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# Self-Actualization and Peak Experiences in Outdoor Recreation

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SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND PEAK EXPERIENCES  
IN OUTDOOR RECREATION

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science  
Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

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by  
Jonathan William Vogler  
August 2012

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Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

While a positive correlation has been illustrated between peak experiences in outdoor recreation and self-actualization, there has been little to no research on the detailed components of peak experiences that might influence self-actualization. The purpose of this study was to explore individuals' perceptions of peak experiences in outdoor recreation and their potential influence on the process of self-actualization. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 criteria recruited participants that had a long experiential history with outdoor recreation. A phenomenological approach was used to explore the essence of the peak experience as well as perceptions of self-actualization, as described by each participant. The study found several characteristics and triggers of peak experiences that were common amongst participants. The results revealed many participants' peak experiences include some form of discomfort, challenge, risk, physical exertion, flow, and natural beauty in a social group. Peak experiences in outdoor recreation were also found to influence individual's perception of self-actualization by encouraging a shift in perceived needs, and through the building of confidence and composure. This study demonstrates that outdoor recreation activities can be practiced to better facilitate peak experiences individuals perceive to influence the process of self-actualization.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.   LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
What is a Peak Experience? .....	4
What Significant Components are Hypothesized to Facilitate Peak Experiences in Outdoor Recreation? .....	5
Can Peak Experiences in Outdoor Recreation Influence One’s Perception of Self-Actualization? .....	8
III.  METHODS .....	14
Phenomenological Approach to Research .....	14
Sample.....	15
Interview Script Development .....	15
Data Collection .....	17
Data Analysis .....	18
IV.  RESULTS .....	19
Sample Description.....	19
Peak Experiences in Outdoor Recreation .....	20
What Components Appeared Most Significant During Peak Experiences? .....	28
Do Peak Experiences in Outdoor Recreation Influence Perceptions of Self-Actualization? .....	37

V. DISCUSSION.....	42
VI. CONCLUSION.....	48
APPENDICES .....	51
A: Interview Script.....	52
REFERENCES .....	54

## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Sample Demographics .....	20
2	Quotes Representing Each Significant Component.....	37
3	Quotes Representing Each Influence on Perception of Self-Actualization.....	41

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Outdoor recreation pursuits contain many components that trigger peak experiences shown to positively correlate with self-actualizing individuals (Chenoweth & Gobster, 1990; DeMares & Krycka, 1998; Dodson, 1996; Lanier, Privette, Vodanovich, & Bundrick, 1996; Lipscombe, 1999; Maslow, 1962, 1964; McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting, 2009; Pomfret, 2006; Wuthnow, 1978). These components include nature, aesthetic beauty, physical exertion, and accomplishment. While these components may be found amongst a variety of activities, outdoor recreation provides an environment where several of these components may occur simultaneously, which suggests they may be particularly effective at promoting peak experiences.

Many people have had peak experiences while participating in outdoor recreation activities (Chenoweth & Gobster, 1990; DeMares & Krycka, 1998; Dodson, 1996; Lipscombe, 1999; McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting, 2009; Pomfret, 2006). These peak experiences are deeply meaningful and transformative moments of intense personal joy (Maslow, 1964). They are often described as containing intense and mystic qualities that are often compared to religious or spiritual experiences (Maslow, 1964). These peak experiences often have the ability to foster new perspectives in an individual that may contribute to their personal development (Breed & Fagan, 1972; Maslow, 1964; Privette, 1983; Wilson & Spencer, 1990).

Research suggests people who have had peak experiences are often more self-actualizing (Lanier, Privette, Vodanovich, & Bundrick, 1996; Maslow, 1962, 1964;

Wuthnow, 1978). Self-actualization is commonly associated with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. It is the need for personal growth that drives an individual to achieve his or her fullest potential. Abraham Maslow illustrates self-actualization with the phrase, "what a man can be he must be"(1943, p. 380). The hierarchy contains progressive levels of needs that must each be satisfied before an individual may be aware of the succeeding need. The need for self-actualization is at the apex of this hierarchy.

While Maslow (1943) posits all lower needs must be satisfied to allow self-actualization to occur, one model suggests personal growth occurs when these needs are challenged. Outdoor recreation and adventure education literature commonly refers to this concept as the "comfort zone" (Brown, 2008; Exeter, 2001; Flood, Gardner, & Cooper, 2009; Leberman & Martin, 2002; Luckner & Nadler, 1997). When individuals are within their comfort zone they are in a state free of anxiety and stress. The comfort zone concept is used as a model that suggests optimal personal growth occurs only when individuals are outside of their comfort zone and are able to overcome stressful or challenging situations. This zone of optimal growth is known as the "growth zone". The perception of risk is a key component the comfort zone model (Leberman & Martin, 2002). If the perceived risks or challenges seem too severe the individual will be outside of the growth zone in what is known as the "panic zone" where they will be too anxious or challenged to experience growth. The comfort zone model suggests that the needs within the Maslow's hierarchy need not simply be met, but must be balanced between satiation and stress to promote the process of self-actualization. Peak experiences may occur in outdoor recreation activities that produce an environment that often challenges

and stresses an individual's perceptions of the physiological and safety needs Maslow suggests must be met prior to an individual self-actualizing.

While a positive correlation has been illustrated between the two, research has not shown how peak experiences might influence the self-actualization process (Lanier, Privette, Vodanovich, & Bundrick, 1996; Maslow, 1962, 1964; Wuthnow, 1978).

Outdoor recreation activities that contain a combination of triggers of peak experiences and stresses that facilitate optimal growth may have a unique ability to influence self-actualization. The purpose of the study was to explore individual's perceptions of peak experiences in outdoor recreation and their potential influence on self-actualization. This study used a phenomenological approach to address the following research questions: Do people have peak experiences in outdoor recreation pursuits? If so, what are the significant components that produce these outcomes? Do peak experiences in outdoor recreation influence self-actualization and if so, how? Attempting to answer these questions through the use of a focused in-depth data collection from an outdoor recreation experience-rich sample will allow the discovery of the potential for a explicit link between peak experiences and self-actualization, the purpose of this study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### WHAT IS A PEAK EXPERIENCE?

Peak experiences are meaningful and transformational moments of intense joy (Maslow, 1964). Within these moments the individual often feels most connected with the world and elicits a state of self-transcendence (Maslow, 1964). Peak experiences are moments when an individual operates at a peak cognitive state in which he or she views the experiences as being whole and complete (Maslow, 1964). Individuals constantly use their preconceptions as filters to make meaning out of their experiences (Rosenblatt & Bartlett, 1976). In many ordinary moments the quality of an experience is contrasted against everything it is not. During the peak experience these preconceptions are removed providing a richness and purity that contribute to “unadulterated perception”(Maslow, 1962). Peak experiences often contain a high level of intensity with “mystic and transpersonal” qualities that are able to foster new perspectives (Privette, 1983). Many compare peak experiences to religious or spiritual experiences (Breed & Fagan, 1972; Maslow, 1964; Wilson & Spencer, 1990).

These experiences may occur for many different people in many different kinds of emotional, cognitive, and environmental situations. Peak experiences can occur in a variety of circumstances including parental, aesthetic, natural, athletic, spiritual, and mystical experiences, as well as moments of intellectual insight and creativity (Maslow, 1962). While anyone at anytime may be capable of having peak experiences, some characteristics of those reporting peak experiences are more common than others. Those

having had peak experiences are more likely to have anti-authoritarian attitudes, be more open-minded, more flexible in their beliefs, more intelligent, more forthright, more experimenting, more assertive, more imaginative, more placid, and freer from tension (McClain & Andrews, 1969). Individuals having peak experiences are also likely to score lower on ratings of religious dogmatism (Breed & Fagan, 1972). While variances exist cross-culturally, peak experiences in natural settings seem to be the most universal. Easterners are more likely than westerners to report group cohesion and social harmony amongst peak experiences. Norwegians have reported experiences involving personal joy, family togetherness, and the birth of a sibling or cousin most frequently (Hoffman & Muramoto, 2007; Hoffman, Iverson, & Ortiz, 2010).

