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Evoking the Ineffable: The Phenomenology of Extreme Sports

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Abstract

We are witnessing an unprecedented interest in and engagement with extreme sport activities. Extreme sports are unique in that they involve physical prowess as well as a particular attitude towards the world and the self. We have scant understanding of the experience of participants who engage in extreme activities such as BASE jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering, and solo rope free climbing. The current study investigates the experience of people who engage in extreme sports utilizing a phenomenological approach. The study draws upon interviews with 15 extreme sports participants across three continents to explicate three unique themes: extreme sports as invigorating experience, inadequacy of words, and participants' experience of transcendence. The findings provide a valuable insight into the experiences of the participants and contribute to our understanding of human volition and the range of human experiences.

Key words: Phenomenology, ineffable, extreme sports

Evoking the Ineffable: The Phenomenology of Extreme Sports

Extreme sports refer to independent leisure activities in which a mismanaged mistake or accident would most likely result in death (Brymer, 2005). Typical activities include surfing big waves over 60 feet (20+ meters) tall; jumping from solid structures such as bridges, cliffs and buildings with only a parachute (BASE jumping); climbing difficult routes on mountains and cliffs without the aid of ropes or other protection; skiing sheer cliffs; and kayaking over waterfalls 100 feet high (30+ meters). Few

statistics are available that focus specifically on participation rates in extreme sports.

However, research in the broader action and extreme sport field suggests that while many traditional sports such as golf and basketball have witnessed declining participation over the past three decades, participation rates in extreme sports have grown exponentially (Howe, 1998; Pain & Pain, 2005). For example, in 1996, snowboarding was the fastest growing sport in the US with over 3.7 million participants (Howe, 1998). By 2002, approximately 86 million individuals were taking up some sort of action or extreme sport (Ostrowski, 2002). In 2003, approximately 30 percent of all sporting goods sold in the United States, equating to \$14 billion, were extreme sports related (Lieberman, 2004).

Although extreme sports are still widely assumed to be a Western pastime, there has been considerable uptake of such sports in other parts of the world. For example, in 2016, approximately 130 million people engaged in outdoor activities in China (Asia Outdoors, 2017). The Chinese mountaineering association estimated that about fifty percent of these individuals participated in more intense adventure experiences. In June 2016, the Iran Surfing Federation (ISF) became the 100th member of the international surf association. In Iran women are the surfing pioneers. These trends of increased participation in action and extreme sports are continuing (Brymer & Houge Mackenzie, 2016).

The idea that adventure sports are only for the young is also changing, as participation rates across the generations are growing. Baby boomers are enthusiastic

participants of adventure sports, more generally. A survey conducted in the UK in 2015 suggested that more pensioners expressed an interest in participating in adventure and extreme sports compared with individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 years (Inghams, 2015). Extreme sports provide significant opportunities for women to participate on equal ground with men. For example, in June 2016, a British woman completed the explorer's grand slam in seven months and nineteen days, breaking the previous record. The feat involved climbing the highest peaks on each continent as well as reaching the North and South poles. She joined a handful of people who have completed the challenge in less than a year. At the time of writing, fewer than fifty people have completed all nine challenges.

Attempts to understand extreme sport participation have drawn on a range of theoretical conceptualizations. Nevertheless to date, these approaches have failed to consider what we term the ineffable, or transcendental nature of the experience. Theoretical models that purport to explain motivation to participate in extreme sports include sensation seeking (Rossi, & Cereatti, 1993; Slinger & Rudestam, 1997; Zarevski, Marusic, Zolotic, Bunjevac, & Vukosav, 1998; Zuckerman, 2007), psychoanalytic interpretation of unconscious motivation (Hunt 1995; 1996, Elmes & Barry, 1999), and personality orientation with reference to a typology referred to as Type T or thrill seeking personality (Self et al., 2007).

