

**Wilderness Adventure Recreation and Social Integration:
What's Going on Here?**

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Introduction

Background and Need for the Study. Wilderness adventure recreation programs have grown rapidly in the last two and a half decades as a method of rehabilitation, therapy, social integration, lifestyle change, facilitation of personal growth, or production of social benefits (Ewert, 1989). A substantial research effort has paralleled this growth, with a variety of dependent variables being investigated: enhanced self-concept, improved social attitudes and behavior, improved physical health, reduced emotional problems, (Ewert, 1989), reduced recidivism, changes in locus of control (Hunter, 1987), increased trust and cooperation (Witman, 1987); reduced trait anxiety, increased integration between persons with mixed abilities, decrease in stereotypes, and longitudinal effects on lifestyle (McAvoy, Schatz, Stutz, Schleien, & Lais, 1989), to name a few. In the large majority of these studies, however, the focus of the research has been on measuring the benefits and outcomes of outdoor adventure programming, with little emphasis on *how* or *why* these outcomes have occurred (Ewert, 1989). Studies that investigated mediating variables in outdoor adventure experiences are limited (Ewert, 1982; Hunter, 1987; Stark, 1981; Teaff & Kablach, 1987; Wichman, 1991). In addition, the format, location, philosophy, participants, and leadership style have varied widely across the outdoor programs studied and have no unified theory (Wichmann, 1991). According to Ewert (1982), "In essence, we have discovered an educational black box; we know something works (the outdoor adventure programming format), but we don't know how or why" (p. 126).

Because outdoor adventure programs appear to be powerful tools in creating change, it is imperative to further understand the mediating variables related to change in participants. This understanding will aid in planning and leading safe and effective outdoor experiences. In addition, a more clear understanding of the mediating variables in the change process that occurs during outdoor adventure/risk recreation programs may allow for generalization beyond the outdoor setting to other recreation/therapeutic recreation environments.

Purpose of the Study. The purpose of this study was to examine the mediating variables that are related to the positive outcomes that result from involvement in outdoor adventure experiences. In essence, the purpose was to examine the 'how' or 'why' of the effectiveness of outdoor adventure recreation. For purposes of this study, social integration between persons with and without disabilities and attitude change toward persons with disabilities were the outcome variables examined in relation to the process variables of the outdoor adventure experience. This study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What are the mediating or critical variables of wilderness adventure trips related to the positive outcomes of social integration/relationship development and attitude change (if they occur)?
- 2) Is the wilderness setting an important mediating variable?

Method

Subjects. Subjects for this study were participants at Wilderness Inquiry, an outdoor adventure tripping company headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The primary purpose of Wilderness Inquiry is to provide outdoor adventure opportunities that integrate people with and without disabilities in experiences that inspire personal growth, develop peer relationships, and enhance environmental awareness (Wilderness Inquiry, 1990). Subjects were chosen from a voluntary pool of applicants in a stratified random sample. Two groups were randomly formed, each consisting of four participants without disabilities and five participants with disabilities. Disabilities in one group included: two people with mental retardation; one person with cerebral palsy; one person with a head injury with hemiplegia and speech difficulties; and, one person with ataxia. Disabilities in the second group included: two people with cerebral palsy with mobility and communication impairments; two people with cerebral palsy with minor mobility impairments; and, one person with bipolar disorder. In total, there were nine males and nine females, with an age range of 22 to 65 years.

Settings. The study took place in two different settings: wilderness or remote backcountry areas and Wilderness Inquiry headquarters in Minneapolis. One group went on four different trips and the other went on two different trips. The destination areas included remote or wilderness areas in Minnesota and Iowa. The structured follow-up interviews took place at the Wilderness Inquiry headquarters.

