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Abstract

There has been little research devoted to understanding the sporting experience of Adventure Racing (AR) participants. Given the possible psychological benefits of AR participation, this investigation was undertaken to obtain additional insight into these competitors' experience of participating in the Everglades Challenge. Existential phenomenological interviews were conducted with 10 participants ranging in age from 34 to 64 years who took part in the 2011 Everglades Challenge. Qualitative analysis of the transcripts revealed a total of 498 meaning units that were further grouped into subthemes, majors themes, and a primary ground. A final thematic structure revealed *Adventure* as the primary ground for the four major themes of *Pushing Limits*, *Community*, *Preparation*, and *Natural Elements*. The results suggest that AR can be transformational in many ways and that it provides an avenue for exploring personal meaning and promoting psychological benefits.

Keywords

adventure racing, humanistic, sport, everglades challenge

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Participation in alternative sports has been on the rise in the United States over the past several decades (Puchan, 2004). These sports have been defined as activities that are unusual, have inherent risk, and contain unconventional rules/regulations (e.g., kayaking, surfing, skydiving, etc.; Bennet, Henson, & Zhang, 2002). In general, prior research suggests that individuals participate in alternative sports for sensation seeking, pleasure, and to experience skill mastery (Diehm & Armatas, 2004; Larkin & Griffiths, 2004). However, Brymer and Oades (2009) suggested that the majority of prior research on alternative sport has been conducted through the lens of the element of risk associated with these activities, suggesting a somewhat negative perspective on involvement in these activities. Furthermore, recent research suggests that nature-based adventure sports may support positive psychological well-being (Brymer, Cuddihy, & Sharma-Brymer, 2010; Loeffler, 2004; Pohl, Borrie, & Patterson, 2000). This research suggests that there may be more to alternative sport participation than what has been previously described.

One alternative sport that is growing in popularity is Adventure Racing (AR). AR is an endurance hybrid sport that is an offspring of triathlons, kayaking, backpacking, sailing, and exploration. Essentially, individuals or teams navigate from a starting line through various checkpoints in the wilderness to a finish line. These events can take several days to complete and require endurance, risk taking, and management of difficult terrains. Two major differences between AR and traditional alternative sports are the elements of competition and teamwork. To date only a few studies have been conducted on AR participants (Edmonds, Tenebaum, Kamata, & Johnson, 2009; Schneider, Butryn, Furst, & Masucci, 2007). Prior studies on AR have examined the role of collective efficacy (Edmonds et al., 2009) and the experience of risk (Schneider et al., 2007). Although the prior research offers some initial insights into AR, they do not provide in-depth information on AR participants' sporting experience. Thus, it is uncertain if the same experiences and benefits seen with other alternative sports relate to AR.

Although there are several different types of AR events throughout the United States, one popular competition is the *Everglades Challenge* (EC). The annual EC is a 300-mile unsupported, expedition-style adventure race from Fort Desoto in Tampa Bay to Key Largo in Florida for kayaks, canoes, and small boats. Competitors are required to complete the race within 8 days or less. The time it takes to complete the race depends on several variables including athlete characteristics (e.g., fitness, coping with stress, etc.), the type of vessel (i.e., sailboat, kayak, etc.), and environmental conditions. Approximately only 40% of the participants who start the race finish (WaterTribe, n.d.). Given the rigor of the EC, it appeared that these

competitors would be good candidates to interview in order to explore the psychological experience of AR. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to conduct phenomenological interviews with AR competitors to explore their sporting experience.

Method

Participants

Participants included eight males (mean age = 49.5 years) and two females (mean age = 49 years) ranging in prior experience (1-7 years). To be eligible for phenomenological interviewing, participants must have experience with the phenomenon and they must be able to articulate this experience (Dale, 1996). The final number of participants was ultimately determined by data saturation. Data saturation occurs when information attained in the interviews becomes redundant (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Procedures

