

# Freedom of the hills

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## Abstract

This study is an exploration of the nature of freedom as experienced in outdoor environments. The research deviates from the analytical philosophical approach and instead focuses on the lived experience of freedom. The construct of freedom is elusive and complex so it was important to select a research framework which allowed for the topic to be researched in a holistic and spontaneous way. The framework used is loosely based on Peile's (1994) ecological paradigm. The research discusses some of the ways freedom is experienced and personal dilemmas some professionals have in reconciling the paradox between the personal and professional practice of freedom.

## Introduction

What is the nature of freedom as experienced in outdoor environments? For many years, I have taught outdoor education and have noted the different responses of individuals to the natural environment. One particular response is that of freedom.

Questions relating to freedom are philosophical and can not be answered by scientific experimentation or by acquiring more facts. Philosophical debates following the Western tradition emphasise intellectual analysis using predominately rational thought. This research deviates from the analytical philosophical approach to explore the feeling of freedom as experienced in the outdoors with specific attention to the lived experience of freedom. To look at freedom from diverse vantage points means that more ways of knowing become available and more people can become involved in thinking about their lives and the world.

This paper is part of an ongoing research project towards a MEd. The analysis of data is not yet complete; the following ideas are some of the emerging issues relating to the reality and rhetoric of the freedom of the hills.

## An ecological paradigm of research

The construct of freedom is elusive and complex. It was therefore important to select a research framework which allowed for a degree of freedom and spontaneity. Ecological research as defined by Peile (1994) is systems based and holistic. It is an emerging framework which allows method and content to develop together without being limited by established conventions.

Some basic concepts of ecological research include:

- **Holism** – Research incorporates the big picture not just isolated parts. The researcher moves between the parts and the whole; every part is dependent on

other parts as well as the system as a whole. The research reflects the culture in which it is situated.

- **Complexity** - Complex systems interact in complex ways. Research must allow for many interpretations and recognise that constructs like freedom are constantly reforming. Interaction is understood to be random and complex and so analysis does not search for simple linear cause-and-effect but allows for a network of connections
- **Being** – Accepting the lived moment involves the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of being human and recognises the importance of imagination and the creative expression of individuals and communities.
- **Participatory** - The researcher is intimately connected to their environment and the research, the findings emerge and are co-created. The ideas are not structured in a hierarchical form but expand out as new connections are explored.

The epistemological foundation is that knowledge arises from many sources. It is not just an intellectual exercise but involves emotions, the senses and physical activity. There is no simple single way to acquire knowledge; it is complicated and complex (Davis and Sumara, 1997). We do not learn independently in autonomous isolation as some theories suggest but as part of a larger ecosystem and our knowing emerges through the relationships we develop with the environment. The interaction of mind, body, community and environment allows for a system of emerging knowledge. This co-emergence of knowledge, knower and environment is called enactivism. (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Fenwick, 2001). The enactive approach does not separate our physical experience and ongoing actions from the environment but allows knowledge to emerge in a dynamic and relational way.

## **The core questions**

One problem with an emerging method and content approach is knowing where to start and finish. The following questions form the framework of the research:

- Is there such a thing as an experience of freedom of the hills?
- If yes, what is its nature?
- Under what conditions is it likely to occur?
- If it can be taught, who should do the teaching and where is it best done?

Within the wider context of:

- What is freedom and how does it impact on learning?

## **The research method**

The research has 3 main components:

1. Interviews
2. Exploration of mountain literature
3. Personal notes and experiences.

## 1. Interviews

The interviews gathered stories which encapsulated a moment of freedom in the outdoors. The narrators generally did not have their responses planned, so the interviews progressed intuitively rather than on the basis of conscious deliberation. The interviews were mainly free flowing stories based on embodied habits of speaking, theorising and reliving experiences of being in the outdoors. Some ideas co-evolved as even though I did not state opinions the nuances of my body language would have influenced the narrators. The feelings of freedom are not observable so it is necessary to trust the words of the respondent.

