A Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Taking Part in 'Extreme Sports'

Carla Willig

Dept of Psychology

City University

Northampton Square

London EC1V OHB

Tel 0044 207 040 3522

Fax 0044 207 040 8580

A Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Taking Part in 'Extreme Sports'

Abstract

This paper is concerned with what it may mean to individuals to engage in practices which are physically challenging and risky. The paper questions the assumptions that psychological health is commensurate with maintaining physical safety, and that risking one's health and physical safety is necessarily a sign of psychopathology. The research was based upon semi-structured interviews with eight extreme sport practitioners. The interviews were analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) version of the phenomenological method. The paper explicates the themes identified in the analysis, and discusses their implications for health psychology theory and practice.

Key words: extreme/dangerous sport; phenomenological method; risk; 'flow'

Bio-bibliographical note:

Carla Willig lectures at City University, London. Her publications have been concerned with the relationship between discourse and risky practices. More recently, she has been exploring meanings and motivations around risky practices from a phenomenological perspective.

Introduction

The research presented in this paper was motivated by a concern with the way in which risky practices are represented and worked with in health psychology. Health psychologists tend to start from the assumption that health risks should be avoided and that those who engage in risky behaviours represent a problem to be solved. Unhealthy practices tend to be understood as manifestations of underlying problems or pathologies within the individual. We tend to assume that no-one in their right mind would choose to act in ways which may jeopardise physical safety and mental equilibrium. This paper takes a fresh look at the meanings of risky behaviours, allowing for the possibility that seeking out such experiences may not necessarily be a sign of psychopathology.

The Imperative of Health

Lupton (1995) has identified a contemporary imperative of health according to which the reduction of health risks supersedes all other goals. Popular culture is steeped in images of health (often conflated with images beauty and fitness) and we are exhorted to subscribe to regimens which will take them closer to the healthy ideal. Although failure to achieve health/fitness is common, rejection of the goal is not presented as an option. Health psychology theory and research has not remained unaffected by the imperative of health. Theories of health behaviour are based upon the premise that health is a universally shared goal and that people's actions are conducted in the pursuit of health and longevity. Healthful behaviours are assumed to be the rational choice. As a result, behavioural choices which are not informed by the pursuit of health are easily seen as aberrations to be accounted for and as problems to be solved. For example, Crossley (2004) points out that unsafe sexual practices in gay men tend

to be presented in terms of addiction models of behaviour rather than as behavioural choices. From a psychodynamic perspective, "conscious behaviours antithetical to normal concern for self-preservation and self-care" (Turp, 1999: 308) are conceptualised as symptoms of psychic conflicts which have their roots in early life. They are expressed in the form of self-harm (eg. cutting), eating disorders, substance and alcohol abuse as well as other behaviours which "knowingly invite physical injury and which typically arouse similar feelings of shock and alarm in those who witness them"; such behaviours may include "driving with deliberate recklessness" (Turp, 1999:308). Similarly, much health psychology research has been motivated by a desire to explain why it is that some people continue to engage in behaviours which they know to be unhealthy or risky such as smoking, drinking above the recommended limit, unprotected sex, high-fat diets and so on. Increasingly complex predictive models are being developed in an attempt to identify the causes of such undesirable behaviours (see Conner & Norman, 1996; Conner & Armitage, 1998). It seems, then, that behavioural choices which do not prioritise health and safety constitute a challenge to psychologists, and one way of meeting this challenge has been to re-conceptualise such choices as the product of psychopathology or false beliefs, and thus not really choices at all. As a result, instead of looking at the meanings of these behaviours within the lifeworld of the individual, psychologists look for the pathology or cognitive bias which generates them. An alternative viewpoint would be that there is more than one rationality and that even though it may be hard to understand why some people may want to do things which are risky and which may hurt, it is possible, and worthwhile, to attempt to bring to light their meaning and value to those who engage in them. Work on the meanings attributed to risky sexual practices has generated helpful insights into the rationalities which

underpin such behaviours (eg. Holland et al. 1991; Maticka-Tyndale, 1992; Willig, 1995; Flowers, Smith, Sheeran & Beail, 1997) and has challenged a 'relapse' model of sexual risk-taking (eg. Hart et al., 1992). The research presented in this paper aims to extend our understanding of meanings and motivations in relation to risky practices within the context of dangerous sports.

Extreme Sport

Extreme sport may be defined as recreational physical activity which carries a risk of serious physical injury or even death. The label 'extreme sport' has become a well-known denominator for activities such as bungee-jumping, sky-diving, skate- and snow-boarding, surfing, hang gliding, paragliding, rock-climbing, kayaking, rafting, canyoning and so on. Campbell and Johnson (2005) report in the Observer newspaper that new research for Sport England into the growth of extreme sports found that over 5% of the adult population was taking part in at least one adventure activity on a regular basis, and that 12% would like to take part. In the US, participation in such 'alternative' sports has increased by 244.7 % between 1978 and 2000 (Puchan, 2004). In addition, the demographics of participants in extreme sports have broadened to include people of all ages and increasing numbers of women (Celsi, et al., 1993).

Psychological Research into Extreme Sports

Since extreme sport is a relatively recent phenomenon, little psychological research in this area has been carried out. A review of the literature, based upon relevant publications listed on the PsycInfo database, identified only nineteen papers directly concerned with the psychological dimensions of extreme (or dangerous or risky) sport. These publications fall into three distinct categories, concerned with

personality, birth order effects, and the meanings and motivations behind high-risk behaviour, respectively.

