

# Playing with risk? participant perceptions of risk and management implications in adventure tourism

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## Abstract

Adventure tourism is a rapidly expanding tourism market segment. It is suggested that adventure travel and its related expenditure contribute \$220 billion annually to the US economy alone ([http://www.adventuretravel.com/seminar\\_home.htm](http://www.adventuretravel.com/seminar_home.htm)). However, recent high-profile tragedies in adventure tourism might suggest that participation does not come without its risks. Existing literature would suggest that the pursuit of these risks is a central attraction of these activities. However, drawing on research conducted in the self-styled 'Adventure Capital of the World', Queenstown in New Zealand, the author suggests that this is a simplistic view of adventurous motivation. The research shows that rather than demanding actual risks, participants engaging in commercial adventurous activity primarily seek fear and thrills. The most successful adventure tourism operators are those that have reduced their actual risk levels whilst effectively commodifying the thrills within. Thus the responsibility of the commercial operator to minimise the opportunity for loss to as low a level as possible is not only an ethical one, but also ensures long-term business sustainability.

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## 1. A risky business?

Adventure tourism, along with ecotourism and cultural tourism, has been part of a spectrum of 'new' tourist practices claiming different ethics to those of traditional 'mass' tourism. These new forms of tourism have seen meteoric growth in recent years. Krippendorf (1987) went as far as to suggest that 'new tourism' would constitute 30–40 percent of international tourism by 2000, a forecast that was not unreasonable, given that in 2000 UK expenditure on independent holidays, which often have a major special interest tourism component, was approaching 47 percent of the total (ONS, 2000, p. 53). This is not only significant for the importance of the size of the industry, but also in its broader societal impact, particularly as many of these adventurous

pursuits carry an entire lifestyle. The Adventure Travel Society (ATS, 1999), a US industry organisation points out that 'people throughout the world will continue to leave the beaten path in record numbers. Even in a soft economy active outdoor recreation will increase in the years to come'.

However this touristic search for adventure would appear to carry its own perils. In June 1999 four British tourists drowned during a whitewater rafting trip in Austria (The Times, 1999). Barely a month later 21 people were killed whilst canyoning in Switzerland. A torrential flash flood swept down the valley, killing almost half of those on the trip. On recovering the bodies, rescue teams noted that many of the participants 'had lost their protective helmets and rubber boots' (Glasgow Press and Journal, 1999). The company running the trip, Adventure World, was severely criticised for ignoring storm warnings on the day of the trip (Guardian, 1999). The safety procedures of

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Adventure World were further called into question by the death of an American bungy jumper in May the following year, when the bungy failed to slow his descent and he went headfirst into a car park (The Times, 2000).

It would therefore appear that there is an element of risk in these activities, but what is significant is that tourist participation involves the handing over of a significant part of the responsibility for that risk management to the adventure provider in question. As a commentary on the Swiss canyoning disaster states:

Most people don't have the time or want to reach a level of independent competence in many adventure activities, so in effect they go shopping for the expertise, buying in experience, handing the duty of care to someone who does have the right certificate or training (The Guardian, G2, p. 3, 29/7/99).

Such an acknowledgement begs the question as to what it is that makes these activities so alluring? Most of the existing literature on adventurous activity would suggest that the pursuit of risk is central to their attraction. However, in commercial activities the displaced responsibility alters completely the balance of that risk. This paper looks more critically at the place of risk in adventure tourism and calls for a more nuanced and sensitive appreciation of the study of risk in tourism settings than is offered by existing quantitative models.

## 2. Risk society

The place of risk in society, drawing on work by Beck (1992), among others, is certainly important to an understanding of touristic practice. As Giddens (1991) demonstrates, risk is an increasingly important factor in modern existence. This is not to say that risk is higher, in fact in many areas of life, especially in the developed world, risk has been progressively lowered over time. The point is that risk as a concept is built into virtually everything we do, despite the fact that, by its nature, attempting to quantify the future is an imperfect science. Nevertheless, 'the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the way both lay actors and technical specialists organise the social world' (Giddens, 1991, p. 3).