These models assume that participation is motivated by a need to take risks or pursue the 'adrenaline buzz' (Allman *et al.*, 2009; Brymer, 2006; Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Hunt, 1995; Lambton, 2000; Olivier, 2006; Pizam, Reichel, & Uriely, 2002; Rinehart, 2000; Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Self, Henry, Findley, & Reilly, 2007; Simon, 2002). From these perspectives extreme sport participation is most often judged to be deviant in some way and socially unacceptable (Elmes & Barry, 1999; Hunt, 2006; Pain & Pain, 2005; Monasterio, 2007; Self *et al.*, 2007). For example, Elmes and Barry (1999) argued that extreme sports, in this case high-altitude climbing, foster 'the emergence of pathologically narcissistic, competitive, and regressive dynamics' (p. 163). Self and colleagues (2007) argued that extreme sports are deviant activities in which participants lack the capacity to

regulate emotions and behaviors in a socially acceptable manner. Extreme sports have also been associated with drug abuse and criminal behavior. Michel, Cazenave, Delpouve, Purper-Ouakil and LeScanff (2009) administered a battery of tests to 11 BASE jumpers and found that the BASE jumpers in the group tested consumed more illicit drugs than a control group. The authors reported that the BASE jumpers showed significantly more clinical pathological personality features from cluster B of the DSM-IV-TR classification compared with control participants. Finally, Ranieri (2009) has speculated that extreme sports athletes evidence personality deficits and a pathological addiction to extreme risk seeking that contributes to their involvement in these activities.

We argue that there are a number of significant problems with the risk-focused perspective we reviewed, including the fact that this perspective is simply not consonant with the experience of extreme sports participants. We challenge a number of the assumptions of this perspective and popular beliefs regarding extreme sports, beginning with the mistaken assumption that all participants are young, male, and under thirty years of age. This widespread belief negates the experiences of many female athletes and participants in extreme sports over thirty. Second, the extant literature challenges the risk-seeking stereotype of extreme sports enthusiasts (Brymer & Schweitzer 2013; Celsi et al., 1993; Soreide, Ellingsen, & Knutson, 2007; Storry, 2003). For example, researchers have found that extreme climbers were high in extraversion and emotional stability but low in neuroticism (Freixanet, 1991). Researchers have also reported that extreme BASE jumping athletes and extreme mountaineers were more curious and less fearful compared with the general population (Monasterio, Alamri, & Mei-Dan, 2014; Monasterio, Mulder, Frampton, & Mei-Dan, 2012). Monasterio and Brymer (in press) showed that mountaineers' scores did not differ significantly from the normative population on characteristics such as cooperativeness, persistence, and social dependency and that the large variation in the standard deviations across all measures was neither indicative of a discretely defined mountaineering personality profile nor a risk-taking profile.

The assumptions that have underpinned prevalent stereotypes regarding extreme sports participants have reflected not only popular misconceptions of such sports, but also a lack of research on the lived-experience of extreme sports participants. An exclusive theory-driven focus on risk has ensured that other salient aspects of the experience of extreme sports mostly have been ignored (Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2009; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer 2013; 2013b; 2015; Willig, 2008). For example, Brymer, Downey and Gray (2009) found that extreme sports participants develop a deep and profound relationship with the natural world, which they often described as a partnership or dance that is expressed as feeling part of nature. Participants were clear that risk taking was not a motive for participation (Brymer, 2009). Furthermore, risk-focused accounts are necessarily deficit oriented and fail to capture the potentially profound and transformational nature of the experience (Brymer, 2005; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013a, 2013b; Celsi et al., 1993; Wiersma, 2014; Willig, 2008).

