

Summer Outdoor Programs: Their Participants and Their Effects

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ABSTRACT. In a study of the benefits of various summer programs, especially those involving wilderness experiences, the use of pretests for all the groups made possible evaluation of the degree of self-selection as well. Similar tests 6 months later showed the influences of the summer programs themselves. The results suggest that even a relatively short encounter with the out-of-doors results in pervasive changes, the most striking of which relate to increased competence in skills required in the woods.

"... I WOKE up this morning at 6:30 not believing that I had made it through the nite. The sun was just coming up; it was beautiful. I am not even hungry it is so peaceful out here that I really could learn to enjoy it without the anxiety that I always have." (MJP)

"I got up today rather excited with the thought of leading the crew on our only hike without leaders. We broke camp . . . wasn't long before we hit a swamp — up to our waists we hit. We cam across three such swamps and even tho we arrived to our destination safely, my leadership was questioned and sometimes challenged. No one else was even willing to lead . . . I love this life. I am rather sad I have to go home. . . . When I go home I know I will want to tell my friends about this experience. I will become frustrated and bitchy because either I won't have the words or they won't have the ears. Whereas now I am happy." (AMG)

These are entries from the diaries written during a solo in the wilderness by participants in the Outdoor Challenge Program (described by Robert Hanson in the preceding paper). The kids express it so well! It is not hard to sense from their notes that the experience matters; that they acquire a different sense of themselves. Our aims in doing research in this area were several: we wanted to know whether the

benefits of a program like this lasted beyond the program itself; we wanted to see whether it is the acquisition of specific skills that relates to enhanced feelings of self-confidence; and we wanted to find out whether the effects are specific to particular kinds of programs.

Our collaboration with Bob Hanson has been an exciting adventure for several years now. The first year produced a small-scale study of the benefits of the program (Kaplan 1974). The study presented here involved the larger scale effort during 1973. The participants were 267 youths of both sexes who had 1 or 2 more years to go in high school when they completed the first round of questionnaires just as the school year ended. Of these, 75 percent returned the second questionnaire some 6 months later, at a time when summer activities seemed long past and the school year was well under way.

The participants included five distinct groups. Two of these can be considered control groups, as we had no knowledge of their summer activities. One of the control groups was drawn from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, because that is the region from which the 20 Outdoor Challenge participants have come. Five schools serving 14 communities were included from this land of low population density where the winters are hard and long. The other control

group consisted of 30 students who took a conservation course at a local high school. It seemed that a group with some nature-oriented background might provide a fair comparison to those who would be involved in summer programs with such a focus.

The closest comparison to the Outdoor Challenge group was provided by the 28 youths who went on backpacking trips of roughly comparable duration—2 weeks or so of actual hiking. Some of these went to a wilderness area southeast of Yellowstone National Park and others to Isle Royal. The trips were described as “hiking, backpacking, canoeing, camping adventures” with an “emphasis on an appreciation and learning about our natural world.”

The remaining group went to a 5-1/2-week coeducational camp in northern Michigan. Its focus was on community, on caring for people and the land. Although the concern for lifestyles adapted to ecological principles is an important feature there, the concern for personal growth in a supportive social setting is equally strong. The 44 participants differed from the other groups both in the duration of the activity and in having a nonnomadic base of operation. They were, however, similar to the backpacking group in orientation and goals, since both were under the overall guidance of the same insightful and dedicated team.

The variety of the participating groups provided an opportunity to determine whether self-selection would be evident in the initial data collected before the summer experience. It was. The members of the control group were outgoing and interpersonally active. The members of the camp group were also oriented toward interpersonal activities and situations, but in a much quieter, noncompetitive, and less active sense. They seemed to approach each other in a very accepting fashion, enjoying the situation for itself. The most striking difference between this group and the backpackers might be thought of as patience. Though the questionnaire did not tap this directly, the backpackers seemed to be more adventurous and eager to be “doing it” without excessive forethought. The Outdoor Challenge group was not strikingly different from the rest of the Upper Peninsula sample, although they were less involved interpersonally and more eager to “get away from it all.” It should be mentioned that the comparisons of the groups yielded no significant

differences with respect to self-esteem, nor on the measures of various skills.

