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The mirror of the sea: Narrative identity, sea kayak adventuring and implications for outdoor adventure education

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex and changing nature of adventure as a form of cultural practice. Borrowing from Joseph Conrad's memoirs *The Mirror of The Sea* (1907), sea kayaking is contextualized here as a journey that takes place just as much between 'landfall and departure' as it does between the paddler's ears (i.e., in the paddler's mind). That is to say, to gain useful insights into the experience of sea kayaking it is necessary to consider both the external and internal journey of the paddler, and the relationship that exists between these two phenomena. Using tenets of personality psychology which presents new ways of understanding narrative identity, we will 'waymark' textual vignettes from four modern day sea kayaking adventure narratives to explore ideas of self, narrative identity and meaning making. These key passages aim to reveal how the adventurer's story is influenced by "external factors that shape the public expression of stories about the self" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). Summary discussion will address potential implications for contemporary outdoor adventure education, offering a way of stimulating reflective practice about the culturally and textually constructed nature of adventure.

Keywords: narrative identity, outdoor adventure education, meaning making, critically reflective practice

Introduction

People and cultures are drawn to the idea of adventure through adventure stories. From the mythological trials of Odysseus to recent autobiographical stories about the exploration of summits, oceans and poles, heroes and antiheroes depart from familiar homelands, overcome challenges, have their epiphanies in the wilderness, and return to society as changed people. Or so it is written. According to Goodnow (2008) their stories constitute and conform to a quest narrative. For both adventurer and reader the attraction of the genre is that both may gain insights into geographically distant places and cultures explored, and the equally remote inner terrain of the adventurer's psyche.

Waves and rollers, storms and winds, rock and mountains are teachers in two senses, in so far as they teach the adventurers something about the obstructive nature of the world and something about their own attitude towards them, and both—the adventurers themselves and their understanding and knowledge—are changed in the process. (Becker, 2007 p. 83)

Whilst Hillary famously pursued the summit of Mt. Everest 'to knock the bastard off' and his predecessor Mallory, 'because it was there', the motivations of the reader may be equally ambiguous: "yielding helplessly to the suction of story ... we just can't resist the gravity of alternate worlds" (Gottschall, 2012, p. 3). The telling of the tale, one might argue, can reveal as much about the reader as the writer;

a narrative where reading about action and action itself become aligned. Zweig (1974) argues that this collective conscience about adventure may be

... taken from a novel, a television serial, a science-fiction story. It would have been harder to have taken it from my own life because adventures are precisely what few of us know from experience. Our familiarity with them tends to be literary. (p. 3)

Yet few publications, scholarly or otherwise, have critically reflected upon what the adventure narrative looks and reads like in relation to influencing, or being influenced by, culture. Zweig's (1974) *The Adventurer*, is one of the few insightful and academic representations of 'adventure as culture,' in which the author explores "the oldest, most persistent subject matter in the world" (p. 6). Nerlich (1987) proposed an 'ideology of adventure' where adventure and modernity (and the adventurer's narrative) are inextricably linked in the development of Western culture. In the preface to *The Ideology of Adventure: Studies in Modern Consciousness 1100–1750*, Nerlich stated that, "writing about adventure is to venture in writing" (1987, p. xix).

There are a small number of notable publications that embark on a cultural understanding of particular forms of adventure. Noyce's *Scholar Mountaineers* (1950) and later Macfarlane's (2003) *Mountains of the Mind* (see also Fleming, 2001, *Killing Dragons: The Conquest of the Alps*) signpost a need for gathering deeper insights into the unique ways humans travel and write when they adventure. These works gesture at the reciprocal nature of adventure, culture and

narrative and allude to different forms of adventure being told through particular nuances of dialogue, image and fable. Collectively these stories about the story of mountaineering tell of a particular type of act, climbing mountains, and its reflexive character with culture through time. And time, one might add, moves with the narrative itself, emerging and evolving “out of the episodic particulars of autobiographical memory, a person may construct and internalize an evolving and integrative story for life, or what psychologists today call a *narrative identity* [italics added]” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233).

Examinations into the development of narrative identity, suggest that narrative identity builds over time through stories (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Narrative identity is thereby a cyclical process between story telling, listening to stories and the creation of the *self* (McLean et al., 2007). As McAdams and McLean (2013) note,

... stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity. (p. 235)

Meaning making, as one of seven¹ themes used by narrative inquirers to investigate lived experience, will be highlighted in this paper. Researchers argue that meaning making involves how an individual responds reflectively to, and through, a story. A number of strategies exist for incorporating meaning making into researching peoples’ stories. Often associated with how people live through and express grief, Gillies, Neimeyer and Milman (2014), developed a *Meaning of Loss Codebook* which clusters common meaning-making strategies into 30 categories. The highest percentage categories include valuing life, personal growth, and lifestyle change, and each of these will be signposted in the sea kayaking excerpts. But from the outset it is clear that the risks taken by adventurers bring the potential for both gain and loss.