After obtaining institutional review board approval, competitors participating in the 2011 EC were recruited for the study. The first author recruited potential participants through face-to-face contact at the event's set-up day prior to actual the competition. Potential study participants were told they would be interviewed about their experience of competing in the EC. Phone and video Skype interviews were then scheduled with individuals expressing interest in participating in the study; the interviews occurred 2 weeks after the event. Phenomenological procedures developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002) were used because these procedures have been successfully used in prior sport psychology research (see Becker, 2009; Post & Wrisberg, 2012; Simpson & Wrisberg, in press). The procedures included *exploring the researcher's bias, data collection, data analysis, developing/confirming the thematic structure, and establishing validity and reliability.*

Exploring Research Bias. Before conducting any interviews, the primary researcher participated in a bracketing interview. The interview was designed to ascertain his presuppositions and expectations about AR participants. Examples of his presuppositions included the following: (a) adventure racers are highly motivated, (b) finishing rather than winning would be the main focus of the participants, and (c) participants enjoyed the element of danger. The primary researcher used the results of the bracketing interview to avoid imposing his bias during subsequent interviews and data analysis.

Data Collection. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Prior to each interview, participants provided written informed consent and were told that their responses would remain confidential. All participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended question: “When you think about your experience of competing in the Everglades Challenge what stands out for you?” Follow-up questions were then only used to assist the participant in clarifying details about their AR experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The primary researcher concluded the questioning by asking each participant if they had anything else to share about their AR experience. The mean time for the 10 interviews was 53.46 minutes.

Analyzing the Data. Several steps were taken to ensure that the research team accurately captured participants’ experience of AR. After each interview the primary researcher transcribed the audio record verbatim and pseudonyms were used to protect participant’s confidentiality. For validity purposes, all 10 participants were then invited to read their transcript for clarity, accuracy, and to provide any additional feedback. All participants verified their transcripts and indicated that the account represented an accurate portrayal of their experience of the EC.

An interpretative research group composed of the primary researcher and the two coauthors then analyzed the transcripts. The transcripts were read aloud and at intermittent intervals the group paused to discuss the participant’s statements, identified comments containing meaningful information, and noted patterns that reoccurred. These information-rich statements were identified as *meaning units*. Hermeneutic procedures (see Thomas & Polio, 2002) were then used to cluster meaning units into distinct *subthemes*. Subthemes were then grouped into *major themes* and a *primary ground*. The final thematic structure was refined until consensus among the group was achieved.

Confirming the Thematic Structure. To ensure that the thematic structure accurately reflected participants’ experience, each participant was provided with a copy of the final thematic structure. Participants were then asked if the thematic structure captured their EC experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Seven out of the 10 participants responded to the request for feedback and stated that the thematic structure accurately represented their EC experiences.

Establishing Validity and Reliability. To further establish validity the participants’ own language was used as much as possible in the results and in the labeling of the themes (Dale, 1996). Ultimately, criteria for validity and reliability are achieved if the reader can find supporting evidence in the text for the

researcher's interpretation and appreciate how the thematic structure is representative of the participants' experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Results

The Thematic Structure

Qualitative analysis of the transcripts revealed a total of 498 meaning units, which were grouped into subthemes, major themes, and a primary ground (see Table 1). In the present study, *Adventure* was the primary ground against which participants' experience of the EC was situated. *Adventure* was the context for the four major themes of *Pushing Limits*, *Community*, *Preparation*, and *Natural Elements*.

Adventure

For several participants, the EC was a welcomed adventure that enabled them to disconnect from their daily lives. Participants' descriptions of these experiences were grouped into the primary ground of *Adventure*. This ground includes four subthemes: *Wilderness*, *Freedom*, *Novel Experiences*, and *Personal Discovery*.

Wilderness. The opportunity to participate in a race that incorporates the natural beauty of the Everglades National Park was certainly appealing to many. As Sue stated, "It was just being in the quite magical place, nobody else is out there, it was just me and it's just so quiet, so still and just kind of like a fairy land." For Robert being out in nature was very important, "I would say, what stands out for me, the beauty of the area and just being in nature out in the Everglades."

Freedom. A by-product of being out in the wilderness was having a sense of freedom. Participants were able to disconnect from their busy life and immerse themselves in the competition. Jane spoke about this freedom, "It's like absolute freedom and it just fills you back up." This freedom enabled competitors to disconnect from their everyday life "I always like the complete disconnect that I have from my normal life. . . . It's a total escape for me and I really kind of welcome that aspect of it" (Richard).

