

FLOW EXPERIENCE AMONG APPALACHIAN TRAIL THRU-HIKERS

Allan S. Mills, Associate Professor
Department of Recreation, Parks and Sport Management
1015 West Main Street
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA 23284-2020

Thomas S. Butler, M.S.
U. S. Air Force

Abstract

This study was concerned with determining to what extent flow experiences occur while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail (AT). Sixty-five percent of the 327 thru-hikers of the AT in 1997 responded to a mail survey questionnaire measuring the extent to which they experienced flow. Results showed that 62.3 percent of the sample had a flow experience while hiking the AT, and for the majority of them it was a daily occurrence. Flow was most often experienced while 'walking/hiking alone' and while 'looking at a view.' Experiencing flow while looking at a view, when this was defined as one of many activities during which flow might occur, was reported significantly more often by women than by men. When this activity was defined as one of the most important activities during which flow might occur, the significant difference between men and women disappeared.

Thru-hikers ranked the following two intrinsic reasons for enjoying their thru-hike as the first and second most important, respectively, among eight possible reasons: 1) enjoyment of experience and use of skills; and 2) the activity itself. The flow experience together with the most important reasons for enjoying thru-hiking appears to help define 'who thru-hikers are.'

Only a small minority of respondents reported having previously completed an AT thru-hike, but a majority of all thru-hikers surveyed expressed a desire to thru-hike the AT again. This was equally the case for those who had experienced flow during the 1997 thru-hike and those who had not.

1.0 Introduction

This paper presents the results of the master's thesis research completed by the second author at Virginia

Commonwealth University (Butler 1999), under the direction of the first author. This was an exploratory study concerned with determining the extent to which "flow" experiences occur among thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail (AT). Specifically, it was a study of those thru-hikers who reported completing the entire AT in 1997. The (AT) is the name given to the 2,180-mile "foot travel only" trail that extends from the southern terminus of Springer Mountain, GA to the northern Terminus, Mount Kathadin, ME. A thru-hiker is a person who hikes the full length of this trail in a single, continuous journey by putting on a backpack, leaving from one terminus of the trail, and hiking unassisted to the other terminus (Bruce 1997).

The first person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail was Earl Shaffer of Pennsylvania in 1948. Today Shaffer's thru-hike is considered by many in hiking circles as comparable to "Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic" (Bruce 1997 p. 1). The number of thru-hikers has grown each decade since Shaffer's became the first, and to date more than 20,000 individuals have attempted to thru-hike the AT (Bruce 1997). Thru-hiking the AT takes several months and is a very special experience for those who complete the entire distance in 1 year.

The question of what makes this endeavor so special to thru-hikers was what prompted the research reported here. It was hypothesized that the concept of *flow* would be useful for describing some of the special aspects of the thru-hike.

Flow is an optimal state of mind which for adventure activity participants is characterized by clear goals and quick feedback, focused attention, loss of self-consciousness, altered sense of time, a sense of control, a merging of action and awareness, a match between participant skills and activity challenges, and an experience which is autotelic in nature (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1999). The purpose of this study was thus to determine to what extent flow is experienced by thru-hikers, how often it is experienced, and during which of the different activities comprising this long distance hike that flow might be found to occur.

2.0 Literature Review

Most of the literature on the experiences of thru-hikers has been descriptive narratives of individual thru-hikes, such as Hare's 1975 compendium of Appalachian Trail hikers in which individual quotes of thru-hikers were used to help capture their experiences. Both Luxenberg (1994) and Setzer (1997) explored the many reasons why people thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. Roland Muesser (1998) further expanded upon the reasons for hiking and experiences thru-hikers have while on the AT. Muesser captured what long-distance hikers did in general on the Appalachian Trail, but did not examine the essence of what makes their activity a unique outdoor recreation experience.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) was one of the first researchers to attempt to explain optimal experiences that individuals share similarly while engaged in certain activities. His original work examined the experiences of rock climbers, chess players, and artists. This led to identification of the flow concept, which he first defined as a state of experience that is engrossing, in itself rewarding, and "outside the parameters of worry and boredom." Flow experiences suggest that the individual finds meaning from activities whenever engaged in a "sense of effortless action in moments that stand out as the best in their lives" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 52). This literature suggests that meaningful experiences such as these are of the type that thru-hikers might share on the Appalachian Trail.