However, in opposition to declining risks in everyday life, the prevalence of apparent risk-taking in our leisure pursuits seems to be only increasing. It is clear that, in our present society, we are more willing to take unenforced risks, as it is apparent that 'the numbers of adventurous personality types has been growing in the general population, whilst the percentages of low-risk-taking types has shown a corresponding decline' (Plog, 1991, p. 17). Indeed, there is a widely held assumption that in our leisure pursuits we are more likely to accept

the presence of risk, as suggested by a British Medical Association's report on the topic:

Nobody sincerely believes that all recreational activities can be made free of risk. Indeed, some degree of risk is manifestly one of the attractions of many kinds of recreation, and it is clear that people in general are prepared to accept far higher levels of risk in recreation than they would be at work, say, or as the result of the operation of a nearby industrial facility. (BMA, 1990, p. 146).

This definition suggests that risk can be portrayed as part of the manifest attraction of certain activities, so that the voluntary nature of risk engagement in leisure activity is an important factor to grasp. The idea of the flow experience suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) helps to solve this seeming contradiction, by showing that, when there is a balance between the skill required and the challenge inherent in an act, positive feedback occurs in terms of satisfaction. The theory was originally developed to explain the popularity of certain activities that at first seem to carry no tangible material benefit, in pursuits as diverse as mountaineering and chess. The experience of flow is defined as 'one of complete involvement of the actor with his activity' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 36) and is characterised by feelings of fusion and fluidity with that activity. Of particular importance is the manner in which, for flow to occur, the activities must be freely chosen. Hence flow is, by its nature, more likely to be found in leisure and tourism activities, as these are held to be, at least in perceptual terms, areas of unhindered personal selection. Thus, it is suggested that controlled risk, when perceived as a challenge, adds to the overall enjoyment of the experience, and, hence is an integral part of the activity.

Flow is an important concept because it gives theoretical manoeuvre for *enjoyment* in experience (Johnston, 1989, p. 34). It is of particular application to the study of adventure activities because, as has been highlighted by others (Johnston, 1989; Morgan, 1998), these activities carry little in the way of apparent rewards. Only through closer study of the experience, via a flow framework, of the notable facets of feelings of harmony and satisfaction and the loss of a conscious self, do the true treasures become clear. However, the concept is clearly very generalised, and its application requires significant qualitative and quantitative insight in order to give situational significance to any example. This recognition concurs with Bloch's (2000) call for 'a broader concept of experience in sociological analysis, as well as empirical studies of the contextual frames of different variants of flow experiences' (p. 43).

One model of flow at work in the adventure experience is that proposed by Priest and Bunting (1993). The Adventure Experience Paradigm attempts to graphically illustrate the relationship between 'risk

(the potential to lose something of value) and *competence* (a combination of skill, knowledge, attitude, behaviour, confidence and experience) (Priest & Bunting, 1993, p. 266) in the practice of an activity. As the authors suggest, when the competence for an activity is high, but the risk is low, a condition of exploration and experimentation is prevalent. Where the risk is increased, but competence decreased, adventure occurs, and when the two are matched there is the condition of peak adventure that corresponds to the balanced nature of flow suggested by Csikszentimihalyi. However, if the activity moves towards a condition of risk being greater than competence to deal with that risk, there is the potential for misadventure, and at levels of complete imbalance devastation and disaster may occur. Such models would appear to have broad application when considering individual participation in adventurous pursuits. However, with the growth of commercial adventure activities and the provision of standardised adventure tourism products, such models fail to adequately explain the negotiation of risk in the experience.

