Beyond Thrill-Seeking: Exploring Multiple Motives for Adventure Participation

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Background

Psychological literature on adventure has generally focused on excitement or thrill-seeking motives. However, while some adventure activities are of relatively short duration (e.g., sky diving) and are reputed to be “risk focused and adrenaline fuelled” (Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2010, p. 193), others (e.g., mountain climbing) are of longer duration and require considerable planning. These activities can reward participants with feelings of achievement and satisfaction through prolonged engagement against the natural elements and the self (Woodman, Hardy, Barlow, & Le Scanff, 2010). The development of psychological measures, such as the Sensation-Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, 1971) and Telic Dominance Scale (Murgatroyd, Rushton, Apter, & Ray, 1978), have influenced the design and focus of adventure research (e.g., Cogan & Brown, 1999; Freixanet, 1991; Kerr, 1991). These studies, while informative, were limited to examining thrill or arousal-seeking dimensions of motivation and failed to consider other possible adventure participation motives. As a result, a gap in the literature developed which has only recently been addressed. Qualitative studies have found that adventure motivations may extend beyond thrill-seeking to include motives such as relationships with nature, self-mastery, negative affectivity, and escape self-awareness (e.g., Brymer et al., 2010; Castanier, Le Scanff, & Woodman, 2010; Varley, 2011). Brown and Fraser (2009) also debate the centrality of risk as a motive in educational adventure activities by observing that de-emphasizing risk can enhance teaching and learning opportunities in adventure settings. These collective findings suggested the need for further investigations of adventure participation motives.

In order to integrate diverse research findings, expand the range of identified adventure motives across activities, and improve current explanations of these motives, we used an established psychological framework to guide this investigation. Reversal theory (Apter, 2001) has been previously been applied to understand specific types of adventure experiences (e.g., Apter & Batler, 1997; Cogan & Brown, 1999; Houge, Hodge, & Boyes, 2010a, 2010b; Houge Mackenzie, Hodge, & Boyes, 2011; Pain & Kerr, 2004). This model posits that the following four pairs of opposing motivational states dictate the way a person interprets his or her motives at a given time: serious vs. playful; conformist vs. rebellious; competitive/domination-oriented vs. cooperative/relationship-oriented; and self-focused vs. others-focused. People regularly reverse between these motivational pairs, producing significant changes in emotional experience. Thus,
we expected that reversal theory would help us to understand how and why multiple motives function during adventure activities, and the degree to which thrill-seeking operates as a central motivation for adventure amongst expert participants across a range of activities. We also expected that these findings would have direct implications for adventure educators and instructors.

**Methods**

Data was collected from seven (N=7) expert adventure participants using a snowballing method to recruit the sample (Patton, 2002). We expected that experts would be best able to articulate a range of potential adventure motives, and any changes in these motivations, based on their expanded experiential knowledge base. The participants included a female riversurfing guide; a female world-champion downhill mountain biker; a male nationally ranked whitewater kayaker; a male mountaineering guide; and an internationally ranked male hang glider pilot; a female BASE jumper; and a male skydiving instructor. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 52 years (mean age = 36 years). Qualitative interviews were conducted using the Scanlan Collaborative Interview Method (Scanlan, Russell, Wilson, & Scanlan, 2003), a four-part interview which captures inductive and deductive data. The inductive section included open-ended questions relating to adventure motivations. This was followed by deductive questions adapted from established instruments (e.g., the Metamotivational State Coding Schedule; O’Connell, Potocky, Cook, & Gerkovich, 1991). Participants provided critique and feedback on themes recorded and visually displayed throughout the interview. Interviews were transcribed and pursued for key themes. Case studies including deductive and inductive quotes were created for each participant. Written member checks were conducted within 10 days to clarify any inconsistencies. A cross-case analysis was then developed which identified and described common themes. An audit trail was conducted by a researcher experienced in qualitative and adventure research. The auditor independently analyzed all transcripts and member checks and compared these analyses to the researchers’ interpretations. The auditor did not identify misrepresentations of the data.

**Results**

In line with previous findings, all seven participants identified thrill-seeking as an adventure motivation. However, all participants also reported that thrill-seeking was *not* their sole or central motive and four (n=4) reported that their motivations had evolved. The range of adventure motives identified included: goal achievement (e.g., winning competitions); risk-taking and thrill-seeking (e.g., excitement, adrenaline); social motivation (e.g., interaction with friends, teaching students); pushing personal boundaries and overcoming fear; travel/lifestyle; relaxation/lowered arousal; connecting with nature; and pleasurable kinaesthetic sensations from moving in water or air. The first five motives supported findings by Allman, Mittelstaedt, Martin, and Goldenberg (2009) and Willig (2008), and the latter two motives supported findings by Brymer et al. (2010) and Varley (2011).

During data analysis, we identified that these motives corresponded to a range of reversal theory states and that participants experienced common motivational state patterns. Thrill or sensation-based motives revealed playful motivations, which contrasted with serious motives for achievement, mastery, and overcoming fear. The thrill-seeking associated with adventure, while strongly motivating in some instances, was not the primary motivation for the majority of the participants. In two cases (kayaker, mountaineer), this factor has clearly diminished over time. Descriptions also reflected self-focused, others-focused, cooperative, and competitive states. Although different participants revealed distinct motivational combinations, a range of motiva-
tional states beyond thrill-seeking were identified. For example, goal-oriented reports reflected serious, self-focused, and competitive states, while thrill-seeking descriptions reflected high-arousal, playful states. Social motivations were associated with cooperative and others-focused states. Reports of connecting with the natural environment emerged as an important motivation across participants, particularly for the kayaker, mountaineer, and BASE jumper. These descriptions reflected relationship-oriented and playful motivational states. Kinesthetic motives were also reported as paramount for the kayaker, BASE jumper, and hang glider pilot. In contrast to thrill-seeking motives, these latter two motives were characterised by the desire for lowered arousal levels. This finding appeared to complement findings by Castanier et al. (2010) that adventure may be used for affect regulation. However, it is noteworthy that current participants reported using adventure to experience positive affect due to lowered arousal upon completion, rather than seeking only heightened arousal. Overall, findings suggested that participants’ adventure motivations were multifaceted and that although some participants shared common motives, these were often described in different orders of importance or motivational combinations.

Discussion

The present study used an established psychological theory (reversal theory) to interpret in-depth qualitative case studies and thereby further expand the range of identified adventure participation motives and current explanations of these motives. Findings countered the popular notion that risk or thrill-seeking is the central motive in adventure activities and highlighted other key motivational aspects of these experiences. These findings have important implications for adventure educators, in terms of enhance teaching and learning opportunities, as well as for recreation resource planners in terms of enhancing recreational experiences. The findings also highlight possibilities for refining motivational models used to understand adventure participation, such as the inclusion of predictive reversal theory constructs and models in future research. Reversal theory provides a comprehensive conceptual model which can not only accommodate multiple motives, but can also explain how these motives might change for individuals during an activity, or over time as participants gain experience or age. Whereas quantitative methods have traditionally concentrated on thrill-seeking motivations, this qualitative study illuminated the multifaceted nature of adventure motivation. Due to the small sample and limited number of activities investigated, these findings may not represent participants’ motives in general across these or other adventure activities. Developing a comprehensive model of the complexities of human motivation for adventure activities will require quantitative investigations of these motives and reversal theory states in larger samples across a wider range of adventure activities.

References


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