

The Attributes of Effective Field Staff in Wilderness Programs: Changing Youths' Perspectives of Being “Cool”

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the perceived influence of field staff on youth participating in a wilderness therapy program. The program, called Camp WILD, was designed for disadvantaged youth who were at risk of academic and social failure. Thirty-five youth who had completed a 2-week program were asked to take part in the study. Structured interviews focusing on the benefits of participation were conducted with each participant. Interview content was examined for counselor-based factors that made the experience beneficial for the participants. Constant comparison analysis of results revealed eight key counselor attributes: (a) *ambitious*, (b) *service oriented*, (c) *hard working*, (d) *possessed identified goals*, (e) *interest in others*, (f) *unselfish with their time*, (g) *fun loving*, and (h) *a sense of perceived freedom to accomplish whatever they wanted to do*. Findings suggest important implications for therapeutic recreation practitioners in all settings. These implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Wilderness Therapy, Camp Field Staff, Therapeutic Recreation, Youth Development*

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Introduction

Over the past 6 years, a collaborative team of university faculty and wilderness outfitters in the western United States has studied the effects of wilderness adventure programs on youth development and family strength. These studies have employed quasi-experimental methods to examine theoretical questions pertaining to the impact of such programs (Duerden, Widmer, Taniguchi, & McCoy, 2006; Widmer, Taniguchi, Duerden, & Freeman, 2005). Qualitative data from these studies, however, have pointed to a key influence that had not been considered in the context of the original research questions. Participants across these studies consistently made remarks regarding the influential role of the mentors, or counselors, who staff these programs.

A number of published papers focus on the benefits of wilderness adventure programs (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2000; Caldwell, 2001; Ewert, McCormick, & Voight, 2001; Grayson, 2001; Russell & Phillips-Miller, 2002; Wells, Widmer, & McCoy, 2004); however, none of these directly account for the impact of field staff members who directly work with and mentor program participants. Although anecdotal evidence suggests field staff members are a major contributor to the success of these programs, little has been published on this particular topic over the past 20 years. Only a few studies specifically examine the influence of field staff on participants in wilderness adventure programs (Chenery, 1981; Freeman, Anderson, Kairey, & Hunt, 1982; Middleman, 1989). To address this lack of research, the current study utilized a phenomenological research design to examine the lived experience of clients who participated in a wilderness adventure program and the role that field staff members played in creating these experiences.

Literature Review

Qualitative research, especially when incorporating classical Grounded Theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), requires the researcher to take extra care in maintaining an objective perspective regarding possible outcomes of an ongoing research project. As such, a thorough review of literature is often delayed until after data are collected and analyzed (Glaser, 1978). Results are then compared to the current literature for purposes of

verification of previous studies, typification of the aggregates studied, or possibly finding differences in the literature. For this reason, the current literature review refrains, at this time, from examining the few studies that have considered the influence of field staff on those who participate in wilderness adventure programs. It is beneficial, however, to review literature pertaining to the needs of the disadvantaged youth served by the highlighted program, as well as the general impact these programs can have on such youth.

Disadvantaged Youth

In the context of this study, disadvantaged youth are distinguished from at-risk youth. We use the term disadvantaged youth to refer to those who may become at risk because of their environmental circumstances. Garbarino (1995) identified eight factors associated with adolescent deviance. These include "poverty, father absence, low parental education, a rigid and punitive childrearing style, minority group status, parental substance abuse, maternal mental illness, and large family size" (Garbarino, p. 152). He also suggests opportunity factors ameliorate risk factors. The accumulation of three or more risk factors, when opportunity factors are absent, puts youth at risk. Conversely, youth who lack access to factors that promote positive development (e.g., positive mentors, sources of social support, necessary academic skills) have higher rates of deviant behavior (Benson, 2006). Nash (2002) claims that two-parent versus one-parent households and high versus low economic status are two factors that directly affect educational behavior. For example, as risk factors increase, research suggests I.Q. scores decrease, making youth less able to succeed in school and life (Sameroff, Seifer, Barocas, Zax, & Greenspan, 1987), and the culture within a family, as it relates to education, is positively correlated to academic performance (Bowen & Bowen, 1998). In this study, the risk factors identified by Garbarino were used as a starting point for identifying disadvantaged youth. Youth with as few as one or two risk factors were considered disadvantaged.

Wilderness Therapy Programs

Russell (2001) pointed out that "Rehabilitative outdoor based approaches such as

'challenge courses,' 'adventure based therapy,' or 'wilderness experience programs' (WEP's) are often used interchangeably to describe wilderness therapy" (p. 70). More recently, wilderness and adventure therapy agencies have formed the Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Industry Council (OBHC; see www.obhc.com). This industry is advocating the use of Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare as the name for agencies that provide therapy in the context of wilderness and adventure (Russell, 2003). In this paper, as has been done in the past, we will use the term wilderness therapy to include outdoor behavioral healthcare, as well as wilderness and adventure programs that are benefits based.

