, I was provided the opportunity to reflect upon this. Consequently, I endeavoured to explain the purpose of the interviews in more detail in correspondence with the participants prior to their interviews.

The semi-structured interviews utilised a series of questions from a purposefully written framework (see appendix 1). By designing a set of scaffolding questions my intention was twofold. Firstly, to standardise the path each interview took, ensuring the desired topics were covered. Secondly, by pre planning the questions I would hopefully ask open questions empowering the respondents to be able to elaborate upon their answers. This valuable tool (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011) took longer than expected to create, with a multitude of facets in its construction. Structuring the principal questions in a manner that enabled open responses whilst remaining vigilant for the introduction of bias was complex and upon review of the interview transcripts still required refinement. Alongside the principal questions I had included possible probing questions with the intent of encouraging further responses. The following excerpt in figure 2 is an extract from a transcript where I used probing questions to delve deeper into a certain recollection.

Figure 2:

I1: *Do you feel that, that college experience, was a good springboard for your future career.*

{Research error - Leading question}

R1: *Absolutely, yeah.* **{Research error - Leading question - leads to a closed answer}**

I1: *What was it about that other that the friends you made, was their anything else about that college experience that you found inspiring, or you found really gripped you.*

R1: *I found the college lecturers quite inspiring; they were really fun to be around and really enthusiastic about the course and about their careers.*

{I could have gone into greater depth here about these individuals and their influence}

It became apparent whilst transcribing, that regardless of having listed potential probing questions in the framework, it was still possible to not ask the respondents to elaborate further upon recollections that could have provided intriguing insights. Additionally, at times some probing questions only encouraged relatively closed answers. Whilst in contrast, it transpired that the use of the timeline preparation task was a very useful tool for encouraging more extended answers. A viewpoint shared by (Adriansen 2012; Germeten, 2013; Pell et al, 2020). By simply asking. *What have you noted on your timeline?* Respondents appeared to often recall extended narratives in relatively ordered and chronological ways. A characteristic noted by Adriansen (2012) as being common within the field of life history research, where timeline interviews are commonplace. Providing me the opportunity to listen more closely to the recollections of respondents and ask more natural and fluid questions related

to what had been recalled. Pell et al (2020) reported that participants using the timeline interview method would seemingly to some degree, take control of the interview eliciting fuller responses.

Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) expressed being an adaptable and competent communicator as vital attributes of a qualitative interviewer. Furthermore, interviewing has been identified as skill that “takes time to master” (Adriansen, H. 2012, p. 43). An aspect I had not considered prior to my first attempt. Listening back to myself, asking at times confusing and rambling questions was a stark reminder that the relationship between researcher and respondent is very different to my previous interviewing experiences of employer and future employee or a tutor and student. I found the terrain of a semi-structured interview difficult to navigate. Controlling my eagerness to ask further probing questions, in search of a desired answer and quelling the feelings of frustration as the interview went off topic. Whilst knowing that intervening at the wrong moment would be contrary to the advice from Corbin and Morse (2003). Who advise the researcher to empower a respondent to express themselves as the “participants are telling their stories” (Corbin and Morse, 2003, p. 339). Hill, Morse and Dymont (2020) warn that researchers should not assume that every interview will invariably become a conversation. As the data gathering phase progressed, I consciously looked to lean upon my experience as a facilitator to “empower participants” (Heron, 1999, p.1) making the process easier for the respondents to enter a reflective dialog.

Conducting the interviews over telephone, developed curiosity as to what I may have been missing by not hosting face to face interviews, considerations discussed in detail by Shuy (2001). The telephone interviews were a deliberate decision made to mitigate the transmission risk of covid-19, whilst also minimising the environmental impact by reducing unnecessary travel. Howlett (2021) discusses the emergence of using video conferencing technology to conduct interviews due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Highlighting the benefits of being able to reach a wider selection of participants, whilst still nurturing effective interactions between researcher and participant. Although, (Gray et al, 2020; Oliffe et al, 2021) express caution of such technologies becoming the dominant norm, without due consideration of the participant cohort and the phenomena being studied.

Data analysis and interpretation phase

The interpretation of the data took a theoretical thematic analysis approach, utilising the 6 stages of analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial stage of familiarising myself with the data, was predominantly done by listening to and transcribing the interviews. Silverman (2013) outlines, that once the rich, potentially thought-provoking data has been gathered via interview it is typically transcribed. My research proposal did nothing to hide my initial contempt for this aspect of a research project. I referred to the transcription of interviews as being somewhat binary. A statement that upon

reflection undervalued a key aspect of the data interpretation phase. Cibils (2019) identifies numerous intricate decisions that could influence the research process. Furthermore, stating that it is common for researchers not to identify such decisions, when describing the transcription process in their methods. Additionally, Cibils (2019) discusses the benefit of adding additional notes during transcription. Instinctively noting the “features in the participants speech” (Cibils, 2019, p. 1135). Features such as the flow of the conversation and tone of voice of the respondent during varied types of responses. Considering the expectation to reflect upon this research process, I deliberately chose to manually transcribe half the interviews and use transcription software for the remainder. Unknowingly, I found myself following Cibils’s (2019) lead in making additional notes whilst transcribing, noting intriguing themes and areas for improvement.

