

**IDENTITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF WILDERNESS:
ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES
FROM AUSTRALIA AND THE UNITED STATES**

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We argue that a long-standing goal in natural resource-based leisure research has been to interpret and describe the relationship between wildland recreationalists and the resources they use. In general, research programs exploring relationship to resource center around two competing perspectives regarding human nature. The prevailing approach has been grounded in an information processing model that makes important assumptions regarding three key aspects of human nature: 1) the source of well-being, 2) the nature of consciousness, and 3) the nature of experience. First, this model assumes that happiness and well-being occur when specific needs or goals are met (Diener, 1984; and Lofman, 1991). Second, as implemented in leisure research based on the concepts of motivation and satisfaction (*cf.* Driver *et al.*, 1987), this approach depicts wilderness recreationalists as rational, analytic, goal-directed individuals who evaluate alternative activities and settings based on objective properties to determine which will produce desired benefits. Finally, this model describes subjective experience as a predictable outcome caused by isolated environmental and personal variables (Altman and Rogoff, 1987; and Anderson, 1986). Thus, this model adopts a deterministic perspective in which the variability in meanings that emerge from the encounter between people and the environment is viewed as a stable and predictable phenomenon.

In contrast to the information processing model, the research described in this paper adopts a meaning-based model (*cf.* McCracken, 1987; and Mick and Buhl, 1992) as the foundation for exploring relationship to wilderness. This model maintains that happiness and well-being arise directly from the nature of activity and from interaction with objects, places, and people rather

than from attaining desired-end states (Diener, 1984; Lofman, 1991; and Omodei and Wearing, 1990). Rather than beginning with a view of recreationalists as information processors seeking a package of benefits obtained through participation in a specific activity with a definite beginning and end, recreationalists are viewed as participating in the ongoing enterprise of constructing a life and an identity (McCracken, 1987). People are not seen as passively responding to meaning that objectively exists in the environment. Instead, they are seen as actively constructing meaning as they seek to create coherence in their lives. Thus, meaning is viewed as an emergent property that is actualized through a transactional relationship between person and setting (Mick and Buhl, 1992).

The goal of this paper is to outline a specific hermeneutic research program for exploring the relationship between recreationalists and wilderness settings. Because many are unfamiliar with a hermeneutic approach to science, a brief discussion of its normative commitments is required.

Since Kuhn's (1962) discussion of scientific revolutions, philosophers of science have defined the appropriate unit of analysis for exploring a research tradition as its macrostructure (Anderson, 1986). This macrostructure is composed of normative philosophical commitments concerning *axiology* (the goals underlying a particular approach to science), *ontology* (assumptions about reality and human nature), and *epistemology* (assumptions related to the nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge) (Laudan, 1984). Different paradigms or approaches to science are characterized by differences in these core commitments. Critical pluralism and other post-positivist perspectives in the philosophy of science

emphasize the importance of seeking a fit between a researcher's perspective on the phenomenon being studied and the commitments of the research paradigm one uses to explore the phenomenon (Hunt, 1991; and Polkinghorne, 1983).

Selection of hermeneutics as the normative paradigm underlying the research program described in this paper reflects the following philosophical commitments:

1. Attempts to understand the realm of meaning underlying human action are more like interpreting texts than like gaining knowledge of objects in nature (Polkinghorne, 1988; and Olson, 1986).
2. Because human experience is mutually defined by the transactional relationships among settings, individuals with unique identities, and situational influences, experience is more appropriately viewed as an emergent narrative rather than as predictable outcomes.
3. One of the fundamental ways people construct and express meaning in their lives is through narrative discourse and story-telling (Mishler, 1986a).
4. Narratives provide the basis for "a direct interpretation of a complex unit of social interaction, in comparison to the standard [research] approach where such inferences are based on de-contextualized bits and pieces" (Mishler, 1986b).

A more detailed discussion of the ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions of hermeneutics can be found in Patterson (1993).