The number of wilderness therapy programs has been increasing during the last few decades. This is primarily due to increased demand for programs designed to positively impact individuals struggling with academic, social, behavioral, or emotional problems. In many cases, individuals who are experiencing some of Garbarino's (1995) eight risk factors are the targeted recipients of treatment programs such as wilderness therapy programs. Some research articles suggest that a number of potential benefits accrue from such programs. In a qualitative study, Patton (1982) found recurrent metaphors including group cohesion and identity as well as a process and change metaphor. Wright (1983) reported significant increases in self-esteem, self-efficacy, internality, and fitness but no gains in problem-solving skills. A meta-analysis of 79 acquired studies, by Cason and Gillis (1994), found effect sizes of .31 ($SD = .62$) or a 12% improvement on outcome-variables. Outcomes measured included self-concept, behavior, attitude, locus of control, clinical diagnoses, grades, and school attendance. Their findings indicated that younger participants benefited more than older participants. Wilson and Lipsy (1999) also did a meta-analysis of wilderness challenge programs in an effort to examine the effectiveness in reducing antisocial and delinquent behavior. They reported recidivism rates of 29% for wilderness program participants compared to 37% for traditional treatment. Their results led them to believe that these programs are more effective than traditional treatments. Hattie, Marsh, Neill, and Richards (1997) found that follow up data, from some of the wilder-

ness programs they examined, indicated post-program increases on outcome measures. More recent studies have also found support for such programs (Duerden et al., 2006; Russell, 2003; Wells et al., 2004; Widmer, Duerden, & Taniguchi, 2006).

The Wilderness Impact

One common belief is that that wilderness alone provides important therapeutic benefits. The effects of nature on child development have received attention by social ecologists and environmental psychologists (e.g., Hattie et al., 1997; Huttenmoser, 1995; Louv, 2006; Wells & Evans, 2003). Studies with diverse populations of children regarding social economic status, geographic location, and even clinical diagnoses, have reported consistent findings. Such findings suggest that the mere presence of nature and vegetation has significant positive effects on children's self-discipline (Faber Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2002), attentional functioning (Wells, 2000), stress resilience (Wells & Evans), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) symptoms (Faber Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Kuo & Faber Taylor, 2004), and engagement in creative play and access to adults in housing projects (Faber Taylor, Wiley, Kuo, & Sullivan, 1998). Furthermore, the studies investigating ADHD symptom reduction point toward the importance of a child's play setting. For example, green outdoor play settings appear to reduce ADHD symptoms more than indoor play settings and artificial outdoor settings (Kuo & Faber Taylor; Faber Taylor et al., 2001).

The Counselor's Impact

As young people's contact time with their parents has been diminishing over the last 40 years (a decrease of 10 to 12 hours per week), filling that void has become a critical factor in how youth will adapt to find new role models (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Bocarro and Witt (2005) state, "All youth, no matter how involved or uninvolved their parents are, need relationships with other caring adults" (p. 271). There have been studies that examined the contributions adult-youth relationships make to positive youth development. Resnick and Bearman (1997) found that strong positive adult-youth relationships were one of the strongest predictors of youth avoiding risky be-

haviors. Such strong relationships lead to fewer exposures to violence and substance abuse (Scales & Leffert). Recreational settings have served as an environment where strong positive adult-youth relationships can develop (Tierney & Grossman, 2000). Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and youth sports programs have focused on creating such positive environments with adults (Tierney & Grossman). In a study using a wilderness challenge program as an intervention for at-risk youth, the relationships formed between adult staff members and the youth participating in the program were found to be deep and meaningful (Sklar, Anderson, & Autry, 2007).

While the wilderness experience is often viewed as the key to bringing about positive change in wilderness therapy program participants, many practitioners in this area will express their belief that field staff members play an essential role in this process. For example, Michael Merchant, President Elect of the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSAP), and past president of the Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Industry Council (OBHIC), said "I believe it is the character and competencies of the individual caregiver that are the fundamental elements in achieving positive outcomes in wilderness therapy... submersion in a wilderness environment allows the caregiver to be in a position of influence in a young person's life and facilitates change" (Personal communication, June 20, 2008).

Consequently, considering the context of wilderness therapy programs, it is important to identify key character traits and skills demonstrated by field staff members that might be influential in bringing about positive change in participants.

Summary of Literature

A growing number of youth are exposed to circumstances that impede their ability to socially, emotionally, and behaviorally adjust to life changes. It has been proposed that wilderness therapy programs may be an effective means to promote the positive development of such youth, and research appears to support this argument. Building upon these findings, the next step is to now identify the program processes and components within the wilderness therapy experience that produce observed

positive outcomes. While some suggest that significant changes occur solely as a result of exposure to the wilderness environment, anecdotal evidence from earlier studies suggests that field staff play an important role in this process (Merchant, 2008). Based on this assertion, the purpose of this study was to examine how program field staff impacted effectiveness in a wilderness therapy program.

Method

This study used phenomenological research design to investigate the meaningfulness of participant experiences in a wilderness therapy camp held in 2005. Data were collected from focus group discussions and dyadic interviews. Through this method, the importance of counselors in the meaningfulness of the participants' experiences became evident.

Program

The design of the wilderness therapy camp was modeled after a previous research initiative (Huff, Widmer, McCoy, & Hill, 2003; Wells et al., 2004). The study took place in the context of an undergraduate mentoring project focused on three specific aims. First, researchers sought to develop a field based lab to develop and study theory based programming and to provide undergraduate students with a mentored research experience. The second aim was to design and implement a wilderness adventure program that would provide youth, who were identified with at least one of Garbarino's (1995) risk factors, with access to a variety of ameliorating opportunity factors. For example, the program promoted specific character strengths identified in the positive psychology literature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The third aim of this project was to provide researchers a laboratory to study outcome variables associated with wilderness therapy programming.

