



Navigating Outward Bound: a first-person exploration of situational exposure through an autistic lens

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Abstract

This article explores the first author's experience as an autistic woman attending a five-day Professional Leadership course at Outward Bound in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Through a first-person autoethnographic narrative, Nicolina shares why she chose Outward Bound and how she navigated the challenges of situational exposure in a physically and socially demanding outdoor education program, using accommodations to maximise time in the learning zone. She discusses the sensory sensitivities and need for routines that often accompany Autism Spectrum Disorder and demonstrates how she adapted and advocated for her needs while participating in a mainstream course. The barriers she encountered and the positive outcomes she achieved are described. Four themes emerged, these were motivation, challenges, coping and thriving through adaptations, and hope. By reflecting on the balance between growth and anxiety within the comfort zone model, this article offers insights for autistic people, outdoor educationalists, and practitioners. Recommendations call for increased awareness and flexibility in accommodating neurodivergent people in adventure education contexts.

Keywords Outdoor education · Autism spectrum disorder · Comfort zone · Situational exposure

This article explores, analyses, and discusses the first author's experience as an autistic woman attending a five-day Professional course at Outward Bound in Aotearoa New Zealand, using an autoethnographic methodology. It intends to communicate her first-person understanding of situational exposure and using reasonable accommodations to create and maintain a learning zone. She describes preparing for and going on Outward Bound, followed by a discussion referring to the existing literature, and finally recommendations offering practical advice. Autistic people, outdoor

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educationalists, and practitioners will have an opportunity to learn about the challenges Nicolina faced in accessing situational exposure, her experiences during the course, and the positive outcomes that resulted, from which to better support themselves, autistic students, and clients.

The first author is autistic and has written this article in her own voice. The second author, who was the first author's PhD supervisor, provided support with the methodology and revisions. This article will proceed in the first author's voice, speaking through an autistic lens.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiography and ethnography. It allows the researcher to examine personal experiences within broad cultural, social or political contexts, and allows for analysis and examination the interplay between self and society.

There are different aims for, and kinds of, autoethnographies of disability. The aims can vary from the need to illustrate the 'lived experience' of disability; to offer a resistance narrative to normative portrayals of some kinds of disability; to fill gaps in research; to remedy injustices to specific groups with disabilities; and to ensure change occurs at policy and strategy levels (Good et al., 2017, p. 112).

This exploration uses analytic autoethnography to provide concrete examples of obstacles, discrimination, and distress that may be encountered when an autistic person pursues a new experience. The aim is to promote understanding and accommodation through storytelling.

My experience of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder is the iteration of my disability described in the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). From their medicalised narrative, people like me have marked impairment in the behavioural, emotional, occupational, and social arenas of our lives. However, autistic advocates regard autism as an identity, and seek to investigate power relationships, rather than focusing on perceived deficits (Arnold, 2023). Singer (2017, p. 32) offered a succinct explanation that, "autism is above all characterised by a hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, which necessitates withdrawal from a world of overwhelming sensation". My perspective is that I have similarities to other autistic people and differences from non-autistic people.

About Outward Bound

Outward Bound is an outdoor education programme that operates in 34 countries and has served millions of alumni (Outward Bound International, 2024). Building on the philosophies of founder Kurt Hahn, they use physical, mental, group, and solitary activities that enable students to experience success in outdoor environments, learning self-respect, compassion, service, and ultimately reverence for life in the process (Outward Bound Trust of New Zealand, n.d). Their motto “there is more in you” speaks to an expectation that students “step outside their comfort zone” (Outward Bound Trust of New Zealand, n.d, para. 1).

The Outward Bound school in Aotearoa New Zealand started in 1962 and is based at Anakiwa, ancestral homeland of Te Atiawa (Outward Bound Trust of New Zealand, n.d). Anakiwa is a unique setting where mountains stretch like fingers into the dolphin encrusted ocean and every conceivable element, rivers, rockface, bush, and shoreline, coalesce into the picture-perfect stationing that Martin et al. (2016, p. 217) described as a “*taonga* (national treasure)”. The school invites all New Zealanders to participate in their courses ranging from five to 21 days, and includes adapted courses primarily tailored for people with physical or intellectual disabilities, or specific health conditions (Outward Bound Trust of New Zealand, 2024).

