

Encountering Heidi: Meeting Others as a Central Aspect of the River Experience

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Abstract—Over the past few decades, numerous studies have investigated relationships between encounters and the backcountry recreation experience. Although academics and professionals may recognize that meeting others in backcountry areas could result in positive interactions that are beneficial to the experience, research directed at the positive aspects of intergroup relations is still in its inception. This paper examines encounters using a symbolic interactionist framework, grounded in empirical data, and provides an interpretation of the inter-linkages between encounters, experiences, and identities. The findings are based on more than 10 years of participant observation studies on multi-day white water rafting trips in the western United States.

Who is Heidi? To put it succinctly, Heidi is someone we “encountered” in the Grand Canyon last summer. We don’t know her last name or what she does in the “real” world. We only know that she was on a solo Grand Canyon river trip last July, ate spaghetti every other night and had a leaky valve on her small, blue cater-raft. We shared a large beach with her one night, the beach being large enough that we couldn’t see where she was camped. We also invited her for dinner—salmon. A commercial trip on the other end of the beach, also out of view, also invited her for dinner, but they were having spaghetti, so Heidi chose to dine with us. We ate together and exchanged stories, and our boatman examined her cater-raft and shrugged his shoulders - not having any spare valves that would fit her tubes. I believe Heidi went to the other group for breakfast and had a similar type of encounter.

Although both the commercial group and our group could have considered the encounter with Heidi as a negative experience - an intrusion into our river/wilderness experience - we defined it more as part of that experience. In fact, we hoped to encounter her again as we floated downstream, and we asked commercial trips that were traveling faster than us if they had seen her: Yes, Heidi had dinner with them last night. No, her tubes still leaked.

On that trip, however, we did have a few “negative” encounters: meeting a large commercial group in a narrow canyon, with a somewhat unfriendly leader; passing a group of

private boaters that were experiencing some inter-group conflicts and feared that everyone wanted to take THEIR camp; and having to crawl over a crowd of boats in the mouth of Havasu Creek and avoiding the growls of one boatman who was upset about people stepping on his boat with sandy feet. What made these encounters “unpleasant,” however, was not based on the fact that they were encounters, but on various circumstances leading up to the encounters that led to the definition of the experiences. In fact, we had encounters at side attractions with a multitude of individuals that made the area seem “crowded,” but we agreed that the overall impact of encountering all those people to our river experience was positive.

The concept of positive encounters seems to contradict the very nature of a back-country experience, such as a river trip. In general, a river trip through the Grand Canyon or many other Southwestern rivers is often viewed as one of the ultimate “wilderness experiences.” The peaceful desert environment and deep canyon walls isolate river runners from any reminders of civilization. Indeed, a main motivation for many who venture on river trips is to escape from the “real world” and the routines of everyday life (Cohen and Taylor 1992). This aspect of the river trip experience has become central to the river runner identity. However, since many individuals share this desire to escape, albeit for only a few days to a few weeks, rivers have become popular. This means that different groups of river runners meet other groups of river runners - that is, they have numerous encounters. How do these encounters coincide with the river runner identity? In this paper, we provide a classical, symbolic interactionist interpretation of identity and the inter-relationship between encounters and identities. Following this, we briefly describe how encounters come to be interpreted as either positive or negative and identify the river guides’ role in facilitating their passengers’ interpretations. Finally, we examine how encounters are an important aspect of both the experience and identity of river runners.

Theoretical Framework

River Runner Identities

The river experience is often perceived as magical or extraordinary (Arnould and Price 1993). Part of the magic is associated with escaping from the rules and mundane routine of everyday life and finding oneself transformed by the beauty and remoteness of the river and its canyons (see, Cohen and Taylor 1992). This transformation has grave implications for one’s identity as the individual learns to embrace becoming a river runner as it allows him or her the avenue for escape.

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While the river experience and emergent river identity are associated with the backcountry (“wilderness”) setting, these also depend on joint action (Blumer 1969) - specifically, the interlinkages of actions among river runners. Various types of joint actions occur among groups of river runners, and include dramaturgical performances (Goffman 1967), identity work-up and displays (Birrell and Turowetz 1979), and danger constructions (Jonas 1999). All of these performances depend upon on witnessing audiences, which is essential in the identity construction process.

