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The Meaning of Adventurous Activities for 'Women in the Outdoors'

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Abstract

Adventurous activities are growing in popularity as a form of leisure and recreation, yet many non-participants find it difficult to understand what motivates people to seek out situations in which there is an element of danger and risk. This research examines the meanings of long-term participation in outdoor adventure for women working in education. A biographical method was employed to explore narratives generated through life story interviews that related to the nature and impact of the women's adventure participation. Key themes focused on the significance of adventurous activities, experiences of fear, and relationships in the outdoors. The women in this research emphasised the benefits, values and importance of adventurous activities, and indicated ways in which their participation had influenced all aspects of their lives. They placed particular significance on time for themselves away from everyday life which they associated with feelings of rejuvenation and calm. When describing their experiences in the outdoors the women reported unusually high levels of fear, and placed particular value on shared experiences which often overshadowed aspects such as physical challenge.

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Introduction

The outdoor adventure environment is in the main seen as a male domain and although women's participation is increasing (Nolan & Priest, 1994), they continue to be in the minority. This is a factor which can deter other women from becoming involved. Additionally, decisions made by women to participate in adventurous activities take place within a system of opportunities and constraints, many of which arise out of gender role socialisation (Loeffler, 1997). Although women have featured increasingly in adventure literature (Neill, 1997), and some consideration has been given to their experiences of adventure (Humberstone & Collins, 1998), little has been written about the meanings of adventure for experienced women participants. This research examines the meanings of long-term participation in adventurous activities for women working in education. In exploring aspects of their lives, it seeks to gain an insight into their reasons for maintaining a high level of commitment and an understanding of what they perceive the value and significance of their adventure participation to be.

Review of Literature

Although different definitions of adventure can be found in the literature (see for example Miles & Priest, 1990; Mortlock, 1994; Priest, 1999) they are consistent in referring to activities where there is an uncertainty of outcome (Miles & Priest, 1990), real or apparent risk or danger (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989), and the necessity for participants to apply their personal competence—which might be physical, mental, emotional—to overcome the challenge and resolve the uncertainty (Priest, 1999). Perhaps of particular significance is Mortlock's (1994, p. 19) contention that adventure is

individual and a "state of mind". As long as an activity is *seen* as having the potential for harm or loss (which might relate to the physical, but could also relate to the social, psychological or spiritual) then adventure may be experienced. One aspect over which definitions of adventure do vary is in their reference to the necessity for a natural environment. Foley, Frew & McGillivray, (2003) compare traditionalist forms of outdoor activity such as mountaineering which take place in natural environments, to current forms of adventure recreation found in both rural and urban environments. Although activities such as climbing on constructed walls, skateboarding and BMX biking can still offer the thrill and challenge of adventure, Foley et al. (2003) suggest that risk is contained within safe, sanitised, controlled environments. For the purpose of this paper, the term adventurous activities is taken to encompass traditional outdoor pursuits such as mountaineering and extreme sports pursued in the natural environment, such as skydiving.

A growing body of research (see, for example, Kahn, 1999; Kellert, 1997) indicates that as humans our identity is rooted in the natural world and we have a need to affiliate with nature and the natural environment. Kellert (1997) suggests that this urge to connect with the natural world is as vital for human development today as it was in the past, although various forces in modern life have led to the diminishing role of wild nature as an integral part of our everyday lives. Nevertheless, modern western society has retained and even enhanced opportunities for experiencing nature through outdoor recreation, and a growing number of people, especially young adolescents and adults (Whelan, 1991), do seek regular recreational contact with the natural world (Scherl, 1989). Kellert (1997) cites four adaptive advantages to be gained from intimate contact with nature, namely, enhanced physical fitness and vitality; increased self-confidence and self-esteem; expanded curiosity and imagination; and greater calm and peace of mind. Ulrich (1999) reports that findings from over 100 studies have demonstrated that one of the key perceived benefits of recreation experiences in the wilderness[1] is emotional well-being and the reduction of immediate and long-term stress.