#### WHAT SIGNIFICANT COMPONENTS ARE HYPOTHESIZED TO FACILITATE PEAK EXPERIENCES IN OUTDOOR RECREATION?

##### *Aesthetic Experiences and Natural Settings*

Peak experiences can be triggered by the appreciation of beauty in the forms of art (Panzarella, 1980; Yeagle, Privette, & Dunham, 1989), music (Bakker, 2005; Lewis, 2002), and nature/wilderness (Chenoweth & Gobster, 1990; McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting, 2009). The aesthetic peak experiences are theorized to contain strong elements of both emotion and cognition providing “dual-hemisphere” processing that is unique to other experiences (Lewis, 2002). The aesthetic experience is particularly significant to this research as elicited through elements of nature and wilderness (Chenoweth & Gobster, 1990; McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting, 2009)

Much of the research on peak experiences suggests nature to be one of the most common and universal triggers (Chenoweth & Gobster, 1990; Hoffman, & Muramoto, 2007; Maslow, 1962, 1964; McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting, 2009). The peak experience phenomenon in the natural setting is attributed to its restorative traits that provide a combination of aesthetic pleasure and rejuvenation that contribute to an individual's "spiritual expression" (McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting 2009). These peak experiences increase individuals' awareness of self and understanding of the human condition leading to a change in perspective, philosophy, or worldview (McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting, 2009). Natural settings also have the ability to provide encounters with wild-animals that have been shown to trigger peak experiences due to their ability to elicit strong positive emotional reactions (DeMares & Krycka, 1998).

Much research supports the ability of these settings to foster outcomes often associated with peak experiences such as spirituality, self-transcendence, and personal growth (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000; Ewert, Place, & Sibthorp, 2005; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2003, 2009; Hollenhorst, Frank, & Watson, 1994; White and Hendee, 2000; Williams & Harvey, 2001).. Much research has been done providing evidence of natural settings' effects on spiritual development (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2003, 2009; White and Hendee, 2000; Williams & Harvey, 2001). The power of expansive landscapes can be a source of spiritual inspiration and peak experiences (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). The transcendent component of spirituality has been attributed to the natural setting in which the experience occurs (Heintzman, 2009). Forest environments have also been shown to elicit feelings of transcendence,

extreme happiness, and harmony, which are commonly described within peak experiences including the dimensions of fascination, novelty and compatibility (Williams & Harvey, 2001). Natural settings have been shown to foster psychological growth through their ability to elicit enhanced perceptions of the universe and understanding of the nature of reality (Scott, 1974). Being isolated from the man-made world can facilitate opportunity for self-realization and discovery (Hollenhorst, Frank, & Watson, 1994). They have also been shown to influence on personal and communal development (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000; Ewert, Place, & Sibthorp, 2005; Hollenhorst, Frank, and Watson, 2004;).

#### *Physical Exertion*

Physical exertion and accomplishment has long been suggested as a trigger of peak experiences (Maslow, 1964). Individuals pursuing mountaineering have been shown to have peak experiences with the elements of risk, adventure, mastery, and the mountain environment as being significant (Pomfret, 2006). Individuals have also had peak experiences while pursuing the physically taxing activity of mountain biking. Mountain bikers report that peak experiences allowed them opportunities for self-discovery through being able to test their mental and physical limits (Dodson, 1996). Research has also shown peak experiences to occur amongst skydivers. These individuals claim elements of exhilaration, excitement, the perception of risk, and the ability of these experiences to elicit strong emotions as being significant characteristics of the peak experiences (Lipscombe, 1999).

#### *Peak Experiences and Flow*

Peak experiences are often compared to another construct in positive psychology known as Flow (Bakker, 2005; Privette, 1983). Flow is a state that occurs during an activity when an individual reaches the optimum balance between boredom and anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is most related to peak experiences in what is considered an important component of flow in that it is “autotelic”, meaning it is an activity that is intrinsically satisfying and is engaged in for its own sake (Privette, 1983). An important addition to flow is the peak experience’s ability to foster a new perspective and process. The study found compared to flow and peak performance, peak experiences had the unique qualities of being “mystic”, “transpersonal”, and elicited feelings of “fusion with the world” (Privette, 1983). The peak experience is often characterized as having a higher level of intensity. Some research suggests flow and peak experiences are not only related, but that flow *is* a peak experience (Bakker, 2005). This study measured what they referred to as “the peak experience of flow” and how it can crossover from music instructors to their students (Bakker, 2005, p. 1). In this study, the researchers consider flow to be a peak experience.

## CAN PEAK EXPERIENCES IN OUTDOOR RECREATION INFLUENCE ONE’S PERCEPTION OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION?

### *Self-Actualization*

Maslow’s (1943) theory of human motivation suggests that human needs are hierarchical with more fundamental needs such as physiological and safety needs at the bottom and the need of self-actualization at the top. These needs in succession are physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Self-actualization is the need

for personal growth that drives an individual to achieve his or her fullest potential. Maslow illustrates self-actualization in his *A Theory of Human Motivation* with the phrase:

A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization (1943, p.380).

Maslow's theory explains that until the needs of one level are satisfied, the needs of the succeeding level will not be realized (1943). If a person's need for safety is not satisfied that person will not be aware of his or her need for love or belonging (Maslow, 1943). If the needs of every preceding level of the hierarchy are not met, an individual will not realize the need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Within Maslow's theory one that is experiencing starvation will be too focused on meeting that physiological need to address the safety need of the next level (1943). This perspective views each level of the hierarchy as voids that must be satisfied to realize the apex of needs, self-actualization.

Another important concept is that the hierarchy is not a rigid construction without variation. It is fluid and needs are perceived differently for different individuals. There are some inherently creative people whose creative drive is so dominant, that their creativeness may not be self-actualization fostered from the satisfaction of basic needs, but in spite of the deprivation of the basic needs. Those who have had their basic needs satisfied throughout their lives, and particularly in the earliest developmental stages of

life, tend to develop an exceptional ability to withstand the deprivation of these needs because of the character structure developed.

Some support that the hierarchy has been misinterpreted (Koltko-Rivera, 2006) and that in his later work, Maslow intended for self-transcendence to exist in the highest stage of the hierarchy. This transcendence has implications to the understanding of the hierarchy with respect to the views of peak experiences, flow, wilderness, and spiritual experiences. Maslow comments in *Religions, values, and peak-experiences* (1964) that peak experiences are often what incite the higher hierarchical need of self-actualization.

#### *Self-Actualization and Peak Experiences*

Peak experiences have been shown to be more common amongst self-actualizing individuals (Lanier, Privette, Vodanovich, & Bundrick, 1996; Maslow, 1968, 1970; Wuthnow, 1978). Those having had peak experiences found their lives more meaningful, are more self-assured, and tend to think more about the meaning and purposes of life than those who had not had peak experiences (Wuthnow, 1978). “Peakers” have shown consistencies with other measurements of self-actualization such as less valuation of material possessions, high pay, job security, being famous, having lots of friends, and high valuation of initiating social change, solving social problems, and helping people in need (Wuthnow, 1978). Those having had peak experiences found their lives more meaningful, were more self-assured, and tended to think more about the meaning and purposes of life than those who had not had peak experiences (Wuthnow, 1978). The peak experience lifted the individuals to an expanded state of consciousness, linking it to psychedelic and mystical experiences (Wuthnow, 1978). Research has not explained

whether these outcomes are caused by peak experiences, they only suggest the people likely to have peak experiences shared these characteristics that have been linked to self-actualization (Wuthnow, 1978).