### 3. The ‘adventure capital of the world’

One destination that has been enormously successful in tapping into the increased interest in adventure tourism is that of Queenstown in New Zealand, which has marketed itself as ‘the adventure capital of the world’. It is important to recognise that Queenstown has always been a tourist destination, primarily as a result of its scenic splendour, but its character has been changed and supplemented by the growth of adventure tourism, which is represented by a plethora of activities ranging from bungee jumping to canyoning. It is for this reason that the town itself is dominated by booking agents, shops, bars and restaurants that extol this adventurousness. The latter are particularly important for that ‘après adventure’ celebration and have names like ‘the edge’ for example. In addition to a comprehensive survey of the evolution of commercial adventure tourism activities in the resort, interviews were conducted with a number of managers and employees of adventure tourism operators in order to get a clear idea of the processes at work in the industry. These individuals were important to talk to, particularly for their role as ‘gatekeepers’, with significant ‘control over key sources and avenues of opportunity’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 34).

Semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted with approximately 100 participants in a range of adventure activities from November 1998 to April 1999. The principal research methodology was designed to examine the attitudes and experiences of the consumers of adventure tourism. However, it was recognised at an early stage that this would be a difficult

area for respondents to tackle without breaking it down somewhat. Consideration of the characteristics of adventure experiences led to the division of three key study areas, the participants’ previous adventure experience, the period before engaging in an adventure activity, and that after completion. This multi-phasic methodology, whilst making no claims to *know* the minds of the respondents, does ‘attempt to connect mobile, moving, shifting minds (and their representations) to a shifting, external world’ (Denzin (1997, p. 32). Following Boden’s (1990) observations on conversational analysis, it seems clear that the study of adventurous experience must be ‘centrally concerned with temporality, with duration, with action, and with, as it were, the *pulse*’ (p. 265) of that experience.

Techniques for interviewing varied from activity to activity, but because of the tripartite nature of the interview schema, it was easy to adapt this collection between differing sites. In the majority of interviews all three parts were collected, as this gave a far broader interpretation of the adventure experience and enabled lateral study, although the schemes were designed to function independently within the analysis if required. Experiential sampling methods such as those used in this paper and elsewhere (see for example McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998) do much to contribute to a contextual appreciation of the negotiation of the experience through the body. The highly dynamic nature of the adventure experience requires a perspective that is iterative and transactional. The post hoc or global measures of person/nature interactions that characterise previous work ‘fail to elucidate the complex, changing nature of these transactions and also cannot provide the contextual insights essential to the full understanding of nature experiences’ (McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998, p. 412).

Accurate sampling of respondents was not deemed of paramount importance to the research, since the study was clearly focussed on the examination of individual experiences. Nevertheless, a degree of representativeness was ensured by the continual turnover of interviews on site. Hence, the completion of one interview usually led to the next available participant being targeted, thus ensuring random coverage. Interviews were recorded on audiocassette, sticking as close as possible to the suggestive nature of the interview guides. Following their transcription, analysis was undertaken through the identification of salient themes running through the commentaries. In this process it was very important, despite knowledge of the experience gained through participant observation, to reverse the idea of ‘investigator-as-expert’ (Riley, 1995, p. 637), so that it is the respondents’ experiences that are noted. The quotes used in this paper are an attempt to embrace a methodology that allows the researched community to vocalise their discourses of risk.

### 3.1. Accidents in Queenstown

Despite active measures to ensure the safety of adventure activities in Queenstown, accidents in the industry do occur. McLauhan (1995) suggests that, since rafting operations began in Queenstown in 1974, approximately one fatality a year occurred. The highest concentration of these was a spate of whitewater rafting deaths in the mid-1990s. Five deaths in an 18-month period sharply focused attention on safety standards in the industry. In the accident reports for all of these deaths, the overriding factor was clearly human error, with conclusions such as ‘negligence’, ‘trip should not have taken place’, ‘pressure on guides due to late start’, and ‘failure to fully explain the trip and what happens being when a problem arises’ being suggested (Page, 1997, p. 49).