The people selected have a professional involvement in the outdoors as writers, photographers, professional adventurers, instructors and teachers. They were chosen because of their commitment to sharing their ideas about the outdoors in a variety of ways. The use of specialists could be seen as elitist, but if the ability to derive pleasure from outdoor experiences is an acquired skill or attitude it makes sense to study those who possess and practice it.

## 2. Mountain literature

There is much mountain literature which talks about feeling free. The books, journals and articles selected were recommended by the participants as well as being supplemented by a more systematic reading of NZ Alpine journals. The focus on the New Zealand writing was to position the research more specifically in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

## 3. Personal experience

Auto-ethnography is a type of narrative research that connects the personal with the cultural, (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It is not a simple auto biographical story but an attempt to describe the self and the cultural context from the inside. It is not always regarded as a legitimate form of research because it can be very personal and individualized. Expressions of personal experiences and emotions are the essence of auto-ethnographic writing (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

My personal experiences can not be dismissed as they are part of me and have created the lens through which I interpret the world. Hence it is better to disclose and intertwine them in an open way rather than dismiss or disguise them.

## Freedom is...

**freedom** noun  
the condition or right of being able or allowed to do, say, think, etc. whatever you want to, without being controlled or limited  
*I felt such a sense of freedom, up in the hills alone.*  
(Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary)

This paper is not a forum for exploring all aspects of freedom. The following is a brief summary of some relevant contributions for the outdoors and outdoor education. For Dewey (1966), freedom emerges from questioning social regulations and when freed from those self imposed limits it is possible to learn more. So freedom involves the ability to analyse and interpret lived-experience with the purpose of transforming previously accepted beliefs. Learning is not static so changing positions and partial

understanding are a necessary part of the process of critical thinking. Freedom involves active participation in recreating social conditions through critical thinking.

Greene (1988) examined how some current interpretations of freedom refer more to self-dependence and self-determination than with connectedness or community. She writes from an American perspective saying that to be autonomous and independent is the American dream but that it is important to look for new ways of achieving freedom. This element of connectedness and community widens the discussion of freedom into areas of deep ecology and a living within the environment. Greene (1988) is also concerned that when freedom is linked to rational choices it can exclude creativity, imagination and possibilities. In contrast Wolf (1990) believes that freedom occurs through reason and thinking; that it is an inner freedom and hence can occur without connections to the things outside us.

Bowers (1995) also challenges the rationalist conception of freedom which is expressed as an autonomous self, making decisions without considering communities of interrelated and conflicting interests. This broader ecological awareness of people sharing and living together conceptualises freedom very differently to one based on individual autonomy. Rather than seeking to be free of responsibility it becomes important to pursue responsibility for the well being of the environment and the transformation of society.

Berlin (1998) discusses positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom refers to freedom from interference or how many doors are unlocked. Positive freedom is more about the freedom to do something; to be able to make choices and act on them.

Hirschmann (2003) addressed positive and negative freedom from a feminist perspective saying that the division is useful for examining women's 'unfreedom'. However to define a feminist theory of freedom she says "Combining both positive and negative liberty elements in the idea of what constitutes a barrier means the line between internal and external cannot be clearly drawn; rather the two must be seen as mutually constituted and understood together" (p.201). Hirschmann goes on to say that "Though freedom must be expressed by individuals, its conditions are made possible by community" (p. 237).

Politics, culture and gender are just some of the influences affecting our understanding of freedom. However Greene (1988) says there is always more and no field of study can ever be complete.

## **Is there such a thing as an experience of freedom of the hills?**

I wanted to sit silently and quite still, and absorb through every sense the scene about me; to let my vision span a hundred peaks or rest contented on a single hill; to rejoice in that freedom I had never known; to draw from all about me a new virtue and a new strength. (Smythe, 1950, pp 6-7).