### *Comfort Zone*

While Maslow suggests all lower needs must be satisfied to allow the need for self-actualization to emerge, one model suggests an individual must deprive these needs for personal growth. Outdoor recreation and adventure education literature commonly refers to a concept known as the “comfort zone” (Brown, 2008; Exeter, 2001; Flood, Gardner, & Cooper, 2009; Leberman & Martin, 2002; Luckner & Nadler, 1997). When individuals are within their comfort zone they are in a state free of anxiety and stress. The comfort zone concept is used as a model that suggests optimal personal growth occurs only when individuals are outside of their comfort zone and are able to overcome stressful or challenging situations. This zone of optimal growth is known as the “growth zone”. The perception of risk is a key component of the comfort zone model (Leberman & Martin, 2002). If the perceived risks or challenges seem too severe the individual will be outside of the growth zone in what is known as the “panic zone” where they will be too anxious or challenged to experience growth.

Comfort zone expansion relies on the psychological theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and cognitive development (Piaget, 1977) to explain how an individual experiences new challenges. Piaget’s cognitive development theory posits that as humans mature they develop increasingly more and complex cognitive structures through which they interpret experiences. When people have new experiences they may

assimilate the experiences by integrating them within an existing cognitive structure. If the experience is too novel to be assimilated into an existing cognitive structure, accommodation may occur by modifying the structure. Optimal learning includes both accommodation of cognitive structures and the assimilation of new experiences; however, if the new experiences are too different to allow for accommodation and assimilation, learning does not occur (Brown, 2008).

Cognitive dissonance is a social psychological theory concerned with how individual's deal with conflicting cognitions (Festinger, 1957). Brown (2008) notes that multiple cognitions can be unrelated or irrelevant, consonant, or dissonant. Consonant cognitions relate and agree with one another. Dissonant cognitions relate but do not agree with one another. Individuals desire to have cognitive consonance. Dissonance is reduced by modifying or adding new cognitions.

The concept of comfort zone expansion suggests individuals will experience personal growth when placed in situations where their current cognitive structures are challenged. The individual will reduce the dissonance in their cognitions by assimilating or accommodating the new experience as long as the experience isn't too different from what their cognitive structures can already assimilate. Experiences that are easily assimilated and don't necessitate cognitive modification would be seen as being within one's comfort zone. Those experiences that require accommodation before assimilation would fall within the growth zone. This is the zone where optimal learning occurs. Experiences that are too different for the cognitive structures to accommodate fall outside the growth zone in what is called the panic zone. In the panic zone the individual's desire

for consonance is not great enough to overcome the dissonance. Individuals in the panic zone experience excess stress and anxiety that do not allow personal growth.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RESEARCH

The phenomenological approach insists truth is not deduced solely from the sensory experiences, but that it exists within individuals' consciousness (Hanford, 1975). Phenomenology does not deny the reality of physical nature, but instead focuses attention on the shared lived experiences as described in terms of thoughts and perceptions of an experience in order to discover the nature of the experience shared by multiple participants. The phenomenological approach values an individual's subjective perception to be the truest form of experience. This aims to clarify the sense of reality by providing a "descriptive, detached analysis of consciousness" (Husserl, 1962). This approach focuses more on the internal experiences of individuals as opposed to the more external approach of empiricism (Hanford, 1975).

A phenomenological approach was used in this study because of the personal nature of the subject area. The interest of the study in the individual's perception of peak experiences and how this might influence their perception of self-actualization is a deeply personal and subjective question and therefore in need of a methodology with this focus. A phenomenological approach attempts to filter through cognitive processes that can obscure an individual's subjective perspectives regarding a phenomenon. The phenomenological method intends to tease out the individual's perceptions of the peak experience, which are the critical elements that cause transformation (Maslow, 1962). Phenomenological approaches have been used to study peak experiences (Rosenblatt &

Bartlett, 1976), and particularly aesthetic peak experiences (Panzerella, 1980). This approach is most valid for answering the research questions because only by exploring the individuals perceptions will the essence of the peak experiences emerge.

#### SAMPLE

Individuals were selected for this study based on the criteria that they were at least 40 years of age and had 10 or more years of experience working in outdoor recreation. Individuals who met these criteria were hypothesized to have had a peak experience in outdoor recreation because of the frequency of their experiences. The researchers also hypothesized that the individuals were more likely to have had intense and meaningful experiences in outdoor recreation because they chose to commit much of their life to these pursuits. We selected individuals over the age of 40 because they were believed to be more likely to have perspective on the meaning and influence of these peak experiences. Research suggests younger adults have difficulty differentiating peak experiences from non-peak experiences (Thorne, 1963). Also, older individuals who are intelligent and articulate provide the most satisfactory responses (Thorne, 1963).

The researchers identified an initial sample of eight. These initial participants were emailed requesting their participation in a study related to their experiences in outdoor recreation. Then subsequently each participant during the interview was asked to provide the name of other individuals that met the sample criteria. In total, a sample of 13 were identified for the study.

#### INTERVIEW SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

Questions were asked that aligned with Seidman's (1998) three-step interview process, attempting to drive the discussion from 1) a focused life history, to 2) the description of the peak experience in outdoor recreation, and finally to 3) the reflections about the peak experience. The intent is to start with the life history to allow the interviewee a topic that may be easy for them to discuss, while allowing them to become more comfortable with the interviewer. The first step began very broad with a general statement "*Tell me a little about yourself.*" The interview then focused on the participant's history in outdoor recreation with the question "*When did your interest in outdoor recreation first begin?*" This question allowed the participant to get comfortable with the interview while also providing important descriptive information such as their experiences working in outdoor recreation.

The second step of the interview answered the first research question: Do people have peak experiences in outdoor recreation pursuits? This step focused on the peak experience itself. These interview questions were developed with guidance from literature on phenomenological research and Maslow's (1964) research in peak experiences. These questions remain broad intending to encourage the interviewee to respond with a variety of data at length. The question intended to get participants to recall a peak experience and was modified for the outdoor recreation setting from a script Maslow used (1964):

*"Feel free to take a minute to think about this, but I would like you to think if you have had any experiences in outdoor recreation that you might*

*characterize as a moment of highest happiness and fulfillment or intense personal joy, and if so, would you please take the time to describe that experience?”*

Responses were followed with questions intended to answer the second research question: What are the significant components that produce these outcomes? Questions such as *“What were the indispensable elements of that experience?”* and *“What about that experience made it meaningful?”*

The third step of the interview process was the reflections on the experience. This step addressed the third research question: Do peak experiences in outdoor recreation influence self-actualization? If so, how? The question was asked, *“What influence, if any did these experiences have on your self-actualization?”* This step of the interview process was the reflection on the peak experience and how it influenced them after the experience.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected using semi-structured phone interviews lasting between 29 and 43 minutes. Semi-structured interviewing was most appropriate because it allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to further explore significant concepts. The interview script was used to first ask participants to describe a peak experience followed by opportunities to reflect upon the influence of that experience on the perception of self-actualization, asked by the interviewer in terms used to define it as a process. Phone interviews were most appropriate to have access to participants located across the United States. The interviews were recorded to allow for transcription. Data saturation was expected between 5 to 25 interviews as recommended by Polkinghorne (as cited by

