

Outline Proposal for Dissertation

Name: **Jon Lasenby**

Title: **Exploring the Spiritual Experiences of Participants of Outdoor Education Programmes.**

Supervisor: **Dr. Peter Higgins.**

Abstract:

This dissertation is an exploration of the claimed phenomenon (Anderson-Hanley, 1997; Fox, 1999) that some participants of outdoor education undergo spiritual experiences during their programmes. These individuals will be sought and interviewed in depth about the nature of their experience, the interpretations they place on the experience and the meaning they attribute to it.

It is widely acknowledged that defining what constitutes a spiritual experience is extremely difficult. For the purpose of this study I will be guided by respondents' own interpretations of their experience and by a description developed by Fox (1999), whose work on spirituality is published in key texts in the field of outdoor education. She suggests:

“Spiritual experience is associated with moments of transcendence and spiritual enchantment. Feelings of enrapture characterize these transcendent episodes and include experiences of sudden awakenings, something inexplicable or something of natural beauty.” (p. 455)

Respondents' experience will be reported in the form of narrative accounts for each individual and a synthesis of the key areas of all accounts, to give an essence of spiritual experience in outdoor education

It is hoped that the study will show a range of different experiences and interpretations and will shed some light on which elements of the programme, facilitation or setting were significant in allowing the experience to occur.

It is expected that the data will also give some interesting insight into contemporary interpretations of spirituality, and the degree to which spirituality is a focus in outdoor education programmes in New Zealand.

Rationale:

The potential value of this study is derived from the following: -

- It is hoped that the interview process will give examples of what kind of spiritual experience is actually occurring on outdoor education programmes. There appears to be a lack of research which details what a spiritual experience looks or feels like, from the point of view of a course participant.
- It is notoriously difficult to define what a Spiritual Experience actually is and is not. I have needed to develop a working definition and draw up guidelines for what might be in and out of scope. However the interview data collected should give a contemporary perspective on what a spiritual experience can entail.
- Spirituality, spiritual experience and spiritual growth have all been linked to outdoor and adventure education (Fox, 1999), but as Stringer and McAvoy (1992) point out, there is a need to know more about spirituality in general and “specifically about spiritual experience in the context of wilderness adventure activities...if spiritual experiences are to be a purposeful element of adventure programmes”. It can be seen that this study will go some way towards meeting a need for research identified in the field of adventure and outdoor education.
- I am already finding, through preliminary discussions with colleagues and potential respondents, that my interest in this subject is provoking some fascinating discussions and debates. These appear to help people clarify their own thinking about the reality and nature of personal spiritual experience and how it can be facilitated in outdoor education programmes.
- This project will enable me to develop my understanding of spiritual experience per se, as well as helping me to become skilled in discussing spirituality with students.
- If I manage to pin down such an elusive and varied phenomenon as spiritual experience, I will have developed a high degree of methodological creativity and rigour.
- This is a part of my own spiritual journey. I am aware of a spiritual element to my self and seek to understand more about how I can give this expression in my life.

Chapter Headings and Content:

Chapter 1 Introduction:

I will introduce this work by stating some of my personal motivation for choosing this topic, before locating the project relative to other work in the area of spiritual experience in outdoor education.

I will include an outline of subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 Review of Literature:

This chapter aims to explore what is meant by spirituality and spiritual experience in general, as well as looking at those types of spiritual experience that seem the most likely to occur in an outdoor education setting.

I will seek common themes occurring in a range of different kinds of spiritual experience in the hope of understanding what is essential, as well as attempting to shed some light on what the mechanism of a spiritual experience might be.

I will also focus on some of the problems peculiar to discussing spiritual experience. These include the difficulty many people have in capturing their experience in words, and the difficulties inherent in differentiating an experience which is spiritual, from one which is more aesthetic in nature.

It may be necessary to explore the way people interpret their experience, and to address the question, 'who decides whether an experience is spiritual or not, researcher or respondent?'

Work in the field of spirituality in outdoor education will be looked at, particularly where definitions of spirituality or spiritual experience are explored. This will include previous masters theses in the same area of study in various parts of the world.

Chapter 3 Research Design and Methodology.

The rationale for choosing in depth interviewing and purposeful sampling will be detailed along with potential limitations of the research design, and the positioning of the researcher in the collection and presentation of data.

I will summarise the positivist and alternate or emerging research paradigms to explore which philosophical postulates are best suited to a study of this kind. I have chosen a phenomenological approach to the interview process because I am seeking to explore people's experience and the meaning that it holds for them, rather than to try to prove that someone has or has not undergone a spiritual experience. As a result it is likely that the research will owe more to the emerging than the positivist paradigm.

This chapter will also include an explanation of the process used to condense the raw data, in the form of interview transcripts, down to narrative accounts of each person's experience and some form of synthesis of all the respondents' accounts.

This synthesis will perform the role of conveying an essence of the phenomenon of spiritual experience during outdoor education programmes as revealed by this study.

Chapter 4 Presentation of findings:

This chapter will set out the narrative accounts of each respondent, using verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts, so that the reader of the report can compare several different experiences occurring for people with different backgrounds and contexts.

This will be followed by a synthesis of the phenomenon as a whole.

Examples of the various stages of the data analysis, such as the identification of meaning statements and the clustering of themes, may be included in an appendix to illustrate the process used without detracting from the clarity of the presentation of findings.

Chapter 5 Discussion of findings:

Here I will look at the findings with a view to examining the following areas:

- The commonality vs. uniqueness of individual spiritual experience.
- Comparing the nature of the experiences reported with any expectations I had after a preliminary literature review.
- Points of interest emerging from a second review of literature (at this stage, prior to data collection, this second search of the literature has been carried out and has revealed many potentially relevant texts. I am not looking at these until the data collection process is complete in order to minimise the forming of preconceptions).
- Which elements of the outdoor education programmes might have been significant in allowing the experiences to occur.
- Implications for providers of outdoor education programmes seeking to encourage the occurrence of spiritual experience or spiritual development on their programmes.