Procedures. In the first year of the study, the first group went on a 6-day and a 3-day trip. They participated in a structured follow-up interview 4 months after the trip experiences. In the second year of the study, both groups participated in 3-day and 6-day trips. They again participated in follow-up interviews 4 months after the trip experiences. Each trip was conducted in the typical manner by Wilderness Inquiry leaders. Although each trip had different leaders with slightly different styles, the same format and structure was evident on each trip. During the trips, the researcher functioned as a participant observer. Detailed field notes were kept, including descriptive and reflective notes. Unstructured, conversational interviews were conducted with trip leaders and participants during the trips and documented in the field notes as well. Participants on all trips were asked to keep daily journals. The journal entries were used to search for patterns in relationship development, interpersonal liking, and other process variables. Journals were typically completed by participants in the evenings on the trips, although each participant developed their own method of daily journal completion. Follow-up interviews, which occurred four months after the trips, were conducted to gather information on perceived outcomes of participation in the wilderness experiences, including changes in attitudes and relationship development. In addition, the purpose of the interview was to learn what the participants felt was important during the trip that contributed to any outcomes they had experienced. The interview protocol was adapted slightly from the interview used by McAvoy, Schatz, Stutz, Schleien, and Lais (1989) in a similar study. Interviews were conducted in private areas, were audio-taped, and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis. The resultant qualitative data were analyzed using a modified version of the constant comparison approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The approach involved reading the data continually and carefully as they were collected, looking for emergent categories or topics, especially in relation to the research questions. The data were read again in their entirety and sorted and coded into categories that were reflective of the research questions as well as other emerging variables. A second researcher, or "auditor" (Henderson 1991) also read a sample of the data as a way to check the dependability or reliability of the major categories. These categories were comprehensive and were further subdivided into themes or subcategories. File folders and physical sorting were then used to place the data in categories, and then subcategories. A master file of all transcriptions, field notes, and journals was kept so that the context would not be lost in the categorization process. All data were then cross-indexed to the master file as they were sorted into categories. The emerging themes in each category were reworked as the data were analyzed, so that the themes were as mutually exclusive and exhaustive as possible (Tesch, 1990). Sorted and coded data were analyzed a final time. The categories and subcategories were mapped out to allow for visualization of the relationships between variables as these relationships emerged from the data.

Results

What were the positive outcomes of participation in the wilderness experience? Figure 1 depicts the main categories and themes that resulted from the qualitative data analysis and their relationship to each other. The personal changes reported by participants included attitude change toward disability, lifestyle change, personal growth and reflection, friendship development, and skill development.

What were the mediating or critical variables of wilderness adventure trips related to the outcomes of social integration, relationship development, and attitude change? The variables that seemed to be critical to change were the wilderness setting, the social/group interaction, the trip leaders, and disability issues. The themes of equal status, disconfirming evidence of stereotypes, cooperation/mutual goals/ interdependence, promotive interaction, and norms that supported inclusion were structural variables that facilitated group development (cohesion) and friendship development. The role of the leader seemed to be crucial in maintaining norms and structuring

interdependence. Disability issues revolved around specific concerns and challenges in negotiating the wilderness environment with the group support.

Is the wilderness setting an important mediating variable? Wilderness emerged as a critical variable. The themes that were discerned included interpersonal and personal variables: perspective-taking, simplified transactions; control; and, challenges/pushing personal and group limits. The external variables that emerged included: weather/environmental challenges and beauty/aesthetics.

Discussion

The importance of nurturing leaders. The data from this study point to the importance of leadership in structuring and maintaining a contact situation between groups that promotes inclusion. The leaders' "soft skills" (e.g., small group leadership skills, communication skills, integration skills) were critical in helping participants experience personal growth through the group process.

The importance of wilderness. The data also point to the powerful effect wilderness has on people in groups. The wilderness setting promoted perspective-taking that helped participants see themselves as having less variation as a group of human beings, despite a wide range of ability levels and differences, than they would experience in everyday life. It allowed people to simplify transactions in their daily living, including transactions between each other, which had a therapeutic benefit. The wilderness also served as an "equalizer", where environmental conditions, such as extreme weather, put all group members on the same level or status. It helped develop friendships in the context of the wilderness travel group.

In summary, wilderness adventure recreation programs are powerful change agents. This study attempted to shed some light inside the "black box" and answer the question, "What is going on here?" Some critical variables were discerned, such as the important role of wilderness and leaders in providing structure for group relationships to develop. Future research efforts in the area of specific leadership skills are necessary in order to continue to refine the therapeutic benefits of wilderness adventure programming. Future research efforts should also focus on the role of wilderness in the change process. How much wilderness is enough? How can we "use" wilderness therapeutically and still preserve its qualities that make it therapeutic?