In general, an identity refers to a person’s location in social life (Hewitt 1994). When a person has identity, “he [or she] is situated, that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgment of his [or her] participation or membership in social relations” (Stone 1981). The term identity is often confused with the concept of role. However, a role can be defined as a perspective from which behavior is conducted. A role in itself is lifeless, an unplayed part that has no substance until the individual claims it for his or her own and breathes life into it by identifying with it (Foote 1955). While some identities are fleeting because the roles are temporary or mundane, others are more heartfelt or intense as the individual comes to perceive that identity as part of his or her “real” self. In other words, the role and self “merges” (Turner 1976). This is typically the case for river guides who often commit a lot of time and personal resources to running rivers, and view the river runner identity as part of their “core” (Hughes 1945) or “glorified” self (Adler and Adler 1991). Passengers, on the other hand, play temporary river running roles and thus tend to have less enduring river running identities. A river trip for the passenger is often a “once in a lifetime” event and, although it may have an enduring impact on the individual, river running is less central to his or her overall definition of self.

River runner identities are not formed merely once an individual departs on a river trip. Identities, in general, are negotiated at the situational level, where they are enacted through the reciprocal process of role taking and role making (Becker 1964; Blumer 1969; Stone 1981; Strauss 1969). Consequently, identities are not stable phenomena and must be continuously constructed and reconstructed in everyday life and are only recognized and confirmed during their enactment (Cicourel 1973; Douglas and Johnson 1977; Garfinkel 1967; Kotarba and Fontana 1984; Schutz 1962). Identity construction is thus a continuous process that depends on both the activities of the individual and the ratification by a witnessing audience. On the river, this process occurs during encounters, whether they be intra- or inter-group encounters. In this paper, we focus on the latter.

Encounters occur between three main types of river running groups: commercial, private and research. Most passengers have their first, and often only, river experience on a commercial trip that they take as they would choose to take any other vacation. While passengers on commercial trips engage in leisure, the guides receive a paycheck and are thus officially working. On private trips, however, both river guides and passengers engage in leisure. As a result, private trips are often associated with heavy drinking, wild partying or merely acting as “a bunch of yahoos who don’t have the slightest idea what they are doing.” While many or even most private trips do not fit this description, there is a general assumption among the commercial river running

community that private boaters behave much like “primates,” which they are occasionally called. Because of their perceived uncivilized behavior, private trips are often associated with disruption of other groups’ experiences.

While private trips can be considered a total leisure experience, research trips are quite different. Neither passengers nor river guides engage in leisure as they venture on a research trip. Those on research trips are very concerned about avoiding negative perceptions of themselves during encounters to preclude accusations of acting like private boaters:

The TL [trip leader] broached the subject of alcohol, “You need to keep a low profile. I know the atmosphere here is to have a good time, and we are one of the most lenient research groups around. You won’t see any other groups with an open beer can on the boat. However, please hide your cans on the boats when we pass other groups. We are a “research” team and we don’t want other groups remarking to the Park service on our partying...we need to keep a positive image in the Canyon.” (Research trip, Grand Canyon)

Although the different river running roles (river guide or passenger on a commercial, private, or research trip) provide the backdrop from which to interpret encounters, the meaning of the encounter (as positive or negative) and its impact on the individual’s identity are negotiated at the situational level.

Methods

All three authors wrote field notes during the summer 1998 river trip when we encountered Heidi, and compared notes during the following months. It was during such discussions that we began to focus on the social dynamics of encounters. Following this, the first author went through more than 10 years of field notes taken for another study that focused on interactions between river guides and passengers on river trips in the Southwest. These notes were written in various forms and perspectives, or “voices” (Ronai 1992). Some field notes were collected in journal format (Johnson 1975) with the first author taking the role of observer (Adler and Adler 1975; Gold 1958) and watching and recording what was going on in the setting, and reporting the “objective” things that river runners said and did. In this fashion, a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of the river running arena was obtained. Other notes were collected to capture the more subjective aspects of the river runner self and subsequently took the form of an “auto-ethnography/biography” (Adler and Adler 1987; Ellis 1991; Hayano 1982, 1979; Jules-Rosette 1975; Krieger 1985, 1983; Ronai 1992). In this fashion, such techniques as “interpretive recall” (Hadden and others 1989) and “systematic sociological introspection” (Ellis 1991) were used to write field notes on personal experiences as both river guide and passenger. This approach to the recording of field notes becomes important as the first author recognized that she was not only observing what was going on, but was also involved in the production of the very events reported (Mitchell 1991; Richardson 1997, 1992).

While collection of the above notes did not focus on encounters, subsequent analysis of the data, using a more focused version of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss

1967), revealed that encounters were central in the river identity construction and affirmation process.

