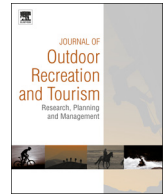




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# Achieving goals and making meanings: Toward a unified model of recreational experience

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding recreational experiences is a longstanding research tradition and key to effective management. Given the complexities of human experience, many approaches have been applied to study recreational experience. Two such approaches are the experiential approach (based in a positivistic paradigm) and emergent experience (based in an interpretive paradigm). While viewed as being complementary, researchers have not offered guidance for incorporating the approaches into a common model of recreational experience. This study utilized longitudinal, qualitative data to examine aspects of recreational experience posited by these two approaches. Results provided a framework for synthesizing across the two approaches. Respondents had clear pre-activity expectations, and most respondents realized their expected outcomes. This supports the experiential approach. Of the 48 activity narratives, 27 experienced something unexpected, and 45 described process-oriented, intrinsic motivation, suggesting evidence of emergent and unique characteristics specific to an individual's realization of recreational experience. This supports the application of the emergent experience approach to understand how individuals create meaning from recreational engagements. The paper proposes a model for integrating results of the two approaches. While not advocating for any specific approach, the findings can serve as an example of building a holistic model of the outdoor recreation experience. The purpose of the model is to allow for a more complete understanding of how individuals create recreation experiences, more complete documentation of the benefits of outdoor recreation for both researchers and managers, and better synthesis across studies.

*Management implications:* Information regarding the recreational experience can assist in implementing informed management decisions. This paper presents commonly applied approaches and discusses their differences and the benefits when combining them. The paper gives insights into different approaches focusing on desired experiences, emergent experiences, satisfaction, or long-term benefits and the related management questions. These help managers to select the most suitable approach for their respective challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Understanding the relationship between human experiences and associated outdoor recreational activities and settings has been a long-standing focus of recreation research (Brooks & Williams, 2012; Cole & Williams, 2012), tracing its roots to early theoretical aspects of the recreation field (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966; Schreyer, 1982; Wager, 1964). Given the centrality to our field of study, researchers have studied the recreational experience from an incredible diversity of perspectives, measuring many nuances of the experience. Studies of recreational experience utilize different approaches and different paradigmatic research commitments (e.g., the Recreation Experience

Preference Scales, based in the positivistic paradigm (Manfredo, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996) and Extraordinary Experience, originating from the interpretive paradigm (Farber & Hall, 2007). We also find different research programs within a single paradigm (e.g., self-efficacy Widmer, Duerden, and Taniguchi, 2014 and attention restoration Weng and Chiang, 2014). What is lacking, however, is a common definition of recreational experience and a model explicitly showing how the differing aspects of recreational experience fit together (Henderson, 2011; Mullins, 2015). To illustrate this point, two recent articles in the Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism both studied emotions associated with wildlife; one wildlife viewing (McIntosh & Wright, 2017) and the other hunting (Hicks, 2017). Both studies used qualitative

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methods, McIntosh and Wright (2017) did not specify a theory; Hicks (2017) followed two theoretical frameworks: Theory of Emotional Memory and Experiential Learning Theory. McIntosh and Wright identified factors that influenced the wildlife viewing experience and concluded by discussing 4 stages of the affective processing of a wildlife viewing experience. Hicks examined the emergent themes and how emotional responses might change over one's lifetime. While both studies increased our understanding of the recreational experience and have management implications, the study backgrounds and, thus, results exist largely in isolation from each other. This is not a literature review issue, as both manuscripts have comprehensive literature reviews. Rather it would appear to be the result of a lack of a unifying framework. This lack of overarching framework contrasts to other fields, such as ecology. For example, the National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON; National Ecological Observation Network, n.d.) has six umbrella areas of measurement, each with several sub areas of measurement. Within the NEON program, methods are consistent across the United States and results are uploaded into a common database. Such a design allows for landscape-level analysis and the detection of trends. That system, though, is dependent on a model for how the different components of an ecosystem fit together. The recreation field measures different aspects of the recreational experience, which could be viewed as analogous to different components of an ecosystem, yet there is no model for how different components fit together. We are not attempting to discourage diversity in researchers' approaches, nor pluralism in choice of paradigms; rather we are advocating for a model that unifies the myriad approaches to studying the recreational experience. Such a model would emphasize the compatibility among different approaches, mapping how findings from the various studies contribute to our understanding of the recreational experience. We are not alone in calling for a unified model. Veal (2017, p. 217), in a thought piece on Serious Leisure stated: "It is not possible in this article to develop detailed proposals, but a potential direction can be indicated. Some 30 years ago, Rojek (1985, p. 4) referred to the phenomenon of 'multiparadigmatic rivalry' in leisure theory; what is being proposed here is multiparadigmatic cooperation. As the discussion of complementary theory above indicates, there are numerous existing paradigms, frameworks, and approaches which a researcher might consider when examining leisure experiences. Six such frameworks addressing leisure experiences are listed in Veal (2017), all seeking to understand the phenomenon of leisure experience. Moving toward a more complete and unified model of recreational experience should enhance efforts to document recreational benefits; allow more effective expression of recreational benefits, both within the field and to those outside the field; and increase effectiveness of recreation management."