A number of studies (see Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Young & Crandall, 1984) have suggested that meaningful change (particularly in terms of self-concept and self-perception) takes place within an individual when undertaking activities in natural, wilderness settings. In the case of an extended adventure programme this change may become evident after returning to everyday life. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) found that the experience of living in the natural environment and coping with physical and mental challenges enhanced self-discovery, and led to feelings of competence and self-confidence. After returning from their outdoor experiences, when compared with a control group, participants were found to be more realistic about their strengths and weaknesses, have greater self-sufficiency in the use of their abilities and time, show a greater concern for others, and have a more positive view of themselves. After conducting a study involving 274 participants of an all women outdoor adventure programme, Hornibrook et al., (1997) concluded that positive aspects taken away from the experience seemed to filter into other areas of the women's lives. Similarly, having researched into women's experiences of outdoor adventure, Henderson and Bialeschki (1987, p. 25) noted that "as women gain strength and confidence in the outdoors they are able to experience strength and confidence in other areas of their life". However, claims that personal traits acquired or evident in one-off outdoor experiences can be used to predict behaviour in other situations have been challenged by Brookes (2003) who urges outdoor educationalists to reconsider Neo-Hahnian theory that favours explanations of behaviour in terms of consistent personal traits. He considers that changes in observed behaviour should not be attributed to trait development, but to the temporary outdoor adventure situation. Although outdoor adventure education programmes may provide situations that elicit certain behaviours, Brookes (2003, p. 60) suggests that it is only by returning

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to the outdoors, and experiencing "on-going relationships between individuals, particular groups, and particular places in the outdoors" that the self that emerges there can be reinvoked.

When attempting to understand the apparent need of some people to take part in adventurous activities, several authors have raised issues of significance that relate to aspects of life in our contemporary western society. Elias and Dunning (1986) suggest that the pleasure and excitement experienced through taking part in activities such as mountaineering represent the antithesis of the stale emotions experienced periodically as a result of overall routinisation and restraint in western society. Lyng (1990, p.860) considers it a paradox that, as many organisations and institutions endeavour to reduce the risks of living in western societies, increasing numbers of individuals actively seek out adventure experiences that involve a high potential for serious injury or death. He suggests that such people value risk-taking because it provides opportunities for self-determination and authenticity[2]. In our modern day society goals are often unclear and many people find themselves removed from situations where they see the outcomes of their own endeavours. When participating in high-risk adventure there is characteristically total involvement, as appropriate skills and abilities are employed to overcome constant challenges. Goals are generally clear and feedback relating to degree of success or failure is immediate (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). With no time to contemplate action, people act instinctively, which Lyng (1990, p.860) suggests can leave them with "a purified and magnified sense of self" and an enhanced feeling of being alive.

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For the committed adventure participant who becomes fully socialised into a high-risk subculture, their activity is likely to influence their leisure time, their work time, their choice of career and where they live (Wheaton, 2000). Lyng (1990) explains that the powerful solidarity felt by committed high-risk participants often transcends the boundaries of interpersonal networks so that those from different high-risk communities regard each other as members of the same select group. As newcomers progress from being an outsider to an insider, the properties of the high-risk behaviour are placed clearly within the realm of the normal and the ideology of the subculture is gradually assumed (Brannigan & McDougall, 1983; Goode, 1978). As insider status is obtained the participant learns to manage the high-risk context through what Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) term a process of risk acculturation. Ewert (1994) suggests that rather than viewing such activities as risky or dangerous they are seen by the experienced participant as adventurous and challenging and according to Brannigan and McDougall (1983) as risk and competence are more accurately assessed, the notion of risk is displaced by the concept of control. In addition, many writers support the suggestion that as an individual becomes more experienced and risk is more accurately assessed, fear recedes (Grant, Thompson & Boyes 1996; Lyng, 1990; Nichols, 2000). When considering such interpretations, it is important to note that much of the theory related to adventure participation and risk-taking is based on the experiences of men (Humberstone, 2000). In 1988, Ewert reported on the fear levels of both men and women in a study of situational fears associated with outdoor recreation. The level of experience of the participants is unclear, but Ewert found that the women consistently reported higher levels of fear for various situations related to physical, social and psychological threats (for example 'the task being too demanding' or 'darkness') than the men. Given that earlier work provided no consistent evidence that females *are* more fearful than men (see for example Leary, 1983) Ewert concluded that females are just more prone to admit their fears. In light of these findings, and the increase in the number of women participating in outdoor adventure (Nolan & Priest, 1994), it is interesting to note that subsequent work by Ewert (1994) continued to examine concepts such as risk and competence largely from a male perspective.