Novel Experiences. The freedom from everyday life simultaneously allowed participants to have novel and interesting experiences. Greg indicated that these novel experiences were invigorating,

Table 1. Major and Subthemes of Participants' Experiences of the Everglades Challenge and Representative Meaning Units.

Major themes	Subthemes	Representative meaning units
Adventure (primary ground)	Wilderness	I enjoy the historical, ecological, and natural aspects of Southern Florida Back to nature. It's very surrealesque
	Freedom	It's like absolute freedom It's a total escape for me
	Novel Experiences	I always like the complete disconnect It's not like real life. There's no choice but to keep going forward I would say the thrill seeker in me What am I going to do go home and sit and watch television? No way. The adventure has just begun
	Personal Discovery	Those hours I go without sleep at night certainly gives me a different perspective Growing, learning, and challenging our every inch of being For me that takes me out of my normal element
Pushing Limits	Pushing Mental Limits	So our mindset is—We're not quitting Stress pays off if you complete your challenge and don't quit. You're pushing that envelope between the conscious mind and the part that's not conscious
	Pushing Physical Limits	It truly gives you a different sense of what you're capable of We paddled for the first like 28 hours straight 4 full days of paddling you know for averaging 12, 13 hours a day, you know 14 hours a day is something ridiculous Yeah I've been exhausted; my hands are sore, back, shoulders are hurting but I know we can keep pushing on
Preparation	Physical	I'm physically stronger, that helps. Every year I get a little lighter and little . . . not bulkier in muscles but more resistance and more endurance in the muscle

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Major themes	Subthemes	Representative meaning units
Natural Elements	Mental and Logistical	So I just do tons of pull ups, tons of sit-ups and paddle, paddle, paddle, tons of push-ups
		I think you have to do that mental preparation if you're going to compete Study the map ahead of time I've got a kind of race strategy in my mind
	Weather	Maximize comfort and minimize effort I was perfectly prepared both in terms of logistics and mentally for up to 5 days
		To have a southwest wind was pretty much a nightmare A front came through with, 35 to 40 knot winds for a brief period It was just a matter of consistently strong headwinds
Community	Danger	Something really bad is gonna happen It can get a little rough and dangerous The animals you know are back there and its pitch black
		It is fun to come across people in the middle of the gulf We are helped by other people or we help other people Just have a fellowship with other people
	Camaraderie	We still compete It is definitely a race There are some people that are more hard core that are just out for themselves
		Competition

There's always a time in these races where I just sort of sit there and stop and look around and go oh "WOW" this is really cool. . . . It feeds you. It gives you something you don't get anyplace else.

For first-time participants everything is novel, and this often brought on a sense of fear, "That's the whole prerace thing that I think everybody kind of has . . . the fear of the unknown, I don't know what's gonna happen" (Richard). However, for other participants this unpredictability was exciting, "This challenge is extremely difficult . . . unpredictability is kind of exciting. . . . I mean in my life today I have a really predictable life" (Jane).

Personal Discovery. The adventure of the EC also created opportunities of personal revelations. This primarily occurred when participants pushed their physical and mental limits, “I just find it fascinating because you know when you push yourself to the limit you learn all kinds of stuff about yourself” (Greg). For others, the EC gave them time to think about life, “I think I’ve solved most of the world’s problems on the trail or in a kayak” (Jane). This process of personal discovery is what many participants appeared to appreciate about the EC as Robert summarized effectively,

Humans are fairly sheltered . . . for the longest time people had to provide for themselves and you know survive enough in a pretty unfriendly world . . . so I think putting yourself back into that sort of environment is good thing for people to experience.

Pushing Limits

Participants described experiences throughout the EC that pushed their mental and physical limits. Successfully coping with the mental (e.g., mental fatigue, lack of focus, etc.) and physical (e.g., exhaustion, pain, etc.) challenges of the EC allowed participants to understand what they were capable of achieving. *Pushing Limits* includes two subthemes: *Pushing Mental Limits* and *Pushing Physical Limits*.