Program model. The setting for this study was a wilderness therapy program (Camp WILD). Staff members taught and mentored disadvantaged youth in a variety of outdoor skills, including mountain biking, river safety and river running, and outdoor group leadership. The program was funded through internal university grants and private donations. As a result, youth participated at little to no cost for themselves or their family.

The recreation program was designed to increase outdoor recreation efficacy among the youth participants and to systematically generalize the increased efficacy to academic motivation, aspiration, and performance (Widmer et al., 2005). Participants were assigned to teams comprised of four or five boys. Teams were led by one male and one female “coach,” who were a part of the undergraduate staff. The coaches stayed with the team of boys for the entire 2 weeks of the program. All team members participated in activities together, ate together, and planned together under the supervision of the team coaches.

During the 2-week program, the teams and their respective coaches participated in three activity rotations. Each rotation lasted for 3 days. The rotations included a 3-day white water rafting trip through a section of the upper main fork of the Salmon River in Idaho, a 3-day backpacking trip in the Frank Church Wilderness Area in central Idaho, and a 3-day multi-activity rotation that included rock climbing, mountain biking, fly fishing, a visit to a gold mine, and other exploratory science-oriented studies (e.g., bird identification and insect collecting). After each rotation, there was a transition day to clean up, rest and recuperate, and prepare for the next rotation.

Undergraduate mentors. A number of methods were employed to recruit university undergraduate students to plan, facilitate, and staff the wilderness adventure program. Informational e-mails were sent to students majoring in recreation. In addition, presentations were given in undergraduate recreation classes and an information booth was placed in the university student center. These recruitment efforts had a snowball effect, leading students representing a variety of disciplines to apply to the program. Applicants were interviewed by the project administrators, who identified students willing to volunteer their efforts as field staff and who had a desire to work with youth.

Selection for this program required the accepted students to enroll in a semester-long preparation and planning course. Course content included related theory and research such as Bandura’s (1994) Self-efficacy Theory, Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) character strengths and virtues, and Taniguchi, Freeman, and Richards’ (2005) Meaningful Experience Model. Wilderness adventure program

design and research design were also taught in this course. These undergraduate students also received training in outdoor recreation hard skills, such as fly fishing, backpacking, mountain biking, and white water rafting. They were an integral part of the planning and program development.

Participants

In an effort to understand participants’ perceptions of wilderness adventure experiences, data were collected from two distinct groups. Primary data were collected from male adolescents who participated in the wilderness adventure program. Secondary data were collected from university undergraduate students who staffed the program.

A purposive sample (Babbie, 2007) of 35 middle school-aged boys was drawn from a suburban area in the western United States. Since this program focused on promoting positive character strengths, there was not an intent or focus on providing therapy for specific diagnoses. Therefore, an attempt was made to recruit participants that had not developed substantial problems with aggressive behavior, addiction, or mental illness.

Using Garbarino’s (1995) risk factors as an initial criterion, a population of potential youth participants was identified. Recruitment focused on finding youth exposed to at least one of Garbarino’s risk factors and who were not in trouble with the law, had dropped out of school, or had run away from home. School counselors identified students exposed to Garbarino’s risk factors and the Camp WILD director and staff interviewed these youth and their parents to make the final selections. Additional youth were recruited through visitations to public middle schools, PTA meetings, distributing flyers in schools not visited and advertising in the local media. Youth with a history of violence or significant psychopathology, such as substance abuse, were excluded from the study. This recruitment process was conducted over a 6-month period. Eventually, actual participants in the camp were selected by identifying youth who were willing to commit to the camp experience and who were experiencing school failure, turmoil at home such as separation or divorce, or foster care.

Youth participants came from three western states in the U. S.: Utah, Colorado, and

Arizona. Thirty boys were of Caucasian descent, and the remaining five were of Latino, Native American, or Polynesian descent. Ages ranged from 11 to 16 years old ($M = 13.2$ years, $SD = 1.1$ years). Approximately 50% of the boys came from families on welfare or who qualified for welfare services. The remaining boys primarily came from lower-middle-class families. Sixty percent of the participants reported that they had no previous outdoor adventure experience.

Data Collection Procedures

Focus group discussions for each team were conducted in a quiet cabin setting after each activity rotation. A researcher asked groups general questions such as “what did you like about the activity,” “what you did not like about the activity,” “what did you learn from participating in the activity,” “how did you get along with each other,” “what did you see in others that impressed you,” “what did you learn about yourself,” and “how do you see what you learned as being useful in other facets of your life.” These questions were designed to elicit different perspectives from the youth about their camp experiences with the intent of helping the youth focus on those aspects of camp that contributed to their experience. The group discussions were open-ended and dependent upon whatever the boys wanted to talk about. These discussions lasted between 25 minutes and 45 minutes.

