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A quality of interrelating: describing a form of meaningful experience on a wilderness river journey

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In this paper I identify the components of 'meaningful experiences' for participants on a wilderness river rafting journey. The research is phenomenologically informed, and includes interviews, journals, observations and follow-up emails from 32 participants on eight Franklin River (Tasmania) 10-day trips. It elicits individual perceptions of meaningful experiences and combines recollections to reveal the commonalities within those experiences. The research identifies two key recurrent 'streams of experience' that provide meaning. The two recurrent streams of experience involved, firstly, *a feeling of humility* and, secondly, *being alive to the present*. In this paper I focus on the stream of experience surrounding a feeling of humility, highlighting the qualities of the ways in which participants interrelated with their surrounding environments and the structure of such experiences. Additionally, I consider some unique elements of the wilderness river journey that contributed to the experiences that participants valued as meaningful.

Keywords: *Meaningful experience; Rivers; Wilderness; Phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty*

Introduction

Outdoor educators, nature-based tourism guides and private recreationalists make use of wilderness river areas for extended journeys. Such journeys offer up a range of experiences, including some that participants might recall as particularly 'moving' or 'meaningful', yet nevertheless find difficult to describe. Despite numerous studies exploring a variety of potentially meaningful experiences in different wilderness environments (see, for example, Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Williams & Harvey, 2001), the elusive qualities of these experiences make them resistant to analysis (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000).

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Outdoor educators and guides who are able to recognise and understand the range of meaningful experiences that can reasonably be anticipated in a given environment should be well placed to facilitate development of participants' self-awareness of such experiences if and when they arise. As John Dewey (1938) writes:

> A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing condition, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile (1938, p. 40).

Extended river journeys offer unique opportunities to explore people's experiences and interactions with the surrounding environment. Significant research has been conducted within this arena but there is considerable scope for further study, and for an enlarged range of perspectives and contexts. For example, much of the insightful research in Australia over the past decade involves undergraduate outdoor education students (see, for example, Stewart, 2004; Thomas & Thomas, 2000; Wattchow, 2007, 2008) and highlights individuals' meaningful experiences as primarily creations, or re-creations, of existing social and cultural conceptions, such as 'wilderness' and 'romanticised' experiences of nature (see, for example, Brookes, 2001; Stewart, 2004; Wattchow, 2007). Although meaningful experiences occur in complex social, historical and cultural contexts (Fox, 2008) that frame and shape individual interactions with their surrounds, there remains an imperative for practitioners to better understand the subtle ways in which the physical surrounds, particularly the ambient natural environment, might pre-reflectively influence a person's experiences of the natural world.

Although each participant on a river journey will have a set of unique and individual experiences, in this research I seek to reveal the shared qualities or structures of experiences that participants describe as meaningful. Are there common qualities of interactions with particular places/environments that might pre-reflectively affect individuals, so that, despite each *post facto* recollection of the experience being individually unique, some 'essence' of that shared original interaction is still available? Thus three key questions guide this inquiry:

1. What forms of meaningful experiences might occur on a wilderness river journey?
2. Are there common essential qualities of those meaningful experiences that are accessible and describable?
3. What components of the journey facilitate those meaningful experiences?

Adopting a phenomenological approach

This inquiry considers what it is like to have various forms of experience; it is concerned with describing human experience. I chose a phenomenological approach as the most appropriate methodological framework because it privileges personal experience, is descriptive and searches for common essences of lived experiences. As Patton (2002) suggests, phenomenology asks 'what is the meaning, structure, and essence of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?' (p. 104).

Phenomenology is both a philosophical tradition and a research methodology. It provides a vantage point from which to view the world and a perspective upon the nature of knowledge. Although there are many different styles of phenomenology (Seamon, 2000), at the heart of these styles is what Herbert Spiegelberg (1960) calls 'the phenomenological task: the descriptive investigation of the phenomena, both objective and subjective, in their fullest breadth and depth' (p. 2), where phenomena are taken to be objects or experiences as they are experienced (Seamon, 2000) or illuminated to us (Heidegger, 1962).

