

A NATURALISTIC INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL WORLD OF WHITEWATER KAYAKERS

Jason W. Whiting
Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources
University of Georgia
whitingj@uga.edu

Katharine A. Pawelko
Western Illinois University

Abstract.—This exploratory research focused on kayakers at whitewater kayaking parks; the social and recreational characteristics of this specific user group had not previously been studied from a managerial and theoretical standpoint. Twelve kayakers were interviewed at whitewater kayaking parks in Colorado and Utah. The interviewers utilized naturalistic methodology with a concentration on grounded theory techniques. Constant Comparative Methodology (CCM) was used during the data collection and analysis process. Triangulation permitted the identification of thematic findings across participants and sites to determine the relevant meanings and practical applications associated with this leisure endeavor. Findings showed that whitewater kayakers at community whitewater parks were motivated by and benefited from the physical experience more than from their social interactions with other kayakers. Recommendations include assessing the carrying capacity of whitewater parks and providing specific programs to target user groups.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Participation in outdoor recreation has been shown to be both physically and psychologically beneficial for participants (Driver et al. 1991). In light of increasing technological influences on younger populations in the United States along with decreasing health and physical activity, recreational programmers and public land managers are especially interested in the benefits of engaging in physical activity and outdoor recreation

(Pergams and Zaradic 2006). Studies have shown that the benefits of participation can be realized and experienced on different levels including the physical, physiological, spiritual, and social domains (Driver et al. 1991).

Despite research highlighting the benefits of engaging in outdoor recreation, participation has declined slightly over the past decade (Pigram and Jenkins 2006). Several studies have described demographic changes in the population of the United States such as increasing diversity, an increasing percentage of older adults, and fewer children participating in outdoor recreation (Floyd 1998, Louv 2008). However, countering this decline, participation in whitewater kayaking continues to increase (Jennings 2007). Some research has suggested that this type of aquatic-based recreation will continue to increase in the future, accounting for a larger percentage of general outdoor recreation in the United States (Leatherberry et al. 1980).

While the benefits of general outdoor recreation participation have been studied, the benefits of whitewater kayaking (WWK) remain somewhat unknown. Furthermore, the unique social world, or the social environment or culture in which WWK participation takes place has not previously been studied, and it is not known how the social world of WWK may influence people's growing participation in WWK. Understanding the social world of whitewater kayaking including how whitewater kayakers recreate and interact with each other and those around them, may help public land managers determine the needs and recreational preferences of this specialized, natural resource-dependent user group. Furthermore, a better understanding of WWK participants may help public land managers plan more effectively and limit conflicts between whitewater kayakers and other user groups that depend on similar or nearby natural resources.

2.0 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to investigate whitewater kayaking as a subculture and to identify the salient factors associated with participation in this outdoor recreational pursuit. Given the lack of previous research in this area, this study was exploratory in nature, used a grounded theory approach, and attempted to present a descriptive and interpretive point of view to address these questions:

1. What factors are associated with the social world of whitewater kayaking?
2. What motivations compel whitewater kayakers to seek and participate in this leisure pursuit?
3. What benefits do whitewater kayakers receive from their participation?
4. What social norms have whitewater kayakers established, either directly or indirectly?

3.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

By examining the interactions between members of a group through the social-based lens, researchers can learn about participation in recreational endeavors (Scott 1990). In addition, public land managers can better understand and meet the needs of particular user groups by examining certain phenomena in the context of a social world. A social world provides the structure of an alternative value system with its own rules and systems (Longhurst 1995). Social worlds have no central authority; therefore, they have no defined boundaries. Within the realm of adventure recreation, new topics of research continually arise as adventure enthusiasts continue to stretch traditional boundaries. New social environments also continue to evolve with the growing interest in a myriad of adventure recreation pursuits.

There have been different views on how to study social worlds (Ditton and Loomis 1992). Some past research suggests that studies should focus on communication and symbolization associated with social worlds (Shibutani 1955). Others suggest that studies should focus on more concrete matters such as sites, technologies, activities, and organizations

that deal with social groups (Strauss 1978). Strauss (1978) suggested that groups may be studied by examining the jargon and body language of their members. Expressive language has long been regarded as a constructive element in social worlds. Terms and language used in outdoor adventure pursuits are often esoteric to the uninvolved layperson (Ewert 1989). Understanding the phrases, jargon, and expressions used by participants can allow researchers to gain valuable insight into the social interactions between group members (Scott 1990).