Creswell, 2007, p.61) for phenomenological studies. This study collected data from 13 interviews with experience-rich sources over the summer of 2012.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. The transcriptions were coded for significant statements that were representative of the experience. The analysis included inter-coder reliability with three different individuals. The individuals coded the transcriptions separately then discussed their analyses until agreement was reached on the coding of significant statements. The transcriptions were then analyzed to identify patterns amongst the significant statements.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Thirteen interviews were conducted that each lasted between 29 and 43 minutes. The participants consisted of 11 males and 2 females. Twelve participants were from the United States and one was from England. While there are less female participants in outdoor recreation (Johnson, Bowker, & Cordell, 2001), the ratio of males to females in this study may not be representative of the ratio of outdoor professionals. To address this difference the two female interviews were compared for noticeable differences from the other interview participants related to the overarching themes, and essence described by each of them related to the components of peak experiences and the possible link to self-actualization. The two inter-coder reliability volunteers for this study were also female and were asked to look for possible differences that may be subtle. After this process the theme overlap was consistent with that of the other male respondents. The participants' ages ranged from 40 to 65 years old with an average age of 50.69. Their experiences ranged from 10 years to 41 years working in the field of outdoor recreation with an average of 22.77 years experience. Eleven of the participants had experiences as professional guides or instructors in activities such as rock climbing, whitewater rafting, whitewater kayaking, mountaineering, and backpacking with organizations such as Outward Bound, National Outdoor Leadership School, and the Nantahala Outdoor Center. In addition to their experiences working with other organizations, three participants owned their own companies that provided instruction or guiding in paddling

or rock climbing. Five participants had experiences working for college or high school outdoor recreation programs. Six participants continued to work in outdoor recreation at the time of the study. Seven participants no longer worked in outdoor recreation. Two of the seven that no longer worked in outdoor recreation also no longer pursued it as a serious hobby due to the constraints of raising children.

Table 1

Sample Demographics

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Average
Gender	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	F	F	
Age (years)	56	50	45	55	43	63	65	54	42	51	40	50	45	50.69
Experience (years)	18	33	27	15	12	39	41	30	11	12	19	29	10	22.77
Currently work in Outdoor Recreation	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	

### PEAK EXPERIENCES IN OUTDOOR RECREATION

All participants responded that they had experienced moments in outdoor recreation they would describe as *“a moment of highest happiness and fulfillment, or intense personal joy.”* Ten of the participants commented that they have these experiences often. Here is one example of a participant’s response when asked to describe the experience:

*“Oh that’s really not hard to do. I have those experiences all the time. I had them early in my life doing this and I continue to have them because I continue to lead trips in a less than professional level, but certainly I do a lot of instruction still...I think the moments of happiness are sort of moments of shared grace in a beautiful place with people who are having a peak experience and that*

*is so attractive...I remember one time at the summer camp, I was probably 15. So if you were to ask for a targeted moment of an epiphany where you sort of go like wow I want to do this the rest of my life I don't think I could really claim that, but this is a powerful one. We were really into doing these things called gorge hikes. There are a lot of very steep gorges that drop about 2,000 feet in four or five miles over the Blue Ridge Escarpment down onto the Piedmont and now they're being run as class V+ kayak runs. In the '60s no one was running them but we were hiking them and they were very hard hikes, very strenuous and difficult. You spent a lot of time with basically minimal gear swimming and climbing up and down in the water. And they were really rigorous hikes so the kids that did them had to be pretty tough and pretty self-reliant. And one evening on one of those hikes a friend of mine and I, another 15 year old, were sleeping out on a rock, just a flat rock in the middle of the river, cause it was the only flat place we could find. It was a beautiful evening and the dusk was settling in and we are in the middle of this river with no one else around and this guy said to me 'you know, I don't think we'll ever be any happier than we are right now.' And I thought wow, that's a heavy thing for a 15 year old to say. And the fact is he was right. I have had that experience many times since, but at the time I said wow this is really great. Here we are out here with basically nothing just these backpacks and we'd been swimming and climbing around on these rocks and seeing these amazing waterfalls and cataracts and yeah this is really happiness, and easily accessible, it doesn't cost much."*

This response was exemplary of the responses given by many participants. These peak experiences were often moments when the participant experienced great happiness within the context of an adventure activity amongst extreme natural beauty with other people. These activities commonly included whitewater kayaking/canoeing, backpacking, and rock climbing. While participants commented on peak experiences that have occurred throughout their lives, many participants reported their first peak experiences to have occurred between early adolescence and early adulthood during a period one participant described as, *“an important time in my life when I was becoming my own person.”*

Another participant discussed his experiences whitewater kayaking a challenging section of river with friends:

*“I was fortunate enough to be in Chattanooga at an age and a time when we were doing first descents on creeks just because no one around here had been doing that yet and those things are out there for us to do. So I remember being on one of those and having a great group of people and having that feeling of grace and composure. Personally that was kind of a high point for me... We were on a creek it was called Falling Water creek in Chattanooga. It was literally out the back door where I grew up, so I'd spent a lifetime hiking on this creek and playing with crawfish and going for swims and all that kind of stuff. When we started kayaking and the boats got to the point where we could push those limits a little bit we went in there and sawed trees out and tried to figure out what it was going to look like at flood stage and those kind of things for when we got it all*

*cleared out and ready. We had a group of four guys, you know, not an ego in all four people and we were here at this creek that we'd grown up playing in and we were ready to do it as class V whitewater. When those rains came we had one of those really golden moments where you've got four really good friends all skilled but nobody is out there for their own fame, just a beautiful summer day with high water. It was intense enough to always keep you on your toes and having to really focus, but there was also just the plain joy of a beautiful place and a good group of people out there and everybody had a good day. We were doing first descents on really difficult rapids and feeling graceful. Everyone was having one of those days where everything seems to click. You know it's that combination of skill, experience, good group of people, and good decision-making. All that put together to make a near perfect day."*

For this participant, the peak experience focused on being with a special group of people during an activity that challenged his skills in the sport. He mentioned the intensity of the experience forcing him to focus. He also mentions feeling graceful while navigating the difficult rapids.

Another participant described one of his peak experiences backpacking with his brother through the Smoky Mountains:

*"Well there's a whole bunch of them. I'm trying to think of one that tops the others. Most of those experiences, the ones that keep coming to mind, are usually experiences about having overcome some obstacle and usually that means the top of a mountain. So one time, I was backpacking in the Smoky Mountains*

*and this was a winter trip so it was either in December or January but it was cold, very cold, and we were hiking up on the AT and we were walking across that ridgeline that basically separates North Carolina and Tennessee. We started at Elkmont which is on the Tennessee side of the mountains and we walked up to the ridge and camped and began to walk along the AT. When I was in college we carried 60-pound backpacks I mean it was insane. We were packing in beer and no freeze-dried food and we thought we could carry anything so we didn't cover a lot of mileage and that mileage was usually pretty rough. I was with my brother, he was a constant companion in my outdoor recreation experiences. It was always important that he was a part of that. We had hiked and hiked and we had a really great day. Then it started getting dark on us, but we weren't, I don't know if you're familiar with that trail on the Smokies, but you're not allowed to just camp anywhere. You are only allowed to camp in the shelters. So it was getting dark and getting cold but it had been a gorgeous clear day, which of course makes it even colder. We were hiking and we were starting to climb this mountain and we're already tired and its already dark and cold and we're starting to climb this mountain called Thunderhead. Thunderhead is a really neat mountain because it's just totally enshrouded in rhododendron. When you get to the summit, and when you're climbing you really can't see anything, you're just walking in this rhododendron tunnel and if you're walking in the rhododendron tunnel and it's dusky you really can't see anything. In fact its really kind of spooky you because there is nowhere to go but up the trail and back down the trail and at that*