Focus group discussions were followed by one-on-one in-depth interviews with selected boys. Two criteria were used to identify boys for these interviews. First, boys who provided unique insights in the focus groups were invited to interview. This was done to obtain thick description regarding their insights. In addition, boys who were not verbally engaged in the group setting were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews to directly illicit interaction and responses in a less threatening setting. Fifteen boys were chosen for the dyadic interviews. These interviews were conducted in a walk around camp and lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. The same general perception questions from the focus groups were asked again in the individual interviews. In addition, more detailed responses were prompted through specific questions such as “why did you feel that way” or “can you explain further as to what you meant by...”

These interviews and discussions were recorded using a small digital recorder that was carried by the interviewer and later transcribed for analysis. The collected data were analyzed for emerging themes, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The transcribed documents were downloaded to a computer database for analysis in the qualitative data analysis software program QSR NVivo. Each recording entry was catalogued by the outdoor experience that was being discussed. A research assistant reviewed the transcribed entries for transcription errors, and the original transcriber corrected the identified errors.

In addition to the interview data, the researcher followed methods suggested by Glaser (1978) to document participants' behavior during the interviews and discussions and begin connecting the data with the conceptual ideas being formulated. Researchers noted that some participants were excited in their tone of voice and body language (e.g., moving their arms around more to emphasize their point) when speaking about certain things and more participants wanted to talk when on certain topics. Such memos, taken as notes during the interviews, added to the description of what was going on with the participants and illustrated the context of what was being said. These memos were also used to validate trustworthiness of the participants' comments (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis involved three steps. First, a broad search of the data was conducted to identify emergent themes. Second, the themes were then evaluated to determine if any were mentioned by participants as affecting their self-perceptions. Finally, the theme(s) related to reported changes in self-perceptions were analyzed.

Initial analysis of the data began with a microanalysis using detailed line-by-line analysis of transcribed data. This generated initial categories of properties and dimensions found in the discussions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes included perceptions of specific trip activities, of their group, of self, their interaction with instructors, their interaction with other participants, and counselor characteristics. Codes were then sorted to identify preliminary categories as suggested by Glaser (1978).

In the second step of the analysis, researchers analyzed the codes to determine if any were perceived as influencing participants' self-perceptions. Analysis clearly revealed that participants felt the counselors had a strong and consistent influence on their self-perception. Because our focus in this study was on participants' perceptions of counselor characteristics, further analysis was limited to the counselor characteristic code.

In the third step of the analysis, axial coding was used to link subcategories to larger categories as relationships were identified between their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using the axial coding process within the counselor code, a preliminary list of categorical relationships emerged through a semantic comparison of coded categories.

It is important to note that we, as researchers, recognize that our perceptions of what was recorded and analyzed carry with them our bias. We, therefore, engaged in a process of reflexivity where we attempted to acknowledge not only our choice for this research study, but also the role we played in gathering the data and engaging with the participants of this study. The data had to control our perceptions. We used this reflexivity to help us transfer what we wrote up as field notes and what we wrote down as part of this narrative. Understanding that Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle has major implications on any research study, especially qualitative ones, we applied the principles of trustworthiness to the analysis of our data.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is conceptually related to reliability and validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Several trustworthiness procedures were employed in this study to establish reliability and validity in the qualitative data. Credibility, which is the qualitative equivalent of internal validity, involves the extent to which the interpretations that have resulted from data analysis are credible to the participants. Credibility was established using member checking. Five of the research study's participants were asked to review the researcher's data and the analysis for validity. All 5 of these participants agreed with the interpretations made by the researcher in the analysis. Dependability and confirmability, the qualitative equivalent of reliability, was achieved through the use of an inquiry audit,

whereby a university graduate student and two individuals not affiliated with university or the research in anyway were used to examine and confirm the qualitative data analysis process and the codes and categories that were produced (Guba & Lincoln). With this triangulation of the researchers' interpretations, the study participants' checks, and the three other individuals' feedback, the resulting analysis was agreed upon.

Phenomenological Analysis

The study of experiences must depend on the individual's perception of the experiences he has had or is currently having. The experiential underpinnings of knowledge are the relationship between the perception of the experience and the experience itself (Husserl, 1970). "The human consciousness actively constitutes the objects of experience" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 263). Schulz (1964) argued that social scientists must recognize the subjective point of view to understand social reality and the meaningfulness of experiences. To ignore such would open doors for scientific explanations that would only create a fictional, non-existing reality (Schutz).

Individuals approach their experiences with *stocks of knowledge* that are composed of commonsense constructs and categories derived from social associations (Schutz, 1970). These stocks of knowledge are comprised of an individual's ideas, values, theories, images, and attitudes that are applied to experiences and this application is what makes experiences have meaning. Stocks of knowledge are the resources from which interpretations of an experience are made and they help make the world a familiar place (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

This familiarity of shared experiences is a categorization of stocks of knowledge and allows for *typifications*. Typifications make it possible to recognize experiences as a particular type and produce categories that allow interpretive application to specific experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Typifications are also adaptable and indeterminate (Holstein & Gubrium).

The researchers found typifications that were identified in the data and labeled them as attributes of a meaningful learning experience. Attempts to identify the stocks of knowledge that are common and frequently shared

amongst the participants of this study were accomplished through interviews between the researcher and the individual participants. The characteristics that appeared to be common for the experiences were analyzed in conjunction with the stocks of knowledge identified in order to form typifications. These typifications were then identified as the characteristics that this research proposes as the attributes of meaningful learning experiences in outdoor education programs.