Participation in Extreme Sports as Positive Experience

The notion that experiences associated with extreme sports can be profound and positive is gaining more widespread traction, as investigators have begun to explore the subjective experiences of extreme athletes. For example, as alluded to previously, participant descriptions of a deep connection to nature and feelings of being at one with nature also seem to enhance feelings of wellbeing in everyday life (Brymer & Gray, 2009; 2010; Brymer, Gray & Downey, 2009). Veteran skydivers' report regular extraordinary experiences such as peace, calm, stillness and altered perceptions of time and space while engaging in skydiving (Lipscombe, 1999). Extreme sport athletes also describe deep and meaningful experiences epitomized by feelings of freedom as a state of mind (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; 2013b). In summary, far from the traditional risk-focused assumptions, extreme sports participation may well facilitate more positive psychological experiences and express human values such as humility, harmony, creativity, spirituality, and a vital sense of self that enriches everyday life (Brymer & Oades, 2009; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; 2013b; Willig, 2008).

The current study focuses on the lived-experience of extreme sport, with the goal of explicating themes that are consistent with participants' experience. To undertake such a study, we refer to non-ordinary states of mind, which we refer to, in this case, as "ineffable" and "transformative." The findings thus have the potential to contribute to our understanding of the full range of human experiences and, ultimately, what it means to be human.

The Ineffable in Phenomenology

Phenomenology considers consciousness as intentional; that is, consciousness is always directed at something. We use the term "ineffable" from the Latin *ineffabilis* to refer to "that which is beyond words" to describe a particular experience or form of consciousness. In our description of ineffable aspects of extreme sport, we draw on Dienske's (2000) phenomenological description of the ineffable, as an entity in its own right existing as an enriching experience not just as the absence of 'linguistic utterance' (p. 3). From a phenomenological perspective, an experience can be ineffable due to: 1) a limited vocabulary, as exemplified by a young child's attempt to find the words to describe an emotion or feeling; 2) certain oppressions or taboos, such as those reportedly encountered in some religious or cultural contexts where particular experiences are incompatible with the dominant perspective; 3) a response to complexity or nuance of feeling, such as the attempt to describe experiences such as love; and 4) the experience of atmosphere (sensorial qualities available in everyday space) that surrounds our everyday life, such as the mist in the autumn morning.

However, beyond the more everyday ineffable experiences highlighted above, the ineffable is also, not uncommonly, associated with non-ordinary or extra-ordinary human experiences (White, 1993; 1988). Such experiences are characterized by tacit rich and bodily experiences, such as the experience of unity with nature (Brymer et al., 2009). Ineffable experiences exemplified by bodily or tacit rich experiences are by definition not easy to describe; instead, words can only partially evoke the experience; to truly appreciate

or fully comprehend the experience, one must arguably live the experience.

Ineffable experiences have been observed in events such as near death experiences (Fox, 2003; Grof, 1985) and bodily activities such as sport (Murphy & White, 1978; Watson & Parker, 2015), and are often characterized by an “extension of consciousness within ordinary space- time reality” (Grof, 1993, p. 12) or “beyond space-time reality” (Grof, 1993, p. 12). In these instances the experience is invariably described as being beyond words, embodied, invigorating, and transcendent. Time often takes on new meaning and is said to “slow down,” the perceiver and perceived are described as merging, senses are enhanced, and space seems altered to include new ways of perceiving the body-space continuum (Valle, 1998; Valle & Mohs, 1998). In these cases ineffability, as a phenomenological construct, reflects the extra-ordinary nature of the experience itself. At its core the ineffable is real, important, and enriching.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Methodology

This article draws on findings from a larger hermeneutic phenomenological study of the extreme sport experience in an effort to better understand the relationship between the ineffable and extreme sports. In the tradition of phenomenology, the initial hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the extreme sport experience from the point of view of extreme sport participants (van Manen, 1997, Wertz, 2015). Findings in this study are particularly poignant because the larger phenomenological study did not set out to specifically explore the experience of the ineffable as an entity in its own right.