3.0 Methods

The target population for this study became all thru-hikers of the AT registered with the Appalachian Trail Conference in 1997. They provided a list of 327 thru hikers from their database of application forms submitted by all hikers who completing an AT thru-hike in 1997. A one-page mail survey questionnaire was sent to all of these thru-hikers in 1999. The questionnaire included the following instruments developed by Csikszentmihalyi for his original research: his flow instrument, items specifying the flow experience to activities and frequency of occurrence during the hike, and an eight item reasons-for-enjoyment ranking scale. Note that his original flow instrument consisted of four items, but the following item was eliminated at the outset because it was judged

to be out of context for this study: *I think that the phone could ring, and the doorbell could ring, or the house could burn down or something like that.* A pre-test of the remaining items was conducted by mailing the questionnaire to 13 of the 327 thru-hikers from the 1997 list, of which 10 responded. In addition to examining the mailed-back questionnaires for non-response, follow-up phone calls were made to these 10 respondents to assess difficulties in understanding and completing the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was revised based on pre-test results. The revised questionnaire was then evaluated using an in-depth personal interview with one 1997 thru-hiker. The final questionnaire was then mailed out to all 327 thru-hikers on the 1997 list. A total of 215 completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 65 percent. The revised Csikszentmihalyi items included in the final questionnaire are shown below. A check in one or more of the boxes in front of the first three statements in Q1 was considered to be an operational indicator of flow. The flow experience was specified to activities and frequency during the hike by Q2, Q3, and Q4. The eight item ranking scale of enjoyment (reasons) is shown in Q5.

Q1. Please read the following statements and check only those statement(s) that you found similar to your experience on the Trail.

- My mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of something else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems.
- My concentration is like breathing. I never think of it. I am really quite oblivious to my surroundings after I really get going. When I start, I really do shut out the whole world. Once I stop, I can let it back in.
- I am so involved in what I am doing. I don't see myself as separate from what I am doing.
- None of these statements describe my experiences Thru-Hiking the Appalachian Trail. (Please go to question number "Q5")

Q2. Please circle **All** the activities below during which you had these experiences.

- a) Breaking camp
- b) Eating
- c) Walking/hiking alone
- d) Talking with friends
- e) Looking at a view
- f) Resting
- g) Assistance by Trail Angel
- h) Walking/hiking with others
- i) Preparing food
- j) Setting up camp
- k) Other (Explain)

Q3. From the list above, which **One** activity during your Thru-Hike most often provided these experiences? _____ (Please give the ALPHABET LETTER)

Q4. Based upon your answer to “Q3,” how often generally would you say that these experiences occurred? (Please circle one)

- a) At least once a day.
- b) At least once a week.
- c) At least once a month.
- d) At least once during your Thru-Hike.

Q5. As someone who has hiked the entire distance between termini of the AT in a single continuous journey with a backpack, please rank in succession your reasons for enjoying the journey from 1 to 8 (Number “1” being your most important reason and number 8 being your least important reason).

- Enjoyment of the experience and use of skills . . . _____
- The activity itself _____
- Friendship, companionship _____
- Development of skills _____
- Measuring self against own ideals _____
- Emotional release _____
- Competition, measuring self against others . . . _____
- Prestige, regard, glamour _____

4.0 Results

Analysis of the data obtained from Q1 revealed that 62.3 percent of the respondents had “flow” experiences during their hike on the AT, with 81.7 percent of those indicating that they experienced flow daily during their hike (Q4). In response to Q2, the two highest frequencies were 88.1 percent reporting “flow” experiences while “walking/hiking alone,” and 71.3 percent reporting flow experiences while “looking at a view.” These same two activities also received the highest activity response

frequencies for Q3 which asked for the one activity most often providing these experiences, but Q3 responses were much more strongly skewed to “walking/hiking alone” (80.6%) as compared to “looking at a view” (6.0%).

Significantly more ($p < .02$) female thru-hikers, as compared to male thru-hikers, reported these experiences while “looking at a view” (Q2), but this significant difference disappeared when genders were compared on responses to Q3 which asked the one activity that *most often* provided these experiences. With the exception of the one gender difference found for “looking at a view” in Q2, no significant gender differences were found for any of the variables included in the study questionnaire. Statistics provided by the Appalachian Trail Conference for 1997 indicated that males constituted a much larger proportion (80.6%) of the thru-hikers as compared to females (19.4%), but an additional question on age included in the study questionnaire indicated that their mean ages were exactly the same (32 years old). Age was the only demographic variable included in the questionnaire, and no significant differences on age were found for any of the other study variables.