Results

Some studies have identified the wilderness environment as an important factor contributing to the benefits of wilderness therapy (Faber Taylor et al., 2001; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), and some studies have suggested that the challenges of outdoor activities are the major contributing factors to wilderness therapy successes (Hattie et al., 1997; Taniguchi et al., 2005; Wells et al., 2004). The researchers were very sensitive to data that would lend insights to these points because one of the purposes of this study was to examine the lived experience of clients who participated in a wilderness therapy program. Being in the wilderness at Camp WILD was mentioned by many of the participants as being a reason why they were enjoying their time in the program. The wilderness was a change from their everyday environment, an environment that brought discussions of many negative experiences. The wilderness represented freedom for them, a freedom they wished they had more of and that was spoken of in a positive connotation. The outdoor activities were fun and the challenges, even though difficult at times, gave a common premise from which the boys could reflect on their experiences. We recognized that these perceptions were mentioned by the participants, but our general observations kept pointing to the impact of the field staff members and the importance they had on the youth.

General Observations

Even though the rotation activities were fun for many of the youth and the wilderness was refreshing, the frequent referrals and discussions about the field staff, along with the researchers' memos regarding the participants' excitement when talking about these staff members, were clear indications that the

youth perceived the field staff as a very important component to the positive meaning of their experiences. The results suggest that the field staff played an influential role in the participants' experience. This finding is in harmony with previous research (Chenery, 1981; Middleman, 1989; Russell & Phillips-Miller, 2002). In an effort to further understand the influence of field staff, we explored the participant's perceptions of key field staff attributes. An analysis of participants' comments identified eight common attributes: (a) ambitious, (b) service oriented, (c) hard working, (d) possessing identified goals, (e) interested in others, (f) unselfish with their time, (g) fun loving, and (h) a sense of perceived freedom to accomplish whatever they wanted to do.

Eighty-three percent of the camp participants expressed, either during the dyadic interviews or focus group discussions, that their relationship with their field staff members was a major reason why they were enjoying many of the camp experiences. For example, when asked the question "What are the things that make Camp Wild a fun experience?", the following are samples of the responses that illustrate many of the boys' perceptions: "The staff for sure", "People, the different people, especially the staff", "...the leaders, cause they were all cool and everything", and "The most meaningful for me, it was just meeting the leaders—the new leaders—and getting to know them a lot better." Another youth responded this way:

They're pretty cool; I think that the coaches make a lot of difference in camps and stuff. Cause, if you have coaches you don't like, it makes it miserable, but if you have coaches you like, it's a lot funner.

At the end of the third activity rotation, the following question was posed during a focus group discussion: "Okay you've named a lot of activities that you've done that you've liked. What do you think it is about these activities that makes them enjoyable for you?" The responses were unanimous, "The guides and coaches."

Camp participants also expressed that their camp experience was meaningful to them because they were learning about what they

could accomplish when given the opportunity to explore:

I think it was meaningful because it gave me more confidence about myself, that I can do some things that I think I could, and also with like the conversation with Thomas (name changed). I think I'm going to hold to that for my life, trying to get the most out of it that I can.

It was evident from comments like this that the youth found meaning in the support from field staff to explore their abilities and to try challenging things in a positive environment. Another boy pointed out the following, "I like the staff a lot, they're like nice and they try to relate to us and have some fun times with them." The boy went on to say that he thinks adults often want him to relate to them, but the field staff seemed to want to get to his level and find out where he was coming from.

All youth participants, except one, commented that the field staff were role models for them. After one boy mentioned that he looked up to his coach as a role model, the focus group facilitator posed to the group the question, "Would you look at them as role models?" The majority of responses were positive including this response that elaborated, "Just 'cause these coaches are all cool; they're like really cool and stuff, and they still have values and stuff."

Most of the boys in this program did not have ideal adult role models in their lives, since many of them have family histories of abandonment, parental drug abuse, emotional and physical abuse, domestic violence, and/or family instability. When questioned about what they perceived about their relationships with the field staff and why these relationships were so important to the camp experience, the majority of the boys mentioned that the relationships with field staff were different and positively unique compared to their previous adult relationships. When describing the positive influence of the field staff, the previously mentioned eight attributes were identified at least twice by the majority of boys in the dyadic interviews and by more than one boy in the focus groups, with consensus from others in the group.

Ambitious and Possessing Identified Goals

Nineteen boys mentioned, either in their interview or discussion groups, that they noticed their coaches and/or guides had ambition and also had specific goals to accomplish in their life. One boy commented, "Even Suzy (name changed) wants to get her college degree and go on to get another degree." Another boy responded, "Yah, all of the staff wants to be doctors, lawyers, professors, business guys, and stuff like that. Even the girls are getting their college degree. That's awesome." Others showed agreement with these observations with statements like "That's cool", "I agree", and "Hope I can be that way". There were no disagreements about these perceptions of ambition.