Opportunities for the formation of genuine friendships and meaningful interpersonal relationships can be a major motivating force for many adventure participants. The social experiences of adventure participants often take place within the context of danger, where there is a need to combine efforts in order to survive, and there is the thrill of a shared adventure. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) report the development of a close group bond between members of an all women wilderness expedition group. Even though the women did not know each other prior to the trip, they continuously offered each other physical and emotional support. Most commented that the emotional support offered was greater than that received from family members and significant others at home. In fact, they commented that in everyday life they were more used to giving support and encouragement than receiving it from others. For many of these women, the positive relationships formed on expedition appeared to overshadow other aspects of the experience, such as the physical challenge. Henderson (1996, p. 97) identifies that concern for connections with others "is a common description of female ways of being in the outdoors". This is partially supported by Kiewa (2001) who explored the perceptions of a group of male and female rockclimbers and found some evidence to support the gendered expectation that men tend to focus on the activity itself whereas women focus more on their relationships with other participants. The perceptions of a group of individuals are complex and differences emerge between participants that are likely to contradict any generalisations made. However, whilst for both the men and women in Kiewa's study, rockclimbing was viewed as an activity capable of offering the challenge and intensity that can facilitate a particular type of relationship, most of the men focussed on the importance of the activity within which these relationships were generated, whereas most of the women focussed on the relationships themselves.

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As identified by Little (2002), whilst women's experiences of adventure have started to be examined (Pohl, Borrie & Patterson, 2000; Warren, 1996a) and there has been some exploration of the value and importance of leisure for women (Henderson, 1990; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1994), there has been little consideration of women's meanings of adventure. Consequently, understandings of adventure are often grounded in the experiences and views of men. In order to develop shared meanings and explore possible explanations for behaviour, this current study set out to gain an insight into women's motivations for maintaining a high level of involvement in outdoor adventure. Participants were asked why they took part, what they felt they gained from their adventure experiences and what adventure involvement brought to other aspects of their lives.

The Research

Having noted the general purpose of biographical research as being "to provide greater insight than hitherto into the nature and meaning of individual lives or groups of lives" (Erben, 1998, p. 4), I identified the biographical method, employed within an interpretive approach, as being the most appropriate for this study. There appears to be no concrete set of methods for biographical research, which can employ personal-life documents, stories, accounts and narratives to examine the life experiences of a person (Denzin, 1989). However, Erben (1998, p. 5) suggests that "the collection of contemporary data through interview is one that is especially useful to educational and other social science researchers". I saw as positive the opportunities afforded by interviewing for establishing a relationship with the respondent, providing some focus and direction in the process of data 'collection' and experiencing first-hand the recounting of aspects of 'a life'. Whilst employing a biographical approach is not unproblematic, and issues related to the ability to accurately 'capture'

a life (Usher, 1998), the social and cultural context of personal experience (Erben, 1996) and the significance of the researcher's own biography need to be taken into account, this approach was seen as being particularly appropriate as it enabled women involved in adventurous activities to tell their own stories in their own words.

In-depth interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted with eight women over a period of fifteen months. In selecting women respondents, I noted Humberstone's (1996, p. 47) call for "more substantial in depth interpretive research around women's informal and formal experiences, perceptions and involvement in outdoor adventure". In addition, I found myself reflecting increasingly on my own involvement in adventurous activities and I welcomed the opportunity to gain an insight into the lives of other women similarly involved. Initially I identified one female teacher committed to skydiving and scuba diving who agreed to take part in the research. A process of snowball sampling (Allin & Humberstone, 2006; Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1996) was then employed, as women are generally under-represented in outdoor adventure (Humberstone, 1996), and it was difficult to locate experienced long-term participants. Each informant put me in touch with one other woman heavily involved in adventurous activities. All of the women engaged regularly (for example, one or more evenings during the week, nearly every weekend and during all holidays) in more than one adventurous pursuit, and had experienced several different adventurous activities since initially becoming seriously involved during their teenage years or early twenties. Activities followed at the time of the research were white water kayaking, open canoeing, climbing, mountaineering, winter climbing, trekking, caving, white water rafting, skydiving and scuba diving, with most of the women taking part in kayaking in the winter and climbing or mountaineering in the summer (often abroad). Undoubtedly, my own biographical details (a white, middle-class lecturer in my early fifties) and the sampling method, influenced the kinds of women that I was able to gain access to; consequently the sample could not be seen as a representative cross-section of women. However, it should be noted that as long-term involvement in outdoor adventure requires some financial commitment, in addition to a certain level of social acceptance and independence, women participants are likely to have the same characteristics as those in this sample, namely to be white, middle-class, educated and in full-time employment (Warren, 1996b). Coincidently, all of the women worked in education; the majority were in their late thirties or early forties and the youngest was twenty-seven. They taught a variety of subjects including geography and science, in several different types of establishments located in urban and rural areas: a primary school, mixed comprehensive schools and an educational outdoor centre. Most of the eight women were in fairly long-term relationships with male partners; three were married and (not all the same) three had children.