Pushing Mental Limits. All the participants indicated that the EC was a treacherous multiday event that tested their ability to maintain focus, make decisions, and fight through mental fatigue. Carl described the mental challenges of the EC, “There are mental challenges in terms of navigation and decision making . . . and there are times where you feel just overwhelmed and you can’t make a decision because you are just overwhelmed.” Antonio articulated the persistency needed to overcome these mental obstacles, “I think another challenge is to have the persistence to go on even if you’re tired, so it pushes you to understand what one’s limits are and you reach them, not regularly but fairly regularly on this race.” Robert summarized how the EC affects competitors’ personal lives, “It truly makes you believe that you can really push beyond what you think you’re capable of.”

Pushing Physical Limits. For many participants there was a direct relationship between the physical and mental demands on the EC. Oftentimes when participants were pushing their mental limits they were simultaneously pushing their physical limits. Specifically, participants described experiences of exhaustion, paddling for hours, limited sleep, and coping with pain. Despite

these discomforts, participants realized that oftentimes they were capable of pushing through these physical obstacles, as Carl indicated,

You come to the realization that you're capable of things way beyond what you usually do . . . you can go farther than you thought, not just "oh I'm exhausted"—that's not really when you're exhausted . . . you actually have much further you can go.

The constant pushing of physical limits inevitably lead some participants to experience pain, "You are in so much pain, the pain threshold gets to a point where your legs are just burning or your arms are burning or whatever you just have to stop" (Carl). Pain and suffering appeared to be integral parts of the experience for many participants, but this was not always viewed as necessarily negative, "You're pushing yourself beyond your normal comfort zone, beyond your normal state of doing things and that for me makes it very interesting" (Robert).

Preparation

The ability to complete the grueling EC involved considerable physical, mental, and logistical preparation. If participants were ill prepared they were likely to suffer from hypothermia, dehydration, injury, and even starvation. The theme of preparation consists of two subthemes: *Physical* and *Mental/Logistical*.

Physical Preparation. To be able to complete the EC, competitors need to be physically fit. Having any injuries at the start of the EC compromises participants' ability to finish, "There's a challenge in preparing for the race physically. The hardest part realistically is getting to the start line healthy. I mean that's half the challenge" (Richard). To cope with the physical demands of the EC participants trained arduously prior to the race, "I had trained for a very very long time" (Simon). Those lacking physical preparation often paid the price in the competition, "I hadn't done any real training. I was just sort of winging it. Which is you know not recommended, I wasn't physically prepared for it, which meant that the winds really did become a factor" (Greg).

Mental/Logistical Preparation. Preparing mentally and logistically included developing race strategies, goals, and coping with the mental obstacles of the competition (e.g., mental fatigue, physical discomforts, etc.). Greg mentioned it was important to implement and adapt one's race strategy throughout the event, "I've got a kind of race strategy in my mind and I'm adapting that strategy to the conditions." One's race strategy was often a by-product of

goals the competitors set for themselves before the start of the race, “So you know you’ve gotta have this general plan and then there are all these little subplans or goals and those are the ones that get interchanged” (Richard).

Such attention to detail lent itself to Chris practicing mental imagery, “Visualization, a lot of mental preparation, more and more every year.” Although experienced participants such as Chris knew what to expect, first-timers such as Richard stated, “I guess the mental challenge, I stood on that beach physically prepared but mentally I didn’t know what was going to happen.”

Natural Elements

Integral to the participants’ sense of adventure was being out in the *Natural Elements* of the Florida Everglades. This included dealing with difficult wind conditions, waves, and rough currents. All the research participants competed in the 2011 EC, which had notoriously bad weather. Not surprising, *Natural Elements* was a salient aspect of their EC experience and consists of two subthemes: *Weather* and *Danger*.

Weather. High winds and large swells provided challenges for many EC competitors. Specifically, these conditions made it difficult for participants to maintain their desired course and pace, “I mean we had our days when it was murder you know going against the wind and against the tide and you know the waves are crashing and you know the weather was not supposed to be like that” (Simon). For some participants dealing with weather conditions was the biggest obstacles of the event, “I beat my worst enemy, the wind, I mean heavy winds, we’re not talking 10 mile an hour stuff we’re talking 20-25 mile an hour winds constantly” (Sue). Although everyone found the weather conditions difficult, some enjoyed the negotiation through the elements, “It was rough and windy and very exciting, the waves were constantly threatening to flip us or swamp us and it was very exciting” (Chris).