Unselfish With Their Time

Every boy made at least one comment about the field staff showing interest in others by being unselfish with their own personal time. The boys recognized when the field staff had their own discretionary time, and they were aware when the staff members sacrificed this discretionary time because of their concern for a boy. Comments such as "They care more about us than themselves. They will sacrifice their own free time to come talk with us", "She (a camp counselor) stopped packing her gear to come over to check on us and make sure we were ready when the van arrived", and "Staff and guides and others ... were really patient with me if I was having a hard time, couldn't control myself or something. They would drop whatever they were doing to make sure I was okay" illustrate the common perceptions amongst the boys. This attribute was identified by all of the boys concerning the field staff. One participant shared the following experience in his interview when trying to illustrate what he meant by the staff being unselfish. He was feeling homesick and went for a short walk around the camp area. His coach must have noticed his absence with the other boys, so the coach sacrificed his dinner time to walk with this boy and listen to his concerns. "He made me feel much better and I knew what he gave up to help me. I thought I wanted to be alone, but he just stayed with me. He showed me how much he cared."

Service Oriented and Interest in Others

Related to the perceptions of unselfishness and interest in others was that many of the boys noticed the field staff's willingness to serve others. Sixty-two percent of the participants mentioned that they specifically noticed how the field staff seemed to want to be of assistance to them. The staff members did not just wait around for someone to ask for help, but they went out of their way to provide service. One boy stated in his interview, "She knew I was mad and frustrated with tying that fly, so she came over to help me get it right." Another boy gave a long explanation of how he feared going on the hike because he was not as fit as many of the other boys, but his coach seemed to know about his fears. The coach offered to carry this boy's backpack on the harder sections of the hike because he wanted the boy to enjoy the experience. The researchers observed that this type of service was the most frequent behavior demonstrated by the boys after they experienced it from their counselors.

Hard Working

The boys unanimously recognized the work ethic of the field staff. Because the activities were challenging at times and required effort to achieve certain results, the boys all noticed and mentioned that their adult activity guides and their coaches set the example of what needed to be done in order to be successful in accomplishing the tasks at hand. As one boy mentioned,

The uphill hike was like really hard, but I could see that the leaders were not complaining and they just did it. They showed me that if I wanted to get to camp, I just had to like work hard too.

Many of the boys recognized that the field staff were always working to get ready or prepare something that was needed. "They are always working. I wonder if they ever really rest", was one boy's comment. Another noted that "I was really tired at the end of the day, but the leaders just kept working on putting stuff away." This type of observations by the boys resulted in some of their comments and attitudes to reflect what their observations meant to them. Such comments as "I like wanted to help them get ready for tomorrow instead of

play Frisbee" and "working hard now really does make things easier later" were recorded. One boy mentioned that "my parents always tell me to learn how to work hard and my camp leaders have shown me why". The attribute of hard work in camp showed results that the boys could relate to and appreciate.

Fun Loving

Another identified quality of the field staff was that they were fun to be around and that the staff wanted to have fun. All but three of the boys who were interviewed mentioned that the coaches were fun to be with. So, the follow up question was "How did the coaches make it fun?" Their responses included "They just kept motivating you. They just kept making it funnier, making everything sound like it was just going to be a blast", "They were just like cool with everything we did and stuff, like we were just playing around with, we were just having fun and stuff. They'd laugh along with you", and "I like them I think they're really cool. Um, there's just fun, all the staff are really fun. I don't know, they're just, you can relate to them, they'll laugh with you." This quality was more than just humor, but was a relational asset, which bonded the boys to their coaches and guides.

Sense of Perceived Freedom

The boys perceived a sense of freedom in the young adults working with them, which contrasted starkly with their experiences in their at-home contexts. Many of the boys felt they lived a life where they were constantly being told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. These perceptions were expressed in both a school and their personal living context.

Many expressed, in different verbiage, how school was "suffocating" and teachers are "always telling me what to do." All but two of the boys commented on how they "hate school." When asked why they hated school, they all indicated how they felt like no one gave them opportunities to choose for themselves and they were always being told what to do and not to do.

Seventy-two percent of the boys in this study came from either a single parent family or foster care family situation. They felt trapped in a box, a box they did not create or want to be in. For some, in the foster care situ-

ations, they had been transferred to several different foster care families in their lifetime and they did not feel they had control over their living situations. One boy commented, "I had to move and change school, lose all my friends, and everything I had worked on to make my life feel happy. It was all taken away in one day." Another boy talked about his mom having to move a lot. "We never stay in one place a long time. I never have a say so in where we will live."

The field staff gave the boys the impression that the staff members were free to choose their future and pursue their own plans. One youth said "Our coaches are going to be going to New Zealand next year to study and play. That would be so cool to do." Another commented on how many of the staff had done so much in their life, "I can't believe that our guides and coaches have been everywhere. Europe, Mexico, South America. I wish I could go to places like that."

The youth's interactions with their coaches were identified as a major part of their realizations of what they were capable of doing. Seeing the field staff as examples of what they could be like opened new perspectives of what can be considered "cool."

Discussion

Results of this study can be discussed within the context of several previous research projects that have focused on the impact of counselor performance in camps. Chenery (1981) studied young girls' perceptions of their camp counselors during a 7-week summer camp in Maine. The amount of control field staff gave to participants and the level of acceptance of participants by these staff members were associated with positive behavioral and self-concept outcomes. This study substantiates Chenery's findings. Middleman (1989) found that a significant correlation existed between four personality factors, identified by Raymond Cattell's 16 Personality Factors (16PF) tool and successful job evaluations. These factors included being single, a concrete thinker, emotionally stable, and flexible and relaxed. Our study has some correlation with Middleman's findings concerning the factors of emotionally stability and being relaxed as important attributes in effective counselors.