Why Outward Bound

My good life plan is expressed on a vision board with pictures of camping with my son, multiday bush walks, and overseas travel on it. These activities challenge my social particularities and strong preferences regarding food and sleep routines. It is known to be common for autistic people to have difficulties adapting to new situations, which has been characterised as over-regulation or a tendency towards sameness (Cashin & Waters, 2006; Spackman et al., 2023). That tendency towards sameness can form a barrier to my good life. Therefore, I actively seek out opportunities for situational exposure to maintain my capacity to do things such as being in groups of new people, sleeping in uncontrolled environments, and going places where I will have to eat different foods. All of which are characteristic of Outward Bound.

Outward Bound promised to expose me to a level of discomfort and challenge with the lure of increasing my resilience (Outward Bound International, 2023). Risk is measured at Outward Bound, and I was aware that expert facilitators and trained activity instructors would be assisting me with established safety protocols (Mott & Martin, 2017; Outward Bound International, 2023). Furthermore, Outward Bound is a well-known “rite of passage” (Martin et al., 2020, p. 250) that I expected would help other people recognise my capacity. I have since found a by and for disabled outdoor education company in Aotearoa New Zealand called AntnzVentures, which is led by a disabled and neurodivergent person and considers disability rights as part of their philosophy, but I was not aware of that option at the time.

Situational exposure

The purpose and process of my Outward Bound adventure aligns with elements of situational exposure. Jacquart et al. (2022, p. 15) described situational exposure as “planned engagement with a situation that creates anxiety.” Smits et al. (2022) discussed the use of exposure therapy and exposure-based protocols for autistic people with adaptations, such as increased time for rapport building and careful consideration of the sensory environment in which exposure occurs. Spratt et al. (2019) enabled one young autistic woman to report her stress reduction and increased socialisation outcomes from the Piece It Together program, which combines exercise with group activities to get neurodevelopmentally disabled participants outside of their comfort zone. Cashin and Waters (2006) identified that therapeutic interventions based on chaos could align with the intuitive practices engaged by presumably *neurotypical* (autistic preferred term for people whose thinking and behaviour aligns with the majority of a culture) parents as they worked to reduce stress response behaviour in their autistic children. They recommended regularly moving autistic people outside our comfort zones to improve our adaptive abilities and overall wellbeing, calling the use of novel situations and new experiences “chaos therapy” (Cashin & Waters, 2006, p. 228). Like Cashin and Waters (2006), I agree that situational exposure is an intuitive practice, making it something autistic people can consider building into our lives, even without the benefit of professional oversight. In this way, I take steps to maintain my tolerance and adaptability (such as on this occasion enrolling in Outward Bound) because I do not want my autistic tendency towards sameness to curtail my freedom.

For Simeon et al. (2007), risk taking and healthy rewards, intrinsic to Outward Bound, are part of building resilience. Resilience is a personal trait concerning the capacity to recover and reintegrate following adverse or potentially traumatic experiences (Immink, 2018; Southwick et al., 2014). Outward Bound is not intended to be nor should it be traumatic, but as Simeon et al. (2007) pointed out, resilience can be learned in anticipation of unexpected stressful events that characterise being human. Another way to conceptualise Outward Bound is the controlled provision of a “brief period of disequilibrium” required to build resilience (Southwick et al., 2014, p. 2). However, Brookes (2003) argued that personal traits are contextual, therefore demonstrating resilience at Outward Bound may not translate to a continuance of the same tenacity in everyday life. In my circumstance, Outward Bound reflects the kinds of activities I aim to achieve normally yet may be limited in doing so due to my shrinking comfort zone.

The comfort zone model

This article uses the comfort zone model as a theoretical bridge between an autistic experience and the world of adventure education (Brown, 2008; McEachern, 2022). The comfort zone is an anxiety-neutral state that involves minimal change,

minimal learning, and minimal growth (Brown, 2008). According to Brown (2008), growth and learning occur in situations that are more stressful than the comfort zone, but less stressful than the panic zone, which is physically or psychologically dangerous and associated with negative outcomes.

