

**"If only you knew what I've just done":
Adolescent memories from a Tasmanian
wilderness primary prevention program**

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Abstract

Forty six subjects were invited to respond by mail to a series of written questions relating to their previous experiences while undertaking a Tasmanian wilderness primary prevention program. Most participants recalled vivid and lasting memories, which when analysed revealed eight major themes. The authors argue that participant memories are a rich source of information and potential source of evaluative data for team leaders and managers of wilderness programs.

Adolescent wilderness-based programs

The debate about the value of physically challenging activities in relation to adolescent development occurs with regularity (Chinsky, 1978; Gaston, Plouffe & Harding, 1985; Wichman, 1991). In terms of school-based outdoor education and summer programs a steady and burgeoning interest throughout Australia continues to occur. A consequence has been the trend towards higher qualifications of instructors and supervisors, development of protocols and specialist training. For example, it is the policy of Tasmania's wilderness primary prevention program, Project Hahn to create an optimum balance of competence in each instructional team of level II, level I and trainee Instructors. Project Hahn encourages instructors to pursue a range of technical and facilitative skills development linked to a special stream in wilderness-based counselling now offered at the University of Tasmania.

Regardless of the perceived need for increased professionalism, Jobling and Cotterell (1990) suggest also the need for greater understanding of the relationship between the development of competence, self-esteem and achievement and the mastery of a variety of physical skills among adolescents. Reid and Matthews (1980) consider that opportunities for the mastery of skills to be of paramount importance during wilderness expeditions as these skills impact future development. The authors maintain that both the simplicity and concreteness of the wilderness experience allow participants to view themselves, as well (as their relationship with others), not only with a realistic self-perception, but with indisputable evidence of success within the context of group situations.

Project Hahn¹ has attempted to examine the differential impact of various aspects of the program on participants (Adams, Sveen & Denholm, 1997; Sveen, 1995a & 1995b). As with many similar programs both nationally and internationally, a preventative focus is sought with the aim to enhance and strengthen the psychological development of individuals as they undertake a variety of challenging physical skills. It should be noted that this particular program is intentionally heterogeneous, holistic and community-oriented where the promotion of positive behaviour for each participant is attempted through a process of applied learning. A major learning intention is that the challenge and stress induced during participation in the various activities will cause a positive internal dialogue (self-efficacy) upon other facets of participant's lives (applied learning) (Bandura, 1977; Connell et. al. 1975). Although open to the entire adolescent community, the majority of participants have been disadvantaged adolescent males and females. Potential applicants are all young people, and include those who are disadvantaged as a result of socio-economic conditions in which they live or because they have been through a specific negative period in their lives. Single individuals from a variety of backgrounds are targeted for each Project Hahn course and pre-existing peer groups are discouraged. Each participant therefore begins the course on an even standing with other members. Thus without fear of judgement from peers, the opportunity is available to the individual to experiment with a range of new ideas and behaviours. Once committed, an individual plan is formulated between all parties, with a specific focus centred on the areas of personal development currently affecting the adolescent. It is the intention of the Project Hahn staff to allow participants the freedom

¹ Project Hahn Inc. is a Public Benevolent Institution (PBI) with a charter to provide services for young people throughout Tasmania. The focus is on supporting young people who are at risk. Project Hahn Inc. works in an adjunctive role with many community and government agencies statewide who assist young people between the ages of 13 and 28. Such agencies include for instance referrals from Community Corrections, Migrant Resources, Ashley Home, Distance Education, MARSS Groups, Aboriginal Health, Disability Services, Local Government Youthworkers, Port Arthur Recovery Group, Parents, Friends or even Self. Through counselling, therapy and participation in wilderness activities Project Hahn Inc. enables young people at risk to develop social skills and personal qualities required for living and working as mature citizens in an increasingly complex world. Success and achievement through the medium of outdoor adventure activities enables participants to mature socially and emotionally, as well as develop their physical skills and enhance their personal knowledge. Programs are custom designed through negotiation to meet the needs of participants. Each program is inherently different from the last by design, based on the presenting needs of each of the individual participants. Groups operate with a ratio of 8 participants to 3 facilitators. Attendance in the program is strictly voluntary; a principle applied to all participants regardless of their referral source. Courses consist of mixed gender groups, participants come from all geographical parts of the State. Each project session occurs over a three month period consisting of an introductory activity day, a five day wilderness immersion program and a three day follow-up expedition (see Sveen, 1991).

to react to challenge in any way they feel is appropriate and responsible during a wilderness experience. Therefore, it is believed that positive future behaviours have more likelihood of success through participants seeking the answers for themselves, than if subtle advice is offered. Such increases in participants' behavioural and social repertoires are considered a measurable outcome of programme effectiveness.

