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# **An exploration of the emotional experience of BASE jumping**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree:

**Master of Psychology**

from

**Massey University**

**School of Psychology**

by

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**25<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

## *Thesis Certification*

I, Anton Green, declare that this thesis, which is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a Master of Psychology, from the School of Psychology, Massey University, New Zealand, is my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. Additionally, this thesis has not been submitted for qualifications at another institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anton Green', enclosed within a hand-drawn oval shape.

Anton Wayne Green

25 May 2017

## *Abstract*

BASE jumping is an extreme sport, where participants parachute from fixed objects and deploy a parachute to land safely. According to the current injury and fatality statistics, it is regarded as the most dangerous sport in the world. The level of danger suggests that participants have to negotiate strong emotional experiences in the sport. The aim of this study is to explore the emotions that BASE jumpers experience and determine what role and impact these emotions may play for participants. Twenty male BASE jumpers with at least 10 jumps and 3 months of participation in the sport were interviewed for the study. Qualitative (thematic) analysis was undertaken to analyse the BASE jumping experience. Participants reported intense emotional experiences that predominantly emerged as fear, flow and thrill states. A number of threats associated with these emotions were identified. The experience of fear may become normalised, whilst flow and thrill may lead to an escalation of risk taking in the pursuit of the rush experience. Conflicting feelings create emotional dissonance which also influences coping styles and rationalisation strategies. This may impact risk taking behaviour, judgement and decision making. Outcomes from the study may enhance greater knowledge of psychological processes that impact risk and safety behaviours in the sport.

## *Acknowledgements*

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge a number of moments in my life's journey that has brought me to this point; and the people who have guided my research process. Without their contribution, this thesis would have never been completed.

I have always been fascinated with extreme sport. My journey into this world began as a young 17-year old crouched in the doorway of a small Cessna aircraft, preparing to do my first parachute jump. Throughout the years I have walked a number of extreme sport paths which have included skydiving, paragliding, climbing, mountain biking, white water kayaking and scuba diving. These have all been meaningful experiences, but none came close to my foray into the world of BASE jumping.

My time in BASE jumping was short lived, but through the guidance of Snake River BASE Academy I was able to fulfil one of my life's greatest ambitions - to learn to BASE jump. Even though I have not jumped for some time now, the experience was profound. I still think about the experience regularly, savouring the feeling of stepping off the bridge and committing myself to the void. The memories never fail to stir me. I was fascinated by the people I met whilst BASE jumping and was interested as to what drew them to the sport. This was the start of my curiosity into researching BASE jumping.

It is important to acknowledge that I came to this research with certain biases and preconceptions about BASE jumping from my time in the sport. Through the guidance of Dr Deborah Green, I have hopefully put aside these biases and opened my mind to what the experience of BASE jumping means for others in the sport. To those that guided my research process, Dr Dianne Gardner and Professor Stephen Legg, I would also like to say thank-you.

This research would not have been possible without the support of all the BASE jumpers that volunteered to be a part of this study. BASE jumping is a small and very closed community,

and one that does not easily open its doors to scrutiny. Your willingness to participate in my study is greatly appreciated.

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## *Definitions*

Aerials:	Gymnastic manoeuvres, such as forward and back loops, that BASE jumpers carry out in freefall.
BASE:	An extreme sport where participants use a parachute to descend from fixed objects.
BASE Fatality List:	A record of the BASE fatalities, since the first death in 1981, on <a href="http://www.blincmagazine.com">www.blincmagazine.com</a> .
Exit point:	The point on a fixed object from which participants start the jump.
Gear fear:	Anxiety about not packing correctly and that the parachute may malfunction on opening.
Object strike:	A 180-degree parachute opening resulting in the jumper striking a fixed object.
Pilot-chute:	A small parachute that is thrown out into the slipstream that pulls out and deploys the main parachute. Pilot-chutes have replaced old style rip-chord handles.
Tracking:	A freefall body position that allows BASE jumpers to fly horizontally away from a fixed object while in freefall.
Wingsuiting:	A garment of clothing worn by BASE jumpers, that makes them resemble a 'flying squirrel'. It inflates with air in freefall and allows them to fly horizontally away from fixed objects.