AREAS OF THE STUDY

The sketches of the initial group differences are based on the responses to a 7-page questionnaire completed in June. At that time the participants had no reason to expect that there would ever be a follow-up. As it turned out, the 4-page fall questionnaires covered much of the same material. The common portions of the two questionnaires dealt with the following:

Care about and good at: A list of kinds of activities on which the participants indicated how much they cared about each and how good at each they felt they were. The list of activities included sports, camping, crafts and making things, sitting around talking, dating, and a few others.

Woodsmanship skills: Participants were asked to rate themselves on each of a dozen outdoor life skills, such as setting up camp, map reading, long hikes, ecology, and finding food in the woods.

Friendship skills: Included with the woodsmanship skills were two items on interpersonal skills: “making new friends” and “getting along with strangers in confined situations.”

Reasons: The 39 items pertaining to reasons for choosing one’s favorite activities were scored to form eight different clusters of reasons, including workout (the competition and exercise in the activities), affiliation, peace and quiet, leadership accomplishment (e.g., “gives me a chance to be in charge”), and self-directed accomplishment (e.g., “always learning new things”).

Self-esteem: Our hope was to break down this concept into meaningful parts. Like many other psychological concepts (intelligence and creativity are good examples), self-esteem is often regarded as a global entity which people possess to varying degrees. It seems to us damaging to look at it that way. The “esteem” scales derived from the 20 self-description items in the questionnaires included: realistic task orientation (e.g., “I’m sensible about how long things take to get done”), challenge, self-reliance, and interpersonal. These four scales together comprised a positive view scale. In ad-

dition, the negative view scale (e.g., "I tend to avoid new challenges," and "I find it hard to open up to people") is quite separate from the other scales. It is possible and even likely for people to have both positive and negative feelings about themselves at the same time.

Open-ended questions: "How would your best friend describe you (aside from physical characteristics)?" "What sorts of things have given you the greatest sense of accomplishment or pride?" and "If you could change yourself in any way, in what way would that be?" These were analyzed in terms of categories based on the spring data and applied to both sets of responses.

In addition, the first questionnaire included the Environmental Preference Questionnaire, *EPQ*, which has two pages of short items dealing with preferences for different kinds of settings. It is scored for seven scales, including nature, suburbs, cities, and social.

Where "scales" are mentioned in the discussion, these are based on groups of items that are all about a common idea. Except for the open-ended portions, responses were rated on a 6-point scale so that there was plenty of choice to indicate how well the item described the participant's feelings. The technicalities of deriving the scales or clusters of items and a more extensive discussion of the findings of the June questionnaire with respect to *EPQ*, reasons, and self-esteem are the subjects of a separate paper (*Kaplan 1976*).

SOME RESULTS

A study of this kind has some built-in handicaps. In trying to avoid misperceptions of summer effects by collecting the "after" material too soon, one necessarily introduces other difficulties. By late fall many things other than summer activities play important roles in the lives of these students. In June school was almost over—for some participants it was already a thing of the past—but in late fall school is very much a reality. Furthermore, many of the topics we studied vary with the seasons. Sports activities and outdoor opportunities clearly differ from spring to fall. The place of driving and dating in the overall picture may also change. But this does not mean that changed responses on the questionnaire cannot

be ascribed to the summer experience. The purpose of collecting "before" and "after" data from various groups attending different summer programs is to get a glimpse of such changes. I mention all these things only to encourage some degree of caution in looking at the results.¹

Skills

Not surprisingly, the Outdoor Challenge group showed a profound and highly significant improvement in virtually every one of the woodsmanship skills. Of the 12 items, only canoeing showed no change—and it was not part of the program! These results are strikingly similar to what we found in the previous year, with a smaller and all-male group. The backpacking group showed significant changes on some of these skills and came out ahead of the camp group on eight of the items. The Challenge participants rated themselves more skilled than did the backpacking group on seven of the items. Although these skill ratings are all self-reports, they match our expectations surprisingly well. The groups did not differ in these ratings before the start of the summer, nor did they know each other's ratings. The emphasis of the Outdoor Challenge Program is on wilderness skills, and the participants are intensely involved in activities that require such skills. The backpackers also used such skills to a far greater extent than the campers.