This paper will briefly outline our use of narrative identity as prescribed in various modes of personality psychology and meaning making as used in social science research. We emphasise that this is our own theoretical orientation to narrative identity and not the work of psychologists. Given our focus on sea kayaking as a form of adventure, the purpose here is not to try to and distill sea kayaking narratives to a description of the essential, true or authentic condition of adventure. As Zweig (1974) suggests, such a singular whole does not exist. Rather, our goal is to attempt to reveal some of the human characteristics that emerge in adventure narratives in order to provoke thoughtfulness on the part of educators concerned

with outdoor adventure education (OAE). Our interest lies with aspects of adventuring that might all too easily be taken for granted. The narratives reviewed can be considered cultural texts in modern sea kayak adventuring, stories that have made a substantial contribution to a particular genre of writing and the cultural representation of this form of outdoor experience. Yet they can also be read as depictions of narrative identity. Doing so we aim to “explore further the role of broad cultural contexts in the development of narrative identity” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). Narrative identity will then be discussed in relation to OAE settings. Key ‘descriptive passages’ (van Manen, 1997) will be waymarked, such as ‘the call,’ to reference the shared contexts of the different sea kayak journeys and texts. Summary arguments will signpost potential meaning making for educators and students of OAE.

Narrative identity: self mirroring culture

The idea that people construct self-identity through stories has emerged over the past two decades in the humanities and social sciences. Narrative identity theory, rooted deeply in psychology, is the focus of interdisciplinary research and proposes that individuals form identity by conjoining life experiences as an evolving story. Typically told through narration, or representation of a reconstructed past, present and imaginary future, self-identity is purported to develop a sense of unity and purpose in life (McLean & Fournier, 2008). As a combination this narrative story contains plots, characters, incidents, a setting (or settings) heroes, antiheroes, and follows a cyclical routine of a beginning (often an event), middle (crisis and consequence) and an end (as success, failure and/or criticism) (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Goodnow, 2008).

Education and social policy research by Dan McAdams (1987, 1990, 2001), a leading figure in narrative inquiry, builds upon earlier work of personality psychologists. Murray’s (1938) ‘personological perspective,’ Tomkins (1979) ‘script theory’ and Singer’s (1975, 1987) work on ‘private personality,’ for example, were foundational in asking how individuals, “organize and prioritize autobiographical memory” (Singer, 2004, p. 440). A contemporary focus on narrative identity first emerged through investigating complex interplays within dispositional ‘trait’ measures, often referred to as the ‘big five’ of a person’s personality (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism — see for example Goldberg, 1993, on the structure of phenotypic personality traits). Trait measures are used extensively in psychological science, as they are considered relatively stable across a person’s lifespan. McAdams draws broadly from these domains but with a focus on ‘identity and life

stories’ (Singer, 2004). Whilst the work of McLean, Pasupathi and Pals (2007) focuses on the construction of an individual’s narrative through their life stages, meaning making might be considered as a shared (cultural) identity. Becker (2007) suggests that a subgroup of individuals telling similar stories “are not only a means to create a community spirit, but they are also a means by which one’s own self can be thematized and presented” (p. 83). “How individuals craft narratives from experiences, tell these stories internally and to others” (Singer, 2004, pp. 437–438) could alert us to the ‘self’ mirroring verbal stories, written words and images represented by our peers.

Such inquiry is most often approached via one of two epistemological paradigms. According to Bruner (1965), ‘narrative’ can be investigated with either hermeneutic or paradigmatic approaches. Hermeneutic investigation seeks to capture the highly personal and specific elements of an individual’s story, yet placed within a cultural context (Josselson, 2004), whilst paradigmatic approaches represent a positivistic attempt to transcend the personal aspects of the narration and draw cause and effect relationships as generalizable findings. Singer (2004), assuming that the self at its heart mirrors culture (in this paper the culture of sea kayak adventuring is the focus) proposes that,

understand[ing] the identity formation process is to understand how individuals craft narratives from experiences, tell these stories internally and to others, and ultimately apply these stories to knowledge of self, other and the world in general. (p. 438)

Noyce, in his later work, *The Springs of Adventure* (1958) uses his self (him-self) as starting point (the spring) by asking ‘why climb?’ (or paddle or ski or fly, we might add). For if such inquiry “*exists in me* [italics added], who am in general a most uninquiring person, how much more must it be present in many others among my fellows!” (p. 1). Expanding on this notion of an adventure narrative ideology in OAE, Lynch, Moore and Minchington (2012) propose ‘adventure as culture,’ where adventure-related print media portrays a representation of the self mirroring culture through a trajectory of distinct national ‘signatures.’ The narrative of adventure magazines and books, as a combination of pictures and text, instill how ‘adventure as culture’ looks and reads. In this way the narration and representation of adventures as presented through the popular press or emerging media such as online blogs, feeds and tweets, evolve through the narrative identity of individuals and the broad culture of the activity itself. Thus both are united in a reciprocal relationship. It is our contention that OAE educators would be well served by understanding the nature

of this phenomenon. As Cunliffe (2004) suggests, “in practical terms, this means examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions, [and] the impact of those actions ... from a broader perspective” (p. 407). How adventure narratives are represented is evolving rapidly and this should be of pedagogical interest to educators, as Lynch et al. (2012) emphasise.