Phenomenology, then, is a return to the investigation and description of the essence of the way things appear for us as we live through them. Max van Manen (1997) asserts that:

> *phenomenological research is the study of lived experience*. To say the same thing differently: phenomenology is the study of the life world—the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it (1997, p. 9; original emphasis).

Thus, phenomenology provides a framework through which to research and interpret lived experience.

Although phenomenology makes use of an individual's first-hand experience to explore and describe phenomena, it is not just a method aimed at explicating individual experiences. Rather, as David Seamon (2000) suggests, 'the aim is to use these descriptions as a groundstone from which to discover underlying commonalities that mark the essential core of the phenomenon' (p. 159). This is done by suspending preconceptions and approaching whatever it is that the researcher seeks to understand from a variety of perspectives, often using direct experience, interviews, personal accounts or texts to search for patterns that define a particular phenomenon. For this reason, sampling is rarely random, and the sample reflects an imperative to gain first-hand accounts that are as thorough as possible. Phenomenology begins with descriptions of lived experience, but it attempts far more than a moment-to-moment description: it attempts to describe the organisational principles and structures of consciousness (Husserl, 1931). As Seamon (2000) suggests:

> . . . the phenomenologist pays attention to specific instances of the phenomenon with the hope that these instances, in time, will point toward more general qualities and characteristics that accurately describe the essential nature of the phenomenon as it has presence and meaning in the concrete lives and experiences of human beings (p. 159).

Thus, phenomenology aims to explicate the essential qualities of experience for a particular group of people in a particular context. It does not provide a universal set of truths that can be generalised. Rather, it illuminates and describes the essence of a unique set of experiences to provide a depth of understanding that might ordinarily have gone unnoticed.

The study

The selection of the Franklin River, an iconic wilderness river, as the site for the research project reflects my desire to maximise opportunities to investigate meaningful experiences as they were vividly lived. The Franklin River sits at the centre of the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park in south-west Tasmania and its journey begins in the small streams and tributaries in the Cheyne Range. The river trip is usually a 9-day to 11-day rafting journey, with commercial trips commonly consisting of two rafts, two guides and up to eight clients. The Franklin is a remote wilderness river that begins with relatively easy sections for the first few days, makes its way through the middle Franklin and Great Ravine with several very difficult sections, and then opens out for the last few days to become a series of quiet flat pools and shingle rapids (Griffiths & Baxter, 1997).

In this study, I selected the sample using a process Michael Patton (2002) describes as 'purposeful random sampling' (p. 240), whereby participants were *purposefully* selected based on contexts where the phenomena under investigation had been previously observed, and *randomly* in the sense that trips, and therefore participants, were selected prior to any experiences (meaningful or otherwise) taking place. I selected both commercial and recreational rafting participants to maximise potentially rich data, and to fulfil the criterion that participants voluntarily chose the experience, with the prime motivation for the trip being recreation and/or holiday, rather than the improvement of technical skills. The study involved 32 participants (aged 17–65), 20 males and 12 females, from eight Franklin River journeys (four commercial and four private trips) during the period 2007–2009. The sample size was not fixed prior to the commencement of the research. Instead, by focusing on the research questions, I determined the sample size by the quality of data available from each new participant that added to the insights of the meaningful experiences described by other participants. Data sources included my observations of participants, as well as interviews, journals and written responses to follow-up emails. Individual semi-structured interviews were the primary data source, usually occurring on the last day of the journey, or as soon after the journey as possible. The timing of the interviews reflected a desire for participants to recall experiences in a natural setting, soon after they occurred (Borrie, Roggenbuck, & Hull, 1998), while ensuring that 'the material experienced runs its course to fulfilment' (Dewey, 1934, p. 151).