Aplet, Thomson, and Wilbert (1999) suggest that freedom and naturalness are two key qualities of wilderness and that the idea of wilderness has evolved both as a place that is free and as a place in which to be free. Neulinger (1981) said that perceived freedom is one of the defining criteria of leisure and defined perceived freedom "as a state in which the person feels that what he/she is doing is done by choice and because one wants to do it." (p.15). Samdahl (1988) suggested that a sense of freedom in leisure arose through opportunities to do something different and break the routine.

While outdoor recreation allows for new and different opportunities, these opportunities are not equally available as gender, class and culture impose their own constraints. Everyone has constraints, however the way work, leisure and non-work are structured limits the quantity and quality of women's leisure experience to a greater extent. Constraints are complex as they are not just external structural barriers but also involve personal responses to fearful situations. Some people fear being alone, the future, or heights; how those fears have developed depends on lived experiences and society.

So on to my core value: freedom. Freedom to be me. By that I do not mean a lack of responsibility. Quite the reverse, as I believe personal freedom brings with it a great deal of responsibility. But freedom from constricting attitudes, self defeating doubts and fears. Some would say oneness. Some of you will no doubt know that feeling, when on top of some hill, whether got there by struggle or not. The really great thing is to bring that feeling into everyday life. (Hart, 2002, p. 113).

From the beginning of colonisation Aotearoa, New Zealand was framed as a natural paradise; a place to escape to. In another reality Aotearoa, New Zealand has been, and is still being, fought over, mapped, renamed, stolen, sold, cultivated and exploited. For many years traces of the Maori culture were systematically removed and replaced by a veneer of European society. However the picture postcard image of a clean green country is still prevalent and has become the accepted reality of many.

Hughes (1993) said "It is a country associated with national parks, scenic beauty, wilderness areas, beautiful deserted beaches, green pastures and a friendly population – an image which is carefully cultivated in tourism brochures and in our trade promotions." (p. 4). To experience freedom is somewhat dependant on the cultural conventions and image makers of a particular time and place.

### **If yes ... what is its nature?**

One man may climb for love of the artistic and aesthetic in Nature, another to add to his knowledge in the matter of science, another from mere curiosity, being impelled by that strange desire which is inborn in us all – *to see more*. Even the child delights to be held aloft that it may attain a greater range of vision. Again a man may climb for the animal love of physical exercise, caring little or nothing for the strange and beautiful sights which meet his eyes in the world above the snow line.

(Mannerling, 1892, pp 8-9)

The following are some snippets from the research interviews and readings which reflect the nature freedom:

### **Transcendental moments and cold feet**

The outdoors can allow for those special moments of freedom to occur when everything feels perfect and the mind, body and environment unite.

*I had been paddling for about an hour or so on my own it was absolutely mirror calm, not a breath of wind, the odd penguin popping up here and there, absolutely*

*phenomenal, and I could feel it coming like a wave of something ... then just paddling along brimming with happiness at the whole thing and not wanting to be anywhere else in the world. (AB)*

Douglas (2002) writes “We’re in it for the freedom nature offers. To be surrounded by living things, to feel part of life’s patterns, that’s enough” (p. 24). He later adds that “We leave these marks on the land in countless ways, the marks of our passing, forming a thread that we cannot choose to abandon, the nature inside us” (p. 25).

After a solo trip in the Southern Alps Vervoorn (2000) writes “There are moments when the configuration of the world and self seems perfect, when everything seems so rightly placed that it triggers an overwhelming sense of order and harmony, when the world appears perfect, whole and we understand our place in it” (p. 114). However, these moments of oneness are few and far between; as Vervoorn says “Yet most of the time in mountain travel, mystical union is not only hard to achieve, it is dangerous to pursue” (pp114-115). Many outdoor experiences involve sore feet, heavy packs and soggy sleeping bags.

