The Meaning Associated with the Experience of a Sea Kayaking Adventure among Adults with Visual Impairment

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Introduction

What is the meaning associated with participation in an outdoor adventure for a person with a disability? A number of studies have investigated the topic of adventure program outcomes for people with and without disabilities. The author located two studies about kayaking with individuals with disabilities: 1) Siegel Taylor and Evans McGruder (1995) found "subjects valued the novelty, challenge, safety, sociability and natural environment aspects of sea kayaking" (p.39) and 2) Nichols and Fines (1995) reported "…the group mean score [on The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale) increased to reflect enhanced feelings of self-worth, confidence…a sense of improved worth in social interactions, as well as the ability to follow through and become physically involved in active recreation" (p. 4).

The purpose of the present research is to inquire into the lived experience of a kayaker with visual impairment on a day long adventure and to present background and methods used to collect data to address specific study objectives; e.g., learn how participants create meaning of a sea kayaking experience and gain a deeper understanding of participants. In addition, the researcher endeavored to expand the body of knowledge by use of a different methodological approach, as suggested by Borrie and Roggenbuck (2001):

> We believe that innovative measurement instruments/protocol were necessary to obtain real-time measures of the dynamic and meaningful aspects of a leisure experience in wilderness. Given this, we selected the ESM [Experiential Sampling Method] approach and attempted to sample random moments in time during the lived experience. But special peak moments/places/times might be more instructive than the ebb and flow of ordinary moments. Researchers should make an effort to identify and sample these times and events. (p. 225)
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> We received hints that our respondents were carrying their experience through time with some of their highest scores during the exit phase of the trip. But we know little about how they were beginning to construct stories of their trip, how they were beginning and continuing to create meaning of their experience, and how they will embed their emergent stories in the context of their daily lives. (p.226)

The reader should note that this is a preliminary study and data analysis has not yet been completed; therefore, the results section is limited to preliminary comments. Presentation of methods without completion of data analysis is occurring because this paper was submitted prior to completion of the author's Master's thesis.

Background

Prior to designing and implementing the study, the researcher served as assistant sea kayaking guide with Environmental Travel Companions of San Francisco, California. During that time she was deeply moved by many individuals with disabilities who, during and after their trip, expressed positive feelings about self and others, satisfaction with having met the challenge and enjoyment of the novelty and beauty of nature. This experience inspired a vision to develop a study based on the literature, one source in particular was McAvoy and Lais (1999):

> We often hear that persons with disabilities receive unique benefits from adventure programs. Others, including many with disabilities…would say…[they] do not….What is unique is the place from which…[they] start. Their day-to-day reality is different from those…[without] a disability. The realities of a disability and the societal attitudes that place limits on those with disabilities make adventure just that much more precious. (p. 404)
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> The literature documenting the effects of adventure programs on persons with disabilities centers on the psychological, social and mental health benefits (McAvoy, Schatz, Stutz, Schleien & Lais, 1989; McAvoy &

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Schleien, 1988; Robb & Ewert, 1987; Schleien et al., 1993). These benefits include enhanced self-concept, self-esteem, and self-fulfillment; personal growth; increased leisure skills; increased social adjustment and cooperation; enhanced body image; and positive behavior change. (p. 404)

Persons with disabilities have had limited opportunity to experience adventure programs in the past because of stereotypic attitudes of service providers that limited opportunities, overprotectiveness of well-meaning family and caregivers, lack of role models, and a lack of appropriate equipment….One result of this pattern of exclusion is that many persons with disabilities have never had the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to participate in lifelong leisure activities like camping, canoeing, horseback riding, kayaking, sailing, or skiing. (p. 405)

Outdoor adventure activities appear to be an opportunity for people to gain and use lifelong leisure skills because of the complexity and functionality of the recreation setting (Anderson et al., 1997, p. 405).

Methods

The researcher situated this study in the qualitative paradigm because the goal was to gather information from a small number of participants in their own voice and words. The quantitative method did not seem appropriate given the desired data was not numerical in nature or to be gathered from a large representative sample. Merriam (2002) provided the elements of qualitative inquiry for this research: 1) the quest for meaning and understanding, 2) the researcher is primary instrument of data collection and analysis, 3) the strategy of investigation is inductive and 4) the end product is rich and descriptive.