GOALS OF THE ANALYSIS

Traditional positivist approaches to science seek to make universal or generalizable statements on the basis of aggregate data. However, hermeneutic

philosophy maintains that "if one puts individuals in groups before even having looked at individual behavior, it is clear that one will never learn anything about individual behavior; if results are about group averages . . . or if nonexisting average individual" (Terwee, 1990). While this suggestion is not completely new, leisure research (*cf.* Shafer's [1969] warning about the average camper), the most common solution to this problem simply has been to look for characteristics by which to sub-aggregate users into more homogeneous groups. In contrast, the solution employed in hermeneutics is to begin analysis by seeking a detailed understanding of individual cases first (idiographic analysis) and then combining across individuals (nomothetic analysis) at a later stage. Although many hermeneutic analyses do seek to provide more nomothetic level of understanding, the research presented in this paper focuses primarily on the idiographic analysis. With respect to substantive insights, the goals of analysis are to illustrate that wilderness experience and relationship to place, though not necessarily predictable, may be understood in ways that are managerial relevant and that a rich understanding of a small number of cases may at times be more useful (though not a substitute for) more generic and abstract knowledge than meets the traditional standards of generalizability.

HERMENEUTIC RESEARCH

Hermeneutic research entails two components; 1) data production and 2) data analysis. The distinction between these two reflects the fact that some hermeneutic research is based on the analysis of existing *texts* (data), which the analyst did not personally collect. The discussion below will focus on the hermeneutic analysis of open-ended interviews.

Hermeneutic analysis begins with in-depth exploration of individual interviews to identify predominant themes through which narrative accounts of specific experiential situations can be meaningfully organized, interpreted, and presented. This involves: 1) establishing a point of view from which to begin analysis, 2) reading the

entire narrative several times to gain an understanding of it in its entirety, 3) using this preliminary understanding as the basis for a deeper exploration of the “parts,” and 4) modifying the understanding of the whole on the basis of the more detailed understanding of the parts. Tesch (1990) describes this as developing an organizing system that can be used to help determine what individual statements reveal about the phenomenon being studied. In this paper, the organizing system is based on the themes of *claimed identity* and *current personal project*.

Claimed Identity

Mishler (1986b) proposes that all interview narratives are a form of self-presentation filled with references to a particular self-identity claimed by the respondent. For example, an interview about an individual’s wilderness experience may contain references to an identity linked to a culture structured around a specialized activity (e.g., rock climbing), an identity related to the social group in which the experience occurred (e.g., a concerned parent), or an identity related to more global setting characteristics (e.g., a wilderness purist). Given the importance attributed to identity in hermeneutics, one major objective of the analysis will be to identify the way that respondents express their identity through the interview and how this is related to their “construction” and experience of wilderness settings.

Current Personal Project

Hermeneutics also emphasizes the concept of projects rather than goal-directed behavior. The phrase current personal project is used to emphasize: 1) the idea that human experience is an emergent narrative rather than a deterministically predictable outcome and 2) the concept of situated freedom in which people are seen as having the capacity to react in distinctively individual ways within the boundaries imposed by their social, cultural, and environmental backgrounds. Thus, in the following analysis, particular attention is given to identifying how people understand the current personal project they are engaged in and how this project is related both to their

“claimed” identity and their “construction” and experience of wilderness settings.

RESULTS

The first set of interviews comes from a study conducted by Lea Scherl for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Lady Musgrave Island is a forested coral cay on the Greater Barrier Reef (Scherl and Valentine, 1992). Data collection consisted of on-site interviews that were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Interviews followed a standard set of questions consisting of 25 open-ended questions addressing issues such as the nature and meaning of the experience, perception of the setting, and opinions regarding management related issues. Below, excerpts from detailed interpretations of two interviews from this area are summarized.

Camper 105

The most prominent theme running throughout the interview was Camper 105’s definition of the current project in which he was engaged: escape. The meaning of responses to many of the questions in the interview become more apparent when interpreted with respect to this project. Many responses provided insight into his personal definition of what it means to escape, while others suggested how his understanding of the project shaped his perception of the setting.