Interpretation of the Data _____

Situational Interpretation of Encounters

An encounter between two or more groups of river runners can be defined as either negative or positive, depending upon the nature of the interaction and the meaning that is attributed to it by the river runners involved. One generally positively viewed encounter entails some sort of “cooperation” among the groups involved, such as through the bartering of goods and services or the exchange of information. The following field notes demonstrates this form of encounter:

A little later, a commercial snout pulls up and asks us if we mind if they had lunch there. Sure, no problem. How do we hit them up for a tow? The boatman and swamper began to prepare lunch as the passengers went up to hike Dark Canyon. They were out of beer and the boatman comes up to see if he could swap ice for some beer. Jack just happened to have an “emergency” 12 pack hidden and was willing to give it to him, not for ice, but for a tow. “I’m not suppose to, but sure.” We also gave them some of our Dutch oven cake and thought that we got a good deal for the tow (Private trip, Cataract Canyon).

A Hatch commercial group came by, the boatman, being a good friend of Frank’s (our boatman), gave us some ice and some badly needed tonic for our gin. We showed the passengers a book full of pictures of fish, made especially to inform the public of the important work we are doing here. It seemed as if everyone was happy with the interaction. (Research trip, Grand Canyon).

Another cooperative encounter occurs at major rapids. Various groups of river runners gather at a popular “scouting” points above the rapids to view the rapids before running them and determine the safest route through (see, Jonas 1997, 1999). Often, several groups converge at the rapids at the same time, making the scouting area seem “crowded.” However, river runners typically perceive the encounters as positive; as a means of exchanging advice of how to navigate the rapids, or providing support for less experienced group or more vulnerable craft. For instance, river guides operating motorized boats will often wait below major rapids to “scoop passengers and gear out of the river” belonging to non-motorized groups. Occasionally, groups will camp together above the rapids so they can run them together the following day.

A motor rig soon lands next to us, with crew and passengers dripping wet. They must have been as miserable as they looked, drenched and wearing little rain gear. The scrawny looking boatman didn’t have anything on but a pair of shorts. He quickly darted up the rocks, probably as a means to get warm, and his passengers followed him. I later found out that the group just decided to go on a river trip on the spur of the moment and weren’t equipped with rain gear. The boatman ended giving all his gear to the passengers until he had none for himself. “Do you mind if we share your camp for a bit ‘til we dry off and warm up?” Jack (our TL) told him that he was welcome to camp here as there was plenty of room and his passengers didn’t look as if they wanted to be drenched again today. He thanked us and it seemed as if there were to be three groups sharing the one camp. I guess it was O.K. since

none of us signed up for it at the registration box. There seemed to be a sigh of relief by all the groups that we were all not planning to run the rapids until morning, when we could provide each other support (Private trip, Cataract Canyon).

Although three groups shared a relative small beach in the above field note, the situation was not defined negatively. Instead, the three groups felt more secure knowing that there were others to help them run the rapids safely. Later in this paper, we examine how encounters at rapids actually enhance the experience of danger or adventure while running the rapids, which has positive implications for the participants’ river running identities.

While the three groups camped on the same beach had positive encounters, perceived competition over campsites often results in negative encounters. This is especially the case on certain stretches of rivers where there are limited campsites, as depicted in the following field notes:

There are a lot of kayakers and canoeists on this stretch of river. They can do the flat water stretch but are motored back up river once they reach Spanish Bottoms, just upstream from the first rapid, Brown Betty. There were some that we passed that didn’t seem very friendly. Maybe they were intimidated by us as we were probably competing for one of the very few camps on Green, and we were rowing as fast as we could to ensure that we would get one of those few camps before they did. (Private trip, Green River).

Negative encounters can also be defined in terms of conflicting with another groups “wilderness experience,” or feeling of isolation, as the following field notes suggest:

George, Debbie, and I were having a wonderful time playing in the falls at Shinimu, until a commercial group pulls in and all these passengers come up the canyon. We decided that it was just a bit too crowded for us, so we grab our things and leave. So much for our wilderness experience. (Private trip, Grand Canyon)

We made camp at the nice, open sandy beach at Fern Glen, but it wasn’t open for long. An AZGF group and a Midge research group soon pulled up. Some faces were recognized as the so called “scientists” flocked to the beach. Kathy [our cook] complained as she sees all the people pull up, “I don’t like this when all these people come. You kinda get used to your own little group.” One guy from the another group had a kayak appropriately named “INVADER.” (Research Trip, Grand Canyon)