The economic effect of the fatalities was considerable and it is estimated that the rafting market fell dramatically from about 500 a day to less than 50, and lead to an estimated drop in tourism expenditure in Queenstown from NZ\$5 million to NZ\$2 million (Page, 1997, p. 27). Criminal proceedings were undertaken in respect of the death of the British tourist, Sean Farrell, who died in November 1994. Whilst other companies cancelled trips due to warnings of heavy rain and snow melt, a Kawaru Rafts trip went ahead with two boats. In the event both the trip leader and the director of the company were collectively charged and convicted with 24 counts of negligently or recklessly operating a vessel to the peril of passengers ‘under section 290 of the Shipping and Seamen Act 1952’ (McLauhan, 1995, p. 74).

In addition to legal proceedings the deaths prompted a comprehensive review of whitewater rafting standards by the Maritime Safety Authority (MSA). Despite the MSA’s reports, including a rather peculiar method of cost-benefit analysis of ‘saving lives’ of participants (MSA, 1995a,b), they also highlighted the numerous errors in judgement, and firmly placed the blame at the door of the rafting companies:

Personnel in the industry are predominantly young men with a desire for excitement and adventure. Many are quite immature and live life ‘on the edge’. This severely affects safety judgements and assessment of client capability. There is a significant difference between the guides’ perceptions of an exciting trip; the guides’ perceptions of client expectations and the actual clients’ concept and expectations of the trip. This leads to guides running trips for their own entertainment without due regard for the need of their clients’ (cited in Morgan, 1998, p. 4).

However, the principal problem with adventure tourism accidents is the lack of any coherent central framework for their reporting and prevention. As Page

(1997, p. 34) emphasises, there is a complete lack of data and knowledge about accidents in adventure tourism, and what little there is tends to be ‘fragmented, scattered across a range of sources and not available in a manner which permits a systematic assessment of the issue’, making comparison with other tourist activities very difficult. Instead, conflicting statistics emerge, such as overseas tourist fatality rates being below 1 per 100,000 in terms of adventure tourism, suggested in *Mountain Scene* (Page, 1997, p. 8) or the 8 per 100,000 suggested in the *Otago Daily Times* (18 November 1999). ‘Despite these reassurances, more accidents occur in the adventure tourism industry than people are led to believe’ (Brown, 1997, p. 139).

What is more difficult to gauge is the number of minor accidents that occur in adventure tourism. Most reporting comes in the form of media interest, particularly the stance that *Mountain Scene*, the local Queenstown newspaper, has taken against poor standards in the industry. A significant number of reports, often of a conflicting nature, on minor accidents in the local media during the period of research not only emphasises the lack of clear data concerning adventure tourism accidents, but also confirms that they are actually relatively common. So far, however, Queenstown has managed to avoid the sort of mass-tragedies that have plagued European adventure tourism operators in recent years detailed above. Nevertheless the fact that there have been serious accidents would seem to suggest that risk is indeed a fundamental part of the adventure experience.

### 4. Contextual significance of risk

As a result of the high media profile of such accidents in adventure, public awareness of them is high. Accidents like the 1999 rafting tragedy in Austria ensure that adventurous activities carry an image of risky pursuit. The high public profile of such a catastrophe was shown when, in the UK, the following weekend the BBC cancelled the screening of the Meryl Streep film *The River Wild*, which involves significant rafting segments. Because of such media influences, it is undeniable that risk is entrenched in discourses surrounding the practice of adventure, and it is primarily for this reason that respondents use the terminology in discussion of their experiences:

So you do the risk things because if you didn’t do that you wouldn’t get the adrenaline and the hype to be here in the first place anyway, so if there wasn’t the risk then nobody would be here to do the things they are doing. But I think I’d only do it if I was happy that if I was able to control it or if the risk was acceptable to do it (Gordon, UK, 26–35, River Surfing).