Research suggests that kayaking is increasingly popular because it is social in nature (Hudson and Beedie 2007) and has the potential to unite people with similar interests. Another possible reason for the increased interest in WWK may be that individual kayakers receive physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and social benefits from participating (Driver et al. 1991).

Recreational pursuits such as WWK are largely oriented toward the concepts of personal challenge and personal competition and are less oriented to formal competition. WWK tends to focus on individual performance and is less of a group-oriented sport. Participants derive self-satisfaction by overcoming personal challenges during paddling outings. Selin and Howard (1988) developed the concept of ego-involvement to explain why recreational enthusiasts participate in certain activities. They theorized that level of involvement is tied to self-expression and enjoyment derived from the recreational pursuit. Thus, the level of psychological attachment between the individual and the leisure pursuit is significant and noteworthy.

The environmental setting in which most adventure recreation takes place is conducive to self-improvement. Gibson (1998), for example, described the personal benefits that individuals may encounter in a riparian wilderness landscape:

The river environment provides a setting where the social construction and interpretation of multiple-realities unfold revealing profound discoveries to seemingly ineffable occurrences.

The experience of moving water provides an environment where self-discovery, personal and environmental challenge, interpersonal relationships, group cohesion, peak experiences, and extraordinary experiences, psychological flow states, and a plethora of other benefits are realized (p. 36).

By identifying social groups who use certain resources and receive certain perceived benefits, public land managers may be better able to meet the needs of a growing subset of the population interested in outdoor recreation. This may be particularly true of whitewater kayaking because of the finite connection to a limited resource.

4.0 METHODS

Naturalistic research methods allow meaningful information to be collected about the lives, stories, behaviors, and relationships of whitewater kayakers (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Instead of focusing on one methodological approach, this research used several methods. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that qualitative research could be multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. "This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them...accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand" (p. 2). Hence, this study employed a naturalistic methodology with a concentration on grounded theory techniques as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The fieldwork attempted to discover and describe social networks that exist between and among whitewater kayakers.

The study was conducted on two separate rivers, the Clear Creek River in Golden, Colorado, and the Weber River in Ogden, Utah, during May and June of 2007. This time of year was chosen because of the spring run-off, which attracts large numbers of national and international whitewater kayakers. The study rivers were chosen because they had

whitewater kayaking parks. Community whitewater parks are excellent locations for field observations of recreationists because they are conducive to social interactions between user groups, mainly kayakers. The social atmosphere among whitewater kayakers who understand the codes and etiquette of the activity makes whitewater parks particularly popular (Hudson and Beedie 2007). WWK runs in the parks ranged in difficulty from Class I to Class III. In observations of two similar cohort groups in different geographic locations, certain patterns and themes emerged.

To ensure the credibility and dependability of this study, triangulation was used during data collection, which included semi-structured interviews with the initial key informants, naturalistic field observations, and reflexive journaling. Purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were used by focusing on settings and groups frequented by whitewater kayakers. The researcher selected key informants after evaluating the skill set of individual kayakers.

While conducting field observations and interviews, the researcher served in the role of a participant-observer. Specific observations were made at the beginning of each session. Field observations included the weather at the beginning of observations, river flow volume (in cubic feet per second), time, date, and location. Observations were made in areas throughout the parks where participants engaged in social interactions before, during, and after spending time on the river. All observations were noted near the time of their occurrence. To insure efficiency while collecting data, rough field notes were used to create detailed summaries, which were word processed within 24 hours (Huberman and Miles 1994). By reflecting on the observations made throughout the day, the researcher was able to gain interpretive insights into the recorded observations and notes. The researcher kept a reflexive journal to record events and details each day.