Substantial support for the value of adolescent wilderness-based programs are available (Cianchi, 1991; Gass, 1993; Mason & Wilson, 1988). However, only recently have comprehensive attempts been made to evaluate what is known about the personal and longer term impact of such programs (Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997, Reddrop, 1997; Sveen & Denholm, 1997). With adolescent wilderness small group based experiences in particular, it is reasonable to assume that when opportunities for growth, challenge, risk and excitement are part of the program, emergence of short-term post course euphoria also occurs.

Adolescent memories

Only recent attention has been directed towards the actual memories held by participants and the types of stories they hold as indicators of success and survival. Clearly, such memories are coloured considering the emotional states and levels of arousal of the events and no doubt plays a role in determining the significance of the program in relation to long term memory (Nettleton & Dickinson, 1988).

Stories and memories of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences by adolescents over a four year period have been found by recording a variety of sources to remain relatively accurate (Denholm, 1990). With one young adolescent who suffered severe trauma during a wilderness expedition, memories including smells, sounds and verbal statements to rescuers remained powerful and vivid five years after the event (Denholm, 1995). Yet overall, there have been few systematic attempts to capture the types of lasting stories and memories held by adolescents following a wilderness experience.

Managers of these programs and referral groups may well ask as to the relationship between long-lasting behaviour and attitudinal changes and particular types of wilderness experiences. Through this research method there is a privileging of the participants' experiences over the facilitators' judgements of what happened, and an opportunity for the participants to give meaning to the events. Thus, given the premise that useful information and greater understanding of the impact of certain activities can be obtained from past participants, a systematic examination of adolescent memories was conducted.

Approach to collection of participant memories

Qualitative information has been regularly sought by Project Hahn about positive and negative outcomes of participants. This includes responses to questions about degree of coercion, group dynamics, leadership, impact of the program on employment focus and specific effects of wilderness-based stress arousing activities (Sveen & Denholm, 1993). In this particular study 150 past participants who were able to be located (over a two month period), were phoned and invited to complete and return an anonymous questionnaire about their experience. It should be noted that a large number of participants had a history of difficulties with academic tasks and thus a reluctance to write. In addition they tend to have high mobility with frequent changes of address. In order not to breach anonymity and thereby influence potential negative responses, telephone interviews were not conducted. In balance, the authors acknowledge that responses may be skewed towards self-selected literate participants. One third of the sample, or forty-six responses (26 males, mean age 18.5 yrs; 20 females, mean age 16.3 yrs) were received within the period; the majority of who had attended a wilderness-based course over the past five years. The gender distribution of the return rate was reflective of the distribution of the higher number of male attendees since the programs inception in 1983; 60/40. Written responses were made on a standardised open-ended questionnaire in response to the following eight (8) questions. Each response was analysed in relation to the key theme by an independent observer and final agreement of the various themes involved the participation of three program leaders. The following is a brief synopsis of the written memories received and to capture the variety, intensity and depth of comments, some verbatim comments will be included.

RESULTS

Question 1: Thoughts and feelings before leaving on the wilderness experience.