Risk for me isn't a problem because I have signed my life away about six times since I have been here! (Scott, UK, 22, River Surfing).

Of course the participation in adventure needs to be appropriate in terms of risk behaviour and this is frequently defined by society. As a result it is not the risk alone that is upheld but the 'contextual significance or participation in risk for the construction of self-narratives' (Schiebe, 1986, p. 134). Through these contexts, participants actively evaluate adventurous activity relative to more everyday experiences, so that their pursuit is frequently compared to, for example, driving a motorbike or a car at high speed.

Facing unusual situations and completing an activity successfully are undeniably an important attraction in adventure tourism. As Weber (2001) maintains, 'learning and gaining insight are not just possible side effects of risk/adventure recreation, they are integral parts' (p. 362). Such experiences give an insight into the self that it is suggested is unavailable in everyday life:

It's not just risk for excitement, it's for a learning purpose, risk is like...if you never have risk you don't really know what you are getting yourself into, you need a definition of what it is you know, I mean getting your own bank card, I mean there is stuff here that I could never have done anywhere else, you may say screw it and just do it sometimes you know? (Bart, Canada, 18, Shotover Jet).

Once again, it becomes apparent that we cannot treat adventurous experience, nor risk analysis as a homogenous process:

That is something that each person has to decide for themselves at each point in time. It is an individual thing, I mean its important to me for the safety of my life, but if you are referring that to the jetboat, I don't feel at risk at all (Bob, US, 26–35, Shotover Jet).

Some people don't even think about risk, so to us we are like more careful. We know there is a risk so we are trying to make them stay with us a bit more. They might think that they can just swim down a rapid on their own, so that way we are aware of more risk. A lot of people think it's the other way around, so many people ask me how many people have died or been injured doing this, and no one has, because it is safe if you do it the way it should be (Teresa, River Surfing employee).

## 5. A lack of risk?

However, as soon as one begins to dig a little deeper into participants' conceptions of personal risk whilst engaging in commercial adventurous activity, the theoretical models suggested above appear to be

fundamentally flawed. When respondents were asked whether they rated the possibility of serious injury (the notional idea of risk in adventurous terms as the 'possibility for loss') in their chosen activity, 94 percent of the sample defined it as very low or completely non-existent. Admittedly, concerning the likelihood of minor injury, such as bruises or sprains, there was greater disagreement. However, it is the former category that is the adventurous manifestation of 'risk' as this corresponds to the 'possibility for loss'. It can be assumed, therefore, that despite much theoretical work on ideas of risk in adventure tourism (Priest & Bunting, 1993; Johnston, 1989; Morgan, 1998), most are flawed in their initial assumptions. For example, whilst Johnston (1989) recognises that it is the context of risk that is of prime importance, 'relegating accident statistics to a minor place during the experience itself' (p. 37), this author would seek to move beyond such a half hearted acknowledgement of the importance of non-risk factors.

Although the term perceived risk frequently emerges in interview, it appears a confused and inaccurate term. The label was originally suggested by Bauer (1960), who 'proposed that a consumer perceives a decision as one involving risk if the consequence of the decision is uncertain' (Weber & Roehl, 2000, p. 122). However, in commercial adventure tourism, for all intents and purposes, the consequence *is* known. Whilst tragedies such as those mentioned above are important in understanding the context of adventure, they cannot be seriously entertained as part of the attraction of adventure. As Eagleton has suggested, sublime experiences, like that of adventure, although associated with danger, do not actually *mean* danger. 'The sublime is on the side of enterprise, rivalry and individuation: it is a phallic 'swelling' arising from our confrontation of danger, although a danger we encounter figuratively, vicariously, in *the pleasurable knowledge that we cannot actually be harmed*' (Eagleton, 1990, p. 54, emphasis added). Although participants are safe in this knowledge of an outcome, there is no knowledge as to what the experience might *feel* like, which is where the attraction really lies.