Chapter 6 Conclusions:

This chapter will review the progress made in recognising spiritual experience in outdoor education and reflect on the value of trying to condense a complex and ethereal phenomenon into analysable form, before reflecting on the usefulness of the research tools used.

I will include suggestions further research.

Literature in the Area of Study:

I will look first at writers who identify a sense of ‘disconnection’ between the human self and other aspects of existence such as the natural world, the cosmos, spirits or a great spirit or god. This is a concept that can be found in many diverse areas of literature ranging from discussions of the Cartesian dualistic division of the world into subjects and objects, to authors such as Matthiessen (1998), or Huxley (1954) who both talk about “screens” that separate the individual from the ‘other’, leaving one disconnected most of the time.

Secondly I will look at works that suggest that this disconnection dissolves in moments of transcendence, awareness, or oneness. The authors above both note that this transcendence may take the form of an altered state of consciousness which can be brought about in a number of different ways including prayer, meditation, ascetic discipline, time spent in nature, and the use of certain drugs. I will compare their accounts with James’ (1902) research into mystical states of consciousness, before looking at some modern accounts of transcendence or connection, both religious and secular, from writers such as Harvey (2000).

Next I will look at examples of spiritual experience (James, 1902; Harvey, 2000) and propose the theory that this re-connection or transcendence is a kind of spiritual experience (Gelter, 2000) before looking at examples of this occurring in the outdoors and in outdoor education.

There is a wealth of writing about profound experiences occurring in outdoor environments, I will restrict myself to those where the author specifically interprets the experience as being spiritual in nature and where there is an element of transcendence. A discussion of alternative interpretations will follow later.

In addition to the authors already mentioned numerous articles have been published in journals relating to the field of outdoor education. The main sources of these articles are the “Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership”(JAEOL) now published as the “Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning”, and the “Journal of Experiential Education”(JEE). More articles have been published as proceedings from the conferences of the associations publishing these two journals, Adventure Education and the Association for Experiential Education respectively.

Reference will be made to other research carried out in the field of spirituality in outdoor education. Examples include Fox (1996) and Price (1999).

Other types of profound experience which might be confused with, or overlap with spiritual experience will be looked at, and key similarities and differences noted with a view to differentiating later. It is expected that these will include aesthetic experience.

Dewey (1997) specifically looks at aesthetic experience, whilst a number of articles in the journals previously mentioned look at profound experiences in the outdoors, interpreting them in non-spiritual ways. These will be looked at in so far as they acknowledge that the meaning assigned to an experience is largely a matter of individual interpretation.

Research Design and Methods:

The aim of the research is to explore spiritual experience as it is encountered by participants of outdoor education programmes. The method chosen to do this is based on an assumption that a good way to understand a human phenomenon is to question willing and articulate people who have experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

This assumption underpins two of the main characteristics of this research project.

Firstly it leads to a qualitative approach to data collection. Specifically I have chosen to follow a phenomenological approach. As Wulff (1995) states, phenomenology encourages the researcher to get as close as possible to the lived experience of the respondent by “walking a mile in the interviewees mind” (p. 196) and suspending ones own view, preconceptions and analysis.

In practice this means that I will need to find a way of making explicit my own ‘baggage’ relating to the field of spiritual experience and outdoor education, and any other areas which may have a bearing on these. This will assist the reader of the research to read the work in context.

There is more than one way of acknowledging this baggage. A traditional approach seems to be the Husserlian concept of “bracketing” whereby “it was possible to achieve an unbiased view of one’s own subjectivity to the extent that one was no longer a part of it.” (Kerry & Armour 2000, p. 5)

I will discuss the feasibility of bracketing and compare with Heidegger’s view that “interpreters cannot avoid being part of the hermeneutic circle and, as such, participate in making data.” (Kerry & Armour 2000, p. 7)

These two standpoints lead on to a whole debate about the extent to which a researcher includes their own voice in the report. On the range of options offered by Ellis and Berger (2002), I expect to describe my own “views and experience with the subject at hand.” (p. 860)

Secondly my assumption dictates that I seek out people who interpret their own experience as being spiritual and whose experience conforms to some part of the guidelines proposed by Fox (1999). As Creswell (1998) points out:

“...for a phenomenological study. It is essential that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied. ‘Criterion sampling’ works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon. All individuals meet this criterion.”(p.118)

Respondents will be asked to reflect on whether their experience is primarily spiritual or aesthetic in nature to as part of the process of ensuring they have experienced the phenomenon under study.

It is my intention also to use an emergent sample design whereby I select participants as I go along in an attempt to achieve the maximum variation of experience and assigned meanings.

The limitations of this methodological framework include the difficulty that many people have in describing their spiritual experiences in words, and the time intensive nature of doing in-depth interviews with people about a subject that is very personal. It will not be possible to interview many people given the time and word constraints of a masters dissertation, which will limit the generalisability of the findings.

Consent:

Permission has been granted by the New Zealand Outward Bound School to use their students as the research population. Other respondents will be approached individually on personal recommendation and invited to participate in the study. All respondents will all sign a pre-written statement of consent prior to the interview process.

Timetable:

Finish reviewing Literature	Nov. 2002
Design interview schedule	Done
Negotiate Provider Access	Done
Submit Outline Proposal	August 2002
Pilot interview	Done
Collect interview data	Aug.-Nov. 2002
Write Draft	Dec.'02-Jan. '03
Submit Draft Report	Dec. '02- Jan. '03
Final Submission	Feb. 2003

References:

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