*time you don't remember that the bears are hibernating. You just think one might be around the corner. So the fear, the fear part exacerbates it. So we're hiking along and we get to Thunderhead Mountain and there's my brother standing there with his shirt off. He has taken his shirt off because I guess he had sweat through it and he's cold and he wants to get that wet shirt off. He's on the summit of Thunderhead and on that summit there's a rock almost like a big cylinder and you can stand on that rock. When you stand on that rock you can look over the rhododendron, which is all grown up even over the summit. So he's standing there with his arms in the air, not saying anything, no shirt on, and behind him is the sunset and its stunning, just fabulous, I mean I remember the colors being extremely vivid and I can still see them very clearly in my mind. It was just a beautiful sunset and he was standing there just as happy as can be, and we were both, I wouldn't say that we were novice backpackers, but we worried about things like hiking at night. We didn't think you should really do that because that is what the boy scouts had put in our minds, but when we got to the summit of Thunderhead we knew we still had four or five miles to go where we were going to camp at another camp ground called Spence Field, and I was all stressed out that we weren't going to be able to get to Spence Field at a reasonable hour and we were going to have to hike at night and it was going to be dangerous, but when I got up and saw my brother and then I stood on the rock with him and we could see this amazing view, you could see Chase Cove from there for example. Then I sort of realized that it's not about a timeline and it's not about getting to this*

*camp before dark or whatever and that it really didn't matter. That we were out there and if we stopped and ate supper there and kept hiking until two in the morning, that moment I sort of remember letting go of trying to control things that happen to me when I'm in the woods. So now I'm much more, sure I have an agenda, but I don't get upset if we don't make the agenda or we don't make that campsite or if we decide to do something different. I'm not as bound to that plan, where as I used to before that moment. I mean it's not just a light switch like I'm describing it, but it certainly was a change in attitude. I would be totally stressed out if we decided to take a different trail. 'No we can't do that that wasn't the plan.' So in that moment of sort of being there with my brother on top of that freezing cold mountain and having that amazing sunset and having worked really hard to get there was awesome. It was just a great moment. That series of events of having the struggle, making the summit, and having that realization that everything was fine and I didn't need to be worried about anything and being there with my brother and then just really enjoying the next hike from there and stopping and looking at the stars and not really being in a hurry even though we had been in a hurry most of the day. That's probably one of my most important memories in the outdoors."*

For this participant the peak experience occurred while facing the discomforts of extreme cold and darkness. He mentioned the importance of being with his brother and having to work really hard to get to the summit of a mountain. He mentions the

experience was a moment where he learned many of the things he had previously been taught really didn't matter and that he should let go of his control.

Another participant described several peak experiences. Some of them were examples when he had been challenging his abilities, but others were examples where he was facilitating outdoor recreation experiences for others. He described a time while instructing a group of whitewater canoeists as well as an experience bringing his daughter down a section of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon:

*“God, there are so many of them. I can vividly remember one time in 1983. I was on the Chattooga River, not too far from Clemson. It’s a part of the national wild and scenic river system and I was teaching a canoeing clinic and there is one rapid part way down where students are more likely to have difficulty, so I was pulled off on the side in an eddy kind of running safety for them as they came by one at a time. I can remember it was a beautiful day, clear blue skies, bright and sunny, and I can remember thinking how this was just the greatest job in the world. I was getting paid to be in such a beautiful place and teaching is fun as well. You watch folks start to master the skills and go up that learning curve and that’s always very rewarding. It was this very nondescript place. I mean, I know where it is but its not like it is the biggest rapid I ever ran or that these students ever ran or the culmination of some long project for them at the end of the week or anything. It was in the middle of the week in a nondescript place on a nondescript day and it just hit me how incredibly lucky I was to be able to be there. That’s one that I think about from time to time. There’s so many. My*

*daughter has taken up whitewater sport and I got to watch her run lava falls rapid in the Grand Canyon. That was incredibly exciting. There was the first time I ran table saw rapid on the Ocoee River. I remember sitting at the top just trying to keep my heart from jumping out of my chest. I actually had a good run the first time I ever ran it. The thrill of that at the bottom stands out. You know it's impossible to single out a couple of experiences. I've been lucky enough to go to Chile and Costa Rica and run the rivers in the southeast hundreds of times and you know there's lots and lots and lots of those experiences in there."*

This participant mentioned several peak experiences. Some of his peak experiences were more about challenging himself personally. He mentioned the exhilaration he felt before running a big rapid for the first time and the accomplishment of successfully getting through it. He also mentioned experiences helping others during these activities and having peak experiences while paddling with his daughter.

#### WHAT COMPONENTS APPEARED MOST SIGNIFICANT DURING PEAK EXPERIENCES?

The identification of significant components helped illustrate what was important about the peak experience and what elements the participants thought most contributed to the experience being meaningful and transformational. Many of these components were responses to the question, "*What elements of the experience were most indispensable?*" One participant responded,

*"I think being out in natural beauty is part of it. I mean you're out in these amazing places. You know, a great British climber said all really good climbs*

*have to involve beauty, muscle, and risk. And that's a nice stripped down way of saying it because what characterizes it as a really good wilderness experience is beauty, you know, astonishing natural beauty and then some degree of physical effort and discomfort. You know because every expedition, even a day hike, usually involves some element of discomfort that you come through and a little bit of risk. Not a lot, but a little bit. The risk sharpens the attention. So I think the risk-based sports outdoors and even a day hike, which may not seem inherently risky, is a little bit. Because you're out a little further away from support systems. A fall or any kind of medical issue, being stung by a bee and having an allergic reaction means you are a little bit further away from societal support systems and you have to assess things a little differently. It makes you pay attention. Of course this goes, that's a minor example, but all the way up to a kayaker looking at a 110-foot drop and deciding whether or not she or he is going to run it or a climber making a decision of a 110-foot run out where a fall could be fatal. That's when you can really get focused. I think that's what blew my mind as a 14-year-old, not because I was particularly good at it, but because I would have this peak experience in a beautiful place sharpened by physical exertion and attention heightened by the presence of risk or the perceived presence of risk. I mean lets face it, while top-rope rock climbing you're not really facing much risk. You might fall and skin your knee maybe, but it's a summer camp for goodness sakes. They're not really going to try and lose any kids. But the perception of risk is I think really important. Just for the same reason when we take people on a raft trip*

*we sure don't plan on losing any customers, but the perception of risk is definitely there... Perception is going to be sharpened by the risk. So it's going a long way to answer your question. I think those three qualities, beauty, exertion, some discomfort and risk are what sharpen and heighten the experience and then of course the friendship. What I notice after years and years of outdoor activities and also being in conventional public education is that I can go out on a day trip with someone. Like tomorrow I'm going to paddle a river I haven't run. It'll be a class IV-V. It'll be challenging and I'll be doing it with some old friends, but also I'll meet a couple of new people on the trip. I'll probably be better friends with those people I'll meet on the trip tomorrow than some people I've known for 10 or 15 years in public education. You know? That goes back to the risk issue. Which is a little bit like the military model. Part of the reason war has such an incredibly horribly long track record is because it's so intoxicating to have these really risky experiences with people. You bond deeply with people. In adventure-based activities you sort of get that adrenalized connection of war-time experience without having to be in a situation where you are trying to kill or be killed. So I think that's probably part of it is your really drawn together."*

This participant explicitly describes the elements of natural beauty, exertion, discomfort, perceived risk, and friendship as being most instrumental in creating the peak experience. He commonly comments on the ability of these components to "sharpen" or "heighten" one's attention. This participant also focuses on the friendship component of

these experiences and the bonding that occurs when individuals participate in these risky activities together. These responses were common amongst many of the participants.