Consequently, it seems clear that the prime motivation for the practice of adventure is thrill and excitement, both of which are inherently embodied characteristics. Risk is the false idea of a gaze involving rational calculation of the 'pros' versus 'cons' of the activity in question, of which there is little evidence in discussion:

I'm not looking for risk, to me it means death (Bern, Sweden, 15–25, Pipeline Bungy).

I think risk is if there is a serious chance to become injured doing something, and I don't think that the river surfing is a risk (Theri, Denmark, 26–35, River Surfing).

How do you decide if you are facing too much risk?

Well it has got to be a safe risk hasn't it? This isn't life endangering so it's a thrill more than anything else (Margaret, UK, 26–35, Shotover Jet).

It doesn't really matter if there isn't any risk involved, it can still be fun (Una, UK, 15–25, River Surfing).

A proof of the lack of risk lies in the fact that employees of the adventure operators engage in the activity whenever possible, even if it is beyond the call of duty. Bungy jump employees would often use the jump as a means of transport between the bridge and the boat on the river, as opposed to walking down the cliffs.

It appears then, that the biggest discursive problem arises out of the similar terminology of real risk and perceived risk, which suggests a close relationship between the two. Although the two are clearly related, the divisions are greater than realistically justify the terms. Real risk is statistical, a numerical estimation of the likelihood of an event, and although it clearly influences perceived risk, this is as much, if not more, influenced by the cultural factors varying from urban myths to media coverage. Real risk is quantitative, but perceived risk, then, despite some commentators attempts to bring within the numerical realm, is an essence, and hence profoundly qualitative.

I suppose there is no risk in bungy jumping but I see that as a fairly huge risk so I won't do it (Kevin, Australia, 46–55, Shotover Jet).

## 6. Fear and thrill

Consequently, it would appear that the pursuit of fear, not risk, is central to the attractions of adventure tourism. For whilst risk is the 'highly contemporary focus for alarm and anxiety articulated through 'rational calculation' and 'complete knowledge', the hallmark of fear is its incalculability' (Gold & Revill, 2001). Adventure tourism is characterised by this fear, for whilst it has been seen that the activities are of near enough complete certainty, on entering into an adventure, participants *play with* their fears. In narrative terms, they step inside the mythology of adventure, reinforced by the operators, and gain that authentic capital for which they have been searching. Although Gold and Revill (2001) offer that 'fear suggests the irrational dreads, reverences and superstitions of the pre-modern world', that *is* what makes it authentic. Fear is part of who we are, and is much older than even this definition would suggest. In the search for real experiences, the quest for the sublime and the search for the self, adventure tourists end up coming face to face with their primal ancestors in what Tuan (1979) calls these 'landscapes of fear'.

This is not to ignore the fact that in adventure tourism, what is a deep-seated desire for these experiences has become very successfully commodified. Commodified fear has become *thrill*, and companies such as AJ Hackett (the worlds' largest bungy jump operator) have turned it into an art form. The process of commodifying fear also makes it more embodied, because removal of the external aspects of fear, brings the experience *within* the body as internalised thrill. Of note is the manner in which these processes are played out within advertising of the experiences, with brochures treading a 'careful balance between too easy a conquest of nature and self, and too dangerous an experience of thrills' (Cloeke & Perkins, 1998b, p. 280). This can be clearly observed in the advertising of a popular Jetboat ride in Queenstown:

I think you have to talk about heart-stopping thrills, adrenaline pumping, we don't use scary, we use 'exciting', its kind of a different word, we don't use scary. Thrills is another good one, to get a thrill you might be scared, but its not going to worry you. The mix that we use is like 'the worlds most exciting jetboat ride', I mean we could say the scariest ride on the water, but your average age would probably drop down to 35 again, and the 60 year olds wouldn't trust themselves to do it (Nick Flight, Marketing Manager, Shotover Jet).