However, as we will demonstrate, the same kind of encounter (in terms of the number of individuals involved, the location, time of day, etc.) can either be evaluated as positive or negative. The evaluation often relies less on the number of encounters and more on the nature of the interaction, which results in a definition of the situation as either cooperative or competitive/ conflicting. Even an initial evaluation could be revised during the course of the interaction. For instance, an encounter that may first appear as conflicting (competition over a campsite) could ultimately turn into a positive encounter. This is illustrated in the following field note:

We ended up having to camp near the canoeist, which made neither of us very happy. Cheryl and Matt passed their camp, and these two gals just started to yell at them - for no reason! We overheard them talking to each-other, complaining how we stole THEIR camp. It was pretty rude - we were sure

happy that we would be rid of them tomorrow. But latter that evening, Brain and this one gal from the other group got to talking, and he brought her over to join us for some drinks. Soon, more folks came over and we all had a great time. When we passed them the next day at Spanish Bottoms, they all lined the banks of the river and mooned us! We all just cheered!! (Private Trip, Cataract Canyon)

The Facilitation of Interpretations

While encounters could be defined as either positive or negative on the surface, the way in which encounters are actually experienced is more complicated. Most river guides would have little difficulty in distinguishing a good encounter from a bad encounter. They have been on the river numerous times and have constructed certain expectations and definitions of encounters. Passengers, on the other hand, because of their limited river running experience, have few expectations or predefined notions of encounters. Consequently, river guides play an important role in facilitating passengers' interpretation of encounters. The following field note demonstrates how river guides aid passengers in viewing certain types of encounters as negative:

Then we heard the other [motor] boatmen complaining about the dorries, who thought that they were so great. For instance, they told us how those dory boatmen would not even look at the motor boats when they passed by and instructed their passengers to look at the canyon wall, or put buckets on their heads, because they thought that they were so much better than them and that motors were evil. (Commercial Trip, Grand Canyon).

The dory passengers in the above story probably viewed every encounter with motorized boats as negative. Their experience would have been different if the dory boatmen greeted the motor groups with more respect and deference. The following field notes also illustrates how negative perceptions of encounters are potentially developed, this time with research trips:

Donna was telling me the story of one research trip where the people worked really hard, and took the hottest time of day to take a break - sleeping in the shade, and a commercial boatman points to them and tells his passengers, "See, your tax dollars hard at work." This really pissed Donna off, "that boatman really gave us a bad reputation in the eyes of those passengers. Why couldn't he have come around when we were working our butts off so the passengers could see how hard we really work?!" (Research Trip, Grand Canyon).

The guide in the above story could have led the passengers to interpret the encounters differently, perhaps by emphasizing how hard researchers worked on the river - dawn to dusk - and that they were only taking a much deserved rest. This would make encountering the research group more positive. In fact, river guides often facilitate positive interpretations of encounters with other groups, because it is in the river guide's best interest if their passengers have an overall, enjoyable river experience. Consequently, instead of ostracizing another group by pointing out some sort of major deficiency, or how the other group's presence disrupts their own river experience, river guides often treat encounters with other groups as a normal, even entertaining part of a river trip. This is evident in the following field note:

Soon after the commercial group from Colorado leaves, another group joins us [in Slickhorn pool - a popular attraction site]. We recognize them as the sport-yak, commercial group that we have been bumping into on the river. Actually, they camped upriver from us at John's Canyon and recognized us, "Oh, are you the group that were yelling and screaming at the other camp?" Uh yes, we were. "How was your happy hour?", asked one women, and we answered that it was just fine. Then their TL and some older male passenger, directing their conversation to Lydia and I, tell us about the skinny dippers they saw, and how the TL couldn't keep the guys from taking pictures, and how this one chap busted his automatic rewind on his camera. "Oh, were you the two that were skinny dipping?.... Another group hikes in and also recognizes us, with the boatman making some snide remark on our previous activities. So, we made a reputation for ourselves on the river. What can you expect? One of the commercial guides invited us to lunch as they hiked up all the fixing....We hesitated for a minute, but then dove right in, mingled with the passengers, and felt as part of their group....[Later, on the river,] the group that gave us lunch passed us, being amazed by the number of people and amount of gear I had in my small boat. We asked them if they had any beer since we were out, but the guide only laughed and said he couldn't believe that we ran out of beer. We later pass him, and to our surprise, he throws us three cans of Keystone, and their passengers applauded as we dove into the water to retrieve them. (Private trip, San Juan River)

While the commercial river guides teased the private river runners for their wild antics, they did not ostracize them from their passengers, but attempted to integrate them with their group by inviting them to lunch and providing beer. By throwing beer to the private group, the commercial guide provided the material for the private boaters to further enact their scripts as "wild partiers," evidenced by their diving into the river to retrieve the beer. This both confirmed the private-boater stereotype and demonstrated acceptance of such behavior through applause. In this manner, the river guides facilitated a positive interpretation of the encounter with private river runners, with the encounter becoming a part of their river "entertainment."

