



## The search for freedom in extreme sports: A phenomenological exploration



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### ABSTRACT

Participation in extreme sports is continuing to grow, yet there is still little understanding of participant motivations in such sports. The purpose of this paper is to report on one aspect of motivation in extreme sports, the search for freedom. The study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Fifteen international extreme sport participants who participated in sports such as BASE jumping, big wave surfing, extreme mountaineering, extreme skiing, rope free climbing and waterfall kayaking were interviewed about their experience of participating in an extreme sport. Results reveal six elements of freedom: freedom from constraints, freedom as movement, freedom as letting go of the need for control, freedom as the release of fear, freedom as being at one, and finally freedom as choice and responsibility. The findings reveal that motivations in extreme sport do not simply mirror traditional images of risk taking and adrenaline and that motivations in extreme sports also include an exploration of the ways in which humans seek fundamental human values.

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### Introduction

Over the past two decades, participation rates in extreme sports and their less extreme cousins have grown exponentially far outstripping the growth rates of many traditional sporting activities (American Sports Data, 2002; Pain & Pain, 2005). According to Puchan (2004) involvement in extreme sports is not “just a ‘flash in the pan’ but a sign of the times” (p. 177). Examples of extreme sports include a parachute activity known as BASE (an acronym of Building, Antenna, Span, Earth) jumping, waterfall kayaking, big wave surfing, climbing without ropes and extreme skiing where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death (Brymer, 2005).

There is a widely held and theory-driven presupposition that extreme sports are synonymous with risk and participation tantamount to risk taking or adrenaline seeking (Brymer, 2002; Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Lambton, 2000; Monasterio, Mulder, Frampton, & Mei-Dan, 2012; Olivier, 2006; Pizam, Reichel, & Uriely, 2002; Rinehart, 2000; Self, Henry, Findley, & Reilly, 2007; Simon, 2002). From this traditional perspective, participation in extreme sports is most often judged as pathological, socially unacceptable, negative, and deviant (Elmes and Barry,

1999; Monasterio, 2007; Pain & Pain, 2005; Self et al., 2007). Participants are frequently described as selfish teenage boys who are “fascinated with the individuality, risk, and danger of the sports” (Bennett, Henson, and Zhang, 2003, p. 98).

The dominant theories focus on psychological and sociological explanations. These perspectives propose that personality traits (e.g., Breivik, 1996; Hunt, 1996; Self et al., 2007), socialization processes (e.g., Allman, Mittlstaedt, Martin, & Goldenburg, 2009; Fletcher, 2008; Laurendeau, 2008), and previous experiences work to compel a participant to put his or her life at risk through extreme sports (Brymer, 2010). The main psychological theories include type T (Self et al., 2007), psychoanalysis (Hunt, 1996), and sensation seeking (Breivik, 1996; Goma, 1991; Robinson, 1985; Rossi and Cereatti, 1993; Schrader and Wann, 1999; Shoham, Rose, & Kahle, 2000; Slanger and Rudestam, 1997; Straub, 1982; Zarevski et al., 1998; Zuckerman, 2007).

Those espousing type T theory explain participation in extreme sports as the realization of a deviant personality trait (Self et al., 2007) and a need for uncertainty, novelty, ambiguity, variety, and unpredictability (Farley, 1991). The psychoanalytic perspective (Elmes and Barry, 1999; Hunt, 1996) has been used to categorize participation in extreme sports as a pathological and unhealthy narcissistic tendency in which participants are “denying limitations and vulnerabilities, rationalizing unacceptable behavior and feelings, overestimating abilities and accomplishments, and offering consistently self-serving explanations for successes and failures”

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(Elmes and Barry, 1999, p. 165). The sensation-seeking standpoint has been used to argue that participation in extreme sports is driven by an inbuilt need for novel experiences and intense sensations (Rossi and Cereatti, 1993; Schroth, 1995). Participants continually search for new outlets to obtain thrills and excitement and alleviate boredom. From these theoretical, risk-taking perspectives extreme sports participation is: 1) the realization of a deviant trait; 2) a pathological and unhealthy activity that results in self deception; and 3) a hedonistic activity where death is played with for thrills and excitement. However, this approach may be too simplistic (Brymer, 2010). Pain and Pain (2005) wrote that extreme sport participants are careful, disciplined, well trained, well prepared, and self-aware:

Despite the public's perception, extreme sports demand perpetual care, high degrees of training and preparation, and, above all, discipline and control. Most of those involved are well aware of their strengths and limitations in the face of clear dangers. Findings of extensive research in climbers suggest that the individuals do not want to put their lives in danger by going beyond personal capabilities.