Data analysis revealed eight commonly cited significant components: (1.1) *Interpersonal Interaction* accounted for the significance of social interactions and the strengthening of relationships; (1.2) *Risk/Exposure* referred to the physical/emotional danger of a situation or the inability to immediately remove oneself from that situation; (1.3) *Challenge/Skill* was defined as pushing the limits and developing one's abilities to deal with a situation of which the outcome was unknown; (1.4) *Natural Beauty* was signified by the mention of nature, wildlife, or beauty within the context of a natural environment; (1.5) *Discomfort* referred to being outside of one's comfort-zone physically or emotionally; (1.6) *Physical Exertion* was signified when participants mentioned being physically tired or testing one's physical fitness; (1.7) *Flow* represented responses that specifically mentioned "flow" or traits related to "being in the moment"; and (1.8) *Reflection* showed the participants listed the significance of contemplating the meaning of the experience to its overall value.

### *1.1 Interpersonal Interaction*

The most common significant component was *interpersonal interaction* found in 92.3% of the interviews. Participants often listed the people they were interacting with as playing an important role in how meaningful the experience was for them. Many participants listed being with family members or great friends as being significant to the experience.

*"It was always important that [my brother] was a part of that."*

Many listed close friends and family members as being important not only because of the importance of those relationships prior to the experience, but also because of the ability of the experience to strengthen those interpersonal relationships. Several interviews mentioned the bond that is deepened between individuals who face the challenges of the outdoor recreation pursuit with one another.

*“It’s so intoxicating to have these really risky experiences with people. You bond deeply with people.”*

These outdoor recreation peak experiences force individuals to rely on each other for safety and places them in a situation to face adversity together.

### *1.2 Risk/Exposure*

The second most common significant component was *risk/exposure* found amongst 84.3% of participants. Many participants described perceived risk as a significant factor because it forced them to be more focused in the recreation activity.

*“Your senses are more aware perhaps, you’re more observant, you’re on your best game so to speak.”*

The perceived risk most often referred to the physical risks that occur in whitewater kayaking or rock climbing, but was occasionally associated with emotional risks. One participant mentioned an experience in a developing country where there is no easy access to close friends and family. Being far removed from the support networks of hospitals and cellular phone service is a common risk in outdoor recreation activities. One participant commented,

*“You’re out a little bit further from support systems.”*

One of the common components of risk was not only the fear of immediate physical harm but also the inability to escape a situation immediately. For the perceived risk to be present the individual really has to be committed to that situation and often in the moment of highest anxiety and fear, wishes they were not in the situation. As one participant put it,

*“You can’t pull the plug and say stop.”*

### *1.3 Challenge/skill*

The significant component of *challenge/skill* emerged in 76.9% of participant responses. Many of the peak experiences were related to whitewater kayaking, rock climbing, and mountaineering where much of the appeal of the sport is developing one’s skills to be able to undertake new challenges. Being forced to face difficulties that one is not sure they are capable of is what drew many of the participants to the outdoor recreation activities. One participant described it as,

*“being presented with a challenge that accomplishing looked like it would be a little bit outside what you knew you could do.”*

Meeting these challenges by reaching the summit of a mountain or succeeding on a difficult section of whitewater allowed the participants to learn more about themselves by pushing their personal limits. While most often these challenges were physical in nature, one participant commented,

*“It can be physical but it can also be interpersonal.”*

These outdoor recreation experiences often force individuals to interact deeply with other people. These challenges can be more about dealing with the social and emotional stresses of accomplishing a task with others.

#### *1.4 Natural Beauty*

*Natural beauty* was coded as a significant component when participants mentioned the natural environment or an interaction with wildlife and was present in 69.2% of responses. An example from one participant was,

*“Another part is being out in amazingly beautiful places where you get to see what the natural world is like without too much impact from humans.”*

The beauty of natural places with particularly aesthetic vistas or wildlife seemed to contribute to the significance of the experience. When asked why this component was significant participants commonly cited the natural beauty as being inherently valuable. Some also commented on the ability of natural beauty to inspire in them a “*connection with nature.*” As one participant said,

*“I was able to connect to the natural world.”*

The inspiration of *natural beauty* and the individual’s connection with nature made the outdoor recreation setting particularly unique.

#### *1.5 Discomfort*

*Discomfort* was a significant component mentioned in 61.5% of responses. Being in the outdoors where one is without the comforts of everyday life, as well as being in a situation where they were cold, tired or hungry.

*“Once we leave the comfortable places...it forces us to really see aspects of ourselves that are our default ways of being in the world.”*

*Discomfort* seemed to contribute significantly to the latter topic of *shift in perceived needs* by forcing them to see what they are capable of handling in terms of comfort.

*“When you get out of your comfort zone, you strip down things in your life to what really matters.”*

### *1.6 Physical Exertion*

Another significant component was *physical exertion*, which was reported by 53.8% of the participants. While most of the peak experiences discussed had to do with a physical outdoor recreation activity such as backpacking, rock climbing, mountaineering, whitewater kayaking, or mountain biking, *physical exertion* was coded for when participants mentioned pushing their physical fitness or being physically tired as being significant for the experience.

*“When you’re hiking and you’re aware of your lungs aching and your legs aching and you wanted to stop, sort of aware of one’s mortality in a sense.”*

For many challenging their bodies and learning what the limits of their fitness were was important. One participant discussed the appeal of backpacking.

*“You can go all day and challenge your body physically.”*

### *1.7 Flow*

*Flow* was coded for as a significant component of the peak experiences in 53.8% of responses. While the notion of *flow* is related very much to the amount of challenge

present versus the individual's skill, some components of *flow* were particularly outstanding. Some participants mentioned the term *flow* directly and others mentioned elements of being completely focused on the activity. One participant commented that,

*"You're totally in the moment and nothings else exists."*

Another participant responded,

*"For those moments the rest of the world has to fall away."*

These feelings of *flow* were important to these individuals because they allowed the participants to be completely immersed in the experience. In these moments they were not concerned with any of the trivial tasks of daily life, but allowed themselves to be completely devoted to that experience in that place at that time.

### *1.8 Reflection*

The last significant component was *reflection*. *Reflection* was found in 38.5% of responses. *Reflection* was coded for when participants mentioned the necessity of *reflection* for gaining the perspective to make peak experiences meaningful.

*"...get out of your comfortable place, be challenged, and reflect on it."*

Some participants particularly noted the importance of *reflection* in affecting self-actualization. When asked if the outdoor recreation peak experiences affect self-actualization, one participant commented,

*"If you are a thoughtful person it does."*

Table 2 below shows the eight significant components accompanied by sample participant quotes to illustrate the meaning of each component.

Table 2  
*Quotes Representing Each Significant Component*

Significant Component	Quotes
Interpersonal Interaction	<p><i>“...having to rely on other people for your safety and they’re relying on you for theirs.”</i></p> <p><i>“...sense of camaraderie of working through that adversity”</i></p>
Risk/Exposure	<p><i>“The risk sharpens the attention”</i></p> <p><i>“If I could press a button to beam me out of there I would. I’d get out of that situation.”</i></p>
Challenge/Skill	<i>“These challenges made me who I was.”</i>
Natural Beauty	<i>“...it’s so beautiful, experiencing nature on nature’s terms.”</i>
Discomfort	<i>“Once we leave the comfortable places it forces us to really see aspects of ourselves that are our default ways of being in the world.”</i>
Physical Exertion	<i>“When you’re hiking and you’re aware of your lungs aching and you wanted to stop, sort of aware of one’s mortality...”</i>
Flow	<i>“For those moments the rest of the world has to fall away.”</i>
Reflection	<i>“The ability to really reflect from those experiences was really instrumental.”</i>

DO PEAK EXPERIENCES IN OUTDOOR RECREATION INFLUENCE  
 PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-ACTUALIZATION?