Danger. The adverse weather conditions meant participants had to be careful not to put themselves in serious danger, “That’s all part of this. You could be in pretty dangerous weather conditions and so you have to know what you’re doing, but that’s part of it is getting through it” (Greg). Given the potential for danger, it was important for participants to prepare for whatever was thrown at them, “I guess you could say I’m not naïve enough to not take precaution against natural elements” (Simon). As the participants are not allowed to receive help from anyone except fellow WaterTribers (see below), they were constantly cognizant of the weather conditions and the potential dangers it brought.

Community

To register for the EC everyone must be a member of a community called the *WaterTribe*. Being a part of the *WaterTribe* meant having shared experiences with other members (e.g., meetings, participating in annual events, etc.). These experiences created a tight knit community among the members. Most participants were quick to discuss their admiration (e.g., physical or navigational skills) for their fellow members. Although the EC is a competition, the mutual admiration members had for each other created an environment where participants helped and encouraged each other. *Community* encompasses two subthemes: *Camaraderie* and *Competition*.

Camaraderie. All the participants had mutual trust, admiration, and friendship for fellow *WaterTribe* members. “It is an intensive, intentional community which exists for me before and after the race which I value and enjoy” (Antonio). Being a part of the community served to provide a certain ethos of working and learning from each other, “Part of it is to learn from other people and to be part of that kindred spirit as they call the *WaterTribers* and I’ve developed some long-term relationships that have been good” (Antonio). Several participants appreciated how members welcomed and embraced them into the community during their first year, “When we showed up the first year we were accepted like family . . . when it comes to this [challenge] you share so much you’re a family, part of a community, it’s a really great feeling, like homecoming” (Robert).

Competition. Although the camaraderie among participants is extremely strong, the EC is also a race, as Carl indicated,

It is definitely a race in a sense . . . you know you . . . put a whole bunch of people on a starting line and put a destination out there, it is kinda human nature that they are going to race.

However, racing and having a strong camaraderie are not mutually exclusive,

It’s a race but it is called the Everglades Challenge, it is not the Everglades Race, you know it is a challenge that everyone is trying to overcome . . . we’ve definitely been assisted by other people and we have assisted them. (Carl)

This does not mean individuals don’t compete, but the competition is sometimes kept a secret, “He doesn’t know that I’m competing against him” (Chris) and “We still compete, to be honest we don’t really tell anybody, but

we are always competing with somebody” (Jane). Chris humorously concluded, “Its love and war, it’s a good thing they don’t offer a money prize in this race there would be all sorts of sabotage.”

Discussion

The majority of prior research on alternative sports has suggested that individuals participate for sensation seeking, skill mastery, and collective experiences (Diehm & Armatas, 2004; Larkin & Griffiths, 2004; Rhea & Martin, 2010). However, Willig (2008) challenged these findings by indicating that “it seems taking part in extreme sports activities means more to participants than searching for thrills and excitement” (p. 700), and recent research suggested that outdoor alternative sport activities may support psychological well-being (Brymer et al., 2010; Loeffler, 2004; Pohl et al., 2000). In the present study, elements akin to personal growth and discovery, connection to nature, challenge and adventure, a sense of community, and competition were at the root of the participant’s experience.

The major finding of this study was the importance of *Adventure*. A major part of the adventure was experiencing the beauty of the Everglades and being able to connect with nature and be out in the *Wilderness*. This finding is important because Brymer and Gray (2009) have argued that the significance of the outdoors has been understated in alternative sport research. The present finding suggests that rather than simply being an obstacle to triumph over, wilderness provides a pleasurable transformational experience for the participant to engage with.