Semi-structured interviews and questions were developed to uncover the whitewater kayakers' behavioral patterns and traits. Using an inductive

theory-building approach, questions were created for semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The questions were designed to help the researcher identify the conditions that gave rise to specific social actions and interactions between kayakers (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Key informants were interviewed in the field. With the permission of the informants, interviews were digitally recorded. Handwritten field notes were taken simultaneously to capture the researcher's personal thoughts or insights during the interview, or to note interviewees' gestures. Interview notes were used to refine the sampling plan and continued direction of the study. Social and behavioral trends were assessed throughout the study in order to generate grounded propositions leading to grounded theory about observations and interviews.

Data gathered by field observations and participant-observer interviews included rich, meaningful descriptions from the whitewater kayakers' perspectives. The researcher used Constant Comparative Methodology (CCM) during the data analysis process and throughout theory construction (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded Theory was used primarily for theory induction. The CCM allowed the researcher to continually compare study results during the data analysis process. Hence, the results were analyzed throughout the full course of the study to ensure proper rigor. All data were transcribed or word processed during the data analysis process. Following transcription, open and axial coding was performed by developing links or keywords that identified themes and topics. Themes were used to develop conceptual maps, which assisted in theory induction (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

5.0 THEMATIC FINDINGS

Four themes emerged that referred back to the original research questions: social aspects, motivations and benefits, social mores, and commitment. Related sub-categories for each theme were identified in the data as well (Table 1). Sub-categories included camaraderie, social networking, environment and perceived challenge, river etiquette and norms, skill level, and recreation specialization.

Table 1.—Themes and sub-categories identified in the data

Themes	Sub-categories
1. Social Aspects	Camaraderie, Social Networking
2. Motivations and Benefits	Environment and Perceived Challenge
3. Social Mores	River Etiquette and Norms
4. Commitment	Skill Level and Recreation Specialization

6.0 DISCUSSION

This research found that whitewater kayakers are typically motivated by and benefit from the recreational experience itself rather than the social interactions between participants. Social norms served to reinforce this idea. For example, participants reported buying equipment solely for its functionality, not to impress others. This is not to say that the social aspect of kayaking was not important or meaningful; on the contrary, it was very significant. However, it was not the main motivation for or benefit from kayaking participation.

The idea that the recreation experience was more important to whitewater kayakers than the social experience was reinforced in comments they made about their experiences on the river. Participants emphasized the importance of spacing while on the water and of staying out of the way when someone was performing. Some also described a sense of spirituality that they experienced while on the water.

Another major finding was about the relationships formed through the mentoring process. One firm, dependable guiding principle among whitewater kayakers was the need to assist novice kayakers as they learned. Because of the complexity of the sport and the variety of specific attributes and river features at different locations, it would be nearly impossible for novice kayakers to learn the fundamental kayaking skills without receiving some basic instruction. Kayakers described experiencing a sense of bonding with the individual(s) who passed on knowledge to

them and expressed sincere appreciation for the people who introduced them to kayaking. This bonding also encourages kayakers to help other beginners in turn; the cycle of being mentored and mentoring was evident throughout the study. Several kayakers were able to trace their mentoring lineage from one mentor to another. The rich, meaningful relationships that are formed through the mentoring process are one prominent reason why whitewater kayakers share such a close community.

Due to the strong tie between kayaking participation and the physical environment in which kayaking takes place, kayakers reported developing a sense of responsibility for the rivers and creeks they paddled. They expressed an inclination to take action against misuse and abuse of the aquatic environment and the riparian zones by other kayakers, other recreationists, and even nonrecreationists. For example, paddlers often will protest the construction of new dams and other agricultural improvements in an effort to ensure that waterways remain in their free-flowing natural states. In addition, many kayakers expressed a preference for natural, rural rivers over rivers located within industrial waterways where the water quality may not be as pristine. Overall, most kayakers expressed a vested interest in the condition of the environment where they kayak.

Finally, for this study, kayakers' commitment to the sport was assessed along a numerical scale. At one end of the scale, participants who were passively engaged lacked a serious commitment of time, equipment, and overall involvement in kayaking. Passive participants did not give much merit to the underlying norms of the activity, either through ignorance or through lack of perception. For example, the kayakers on the lower end of the spectrum were less concerned with safety or river ethics.