The identification of the potential influences of the peak experience helped illustrate how these experiences contributed to the individual’s perception of their self-actualization. Many of these components were responses to the question, *“What effect, if any, did these experiences have on your self-actualization?”* These were different than

the significant components of the peak experience because they were about the impact of the experiences afterwards. The last step of the interviews was concerned with the participants' perceptions of how the peak experience contributed to their self-actualization and how that affected them later in life. When asked if these experiences have an effect on self-actualization one participant responded,

*“Well yeah. I mean that’s kind of why so many of us have been doing this for so long is that so many of us believe that it can do that...A lot of people have written in stories about how they found something in the program that they couldn’t find anywhere else in college and they discovered that they could accomplish what they didn’t imagine they could, or that they could meet challenges with other people, how to relate to other people. They’ve learned about themselves and they’ve taken those experiences into whatever they are doing now...I think it can be real powerful stuff. I think it’s too easy to live inside the lines and be intimidated by anything that looks unusual or unanticipated. I think people who have been continually in a mode where they have to assess what’s going on and figure out how to deal with it find themselves a lot more calm and can be a lot more productive in other environments because they just don’t really worry too much about how new and different something is or how much of a challenge it is. To be able to default to ‘what have I got’ and ‘how do I deal with it.’ ...For me self-actualization and enlightenment are on the same plane. I guess the core of it is the real basic level of the perception that your well-being is not certain. It may not be in jeopardy but it’s not certain. I think of someone*

*backing off a rappel for the first time. They have to trust the system or trust others on some level. I think you have to give up some control in order to find some control. You give up complete control of everything or where you thought you had control and you learn what you can control. I think you have to step out of a place where you are comfortable and try to perform in a place where you are uncomfortable and see how it goes. I think a big part of this is that people learn what matters. They learn that their tight grip on a lot of things, how they should be, really doesn't matter and they learn what they can influence and what they can't. They become more comfortable with the idea that they can't control everything all the time. If I were to look at someone I thought was truly self-actualized, it would be someone who was pretty comfortable with all the variables that are out there but they are confident that they can navigate that."*

According to participants the most common influences of the peak experience on the perception of self-actualization were *shift in perceived needs*, *composure*, and *confidence*. These results elaborate on specifically how the perception of self-actualization is influenced by the components that seemed to challenge the needs of Maslow's hierarchy as opposed to satisfying them.

### *2.1 Shift in Perceived Needs*

The most common response found for the peak experience's influence on the perception of self-actualization was *shift in perceived needs* and was found in 61.5% of interviews. This was coded for when participants' responses related to a shift in what was

important to them. Several participants called this shift learning “*what really matters*”.

One participant listed the peak experience’s affect on her self-actualization as,

*“You learn to define what your enough is, or what your minimum is.”*

Many responses also included participants commenting on lowered anxiety or stress about things that no longer seemed important.

*“It [peak experience] gives you perspective on the hazards and obstacles that we invent in our day to day lives that probably really aren’t as significant if you take a deep breath and sit back and think about it.”*

## 2.2 Composure

The second major influence on the perception of self-actualization was *composure*. *Composure* was found in 53.8% of the responses. This was coded for when participants discussed the ability to deal with fear.

*“It taught me how to deal with fear.”*

Many participants commented on how learning to keep one’s composure while dealing with the challenges of their peak experience transferred to everyday life.

*“Since I put myself into that situation, the only thing is to sit around and wait for the fear to play out...and that’s a big transferable thing to life.”*

## 2.3 Confidence

The last topic found that influenced the participants’ perception of self-actualization was *confidence*. *Confidence* was found in 53.8% of responses. Many participants commented that the challenges and risks that they faced during their peak experiences helped them to learn what they are capable of.

*“You gain confidence to try things. You gain confidence to sort of learn that you are capable of lots of different kinds of tough and challenging experiences.”*

This confidence allowed the participants to be more willing to seek out and accept new challenges. One participant commented that one affect was,

*“...not to avoid things just because they are hard.”*

Table 3 below shows the three most common influences on the perception of self-actualization accompanied by some participant quotes to illustrate the meaning.

Table 3  
*Quotes Representing Each **Influence on Perception of Self-Actualization***

Influence on Perception of Self-Actualization	Quote
Shift in Perceived Needs	<i>“People learn what matters. They learn their tight grip on a lot of things, how they should be, really doesn’t matter.”</i>
	<i>“You learn to define what your enough is, or what your minimum is.”</i>
Composure	<i>“Putting yourself in a chaotic, uncomfortable situation on purpose to see if you have the composure to get through it.”</i>
	<i>“I learned how to handle my fear.”</i>
Confidence	<i>“It helped with my confidence...not to avoid things because they are hard.”</i>
	<i>“I have personal issues, these emotional challenges, these physical challenges, these social challenges, but I can deal with it and move on.”</i>

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore individual's perceptions of peak experiences in outdoor recreation and their potential influence on self-actualization. The phenomenological approach allowed the participants' conversations to illustrate the essence of the outdoor recreation peak experience and to define for themselves both peak experiences and self-actualization. The findings suggest that people can have peak experiences in outdoor recreation pursuits. All of the 13 participants responded positively that they had had an experience in outdoor recreation they would describe as a "*moment of highest happiness and fulfillment or intense personal joy.*" Many of these experiences were during activities such as whitewater kayaking/canoeing, backpacking, rock climbing, and mountain biking. While participants commented on peak experiences that have occurred throughout their lives, many participants reported their first peak experiences to be between early adolescence and early adulthood. One participant described this period as, "*an important time in my life when I was becoming my own person.*" This finding suggests although peak experiences occur throughout many stages in individuals' lives, peak experiences in late adolescence and early adulthood may be particularly influential.

These findings suggest there are many significant components of outdoor recreation activities individual's perceived to contribute to peak experiences. The most common significant components identified were *interpersonal interaction, risk/exposure, challenge/skill, natural beauty, discomfort, physical exertion, flow* and *reflection*. Many

of the significant components identified were consistent with previous research on triggers of peak experiences, particularly the triggers of wild animals and nature (DeMares & Krycka, 1998; Davis, Lockwood, & Wright, 1991; Wuthnow, 1978), physical accomplishment and reflection (Maslow, 1964), supporting the accuracy of the study and its ability to inquire into the essence of the peak experience.

The component of *natural beauty* aligned with the literature as one of the most common elements of peak experiences. This study suggests natural settings allow for an experience filled with aesthetic landscapes and beauty that add to the value of the experience. Natural settings provide a beautiful place that is able to elicit a connection with nature. Natural settings can inspire individuals to transcend beyond themselves and inspire the spiritual quality that is common amongst peak experiences. The *natural beauty* also adds novelty by creating an experience where one is away from the man-made influences they are subjected to in daily life.

The significant components of *challenge/skill*, *risk/exposure*, *physical exertion*, and *discomfort* place individuals outside of their comfort-zone. This research shows components facilitate sharpened attention and heightened awareness causing an elevated intensity that contribute to the peak experience. While on the most basic level the physiological and safety needs are being met, an individual's perceptions of these needs are stressed. This *perception* of stressed needs makes the experience unique from individuals who are forced into situations where they are *actually* starving or being physically harmed. The participants of these activities freely choose to subject themselves to these risks and challenges. While an individual's perceptions of needs may be stressed,

they exist within a balance. This balance is also suggested by the component of *flow* found in the study. The individual may perceive risk, challenge and discomfort, but are not pushed into the realm of extreme anxiety. This balance may also be influenced through the component of *interpersonal interaction*. This component may support the more social needs on Maslow's hierarchy of belongingness and self-esteem while the other components are perceived as being stressed. Perhaps without this *interpersonal interaction*, individuals are either less willing or less capable of dealing with the components they perceive to stress their needs.

These findings suggest reflection is essential in understanding the process that allows the peak experience to influence self-actualization because it is the component that allows the peak experiences to transfer and create meaning. According to this research experiences mostly seem to influence the perception of self-actualization when the individual has the time and intentional thought to gain necessary perspective. Self-actualization does not occur during the moments of perceived stress and risk, but occurs afterwards through the process of reflection.