Phenomenological research seeks to illuminate the essence of an experience, as it is experienced in the lifeworld of people having the experience (Wertz 2015). Hermeneutic phenomenology, as differentiated from other variants of this philosophical school, acknowledges that the process of gaining insights into lived experience is interpretive rather than purely descriptive (Willis, 2001). This hermeneutic process is undertaken as a means to offer insights into the experience examined, as opposed to explaining or classifying the

Hermeneutic phenomenological researchers contend that although language and explicit accounts are a crucial tool in understanding experience, much of immediate experience is pre-reflective and thus not determined entirely or captured adequately by language (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Nevertheless, the aim of hermeneutic phenomenology is to penetrate deeper, beyond the reflective interpretation of an event, in order to reveal the essence of an experience. As Willis (2001, p. 7) points out: When speech, language and thought patterns generated from experiences in the world are used, they always involve an interpretive process; however, the aim here is to try to disclose the most naïve and basic interpretation that is already present but as yet is unelaborated in the life world experience, a phenomenological hermeneutic.

From this position, as hermeneutic phenomenological researchers, we interpreted the accounts of extreme sports participants, who might have struggled to disclose their own experience, in an attempt to recuperate the elusive primacy of intense, even transformative extreme sport experiences. The analysis proceeded across different individuals' accounts, because what may be a trace of the inexpressible in a single interview may recur across several different accounts as participants seek to articulate a shared aspect of the phenomenon, which is not easy to render into explicit form.

The hermeneutic approach is particularly appropriate when attempting to assemble a phenomenological account of people's lived experiences, especially when this experience is studied for the first time, when a particular topic requires a fresh perspective, or when the experience is difficult to access (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). Rather than projecting the analysts' own biases or pre-conceived understandings of what is occurring, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach carefully obtains and analyzes first-hand accounts of an experience from those who have engaged with the experience. In practice this process requires that the researcher be open to what the informant reports during the data gathering and analysis process, which requires that the researcher suspend or 'bracket' previous

knowledge or subjective understandings about the experience. Even though, as a researcher, we may not have personal experience with the experience investigated, phenomenological analysis often produces a rich textual description of the phenomenon that resonates with our own experiences or experiences we could conceivably have in the future (Smith, 1997; van Manen, 1990; Wertz, 2015). The current study focuses on one aspect of human experience, participation in extreme sports and, more specifically, the experiences best captured by the term ineffable.

Method

Participants

Following ethics approval from the University of the first author, 15 extreme sport participants (10 men and five women ages 30 to 70 years) were recruited across three continents: Europe, Australia, and North America. Extreme sport participants were required to meet the inclusion criterion that they participated in “extreme sports” and they were willing to explore, through reflection, the extreme sport experience. Participants’ affiliation with extreme sports included BASE jumping ($n = 4$), big wave surfing ($n = 2$), extreme skiing ($n = 2$), waterfall kayaking ($n = 2$), extreme mountaineering ($n = 3$), and solo rope-free climbing ($n = 2$). Initially participants were recruited through social media and the first author’s network, followed by snowball sampling.

Interviews

The phenomenological approach requires that the researcher enters the project with an open mind; pre-existing understandings are “bracketed” or set aside to the extent possible (Giorgi, 1997). Interviews were conducted face-to-face ($n=13$) or by phone ($n=2$), by the first author, at a pre-arranged time and place that suited the participant. Twelve of the face-to-face interviews were conducted at the participants’ homes, and one participant was interviewed in a quiet, distraction-free room at the university of the first author. Although the face-to-face interviews facilitated the development of rapport, the phone interviews made it easier to make notes and draw attention to words and phrases that required deeper explication.

The interview process was guided by the question: “What is your experience of your activity?” Follow-on prompts were used to more deeply explore aspects of participants’ experience. Examples of prompts were: tell me more about... how was that for you, and please elaborate. In other words, the open-ended format sought especially to encourage participants to elaborate on topics that they themselves raised in the course of answering very basic, open-ended initial questions. The open-ended, response-driven interview process is especially suitable for hermeneutical phenomenology, because the themes are explored in terms introduced by the informants themselves, not by the interviewer. Pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality.

