Solo Trekking: An Autoethnographic Journey

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Socio-Cultural - Other (Other) 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Mode: Synchronous
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Adventure trekking is characterized by its unique temporal and spatial qualities and sometimes risky nature. Such an experience offers a distinct opportunity to explore sport through a personal, lived experience (Ellis, 2004). Rarely have studies in sport management considered the researcher’s experience when exploring sport in such contexts, despite calls for its use in sport management research (Cooper et al., 2017; Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015). The purpose of the study was to explore the meaning and lived experience of solo adventure trekking and apply these findings within existing scholarly work in adventure tourism.

I employed an emic perspective, focusing on the insider (my) perspective of the experience (Coghlan, 2012) while using an analytic autoethnography approach (Anderson, 2006). Autoethnography requires the researcher to analyze – both retrospectively and selectively – and write about revelations made possible by experiencing a social world (Ellis et al., 2011). I used reflexive journaling to document my experience (Misener, 2020) as well as voice memos, field notes, and photos. Four procedures were used to ensure data quality. First, I acknowledge that I embody several cultural ideologies that can serve as a foundation for interacting with an environment (Fleming & Fullagar, 2011) and biases that can hinder my ability to remain objective (Cheng, 2008). Positivists have argued that research must be objective and free from bias, however, postmodernism demonstrates the possibility of gaining and sharing knowledge through other means of ‘knowing’ (Richardson, 2000; Wall, 2006). Next, prolonged engagement allowed me to fully immerse myself in the sociocultural aspects of the region and to engage fully with residents, guides, and tourists. Then, a search for alternative explanations was conducted during the coding process to enhance objectivity. Finally, photos, informal discussions, the journal, voice memos, and third party documents were to triangulate the data (Cope, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Given the analytic approach, I identified three main categories in the data: experience, solo travel, and sustainability. Experience included four subcategories: transformation, freedom, escape/disconnect, and social interaction. Solo travel revealed two subcategories: challenges/issues faced traversing the world alone and self-improvement through improved self-esteem, confidence, and efficacy. Finally, sustainability referred to the triple bottom line of sustainable development (Stoddard et al., 2012), where the three subcategories of sociocultural, environmental, and economic impacts emerged.

The three main categories (and subcategories within them) and how they relate to the broader literature in adventure trekking will be discussed in greater detail. As a solo female traveler, the unique “insider” position enables a deeper discussion of the lived experiences in adventure travel (Wilson & Little, 2008). The study answers the methodological call for autoethnographic research to spotlight the role sport plays in the lives of individuals and global societies by discussing how it enhances life and well-being (Cooper et al., 2017). Finally, the central focus and critical importance of “experience” will be discussed (Ellis et al., 2020). Findings can help destination marketers and tour operators to design better travel experiences for solo and adventure tourists.