Adventure is far from being a clear and constant construct...utilized by diverse interests for a range of purposes so that it becomes a slippery, contested notion, disaggregated rather than a singular whole. (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 239)

Meaning making, as one of the seven thematic elements coded for narrative inquiry, is applied to our adventurers’ textual vignettes. Given that OAE may often operate under the presumption of individuals transferring learning and skills from fieldwork experiences into home and everyday life (Brown, 2009, 2010), we believe that meaning making might offer practitioners a viable approach to learning more about lived experiences. Hence “the internal dynamics of private life narration and the external factors that shape the public expression of stories about the self” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233) could well be an emerging and relevant form of OAE transfer.

Whilst thematic elements of narrative identity research are often scored on a scale, as with paradigmatic approaches, this study will instead use phenomenological waymarkers to prescribe key individual or shared responses that, after a deep reading of these sea kayak narratives, we deem worthy meaning making points of interest for both the narrator and reader. Each of the selected texts, taken from two autobiographical and two biographical sea kayaking narratives, are of pivotal sea kayaking journeys in the contemporary era (and culture) of sea kayaking.

Adventure and narrative

If the adventure narrative is about anything it is about the endless search for novel experiences — an almost ceaseless pursuit of the new — and ‘the new’ is the portal one must slip through to record even deeper inscriptions of one’s identity. When we read the accounts of modern or contemporary adventurers they are “in fact heir to a complex and largely invisible dynasty of feelings: we see through the eyes of innumerable and anonymous predecessors” (Macfarlane, 2003, p. 167).

Adventure travel narratives are often written within a quest genre The quest follows a sequential pattern of events. First, a travel writer describes her life prior to the journey. She is characterized

by feelings of discontent with her life and the longing for something more meaningful, real, or something more akin to truly living. The response to this disenchantment with life and society is to accept the call to journey (Campbell, 1968). The traveler then leaves the safety, security, and routine of daily life in order to journey to dangerous, uncomfortable, and uncertain places ... and this travel encourages discovery and insight into life and self. (Goodnow, 2008, p. 8)

At last, feeling freed from the expectations and norms of regular society, the adventurer seeks a liminal experience, a crossing of the threshold. Later, exhausted but fulfilled, “with his [sic] concrete or symbolic treasure, [the adventurer] makes his [sic] way back home to tell the others what he saw and experienced, to reconstruct a new order, to establish his life and that of his group anew” (Liotta, 2009, p. 127).

In the complexity and chaos of post-modern societies where virtual reality replaces the real, and vicariousness is substituted for experience, the modern adventurer has an alluringly simple, seemingly timeless, story to tell — and sell. In telling the story, it appears that it is crucial that the adventure writer is willing to expose their inner fears, their state of confusion, turmoil and crisis. As readers we consume their insights and struggles not just to survive, but for meaning. This inner journey, the slow and painful passage to transformation, is central to the plot. A description of the journey itself is no longer enough. Capturing the transformational story of the self has become equally important.

Sea kayaking and expeditionary narratives

In choosing particular sea kayaking expedition narratives to read and explore for this paper, we have been guided by what Patton (2002) calls extreme or deviant case sampling. Such a sampling is suited to ‘outliers’ — those members of society that seem to be “unusual or special in some way, such as outstanding successes or notable failures” (p. 231). And while sea kayak adventurers might be thought of as being in search of “idiosyncratic symbolism and individualism rather than collective participation and collectively held meanings” (Lett, 1983, p. 45), our earlier discussion suggests that they are just as likely as anyone else to be influenced by the ‘invisible heritage’ of adventurous culture that has preceded them. It may be possible that they simultaneously reflect and resist that heritage.

As a coastal, then offshore, then receding to out-of-sight figure, the sea kayaker can genuinely be considered a liminal character (Varley, 2011). Turner

and Turner (1978) suggest that this liminoid character operates outside the central economic and political processes of industrialised societies, as someone who exists along the margins of what is considered acceptable to society. The sea kayakers we review below have each undertaken a remarkable journey, noted either for length of the expedition, distance of the ocean crossing, or being the first, or fastest, to circumnavigate a continent or country.