This article provides a case study that moves toward a more complete and unified model of recreational experience. We applied principles from two distinct approaches: the experiential approach<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Manfredo et al., 1996) and the emergent experience approach (e.g., Patterson, Watson, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 1998). While those approaches use different paradigms with respect to epistemological and ontological commitments,<sup>2</sup> we propose the elements of experience that

<sup>1</sup> Different labels have been applied to describe the experiential approach. Borrie and Birzell (2001) label it as a "benefits-based approach." Manning (2011), following Driver and Tocher's language from 1970, frames it as a "behavioral approach." Patterson et al. (1998) refer to it as the "motivational approach." Here we utilize Manfredo et al.'s (1996) terminology to describe a research program committed to the idea that recreationists have specific and desired expectations for outcomes associated with their recreational engagements, and their expectations are dependent on personal variables (i.e., people are motivated to participate because they expect something in return).

<sup>2</sup> Epistemology pertains to the type of knowledge that can be generated, e.g., is the observer separate from the phenomenon being observed; ontology addresses the nature of reality, e.g., reality to "uncover" vs. idiosyncratic realities; axiology refers to the goals of science, e.g., prediction vs in-depth understanding (see Patterson and Williams (1998)). As highlighted in Manfredo et al. (1996) and Appendix A of Moore and Driver (2005), the

are the focus of these two approaches are occurring at different points in time within the same recreational experience and, thus, are compatible. Furthermore, looking more closely at both approaches in the same study contributes insights useful for developing a more complete and unified model of recreational experience.

Taking from the experiential approach, we examined whether recreationists had a priori experiences they were seeking from the recreational engagement. Those same recreational experiences were also examined with an idiographic lens to allow for an emergent experience with highly individualistic meanings. It is important to note this paper is not advocating a particular methodological approach, nor suggesting these methods be replicated. Rather our purpose is to:

- synthesize knowledge across the experiential and emergent experience approaches,
- offer suggestions for conceptualization and measurement of the recreation experience, and
- provide a model for integrating research with different paradigmatic commitments.

## 2. Background

Since the early 1970s, one of the most prevalent approaches to studying the recreational experience has been the experiential approach and associated Recreation Experience Preference (REP) Scales (Manfredo et al., 1996; Manning, 2011). The impetus for developing this approach was perceived shortcomings in the activities approach to recreation, which views the outcome of recreation as synonymous with participation in activities and was the dominant view through the late 1960s (Driver & Tocher, 1970; Manfredo et al., 1996; Manning, 2011). The experiential approach was built on the idea that recreation provides valued outcomes and desired experiences beyond the recreation activity itself (Driver & Brown, 1975; Driver & Tocher, 1970; Wager, 1964). The valued outcomes and desired experiences are motivational forces that direct people to engage in recreation. Guided by the expectancy valence theory as applied in industrial psychology (Lawler, 1973; Vroom, 1964), researchers explored potential valued outcomes and desired experiences, and developed a set of psychometric scales (i.e., the Recreation Experience Preference Scales). The experiential approach defines recreation experience as the package or bundle of psychological outcomes desired from recreation (Driver & Brown, 1975; Driver & Knopf, 1976). It was also postulated that specific recreation settings could increase the likelihood of realizing valued outcomes and desired experiences. This idea sparked the development of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Manfredo et al., 1996).

In response to anomalous research findings such as respondents' ratings of the importance of REP scales seeming to shift in response to what was actually experienced onsite (Stewart, 1992) and questions of how individuals actually construct meaning associated with broadly worded REP scales such as "enjoy nature," alternative paradigms were applied (e.g., Patterson et al., 1998). Because experience was viewed through a constructivist lens (Patterson & Williams, 2002), these researchers worked within an interpretive paradigm called hermeneutics (Patterson & Williams, 1998, 2002, 2005; Rosenberg, 2015). One approach in particular is called emergent experience, which defines the recreation experience as "an emergent phenomenon motivated by not a very well-defined, precise or specified goal of acquiring stories that ultimately enrich their [SIC] lives" (Patterson et al., 1998, p. 450).

Key to emergent experience is the concept of situated freedom, referring to the structure in the environment providing boundaries on the experience, but within those bounds, individuals can experience the

(footnote continued)

experiential approach is rooted in a positivistic paradigm. Patterson et al. (1998, p. 424) and Patterson and Williams (2005, p. 366) place the emergent experience approach within the interpretive paradigm.

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