Adventure educationists are known for harnessing stressful situations to connect learners with their growth zone (Palethorpe & Wilson, 2011). As Palethorpe and Wilson (2011, p. 421) said, the key is to find an “optimal level of challenge” that avoids the barriers to learning characteristic of the panic zone. Seminal author Mortlock (1984) categorised adventure in an analogous system of four stages, which are play, adventure, frontier adventure, and misadventure. He found the cornerstone of growth to be that “you, the person in the situation, are being challenged to the best of your abilities” (Mortlock, 1984, p. 19). Autistic people are known for our high prevalence of mental distress, especially concerning anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Gernert et al., 2024). Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al. (2017) found that we experience higher levels of self-reported, perceived, and observed stress than non-autistic people. For Gernert et al. (2024), these occurrences are often linked to sleep disturbances and sensory challenges, both of which are likely to be part of the challenge at Outward Bound. For these reasons, autistic people may approach the panic stage more quickly than others, especially in outdoor education settings.

Getting ready to go on Outward Bound

To bridge the theoretical framework of the comfort zone model with the tangible impacts of situational exposure, I now turn to describing my own experience. Preparing for the trip to Outward Bound caused me a lot of anxiety because of the enrolment process and because some of my normal strategies for managing uncertainty would not be allowed at Outward Bound. I had numerous lengthy discussions pursuant to the focus Outward Bound has on ensuring I would agree to do the same thing at the same time under the same conditions as everyone else. Neurodiversity is not accounted for in the range of adapted courses offered in Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet they hesitated to admit me onto a mainstream course. I found their approach inflexible, which led me to continuously reevaluate whether I was still going to go, even though I had received a grant to cover my fees. My experience demonstrated the contrasting expectations and realities for myself as an autistic person, and Outward Bound as an organisation. I needed to keep myself and others safe by ensuring my situational exposure event was not going to be unbearably stressful.

It is difficult to compare experiences, but I believe I am hypersensitive to some sensory input compared to neurotypicals. Decreased Sound Tolerance Disorders are highly prevalent among autistics (Danesh et al., 2021). I startle easily from noises and can hear some sounds that other people cannot hear. To help manage this at night, I sleep with Bose Noise Masking Sleepbuds, which only play variations of white noise and are marketed as a medical device. This product is now sold by Ozlo as Ozlo Sleepbuds. I also have Soundcore Sleep A10 True Wireless Noise Masking Earbuds as a backup. I was told I would not be allowed to bring my Sleepbuds due to the prohibition of devices at Outward Bound. This was a deal breaker. It would

be a problem for me to go one night without my Sleepbuds at home, let alone giving up my comfort item in an unfamiliar environment. I was struck with the conundrum of being funded to go on Outward Bound because I am autistic but restricted from going on Outward Bound because of my autistic needs. Learning occurs in the growth zone not the panic zone, and I was already in the red. In the end, my speaking with a lawyer (actually three lawyers, but they only knew about one) was enough to get my enrolment progressing again. I also had my support worker with me during further contact with the enrolments team, as I was unable to communicate effectively with them on my own. It was good to get this sorted, but my contest was somewhat demoralising for someone who is successful in many other areas of life.

Like most participants in Spackman et al. (2023), I also need some elements of sameness in my bedtime routines. A shared environment is an unpredictable environment, and I knew I would have problems sleeping there. I did ask if I could bring a tent and sleep outside, but that idea was well outside the Outward Bound rules about unity. My solution was to sneak in a single-skin bivvy bag shelter that has no poles and no ties. Technically, it was not a tent. I had aspired to go on Outward Bound since I was a child, and now, with the opportunity imminent, I was not going to let this adventure pass me by. Enablers that helped me get to day one of the course were organising and packing what I would need to escape from Outward Bound if I needed to, and enlisting verbal support from my parents, friends, and support person.