The decision to implement the naturalistic perspective was inspired by Priest (1999) who stated that according to Klint (1988) two paradigms were prevalent in research and evaluation, positivism and naturalism. Priest believed "Naturalistic inquiry generates *ideographic* knowledge (a collection of characteristics, events or elements that represent reality in context.)" Outcomes cannot be generalized…they "are bound by the societal or cultural context of the study" (p. 311). Naturalism was oriented toward "revelation and comprehension of meaning within the actual context of the situation without causality" (p. 310). Positivism, he argued, was preferred by individuals seeking to describe, explain, predict, control and verify causality. Naturalism was the better fit given researcher's personal style, values and goals for the study.

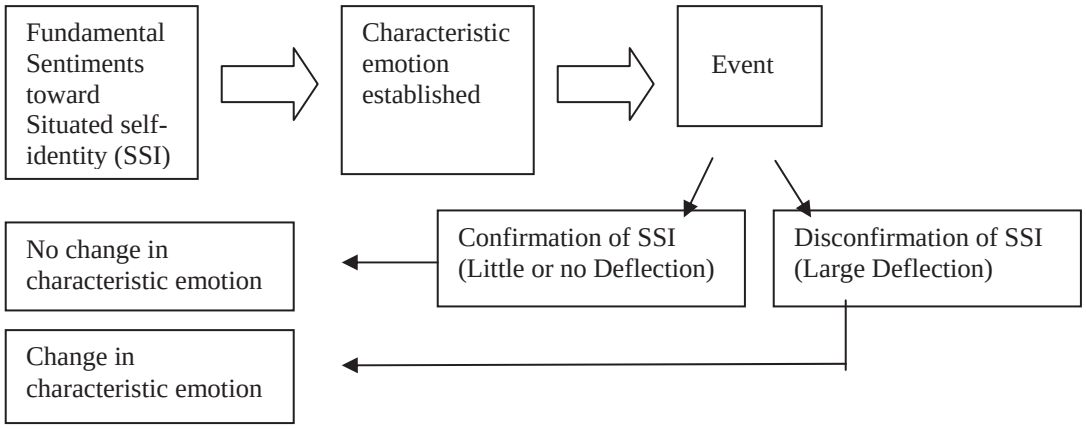
Denzin and Lincoln (2000) motivated the researcher to include interviewing with his description of it as one of the most powerful and common techniques known for endeavoring to understand people. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004) stated that in order to understand human behavior one must refer to purposes and meanings human actors attach to activities in which they engage. Silverman (1997) confirmed the interview as the context for pursuit of meaning:

A recently heightened sensitivity to representational matters (see Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) - characteristic of poststructuralist, postmodernist, constructionist and ethnomethodological inquiry - has raised a number of questions about the very possibility of collecting knowledge in the manner the conventional approach presupposes. In varied ways, these alternative perspectives hold that meaning is socially constituted; all knowledge is created from actions undertaken to obtain it (see e.g., Cicourel, 1964, 1974; Garfinkel, 1967) (p. 113). Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself. (p. 114)

. . . Both parties to the interview are necessarily and ineluctably *active*. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent's replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. Respondents are not so much…treasuries of information awaiting excavation…as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. (p. 114)

Ideas for how to design this study's interviews came from three key sources: Hertz (1997, chap. 6) advocated for the interactive interview in which equal partnership with research participant is vital and Luckner and Radner (1995) promoted the technique of helping research participant process an experience. Lee and Shafer (2002) inspired a focus on events and emotions as a primary focus. They used the affect control theory developed by David Heise, University of Indiana, to demonstrate "…how an individual's situated self-identity, in relation to events, helps to create emotions along the way" (p. 304). See Figure 1 for researcher's interpretation and reconstruction of an illustration by Lee and Shafer.

Figure 1 - "A Basic Tenet of Affect Control Theory" (p. 293).



David Heise (personal communication April 16, 2003) believed the theory could be adapted and simplified for the present study and recommended participants identify five events and "…report actual emotions for each event." He granted permission to the researcher to use his emotion spiral tool which served as inspiration for creation of the emotion-event chart for this study.

Participants

The recreation service provider in the study was Environmental Travel Companions' sea kayaking program (www.etctrips.org). They were chosen because: 1) the researcher was an assistant volunteer guide for the agency, 2) the agency's long history of providing kayaking adventures in San Francisco Bay for individuals of all ages and abilities and 3) the likelihood they would help make the study possible and suggest a local client who would provide research participants.