As a brief biography, Paul Caffyn (New Zealand) is considered a doyen of modern sea kayaking, having solo circumnavigated Japan, Ireland, the UK, New Zealand’s North and South islands, and paddled the entire length of Alaska. Freya Hoffmeister (Germany) came to sea kayaking as a competitive gymnast and skydiver. She quickly (speed is a consistent theme in Freya’s journeys) took in circumnavigations of Iceland and New Zealand before being the second person, after Caffyn, to circumnavigate Australia. In July 2015 Hoffmeister became the first person to circumnavigate South America. Like Freya, Andrew McAuley (Australia) came to sea kayaking after many years of high performance climbing and mountaineering. Often alone in the mountains, McAuley seemed to take with him to sea a calculated, yet risk adverse mindset. He crossed Bass Strait and the Gulf of Carpentaria in Australia, both notoriously dangerous bodies of water, and was one of the first people to take in a significant section of Antarctica by sea kayak. Unlike Caffyn, McAuley and Hoffmeister, Chris Duff (UK) seems less concerned about being the first or fastest. The challenges of paddling the US coastline, then circumnavigating Ireland and New Zealand’s South Island, are represented as “not the self-affirming individuality of the hero, but the pure instrumentality of the spirit, which acts and speaks through him” (Zweig, 1974, p. 8). These paddling biographies fit within a rapidly emerging and evolving sea kayak travel history. Our interest for this paper was to read these narratives deeply, searching for descriptive passages that reveal something of the lived-qualities of the sea kayak experience and also to review how the narrative is constructed and the paddler’s identity represented. We have also tried to provide a spectrum from the contemporary era of sea kayaking, defined here as 1980s to today. Each journey has been represented via rich textual accounts; two are biographical (Glickman, 2012; McAuley, 2010) and the other two autobiographical (Caffyn, 1994).

In the next section we present a collection of selected short vignettes that represent the lived-qualities of these experiences (depicted in each subheading), which are expanded upon through key quotations from the sea kayakers’ published accounts. Given that key stories often inspire and navigate how we as readers, researchers and sea kayakers, approach outdoor life, we have waymarked key expressions as

an interpretive aid the call. What van Manen (1997) refers to as idiomatic phrases, the approach taken here is to

‘borrow’ other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning and significance of an aspect of human experience. (van Manen, 1997, p. 62)

We briefly discuss what we believe these represent in terms of their narrative identity and meaning making before drawing final considerations for OAE in the conclusion.

The call

There seems more than a hint of escapism in the motivations of these paddlers, triggered by a sense of restlessness. The call of the next expedition seems inevitable. Vicki McAuley, Andrew’s wife and biographer, neatly articulates this when she writes about her husband answering the call to attempt to paddle across the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand.

[Andrew], I’d noticed, had an inclination towards, well, I wouldn’t exactly say melancholy, but something just short of it — restlessness perhaps — upon returning from an expedition. That awkward transitory period of fitting back into conventional life after incredibly intimate experiences with the natural environment and his own psyche was always challenging And, of course, the Tasman was waiting patiently, turbulently, relentlessly, for Andrew McAuley’s assault. (McAuley, 2010, p. 67)

Paul Caffyn seems well aware that it is only a matter of time before he answers the call to attempt to circumnavigate Australia, like a Siren’s song of the next adventure.

Two years of teaching music and outdoor education to teenagers at a local high school in the mid seventies had left my morale and self esteem at a low ebb.... Like a drug addict cut off from his supply, a recurring problem with my sea kayak expeditions was the inevitable withdrawal symptoms or post trip blues ... The only way to recapture the adrenalin rush of break-outs through massive surf, the magic of paddling through moonlit nights, and the ‘thank God’ relief of escaping from a raging sea

into the quiet tranquility of a sheltered bay, is to dream up another outrageous, impossible dream. (Caffyn, 1994, p. 2)

When talking about getting away from Germany for her ‘speed record’ attempt to circumnavigate Australia, Freya Hoffmeister twisted Mallory’s classic response when asked why anyone would want to climb Everest into, “because it isn’t here” (Glickman, 2012, p. 29). As her biographer noted candidly, “no-one who is paddling around Australia is happy at home” (p. 29).

Departure

The moment of departure looms large in each paddler’s consciousness and is a key component of their narratives. Doubt raises questions about balancing risk with the likelihood of success. “What was I doing turning my back on everything that was secure and safe for a life that was full of the possibility of failure?” writes Chris Duff (1999, p. 24), as he set off on his circumnavigation of Ireland. There is an air of inevitability about Andrew McAuley’s description of his feelings just prior to his attempted crossing of the Tasman Sea.