Data Explication

The first stage of process of explication was undertaken by the first author and involved listening to each tape immediately following the interview (Amlani, 1998; Ettling, 1998). The second step involved repeatedly listening to and reading individual interviews and transcripts. Each individual tape/transcript was listened to, read, and thematically analyzed ideographically. All transcripts were revisited as themes became more explicit. Both formal and non-formal understandings of potential themes were continually questioned, challenged, and assessed for relevance. A series of questions checked the explication process: “What is the meaning implicit in the text as presented?” “Am I interpreting this text from a position of interference from theory or personal bias?” “What am I missing?” Interesting phrases and relevant non-verbal considerations were noted. These notes were reconsidered from a nomothetic stance in terms of potential underlying thematic phrases or meaning units (DeMares, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Thematic ideas that emerged were clustered into groups and further defined, giving rise to second order themes. These second order themes were refined and developed by both authors and considered against the original transcripts to ensure accuracy of explication. For example, we made sure that the analysis did not group concepts that participants used to make fine but important distinctions. This process of moving between the parts and the whole was repeated recursively to the point of saturation. To ensure research rigor, second order

themes were shared with participants for comments and checking to ensure that our explication reflected their experience. All participants agreed with the themes as identified and with the explication of the data as reflecting their lived-experience.

Results

The following sections are organized by three themes that are presented in a hierarchical order, that is, each theme builds on the prior theme. Each theme is explicated, and direct quotes provide evidence for the emergent nature of the thematic process. The three themes are extreme sports as invigorating experience, inadequacy of words, and participants' experience as transcendence (see Table 1), themes all related to the experience of what we here term the ineffable.

Extreme Sports as Invigorating Experience

A significant characteristic of the extreme sport experience reflected the profound vigor associated with the activity. The term vigor from the original, *invigorate*, is considered particularly apt, as it is derived from the Latin, *invigorat* – which is “to give vigour to, strengthen, animate” from *in-* towards and *vigorare* which includes both “active strength” and “vital strength in animals and plants” (Chambers Etymological English Dictionary, 1965).. An extreme skier interviewed for this study put it this way

It's just three hours of AAAAAARRRRR (yells out) and when I get back to the car, like that's my memory of going skiing, it's just this crazy wild ride for three hours in the day. (Nikki, extreme skier)

On further reflection, Nikki depicted the feeling as “being cool” and as if every cell was twitching and alive. An extreme surfer spent a considerable length of time considering the experience and attempting to describe how the experience made him feel invigorated: “It's like you're just wound up and YEAH and going NO WAY you know "how did I make that" just CRRRRR! Oh mate it's just amazing what it does to you ... like seeing something that was totally um like you'd never seen before and you can't believe it you

know like GRRRRRRR what do you do?" (Aaron, big wave surfer)

Participants typically described the experience as enhancing the way that they felt to an extent that they experienced the feeling as tapping into an aspect of themselves that was far beyond the mundane and was difficult, if not impossible, to describe. It was also typical for participants to accept that while the experience was invigorating, words were an ineffective tool. Tim, an extreme kayaker observed: "I often dream that I'm able to take somebody else's being and put it inside my body just to let them look out through my eyes because it's such an amazing situation to be in. There's no way they could possibly understand the feelings, to feel what I'm feeling and to see what I'm seeing because you never get to see those things. It feels like being in another world."

The journey into the "other world" is better than the everyday world. The experience of sitting at the top of the waterfall is described as quiet and "totally cut off in this really artificial world" (Tim), where he readies himself to enter the other world. Priya, a BASE jumper, described the experience as an ultimate metaphor for life in which a participant is committed to experiencing life rather than "quivering on the edge." James, a mountaineer, described the experience as a life altering powerful energy, which we refer to as vigor. The invigorating experiences described signify that extreme sports enable a state of being beyond the confines of everyday life, and one that often defies adequate description.