Youth who were visually impaired were chosen for the study for several reasons. First, Environmental Travel Companions had a relationship with the Living Skills Center for the Visually Impaired, in San Pablo, California (Living Skills Center). For information about the agency see their web site: www.livingskillscenter.org. Their 2003 trip would probably be in September or October which was ideal timing given the researcher's need to gain approval to proceed with the research and time needed to implement the research design. Second, the researcher desired individuals over 18 years of age to simplify the consent process. Third, to facilitate data collection on multiple occasions, it was desirable that research participants live in a single location as was the case with Living Skills Center students. Lastly, the researcher enjoyed kayaking with individuals with disabilities, particularly youth with visual impairment, and felt confident in her ability to successfully integrate them into the study. The decision to involve between six and 10 research participants was confirmed by Merriam (2002) who stated that "…since small, non-random samples are selected purposively in qualitative research, it is not possible to generalize statistically. A small sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (p.28). Inclusion criteria specified by the researcher were as follows: Participants would 1) be at least l8, 2) have some level of visual impairment, 3) voluntarily self-select to be in the study and 4) be emotionally and physically stable and capable to fully participate in the study. Living Skills Center staff selected students with whom to promote the study, based on inclusion criteria. Students who were deemed by staff to be emotionally or physically unstable or incapable of being in the study would be excluded from promotion and self-selection process.

Instruments

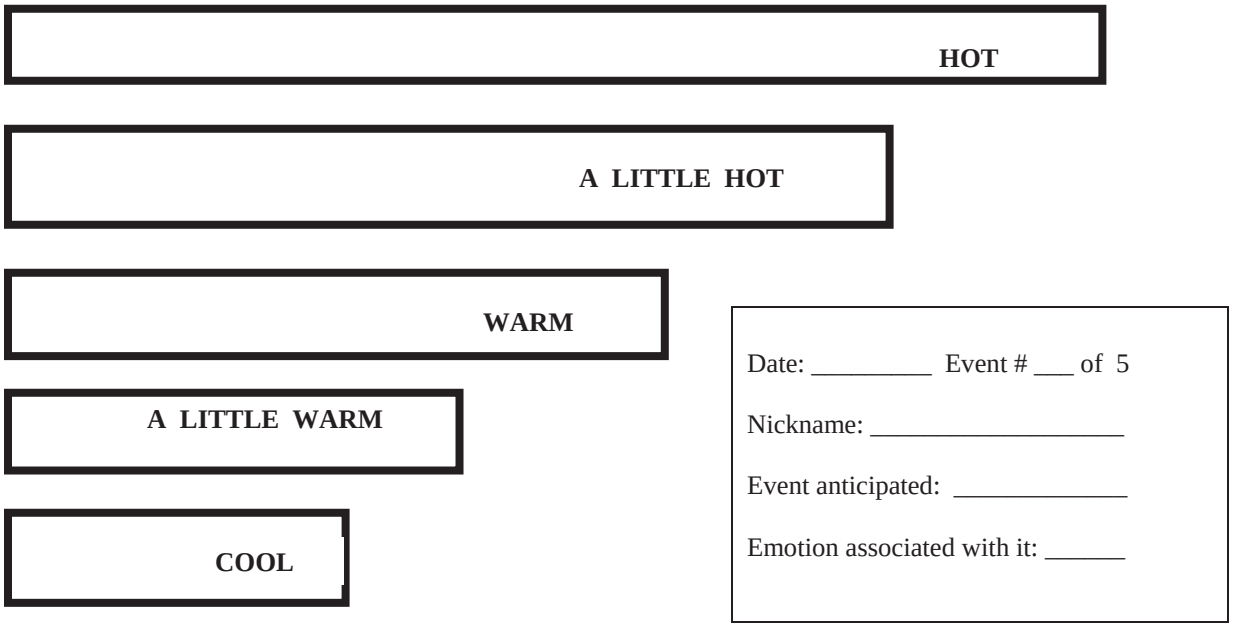
The researcher designed the interview guides using several key sources that explained facilitation of processing an experience; e.g., Luckner and Radner (1995), Nadler (1995), Knapp (1984) and Quinsland and Van Ginkel (1984). This information provided a starting point for development of organizational structure for interviews, wording and sequence of questions. Interview guides were reviewed by the researcher's thesis committee prior to implementation.