### **Resistance – pushing out the barriers**

Greene (1988) argues that freedom frequently involves resisting the world as it is and daring to pursue personal projects which many oppose.

*well I was working with the rules a wee bit and not so much breaking them ... I felt those rules didn't necessarily apply to me ... I was really only exercising what I normally do ... the rest of society however should conform to those rules but they don't apply to me. (JK)*

Rojek (1995) says that to understand freedom it is necessary to place it alongside unfreedom or restraint and that the feeling of freedom occurs only as a relationship to constraint.

*a time when I felt freest on a mountain and it was coming down Scott Creek after being on the east face of Sefton. We had two nights on Sefton and the second night had been in a really bad place ...we had been struggling the night before and that morning to find Welcome Pass in the mist ... I was so relieved to be free of that situation where we'd been struggling to stay alive in the mountains...It was the fact that we had got out of it and I was able to run; had the freedom to run. It was great just moving easily after being so careful on the mountain. (DE)*

### **Active discovery**

Our sensory perception depends on how the body feels and functions; when we smile a lot we feel happy it's not just that we smile a lot because we feel happy. When we move in an unrestricted way then the perception of freedom is enhanced.

*I feel free in the city on my bike ... well I know that's not a natural environment but when you said freedom I always consider either running or biking is my escape, my mode of discovery ... I love to go for a run to get my bearings and look around. (FG)*

*... when I was a full time student and playing in a band 3 or 4 nights a week I'd drive to Mt Thomas or Mt Richardson for a mountain run for two or three hours, on my own, so there was an aspect of freedom in that ...the solo experience and the total freedom ... freedom to go at your own pace freedom to go where you wanted ...to explore an area. (HI)*

Vervoorn (2000) writes “When it comes to mystical understanding and union with the cosmos, I prefer the way of action to the way of contemplation, absorption of the self through purposeful action within the world in preference to reposing in meditation outside it” (P. 115). Thompson (2004) credits Dave Vass as saying “A smooth and fluid travel through the terrain becomes the reason for doing it –a timeless loss of self amongst movement and mountains – if you're lucky” (p. 20). We connect with places not just visually but with our body and the way we move and things we do. When we are able to move freely we are free.

## **Uncluttering**

Escaping from the city can also create a sense of freedom. This is sometimes framed as escaping from real life, from the pressures and responsibilities of everyday life. Cohen and Taylor (1992) say that it is important to know how reality is being framed so that we know what we are meant to be escaping from and to. Escape to the outdoors is often seen as escape from routine in search of excitement and adventure. These escapes are often first imagined and then acted out. So, if we escape to the outdoors to experience freedom then we will create such a fantasy and if we escape for adventure then that is the story we will reference our experience to. The experiences and events that support our escape fantasies are those that get retold and are reinforced when we return.

*...the freedom part comes in being outdoors and it comes from the change in focus from the day to day clutter that goes on to just dealing with the basics when you're in the outdoors it frees you up because what I'm focusing on is being warm, hopefully being dry and having some food, so it reverts to basic needs and the longer you go away because it takes time to kind of sloth off the worries and the stuff that you take with you ... the truer that becomes and the more pure the experience.(BC)*

This escape motivation is not new:

Perhaps it is our modern tendency to 'individualism' which makes the Alps so much to us... To habitual residents among the Alps, this absence of social duties and advantages might seem barbarizing, even brutalizing. But to men wearied with too much civilisation, and deafened by the noise of the great cities, it is beyond measure refreshing.

John Addington Symonds, 1880

However for some it's important to escape from the outdoors. From my own observations even students who enjoy outdoor activity often want to return home after three or four days because they require some of the luxuries and extra stimulations city life provides. Gates says “In an e-mailed dispatch from an American expedition last year, one climber reported watching the "Star Wars" DVD at 21,000 feet... On the

way to and from the Sublime, Everest gets as boring as anyplace else, except more so” (2003 p. 38).