In an attempt to build a comparative picture across the life story accounts and to make sense of the data in a meaningful way, insights, interpretations, patterns and emerging themes were systematically recorded throughout the research process. The underlying principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), were employed alongside an hermeneutical approach in an attempt to interpret the meaning of experiences and events for the participants (Glucksmann, 1994). As advocated by Pidgeon (1996) I gave consideration to participants' own accounts and identified 'member categories' (those derived directly from interviewees discourse; see Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as well as 'researcher categories' when examining indicators within the data of potentially significant themes. For example, 'the significance of adventurous activities' was a theme formulated out of my own experience and theoretical understandings and evident within the interview questions, whereas 'relationships in the outdoors' and 'experiences of fear' were themes evident within the life story

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accounts and raised directly by the respondents. Key themes explored within this paper relate to: the perceived value, importance and benefits of adventurous activities, experiences of fear, feelings of freedom, adventure 'insiders', the 'self' and relationships in the outdoors.

Discussion of Findings

This section explores the meanings for women teachers of their long-term participation in adventurous activities. In an attempt to reflect what events and experiences meant for the participants, the findings are presented in narrative form supported by direct quotations from interview data. Discussion focuses initially on the significance of adventurous activities and subsequently considers some of the reasons for the high priority given by the women to their adventure participation, particularly in the light of their experiences of fear. Perceived benefits relating to feelings of freedom and authenticity are examined and the reconstruction and nurturing of an independent self is explored. Relationships formed in the outdoors was a significant theme that emerged from all the women's life stories, and the final section moves on to examine the meaning and importance of shared experiences.

The Significance of Adventurous Activities

Throughout their narratives, the women in this research emphasised the benefits, values and importance of adventurous activity. Like the windsurfers questioned by Wheaton (2000), they spoke about the ways in which outdoor adventure had influenced all aspects of their lives. Cathy explained that maintaining her adventure participation was "more important than work or family, and it's the main way I get to know friends" and Faye said that the outdoors was "...what drives me to do everything...the outdoors is what's made me who I am". A key motivating factor for all the women appeared to be resultant feelings of well-being connected to their bodily experiences in the outdoors. This was illustrated by Debbie who, after considering the benefits of her adventure participation, noted that "...more than anything I always think it makes me feel more alive". The enlivening nature of the women's adventure experiences appeared to relate to feelings which they described as ones of excitement, euphoria, or "a buzz", as well as to a great sense of satisfaction and achievement, arising out of successful completion of a demanding mental and physical challenge. The emotions reported by the women appear similar to the feelings of omnipotence reported by experienced skydivers questioned by Lyng and Snow (1986). For the skydivers such feelings arose out of testing what they saw as their special skills 'to the limit'. Similarly, the women's positive emotions were associated with their ability to marshal the mental and physical skills necessary to survive life-threatening experiences, and as with the skydivers they were identified as their chief motivation for participation.

Fear

As identified above, fear is inherent in high-risk adventure, and as explained by Helen, "you do get scared and controlling your fear is, I think, that's a part of it". In describing positive outcomes in terms of their excitement and sense of achievement, several of the women identified feelings of fear when faced with challenges they were not sure they could overcome. This contrasts with Lyng's (1990) assertion that as an individual gains experience and learns to manage risk in outdoor adventure, fear recedes. The following statement suggests that for Gill, the level of fear experienced contributed to the degree of excitement felt on completion of the task. When asked to describe a climb, Gill chose one that had been at the limit of her ability. She recalled how:

> *I was just looking at it and seeing to start with like a staircase and thinking "Yeah I can do it" and then starting off and everything sloping the wrong way, and you just think "Well*

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can I really do this?". You are looking around at where to put the gear and all the gear is always at knee level...you can't protect it above you. I can just visualise it now, the terror of it. You're doing one bit at a time and when you've done that one bit you think "Well, I can't actually get down off here if I need to so I've got to go on". It was the first VS [very severe] climb I'd ever led – and you get more and more excited and you think something's going to go wrong at the top...and it almost did...I couldn't reach this bit so I had to pull in a load of rope behind me and jump...because there was no way up otherwise. But the excitement as soon as you make that last move is just amazing. It's worth the whole day just for that one move.

Although the climb had taken place four years ago, Gill felt she could remember virtually every move as well as the feeling of euphoria when she got to the top. Similarly, Faye explained that when she had achieved a challenge that had scared her, the result had been "...an enormous buzz, you're just absolutely bananas for weeks afterwards and you just bore everyone to tears". Debbie reported that canoeing often "scared [her] stupid" although most of the time she:

...got through the fear barrier; it's mostly just in my head, you know, I know I'm perfectly capable...I wouldn't do something I'm not capable of doing... It's pitting yourself against that fear and getting through it, I suppose.