Participants, researcher and the context of questioning all play a role in constructing data of this type. In being asked to recall meaningful experiences, participants may be led to place experiences within that category that they might not otherwise have done. By trying to put what are potentially personal and difficult to describe experiences into words, participants can search for words and will inevitably employ a layer of reflection before responding. As a result responses can, and probably must, involve socially acceptable norms. These are inherent challenges within the study of meaningful experiences and are related to an overall phenomenological challenge; how to get back to the immediacy of the original experience. During this inquiry I made every effort to avoid disclosing anticipated responses by being transparent about the project without signalling my personal views or discussing my own experiences. An effort was also made to make clear, during the interviews, that it was the participants' unique perceptions of what it was to be on the river that I valued.

I transcribed and coded the interviews, using emergent themes, and constructed concept maps for each individual interview to represent the conversational flow and highlight relationships between themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Early in this process, two independent researchers coded and mapped a selection of individual interviews in order to check my analysis and interpretation of the interview data. The two independent researchers had a high level of agreement with my analysis, although one independent researcher at times had fewer codes for equivalent interview segments. The independent researcher involved felt that this may have been due to a lack of familiarity with the remainder of the data, and a more extensive description of themes was constructed to guide further analysis.

The individual concept maps and interviews were then considered collectively to search for common thematic relationships. This was done by locating themes commonly linked by conversational flow within interviews (using the concept maps) and then double-checking those relationships alongside a matrix of themes that occurred together within individual interview transcripts (using a computer program—NVivo 8).

As this process progressed, common thematic relationships emerged and were placed on an overall concept map, providing a visual representation of the way themes were commonly related and clustered. This was not an attempt to find cause/effect relationships within the data. Rather, it was an attempt to better understand and describe the thematic relationships and potential central nodes within the participants' recollections of meaningful experiences. These central nodes of experience and the way they were linked allowed 'streams of experience' (overall commonly described forms and flows of meaningful experience) to emerge, suggesting possible common structures of meaningful experience and providing a framework within which to carefully re-interrogate participants' original individual descriptions.

Findings

Analysis and interpretation of the data revealed two age-neutral and gender-neutral key recurrent streams of experience that provided meaning for participants, namely: *a feeling of humility*; and *being alive to the present*. Interrogating the thematic relationships of participant descriptions surrounding these two streams of experience revealed the essential qualities of these experiences. In this article I will focus on the stream of experience surrounding a feeling of humility (the second stream will be considered in a subsequent article). Of the 32 participants (names changed to pseudonyms), 24 described meaningful experiences that fitted within this stream of experience.

Participants rarely used the term ‘humility’ directly, but I chose to adopt it as an overarching descriptor because it did not overemphasise any particular theme, and the term humility reflected a key notion of the overall experience: ‘an outwardly directed orientation toward a world in which one is “just one part”’ (Tangney, 2002, p. 416). At the heart of this stream of experience was a quality of interrelating with the ‘more-than-human world’ (Abram, 1996):

> When you stop and you look around you, you realise how profoundly unimportant you are to the natural flow of life as it unfolds in there. And I think, so I think that sort of lesson in humility. So when I say I’m left with this feeling of awe and an impression of the extraordinary beauty of it, its impact on me as a person is a humbling one. And it makes me profoundly aware of how unimportant I am personally, that my species is not the be all and the end all. It’s not the last word in value on the planet (Richard).

Although recollections of meaningful experiences were unique and individual, participant descriptions revealed an invariant structure of experience that was common throughout the stream of experience described as a feeling of humility. This structure of experience comprised the following qualities:

- The ‘things’ become ‘something’.
- A tension between vulnerability and comfort.
- An intertwining with the more-than-human world.
- An imminent paradox.

The ‘things’ become ‘something’

In a variety of ways, participants experienced a sense that the ‘things’, or observed objects, were a part of ‘something’. The things that were interacted with, and which claimed their attention, particularly in the natural world, pointed towards a *something other* that was not (and perhaps could not be) literally described. The river, the geology, the forests, the micro-worlds, the macro landscape—all suggested something that exists but that is not wholly describable by reference to its parts.