Personality

First, there are those studies which attempt to establish a relationship between the practice of extreme sport and certain personality traits. Most of these have focused on sensation-seeking. Typically, studies of this type compare scores on Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) obtained from experimental and control groups. Perhaps not surprisingly, significant differences tend to emerge between the two groups, showing that extreme sports practitioners do, indeed, demonstrate a preference for novel, high-risk activities (eg. Rowland, et al., 1986; Franques et al., 2003; Diehm & Armatas, 2004; Shoham, et al., 1998) and for high levels of arousal (Kerr at al., 2003). It could be argued that the desire to encounter new and stimulating experiences (ie. sensation-seeking) is a necessary pre-condition for the initiation of extreme sport involvement. Within this context, it is striking that the size of the correlations between sensation-seeking measures and chosen leisure activities (including dangerous sports) across a range of studies are modest, controlling only around 10% of the variance in behaviour (Furnham, 2004). This means that other factors must contribute to the decision to practice extreme sports and that sensation-seeking as a personality trait constitutes only a modest influence.

Birth Order

A number of early papers report research which demonstrates that those who were born first are less likely to take part in dangerous sports than their siblings (eg. Nisbett, 1968; Yiannakis, 1976) or that those born last are more likely to participate

(Casher, 1977); this was particularly the case for those sports where the severity of possible injury was perceived to be high (Yiannakis, 1977). However, a later study (Seff et al., 1993) did not support the hypothesis that later born children are more likely to engage in high-risk recreational activities.

Meanings and Motivations

A small number of studies have concerned themselves with the inter- and intrapersonal processes which enable and define participation in extreme sport (eg. Celsi et al., 1993; Larkin & Griffiths, 2004). Such studies have adopted qualitative research methodologies in order to access meanings and motivations associated with extreme sports. For example, Celsi et al. (1993) conducted an ethnographic study of a skydiving drop zone and its attendant skydiving community. Grounded theory analysis of observational as well as interview data revealed a dynamic process of motivational change as individuals progressed from novice to experienced skydiver. Whilst motives for getting started tended to be interpersonal (eg. friends asked them to try the sport) and hedonic (eg. the desire for 'thrills'), maintenance of involvement was motivated by a combination of the desire to achieve mastery and status, and the opportunity to construct a new personal identity. With increasing involvement, participants were motivated by what the authors call 'higher-order values'. Eventually, the achievement of experiential qualities which transcend normal, everyday experience became primary motives for taking part. Larkin and Griffiths' (2004) analysis of five bungee- jumpers' accounts of their involvement in the sport also identified processes of initiation and maintenance. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, these authors identified a number of themes representing motives for getting involved and staying involved. Some of these resonated with

Celsi at al.'s (1993) inter-and intrapersonal processes. For example, Larkin and Griffiths' (2004) initiation themes included the influence of other people upon participants' decisions to try bungee-jumping. Again, reflecting Celsi et al.'s (1993) observations, identity work was an important part of the bungee-jumpers' motivation for perseverance with the sport. In their discussion of the ways in which their participants managed risk and pleasure, Larkin and Griffiths (2004) depart from Celsi et al.'s (1993) account by emphasising their participants' (discursive and psychological) strategies for minimizing their perceptions of risk and their resulting 'optimistic bias'. Thus, whilst Celsi et al. (1993) propose that death as a possibility and reality is part and parcel of the phenomenology of skydiving, Larkin and Griffiths (1993) suggest that a certain amount of denial is common. Studies focusing on meanings and motivations, then, suggest that involvement in extreme sport can be understood as a dynamic process of motive evolution and risk acculturation leading to the formation of a high-risk identity (cf. Celsi et al., 1993). The rewards reaped by individuals in return for investing in such a process include emotional (eg. 'flow', catharsis), social (eg. communitas, inclusion), and psychological (eg. sense of mastery, increased efficacy, self-esteem) benefits. Studies focusing on meanings and motivations have succeeded in throwing light on why individuals may take part in activities involving risks which to most people must seem "painfully unnecessary" (Celsi et al., 1993: 19). Most importantly, they have done so without conceptualising risk-taking behaviour as the product of pathological traits or states within those individuals who take part. In this way, extreme sport can be understood as a meaningful and purposeful activity, albeit an unusual one. The research presented in this paper aims to expand our understanding of the meanings and motivations associated with involvement in extreme sport.

Methodology

There are a number of different ways in which researchers have used a phenomenological orientation in order to carry out empirical research (eg. Giorgi, 1970, 1994; Giorgi et al. 1975; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 1996; Smith et al. 1999). The research presented in this paper took as its guide Colaizzi's (1978) account of how phenomenological research may be carried out. Colaizzi's version of the phenomenological method is influenced by Giorgi's (1970; 1984; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) descriptive pre-transcendental Husserlian phenomenology (Giorgi, 2000). This means that its aim is the identification of the basic structure of a phenomenon based upon the convergence of accounts.

The Research Process

Recruitment of participants

Experience with the phenomenon under investigation and the ability to talk about it reasonably articulately were the only criteria for selecting participants. Eight extreme sports practitioners were recruited. Three of them were skydivers (all male), three were mountaineers (two male, one female) and two practiced a variety of extreme sports (one female, one male).

The Interviews

Participants were interviewed at a location of their choice. All interviews were carried out one-to-one and without any interruptions. Interviews lasted for around one hour and were tape-recorded. In order to encourage rich descriptions of experience, participants were invited to recall and describe in detail one particular, concrete episode of extreme sport activity. Further open-ended questions were then used in

order to encourage participants to reflect and elaborate on their initial accounts. These included questions about their feelings before and after taking part in extreme sports, their best/worst experiences with it, and the qualities and meanings associated with the experience. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants were invited to choose an alias by which they would be referred to in the research report.