Somewhat surprisingly, I found myself preferring to manually transcribe rather than use software driven transcriptions. I found the automatic transcripts confusing and quite inaccurate at times, requiring just as much time to organise them into coherent conversations. Finding this process frustratingly slow, confusing, and disjointed. Resulting in less detailed additional notes, and less connection with the data. Observations mirrored by (Johnson, 2011; Evers, 2011). Critically however, the automatic transcriptions brought the potential for anonymisation errors. By comparison when manually transcribing it was straightforward to apply the different anonymised codes in a logical ordered fashion. In the field of life history research Mukungu (2017), debates at length the intricacies of using pseudonyms in interview transcripts. Balancing the essential ethical consideration of providing confidentiality via the anonymisation of names, locations, and organisations. Whilst empowering fuller participation in the process, by suggesting that in life history research it may be beneficial for participants to choose their own pseudonym to be able to identify themselves in the results.

The stage of generating themes took the form of theoretical thematic analysis, as the initial coding intentionally followed that of Tanners (1980) work. Tanner’s original coding provided convenient foundations for the generation of contemporary themes based on the responses from the 4 participants. Following this, I endeavoured to apply a “latent level” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84) of interpretation of the themes. Interpretations that looked to explore the deeper socio-cultural influences within the respondents’ recalled experiences. “We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 305). The social constructivist stance that I took with the interpretation of the data was somewhat derived from a fundamental understanding, that the lived experiences of the respondents are inexplicably intertwined within the socio-cultural influences of their own existence. Therefore, with a critically reflexive lens whilst contemplating future research in this field. I am aware that my future interpretation of respondent’s experiences will require me to gather additional information,

surrounding their personal backgrounds and additional data regarding their environmental attitudes. One such method could be the use of a validated environmental attitudes questionnaire, such as the “Environmental Attitudes Inventory” (Milford and Duckitt, 2010, p. 82). An inventory measure, specifically constructed to interpret the multitude of factors involved in environmental attitudes. Chawla (2001; 2006) advocates the use of a mixed methods approach. Calling for more exploratory methods within the field of Significant life experience research, such as participant background questionnaires and observations combined with naturalistic experiments with deliberately constructed cohorts.

Reporting the findings

It feels prudent to conclude my reflections on this small-scale research project by summarising its effectiveness in answering the three questions posed in my research proposal. Firstly, commonality was found in the significant life experiences recalled by participants. The commonly utilised methodology of interviewing participants produced intriguing results. The life significant influences of interacting with nature via the medium of adventurous activities, whilst supported by parents and outdoor groups, emerged as common themes throughout the analysis. The alignment of the study to a qualitative paradigm nested neatly with previous work in the field. Which was highlighted in the similarities found when looking to answer the second question. Whether the commonalities discovered aligned with previous findings. Tanner’s (1980) original coding was used as a thematic basis for analysis, when applied in conjunction with contemporary thematic analysis methods it was apparent that similarities could be found. Thirdly, it would be indulgent to imply that the anecdotal evidence, regarding the effectiveness of the preparatory timeline task is enough, to definitively state that this is the ideal methodology for data gathering in this context. The flaw in the analysis of its effectiveness, lay less with the methodology, rather more with my plan to interpret its results, being far too subjective. However, my reflections upon the experience provide the motivation to explore and experiment further with this methodology in a future research project. Quite possibly when combined in a mixed methods approach with additional ethnographic data gathering tools. The experience of conducting this small-scale project has been immensely beneficial. Notably the opportunity to cast a reflexive lens upon the process has enabled numerous reflections and realisations that I am confident will develop my competence as a researcher and outdoor adventure environmental educator.

Word Count: 3051 words

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Appendix 1.

Interview Questions Framework

1. How long would you say you have been actively participating in outdoor adventurous activities?
2. At what point did this start to become a profession, ie. How long have you been working in the outdoor adventure education sector?
3. What do you think drew you to this type of work?
4. How much of your work do you feel is connected to encouraging people to change their environmental behaviours?
5. Looking back through your life, what experiences do you think lead to this development of an environmental adventure education focus?

Probe... Can you pinpoint a specific moment in time or was it more of a series of events?

Probe... Length of time? – Regularity?

6. Do you feel that there were any particular people who influenced you during these experiences?

Probe... What relation were they to you?

Probe... What was it about these/these person/s or organisations that inspired or connected with you?

Probe... Was there something specific about the way the experiences were created?

7. What was it about these experiences that you attribute to this enviro focus?

Additional Question

8. If you are happy to, please can you recount your early childhood experiences of play?

Probe... How old were you during this time?

Probe... Where was this, what type of place was this?

Probe... Who were you with?