On the eve of heading off, I feel a lot like I’m about to go to war. It feels like the chances of not coming back from the Tasman are similar. It’s a scary feeling. I’m scared and frightened, but I cannot turn away from it. (McAuley, 2010, p. 182)

Each of these expeditioners paddled either completely or substantially alone. This heightens the sense of severing of ties with both land and loved ones. “Ties to the point of departure are cast off. The handshake of a friend is loosened as reluctantly as the line tied to the dock. The boat drifts from the land Solo suddenly means exactly what it says” (Duff, 1999, p. 21).

The body and the craft

Once under way Duff revels in reacquainting himself with the feeling of the kayak and how it makes him respond to the sea in a particular kind of way. In union with his kayak, Duff’s identity begins to shift. It is not just about technique, moving from one point of departure to somewhere else. It is about feeling and identification.

I loved the feel of the boat snugly wrapped around me; the firmness of the bulkhead against my feet, the touch of the deck on my slightly bent knees, and the padded cockpit lightly holding my hips within the seat I reached forward, slipped

the paddle into the bow wave, pulled back, and felt shoulder, arm, and stomach muscles tense. Fingers tightened around the shaft of the paddle, pulled smoothly, then relaxed as the blade exited at the rear of the cockpit. Rotate, reach, plant, pull. Again and again. Through the skin of the boat I could almost feel the caress of the waves, two worlds meeting in the rhythm of muscle, and the rise and fall of swell. (Duff, 1999, p. 23)

It is plausible to discern in this passage the moment when Duff's body begins to merge with the shell and fittings of his kayak. On expedition he undergoes a metamorphosis. What began as separate entities (person, kayak, paddle) merge into a singular entity suited and adapted to its surrounds. Together, they become a *sea-kayak-er*. For Hoffmeister and McAuley questions of technology and technique hint at an underlying philosophy or ethic guiding their journeys — as though the measurement of a sea kayaker's worth rests upon a particular style of craft and of propulsion. "I will not use a sail at any point," Hoffmeister attested, "I'm a paddler, not a sailor. My wide shoulders need to be a sail enough" (Glickman, 2012, p. 52). For McAuley, "he was after the smallest possible boat he could fit all his gear into. And, from a purist's perspective, he wanted something easily recognised as an off-the-shelf kayak with minimal modifications. Not an ocean liner" (McAuley, 2010, p. 89).

Phelan (2007, p. 3), referring to sailors on larger boats and ships, writes that at sea "the body is no longer central to perception." He feels that the wind, waves, currents primarily affect the boat and that phenomena such as direction, distance and position primarily relate to the boat not the person. "The lived body still perceives," Phelan argues, but is always "mediated by technology." While this latter point certainly has validity, in relation to perception the sea kayaker is in a much smaller vessel and unlike the sailor or boater who rides upon the craft and moves about its surfaces, the kayaker is a coupling of craft and human. Rather than a sensing body on a boat the sea kayaker secures him or herself into the kayak and the body becomes an integral part of the boat and the boat an extension of the body.

Speck, point and horizon

The cover image on Duff's book shows the bow of his kayak as it digs into a toppling, oncoming wave. "I had made a choice to come here, to be this speck on waves that could swallow a thirty-foot boat in their troughs" (Duff, 1999, p. 64). The horizon is a serrated, curving crest of rough water. Above the water there is a brooding, cloudy sky and part of a steep, rocky

headland. The kayak plunges forwards. Long days alone at sea are an experience of seemingly endless, stroke-by-stroke, forward sliding movement against the resistance of wind, wave and tide. There is no path to follow and no track left by the kayaker's passage. The bow of the kayak might bounce this way and that like a compass needle, but its directionality is relentless. Similar images of a pointing bow are present in all of the narratives. It is an ever-present reality in the daily life of the sea kayakers. Point and paddle to the horizon, which, depending on the sea conditions, can either be experienced as a heaving, immediately threatening mass of looming water or a vast, wide plane stretching to the ocean's rim. Referring to her long crossing of Sherlock Bay with little evidence of it being anything other than just another day, Hoffmeister displays a neutrality to the sea's horizon, an almost taken for granted scene that defines the paddler's view. With brevity, Hoffmeister refers to her forwardness as "I'm used to looking ahead, not back" (Glickman, 2012, p. 168), and when comparing her Australian circumnavigation with other expeditions responded to a concerned blogger with "There are hazards to overcome for sure, but basically its just another trip" (p. 20). In very different circumstances, Duff rarely smooths over the conditions presented to him over his bow, "visually, there was only chaos, and yet in the water-sky-water turmoil there was a balance and a pattern that my eye and inner ear found and directed the forward motion of the boat" (1999, pp. 181–182).