Encounters as Witnessing Audiences

Encounters play an important role in shaping the identity of river runners, as other groups provide audiences that are able to recognize and confirm those identities. Consequently, when boats pass other boats or occupied camps, the groups oftentimes attempt to greet each other with a wave, shout or water fight. Such recognition can also be obtained from others who are not river runners, as the following field note suggests:

As we passed the helicopter landing on river left, we watched the nice man in suit and tie pour bottles of champagne for the good people. We also watched five or six blue helicopters land nosily to deliver more people for the champagne brunch "on the river." They probably paid a lot for their "Grand Canyon Experience." We were just freezing our butts off in the rain - enduring the third day of cold drizzle. But what about these helicopters "ruining" our wilderness experience? I noticed our guide take our snout-boat directly towards the left shore, just directly below where the good people were having brunch under the Hualapai-made shelters. They point, take pictures, and wave. We wave back, toast them with

our beers. Oddly, I didn't notice any resentment in our group—or even annoyance. For us, it seemed merely a break in the routine of running this flatwater stretch; to watch the helicopters pass by and land, one by one. And, even more so, it gave us a sense of authenticity—even superiority. We were able to compare our “Grand Canyon experience” with theirs, which demonstrated that we were having a “real” Grand Canyon experience (getting cold, wet, sandy), while those having champagne brunch were not even getting their feet wet—so to speak. We even had “proof” that we were “real” river runners as they were taking OUR pictures - as if we were natives in this Canyon setting. (Private Trip, Grand Canyon)

There have been numerous attempts to have helicopters completely banned from the Grand Canyon, both above and below the rim, because the noise disrupts the wilderness experience. The above field note suggests, however, that encounters with such “horrid” machines could become central to the identity construction process. While the encounter was not defined positively - helicopters in the Grand Canyon are still seen as unpleasant - it did provide a comparison for the river runners. They were able to prove to themselves, and others, that they are “real” or “authentic” river runners. This authenticity was reconfirmed by recognition from those on shore, as indicated by their taking pictures of the river “natives.” This type of identity affirmation occurs even if the encounter is defined as negative by individuals who are generally unaware of the implications to their identities.

When an individual engages in river rafting over a period of time, the river runner identity becomes more central to his or her overall sense of self. As this occurs, affirmation of that identity by other river runners becomes more important. This includes being recognized by name by river runners from other groups, as well as being acknowledged by appearance as a “true” river runner:

After I hiked down the side of the canyon, I decided to venture back into the mouth of Blacktail to find some dunk pools. As I was headed out of the dark canyon, an OARS commercial group was just beginning to wander inside the canyon. The passengers were your typical commercial passengers; all dressed up in their little tourist outfits, floppy hats, a mixture of white and sunburned skin, and generally out of shape. They seemed as if they couldn't even walk on the rocky ground, probably being only used to pavement. As I greeted them, I was thinking about how they looked out-of-place in the Canyon setting, as if they didn't belong. I waited for the passengers to awkwardly scamper up the rocks and around some small pools. One gal said to me as I waited for her to pass, “Oh thank you for allowing us in your back yard.” She seemed to consider me, all tanned and scratched, and dressed like a “real” river runner, someone who belonged there, as compared to her and the rest of her group. (Private Trip, Grand Canyon).

Again, the above encounter could, on the surface, be defined as negative: The river runner's wilderness experience was negatively impacted by a large group entering into the narrow canyon. Instead, it provided her with a comparison of what a “real” river runner is, which, in turn, confirmed her image of herself as “authentic.”