## **On top of the game**

Freedom also comes from a feeling of being in control. This can be likened to Csikszentmihalyi (1975) concept of flow which he describes as “For a climber this state of being includes a heightened sense of physical achievement, a feeling of harmony with the environment, trust in climbing companions, and a clarity of purpose.” (p.99)

*I've felt so on top of the game that even though I'm doing things that are quite hard for me ... It feels like you are an external observer manipulating a toy around thinking I'm so in charge of this thing I can do whatever I want. I remember one rapid in particular I got to the top of it and straightaway thought no way and grabbed my boat and walked to the bottom ... Everyone else was in their boats ready to head off downstream and I said no I'm going up to do the run so I carried my boat back up and paddled this drop ... everything was so obvious and there so much time and ... it all it felt like a complete doddle ... From a physical mental kinaesthetic sense it was kind of like liberation. (AB)*

One of the consequences of seeking out this feeling of being challenged is that as skills and experience increase the intensity of the challenge also increases. As AB says

*You get a heightened sense of importance with a higher element of risk, where the consequences of blowing it were much, much higher and more disastrous, so it would be much harder to focus that much energy and intensity on something that clearly wasn't going to do me in if I made a mistake. (AB)*

The consequence of that is that people die in the outdoors whilst pursuing that sense of freedom and leave behind friends and family. Coffey (2003) in her book “Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow” refers to the taboo subject of climbing accidents that shatter lives and break the hearts of those left behind.

## **Aesthetics of place**

The conceptual separation of humans and wilderness is paradoxical in some aspects because humans are thought of as distinct from wilderness because of the types of impact we cause, while the type of impact we cause derives in part because we have been constructed as distinct from wilderness. This separation of humans and wilderness has beneficial consequences as well as conflicting and ironic ones. Under this system, wilderness becomes a special place that is distinct from life in the city.

*That freedom in going to an environment I wanted to go to like Bhutan ... generating the peace of mind to be with local people and not using mechanised transport ... being on foot on skis with dogs on yaks, camels, horses ... and that to me is a total freedom. (EF)*

Berleant (2002) says that environmental experience involves the senses, physiological factors and cultural influences as we perceive through the modalities of our culture. “The perception of snow, of rain, of distance ... are discriminated and identified according to the paradigms and categories embedded in our cultural practices” (p.8).

*Outer Mongolia has a big landscape and there were definitely times in that you felt very free and I think it was partly the landscape the nature of the landscape. The landscape there is just huge; when you can see tomorrow then you know that's a long way away, ... the landscape imposes a type of freedom. (BC)*

*JK - Well I like flat spaces, deserts, flat areas in Antarctica where you have ideally the 360 degree view of nothing ... when I'm standing on the middle of the Ross Ice-shelf or in a desert in Australia when you can go in any direction that you choose ... go wherever you like it's a kind of a nice feeling ...and I like that.*

*J – Is that freedom?*

*JK- yeah that's freedom for me.*

## **Freedom and outdoor education**

If freedom is a component of the outdoors ...is it also a part of outdoor education? As outdoor education becomes more established in Aotearoa, New Zealand so do the constraints. The regulations, forms and plans that are required to take groups outdoors reduce spontaneity. More assessment is done; students are assessed as part of the curriculum and educators are assessed to national standards.

Foucault (1977) used Bentham's panopticon as an architectural metaphor of surveillance and discipline. It is a tower which can see everywhere but it is not possible for those on the outside to see in. Hence those on the outside assume they are being watched and adjust their behavior accordingly. Foucault says surveillance is the key to control and we apply this surveillance to ourselves and others. In the outdoors as in other sectors of society we gaze on others and others gaze on us. Particularly when we are placed in positions of responsibility we watch, we encourage disclosure of feelings, we assess and we encourage the group to watch each other. Foucault (1977) describes how we willingly accept and internalise limits on how we behave. In outdoor education we talk about freedom, but we regulate, control, follow normal operating procedures and assess to industry standards; this does not match our rhetoric.