Analysis

Analysis of individual transcripts

The transcripts were worked through one of by one. The first stage of analysis involved the identification of statements, phrases or words that were concerned with the nature of the phenomenon. Next, the statements were grouped in terms of the themes that they invoked. Having grouped all statements into appropriate themes, one general statement per theme was written in an attempt to capture the essence of each theme. This completed the analysis of an individual transcript. The same procedure was followed for each transcript, generating eight lists of themes and eight general statements. The next stage of the analysis involved integrating these in such a way as to produce an overall account of the quality, structure and essence of the phenomenon under investigation.

Integration of themes

The eight lists of themes were integrated by first selecting all those themes whose meaning was shared by all participants. The next step was to identify those themes which were shared by some but not necessarily all of the participants, and to group them under shared headings. As a result of this process, clusters of shared themes

were produced together with an indication of how many of the participants had contributed to them.

Production of a final statement

As a last stage in the analysis, Colaizzi (1978) recommends that the researcher produces a final descriptive statement about the phenomenon under investigation. This was done by drawing on the themes and statements extracted during the analysis of the interview transcripts. Both universally shared and additional themes feature in the final statement. Following a process of participant validation, a revised version of the statement was produced.

Analysis

We begin by presenting the general structure of the phenomenon in the form of the final descriptive statement. This will be followed by a more detailed exploration of its constitutive themes and their relationships with one another.

Final Statement

'Entering a situation which is physically and mentally challenging provides an opportunity to test one's limits. Choosing to encounter the unknown means breaking with comfort and familiar routines and it allows one to stretch oneself, to lift oneself to another level. As such, it forms part of a wider aspirational project which is concerned with challenging, and ultimately extending, one's personal limitations. Rising to the challenge, and success at mastering it, generates a sense of achievement and satisfaction. This may also involve the satisfaction associated with the acquisition of increasing levels of experience, skill and expertise. There may also be an element

of surprise at one's emotional response to the situation and at the realisation of what one may, or may not, be capable of. Other people are aware of the challenging nature of one's activity. Whilst they may or may not approve of it, they appreciate its difficulty and potential hazards. Other people's perceptions of oneself are, to some extent, influenced by this awareness. The knowledge that one's activities are too challenging for most people to contemplate does contribute to their attraction. However, it is not the primary motivation for engaging in them.

Other people may also play an important role in that amongst those who practice a particular extreme sport there may exist a strong bond and strong feelings of camaraderie generated by being together during moments of great vulnerability. During the activity, one is aware of the presence of real danger to oneself and of the possibility that one may sustain physical damage or injury. As a result, one may feel scared and vulnerable. Death is also acknowledged as a possibility; however, the prospect of death carries different meanings for different individuals and it is not necessarily experienced as the worst thing that can happen. The intense quality of the experience means that one is fully immersed within the present moment. One is so preoccupied with the sensations and demands confronting one from moment to moment, that it is impossible to reflect on the experience as a whole whilst it is taking place. If environmental and personal conditions are right (eg. no over-crowding, good weather, appropriate equipment, appropriate level of fitness and/or skill etc), one may experience intense feelings of joy and pleasure unlike those generated by any other activity. These feelings of elation may persist for some time afterwards. The experience also has a paradoxical quality in that it combines apparently contradictory feelings and sensations such as pleasure and pain, calmness and arousal, feeling at risk and feeling safe, all at the same time. The presence of these contrasts contributes

to its exceptional quality and to the sense that it is an experience out of the ordinary. An encounter with novel rituals and routines as well as specialist equipment can add to this quality. The experience offers its participants access to combinations of feelings and sensations which are not available in everyday life.

In some cases, a sense of loss of control and letting other people take responsibility for one's safety forms an important part of the experience as a whole. However, in other cases, self-sufficiency and independence are much preferred. Despite these differences, it was agreed that taking part in these activities constitutes an extremely important part of one's life and that one's sense of self, identity and well-being is clearly bound up with them. For some participants, this meant that the activity had an addictive quality in that it was experienced as a necessity- life without it was inconceivable.'

Constitutive Themes

The descriptive statement is structured around a series of themes. Four of them were invoked by all participants. These were *Context, Challenge, Suffering* and *Other People*. A further five themes were shared by at least half of the participants. These included *Mastery and Skill, Contrasts, Being in the Present, Compulsion,* and *Pleasure.*

Context

This refers to the conditions which need to be met for the experience of extreme sport to be possible, or at least to be fully appreciated. All of the participants specified conditions which contributed, in one way or another, to the quality of the experience. Often these were environmental conditions such as the weather or social conditions

such as the presence of other people. For example, Dragon describes how, for him, the experience of mountain-climbing is linked with solitude and independence, and how, therefore, the presence of other people "pollutes" the experience and renders it "a different experience altogether". He concludes that,

> "If I had a choice, I'd prefer to go alone on these trips (pause) I'd choose to go on my own. If it was safe enough, I'd go on my own. I'd choose my own routes, I'd get there at my own pace."

The fact that all participants invoked *Context* suggests that the experience of taking part in extreme sport takes place at the interface between person and environment; it requires that the person opens up to the environment and works with it in order to bring about the experience.