In the context of "the undisputed conclusion...that values are an inescapable part of the methods of psychotherapy...(and)...that psychotherapists inevitably urge their clients to adopt these values, often without recognizing that they do" (Slife, 2006, para. 4), we contend that such clinical findings regarding the transfer of values, or, in regards to this study, attributes, from psychotherapist to clients apply to wilderness therapy. Clinical studies have shown that even when psychotherapists *consciously* strived to be value-free, the findings are unequivocal; they still attempted to persuade their clients to adopt their professional and personal values (Tjelveit, 1999). Indeed, there is considerable evidence that clients were not considered cured or normal until they had matched the values of the therapist (Arizmen-di, Beutler, Crago, & Hagaman, 1985; Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003; Slife; Tjelveit, 1989). We contend that such relationships between therapist and patient are very similar to the relationships between our youth participants and the field staff and, therefore, not different in regards to Slife's point of personal value laden relationships.

Although different in design, context, focus, and in some cases findings, results of our study are consistent with these earlier works in that they support the idea that field staff members can significantly influence the client, or camper, experience. From these observations, one can assume that the benefits provided by the natural environment of wilderness therapy programs can be further enhanced or, in other cases, degraded by the performance of the staff.

Russell and Phillips-Miller (2002) have identified relationships with counselors as one of the primary wilderness therapy strengths. They argue that the wilderness environment makes counselors more approachable, thus therapy can be more successful. More recently, Russell (in press) has focused on this therapeutic relationship. Our findings support Russell's and Phillips-Miller's conclusions concerning the critical role of field staff in promoting positive change among participants of wilderness therapy.

Field staff are in an excellent position to use the therapeutic relationship to promote positive changes in values, behaviors, and attitudes among participants. This might be due to the length of exposure, intensity of the wilderness setting, the small groups, and the

mental and physical challenge associated with wilderness therapy (Hattie et al., 1997). These characteristics are unique to wilderness and create the potential to greatly enhance the therapeutic relationship. Russell and Phillips-Miller (2002) also argue that the wilderness environment lends itself to making the counselors more approachable, thus therapy outcomes can be more successful. For example, in regard to the importance of education and the attribute of ambition, several participants in the current study commented to the researchers that they hope to do well in school so they can go to college. Furthermore, many of the boys experienced a change in attitude as they observed field staff behavior. For example, there was an increase in their willingness to help. As was mentioned in our results, we observed many instances where boys helped their teammates in difficult times and activities. Boys talked about the possibilities to change. "I can make something of myself." "If my coaches say that I can be whatever I choose to be, I believe them." These experiences were not simply fun, but held deep meaning to the boys.

The Meaningful Experience Model

One context to interpret these experiences comes from the Meaningful Experience Model (MEM; Taniguchi et al., 2005). This model identifies the attributes and the sequential development of meaningful experiences (See Fig. 1). The research underlying the MEM focused on young adults participating in a challenging outdoor recreation course. The MEM represents the attributes and the process of what makes such experiences meaningful.

Taniguchi et al. (2005) enhanced a model that Dewey (1938) proposed for an educative experience into one that illustrated how common identified attributes make an educative experience into a meaningful one (see Fig. 1). The outdoor environment provides unique and different challenges from the usual routines that most civilized people experience on a daily basis. Conveniences, usually taken for granted, are either missing or much different in the outdoors and comfort is a commodity that takes on a very relative definition when coping with the challenges of the outdoor environment. Priorities must be shifted and personal goals become short-term rather than long-term plans for the distant future. Because

this outdoor environment is different for most people, it creates disruptions for individuals. In order to regain the homeostasis that is a part of the natural order of things, there must be some common avenues that everyone follows to recapture what the laws of thermodynamics call stability (Taniguchi et al.).