Descent into darkness, emergence into light

The quest genre of the adventure narrative demands that the protagonist face many trials and tests. The fortitude and endurance of these sea kayakers is remarkable. Days and weeks are spent alone at sea amongst huge waves where they grapple relentlessly with their uncertainties and fears. Duff recounts that as "time and distance began to blur... I closed my defensive circle around the boat to the length of a paddle, I exhaled with each wave breaking over me, and mentally pulled in tighter" (1999, p. 250). Andrew McAuley faced many of these trials with exhilaration.

Well today, I capsized in 30 knots [55 km/h] of wind. Huge swells. Lost a bit of gear ... had to empty [pump out] my huge cockpit which is about ... I don't know ... 90 or 100 litres or something. And it was all pretty full on. And I thought, here I've learnt the meaning of the word extreme. This really IS extreme. It's full on man, it's fuckin' full on. I really could die. I mean, it's an excellent, excellent, EXCELLENT adventure ... provided I make it. (McAuley, 2010, pp. 198–199)

Typically, a series of crises, like Odyssean tests, must be overcome in the heroic tale. Meaning making research, most often associated with a person's coping strategies during times of crisis (including into death and loss), has found that through narration, survivors become more resilient. Vicky McAuley's (2010) depictions of her husband's voyage might be considered (see Davis, Harasymchuk & Wohl, 2012) a way of finding (whilst narrating) some sense of meaning in her traumatic loss, as Andrew never reached his destination

For those that survive a near death experience, as did Duff, Caffyn and Hoffmeister, there are times when they question their own mortality and life's meaning. Stuck on land during storms was often a time of questioning and journaling over long cups of tea. In doing so the adventurer-writers were attempting to make sense of their experience. More often, either through the predicament of geographical location, or pride, their narratives revealed no obvious way of avoiding or turning away from the adventures that lay ahead. Another departure would call. Becker (2007), rejecting the idea of the 'journey,' thinking it too scripted, refers to this as being 'on the way' or 'underway' (depending on the translation of Germanic to English) and in many respects this epitomizes the adventurer's mantra — 'just keep moving forward.' For, "when coping with the external reality of external critical situations, adventurers are also confronted with having to cope with their inner reality ... the process of coping with the resistance of waves, storm, abysses and darkness" (Becker, 2007 p. 83).

Paddling all day and night during his Australian circumnavigation, with no possibility of landing due to unbroken lines of cliffs along the Western and Southern edges of Australia, Caffyn recalled "a great battle of will power to pull myself out of the pool of despair... supreme struggle had burnt out any last vestige of emotion. Physically and mentally I was a spent force when I landed" (1994, p. 148).

Speed, distance and safety

Both Caffyn and Duff were the first to complete circumnavigations of Australia and Ireland respectively. Hoffmeister was determined to be the fastest; emblazoning the side of her kayak (purposely designed for maximum speed) with a large sticker that read 'Race Around Australia' (even though she was racing only against the time it took Caffyn to complete his circumnavigation nearly thirty years earlier, when he wasn't racing anyone). McAuley felt that if he succeeded in his attempt to cross the Tasman Sea it would be an accomplishment of such magnitude that his reputation would endure long into the future. "I knew that if I crossed the Tasman safely, I could die a happy man, deeply satisfied that I had done

something truly bold and significant for the world of sea kayaking" (McAuley, 2010, p. 88). Some of these motivations might be thought of as the adventurer's search for immortality through fame, where the hero lives on endlessly as their story is told to future generations.

Both Hoffmeister's and McAuley's expeditions have been undertaken in the age of the blogosphere, where the public could go online to follow their daily progress. Hoffmeister's Race Around Australia blog and her ongoing South America blog are a running list of stages, dates, kilometers paddled and hours on the water. As she noted while cruising past an interesting looking group of islands of the north-west coast:

All of them would be worth a landing and exploring, but I had to keep on going... 7:00 am to 5:30 pm, 55 km. What to say? Just another paddling day... strong beam wind with some strange contra-productive waves the morning, calm the afternoon. 30 km to Onslow tomorrow ... (Hoffmeister, 2014)

For Hoffmeister 'the race' to beat Caffyn's 'record' seems, at times, to reduce the coastline and paddling to little more than arithmetic.

Crossing the threshold

There is a double-aspect to the relationship the sea kayaker has with the land. Unlike McAuley who slept inside his modified kayak while attempting to cross the Tasman Sea, most expeditions are a series of regular punctuation marks of land-based camps between long days spent at sea. Each day begins with departure and ends with arrival. Hoffmeister's blog site uses Google Earth satellite photographs to indicate her spot by spot progress. Constantly crossing the threshold between the solidity of land and the fluidity of the open sea can be fraught with peril where the land is either "blessed refuge or cursed executioner" (Duff, 1999, p. 182).