In referring to her feelings of fear, like Debbie, Cathy identified the significance of psychological factors. She explained that at times, when faced with a difficult challenge, she felt petrified and would "often have a good cry on the bank, trying to decide whether to do it or not". She commented that on a big trip:

Perhaps one rapid will just freak me out, and sometimes I decide to paddle it and it's just part of getting my head into gear and other times I just walk round it.

Decisions about whether to attempt a particular challenge appeared to relate to the degree of control predicted. If the women did not feel psychologically prepared as well as physically capable, then at times they chose to opt out. Their narratives reveal that they enjoyed working at the edge of their abilities, but their stories support the findings of Celsi et al. (1993, p. 17) that high-risk adventurers: "rarely go beyond the limits of their control, preferring to back down to jump or climb another day".

These stories are of particularly interest in that they include reference to high levels of fear seldom reported by experienced (largely male) adventure participants. Individuals committed to high-risk adventure are generally presumed to be high sensation seekers (see Zuckerman, 1979) with a tendency to underestimate risk and experience less anxiety than low sensation seekers. Whilst novices might be expected to exhibit signs of fear regardless of their optimal level of arousal, it is my contention that dedicated adventure participants who have adopted a subcultural identity learn to manage risk and rarely express serious concern for their own safety. However, these women's interpretation of fear could be partly explained by Ewert's (1988) conclusions, in his study of situational fears associated with outdoor recreation, that women are not more fearful than men, they are just more willing to admit their fears.

Feelings of Freedom

Leaman and Carrington (1985) suggest that girls are socialised into having more concern for others than for their own interests, and as noted by Henderson (1998) many women perceive themselves

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as family members first and individuals second. However, a common theme identified as important by the women in this research was the high priority placed on time for themselves. This time in the outdoors was viewed as a chance to escape from the constraints and materialism of everyday life and was seen as valuable in terms of its benefits to the women's mental health. Emma described her adventure experiences as "total escapism" and explained that because:

> *you're just totally absorbed in what you're doing... Everything else is just forgotten like all the worries about school and kids and work.*

Jenny described how participating in adventurous activities away from everyday life enabled her to "...feel better, feel normal. Somehow you can put life in its proper place and get things in perspective". Faye found being on her own in the outdoors "rejuvenating" and at times "peaceful" and "calming". She similarly explained that:

> *You might go out with something on your mind and you come back and it's just put in its place...It's just got everything combed out in your head...it's lovely, and you're free to carry on.*

These perceived benefits mirror those identified by women in Fredrickson and Anderson's (1999, p. 31) research, who indicated that periods of solitude in the wilderness "had left them feeling rejuvenated" and had given them a renewed perspective on "the challenges that were waiting for them back home". Similarly, greater calm and peace of mind were identified by Kellert (1997) as adaptive advantages of experiences in the outdoors, and in addition, emotional well-being and the reduction of immediate and long-term stress were found by Ulrich (1999) to be key perceived benefits of recreation experiences in the environment. As in the stories told by the women with children in Davidson's (1996) research into holiday and work experiences, these accounts emphasise the value placed on 'getting away' from a sense of pressure experienced in every day life. However, whereas for the women questioned by Davidson freedom from pressure was identified as a state of mind rather than a physical 'getting away', for the women in this research the physical change of site and the actual places visited were of particular significance to the worth and well-being derived from their adventure participation.

In the pursuit of authenticity and meaning that was apparently lacking in her every day life, Jenny emphasised the importance of escaping from the material "quality of life", with its excesses and "bustle", offered by western society (see Lyng, 1990). This was illustrated when she said:

> *I find that traffic and buildings and being with lots of people and congestion quite oppresses me...I like not having distracting noise and when you get completely away you can just enjoy something very basic really.*

Similarly, for me, being in the outdoors far removed from everyday responsibilities and expectations with only a limited number of possessions has always given me a great sense of freedom and has held particular meaning due to the way in which individuals are generally accepted 'at face value'. Jenny's narrative suggests that she had found time in the environment, with only the bare necessities, a liberating, rewarding experience.