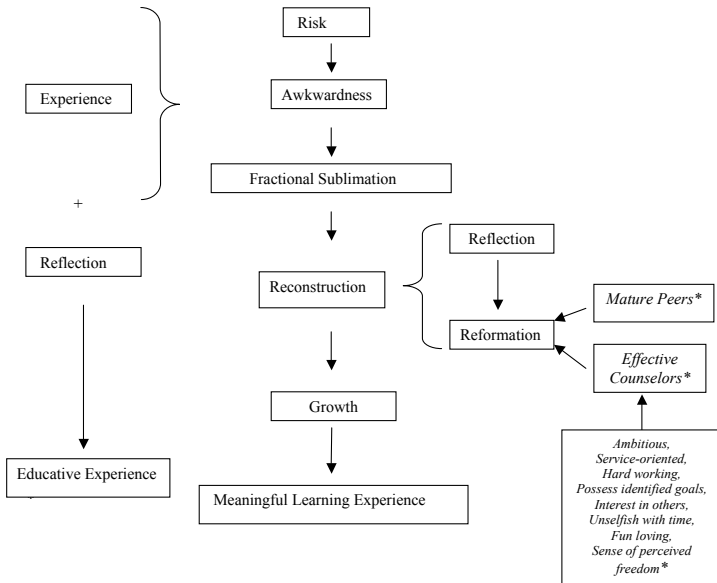
Taniguchi et al. (2005) observed and identified five major themes of meaningful learning experiences: (a) risk, (b) awkwardness, (c) fractional sublimation, (d) reconstruction, and (e) growth. The sequential presence of these themes was critical for the process of having a meaningful learning experience to progress, and therefore, the linear progression of the MEM. An important assumption in the use of the MEM is that an experience had a level of risk and awkwardness for the participant. This led to the phenomenon of fractional sublimation, which involves a realization of one's true abilities and inabilities to cope with the risk and awkwardness present. But, the critical addition to Dewey's educative model is the reconstruction phase. This is the time of explaining what is happening during Dewey's reflective period. There are two sub-phases of this reconstruction, reflection and reformation. Reconstruction is an experience that causes one to be reflective on what had happened during the experience; it is not just an unnoticed moment in time. The reflection phase allowed the participant to process all that had occurred up to then and put the important experiences into a context that could create meaning. The reformation phase is the time that the participant can use his strengths, recognize his weaknesses and decide what to do about them and, with the help of others (which was considered crucial for this phase), discover the potentials of the participant. With adults, who share the same experiences, the perceptions and insights of others can assist an individual to reconstruct himself in light of what others offer through examples or comments. This may be similar to what occurs with psychotherapy work. But, a question arises concerning this peer reconstruction phase and that is: can peers of a young age experience the same effect as adults? Are youth mature enough to observe and process the strengths, weaknesses, and potentials of others around them? Can they convey these observations in a constructive way to their peers? And, if it is questionable that youth peers are

capable of facilitating this reconstruction, then are adult counselors in a position to do so?

The added insight of the importance of role models is important to consider when looking at the MEM (see Fig.1). During the reconstruction phase of the experience, the comments from others who have shared the experience with the youth are important in the reformation stage. These insights help individuals reconstruct themselves from a view outside of themselves (Taniguchi et al., 2005). During the fractional sublimation phase, a person is divested of social facades they bring from their past. From this phase, an individual needs to reflect on the experience and, with the help of others who have shared the same experience, reconstruct their sublime nature. People who share these meaningful experiences with mature individuals can get constructive feedback that may lead to the growth phase. When youth do not have feedback from mature individuals who they respect or if they are receiv-

ing feedback from individuals who prolong the previous phase of fractional sublimation, the growth phase of the original MEM is less likely to occur.

Role models who exhibit the attributes identified in this study can provide the mature and constructive feedback that youth need in order to have meaningful experiences. This research has expanded our knowledge of meaningful experiences and has added another component to the meaningful experience model, especially for at-risk youth (See Fig. 1). When looking at youth, especially youth who lack positive role models in their lives, challenging outdoor recreation may create a context that makes this same model applicable to youth, with the added dimension of the counselor's role. The application of this model and the findings of this study highlight the important role adult counselors play in the outcomes of adolescent camp experiences.



*Added components derived from this study.

FIGURE 1. MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE MODEL

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. The findings are not meant to be generalized to any larger population, but there may be typifications that appear to be similar to other programs, field staff members, and youth, especially disadvantaged youth as we have defined them. It is important to note that our findings are based on the perceptions that participants had noted about the staff they worked with and that researchers did not monitor behavioral changes beyond the camp experience. It should also be recognized that this is not a causal study, so even though there may be implications of what our results could mean regarding possible relationships, we do not imply any predictive value for these results.

Implications

It is evident in the literature and this study that wilderness therapy has the potential to positively influence the lives of youth at risk. Wilderness therapy has been successful in decreasing the chances of youth failing in school and enhancing their ability to make positive contributions to society. Caldwell (2001) stated:

With some careful consideration and hard work, therapeutic recreation practice and research can more effectively make significant contributions to the lives of youth. To do so, professional boundaries must be widened, different perspectives should be adopted, and education institutions must rise to the challenge of educating professionals and researchers to meet the social realities of youth in need of adjustments in their life course. (p. 287)

This challenge that Caldwell speaks about of educating professionals and researchers is more than just knowing how to report outcomes. The desired effect is to understand what the outcomes mean and, if positive, how to reproduce these outcomes. This study suggests we have begun this process because we have investigated one of the major sources of positive outcomes, effective adult camp counselors. Finding adults who possess the identified attributes may increase the likelihood of reproducing such positive outcomes.

Caldwell (2001) presents the question, are TR students being prepared to work in these situations? We believe that this study, along with others, begins to answer Caldwell's

question in the affirmative and adds insight as to what should be taught. When national TR organizations recognize and promote the importance of wilderness and adventure recreation in the lives of youth, curricula, based on studies, like this one, may be easily adapted to train potential field staff. TR educators might consider integrating character strengths in existing programs. Individually, TR professionals might consider how they can use the positive attributes they possess to help their clients. Also, wilderness therapy and TR administrators, who are seeking to recruit and train effective staff, might consider assessing character strengths, identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004), in the interview and hiring process. Therapeutic recreation in general and wilderness programs, in particular, offer unique opportunities for staff to develop strong therapeutic alliances with program participants.

Our hope is that interested scholars will continue to study the therapeutic alliance and how character strengths and the attributes identified in this study influence program participants. The relationships that come naturally in the TR setting are those that provide unique opportunities to promote greater well-being and higher quality of life among our clients.

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