Before leaving many of the 71 comments (42%) were about being nervous, apprehensive and uncertain. Specific comments about anxiety were expressed considering meeting and working with individuals never previously met (18%), course expectations and in facing the unknown challenges (6%). Remarkably, there were no concerns expressed about potential physical danger and the reported anxiety was often balanced with a sense of excitement and positive anticipation. A number of single issues were mentioned such as being shy, being intimidated by the other participants, changes in daily routine and uncertainty about course expectations, as can be seen with the following:

Being both nervous and anxious before the experience was frequently expressed with these feelings remaining clear and fresh with for a number of years. These feelings were more often expressed in relation to others by females, and, with reference to activities, by males. For example, a 15 year old female added: "I was nervous at the thought of spending 5 days with completely new people...I was also very excited that I was doing something different and would be able to look back on it and say 'I've done that.'" The opportunity to escape was mentioned several times (eg. "Thank God I'm getting away from everything to do something new." male, 16 yrs) as was the belief that the anticipated experience would be beneficial (eg. "Beforehand I had wanted to run and hide instead of putting myself on the line like this, but I know that that was the very reason I should go." female, 15 yrs).

Question 2: Greatest personal struggle during the course.

In attempting to describe the most difficult personal struggle they had during the course, participants made a total of 61 comments by 44 participants. From 60% of all responses, three key themes emerged. The first theme referred to fears associated with a particular activity (eg. abseiling, kayaking) (21%). This fear was graphically described by one 15 year old female as "having to place all my trust in a rope and a bit of metal." For a 17 year old male participant, the entire experience served to confront a number of dislikes ("Facing the things I didn't like doing: sleeping in tents, going camping, carrying large loads"). The second theme was the need to persevere considering physical discomfort and lack of privacy (20%) while the third theme described issues of tolerance and the experience of trusting strangers (25%). As one 17 year old female stated: "I had to learn not to judge people without getting to know them which was particularly scary as all my group were 'tough' looking."

It is interesting that whereas females were more likely to make comments about trusting others (67%–12%), males made more comments about physical discomfort and the struggle to complete certain activities (20%–31%). Of note were memories of self doubt and lack of confidence in speaking to others and, learning to be responsible for themselves (some for the first time). One 16 year old male noted that his greatest personal struggle was "not missing the people I love" while a 23 year old male who completed the program at 17 years of age recalled the greatest struggle as "Trying to sort out what direction I was going to take in my future."

Question #3: Significant personal discoveries about self.

From the total of 63 comments describing a significant personal discovery, three of the twelve main ideas accounted for 57% of all comments. The largest issue of confidence, courage and trust in the unknown (25%) described a range of personal qualities. For example, one 17 year old male noted, "I was more capable than I thought", while a 17 year old female found that she was able to be full of courage and at times "... be there for other people." The next largest theme involved support from friends, learning to trust people and reflection on the level of cooperation that was required to undertake the set tasks (21%). The issue of perseverance was also significant (11%) as one 19 year old male commented: "... it made me feel like I had done it before, and could do it again."

Other comments ranged from learning about leading the group, the likes and dislikes of the outdoors, enjoyment from the activities and the chance to be away from people and family. Comments were expressive and personal as one 15 year old female twin: "...that I am an individual and people can recognise that, and not one half of a pair." Some of the comments were difficult to decode and no doubt came surrounded with a host of personal issues such as the following: "...that I'm probably not the bad person I'm always telling myself I am" (female, 17 years). Examples of humour (eg. "That being small can be handy" male, 18 years) were infrequent and a number of participants spoke of having their 'comfort zone' both expanded and 'rattled'.

Question #4: Significant learnings about others.

Participants were asked to describe the most important thing that they learned about other people while on the program. From the 55 responses, 80% fell within three main themes. The first (36%) was the experience of positive acceptance and a non-judgemental relationship from peers and feelings of mutual strength and support. As one 18 year old male described, "We all got the same feelings and we shared our feelings with other people." Others went a little deeper suggesting a reciprocal relationship that was reflected in the following: "If you reach out for somebody, and really make an effort, they will most probably respond" (male, 17 years). The second theme was a new appreciation of individual differences and mutual needs shared among peers (28%). For example, one 15 year old female recalled the following memory one year later: "I felt that they were as insecure and troubled as I was but it was amazing how we were all strengthened by each others support and valued each other's opinion." The third theme was identification with others having similar problems (16%) such as difficulties in getting along with others during the expedition, examples of selfishness and the ability to control one's anger towards others. Males wrote the most

succinct and compelling responses and, in the words of a 17 and 18 year old, "Whereas everyone was reasonable it was also found that everyone is different."