Adventure 'Insiders'

Many aspects of the women's lives and identities as adventure participants set them apart from those not involved in adventure. As described by Kellert (1997, p. 89), the close interaction with nature experienced through adventure challenge had produced "a heightened sense of vitality" and

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"a sharpened awareness and experience of the world" resulting in a sensation of "living life rather than just passing through". Challenges in the outdoors test emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual competence to personal limits seldom experienced in every day life. As explained by Debbie, adventurous activity is "so much more exciting than real life...because you make real decisions". Differentiating between their own life as an 'insider' of a high-risk sporting subculture, and the lives of others seen as 'outsiders' (see Donnelly & Young, 1999) was a common theme within the women's stories. This was illustrated in a statement made by Belinda who said:

> *You have a different way of living your life to people who don't ever take risks...I've come to the conclusion that there are two groups of people, there are those who are dreamers and those who are doers, and the people who do, do lots of things...and the dreamers are the sort of people who read books and watch lots of TV and basically live their life within that sort of...you know the brain, basically...And actually don't go out from that point, and don't need to, which is fine...I do need to, I need to be out there, I need to be experiencing.*

Debbie also appeared conscious of there being "other" people outside adventure sports when she explained that since having her children she had met what she called "normal people" with "very different things on their minds, and aspirations in life". She said that she had never known "ordinary people like that before" and felt that by being involved in adventurous activities, she was "getting to see more than most people who are involved in their busy little lives". Many non-participants would see the behaviour of a high-risk adventurer, apparently addicted to thrill and danger, as extreme. However, for those committed to outdoor adventure, high-risk activities form a distinct and integral part of their social 'reality' (see Elias & Dunning, 1986). Brannigan and McDougall (1983) suggest that as identity as an adventure participant develops, deviance neutralisation occurs as the ideology of the subculture is gradually assumed, and the properties of high-risk behaviour are seen as 'normal'. With the possibility of injury or death becoming a fairly common occurrence, as explained by Emma "the decisions you have to make are a lot more serious" than in everyday life. Consequently, actions take on more significance and achievements become more meaningful. In comparison, the lives of those not involved in adventure participation are likely to appear lacking in stimulation and inconsequential (Iso-Ahola, 1980).

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The 'Self' in the Outdoors

Taking part in adventurous activities provided opportunities for the women to reconstruct and nurture both an independent and a social self separate from their roles as a teacher, mother, and at times partner, and often absent in their normal routine (see Davidson, 1996). Jenny explained that being out in the mountains for her meant that "you can just be yourself". Debbie, who had two children, emphasised the importance of "doing something for myself" and Gill said that her adventure participation was important because "I don't have to think about anything but my safety...and I'm not constantly looking after little children". Going into 'the outdoors' enabled choices to be made about whether the individual or the social self would be engaged (see McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998). As explained by Faye, although she enjoyed participating with others:

> *I do stuff on my own as well, like the fell running. I tend to do most stuff on my bike on my own, just because it's just me. I'm a self-contained unit, and that's really important to me as well.*

The opportunities provided in the outdoors for personal challenge meant that the women had to rely on their own abilities (see Ewert, 1994), and as explained by Helen:

> *...you have to be able to look after yourself...These activities don't come without some sort*

> *of contract between you and yourself...in the end you are the person running off the edge of a cliff with a bit of material attached to you.*

Gill reported that she found this self-reliance, and the fact that "if you get into trouble you've got to sort it out" exciting because it gives you "confidence in your own ability to look after yourself". Faye considered that through the personal challenge found in the outdoors "you become a more whole person" which effects your "well-being and self-esteem...because you do push yourself and take yourself to those extremes". It is clear that through their adventure experiences the women had developed an ability to fairly accurately assess their own competence (see Lyng, 1990). Realising aspects of their mental and physical potential had increased their self-esteem and their cognitive abilities, as found by Ewert (1989) in a study of participants from several outdoor programmes. Cathy described aspects of her own personal development when she said:

> *I'm more self-confident, especially...I got a lot of self-confidence from doing a couple of trips where I was the leader...on a really difficult river, and you come back feeling that you can make those decisions [which are] much harder than any other decisions...I was hopeless at making decisions but now I'm quite happy to just say, this is it, we'll go with this one, and that's certainly something that probably stems from the canoeing.*

The extent to which any positive outcomes from experiences in the outdoors can be generalised is open to debate. It has been suggested that risk experience can be effectively used as a paradigm to inform situations from other aspects of life (see Robinson, 1992), but work by Ross and Nisbett (1991) within the area of social psychology supports arguments put forward by Brookes (2003) that traits evident in adventure settings are not predictive of future behaviour in situations outside of the adventure environment. However, in a letter sent in response to a directive I gave to the women after they had been interviewed, Faye wrote:

> *Participation in outdoor adventurous activities makes you strong and driven in other areas of your life. You experience in the outdoors what it takes to get success (like determination, drive, motivation, strength and independence) and you become unafraid to use these things to enable you to get success in other areas of your life.*

This apparent contradiction could partly be explained by Brookes' (2003, p. 60) reference to *on-going relationships* between individuals and "particular places in the outdoors". The women in this research were long-term adventure participants and Brookes does suggest that "the self that emerges in the outdoors can be reinvoked by returning to the outdoors, and in this way changes observed in the outdoors could be said to be enduring". Nevertheless, as suggested by Tinsley and Tinsley (1986), for these women, taking responsibility for their lives in ways not generally possible, evidently resulted in the worth of their adventure participation being seen as connected to self-fulfilment and personal growth.