A second primary theme was related to the identity “claimed” by the respondent in the course of the interview—that of an experienced backcountry camper. This claimed identity was closely related to the project of escape. The opportunity for escape was also linked to three other themes running throughout the interview: attention, convenience, and safety.

Escape - Attention -The attention theme has two sub-dimensions: 1) captivation and 2) intrusion. For this respondent, captivation represents the positive possibility of escape. It is the opportunity to experience stimuli he finds inherently fascinating, involving, and different from that typical of life in Sydney (Australia) and is linked

to a detail-specific, object-centered mode of perception. In contrast to captivating stimuli, intrusions are a class of stimuli that represent the conditions this camper is trying to escape. Day trippers were particularly intrusive because they were not a part of the experience, but they were more “like going to a glorified museum.” The mere presence of other campers was not a problem because their mode of experiencing the environment was consistent with the nature of his project. However, because there was only one campsite on the island, Camper 105 was sensitive to the proximity of other campers. This influenced his preference concerning appropriate group size—he preferred large groups because they camped together and, therefore, took up less space than several small groups would have.

Escape - Convenience -A second theme linked to this camper’s personal definition of escape and shaping his perception of the island was convenience. Although he wanted to escape civilization, adversity and the rigors of primitive life were not essential features of the experience. Additionally, he found the solar-powered toilets “pretty fantastic.” However, he had mixed feelings. He recognized that this added convenience also attracted more people, forced visitors to camp in close proximity, and increased the possibility of intrusive interactions. As a result, he was willing to sacrifice this convenience to preserve the opportunity to escape.

Escape - Safety - Although he wanted to escape civilization, Camper 105 did not want to be entirely isolated from the sense of security it affords. His desire for safety defined the extreme boundaries of suitable opportunities for escape. This understanding helps explain why he found the presence of other campers acceptable. It also clarifies his response to an earlier question in which he indicated that commercial fishing was acceptable as long as fishing vessels did not remain in the lagoon. His opinion regarding commercial fishing, then, was not centered on the effect it has on the resource or the apparent discrepancy between commercial fishing and wilderness. Rather, it was shaped by his desire to escape but not be completely isolated.

Day User 68

Day User 68’s current project is best described as one of enjoying the experience. His responses suggest the nature of the experience was inherently subject-centered. Also consistent with a subject-centered mode of perception are passages emphasizing various forms of sensory experience. In contrast to the detail-specific, object-centered experience of Camper 105, this visitor’s experiences were more impressionistic and holistic in nature.

World Traveler - A claimed identity that was evident throughout the interview was the respondent’s self-portrayal as a world traveler. This identity seemed to influence the manner in which he experienced Lady Musgrave in several ways. For example, he viewed the experience as a visit to another world. This perspective on the experience left him with a feeling of connectedness with the environment as well as a sense of wonder and awe. Ultimately, this sense of awe and feeling of oneness is what produced the deeper meaning of the experience. This respondent’s experience as a world traveler and his feeling of connection and sharing as a result of the visit also influenced his responses to other questions in the interview. When asked about his feelings regarding the size, etc. of tourist operations, he thought a higher level of use would be possible if operators would only share and dovetail operations. Also, relative to the previous interview, his narrative suggests a greater concern for the environment as opposed to a concern for the effects of setting conditions on his own immediate experience.

MORE RESULTS

The second pair of interviews come from a study conducted at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, a relatively wild, undeveloped stretch of river in the eastern United States. Data collection consisted of on-site interviews that were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Interviews followed a standard set of questions consisting of 25 openended questions addressing issues such as the nature and meaning of the experience, perception of the setting, and opinions regarding management-related issues.

Interview 23 '

Two projects are evident in the responses throughout this interview. The first, most immediate project was relaxation. This project led to a subject-centered experience, characterized by global impressions and an inward focus on thoughts, moods, and sensations rather than on a detailed apprehension of the environment.