Challenge

Participants talked about extreme sport as an opportunity to push themselves to their limits, possibly even beyond, both mentally and physically. For some, such as Jo and Andy, the challenge consisted in overcoming the basic fear of jumping from a great height. As Jo put it, "It's a challenge to mentally make yourself jump off a bridge". Others experienced challenge as more of a process. For example, Billy describes how learning to skydive involves the challenge of undergoing physical and mental transformations:

> "I think what I liked about it was the fact that it was hard to learn. It's not something you can learn all in one day. It takes years to learn how to do it. It's

> not just physical condition, mental condition, you've got to build muscle memory, balance, and build up your strength. You're using all your body, and it's a challenge."

Whether in the form of a 'moment of truth' (eg. jumping off a bridge) or an ongoing process (eg. learning to skydive), the challenge of taking part in extreme sports allowed participants to find out what they were capable of, and, having identified their current limits, to push themselves yet further and to attempt to extend the remit of what they were capable of. Challenging mental and physical limits involved overcoming fear, fighting exhaustion and acquiring new skills. Rising to challenges was accompanied by a sense of achievement. To triumph over one's limitations generated feelings of satisfaction and pride, and these were experienced as pleasurable.

The close relationship between challenge and achievement in participants' accounts of their experiences suggests that, on the whole, they only took up challenges which they could meet successfully. Thus, although taking part in extreme sport involved pushing boundaries, it seems that participants took care to ensure that the goals they set themselves, though challenging, were achievable. This indicates that the practice of extreme sport involves careful assessment of one's own abilities and the identification of targets which lie just beyond, and yet within reach of, one's current capabilities. The experience of extreme sport, then, involves reflection and monitoring of one's developing capabilities. This means that the phenomenon is brought into being by carefully matching ability with challenge, and it is, therefore, self-consciously contrived, rather than encountered inadvertently.

Suffering

Although physical pain was not involved on every occasion, and the experience of extreme sport did not normally cause physical damage, the possibility of pain, injury or, indeed, death was ever present. This awareness contributed to the value of the experience. As Pea put it,

> "The freedom that it gives you as well, of I guess the process of putting your life at risk, and then surviving that is part of the buzz".

All participants talked about their own and other people's experiences of discomfort, pain or injury as a result of taking part in extreme sports. Two of the participants had indeed been very seriously injured in the past and had sustained lasting damage which was still visible at the time of the interviews, many years later. Whilst participants tended to talk about pain and injury as undesirable dimensions of the experience, there was also a sense in which some degree of physical suffering was a necessary part of pushing oneself to one's limits, and beyond (see *Challenge*). This may involve feeling "sick" or "queasy" with anxiety before a jump (eg. Andy and Jo) or feeling "completely exhausted" and "physically drained" after a climb (eg. Dragon and Elle). Suffering is necessary because it constitutes tangible evidence of the fact that one is really pushing up against limitations and breaking through boundaries. Elle makes this explicit when she describes her experience of a difficult climb,

> "It's really telling on your body and it was really strenuous but you kind of feel it makes it even better because you're really pushing yourself to the limit (pause) the next day I just felt really dreadful."

Thus, whether actual or potential, *Suffering* is a defining feature of the phenomenon because without the possibility of pain or damage the experience could not be construed as challenging and this, in turn, is an essential quality of the phenomenon.

Other People

Participants were aware that other people took note of the challenging nature of their activities and that this influenced the way in which they were perceived by others. Although such perceptions were not always positive, it was important to participants that other people were aware of what they were doing. Being different from the majority and have other people acknowledge this was experienced as enjoyable. Elle acknowledged that she experienced "an immense sense of satisfaction and pride" when people displayed signs of surprise and disbelief at hearing of her risk-taking. Similarly, Shiva explained,

> "And that's part of the enjoyment, becoming accustomed to things which if you present them graphically to a public audience, people would be stunned."

For Andy, the anticipation of being able to 'live and tell the tale' added to his enjoyment of extreme sports activities. He differentiated between "the experience itself" and "the story-telling bit" both of which were equally important to him. By contrast, Billy acknowledged that he likes to impress people with his activities but at the same time feels self-conscious about this:

> "I'll be honest, I think it's impressive for other people to find out that this is what I do. But then at the same time I'm a bit embarrassed about that. If I tell somebody, I'm a bit embarrassed about having told somebody."

Whether enjoyable, embarrassing or both, other people's astonishment at what they were capable of doing added meaning to participants' experience of extreme sport.

Additional Themes

These themes add further depth to our understanding of the phenomenon; however, as will be demonstrated below, they chime with the four constitutive themes discussed above and, therefore, support the basic structure of the phenomenon.

Mastery and Skill

Most of the activities participants talked about required a degree of technical knowledge and skill which could only be acquired through training and experience. Gaining experience and getting better at performing the sport generated a sense of mastery, and this was experienced as rewarding. Some participants were very much aware of their level of expertise and how their current abilities compared with those of their peers. For some, there was a clear sense of progression characterised by the acquisition of increasing levels of skill which were recognised within their community. For example, for Pea, a competitive element was a necessary ingredient to making the experience worthwhile:

> "Just getting out of an aeroplane on your own, messing around in freefall for a minute and then open the parachute doesn't do anything for me. You know,

> it's the performance-based bit where you are linking up with other people, achieving things, breaking records and achieving the goal that you set out to achieve, that really interests me, and when you jump on your own, there's nothing to judge your personal performance by."

Others experienced a more internal sense of achievement based upon their own assessment of their progress. For example, Billy described how he takes pleasure in learning difficult things over a period a time, and how satisfying it is to (slowly) acquire a "sense of mastery":

> "I've had that feeling again and again and maybe that is what I'm looking for. When I discovered that I could get out with no instructor and, you know, look around, fall, deploy, sort myself out, get down safely, land, pack the parachute, get back up in the plane, and then I discovered what jumping with other people was like and I got that feeling again, wow, this is good, do it again and again and learn how to and then I got into a team and it was the same feeling. The more you jump, the more air-wise you get."