An important aspect of a river runners' identity is being an adventurer - able to face and conquer the mighty rapids. The feeling of danger, however, must first be constructed before

the river runners can experience adventure. As river guides play an important role in facilitating how passengers interpret encounters, river guides also manage passengers view of the rapids as dangers (Holyfield 1997; Jonas 1997, 1999; also see Donnelly and Young 1988; Fine and Holyfield 1996; Holyfield and Fine 1997). River guides engage in a number of rituals and performances that increases the level of danger felt by the passengers, such as when scouting rapids:

The dance of danger begins at Lava's lip. The boats are beached, and in ritualistic fashion the guides climb to the sacred vantage, a basalt boulder about 50 feet above the cataract. Once there, weight shifts from heel to heel, fingers point, heads shake, and faces fall. This is high drama, and passengers eat it up. (Bangs 1989, p. 17)

Such performances, as well as the actual running of the rapids, typically occur in front of an audience (that is, other groups of river runners). While the river guide plays an important role in constructing the danger, the audience plays an equally important role in acknowledging that the river runners endured the danger. This is evident in the remarks below made by a river runner:

I think people would be upset if there wasn't a crowd at Lava. I really do think that it would be a big let down if you run through Lava and no one saw you. It wouldn't be as big of a thrill, people couldn't congratulate you, and you couldn't pop open a beer and bask in the limelight. (Private Trip 6/5/93)

Thus, the performance (ritualistic displays during scouting), the action (running the rapids), and the ratification by a witnessing audience (other groups watching from shore or on boats below the rapids), both creates and confirms the identity of the participants as true adventurers.

River guides are officially “in charge” on a river trip. They take novices and passengers down the river and are in charge of their care and safety. In terms of identity, however, this can become overwhelming and river guides often seek the company of other river guides to ratify their higher status as leaders and true members of the river runner community. They then share stories, as well as help prepare for upcoming rapids:

Earlier this morning, Jack, Sam and I walked down to the lower camp to talk to the guide of the motor trip...we were kinda glad to hear that he was running support for some commercial oar group that were to be running the drops today. He said that he would be below the drops for a couple of hours today, hanging out, scooping passengers and gear out of the river. He then told us about the rapids at this water level, stressing the importance of staying right in rapid # 15, and especially to miss the “hidden hole” in #8, “I've never seen anything under 18 feet come out of that hole right side up.” I thought that was encouraging, especially since all our rafts were under 18 feet. He also told us of another private trip who, according to him, “have never seen white water and look as if they don't know what they are doing.” We agreed. We have seen the group pass by earlier; five people in two 16 ft cater-rafts that, from the looks of it, didn't seem rigged appropriately for white water. (Private Trip, Cataract Canyon).

For the boatmen, sharing camp gave them the opportunity to “show their stuff,” tell stories, talk about strategies, rub shoulders with famous boatmen or just talk among peers (as opposed to lowly passengers). For private trips, the positive aspects of encounters with commercial boatmen include

interaction with more experienced commercial guides (who do this for a living) and doing so under the same status. They are all river guides about to face the dangers of rapids and concerned about the safety of their passengers. Encounters with other river guides thus help ratify their glorified, river runner selves.

Implications

The major point of this paper is that encounters between groups of river runners are evaluated at the situation level and based on the individuals involved, the location, and the nature of the interaction. Rather than focussing on faceless encounters with some discrete number of users, this study views encounters as negotiations between groups of river runners that is central to the river running experience. These negotiations provide audiences that help shape and ratify one's identity, and in doing so, have an enormous potential to affect one's quality of recreation experience.

Although scores of studies have addressed relationships between encounters and recreation experiences, the majority have purposely de-personalized "encounters" to focus on quantity (that is, body counts) rather than targeting the quality of recreation experiences. By addressing the question "How much use is too much?", several studies have focused on the number of encounters; such research designs are critiqued for their ability to capture variation in numbers of encounters while issues of the quality of experiences have not been given close examination. This study re-frames the encounter issue by addressing the question "What role do encounters play regarding the quality of the river running experience?" Re-framing the research question emphasizes the quality of recreation experience; the primary critique for such research designs would assess their ability to capture the breath and depth of river running experiences. Although these two encounter-based research questions are not mutually exclusive, the question directed at understanding the quality of recreation experience is important yet has not received adequate attention within the encounter-based recreation literature.

The management implications of this study provide a qualified context to understand past research that asks the question "How much use is too much?" The effects of encounters in back-country settings are complex; understanding such effects requires the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of encounters. Such a concern is not a new idea; more than three decades ago Wagar (1964) addressed the importance of understanding both encounters and the quality of recreation experiences. The management implications of this study reinforce Wagar's viewpoint that the quality of recreation experiences are a meaningful focus for studies examining effects of encounters.

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