From the land, the sea is a place of departure: from the sea, a place of arrival. To the coastal paddler, the corridor of ocean meeting land is a place of both departing and arriving. A time of looking out as well as inward. (Duff, 1999, p. 54)

'Land,' such a simple, taken-for-granted word. For the sea kayaker it can be tantalisingly close, but unreachable. Along the 106 mile overnighter required to pass the Zuytdorp Cliffs (north of Kalbarri, Western Australia) Caffyn took Lomotil to quieten the bowels and NoDoz to keep himself awake. The cliffs are named after the Dutch vessel that went missing in

1712, presumed to have ploughed into the cliffs in the dark of night, with no survivors. It disappeared without a trace. A similar fate almost befell Caffyn.

Only a desperate lunging brace with the paddle kept me upright. Fortunately my body and brain had switched into survival mode. The brace and support strokes went in automatically when needed. Panic did not set in, but the chilling hard reality of the situation said that I was close to being overwhelmed I felt despondent in the knowledge that I was nearing the very limits of my endurance. (Caffyn, 1994, p. 146)

In accord with the quest narrative, redemption is experienced at the very limits of crisis. The hero returns from the dark underworld back into the light. As Becker (2007) implies, the adventurer might also grow in confidence, where “the degree of their fear, their light-heartedness, their cautiousness, their willingness to take risks” (p. 83) settle within them after the expedition or event. Optimism, or resignation to the task, returns. For Caffyn this occurred several times after overnight paddles.

As [the] bow sliced onto the flat calm river, I felt a gush of emotional relief such as I have never experienced before. My eyes misted over. I choked back a stream of tears. The bubble of pent-up nervous energy, which had kept my batteries charged and my motor running for two days and a night, burst. Yet it was not so much a feeling of accomplishment or achievement, as simply intense relief at having gone beyond that unimaginable edge of darkness. (Caffyn, 1994, p. 130)

In the shadow of great loss, something can be said of ‘valuing life’ in the context of crossing personal thresholds. As a meaning making strategy suggested by Gillies, Neimeyer, and Milman (2014) who were studying how people cope with bereavement, valuing life is said to heighten one’s perspective, often to reevaluate and cherish the life they have. Often upon surviving, in this case upon being safely ashore, life purpose is reflected upon before new departures. Casting off with a changed mindset, having survived an ordeal, tends to be narrated as a simplification and re-calibration of one’s values.

Epiphany and closing the circle

At the heart of the quest narrative is the notion that the protagonist’s experiences will be of such depth and magnitude that he or she will gain insights

into themselves and the human condition that cannot be achieved in normal life (Becker, 2007; Goodnow, 2008; Goodnow & Ruddell, 2009).

The final metamorphosis from dream to reality had occurred with that final landing at Queenscliff. Instead of feeling a glow of success, we all felt an essential part of our life was now missing. We were unwilling to accept the finality of the experience and lifestyle coming to an end. (Caffyn, 1994, p. 183)

One last paddle stroke, the forward glide of the kayak finally striking the resistance of the sand, unthreading oneself from the partnership with the kayak and “the circle would be completed I would have to give up the freedom of the tides and the paddle” (Duff, 1999, p. 258–259). So “perhaps this journey was not what it appeared. It wasn’t an expedition but an introspection, a bridge between the ages, connected by the silence of a heart and quieted with the rhythmic pull of the paddle” (p. 255).

Hoffmeister’s final blog entry from her Australian circumnavigation simply states: “DONE!” Of course, sadly, we’ll never know about the deeper thoughts and reflections of Andrew McAuley, as he never made it to New Zealand. Within sight of land near Milford Sound he sent a distress signal by marine VHF radio. The Coroner’s report into his disappearance summarises:

A search ensued by helicopter, boats, fixed wing planes, and a New Zealand Airforce Orion P3. At 7.25pm on 10 February the Orion sighted a semi-submerged kayak which was recovered by a nearby vessel and identified as that of Andrew McAuley. There was no person with the kayak and Andrew McAuley has not been seen or heard from since the distress call. His body has never been recovered. (Savage, 2007, p. 2)

Conclusions: Adventure travel narrative and outdoor adventure education

Singer (2004) has noted that, “we can employ stories to raise our spirits, guide our actions, or influence others as a tool of persuasion or rhetoric,” hence “we can draw inferences from stories with particular self-relevance in order to gain insight into our own nature, values, and goals” (p. 442). So what can OAE educators take from the narratives of these four kayakers? Is it possible to become more reflexive with our own adventures and ‘adventure as culture’ as suggested by Lynch et al. (2012), through meaning making inquiries into the narrative identity of others?