References to the importance of mastery and skill suggest that the experience of taking part in extreme sport requires discipline and structured learning. It demands commitment and it calls for considerable investment of resources such as time and energy on the part of the participant. Thus, the phenomenon does not arise spontaneously; instead, it is carefully constructed and nurtured by participants who commit to it over long periods of time.

Mastery and Skill connects with the theme *Challenge* outlined in the previous section in that the acquisition of increasing levels of expertise requires that one challenges existing limits and that one pushes oneself to overcome limitations in one's capabilities. The sense of achievement that was experienced as a result of rising to a challenge was also felt within the context of *Mastery and Skill*. And again, self-reflection and monitoring of one's developing capabilities were involved in both.

Contrasts

Experiencing a contrast meant being aware, whilst involved in a particular extreme sports activity, of the presence of two apparently contradictory qualities. For example, the beauty and peacefulness of the environment (eg. the mountain one is climbing, the landscape into which one is skydiving) might instil a sense of calmness whilst, at the same time, the activity itself may be experienced as unsettling and physically challenging. Similarly, there might be a sense of being at risk of serious injury combined with feeling ultimately safe. Elle's reference to the "adrenaline-fuelled comfort" she enjoys when climbing mountains illustrates this feature of the phenomenon well. Shiva invokes a similar quality:

> "Part of the enjoyment and enrichment of this experience is becoming very calm with things that, on the face of it, might seem disturbing (…) the more satisfying experiences of calmness come only after periods of intense exertion and mobility but according to given rules so it's structured."

Elle invoked a contrast-experience of temporality ("right now- but forever") whereby

> "You get this wonderful sense of right now, this is the wonderful place, right now, and that's all that really matters but in that I kind of feel: and this is the way it's been for millions and millions of years, and this is the way it's gonna be for millions and millions of years. I'm not gonna be here and loads of other folk aren't gonna be here but this mountain still is. So there's a sense of right now - but forever."

Participants repeatedly drew attention to the presence of such contrasts; most of them described their presence as enriching whilst none of them experienced them as unpleasant or problematic.

The paradoxical quality of *Contrasts*, together with the necessity of *Suffering*, suggests that the phenomenon of taking part in extreme sports challenges our assumptions about what is or is not logically coherent or in line with everyday assumptions about consistency and rationality (such as the assumption that suffering is best avoided or that contradictory feelings are mutually exclusive). The phenomenon, then, accommodates a range of opposing qualities, and their juxtaposition generates the possibility of novel emotional experiences.

Being in the Present

Participants described how they focused on the immediate demands of the extreme sport situation, to the exclusion of all other thoughts, feelings or perceptions. During such moments, there appears to be no mental space available for anything other than the task at hand, and as a result, one's world is reduced to the immediate present. Participants described life becoming very "simple" and "straightforward" as a result. Elle describes her experience of this process during a climb:

> "You don't think about anything else. You think about where you're putting your feet, you look for where you're gonna go next. Above all, you feel it. You feel every footprint, you feel every handhold, you feel the security in it and that's what you spend, or that's what I spend all my time doing (pause) is I suppose attempting to feel secure at that precise moment and that's the only thing you think about. It's not what you're gonna do when you get to the top. It's not what you're gonna have when you get into the pub, it's not what happened twenty minutes ago, it's only that."

Participants experienced this sense of *Being in the Present* as calming and relaxing, comparable to a "meditative state" (Shiva). It allowed them to lose themselves in the present and to be momentarily freed from the concerns and responsibilities associated with everyday life such as "gasbills" (Elle) and "the taxman" (Billy). This was experienced as liberating. *Being in the Present* constitutes a way of gaining a different perspective whereby things that appear to matter so very much in the course of everyday life become small and insignificant when faced with the task at hand. As Elle put it, "[T]here are no problems in the mountains other than where you stick your hand next and that's why I love it". So it seems that seeking out the physical and mental challenges associated with extreme sports activities is a way of re-arranging one's priorities and escaping from the demands and pressures of everyday life. *Being in the Present* links with the theme of *Compulsion* (see below) in that the release from the burden of everyday concerns is experienced as both pleasurable and necessary, providing a means by which participants managed their emotional life. Within this context, they talked about the need to "ground oneself" (Elle) to "get rid of negative

energy" (Dragon), or the need for "a lift" (Jo). In this way, taking part in extreme sports on a regular basis was experienced as therapeutic, reducing stress levels and preventing the build-up of tension.

Compulsion

Taking part in extreme sport is not an additional extra, something which participants could easily imagine doing without. Rather, extreme sport was experienced as an integral part of their lives, something which, if taken away (eg. as a result of injury), would need to be replaced with something comparable. This was because the experience of extreme sport provided something vital for participants which they could not access in other ways. Jo describes how she has used extreme sport to generate much needed positive energy and motivation:

> "The times when I wanted to do those things, it's times when everything else in my life is boring and dull, nothing is going on and I just needed a big lift. And doing something like this gives me a big lift at the time I do it and afterwards I'm regenerated and I feel motivated to do other things."