Skills and Self Views

One of our ideas in doing this research was that gaining competence at something would enhance some aspect of a person's view of himself. While people have the capacity to dismiss their own skills as not important, we felt this was less likely to happen in the case of nature-related skills. It seemed reasonable, then, to relate the scores on woodsmanship skills to the various domains of self-esteem. Had we simply divided the entire sample into high and low scorers on the skills, we would have found the Challenge and other backpackers in the "high" group. Instead, we divided each of the five groups—those in summer programs as well as the controls—into high and low scorers within each group. Our concern was not whether

¹ Throughout this paper the findings that are cited are statistically significant at $p < .05$ when small groups are compared and $p < .01$ when groups of 100 or more are compared. The tools used in these comparisons were *t* tests, analysis of variance, and in a few instances chi square.

the skills were acquired through a specified program, but simply whether being more skilled in these particular activities had a bearing on the youth's feelings toward himself.

We found that within each group there was indeed a significant relationship between relative standing on woodsmanship skills and one of the domains of self-esteem. Those who scored higher on the skills thought of themselves as more realistic about the demands of their work and better able to gage their task-related limitations.

Quite apart from the measures of skills, the Outdoor Challenge people were less likely to express negative views of themselves. Comparably, of the people who initially scored low on the positive view scale, close to half of those in each of the summer programs ended with high scores in the fall. By contrast, only about a quarter of those in the two control groups showed such changes.

Composite View

The overall pattern of the results suggests that the different summer experiences resulted in changes that were clearly reflected several months later.

By late fall the two control groups reflected one stereotype of people in their mid-teens: they saw themselves as good at driving (motorcycles, cars); they cared about sitting around talking and listening to music. They were interested in dating. Contact with nature and various activities that were less interpersonal were not of great importance.

The campers from the start took a more accepting, noncompetitive stance toward their peers. By fall, many felt more skillful at "making friends," though dating was relatively less important to them. Many of them expressed a concern for social commitment, for being considerate of others. They also talked about personal growth and self-discipline, and continued to favor activities that permit creative expression.

Both the Outdoor Challenge and the other backpacking groups showed little desire to change their physical characteristics or prowess. Perhaps the competence they acquired in particular skills in the woods is related to this. The Outdoor Challenge people showed the least concern for interpersonal activities and interests, though they felt they were better at

dating as well as better at getting along with others under confined conditions. In addition, they now preferred activities that permit some peace and quiet, some solitude.

The results suggest that nature-related activities do indeed make a difference. Even a relatively short encounter with the out-of-doors is reflected in some pervasive changes. There is a suggestion that competence in the skills required in the woods is related to some aspects of self-esteem. This is true whether the skills were acquired in a summer program specifically focused on such skills or elsewhere. The results also support the more informal findings reported in the previous Outdoor Challenge study, that a relatively short program can result in positive changes some time later.

Let me close with some more of the "poetry" that these kids produced while all alone with their thoughts in the woods:

"I have all ways been in the woods and I can relax by taking a short hike in the woods easier than watching TV or reading a book because in the woods there are no words or signs or people to look at and I am glad that they have nature areas like this so people can use this as an escape . . . Now I know why my father likes to take a lunch to work rather than go to the country club and eat. He is in a business that he makes deals with people every day because he is a car sales man and he is the best I know . . . [Like the other sales people] my Dad gets tired of people too, but he eats his lunch at the park and maybe that is all it takes—just that half or full hour in the park can make my Dad forget people and he is glad to go back to work. The other salesmen go and eat at the club and they see more people—they have no escapement." (WM)

"I spent the night sleeping and listening to the silence. I had a lot of thoughts. I have always worried too much what other people think of me. I am going to try and fix that. I will still worry a little bit but not so much . . . Silence is really a funny thing. I don't hear it often. Last night I think I experienced the most I ever have." (TP)

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