Pain & Pain, 2005: S34

The major problems with this risk-taking approach are fourfold. Firstly, a focus on risk has meant that other aspects of the experience such as positive health benefits (Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012; Willig, 2008) and development of a positive relationship with nature (Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2009; Brymer & Gray, 2009; 2010), have been largely ignored. Secondly, theory driven perspectives do not seem to reflect the lived-experiences of participants (Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012; Willig, 2008). Thirdly, research reveals characteristics and statistics that do not seem to fit with this traditional assumption about risk (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Soreide, Ellingsen, & Knutson, 2007; Storry, 2003). For example, Storry (2003) found that in the UK the death rate for climbers was 1:4000 which compares favorably against motor cycle riding where the death rate is 1:500. Soreide et al. (2007) undertook an analysis of 20 850 BASE-jumps in Norway over 11 years and found that the death rate was 1:2317 and while the injury rate was high they were in the main linked to sprains and bruises. Studies have also indicated that extreme sport participants are not inclined to be reckless. For example, the study by Celsi et al. (1993) referred to numerous examples of well-respected extreme sport participants who considered that they participated well within their personal capabilities. The preference was to leave participation for another day if they felt that the limits of their capabilities were being extended. Pain and Pain (2005) observed that athletes expend considerable time and effort to develop high level skills and a deep understanding of their particular activity and also undertake extensive planning. They deliberately become very familiar with all the variables including the environment, their equipment, and the weather.

Finally, research is finding that participation in extreme sports might have positive psychological and emotional outcomes such as the development of courage and humility and the transformational benefits of fear (Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012; Willig, 2008). With participation increasing so rapidly it is arguably essential that we gain a better understanding of what constitutes an extreme sport, what motivations and meanings are involved and how we can best determine the benefits and costs of participation. This article presents one element of the extreme sport experience that points to an understanding of motivations for involvement based on findings from a larger hermeneutic phenomenological account of the extreme sport experience, the search for freedom.

### *Extreme sports and freedom*

A review of the sport psychology literature reveals that studies have rarely examined freedom from a phenomenological perspective despite the notion being a valuable and critical discussion point in sport psychology (Nesti, 2011). Previous research on extreme sports has proffered the idea that freedom motivates participation (Welser, 1997). Advertisers and marketers who have exploited the notion of freedom in sport have often juxtaposed adventure sports, such as climbing, with a product such as brands of energy drink (e.g., Mountain Dew and Red Bull) and even cigarette smoking (Pollay, 2001; Welser, 1997). At the same time, freedom has also been juxtaposed with the constraints of modern society (Lambton, 2000; Welser, 1997), with the theme that participants in certain sports are able to avoid the constraints of social domination and social control.

As an example of the juxtaposition, advertisers created the Marlboro man to appeal to the young male based on a perception of freedom. As suggested by Pollay (2001):

He is totally and autonomously free – usually alone with no parents, no older brothers, no foreman, no bullies, indeed no one at all whose authority must be respected. It seems no accident that there is no sheriff in Marlboro Country. (p. 72)

Here, the advertisers appear to be linking their product to a sense of self where the individual appears disengaged from all around him as Pollay notes “it seems no accident that there is no sheriff in Marlboro country,” (p. 72) the self is privileged above all else. In this instance, extreme sports have been used to reflect a particular stance.

Previous research has found that extreme sports participants consider that participation in their chosen activity reflects a desire to free themselves from the rules, restrictions and limitations enforced in the everyday social world (Yakutchik, 1995). Bower (1995) built on this concept in suggesting that extreme sport participation was about “looking for a sense of excitement and challenge that is missing from their everyday lives” (p. 21) and by extension extreme sports participants are freeing their very selves from boredom and routine. Extreme sports participants consider that their chosen activity allows freedom from normal life independent of all social and economic constraints (Celsi et al., 1993; Shoham et al., 2000). Ostensibly, Midol and Broyer (1995) determined that extreme sports provide an “aesthetic liberation of life” (Midol & Broyer, 1995, p. 209) that transgresses both traditional sporting rules and regulations imposed by traditional societal norms. Athletes engaging in extreme sports associate the experience with a sense of self unconstrained by social norms.

In summary, studies have posited that extreme sport participants attempt to use their sport as a way of freeing themselves from socio-cultural constraints. Researchers have most often focused on sociological rather than psychological frameworks, relied on anecdotal data or investigations, or examined a specific sport such as rock climbing or surfing from a cultural perspective (Booth, 2005; Wheaton, 2007; Winstead, 1996). Marketers have also presented extreme sports as a search for freedom in order to exploit a concept and project an image on extreme sports.

The aim of this paper is to explore the theme of freedom in the extreme sport context based upon the direct experience of extreme sports participants. This study has adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explicate the experience of freedom with a view to gaining a better understanding of the meaning of freedom within the context of sport.

### *Phenomenology and freedom*

Freedom has been central in the writing of phenomenologist's such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Nichols, 2000). Heidegger

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