6.1 Recommendations

Public land managers continually strive to understand the needs of their constituents. Manning (1986) suggests that resource management must differentiate users into segments or sub-groups seeking different

recreational experiences. This study identified and distinguished whitewater kayakers as a quickly growing sub-population of recreationists and a unique, prominent user group that must be understood in order to meet the needs of the participants. By obtaining more data and seeking to further understand this user group, management agencies can avoid user group conflicts, depletion of waterways and riparian zones, and mishaps and injuries that occur as a result of crowding and mismanagement.

Additional research is needed to investigate the hypothesis that whitewater kayakers' participation is strongly linked to the recreational experience and linked less strongly to the social interactions between participants. Whitewater kayakers could be compared to other user groups such as windsurfers, water skiers, or other aquatic-based recreational users to see if there are differences among participants' motivations and benefits among different user groups.

7.0 LITERATURE CITED

- Denzin, N.K.; Lincoln, Y.S. 1994. **Handbook of qualitative research**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ditton, R.B.; Loomis, D.K. 1992. **Recreation specialization: re-conceptualization from a social worlds perspective**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 24: 33-51.
- Driver, B.L.; Brown, P.J.; Peterson, G.L. 1991. **Benefits of leisure**. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.
- Ewert, A.W. 1989. **Outdoor adventure pursuits: foundations, models, and theories**. Columbus, OH: Publishing Horizons, Inc.
- Floyd, M.F. 1998. **Getting beyond marginality and ethnicity: the challenge for race and ethnic studies in leisure research**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 30: 3-22.

- Gibson, M.A. 1998. **A qualitative investigation of river rafting expeditions: the guide's perspective.** Greeley, CO: University of Northern Colorado. Dissertation Abstracts International. 60/04: 1326. Ph.D. dissertation.
- Glaser, B.G.; Strauss, A.L. 1967. **The discovery grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research.** Chicago, IL: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Huberman, A.M.; Miles, M.B. 1994. **Data management and analysis methods.** In: Denzin, N.K.; Lincoln, Y.S., eds. Handbook of qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.: 428-444.
- Hudson, S.; Beedie, P. 2007. **Kayaking.** In: Jennings, G., ed. Water-based tourism, sport, leisure, and recreation experiences. Burlington, MA: Elsevier: 171-186.
- Jennings, G. 2007. **Water-based tourism, sport, leisure, and recreation experiences.** Burlington, MA: Elsevier.
- Leatherberry, E.C.; Lime, D.W.; Thompson, J.L. 1980. **Trends in river recreation.** In: LaPage, W.F., ed. Proceedings: 1980 National Outdoor Recreation Trends Symposium. Gen. Tech. Rep. NE-57. Vols. I and II. Broomall, PA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northeastern Forest Experimental Station: 147-164.
- Longhurst, B. 1995. **Popular music and society.** Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Louv, R. 2008. **Last child in the woods: saving our children from nature-deficit disorder.** Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books. 380 p.
- Manning, R.E. 1986. **Studies in outdoor recreation.** Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press.
- Pergams, O.R.W.; Zaradic, P.A. 2006. **Is love of nature in the U.S. becoming love of electronic media? 16-year downtrend in national park visits explained by watching movies, playing video games, Internet use, and oil prices.** Journal of Environmental Management. 80(4): 387-393.
- Pigram, J.J.; Jenkins, J.M. 2006. **Outdoor recreation management.** New York: Routledge.
- Scott, D. 1990. **An analysis of adult play groups: theoretical and empirical considerations.** University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University. Dissertation Abstracts International. 52/01: 296. Ph.D. dissertation.
- Selin, S.W.; Howard, D.R. 1988. **Ego involvement and leisure behavior: a conceptual specification.** Journal of Leisure Research. 20: 237-244.
- Shibutani, T. 1955. **Reference groups as perspectives.** American Journal of Sociology. 60: 562-569.
- Strauss, A. 1978. **A social world perspective.** In: Denzin, N.K., ed. Studies in symbolic interaction. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press: 119-128.
- Strauss, A.; Corbin, J. 1990. **Basics of qualitative research.** Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

The content of this paper reflects the views of the author(s), who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.