This respondent's canoeing trip was also part of a more long-term, life project that illustrates a stronger attachment to the place. For example, when asked to explain how the trip came about, the respondent began describing, not plans for this particular trip, but events that began over 10 years ago. The responses suggest that this long-term relationship with the area was far more important to the respondent than events associated with the immediate experience.

The theme of claimed identity was less evident throughout the interview than the theme of current projects. However, an identity that is evident and appears to influence the nature of this respondent's experience is his role as a responsible father. For example, when asked about what he is aware of during the canoeing trip, he refers to his children (who are on the trip with him). In part, this arises from his concern for their safety. But, at the same time, watching their reactions becomes one of the high points of the trip. This identity also seemed linked to the one complaint he had about the management of the area:

They demand that we wear life preservers [when we're using our inner tubes in the water], which I can understand, but it's a little annoying . . . because they're my tubes, and I don't let anyone in them who doesn't know how to swim well.

Thus, enforcement of this regulation challenged his standing as a responsible father.

Interview 6

The current project for this respondent focused on the social context and the desire to experience

family togetherness. This interpretation of the project is further supported by comments suggesting she did not play a major role in the decision to choose this particular setting and that, personally, she would have found other environments more appealing. In fact, the activity she most participated in on her visit to the Recreation Area (reading a book) had little to do with the setting. At the same time, her identity as a concerned mother and her desire to experience family togetherness did lend an instrumental component to the perception of the environment.

DISCUSSION

Perception is a central issue in the management of wilderness environments for leisure experiences. In wilderness research, perception is typically anchored in a reductionist, deterministic, stimulus-response model in which isolated stimuli presented out of their natural context are rated by respondents. Interpretive researchers maintain that by fragmenting the perceptual process, a reductionist approach artificially removes it from the complexity of everyday life (Wertz, 1983). As a consequence, responses to isolated stimuli in artificial contexts may not adequately represent perceptual responses occurring during the lived experience of leisure. The narratives from Lady Musgrave and Delaware Water Gap suggest that perceptual experience is contextual, influenced by individuals' unique identities, their current personal projects, recent past experiences, and situational influences. For example, consider Camper 105 on Lady Musgrave Island. Although he wanted to escape civilization, he did not oppose the presence of commercial fishing vessels. In his mind, the vessels symbolized safety and not the intrusive qualities of civilization. Also, in his opinion, outhouses were not out of place on the wilderness island because his definition of the project of escaping also emphasized convenience. Thus, his personal understanding of the project of escaping influenced his perceptions of the setting conditions.

The idiographic level of hermeneutic analysis is often hidden or glossed over due to space limitations in peer-reviewed journal articles. This is

unfortunate because this is both the most critical stage of the analysis as well as the stage most likely not to be accepted by those with a positivist world view because of its interpretive nature. However, while it is true that hermeneutic analysis changes the nature of interpretation in research and analysis, its proponents argue that it creates a more appropriate balance in interpretive responsibility between researcher and respondent. This is because “the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee . . . create[s] the possibility of [interpretation] . . . that is tested in the arena of open discussion” (Bellah *et al.*, 1985).

Idiographic analysis provides an understanding of individual cases, which serves as a suitable basis for determining when it is appropriate to aggregate or group responses. Nomothetic analyses consist of looking for patterns in narrative descriptions of experiences. Such patterns may range from relatively tangible management issues to more abstract and theoretical concepts.

In conclusion, hermeneutics is not offered as a substitute or replacement for past approaches to wilderness research in the leisure discipline. Because hermeneutics takes a different view of the phenomena to be studied (i.e., has different ontological assumptions) and has different axiological goals, it should be viewed as a complement to the existing approach to research. However, in recognizing that more than one approach to science legitimately exists in our field, we need to be more conscientious about evaluating our paradigmatic commitments and matching these underlying commitments to the phenomenon being studied. To accomplish this, we need to become more familiar not only with the philosophy of science, but also with the literature of those who study the practice of science.

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