These findings suggest individuals may perceive peak experiences in outdoor recreation to influence self-actualization by encouraging a *shift in perceived needs*. The outdoor recreation peak experience creates a situation where "real problems" are relevant. During these activities the individuals focus on the basic needs of shelter, food, water, physical safety, and interpersonal cohesion. The peak experience causes a shift in perception that reorients their focus. The individual is no longer as concerned with the situations in daily life that are not "life and death."

This study shows individuals may also perceive the peak experiences to influence their self-actualization by building their *confidence* and *composure*. By being in situations where one perceives his or her needs as being stressed, they learn what they are capable of dealing with. They learn that they could deal with many more problems in their lives than previously thought. By dealing with stresses and challenges during the peak experiences, individuals gain the confidence to accept new challenges. Surviving situations they entered without being sure of the outcome makes one realize there is much more through which they are able to persevere. Peak experiences in outdoor recreation may also build one's *composure*. By intentionally placing one's self in risky outdoor recreation experiences, he or she may learn how to handle fear and anxiety. This ability transfers to other areas of life both professionally and personally.

The results of this study suggest an ideal balance exists between needs satiation and deprivation within Maslow's hierarchy. This idea supports the comfort zone model for optimal personal growth. While a minimum of needs within Maslow's hierarchy must be met, perceived challenges to these needs may contribute to one's perception of self-actualization.

#### *Further Discussion*

Many participants commented that as they have gotten older, their peak experiences have changed. They commented that they were less willing to accept or seek risks later in life. One of the changes in the experience may deal with motivation for the experience as this participant commented,

*“when you’re young, the idea of pushing the limits is real significant motivation, but I think that changes over time.”*

One reason for this difference in experience may be related to *flow* where a balance of challenge versus skill is necessary for the optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). If there is a decrease in skill in later life stages then a relative decrease in challenge may be necessary to sustain the flow experience. As one participant commented,

*“It takes less of a challenge now to still be in the flow.”*

Another difference with later life peak experiences was that in addition to a decrease in necessity of risk or challenge, participants commented that enabling others to have these peak experiences was a significant motivation and even contributed to their own peak experience,

*“Being able to share that with my daughter was very different and equally rewarding, if not more rewarding than I had when I was younger.”*

Another participant commented,

*“That kind of enabling aspect gave me a tremendous pleasure. You’re in a pretty place, you’re watching people having their personal horizons and frontiers expanded and you’re a part of that.”*

While this enabling aspect of the peak experience may be more expected amongst the participants surveyed in this study because they spent many years instructing or guiding others in outdoor recreation, the contribution of others-centered enabling to the peak experience and self-actualization may align with the self-transcendence that Maslow

discussed as being the step beyond self-actualization (1962). One of the best examples of self-transcendence came from one participant who commented that from his outdoor recreation peak experiences he learned,

*“I am not the center of the universe. Ultimately self-actualization is grounded in a sense of community.”*

The high frequency of *interpersonal interaction* may support the importance of self-transcendence to the self-actualizing process.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

Many outdoor enthusiasts would say their experiences in outdoor recreation have contributed to their personal development, but little research has explored the concepts in relation to Maslow's hierarchy. Maslow's hierarchy focuses on how the satiation of various levels of needs is required to allow one to reach self-actualization. Maslow also commented that individuals having peak experiences were more likely to be self-actualizing (1962). Many of the identified triggers of peak experiences such as wild animals and nature (DeMares & Krycka, 1998; Davis, Lockwood, & Wright, 1991; Wuthnow, 1978) and physical accomplishment (Maslow, 1964) are common in outdoor recreation activities. These outdoor activities often contain elements that challenge rather than satiate these various levels of needs. This challenging of needs concept is often referred to in the adventure education literature as expanding the comfort zone (Brown, 2008).

The interest of this study was to explore how the challenging of needs contribute to individual's perception of self-actualization. The participants of this study listed *significant components* of *risk*, *discomfort*, *challenge*, and *physical exertion* as being most important for the peak experience. These findings are interesting because they are contrary to the physiological needs and safety needs Maslow claims are to be satiated to reach self-actualization. The results concerning the *affects on self-actualization* further elaborate on specifically how these experiences contribute to self-actualization by

identifying *shift in perceived needs* and the building of *confidence* and *composure* as being the most common contributions.

These results provide insight into the outdoor recreation peak experience and how being in situations filled with risk, discomfort, challenge, interpersonal interaction, and reflection can lead to an individual's self-actualization through a shift in perceived needs, composure, and confidence. Outdoor recreation seems to be unique in its ability to provide these experiences, especially for those living in developed environments. Many believed Maslow's hierarchy requires individuals to stay within the boundaries of comfort to reach self-actualization, but these responses suggest that an outdoor recreation experience with challenges, risk and discomfort may be a path towards self-actualization. Many participants' comments on the change of peak experiences with age suggest there may be room for further research concerning peak experiences in later life stages and the relation of these findings with Maslow's idea of self-transcendence in the process of self-actualization. These findings elaborate on the understanding of Maslow's hierarchy and the idea of the expanding comfort zone.

The more and more our society becomes immersed in technological and cultural changes that eliminate the opportunity for risk, physical challenges, and discomfort, the more important it is for individuals to break out of their comfortable places to create opportunities that are valuable for their self-actualization. As developed societies continue to eliminate the opportunities for these experiences in daily life, individuals have to be more intentional about creating these opportunities. One participant who worked for a high school outdoor recreation program commented,

*“I think that this outdoor education, as far as making people feel uncomfortable in wilderness, is becoming more and more important and more and more difficult to pull off. But you know, my job is getting more difficult, but it’s getting more important each day.”*

The role of the outdoor recreation professional is no longer just about creating an atmosphere for people to have a good time, it is about creating fulfilling opportunities in a unique environment for people to challenge themselves and place themselves amongst risk and discomfort to really help them learn what is important in their lives. Forcing people outside is commonly the only way to get people away from the technology that allows them to reflect on their experiences and to create meaning in their life.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### INTERVIEW SCRIPT

#### LIFE HISTORY

Just to start out why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Did you participate in outdoor recreation activities while growing up?

When did your interest in outdoor recreation first began.

Have you worked in an outdoor recreation field? If so, what did/do you do?

What about the outdoor recreation field made you want to be so involved?

#### EVENT: PEAK EXPERIENCE

Feel free to take a minute to think about this, but I would like you to think if you have had any experiences in outdoor recreation that you might characterize as a moment of highest happiness and fulfillment or intense personal joy. And if so, would you please take the time to describe that experience?

Are there any particularly memorable outdoor recreation experiences you think were significant in your life?

Why was this so significant?

How was this significant?

What components of this experience were most indispensable?

What was the setting like? Wilderness/backcountry/frontcountry?

How important was the setting to the experience? Why?

Were you with a group? Were you the leader of the group?

What was your perceived risk?

What was your skill level compared to what skill was required?

How old were you?

Do you feel this experience was outside of what you would consider your comfort-zone before you began?

How do you feel your level of comfort or discomfort you played a role in your experience?

What role do you think risk played in this experience?

Were the feelings you had during this significant experience ever repeated?

REFLECTIONS: INFLUENCE OF PEAK EXPERIENCE ON PERCEPTION OF SELF-

#### ACTUALIZATION

What influence, if any did these experiences have on your self-actualization?

If so, how did it contribute to who you are today?

Did these significant outdoor recreation experiences have any affect on your values?

If so, what effect did they have?

Are there varying levels of self-actualizing moments depending on the activity

Were these effects long-lasting?

Did this experience affect your interpersonal relationships?

Did this experience have any effect on you self-sufficiency/autonomy?

Is there anything else you would like to share that you think may be relevant?

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