Inadequacy of Words

Without exception, those interviewed were clear that words were inadequate tools for exploring the central elements of the extreme sport experience. A typical response was that not only could words not fully explore or describe the experience, but finding an appropriate simile was also difficult. For example, Priya, a BASE jumper, deemed that words were inadequate, as the sensations felt had no comparisons: "There are no words, I think English is a very limited language and there are no words because it is a complete sensation. It's a sensation that's taking in all your senses and then some that you didn't know you had." Later on in the interview, Priya returned to her description and attempted to clarify and explicate her feelings further: "It's more of a self-discovery activity, it's more of a

spiritual esoteric ... umm ... it's another form of expression that's so outside any normal type of activity yet you can get results from it that are so outside anything you'd expect from any normal activity."

Jenny, a mountaineer, attempted to describe the essence of the experience by likening it to sexual orgasm; however, on reflection, even this was deemed an inadequate representation. Other interview participants offered a similar response. For example, Dave, a big wave surfer, described the extreme sport experience as more significant than the sexual orgasm. Aaron, a big wave surfer, explored the notion of fulfillment and enjoyment only to accept that nothing else compared: "It's just better than sex, better than any shit like that it's just very hard to describe, like I say only the guys that have done it would be able to put it into words... if they can."

Certain elements of the experience emerge as being beyond description, or at the very least beyond words comprising the English language. While some participants felt that perhaps it was just they who did not have the ability to verbalize the experience, the above quotes epitomized their collective experience. Metaphor emerged as the only means of expression and thus the only vehicle for interpretation. For example, Suresh, a BASE jumper, searched for parallels to point to the essence of the experience. Suresh was adamant that the extreme sport experience could not be compared to any other single experience and that it was complex, involving a variety of characteristics. He drew on a number of metaphors including sexual orgasm and taking control of a spinning and out of control car. Nevertheless, even this mixture of metaphors was considered an inadequate representation of the essence of the extreme sport experience.

Participants' Experience of Transcendence

The extreme sport experience was described as being beyond the normal on psychological, physical, and descriptive levels. Sam, an extreme mountaineer, maintained that the experience was akin to losing himself through the action of participation. Fred, an extreme climber, described an experience whereby the essential movements required were

beyond description and explanation. In particular, a climb was recalled whereby: “To get over the bulge in the ice and I had a real weird feeling at that point ... I felt as if I was going up onto a higher plane and I can't tell you today how I did that move but I felt something go like there was no way I was going to go back.”

Sam, an extreme mountaineer, reflected on the experience as being “the call of the wild,” which one can either ignore or answer. Jenny, an extreme mountaineer, spoke of connecting to a primal animal like state as if connecting to all animals. Priya, a BASE jumper, spoke about the power of the energy involved in the experience, an energy that comes from the environment. Jenny, an extreme mountaineer, also reported feeling a powerful energy coming from the environment as well as an instinctual element as if reacting to the environment. Sam, an extreme mountaineer, was quite clear that the only reason he participated was to satisfy a base and indescribable instinct hidden deep within.

The extreme sport experience should not be confused with the immediate after effects of the experience. That is, while benefits might transfer to everyday life, the essential element of the experience seems to be during the activity, most often related to the feelings of freedom and fear mentioned in previous accounts of extreme sports (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012; 2013b). Fred, an extreme climber, observed that, “You do it because you are obviously hitting some sort of plane that you can't normally hit.” Priya described experiencing time “slowing down” and an increased ability to notice detail in the environment, even while travelling at 125 miles (200km) per hour: “On every BASE jump you experience something interesting in that your awareness of one second expands enormously. What we would normally perceive in one second is very little compared to what you perceive in one second on a BASE jump. Your mind, so you can deal with everything that you have to, slows things down so when you're doing it, it feels like it's in slow motion.”