In addition to giving examples of ways in which outdoor experiences facilitated the development of an independent self, this section has suggested outdoor adventure as a site for the reconstruction and nurturing of a social self, arising out of shared events in the outdoors. As a result of her own research Davidson (1996) emphasises the importance of relationships in the study of women's leisure, and Bella (1989) suggests that the meaning of a leisure activity is found through the relationships it serves rather than through the activity itself. The following section examines the meaning of relationships formed through adventure for the women in this research.

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Relationships in the Outdoors

The meaning and importance of relationships formed in the outdoors was a significant theme that emerged from all the life stories. Like the windsurfers in Wheaton's (2000) research, it was apparent that the women's friendships had developed almost totally out of their adventure participation. Cathy explained that her friends were "virtually all based in outdoor activities" and Debbie's whole social circle was "based around people that do the same activities as me". The value placed by the women on shared experience supported the notion that women's leisure centres around social interaction, which contributes to the meaning of that leisure experience (Wimbush & Talbot, 1988). This was illustrated by Debbie's assertion that the social aspect of her adventure experiences was "probably more [important] than anything". Similar sentiments were expressed by members of an all women expedition group questioned by Fredrickson and Anderson (1999). Positive relationships formed on their expedition appeared to overshadow other aspects of the experience, such as physical challenge. Gill considered positive outdoor experiences to be more meaningful when shared. She explained that:

> *When you get to the top of a mountain there's just the sky and nobody else around, it's a brilliant feeling...But I wouldn't like it if I was totally on my own; I have to have people there to share it with.*

Whilst Helen noted that she "could quite happily go and walk for instance over Striding Edge [in the Lake District] on my own", she said that she would get:

> *...more out of it if there's somebody who's with me, because then there is someone who's sharing what you are enjoying.*

Shared experience of the type and intensity found in outdoor adventure can lead to the formation of close bonds with other adventure participants, and can result in meaningful long-term relationships (see Celsi et al., 1993). Adventure participants often support each other in life-threatening situations, and as explained by Emma:

> *...the thing about paddling is you rely on the people around you...you look after them and they look after you. I don't think there are many things you get that quite so much in.*

This strength of relationships formed in the outdoors was alluded to by Jenny when she said that shared wilderness experience:

> *...connect[s] you with each other...the interaction you have with people in that [adventure] context is a lot more... rewarding.*

Debbie explained that she had stayed "really strong friends" with many of the people she had met through her climbing activities, and interaction with these people had helped to keep her motivated. As experienced adventure participants, several of the women perceived themselves as belonging to "a small elite group" of like-minded people. Belinda explained that these people travelled the world and "you actually meet people you know all the time, and I quite like that, I quite like belonging".

One aspect of work with others which was identified as significant for the women in this research, and seldom mentioned in previous adventure research, was <u>who</u> they shared their adventure experiences with. All expressed a preference for certain conditions to be met by any other group members, although there was some variation in the priority given to particular requirements. Both Gill and Helen placed importance on "level of competence" because of the safety implications.

Gill said that she did not like canoeing with somebody she did not know because "you don't know if they can get you out of something". Providing they were competent, Helen did not mind who she shared her adventure experiences with, whereas the relationship that she had with any outdoor companions held particular meaning for Faye. She said that it shocked her that her male partner would "just go and do any climb with anybody...I'm really, really choosy who I go with". Faye only went into the outdoors with people she was "very fond of" and commented that:

> *There's no way I'd have a really top day out if I'd pushed it and I'd achieved it, but it was the wrong people. The perfect day out is perfect conditions, perfect climb, perfect people to be with.*

Criteria for men and women's choice of a climbing partner has been considered by Kiewa (2001) who questioned thirty one experienced climbers, seventeen men and fourteen women. Although Kiewa did find that to some extent the women and men conformed to stereotypical understandings of gendered behaviour, with men focussing on the activity and women focusing on relationships, both male and female climbers did identify important qualities for any partner, which included liking their company. Kiewa's respondents more often found compatibility with partners of the same sex, but of particular interest in this research was Faye's assertion that her "perfect day" in the outdoors would be with someone she related to, but "it wouldn't be a female". This contrasted with Debbie's statement that at times she "enjoyed doing things with other women". Research suggests that women's leisure outside of the family has generally tended to centre around social interaction with other women (see Green 1998; Henderson, 1990) whose company they appear to value (Wimbush, 1988). Kiewa's (2001) research gives insight into the adventure context; some of the women questioned in her study had found that a sense of equality, credibility and respect could only be achieved when they climbed with other women. However, it appeared to be qualities stereotypically perceived as feminine rather than masculine, such as those associated with caring rather than risk-taking, that led Faye to say:

> *I don't like climbing with females, I don't like paddling with females, because it's like "Oh, do you think we should", "Oh, I don't know". I just hate that...I think it's more of an individual thing if you climb with a man; I think that's good. I find that women will say "Oh if it's too hard come down"...whereas a man would never say that...you* ***know*** *you can always come down and if you wanted to...you would.*

Whilst generalisations about types of behaviour cannot be made to all men or all women, research suggests that female adventure participants are more likely than men to exhibit care-taking rather than risk-taking behaviour (Henderson, 1992). Many of the women in Loeffler's (1997) outdoor leadership career development study considered that women were more willing to take risks in the type of supportive, nurturing environment offered by all-women groups. However, Faye's comments support Henderson's (1996) suggestion that a learning approach considered woman-centred may not be appropriate for all women. Faye appeared to have internalised some of the values seen as dominant in male outdoor culture (see Henderson, 1996), and assigned particular meaning to adventure experiences offering a sense of independence and self-determination.

Conclusion

This paper has described some of the meanings of women's long-term involvement in adventurous activities and has illustrated ways in which these women constructed individual and social identities centred around outdoor adventure. High-risk adventure experiences were described as being more

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'meaningful' than events in everyday life, and were seen by the women to positively influence their well-being, self-esteem, confidence and competence. Faye appeared to reflect the views of all the women when she explained that the outdoors was "what drives me to do everything...the outdoors is what's made me who I am". The high levels of fear reported by some of the women contrasted with Lyng's (1990) assertion that as an individual gains experience and learns to manage risk in outdoor adventure fear recedes. However, the number of women involved in Lyng's five-year ethnographic study of skydivers is unclear, and as mentioned previously, there is evidence to suggest that women are not necessarily more fearful than men, they are just more willing to admit their fears (Ewert, 1988). All the women placed importance on shared adventure experiences which were seen to lead to the formation of close bonds and often long-term friendships with other adventure participants. That some of them placed more importance on the social aspects than on the physical aspects of an activity supports Henderson's (1996, p. 197) suggestion that concern for connections with others "is a common description of female ways of being in the outdoors". However, in order to succeed and 'survive' in what is a male dominated adventure environment, the women appeared to have developed a strong sense of their own physical self and a high level of technical skill and ability; qualities often perceived as 'masculine' (see Lugg, 2003).

Although the adventure environment is no longer "a man's world" (Green, 1998), it continues to operate under a "paradigm of masculine control" (Carter, 2000, p. 79) and to be judged against masculine definitions of competence (Loeffler, 1997). An increasing number of women participate in all aspects of adventure recreation but there is much literature to suggest that in general men and women have different understandings of adventure (see for example Henderson, 1990; Warren, 1996a; Wearing, 1998). This paper provides some insight onto the meanings ascribed by a small number of women to their long-term adventure participation and contributes to ways of 'knowing' about outdoor adventure and to our understanding of 'women in the outdoors'. However, it is important to note that the women in this study were all relatively privileged, white, British and middle-class and there is a need for further research recording the experiences of women in various lifestyles and from different backgrounds. A body of literature focusing on women's experiences of adventure is now emerging, but there is a continuing need to provide opportunities for women to tell about their experiences 'in their own voice'. Stories such as those told by the women in this research enable understanding to be developed from lived experience rather than out of dominant discourses (Gough, 1999).

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Notes

[1] Murphy and Heimlich (1997) suggest that in addition to being represented as a large, isolated, desolate environment, wilderness may also be described as a state of mind. Miles (1999) suggests that a natural environment offering an individual the physical and emotional challenge of the unknown, is for them a wilderness. Thus, for the purposes of my study, insofar as it provides personal challenge within a natural environment, wilderness is interpreted as both a physical and conceptual place.

[2] Having conducted a five-year ethnographic study of a group of sky divers, Lyng (1990, p. 860) concluded that participants in all types of sports and activities involving the threat of death or injury if the challenge at hand is not met, claim that their experiences produce a sense of "self-determination" or "self-actualisation". They act instinctively which 'leaves them with a purified and magnified sense of self' and an enhanced feeling of being alive.

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