The pre-trip interview guide created by the researcher included the following: 1) introductory statements; e.g., purpose of research and interview, the conversation would be taped, participant's rights and presentation of signed Informed Letter of Consent; 2) warm up questions; e.g., age, kayaking and swimming experience, level of visual impairment and how it affected recreation choices, recreation activities and benefits of recreation; 3) a two-minute guided

imagery to facilitate relaxation and anticipation of the upcoming sea kayaking trip, followed by silent time; 4) the researcher asked participant to express thoughts and feelings that emerged during guided imagery and 5) participants named five anticipated events, one at a time, emotion(s) associated with event and rated intensity of emotion(s) on a five-point scale from "Cool" to "Hot." The researcher created an event-emotion chart assisted by her thesis committee, Living Skills Center staff and a Special Education professor at San Francisco State University who had experience with individuals with visual impairment. Three versions were created: one in color with a different bright color for each bar, for research participants able to see color, and one in black and white for note taking during interviews (see Figure 2). The third, for use by research participants unable to see color, was created with help from The Disabilities Resource Center of San Francisco State University: A black and white image of the five bars was first reproduced on heat sensitive paper in a photocopier and then inserted into a Picture in a Flash machine. The result was an instrument with thick raised black lines around each bar that enabled research participants to feel, and discern the difference between, each level of intensity.

After naming five events, research participants described the most significant challenge they anticipated and if s/he felt the trip would change them in any way. A debriefing question was asked to encourage feedback on their experience of the interview and researcher coached participant to be mindful of thoughts about the trip and consider keeping a journal of some kind. The pre-trip interview was concluded by the researcher presenting a small gift of appreciation, a decorative writing tablet, and expressing gratitude for their trust, desire to help and enthusiasm.

Figure 2 - *Anticipation-Emotion Chart



ANTICIPATION-EMOTION CHART: Participant names anticipated event, identifies emotion associated with event and rates emotion from "Cool" to "Hot." Participant names five events, one at a time. Researcher writes date, nickname, event number, event and emotion and circles intensity of emotion on a separate chart for each event.
* **This chart was created by researcher in the present study for pre-trip interview.**

The structure and content of the post-trip interview guide and process were similar to the pre-trip; e.g., warm-up, guided imagery, emotion-event charting, conversations recorded on tape and notes written on the interview guide and charts. The organization differed in that guided imagery was first, lasted twice as long and included more silent time because it was deemed to be the generative mechanism by which research participants would discover memories about the trip. They were asked to share what emerged during the imagery and given a chance to speak uninterrupted unless the

researcher felt probing questions would encourage sharing. The Remembered Event-Emotion charts were next and included three additional questions; e.g., when the event occurred, who was involved and the meaning of the event and emotion. The researcher inquired about meaning of the entire kayaking experience; if anything was challenging, new or not typical; what the most pleasant memory was and why; what they would like to share, if anything, about their experience with other individuals with visual impairment and if their recreation activities would change in the future. Debriefing included inquiry into whether they felt the researcher led or influenced them unfairly, their experience of the research process and if they would consider joining the researcher at the Social Aspects of Recreation and Research Symposium in February 2004. The researcher's finishing touch was presentation of a keepsake, a small yellow sea kayak ornament, as an expression of gratitude and camaraderie.

Procedures

The research protocol was created during the spring semester of 2003 and submitted to the Office for the Protection of Human and Animal Subjects on May 30, 2003. During June of 2003 the researcher did a literature search about the research process, started to further develop methodology and secured Environmental Travel Companions and the Living Skills Center as participants in the research. Each agency was given a copy of the research protocol after the initial telephone conversation. Two months prior to the trip, on July 22, 2003, the researcher met with them to discuss the research; e.g., access to students, selection, optimal number, best times, place to meet and expectations; number and timing of data collection meetings; letters of introduction and consent; feasibility of participants keeping journals; researcher's role and data collection tools. Living Skills Center staff described their students, inquired about benefit(s) students would gain by being in the study and recommended short meetings with them; specified staff would select students for the study; indicated trip duration of one day, because it was more manageable and less stressful than overnight; and adaptations to the instruments; e.g., letters and the emotion-event chart. Environmental Travel Companions' primary concerns were trip dates, logistics and minimization of researcher intervention with participants during the trip. The researcher sent both agencies a letter on July 27, 2003 recapping the meeting and next steps.

On August 1, 2003 the researcher received contingent approval to proceed with the research from the Office for the Protection of Human and Animal Subjects. On August 18, 2003 the researcher express shipped 10 copies each of two versions of a Letter of Introduction, one on paper in Times New Roman with 14-point font and the other on audiotape. That same day the researcher emailed a revised Informed Letter of Consent to the Living Skills Center so they could arrange for transcription in Braille. The Living Skills Center retained copies of the consent letter in Braille for use by research participants and gave the researcher copies, one of which was delivered to the Office for the Protection of Human and Animal Subjects for removal of the final contingency. On August 25, 2003 final approval to proceed with the research was received.