She later continued: “When you watch it back on footage you look and go WOW, that's over in a blip (clicks fingers), but when you're doing it you know you can see the tiny little creases

in the rock and different colors in the sky and you're totally aware of where your body is in space and how its moving and ... it's very surreal."

Here, Priya describes the difference between living the experience and watching the experience, noting that perceptions of time are different in each case. What is over in a 'blip' when watching herself on video was perceived as much longer when living the experience. The extreme sport experience seems to be a medium for alternative perceptions of space, time, and a clarity or augmented state of sensual awareness, which tends to enhance participants' ability to act. Time, as "normally," perceived drops away and time is experienced as being lost or slowing. Senses grasp or take in more detail than otherwise available. Focus is opened in new or transcendent ways. Jim, a BASE jumper, differentiated this experience from other experiences that he described as "tunnel vision":

"The more experienced you become you know your mind is clearer. I've had situations where I've had tunnel vision and it cuts your brain off as well where you can't control it you know you've got [sensory] overload. I nearly died actually in California on one of my early jumps where I got tunnel vision."

Frank, a BASE jumper, expressed a similar perception: "I like to see the rock come by but I'm also fully aware of everything else that is going around me. It's the opposite of tunnel vision." Suresh, also a BASE jumper, put it this way:

"It's incredibly, incredibly intense and mostly because if something goes wrong in a BASE jump you have to do something about it extremely quickly. You're at this level of alertness that you're not in a normal life. You've only got seconds to sort it out or you die."

Suresh explains how the experience facilitates an intense alertness directly linked to the need to be ready for the possibility of something going wrong. BASE jumpers often travel at speeds approaching 155 miles (250km) per hour for perhaps only a few hundred

yards (meters). If something does go wrong, if the parachute opens and twists, then there is very little time to resolve any problems. This existential readiness appears to facilitate experiences beyond those available in modern everyday life where death is rarely even considered.

Discussion

The extreme sport experience can be conceptualized as an altered state of consciousness that encompasses novel perceptions of time and enhanced human senses to process sensory experiences meaningfully (Grof, 1993). We have explicated three themes associated with extreme sports: invigorating experience, the inadequacy of words to fully capture the experience, and the experience of transcendence. Participants report that they are totally absorbed in the experience and are able to sense and experience themselves and their environment in unfamiliar ways during every moment of the experience. For example, the sense of time transcends measured time. At some point during a particular extreme sport event, beginning with the commitment to jump, climb or paddle over the waterfall, participants metaphorically leave this world for another. During the ensuing moments, senses are enhanced and physical potentials are realized, which is often described as being like a particular animal. Participants typically describe transcending everyday human capabilities while also connecting with a self-described inner power, characterized as relaxing and peaceful. Participants experience “being powerful” in a way that feels like being “alive,” as if primal elements of their being are in direct contact with a universal life force. Participants invariably describe feeling conscious or more fully aware of “non-material” potentials not experienced during other parts of their lives.

Experiences such as these have previously been associated with and even grouped together with mystical-type or spiritual experiences (Watson & Parker, 2015). For example, mystical-type experiences resemble the experiences recounted by extreme athletes in that the

former are often characterized by ineffability; a sense of loss of self and transcending the environment, the mundane senses, and the boundaries of time and space; peace and joy; and a noetic quality (see Lynn & Evans, in press).

Nevertheless, mystical experiences in a purely religious context are, by definition, more likely to encompass a sense of sacredness and the acceptance of a higher 'Being' external to the self. Accordingly, although the extreme sport experience might be similar in terms of sharing certain characteristics with a religiously-oriented mystical experience, the fundamental interpretation and focus regarding the two experiences differ. Further, ineffability in the context of extreme sports is often evoked through experiences that reflect what Dienske (2000) terms bodily or 'tacit rich knowledge' and non-ordinary experiences rather than a lack of vocabulary or cultural limitations, which is evident in the explication of the three themes (i.e., invigorating activity, inadequacy of words, transcendence).