It seems that taking part in extreme sport is functional for participants; it can provide a solution to a problem. Pea perceives a "therapeutic" quality in the practice of extreme sports:

> "People who actually stick at it are people that have found some sort of satisfaction and some sort of, I don't know, some sort of therapeutic achievement by actually doing it, that they enjoy, whether it's overcoming

their own personal demons or whether it's having found group of people who they get on with"

The desire to take part in extreme sport was experienced as a fundamental need which, when frustrated, gave rise to distinctly unpleasant emotional states such as feeling "stressed" (Elle), "unhappy" (Billy), "itchy" (Jo), or as though one was "falling apart" (Jay). Participants found it difficult, and sometimes frightening, to imagine life without the sport. Several of them used the term addiction to describe their relationship with extreme sport, and they expressed the belief that without it they would be less able to function in everyday life. Two participants felt that without extreme sport they would be using drugs or alcohol, respectively, in order to meet their emotional needs. It appears, then, that the phenomenon, whilst being carefully and deliberately constructed and nurtured by participants (see *Challenge* and *Mastery and Skill*), is not entirely under the control of those who experience it. Chiming with the theme of *Contrasts*, it appears that taking part in extreme sport involves *both* control and a loss of control; the deliberate use of the phenomenon (to challenge oneself; to transcend one's limitations; to manage one's emotional life) co-exists with a sense of being dependent upon, and in need of, the phenomenon in order to be able to function satisfactorily in everyday life.

Pleasure

The enjoyment of extreme sports activities manifested itself in a number of different pleasurable feelings. These included an "adrenaline buzz" characterised by excitement which some participants described as "feeling high". Feelings of joy and happiness were also invoked, and the experience was described as "magical" (Jay), "fantastic"

(Jo) and "blissful" (Billy). There was a sense of pleasure through feeling alive, energised and vital; participants talked about feelings of "elation" (Jay) and "exhilaration" (Jo). These feelings could outlast the actual sporting activity, sometimes lasting for days afterwards. They were felt throughout the body and they seemed to lie outside of the normal range of emotions experienced by participants in their everyday life. As such, they were experienced as rare and precious moments. Dragon describes the "high" he experiences whilst climbing a mountain, comparing the pleasure he obtains from this to the effects of a drug :

> "It's like breathing the fresh air, out in the open, away from the pollution. I don't know exactly how to describe it but it's an absolutely amazing feeling that I've had then. I cannot describe that feeling. And it's a feeling you get no-where else. You cannot get that high. It's like for a drug user, they will take cocaine to get high. For me it's my addiction, I have to go to the mountains to get high."

Interestingly, *Pleasure* was not generally construed as a reason for engaging in extreme sport. Unlike *Challenge* and *Compulsion, Pleasure* was not described as a driving force behind participants' commitment to extreme sport. Rather, pleasurable feelings seemed to be accepted and enjoyed as a by-product of the activity, akin to a gift which one receives with gratitude and joy but which is not expected or sought out as such. In other words, participants did not engage in extreme sports in order to produce *Pleasure.* At the same time, there was a connection between *Pleasure* and *Compulsion*, as illustrated by Dagon's quote above, whereby the intense and unique feeling of joy produced by the activity was experienced as extremely alluring, even

addictive. It seems that there are two distinct levels of motivation for engaging in extreme sports; one of them more rational and purposive, linked with the desire to rise to a *Challenge* and to acquire increasing levels of *Mastery and Skill*, whereas the other operates at a less conscious level, drawing the individual towards the repetition of an activity which produces otherwise inaccessible feelings of joy and elation.

Discussion

The analysis produced a number of insights which resonate with those generated by Celsi et al.'s (1993) ethnographic research into skydiving. Most importantly, both investigations identified the relationship between person and context as a defining feature of the phenomenon. In the study reported here it was found that in order for the phenomenon to emerge, participants needed to ensure that certain internal and external conditions had been met and that the challenge they set themselves was on the edge of, yet within, their existing capabilities. In order to capture this feature of extreme sport, Celsi et al. (1993: 12) use the metaphor of the 'set piece' whereby participants "(…) carefully create a context of controlled uncertainty as a stage within which they can act". Thus, both investigations identified the importance of matching the individual's abilities with the demands of the context in such a way as to test one's limits without being overwhelmed. And again, both studies suggest that this process of matching requires considerable skill as well as commitment to the task, and that the acquisition of the necessary skills and experience takes place over time, along a trajectory involving increasing expertise, and which may also involve status and identity formation within the context of a community of likeminded and supportive peers. Thus, what may appear, from an outsider point-of-view, as a reckless, perhaps

impulsive act whereby caution is thrown to the wind in the pursuit of thrills (as suggested by the literature on sensation-seeking and dangerous sport), participants' own accounts suggest that what is required is a carefully staged scenario which produces just the right balance between challenge and comfort in order to allow a certain kind of experience to become possible. Thus, whilst pleasurable feelings (described by participants as 'adrenaline buzz' or 'feeling high') were part of the experience of taking part in extreme sport, they are not, in fact, its purpose. This contrasts with what seems to be suggested by research which conceptualises dangerous sports activities as mood modifiers alongside drugs and alcohol (eg. Larkin and Griffiths, 2004; Hobfoll et al., 1989; Franques et al., 2003). Instead, participants in both Celsi at al.'s (1993) and the present investigation identified a state of mind and body, referred to in the literature as 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Le Breton, 2000), as a major influence keeping participants involved with the sport and providing them with a sense of liberation and satisfaction. It was the achievement of this state, rather than thrills and excitement, which both Celsi et al's and the participants in this study described as potentially addictive. 'Flow' describes the experience of a unity of self, world and activity as a result of total absorption in an activity or situation. Everyday worries and concerns lose their significance, and we are not aware of any gap between what is and what ought to be. Whilst the present research identified this state of mind and body (*Being in the Present*) as one amongst a number of important dimensions of the experience of extreme sport, Celsi at al. (1993) go further to describe the ways in which other dimensions, such as achievement and mastery as well as controlled uncertainty, contribute to the production of 'flow'. For Celsi et al. (1993), 'flow' is the ultimate aim and purpose of the practice of extreme sport.