Question #5: Reactions three days post course completion.

Participants made 67 separate statements. Within one of the eight theme's participants described a sense of achievement (24%) at having completed the entire experience. This sense was not without feeling exhausted and sore (19%) or expressing a sense of loss and separation from their peers at the conclusion (12%). As might be expected, a number of participants wrote about feeling high and excited following their return home (15%) which in some cases lasted for a number of days. Of particular significance was the number of personal changes (15%) which participants believed come about soon after completion. For example, one 19 year old male stated that he felt "confident, job ready and looking for work" while a 14 year old female commented that "I am now able to cope with stress easier." The intensity and commitment to maintain these changes are reflected by a 15 year old female who wrote, "I looked at people differently, I couldn't judge them anymore, and my feelings were different about life". Comments such as "stuffed but relaxed" and "physically GREAT" can be anticipated from this type of activity as may comments about other significant individuals making observations about visible changes in the post course life of the participant. A number of graphic comments suggest that the experience was unique and highly prized. For example one 17 year old female described it as "like I'd been abducted by aliens and I had this amazing emotional experience and then dumped back on earth." The feeling of euphoria was graphically captured by a 23 year old male who recalled feeling "On top of the world. I'd walk through town and smile to myself when I saw people going about their business, I'd think if only you'd just done what I have."

Question #6: Reactions one month post course completion.

Forty-one participants wrote 52 separate comments about this question. Many of males (35%) stated that they wanted to go an another adventure experience and, overall, 10% said that they appreciated and valued the opportunity. Some reported that they felt isolated and sad in being separated from their newly found friends while others reported a return to regular activities (13%) or spending time reliving their memories and looking at photographs (13%). This sense of separation and desire to recapture 'that which was lost' was best captured within the words of a 17 year old female who had completed the program 12 months before this study. She stated: "I felt lonely, confused, wanting my life to return to how it was on the camp. It brought up a lot of issues for me to think about and deal with."

For the purposes of this study it is comforting to note those 25% of responses were reflections on life changes and the attempt to implement the personal goals that were developed during the camp. One male (14 yrs) stated that "I am a more interesting person to talk to" while a 17 year old female commented that "I was able to talk about my problems more openly to my family." As might be anticipated, when many of the participants return home, they see the world and themselves in a different light and these changes can cause disequilibrium within the family. Not to be underestimated are the potential for significant life changes to provoke stress within the family one 15 year old female explained: "my sister, I believe, is jealous of the experience I've had and is a little competitive, especially since I'm more confident to oppose."

Question #7: Life and behaviour changes as a result of the adventure experience.

Seven participants indicated that no changes had taken place as a result of their wilderness experience while several indicated an increase in trust and three noted that they were now more physically active. Whereas six females indicated they had become more tolerant of other people (eg. "I feel differently towards the people I hate"), 15 males noted particular changes in behaviours and values. One 15 year old wrote that, "Dad says my attitude has improved" while others made reference to "increased school work", "clearer employment focus" and work related attitudes. Subjects also referred to increased confidence as in the example of one 16 year old female who commented "I feel I can go through anything physically and mentally now."

During a program such as this it is never really known the full extent of the personal issues brought to the surface or how participants will respond to the host of physical and emotional challenges. In addition, the depth of internal resources, degree of resilience and of the long held secrets that inevitably become shared can never be adequately pre-assessed. Regardless of the level of trust and support established with a group of strangers, verbal self disclosure is never easy and may elicit painful memories.

Perhaps one of the benefits of this type of study is the depth of trust within this type of therapeutic program, as seen in the following arresting statements:

"I am now able to talk to my father after about 5 years" (female, 18 yrs).

"It helped me cope with losing a close friend" (male, 18 yrs).

"I am not as prejudiced against the 'street kids'... I realised that deep down EVERYONE has something worthwhile to share and that even the

toughest person can be the nicest underneath the act" (female, 17 yrs).

Question #8: Suggested changes to the program.