Each of the three themes are well captured in Dienske's definition of the ineffable. The notion of transcendence is particularly salient in capturing the idea that some experiences are potentially not able to be expressed in ordinary discourse. That is, the experience of transformation or transcendence can only exist in opposition to what phenomenologists may term, a mundane-mode-of-being-in-the-world. This idea is consistent with Dienske's notion of tacit knowledge and meaning being derived from our senses. A good example of the use of such metaphor is well expressed by a participant whose only way of expressing her experience of immediacy and vitality was "it's just three hours of AAAAAARRRRR (yells out)".

Several limitations and areas for further research are important to acknowledge. Sample size is often an issue in phenomenological research. It would be useful for researchers to acquire larger samples and consider the experience of a wider group of participants to enhance the generalizability of the findings (e.g., relatively old vs. young;

different ethnic groups; beginners vs. more experienced participants). Indeed, the participants in the current study might have been non-representative of extreme sports athletes in that they were willing to participate in a study that involved considerable self-reflection. Our sample was necessarily constrained by language and the activities that formed the basis of the participants' experience. It would also be worthwhile to replicate the three themes identified and examine the intercorrelations among the three themes and to explore the aftereffects of extreme sports and follow participants over time, beginning with their first involvement with the sport. Future studies could address potential interview demand characteristics, and researchers would do well to develop standardized interviews with established inter-rater reliabilities and self-report measures with established psychometric properties to address common and unique aspects of extreme athletes' experiences across different sports.

A more general criticism of phenomenological studies is that they do not capitalize on or flow from on previous research. Although the current findings challenge previous deficit-based accounts, it would be worthy for future researchers to build on the emerging literature in the phenomenology of extreme sports and to consider how current findings can be integrated and accommodated into data-driven conceptual models that specify and predict subjective experiences during and after extreme sports and serve as heuristics for comprehensive studies. We envision a role for mixed-method controlled studies that compare participants who engage in extreme sports with individuals who participate in a range of alternative activities such as intense exercise and yoga practices that purport to induce mystical or ineffable experiences. Such studies could include well-standardized measures, such as the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ30; Barrett, Johnson & Griffiths, 2015).

The methodology adopted in the current study as well as the topic provides us with an exemplar to study lived experience. In this instance, such experience is conceptualized as potentially representing endeavors at the extreme end of human agency, that is, making choices to engage in activity which may, in certain circumstances, lead to death. However, such experiences have been shown to be affirmative of life and the potential for transformation. It is arguable that as humans engage increasingly with a digital reality, the yearning for a more direct relationship with nature will result in greater engaging in extreme activities such as those outlined in the current study (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2015). Future research may well benefit by combining sociology, leisure studies, and psychology to gain a more comprehensive understanding of human motivation, and to utilize our understanding of extreme sport-related experiences to better understand the nature and range of experiences of modern living. Extreme sports have the potential to induce non-ordinary states of consciousness that are at once powerful and meaningful. These experiences enrich the lives of participants and provide a further glimpse into what it means to be human.

Summary

We explored an aspect of the life-world of extreme sports participants from a phenomenological perspective. We focused on describing the ineffable element of the extreme sport experience. However, any attempt to describe the indescribable immediately reduces the intensity and power of such an experience to defined, bound verbalizations and conceptualizations. Attempts to clarify certain experiences potentially results in the experience being lost, or, perhaps worse still, being obliterated in the process. A contemporary phenomenologist, van Manen (2002) contended, "In the act of naming we cannot help but kill the things that we name." (p. 239). Still, beyond the world of words is a rich landscape of experiences that needs to be better grasped and explicated, as it forms an

important element of the human experience –often ineffable yet enriching and meaningful--
that resides outside the boundaries of the mundane.

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