Technology and the latest advances in clothing are no longer seen as a luxury because to be outdoors in Aotearoa's unstable climate without them is seen as being foolhardy and irresponsible. For outdoor professionals, if the technology exists and is not used then the trip is perceived as not being as safe as it could have been. The result is that we become more reliant on it which alienates us from the outdoor environment and hence developing meaningful connections become harder to achieve.

Often outdoor educators want to take others to special places but in doing so remove the specialness.

*The North Temple is pretty special ... its where Bruce died on a search and rescue thing ... recently I took some clients up there and I didn't feel good about it ...I remember not feeling that great about having brought them there it was a bit of an imposition. (BC)*

When professionals are responsible for others in the outdoors then a different dynamic occurs. EF explains what happens when instructing in the outdoors:-  
*So I think that I feel constrained when I'm instructing, ...I don't think I could feel free relaxed and really enjoying things to the fullest because always at the back of my mind ...is making sure that nothing went wrong and watching the emotional safety and physical safety, but also analysing; was that a good activity to do? and what are we doing next? and how does that fit with the time? and is everyone involved? I'd be thinking all those things that go along with that so the constraint would be the responsibility factor. (EF)*

When instructors are feeling constrained then they will pass those messages on to their students. Likewise, when participants are fearful or negative they influence other group members. Bixler, Carlisle, Hammitt, and Floyd (1994) collected examples of negative reactions from school students. They had a general fear of the outdoors and the dark; fear of wild animals, insects and spiders; disgust at the dirtiness of the environment; and discomfort from weather extremes.

The romantic notion of the outdoors is a place of peace and solitude. However, Castle Hill near Christchurch, is a site of spiritual and cultural significance; which is used for rock climbing, rock concerts, solo flute renditions, meditation, tramping, painting and parties. Diversity is important and that means conventions are challenged just as postmodern fashion explores underwear as outerwear, outdoor activities go airborne on bikes or cart-wheeling kayaks. The traditional uses of gear, technology and the body are pushed and extended.

This diversity can create conflicts and dilemmas, but can also expand the scope of outdoor education.

*We were letting them go away in small groups of 3 to 4, totally contained with their packs and their food ... we were trying to facilitate that feeling of being in the outdoors not of a class of 20 in a row ... it was important in terms of giving them group freedom and individual freedom... there was no constraints that really mattered ...I mean they knew they had to get to the tent site within 3 hours or whatever . (HI)*

*Well I try to encourage people to develop their own path in how they instruct and so to assess to some kind of a national standard always has a conflict of interests. (JK)*

*What we try and do is take away any issues they have about umm doing any of the organising ... but that just means they are uninvolved ... when people come on a trip like ours what they abdicating is control they saying here's my money give me a good time and I'm going to trust you to do that for me ... but these are intelligent people and you've taken away ...umm. (BC)*

There are many ways to experience the outdoors and while freedom is just one of the felt emotional responses it is a powerful motivating factor for some. To examine the lived experience of freedom reveals a paradox between the personal and professional and between the romantic and postmodern but it is at those interstices that new ways of being occur.

## Conclusion

This research is exploring ways to encounter freedom and some of the constraints we place on ourselves and others. Deriving knowledge from such experiences is not about creating universal principles but about increasing an awareness of what is possible.

The freedom response seems to move beyond a socially constructed response to include a more profound response of humans to their environment. When movement is fluid and expansive, vistas huge, boundaries expanded or meaningful connections made, then it is possible to feel a sense of freedom. That feeling becomes more embodied when we tell stories of those lived and relived moments.

The final quote goes to Mitchell (1983) who says  
“Whatever we find in the mountains we took there in the first place. In the end the mountains do not care what experiences we make of them. They are nothing but wrinkles on a shifting crust, frozen water upon water, dust upon dust – nothing – until men and women come and give them meaning.” (P.225)

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