A total of 51 comments provided ideas about the venues, bush walks, food, follow-up sessions, cost, hygiene issues and more even gender distribution of the leaders. Five participants wanted it to be longer (10%) and two stated that they wanted the next course to be at a more advanced level. By far the strongest response was that of "nothing" (59%) meaning that it worked well, was well organised and the leaders were thought to be excellent. As one 17 year old male explained, "It was like going away with a family."

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Address the Social Issues

From the writings of adolescents who attended this wilderness therapy it is apparent that the power of their experience remains. Memories by past participants about thoughts prior to the program beginning, suggest that greater attention was paid to the social implications of mixing with new people rather than concern about the risk-recreation activities. Although some concern was expressed about anticipating the nature of the impending activities, a trend from the responses reflected the strong role of peer-related self esteem and the self perception how others might assess their performance. Community-based programs for adolescents may acquire higher participation rates by focusing on the social dynamics rather than the activities presented (Tolson & Urberg, 1993). Marketing of the program along lines of sharing fears with new peers seems closer to the mark.

Coping Self is Paramount with At-Risk Populations

As noted by Seiffge-Krenke (1993) when studying 3000 12-20 year olds across cultures, populations of adolescents who are at-risk are more readily threatened by everyday problems and ambivalent with coping strategies. Similarly, this population sample focused on self-efficacious responses when asked about significant self-discoveries (eg. positive self-talk gleaned through mastery of a challenging initiative), instead of higher order personal insights. Only one respondent wrote about the perceived spiritual healing power of the natural environment. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect that this type of study would capture moments of deep introspection as these are often fleeting and highly personal and are not easily acquired. As a large number of recent participants have voiced life and death issues as the area that they are presently trying to resolve (Adams, Sveen & Denholm; 1997), it would seem that process rather than outcome based evaluation may be a more effective means of capturing their spiritual discovery.

Gender Response to Challenge

The greatest struggle during the program as reported by male participants evolved around activities, whereas females were more likely to recall issues about social relationships. With learnings about others, females were more likely to describe the development of a wilderness 'community' and the breaking down of barriers between people, with males more likely to refer to the recognition of commonalities between group members. Although the gender discussion remains open to conjecture (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993; Moir & Jessel, 1989; Neill, 1997; Skoe & Gooden, 1993), it is considered by the authors that the adolescent female is maturationally more advanced than her male counterpart, more acutely aware of her social networks and has easier access when attempting to communicate her thoughts and feelings. Therefore it is argued that the adolescent female responses to their social and physical environment received are indicative of their less egocentric manner, and indeed normative.

Catalyst of Change

In terms of personal life changes, the majority of participants referred to the completion of personal goals established during the program. The types of euphoric responses reported during the first days after the completion of the expedition have been well documented in the literature on wilderness programs (Bauer, 1982; Marsh, Richards & Barnes, 1986; OBrien 1990; Sakofs, 1992). The time spent rearranging these new experiences into the personal psyche is considered to be a natural process of disequibration, and an ideal period of time for taking on new personal goals within the home environment. Ironically, after the group support is gone is considered the most valuable period for implementing changes acquired on the program. Calabrese and Schumer (1986) recommend a process of establishing non-threatening positive mentors who can support the participant in their community post-program, particularly as an alienation reduction measure.

Dealing with Grief

Upon completion of the program, participants reported a general feeling of loss and separation from their newly found friends; a natural experience obviously immersed in the closure phase of group dynamics. This is the period of the program when issues of associated grief may receive the greatest airing. Prepare to structure time into the closure process if this is one of the issues being presented by participants. In order to be effective, facilitators need to recognise stages of grief and that prior to working with issues of mourning they have had to have worked through their own grief (MacLennan, 1998; Price, Dinas, Dunn & Winterowd; 1995).

SUMMARY

Summarising participant responses after attending this program has provided a microcosm of the types of memories held and regardless of the background of the participant or original reason for referral to this program, a kaleidoscope of normative developmental needs and hopes of adolescents emerge. Trends emerging from this type of field-based study in general supports the medium of risk-recreation activities, the construction of a short-term small intimate communities within the wilderness and the influence of the therapeutic encounter. Qualitative research through analysis of participant memory as described in this study provides an informative and evaluative tool for practitioners in the understanding of participant learning within the wilderness environment.

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