Many participants expressed a sense of being directed towards an apprehension of something that in scale, temporality, beauty (diversity) and flow of change was beyond everyday imagination. For example, geological features provided senses of both physical and temporal scale that revealed something much larger. Recollections of a physical sense of diminishment within a landscape such as the Franklin River might seem to be predictable, but these were (perhaps surprisingly) outnumbered by recollections of a temporal sense of scale. Participants reported their perceptions of the geological time-scale by reference to their observations of strata in the valley walls, the smoothing and shaping of the rocks by the water over time, and the apparent tumbling of larger rocks to make smaller rocks as the river carried on downstream:

> But then, I’ve got this one particular rock I remember, sitting at Big Fall beach on our last night . . . so when I was sitting on this beach, particularly thinking about these rocks, I

> guess I was wondering about all that had come before it, you know . . . what natural things had passed before (Beth).
>
> I mean there are little creeks that have just carved their way through solid rock to get to their output, to get to the river, to get out to the sea, they've just gone straight through this rock . . . you know that over time water wears away rock. And then you just see that, that incredible time scale is all sitting there in front of you in evidence (Sarah).

The river itself added to their sense that the place 'exists on its own'. Participants sensed the relentless power of the river, describing it as having its own 'obligations', operating under pressures and constraints that were largely free from human interventions. Some participants imagined how the river might be in flood, even when the trip itself was at low water. Many participants expressed a (somewhat surprised) realisation that the river exists as an independent entity, regardless of whether or not humans are (or were) there to observe it:

> A lot of us would talk about the bits of stuff in the trees. Like we'd be sleeping down here, and then way up there, like, twenty feet above us there'd be those twigs and leaves and stuff that were caught in the floods. And just to think, wow, the water was that high. So we were thinking about that quite a lot, what it would be like (Rosie).
>
> It's a weird concept because you only sort of think—you know, as humans we—I mean, you tend to only—you don't think about that, you know? Something seems to, in some ways, only exist when you're experiencing it and when you're there . . . there's that idea of the power and the temporal nature of us being there, in the fact that it's continuing all the time (Jessie).
>
> It's awesomely beautiful, and that's entirely a human attribution of value. But I'm more and more wondering whether there is nevertheless an intrinsic beauty in nature which is beautiful whether there's a human there to see it and label it as beautiful or not (Richard).

Although participants' interactions with what we might call the 'macro-landscape' produced a sense that the place existed as an independent entity, it was also apparent that *micro-worlds* consistently engaged participants and provided them with a further sense of a 'something other'. Micro-worlds, such as continuously flowing waterfalls and intertwined patches of mosses and ferns, hinted at infinite complexities and an infinite number of further micro-worlds. Participants recognised that individual trees, or perhaps more accurately the micro-worlds connected to a single tree, were beautiful and infinitely complex in themselves, albeit only a tiny part of the larger forest. Their glimpses of the forest and exposed geological features, together with perceptions of the imminent power of the river and seemingly endless micro-worlds, pointed them towards something other than that which existed without human apprehension:

> I love the micro worlds, you know? I loved all the tiny, the little mossy lichen assemblages of plants . . . and I'd look at that and I'd think, how complex. And you multiply this by infinity because it's all . . . that's what the river is (Richard).

A tension between vulnerability and comfort

Participants combined their senses of 'something other' with perceptions of tensions between *vulnerability* and *comfort*. Interruptions and intrusions from the surrounding environment produced feelings of vulnerability and openness to the world, yet these were not necessarily perceived as negative experiences because they also produced senses of reassurance and comfort. Participants were enfolded by the place (or this something other)—taken in to become part of some larger assemblage:

> And in that insignificance, like those little trees like, there's thousands of them, millions of trees there. And, each one on its own is big and strong and green, it's beautiful. But when they're put together, like they're, each individual one in amongst the forest is insignificant, because it's just one amongst thousands, but, together it's spectacular. And so I think by, maybe by, feeling insignificant it makes me feel quite significant, it makes me feel part of it, but, and because I like it it's good to feel part of it (Rachel).
>
> Standing on this rock, I ask myself the question, how can I feel so connected to a place and at the same time be so terrified? (Alison).