This study identified a range and diversity of experiences which reflects the differences in the types of extreme sport practised by participants. For example, it is interesting to note that those participants who were involved in skydiving tended to focus much more upon the social (camaraderie) aspects of their experience than the mountaineers in whose accounts the experience of 'flow' was more central
On reflection, the label 'extreme sport' which was chosen to identify the phenomenon of interest somewhat artificially draws together a range of activities which do differ in a number of ways. This suggests that there is scope for further research into the differences between the various types of extreme sports activity and their phenomenologies (for further reflections on the use of the phenomenological method in relation to this study see Author, in press).

Concluding Reflections

The analysis presented here suggests that taking part in extreme sport holds meanings and fulfils psychological functions beyond those which have been attributed to it in much of the research literature; as such, it challenges some of the assumptions which appear to underpin psychological practice in relation to risky behaviours. It seems that taking part in extreme sports activities means more to participants than searching for thrills and excitement, and their deliberate and self-conscious approach to the activities suggests that they are making informed choices rather than simply acting out unresolved conflicts or implementing distorted cognitions. Participants' accounts suggest that the experience of extreme sport permits them to experience their own existence in novel ways (eg. the experience of 'flow'). Thus, rather than (merely) being a vehicle of (potential) self-destruction or a symptom of unresolved psychic

conflicts, taking part in extreme sport seems to offer participants a way of extending their range of experience in order to make available new and potentially enriching ways of being. In the case of extreme sport, these ways of being carry certain risks to one's personal health and safety, and it seems that participants are very much aware of these risks and of the fact that the possibility of suffering is a necessary dimension of the experience.

These observations raise questions about the extent to which taking part in extreme sports may itself constitute a therapeutic experience. Participants talked about how extreme sports activities helped them to 'ground' themselves, to 'get rid of negative energy' or to 'lift' themselves to another level. They also felt that taking part in extreme sport had increased their levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. If the purpose of psychotherapeutic work is to explore, challenge and possibly re-configure the self-structure (see Spinelli, 2001:54-5) in the service of personal growth, it could be argued that participants' desire to push themselves up to and beyond their physical and psychological limits may be therapeutic in that it provides opportunities to test, play with, and possibly transcend the confines of the 'self'. This would suggest that engaging in extreme sport on a regular basis may be a way of living a particular set of meanings, of integrating into one's experience of life those meaning elements which would not otherwise be part of it and which would be missed (eg. the experience of 'flow'). Jungian psychotherapists acknowledge the importance of this when they talk about the process of individuation whereby diverse and sometimes oppositional elements are brought together and are integrated into the client's personality (eg. Sedgwick, 2001; Samuels,1985). From this perspective, the adoption of what may appear to be extreme, excessive or maladaptive practices or preferences may, in fact, be ways of adding missing meaning elements and of allowing neglected or

marginalized dimensions of existence to be lived (eg. Cowan, 1982; Yeoman,1998). Such a dialectical view of human psychology is echoed by Spinelli's (2001) argument that the various 'existence tensions' which characterise being human (eg. self/other, isolation/belonging, mental/physical, active/passive, freedom/determinism) are not, as may appear to be the case, oppositional but rather that they are complementary. This means that, rather than trying to resolve them, for example by eliminating one of the pair or by merging them, we need to accept that "(…) each requires the other, and, indeed, exists only via its relation to the other" (ibid.: 149). Generating the experience of 'flow' through engaging in extreme sport may be one way in which participants were able to foreground unity with the world and to temporarily foreclose their more commonly experienced individuality and separateness. In other words, producing the experience of 'flow' may be a way of managing existence tensions in a creative and purposeful way. However, it is important to remember that some of the participants described their relationship with extreme sport as addictive in that they experienced a need (rather than simply a desire) to engage in extreme sports. This suggests that whilst extreme sport may fulfil a therapeutic function, it may also lead to dependency. Future research needs to take a closer look at the tensions and contradictions which characterise the experience of extreme sport.

Total no. of words 8693 (incl. abstract and references):

References

Author (under review) Reflections on the Use of the Phenomenological Method, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*

Campbell, D. and Johnson, E. (2005) If It Can't Kill You, It Just Isn't Sporting. The *Observer*. 27th March, p. 6.

Casher, B. (1977) Relationship between Birth Order and Participation in Dangerous Sports, *Research Quarterly*, 48(1): 33-40.

Celsi, R.L., Rose, R.L. and Leigh, T.W. (1993) An Exploration of High-Risk Leisure Consumption Through Skydiving, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20:1-23.

Colaizzi, P.F. (1978) Psychological Research As the Phenomenologist Views It. In: R.S. Valle and M. Kings (eds) *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology*. New York: OUP.

Conner, M. & Norman, P. (Eds.) (1996) *Predicting Health Behaviour*. Buckingham; Open University Press.

Conner, M. & Armitage, C.J. (1998). Extending the Theory of Planned Behavior: A review of avenues for further research, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 28, 1429-1464.

Cowan, L. (1982) *Masochism. A Jungian View*. Woodstock: Spring Publications.