On August 28, 2003, three weeks prior to the trip, the researcher held the initial meeting with students, the Subject Briefing, at the Living Skills Center from 3:45 p.m. to 4:50 p.m. in the recreation room. Earlier that afternoon staff convened a group of nine students, who met inclusion criteria, and played the audio tape of researcher's letter of introduction. Upon arrival the researcher introduced herself, the purpose and value of their participation in the study, intended outcome of the research and what would occur in the meeting. Each student and three staff members introduced him or herself and adopted a nickname that started with the first letter of their first name to facilitate recall and anonymity. To prepare research participants for a key activity planned for the pre-trip interview, a brief guided imagery was facilitated to introduce the practice of conscious relaxation and awareness of thoughts and feelings about the trip. One student opted out of participating in the study. Students gave positive feedback on two instruments, the color emotion-event chart and the black and white Picture in a Flash version. Discussion followed about expectations the researcher had for herself and for research participants; all eight students agreed to fulfill expectations and decided to be in the study. Staff helped with scheduling of pre-trip interview dates and times by checking their teaching schedules and encouraged students to sign up for a date and time they liked. The researcher assisted participants in the signing of Informed Letters of Consent, holding a signature guide for some to facilitate placement of pen. Pre-trip interviews occurred the next week in the evening on September 3 and 4, 2003 at 4:00, 5:00, 6:30 and 7:30 p.m., each lasted between 45-60 minutes.

On Friday, September 19, 2003, the kayaking adventure occurred in San Francisco Bay; it was a warm and sunny day with a gentle afternoon breeze. The trip launched from the beach in the Sausalito marina, situated just north of the Golden Gate Bridge in Marin County, California. This is where Environmental Travel Companions stores kayaking equipment and launches most trips. At the usual time, 8:00 a.m., Environmental Travel Companions convened a pre-trip meeting in which the researcher participated in order to orient the trip leader and five guides to the research. We all counted and loaded gear into the kayaks and wheeled them to the beach. Environmental Travel Companions provided the following equipment for the trip: four types of sea kayaks; e.g., double, triple, sit-on-top and single; personal flotation

devices (PFD's); feathered and unfeathered paddles; spray skirts; cushions; dry bags, extra clothing, hats and visors. All equipment was modern, sturdy and stable and in good to excellent condition. Six staff and 10 students (8 were research participants) of the Living Skills Center arrived via their van and two cars at 9:45 a.m. The researcher helped greet and walk them to the beach. The trip leader facilitated a warm-up activity and shared the plan for the day. The researcher participated in helping individuals put on PFD's and spray skirts, which facilitated quality check-in time, and then conducted the paddle talk, assisting with grip and paddle stroke as needed. Next, trip participants were oriented to the kayaks and informed of boat assignments and partner(s). Cushions were issued to ensure everyone was comfortable which was appreciated in particular by the research participant with cerebral palsy. While research participants were staged in their kayaks waiting to launch, the researcher continued checking in with them, using the opportunity to also take photographs. Moments before launching, at 11:30 a.m., the trip leader conducted a safety talk. Once afloat, everyone practiced paddling in the harbor before navigating the boat channel. Our destination was Strawberry Beach which features picnic tables, plenty of shade, beautiful views, a clean portable toilet and a swing set. This spot is common for day trips because of its location on an inlet, Richardson Bay, which is often free of prohibitive tide swells and heavy winds. Two research participants traveled in a triple kayak, one with an Environmental Travel Companions guide and Living Skills Center staff, the other with a guide and fellow student; five research participants traveled in a double kayak with a guide or center staff, as did two students not in the study; and one research participant traveled in a sit-on-top kayak with center staff. The trip leader navigated in a single kayak as did the researcher who tape recorded field notes, took pictures and engaged in conversation with research participants whenever safe and feasible. We landed at Strawberry Beach at 12:45 p.m. where we enjoyed relaxing, lunch, getting to know one another and swinging. We launched at 2:00 p.m. to go west across Richardson Bay and landed at 3:00 p.m. on the beach where we started. Total paddling time to Strawberry Beach was 90 minutes and back to the marina was one hour. Upon landing in Sausalito, everyone promptly got out of their kayak, shed gear and circled up for a closing activity. All were pleased to share a favorite "Kodak" memory of the trip which the researcher got permission to record on tape. Participants departed for home at 3:30 p.m. as scheduled.