Participants related this apparent tension between vulnerability and comfort not only to the physical challenges of the trip inspired by the environment (certainly, many participants felt intimidated by some environments, particularly where the scale or power of the place was evident), but also by challenges to their individuated senses of themselves:

> The sense of diminishment that you get which can be both inspiring and also a bit frightening because it's ego dissolving (Richard).
>
> But at the same time that you feel small, a part of something bigger, so you feel diminished. At the same time, you're also aware that you're part of that system and there's something comfortable about that (Vickie).

Participants had a sense of being 'comfortably terrified', which is not to say that there was necessarily comfort *in* being terrified, but that perhaps there was an additional element to the experience that provided comfort. What seems certain is that for many participants the experience was both threatening and comforting—an interaction with the landscape that both threatened and enfolded, involving a vulnerability or openness to the surrounding environment. Participants perceived the landscape, yet felt that they themselves were perceived by something other. There was a sense that participants lost themselves, the importance of their 'selves', and in doing so potentially found their place in the larger scheme of things. As Bob Henderson (1996) suggests, 'one does not sing the praises of the awe of nature. Rather, one comes to see and accept one's place in a grand design at the level of the comforted soul' (p. 140).

An intertwining with the more-than-human world

An essential quality of the meaningful experience surrounding a sense of humility was the intertwining or interrelating of oneself with something other. The experience of intertwining involved a paradox of being both *separate* (in response to something other) and *connected* (a part of that something other). The experience appeared to be, at least in part, pre-categorical and indescribable, albeit with a number of identifiable qualities. These qualities revolved around feelings of diminishment or humbleness in the face of something undeniable, immense, overwhelming, inexhaustible and larger than oneself, in combination with feelings of being a part of that larger assemblage/system/something other. Scale, for example, was made apparent both as a realisation that there *is* something larger and indescribable, and that we are *in* whatever that 'something' is:

> So there was that side of being alone in this big environment, as well as feeling connected to all things. Those two feelings aren't mutually exclusive I don't think. I think there's a relationship between them (Morris).
>
> I feel insignificant in terms of the fact that all those water molecules have come from somewhere else, from the sky, from evaporation in the sea, but then from rivers before that. And that should make me feel small but it doesn't necessarily. I almost feel very small but part of something (Jessie).

It was not just about recognising any apparent time-scale, there was also the recognition that participants were part of that time-scale: that they were enfolded in something larger. As Peter Hay reflects on his journey down the Franklin:

> The river holds all of time within its flow. I'd once thought Europe old—that I lived in a young place, one lacking any thread to a deep, unfolding past. All its history ahead of it. I'd thought this until I came to the Franklin, until the ancient Gondwana forests reached over me, gathered me into time itself, and my life changed, my scale of things, and my understanding of what is right and what is wrong (2008).

An imminent paradox

At the heart of this profound experience was a paradox: that one can perceive something as the other, in its alterity (otherness), and also be a part of that other. The way in which this sense of interrelatedness appeared for participants was vital to the meaningful experiences they described. These two perceptions are intimately connected, and yet paradoxical: we cannot really be a part of the world and be separate from it at the same time. Nevertheless, the imminent perception that we might be either may affect our experience of the surrounding world, making us more aware that we are *in the world*. Participants appeared to experience this paradox at the pre-reflective or perceptual level, and struggled to articulate it directly in their recollections. However, continual turning over of the data revealed its consistent appearance.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) characterises the intertwining of two such related yet divergent possibilities of perception as 'chiasmic' (see pp. 130–155), in the sense that the two possibilities continually cross but never actually meet, providing a combined effect that is potentially profound. The term chiasma reflects an intertwining of two anatomical possibilities (such as the X formed by the optic nerves) and is used by Merleau-Ponty, 'as a figure for understanding both the paradoxical contact and separation of the intersubjective relation' (Toadvine, 2009, p. 111).

Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes the reversibility of such perceptions. For example, our right hand 'touching' an object in the world and at the same time attempting to 'be touched' by our other hand. The perception that our right hand might be the touched potentially heightens, or affects, our experience of the touching of an object in the world. That is, the perception that we might touch this something other, and yet be part of that something other being touched, places us more directly in the world. It is this potentially imminent reversibility (of being the toucher or the touched) that appeared to affect participants so profoundly. It is possible to be one *or* the other but not both simultaneously, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) suggests:

> It is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it* (1968, pp. 147–148).

Rather than suggesting that the two experiences can occur at the same time, Merleau-Ponty (1968) argues that the simultaneous realisation and chiasmic intertwining of the *relatedness* (I cannot touch the world without being aware that I might be touched) and *divergence* (I cannot touch and be touched at the same time) of the two perceptions is at the heart of being in the world. There is a profound and inescapable *openness* to the world; it intrudes into us and we intrude into it: 'the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen' (1968, p. 139).

Similarly, experiences of touching another person or interacting with the more-than-human world can pre-reflectively reveal the alterity of the other in a profound way. Such experiences have at their heart a pre-reflective interaction with an Other that is, as Erazim Kohak (1992) suggests, 'there-for-itself, an appresented Other, with an integrity of its own and calling for respect' (p. 176). For many participants, this *quality of interrelating* appeared to be at the heart of the meaningful experiences they described. Such experiences reflect a perceptual interaction with an *already* meaningful natural world. Ted Toadvine (2009) describes Merleau Ponty's position thus:

> Merleau-Ponty's approach is defined by his conviction that nature has its own meaningful configuration to which we are oriented at a level more originary than thought, at the level of our bodily engagement with the perceived. And since our bodies and minds are of the same stuff as this perceived, our own meaning-making is an event within the larger process of nature's production of sense (Toadvine, 2009, p. 131).

By continually turning over the data I uncovered a quality of inter-relating that was common to many participant recollections and involved the perception of an imminent paradox. The simultaneous perception of two related yet divergent possibilities (being separate, yet intimately connected) appeared to be at the heart of meaning-making for many participants. Such experiences were difficult to describe, or hold onto, but were deeply felt:

> It was like a moment for pause . . . I felt extremely empowered by how I felt by being there, and, I was feeling, feeling small . . . despite your size you can still be, you can still climb that big mountain, you can still go over that big rock, you can still swim in that big river, you can still climb that big tree. Like there's, you can live within it. Yeah, I'm not sure, if I'm going to be able to verbalise that (Beth).

Contributing components of the journey

Although the limitations of a phenomenological approach make it impossible to generalise the findings beyond the context from which they have been derived, it may be of interest to consider the components of the river journeys studied that appeared to facilitate the meaningful experiences. The interactions described were a matter of not only *what* participants paid attention to, but also *how* they were able to pay attention. It is tempting to suggest that such experiences of interrelating with the surrounding environment might provide an openness to the world; however, it may be that such an intersubjective openness pre-exists, and it is the way in which one is able to pay attention that is also vitally important. As Evan Thompson (2007) suggests of perceiving the other:

> For me to perceive the other—that is, for the other's bodily presence to be perceptually disclosed to me—the open intersubjectivity of perceptual experience must already be in play. Thus one's actual experience of another bodily subject is based on an *a priori* openness to the other (2007, p. 385).

Components of the journey that appeared to contribute strongly towards participants paying an effortless attention to interactions with the surroundings included the river environment itself, a lack of distractions, time for experiences to run their course and a sense of exploration. For example, visually, auditorily and physically participants were constantly connected and 'oriented' to the river while travelling upon it. The river valley and riverbanks decree that campsites are sloped or oriented towards the river or incoming streams. Where such slopes do not exist, the campsites sit with hills 'behind' and the river 'in front'. The orientation to the river is continuous; one is either travelling *down the river* or oriented *towards the river*. Movement, orientation and sensual experience are relative to the river. The constant focus towards the river is expressed within both participants' language and their physical orientation. Even when participants wander off for a quiet sit down or a stroll, the river is the defining feature. To sit on a rock and look across the river, with the forest or hills at your back, is the natural position. It is something that may seem self-evident and taken for granted, yet it is unique to river travel and appears to impact upon the way participants pay attention to the river and surrounding landscape:

> If you invert the world it [the river] dominates the landscape of the area, as much or more than the mountain, which is the more obvious feature. I guess if you poured a cast and turned it upside down then you'd see the influence (Sarah).