Such language reinforces the proposition that 'not unlike those who seek the 'safe' thrills of a horror movie or roller coaster ride, tourists may engage in highly exciting adventure activities with the perception that they are placing themselves at minimal risk of harm due to the nature of the tourism context' that is sold to them (Berno et al., 1996, p. 23). Although there are clear differences between adventure tourism and these far less interactive thrill-seeking pursuits, this is an important recognition.

the thrill of the whole thing, the exhilaration of it all, a bit of fear sometimes as well! (Teresa, Ireland, 26–35, Shotover Jet).

Consequently it becomes clear that the performative aspects of adventure tourism are paramount, with the delivery of these thrills being what the business is all about.

## 7. Operators and the fear paradox

In addition commercial operators should be acutely aware that any real risk is inherently destructive to their business. This is clearly recognised by the operators in Queenstown:

Well the actual risk is zero, its minimal because there is no risk at all, it is perceived, and perception is reality (Mark, driver/guide, AJ Hackett).

In actual fact very few people get killed, because its you know bad business to kill people. So really it is in the operators own interests to keep it safe (Charles, Canada, over 55, Shotover Jet).

Oh they have no idea, its all perceived risk, and its way out (Stu, jumpmaster, AJ Hackett).

In fact, although Cohen (1993) suggests that bungy jumping is merely the latest chapter in the ‘lunacy of risk-taking pastimes’ (p. 173), it is suggested that, on the contrary, such pastimes are in fact a direct representation of his call to ‘play playfully’ (p. 186). Participants are in fact actually very concerned with their safety, a fact ‘reflected in the selection of experienced operators’ (Weber, 2001, p. 362).

Consequently trust is an enormously important part of the experience, and once again brings us back to the recognition that participants *do not* want to participate in an experience where there is not the trust in the operators and the outcome. Participants are very much surrendering their bodies to the care of the adventure providers, even being placed in ‘chains’ to do so:

Probably part of the fear is the loss of control. Also you feel a real loss of control when they are binding up your feet, that is really giving in and losing your control, yeah (Rachel, USA, 48, Kawarau Bungy).

If you are with people you trust then there is no real risk (Gary, UK, 26–35, Queenstown Rafting).

What is often taken for granted is the fact that ‘in the adventure we abandon ourselves to the world with fewer defences and reserves in any other relation’ (Simmel, 1959, p. 248, quoted in Jokinen & Veijola, 1997, p. 30).

Of course there is a paradox within this industry of thrill provision, related to the degree to which individuals seek fear. If we take one activity as an example, it is suggested that there will be a huge spectrum of people and contexts in which that activity is pursued. Within the participants there are likely to be some who seek the fear more than others. However, these participants are probably more used to being scared and, paradoxically, are less likely to get a thrill:

Bungy is another good e.g., you know again, a lot of people just cannot resist it, I wonder what it is like, I really wonder if I can do it, the psychology of I, I reckon. I think people come with an inherent fear factor, and what they like doing is pushing themselves above that. And the really interesting thing is, especially with bungy is that people with high fear thresholds, i.e. they can withstand a lot of fear, basically get very little out of the bungy, it is something that they can do no problem. People with a low threshold and naturally very scared have a huge rush, as they have really had to get over and conquer some pretty serious fear to go and do it. It is amazing that the number of people that will tell you that the

bungy was a life changing thing, they really do feel that they have conquered something. They go up in those trucks, pack them in sardines, they all feed off the emotions, I think that is another part of the product that is so great, you feel like part of a wider group (Mark Patterson, Marketing manager, Challenge Rafting).

This process can be clearly observed in participant responses:

I mean I looked at some people in the boat and they were hanging on for grim death, I must admit I wasn’t, but then I’ve been a lot quicker in other things...but it is fast (Kevin, Australia, 46–55, Shotover Jet).

I mean if someone like my mum had gone on it she would have had a good scary ride, but I’ve done scarier things (Lance, NZ, 15–25, Shotover Jet).