Crossley, M. L. (2004) Making Sense of 'Barebacking': Gay Men's Narratives, Unsafe Sex and the 'Resistance Habitus', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43: 225-244.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975) *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Diehm, R. and Armatas, C. (2004) Surfing: An Avenue for Socially Acceptable Risk-Taking, Satisfying Needs for Sensation Seeking and Experience Seeking, *Personality & Individual Differences*, 36(3):663-677.

Flowers, P., Smith, J., Sheeran, P. & Beail, N. (1997) Health and Romance: Understanding Unprotected Sex in Relationships Among Gay Men, *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 2: 73-86.

Franques, P., Auriacombe, M., Piquemal, E., Verger, M., Brisseau-Gimenez, S., Grabot, D. and Tignol, J. (2003) Sensation Seeking as a Common Factor in Opioid Dependent Subjects and High Risk Sport Practising Subjects. A Cross Sectional Study, *Drug & Alcohol Dependence*, 69(2): 121-126.

Furnham, A. (2004) Personality and Leisure Activity: Sensation Seeking and Spare-Time Activities, In: R.M. Stelmack (ed) *On the Psychobiology of Personality: Essays in Honour of Marvin Zuckerman*, Elsevier Science: New York.

Giorgi. A. (1970) *Psychology As Human Science*. New York: Harper and Row.

Giorgi, A. (1994) A Phenomenological Perspective on Certain Qualitative Research Methods, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 25: 190-220.

Giorgi, A., Fischer, C. and Murray, E. (eds) (1975) *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology*, Vol 2. Pittsburgh, P.A.: Duquesne University Press.

Giorgi, A. (2000) The Similarities and Differences Between Descriptive and Interpretive Methods in Scientific Phenomenological Psychology. In: B. Gupta (ed) *The Empirical and the Transcendental: A Fusion of Horizons*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Giorgi, A. and Giorgi, B. (2003) Phenomenology. In: J.A. Smith (ed) *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. London: Sage.

Hart, G., Boulton, M., Fitzpatrick, R., McLean, J. and Dawson, J. (1992) 'Relapse' to Unsafe Sexual Behaviour Among Gay Men: A Critique of Recent Behavioural HIV/AIDS Research, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 14(2): 216-232.

Hobfoll, S.E., Rom, T. and Segal, B. (1989) Sensation Seeking, Anxiety, and Risk Taking in the Israeli Context, In: S. Einstein (ed) *Drug and Alcohol Use: Issues and Factors*. New York: Plenum Press.

Holland, J. Ramazanoglu, C., Scott, S., Sharpe, S. & Thomson, R. (1991). Between Embarrassment and Trust: Young Women and the Diversity of Condom Use. In P. Aggleton, G. Hart & P. Davies (Eds.) *AIDS: Responses, Interventions and Care*. London: Falmer Press.

Kerr, J.H., Frank-Ragan, E. and Brown, R.I.F. (1993) Taking Risks With Health. *Patient Education and Counselling*, 22: 73-80.

Larkin, M. and Griffiths, M.D. (2004) Dangerous Sports and Recreational Drug-Use: Rationalising and Contextualizing Risk, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 14: 215-232.

Le Breton, D. (2000) Playing Symbolically with Death and Extreme Sports, *Body & Society*, 6(1): 1-11.

Lupton, D. (1995) *The Imperative of Health*. London: Sage.

Maticka--Tyndale, E. (1992). Social Construction of HIV--Transmission and Prevention Among Young Heterosexual Adults, *Social Problems*, 39(3), 238--252.

Moustakas, C. (1994) *Phenomenological Research Methods*. London: Sage.

Nisbett, R.E. (1968) Birth Order and Participation in Dangerous Sports, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8 (4): 351-353.

Puchan, H. (2004) Living 'Extreme': Adventure Sports, Media and Commercialisation, *Journal of Communication Management*, 9 (2): 171-178.

Rowland, G.L., Franken, R.E. and Harrison, K. (1986) Sensation Seeking and Participation in Sporting Activities, *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 8(3):212-220.

Samuels, A. (1985) *Jung and the Post-Jungians*. London: Routledge.

Sedgwick, D. (2001*) Introduction to Jungian Psychotherapy. The Therapeutic Relationship*. Hove: Brunner- Routledge.

Seff, M.A., Gecas, V. and Frey, J.H. (1993) Birth Order, Self-Concept and Participation in Dangerous Sports, *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 127(2): 221-232.

Shoham, A., Rose, G., Gregory, M. and Kahle, L.R. (1998) Marketing of Risky Sports: From Intention to Action, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 26(4): 307-321.

Smith, J.A. (1996) Beyond the Divide between Cognition and Discourse: Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Health Psychology, *Psychology and Health*, 11: 261-71.

Smith, J.A., Jarman, M. and Osborn, M. (1999) Doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, In: M. Murray and K. Chamberlain (eds) *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods*. London: Sage.

Spinelli, E. (2001) *The Mirror and the Hammer. Challenges to Therapeutic Orthodoxy*. London: Continuum.

Turp, M. (1999) Encountering Self-Harm in Psychotherapy and Counselling Practice, *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 15(3):306-321.

Willig, C. (1995) 'I Wouldn't Have Married the Guy If I'd Have to Do That': Heterosexual Adults' Constructions of Condom Use and Their Implications for Sexual Practice. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 5, 75-87.

Yeoman, A. (1998) *Now or Neverland. Peter Pan and the Myth of Eternal Youth. A Psychological Perspective on a Cultural Icon*. Toronto: Inner City Books.

Yiannakis, A. (1976) Birth Order and Preference for Dangerous Sports Among Males, *Research Quarterly*, 47 (1): 62-67.