Results to Q5 were used to confirm the *autotelic* aspect of flow for these thru-hikers, a characteristic which is generally considered to be a key component of the flow experience. A participant who is having an *autotelic* experience is intrinsically motivated. Some of the items in Q5 are indicators of intrinsic motivation and others are indicators of extrinsic motivation. Respondents ranked the following two intrinsic reasons for enjoying their thru-hike as the first and second most important, respectively, among the eight possible reasons for enjoying their thru-hike: Rank #1) enjoyment of experience and use of skills, and Rank #2) the activity itself. Ranked last in importance, respectively, were two indicators of extrinsic motivation: Rank # 7) competition, measuring self against others, and Rank # 8) prestige, regard, glamour. These results were exactly the same as found for rock climbers in an early study by Csikszentmihalyi (1975). An autotelic score was then calculated for the thru-hikers by summing the means of the two highest ranked intrinsic items and subtracting from this the sum of the means of the two lowest ranked extrinsic items. Autotelic scores are interpreted as *the*

higher the score the more autotelic the experience. The *autotelic* score for these thru-hikers was 9.1, even higher than the *autotelic* score of 7.6 which Csikszentmihalyi (1975) found for rock climbers. Autotelic scores for men and women did not differ, but curiously neither did the *autotelic* scores for non-flow hikers (9.4) differ significantly from that of hikers who experienced flow (8.9).

Two additional questions included in the study questionnaire, number of times respondents had completed a thru-hike of the AT and whether or not they would like to attempt another thru-hike in the future. This was the first thru-hike for 97.6 percent of the respondents, and a majority (80.5%) reported a desire to thru-hike the AT again. This was equally the case for those who had experienced flow during their 1997 thru-hike and those who had not.

5.0 Discussion

Thru-hikers of the Appalachian Trail are a unique group of back packers who achieved their goal of completing the entire 2,180 continuous miles of the AT, between Georgia and Maine, in one calendar year. Results of this study show that the majority of thru-hikers completing the AT in 1997 had similar types of experiences. Flow experiences occurred for approximately three out of every five thru-hikers (62.3%). Another important finding of this study was that most thru-hikers' flow experiences on the Appalachian Trail were regular occurrences, with 81.7 percent indicating that they experienced flow daily.

For those thru-hikers who experienced flow, the flow model provides a viewing lens through which to describe the activity of AT thru-hiking. Responses from these *flow* hikers indicated that experiences they had on the AT were similar to a state of focused attention, a loss of self-consciousness, and a merging of action and awareness as they pursued their ultimate goal. On average they also rated intrinsic reasons much higher than extrinsic reasons for enjoying their thru-hike, an indicator of the autotelic characteristic of flow. Interestingly, those thru hikers who did not experience total flow rated intrinsic reasons for enjoying their thru-hike just as highly as did flow hikers. The average autotelic score of 9.1 for all 1997 thru hikers indicates that thru-hiking on the AT can be considered

a flow-producing activity, similar to other challenging outdoor activities such as rock climbing.

To explore thru-hikers' flow experiences in depth, activities that may provide these experiences during the thru-hike were also examined. The two activities reported most frequently by thru-hikers for when they had flow experiences were *walking/hiking alone* (88.1%) and *looking at a view* (71.3%). For flow to occur there must be concentration by the participant in order to focus on the task at hand. Results for the activity of *walking/hiking alone* support Csikszentmihalyi's assertion that walking on a mountain, although sometimes unselfconscious for the participant, can be a highly intense activity requiring concentrated attention (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The one activity specified as **most often** providing a flow experience for these thru-hikers was walking/hiking alone, chosen by 80.6 percent of respondents as compared to only 6.0 percent who chose looking at a view, with all other activities being chosen by proportionately fewer respondents.

Thru-hikers appear to comprise a fairly homogeneous group. With the exception of one gender difference found for "looking at a view," no significant gender differences were found for any of the flow-related variables included in the study questionnaire. Significantly more female thru-hikers, as compared to male thru-hikers, reported flow experiences while "looking at a view," but this difference disappeared when genders were compared in terms of the one activity that *most often* provided for flow experiences. Statistics provided by the Appalachian Trail Conference for 1997 indicated that males constituted a larger proportion of the thru-hikers as compared to females, but a study question on age indicated that mean ages for men and women thru-hikers were exactly the same (32 years old). Age was the only demographic variable included in the questionnaire, and no significant differences on age were found for any of the other study variables.

One potential limitation of this study arises from the method of data collection. Surveys rely heavily on the memories of individuals and assume that individuals are able to thoroughly reflect upon their past experiences. Thru-hiker respondents for this study were asked to rely on their long term memories to reported experiences they

had more than one year back in time. This could account for some of the non-response to the survey, as well as memory-related error in response to the flow items included in the questionnaire.

The general conclusion for this exploratory study was that flow experiences appear to be universal experiences for most thru-hikers. As such, they help us understand 'who Thru-Hikers are' by recognizing the commonality of many of their experiences, actions, and desires on the Appalachian Trail.

6.0 Citations

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