However, the best guides recognise this phenomenon and adapt their behaviour accordingly for the individual participant:

Well seventy percent of the people going out there you are trying to make them more comfortable, by just having a bit of a laugh or asking roundabout questions. But thirty or forty percent who go out there you need to wind them up, so you do the opposite, so you actually make them scared. A little bit is, well it comes down to where you come from, Like the New Zealand blokes are like ‘ah yeah’ you know, they have been taught all their lives to never be, to never show fear you know, so that’s the thing. You know they are scared, they just aren’t going to admit it (Stu, Jumpmaster, AJ Hackett).

## 8. Pleasurable exploration

In conclusion it is evident, as has been suggested elsewhere, that these activities are fundamentally about pleasure and fun. It should be clear that we can learn a great deal about ourselves through such engagement, but to ignore the importance of hedonism is to miss the principal aim of these pursuits. Indeed, it is important to note that ‘there is a realisation that while ‘peak experiences’ (times of strong, positive emotional intensity) are important, they are not necessarily life-defining’ (Ryan, 1997, p. 44). It would appear therefore that what has been detailed above is the experiential manifestation of what Cloke and Perkins (1998a, p. 210) define as ‘eager experimentation’. Adventure tourists cross boundaries in pursuit of thrills, so that the places and the experiences that result may be defined as playfully exploring. Queenstown, along with many other adventure destinations is full of tourists, participating and spectating, eagerly chattering about the dimensions of

their latest hit of adventure. Hedonistic it might be, but participants would like to live by the mantra ‘what price a ripe old age in the sterilised bubble, when there is the temptation of adventure on the outside and a short sharp dose of Life?’ (Eassom, 1993, p. 27).

The author does not wish to suggest that an awareness of risk is unimportant, as the accidents that do happen, such as those in Europe in 1999 would tell a different story. What is clear, is that in tourists quest for embodied experiences, risk, as portrayed by most existing work, is not part of the picture. The risk that participants talk about is strongly divorced from that which operators need to consider, and this has important management implications for adventure operators, particularly as regards briefing of groups or individuals. Certainly this requires a ‘balancing act’ between managing actual risks on one hand, whilst simultaneously maintaining optimum thrill levels on the other. What follows from this is that responsibility for risk management in this context lies increasingly with the tour operators and the licensing authorities. It is vital that the best possible frameworks are in place to ensure that the ‘certificates and training’ discussed in the introduction are truly up to the required standard for the elimination of foreseeable risk. Standardisation of risk management through such proactive measures as the Adventure Tourism Process (ATP) framework suggested by Morgan (2000), can only assist this need. In addition, it is important that participants have a way of assessing the actual risk that they are placing themselves in, and this calls for greater transparency in the industry. It is notable that the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) has recently drawn up a code of conduct for adventure tourism operators (RGS, 2000). Quite apart from the major ethical issues of running an adventure tourism company, in an increasingly litigious age operators may need to demonstrate to courts that they followed adequate procedures, as is shown by the prison sentences given to the management of Adventure World.

As increasing numbers of tourists engage with these activities, further academic work in this area becomes of even greater importance to better understand motives and managerial implications. The study of these pursuits also begins to tell us more about what lies behind the drive for tourist experiences in a broader context. This is all the more important as we observe the increasing interest of large tourism industry players in the adventure tourism product, for example the £9m acquisition of Exodus by First Choice in 2002. The study of adventurous experiences such as bungy jumping correspondingly tells us about the direction of tourism as a whole. It is a ‘moniker’ for the post-modern touristic mode, and, as such, is the expression of tourism in the 21st century. In our speeded-up, hyperreal global village we are increasingly encouraged to ‘jump right in’

and try all that is (commercially) offered at the smorgasbord of experience. Understanding these experiences, and the manner in which they are played out through the tourist body thus becomes a quest for the contemporary tourism researcher.

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