To contextualize our conclusion within OAE we must make clear that our sea kayaking adventurers represent a small and extreme sample of adventure travel. The four narratives profiled here manifest motivations, actions and reflections that are unlikely to be found to such an extent within an educational setting. Yet it is possible that educators and students alike bring cultural expectations to their experiences when the notion of adventure or a specific form of outdoor travel is integral to the educational program. They may anticipate similar highs and lows of the sea kayak adventures recorded here as it is the stories of extreme encounters that are recorded, popularised and influential in the broader cultural of adventure. At some level they may also experience some of the characteristics and qualities of the sea kayaking experience, like crossing the threshold between land and sea, the receding horizon, a merging of body and craft and the sense of departure and return. We hope to have demonstrated in this paper how the narrative identity of adventurers is reflexive with culture and therefore enters our consciousness prior to us ever dipping a paddle in the water. It is also perhaps where narrators and readers merge their understandings of the world. As noted by Singer (2004), “narrative processing and autobiographical reasoning often converge because many of the cultural forms that guide the creation of narratives will subsequently influence what meaning or lesson we extract from a particular narrative unit” (p. 442).

A more nuanced understanding of an individual’s narrative may help leaders and educators navigate their way between some of the educationally problematic qualities represented in adventurous tales (competitiveness and gambling with one’s life) and others that seem more virtuous (gaining deeper personal insights, a sense of self-reliance, introspection on one’s life and culture). The strength of narrative inquiry, praised by Singer (2004) as a method of inquiry used across the disciplines, “is almost an implicit endorsement of theories of personality that seek individuals as inherently meaning seekers” (p. 439). Analysis of the adventure narratives of four sea kayakers is really just a departure point on a journey that highlights how the meanings of OAE and its practices are tied to a complex interplay of the self, culture and narrative as identity. As Bruner (1965) argues, narratives emerge through an influence of complex, lifelong and historical contexts and we should warn researchers on drawing too many ‘departures’ from singular narrative texts (particularly from one adventure, or one journey), regardless of their bestseller popularity. Yet unique voices may be heard. Rarely do we hear the words of the widowed or bereft after the death of their adventurous spouse or family member for example. Vicky McAuley, in writing the story of her husband, provides a haunting and engaging window into the adventures of a loved

one from one who is left behind. Such an insight might be the most perceptive of our selected narratives given that narrative identity research is most often aligned to studies of loss, death and bereavement. This intimate pact between narrator and reader seems to emerge given the meaning making gravity of the dialogue. This, perhaps, is an important counter to Goodnow’s (2008) depiction of the heroic adventurer’s quest narrative. Moreover, it seems to dissolve the tenuous and at times ambiguous link between ‘knocking the bastard off’ for the sheer experience of it, and instead departing (and telling/sharing) for very complex and personal, yet culturally reflexive reasons. Returning to Conrad’s (1907) ‘mirror of the sea’ metaphor, we do not advocate the extreme risks taken by our selected narrators to be charted within OAE programming. But as with many ‘boom and bust’ case studies employed to emphasize, for example, decision making, leadership and risk management, we believe the consideration of narrative identity might help to reflect upon and articulate the power and influence of iconic narratives within an adventurous activity such as sea kayaking.

As with any form of education, taking the middle road requires balance. There are many possibilities for OAE to work with participants, developing and reflecting upon aspects of their own adventure identity narratives. Journal writing and image capture, drafting, plotting and ultimately story telling (in many forms), may provide new possibilities for pre-departure reading, and post experience reflecting. What is crucial here, we argue, is that educator and participant alike are conscious of the reciprocity between self, culture and the act of narrating — and listening to — stories. Rather than resisting or replicating Macfarlane’s (2003) ‘invisible heritage’ it may be possible to make the invisible visible and the story more meaningful. While we hope that this paper has highlighted a continued need to critically approach our practices, given the ongoing cultural promotion of adventure identities, risk taking and heroism by the media, the extremes of human experience demonstrated by these four expeditionary paddlers are beyond the scope and ideals of outdoor adventure education at a school and tertiary level. Even so, whether we see it or not, we all live in a culture that has been defined by adventurous travel.

Notes

1. Narrative identity research has focused especially on the thematic elements of personal narratives. When participants in research studies are asked to recount a personal narrative, researchers may code the story on the following seven constructs: agency, communion, redemption, contamination, exploratory narrative processing, coherent positive resolution, and meaning making.

2. Each of the selected accounts are among the most purchased narratives on sea kayak adventure. When keywords ‘sea kayaking’ is searched on Amazon, Freya Hoffemeisters biography *Fearless* (Glickman, 2012) is the 18th most sold publication on the subject whilst Chris Duff’s (2004) autobiography *Celtic Tides* ranks 12th. Noteworthy is that the other top 20 publications are instructional manuals or pictorials, making these the most purchased accounts of journey/adventure based sea kayaking from online sales (Amazon) since 2002. The other two selected journeys do not carry this analytical data, most likely as Caffyn’s (1994) *The Dreamtime Voyage* is self-published and *Solo* (2010) by Vickie McAuley seems to be less known/purchased in the larger northern hemisphere markets (whilst prominent in Australian/NZ bookstores and online sites).

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