The adventure in wilderness allowed participants to disconnect and escape from the demands of everyday life, have *Novel Experiences*, feel a sense of renewal, and it also provided a sense of *Freedom*, and of pleasures outside the realm of those normally experienced from everyday life. These results are consistent with motivations and experiences described by other alternative sport participants (Diehm & Armatas, 2004; Larkin & Griffiths, 2004; Willig, 2008). Taken together, these findings appear to support Priest and Baille’s (1987) argument that individuals might be motivated to experience adventure because life is inherently rational, controlled, and governed by extrinsic rewards. Thus, engaging in alternative sports appears to provide a break from everyday reality, gives individuals something new to explore, and provides a form of stress relief, while simultaneously providing participants with intrinsic enjoyment (Willig, 2008).

The present study is also consistent with prior outdoor alternative sport research demonstrating that connecting with nature promotes reflection and contemplation leading to a deeper and greater self-awareness (Brymer et al.,

2010; Loeffler, 2004). It appears that going through the physical and mental challenges of the EC enabled participants to discover parts of themselves that they were not aware existed. Some participants described the solitary nature of the event as being salient to their experience, which can be a coveted aspect of the alternative sport experience (Willig, 2008).

Several other themes emerged from participants' experiences. They were faced with the challenge of exerting mind over body in their efforts to handle adversity, make necessary decisions, remain persistent, and deal with the inevitable toll of the physical demands of the event. The idea of seeing what one is made of was a defining feature of the participants' experiences and is consistent with prior alternative sport research (Willig, 2008). In contrast, pushing limits also involved the experience of suffering (e.g., pain, injury, sleep deprivation, and exhaustion). The personal significance and value of the experience is thought to increase as the intensity of the suffering increases (Willig, 2008). Essential to being able to push one's limits is the necessity of *Preparation*. Participants engaged in physical as well as *Mental/Logistical Preparation* prior to the event to ensure that they were ready to experience being outside their comfort zone and for the physical/strategic demands of the EC. Although the event is inherently dangerous, participants did not haphazardly take part in the event; rather, participants carefully prepare to minimize risk and maximize the pleasurable experience.

Despite the necessary preparation efforts prior to the event, AR requires flexibility, adaptability, and risk management. Participants of the EC mentioned *Weather* and *Danger* as natural elements they needed to cope with. The significance of weather is consistent with Willig's (2008) finding that context (i.e., environmental conditions) is a key feature of the extreme sport experience and affects the perception of the quality of the experience. The element of danger (i.e., sleep deprivation, animals, etc.) appears to be an inherent aspect of the adventure experience and distinguishes adventure activities from traditional sports (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1989).

One interesting finding from the present study is the significance of *Community* to the participants. *Camaraderie* emerged as a defining feature with regard to the perception of the WaterTribe group as kindred spirits participating in a tight knit community. This community was highly valued by every member and resulted in long-term sustained relationships. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that connecting with others enhances the alternative sport experience and enjoyment (Kerr & Mackenzie, 2012; Willig, 2008). The shared experience of engaging in unique sporting activities appears to provide opportunities for individuals to harness meaningful relationships (Loeffler, 2004).

A final intriguing finding was the importance of *Competition* within the *Community*. One participant summed this up well in commenting that “it’s love and war.” For these participants, the EC was primarily a challenge and not a race, but competing against other competitors was still a salient aspect of their experience and appeared to fuel their persistence. This has not been widely discussed or investigated in previous research on alternative sports. Competition is a key feature of AR and this aspect may distinguish AR from traditional alternative sports.

Conclusions

Alternative sport seems to provide a unique contrast between the experience of connecting with nature and that of engaging in a physically and mentally demanding challenge. This contrast seems to ignite an array of meaningful experiences that are viewed as invaluable to participants and it is something that could not be experienced or accomplished by another means. The present study highlights that AR can be transformational in many ways and that it can provide an avenue for exploring personal meaning and promoting psychological benefits (i.e., stress relief, intrinsic enjoyment, social connections). For alternative sport participants, engaging in novel and challenging activities appears to promote curiosity and exploration leading to absorption, discovery, pleasure, and possibly personal growth. Therefore, although others have alluded to the extreme sport or adventure experience as a conquest over nature, it seems to involve more of a conquering and pursuit of self and meaning (Brymer & Gray, 2009).

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