Many participants described a lack of distraction as contributing to the ways in which they were able to pay attention. The length of the journey, the remoteness of the river, the physically enfolding qualities of the landscape and the lack of social intrusion all facilitated participants' ability to pay effortless attention to the surrounding environment. For example, while a sense of 'solitude' was a common thematic descriptor for meaningful experiences, solitude was not described physically but, rather, as a mental state that could occur in close proximity to others (e.g. while paddling on a raft with other participants), where the key element was a lack of intrusion that could break the spell of intimate interactions. There was also a sense of time for experiences to run their full course: a slowness, length and rhythm of the journey that allowed participants to settle into the place and provided the opportunity for experiences to flow:

> And noticing those things, that being what you're turning your attention to, is things like, sunlight on water, or, you know, the mist curling off it in the morning, like actually having the time, and turning your attention . . . turning your attention to those sorts of things (Amy).
>
> It also happens to you. Because there's no distractions, so you, you, it gives you that time, and mental time as well. Partly because of the distance maybe involved, to . . . focus on the things around you. And that's how you start to see that you are, might be, you still are a part of the system. As opposed to separate from it (Rachel).

The ability of the guides to provide participants with the time and space to have their own set of unscripted and unexpected experiences was also recalled as a contributing factor for many participants. It was commonly the small things that fascinated participants, like the leatherwood blossoms floating in an eddy or the pieces of bark washed up on the shore. It was not Rock Island Bend or Thunder Rush (iconic symbols of the Franklin) that the guides insisted participants see as the most significant parts of the river. Rather, the guides allowed participants to have their own journey, relax into the place and find personal meaning. Also, the opportunities and encouragement provided by the guides for participants to explore the complex micro-worlds to be found up small side creeks, in forest glades and in canyons were often recalled as significant and meaningful:

> And the guides were really good as well, in terms of not pre-empting our own experience, or the things that we would notice . . . in terms of not saying 'oh this thing's just around the corner' or whatever. They would respond to whatever it was that we were noticing. And that was really nice. Like it didn't feel like a prescribed experience (Amy).

Concluding comments

In this paper I have described the common qualities and *essence* of a form of meaningful experience for participants on a wilderness river, as well as the components of the journey that appeared to facilitate such experiences. I have not been prescriptive about how such experiences are achieved. Rather, I hope a descriptive understanding might inform individuals' practice to take into account the underlying structure of these experiences. It is not the purpose of this paper to suggest that such experiences should be the aim for participants on a wilderness river journey but, rather, to highlight the possibility of such experiences.

The essences of the experiences described in this paper highlight the importance of the quality of interrelating with the surrounding environment in providing meaning. Will Adams (2007) reminds us of the 'primacy of interrelating' (p. 24), and suggests that, 'interrelating is an essential given in human existence . . . *interrelating is our essence, our calling, and our path*' (p. 28; original emphasis). Viewed in this light, river journeys such as the Franklin River with a lack of distractions, time for experiences to run their course and a physical 'riverscape' provide unique opportunities to facilitate a quality of interrelating with the surrounding environment that can provide potently meaningful experiences.

By highlighting the essential qualities of meaningful experience for participants on a wilderness river journey, I have drawn attention to the importance of the pre-reflective and perceptual realm of experience. Crucial in the context of this research were not only the unique elements of the place itself, but also the ways in which participants were able to experience their surroundings: not only what they were able to pay attention to, but also how they were able to attend to it.

Author biography

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