Data Analysis

The researcher plans to use a narrative development process implemented by Johnson-Bailey (2002) who used data analysis strategies designed to "preserve voice and the specific, personalized sense contained in the data" (p. 324). The first step will be to generate categories that summarize perceived highlights in each participant's experience; emphasis will be placed on listening to their voice. Next, researcher will remove her questions from the text to focus on participant's responses and transform the transcript into a first-person document that resembles an autobiographical account. Major themes that emerge from the revised transcript will be coded and pertinent data for each theme grouped and analyzed. The researcher intends to use "[Alexander's (1988)]…*principal identifiers of salience*, such as omission, frequency and emphasis….[which Johnson-Bailey believed] allows the researcher to sort through the data's 'network of rules designed to call attention to importance" (p. 324). The result will be reduction of data to manageable proportions and 'to break the conscious communication intent of the content' (Alexander, 1988, p. 268) (p. 324). The researcher will use triangulation with a panel of experts to establish internal validity of the findings that emerge.

Preliminary Results

Eight research participants started and completed pre- and post-trip interviews that were recorded on audiotape and converted into typewritten transcripts. In a preliminary review of transcripts several themes emerged; e.g., confidence, empowerment, having fun, positive feelings and others as evidenced by participants' narratives. See Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3 - Post-trip inquiry: What meaning does the entire sea kayaking experience have for you?

"That means meeting new friends and being able to look back on the trip and remember the things that went on and everything. It has a lot of meaning, you know." Ribeye	"To me it means that, like, everybody can do anything. It doesn't matter if you have a visual impairment or any other problem or handicap." Jumpin'
"Basically, like I can just go out there and do whatever…" "It was really fun; it was hard work but it pays off." Kind	"…it means a lot. It's a very significant fact I've never done it before. I was able to do something, surprise a lot of people." Joyful
"I don't quite know….Oh, I really don't have anything to say; but then I dug up a bunch of feelings, some I didn't want to talk about but they kept coming up." Enchanted	"It means a lot to me because I had never done kayaking before…been out on the water. I have but it was on a big ship not on open water. So I felt good about all that." Kayakin'
"I can do different recreational stuff." Crouching	"…I enjoy doing recreation…I want to do more outdoorsy stuff…in some ways I am slightly limited because of my disability, not being able to walk long distances and such." Joyful 2

Figure 4 - Post-trip inquiry: Pretend I am a person who is visually impaired. What would you like to share with me, if anything, about your sea kayaking experience?

"It's fun, it's safe and you have guides and everything and people are friendly and it's a whole lot of fun. It's well worth going on." Ribeye	"…you should go because for a while you forget about the routine, all the things you do every single day…you will get in touch with nature, and it's really fun. I would recommend it." Jumpin'
"It is very relaxing and you can just, like, if you want to, stop and think about what you're doing; you can and, like, reflect on what's going on around you, and it's really good exercise too. You will get a good work out." Kind	"It's great…because [it puts] your mind at ease….And it's completely safe because you have life jackets on, you have, you know, all the stuff you need to stay afloat. And it's just a great feeling when you're on the water paddling, especially if it's a nice day." Joyful
"You…get…to meet other people, making new friends…learn how to paddle a kayak and you feel like you are really working as a team; you get wet, kind of." Enchanted	"It is relaxing and it can be helpful in the future because you may not know that you like the water until you actually are out on it. You can also see how nature is." Kayakin'
"It's having fun, doing something you've never done before, believing that you can do anything, you know?" Crouching	"I'm glad you are coming to me because I can tell you that, yes, it can be done, and I am proof, I've done it." Joyful 2

Discussion

Although data analysis is not yet completed, the study suggests the potential value of a single-day sea kayaking adventure for individuals who are visually impaired. A preliminary review of the data indicates that methodology, for the most part, was effective in addressing the study's objectives; e.g., gain insight into how research participants constructed meaning of an adventure and develop a deeper understanding of participants. Similar methodology could be used in the future with individuals with a different disability to see how the lived experience varies. Mixed methods could also be used: a short standardized quantitative instrument and different qualitative methodology, perhaps phenomenology, to yield additional and more subtle information from a deeper level. The primary lessons learned from this research were the pursuit of depth (rather than breadth) would have produced lengthier, richer narratives for data analysis and time could have been managed differently to facilitate an earlier completion date.

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