Once committed, I started preparing in every way possible so I could reserve my adaptive stress response for the unknown. I trained at the level of fitness I would need to comfortably complete the physical challenges by running three kilometres in 25 min several times a week, reacquainting my legs with full days of tramping, and spending time in cold water to familiarise myself with that sensory aspect. Like many highly prepared autistic people, I was ready to walk to the adjacent Queen Charlotte Track by myself and stay there until my planned travel home. It speaks to the level of anxiety I experienced in getting ready to go on Outward Bound that I considered finishing off my time going solo in the bush to be potentially less challenging than completing the course. Future participants should carefully consider their preparation for a situational exposure event and take the opportunity to manage their level of challenge through readiness, with practitioner support where appropriate.

My Outward Bound adventure

While many people consider Outward Bound to be physically challenging, my main concern was social. Tears streamed down my face as I waited for my course to start. I was terrified about spending the next 99.5 h with my *watchmates* (the term at Outward Bound for other students in the same group) who would, as far as I was aware, be neurotypical. Prior experience warned me that we might face difficulties forming connections. My fear was that they would not like me, and I would not like them. The rain and clouds outside felt like an extension of my inner tension and unease. Our course embarked from the small seaside town of Picton with a sailing lesson.

We were literally outward bound on a cutter boat modelled on the ones used by Captain Cook, an early British explorer and coloniser. Martin et al. (2020) recalled the cutter trip as a metaphor for leaving the known and launching forward into a new adventure, a ritual repeated in all Outward Bound courses in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our team efforts at pulling ropes and tying knots culminated in our arrival at the remote Te Kainga Bay, which is only accessible via boat. The sheer beauty and otherworldliness of our location distracted me from any negative feelings. That evening, we were asked to sit in a circle and say one thing we were proud of and one thing that was hard for us in our childhoods. I said I was proud of being autistic. It was good to get that information out there and not have to find ways to bring it up in conversation with each person. I feel more at ease socially once I know people know I am autistic. Afterwards, I lay on the floor by a pitiful fan heater with my legs up the wall. I find yoga helps settle my anxiety. A watchmate came over to say he was an introvert and wanted to get to know me. I realised I may not be alone in my neurodiversity. Seeing phosphorescence in the water was a highlight of our first night and I felt like it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I needed to stay up later than anticipated to have this encounter. My scheduling flexibility was rewarded.

I attempted to sleep in the shared room one time, both to give it a go and because it was raining heavily that night. My anxiety escalated to the point that I was unsure if what I was experiencing was real (i.e. was I really in a bunk room at Te Kainga Bay). I was gasping for air, getting in and out of bed repetitively to check that my body was okay, and going for showers to try and calm myself down for hours. Four sleeping tablets in, I finally moved to a different room and got some rest. On the second day we sailed to the main school in Anakiwa. I spent the remaining nights in solitude underneath the southern sky, unfurling my sleeping bag and bivvy bag at night and returning it to my bunk bed in the morning, pretending that was where I slumbered. My enrolment experience taught me not to bring attention to myself for doing something different, and the instructors did not find out I was sleeping away from the group.

One of the teaching strategies at Outward Bound seemed to be that instructors tell you what (they think) you need to know when (they think) you need to know it, from their neurotypical perspective. While autistic people often need more time to process what is going to happen, the Outward Bound way appeared to involve keeping activities a secret until go time. For example, we unknowingly approached the high ropes course consisting of various obstacles suspended between Kahikatea trees by listening to an instructor clapping and following her with our eyes closed, opening our eyes when we arrived.

The high ropes were ridiculously high. I resolved to get through them quickly and not look down. There were two ostensibly equal courses. The first one was fractionally lower in my view, but it made no real difference considering how high they both were. I lined up for the first course but was asked to move to the second course. Even though I was unsettled by the change of plans, I decided to try anyway. After climbing the ladder, I froze on the tree in a static embrace. I could not make myself reattach my carabiners from the ladder onto the first element. I descended after some time, knowing I could do the first course because that was my initial plan. Then, I did it! Finishing the high ropes was an excellent effort considering my aversion

to hydrosleds, theme park rides, gondolas, and all things supra-ground level. This was one example of having a challenge in common with everyone else. Doing the high ropes course was hard for lots of people, but it did not incur panic. We knew it was safe, having been inducted on the proper use of our harnesses with professional oversight, and there was nothing about it that was over stimulating to me. I was scared at first but overcame that fear through group pressure to conform. It was one of the most rewarding parts of my course being like, oh yeah, there really is more in me, just like the Outward Bound motto says.

One struggle was dealing with some unfamiliar foods at Outward Bound and eating in a noisy dining hall with around 100 people. I had one minor meltdown related to the food. This is when I experience a heightened state, like a brief storm in my brain, and I become less able to control my behaviour, often leading me to do things that are out of character and can feel embarrassing. I raged through a prohibited area and into the kitchen, ready to take food matters into my own hands. Two staff members spoke to me harshly because of my behaviour and specifically that I was not wearing shoes. I thought about throwing cutlery onto my bare feet to eschew their authority but started crying instead. An instructor listened to my account of what happened and asked me if I could let it go. She told me I was not the only person to experience challenges on Outward Bound so we could just let it go. This was a testament to her judgement, empathy, and skill in her role. The incident was forgotten, and everything was okay.

A highlight of my Outward Bound experience was spending 24 h alone in the bush with no devices, including giving up our watches (except I still had my Sleepbuds because Outward Bound had allowed these in receipt of my legal advice). We each took a sleeping bag, ground mat, and tarpaulin, with a meagre ration comprising a biscuit, apple, and handful of peanuts. Everyone was supposed to take a sleeping bag supplied by Outward Bound, but I insisted on taking my own because I knew the texture of it. The instructors dropped us off at intervals and said they would be back at around 11 am the next day. I noted the group emergency supplies and Outward Bound cell phone was left by my station, a nod to their unfounded concerns about my ability to do the course. I did get a bit cold and tried to remedy this by stuffing my sleeping bag into the plastic pack liner, but got soaked with sweat instead, while reflecting on my decision not to take the Outward Bound sleeping bag. The alone night was a milestone for me, being able to do more on my own has been a long-term goal, and this was an undeniable demonstration of my progress.

The best thing I gained from Outward Bound was learning to love cold water exposure. The ocean is cold in Aotearoa New Zealand, at around 9–11 °C (48–52 °F), and everyone must go in for at least two minutes every day. While I initially conflated the two separate instructions: that we fully submerge, and be in the water for two minutes, concerned that I would not be able to fully submerge for two minutes without drowning, I found this to be a most exhilarating experience. It is something I never would have tried without being made to do it. The key to success is staying in for two minutes, after which time our thermoregulation mechanisms, like changes in blood pressure and skin blood perfusion, become more noticeable and we can relax as our endorphins kick in and a sense of wellbeing takes over (Espeland et al., 2022). Having to do this every day gave us a chance to habituate to

the experience, and I now incorporate cold plunges as a regular and important part of my self-care.

At one day longer than the global average for Outward Bound courses (Martin et al., 2020), five days was enough social connection for me, and I was pleased to go home at the end. I would love to go on AntnzVentures or come back to Outward Bound if there was an autistic adapted course.

Discussion

In writing this autoethnographic account of Outward Bound through an autistic lens, I have highlighted my resistance to the demand for conformity in outdoor education. Four themes have emerged, these were motivation, challenges, coping and thriving through adaptations, and hope for how others could benefit from my story. The benefit of writing this layered account (Carolyn et al., 2011) is the therapeutic value of reflecting on what happened at Outward Bound within the construct of situational exposure. The drawbacks of this using method are that my memory could have changed in the two years intervening my Outward Bound experience and this article being accepted, and my understanding of truth has no doubt been influenced by my readings about outdoor education. Secondly, I have implicated Outward Bound New Zealand in my story by exposing my experience. My autoethnography has highlighted gaps in the literature.

Some of Outward bound was in my comfort zone, because I am physically fit and have done a lot of tramping in the bush; some was in the growth zone, like the high ropes, cold plunges, and the overnight alone; and some was on the panic zone, like trying to sleep with the group, and getting over stimulated in the dining hall. I discovered that what I got from Outward Bound was an increase in my social comfort zone. This is not something specifically discussed in the literature, which focused on the character traits required to perform a task (Brown, 2008; McEachern, 2022; Mortlock, 1984; Palethorpe & Wilson, 2011). I experienced an increase in my social comfort zone as I was surprised to genuinely enjoy getting to know my fellow watchmates and appreciating them as people. We accepted each other, and I was able to confront my self-limiting belief that neurotypicals do not like me. I now feel more confident about participating in future activities that I would have previously avoided, such as a group tour. Considering these discoveries, literature about the comfort zone should move to take a more holistic approach, including mental, physical, and social dimensions.

Literature about disability in outdoor education highlights the risks, challenges, and support needs of disabled people, and the benefits to us of engaging in it (Armstrong et al., 2023; Spratt et al., 2019). Yet I found a paucity of reporting on outdoor education from a disabled perspective or about how disability could bring benefits to others, and advantages in outdoor education. Outward Bound markets their courses as fostering connection between watchmates from “diverse backgrounds” (Outward Bound International, 2023, p. 32), while I found my Professional course lacking inclusion for disabled people who can provide the group with a uniquely diverse experience. In terms of advantages, disabled outdoor educator Toni “Antnz” Burgess

(2023, para. 3) explained that disabled people can be easier and less risky to guide, “because [we] often understand [our] limitations, comfort zones and boundaries far better” than some non-disabled people. Disabled people bring valuable perspectives and contributions to outdoor education, and these should be recognised and celebrated.

The literature relevant to situational exposure for autistic people (Cashin & Waters, 2006; Smits et al., 2022; Spratt et al., 2019) talks about adaptations that are managed by others, whereas I was responsible for managing my own adaptations, and some of these needed to be forced or hidden to achieve. Cashin and Waters (2006) recommended regularity to the situational exposure, which aligns with the concerns of Brookes (2003) who writes in the context of outdoor education to argue that character traits developed in one situation may not persist in another. Applying these learnings means understanding that Outward Bound is not the answer, but rather situational exposure is an ongoing practice that autistic people can use to maintain the boundaries of our comfort zone. Outward Bound is one example of a situational exposure experience I have chosen because of aspects that align with my good life. To keep the spirit of Outward Bound alive in me, I am now surpassing my goal of completing 100 cold plunges in natural water each year.

Recommendations

I recommend outdoor educators listen to autistic students when we articulate our needs and allow us to bring our own accommodations wherever possible. I recommend autistic people respect and advocate for our needs, as proactive preparation greatly reduces the risk of reaching a panic state and the aftermath of that. Reasonable accommodations could include things like comfort items, e.g. a plushie or textured fabric (comfort items are not childish for autistic people), stim equipment, e.g. a glitter wand or chewable necklace, noise cancelling headphones, weighted clothing or a blanket, or spending some time in a low sensory environment. Whatever reasonable accommodations are used, these must be necessary, appropriate, and not unduly burdensome to others (Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission, 2023), for example only using silent sensory items and only wearing noise cancelling headphones when it is safe to do so. Autistic needs are different for everyone, so it is important that we, or people who know us well, are the leaders in identifying and managing what will be needed to access our growth zone.

Conclusion

This article describes my experience accessing Outward Bound to use situational exposure in nature as a tool for achieving my good life plan. Outward Bound is a popular adventure and personal development course with adaptive streams for people with physical and intellectual disabilities. However, as there is no course specifically for autistics in Aotearoa New Zealand, I advocated for and implemented my own accommodations to undertake a Professional course alongside non-disabled people.

I completed the full course, including a dismount on the flying fox, even though it took three countdowns for me to step off the platform. I hope I have encouraged more autistic people to try experiences like Outward Bound, and equipped outdoor educators and practitioners with insights into what these experiences can be like from our perspective, acknowledging that every autistic person is different.

The parts of Outward Bound that contributed to my resilience were the overnight alone, because I have never gone a night alone without distractions and, surprisingly, the dining hall incident. In the past, I would often become stuck in a conciliatory state of mind after a meltdown, worrying about how to repair any social damage my unexpected behaviour may have caused. Now, however, I have adopted a more helpful 'let it go and move on' attitude. It was true after all that I could do more at Outward Bound than I thought I could, thanks to being in a group of people who were all encouraging and supporting each other. Outward Bound also taught me new skills, such as the cold plunge technique, increased my confidence about being alone without distractions, and enabled me to get outside my comfort zone, albeit in a different way than expected.

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