

SEER 2008 ABSTRACT

Optimal Challenge: The Impact of Adventure Experiences on Subjective Well-Being

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Adventure therapy (AT) and the use of activities and outdoor experiences for educational and therapeutic purposes have a long and rich history. In recent years, the popularity and use of adventure programs in schools, clinical treatment facilities, and various other settings has increased. This increased use of AT in a therapeutic context has brought it to the awareness of clinicians, consumers, and researchers. Although participation is growing rapidly, research on the effectiveness and impact has been slow to substantiate claims.

Review of Literature

Research on AT outcomes is sparse and methodologically flawed, although authors claim that its effectiveness is generally accepted and that adventure and wilderness programs can and do result in positive changes in the participants (Bandoroff, 1989; Gibson, 1979; Gillis & Thomsen, 1996; Moote & Wodarski, 1997). In addition, over the past 25 years researchers have called for a new direction of research to answer more specific process-oriented questions such as how these programs bring about change and what components or activities are most effective (Bandoroff, 1989; Gibson, 1979; Gillis, 1992; Russell, 2004). Regardless, existing studies still largely evaluate program effectiveness and there continues to be a paucity of research on the process of adventure therapy or programming (AT/AP) experiences.

AT is best defined as an experiential approach to counseling or psychotherapy that integrates adventure, or adventure-based, activities and

experiences with more traditional forms of psychotherapy (Gillis & Thomsen, 1996; Newes & Bendoroff, 2004). One of the core elements of AT/AP presented in the literature as key to facilitating growth and change within these experiences is the construct of challenge (Newes & Bendoroff, 2004; Gass, 1993; Kimball & Bacon, 1993). Theoretical assumptions stated that challenge is used to facilitate the process of taking individuals out of their comfort zones in hopes that they experience a sense of disequilibrium that propels them to develop new and, ideally, healthier coping mechanisms to regain their equilibrium (Gass, 1993; Nadler, 1983; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Thus, change or growth occurs.

This study sought to contribute to the gap that exists in the research by examining the role of challenge within AT/AP experiences. The overall purpose was to investigate the relationship between challenge and subjective well-being. Specifically, the goal was to determine whether the level or degree of challenge impacts mood and whether an optimal level of challenge yields significantly more positive subjective well-being. The researcher also examined whether differences existed based on actual or perceived challenge as well as whether there was a correlation between self-report and observer-rated levels of challenge.

Methods

A within-subject repeated measure design was used in which each participant completed four challenge course tasks or elements of varying difficulty levels. Participants were 20 adults, ages ranging in age from 23–36 ($M = 29$, $SD = 4.63$), who volunteered to participate in an adventure laboratory and study. Sixty percent of the participants were female and 40% were male. Ethnicity included 85% who self-reported as Caucasian/White; 10% Latinas/os; and 5% Asian. Eighty percent of the participants had no previous experience with ropes or challenge courses.

Measurement to determine the level of challenge was conducted via self-report and an observer-rated measure. The self-report Activity Challenge Scale combined items from both the Experience Sampling Method used to determine flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987), as well the Adventure Experience Paradigm research (Priest & Carpenter, 1993; McIntyre, 1999) to yield a 4-item Likert scale measuring perceived risk/challenge and perceived competence/skill. The observer-rated measure (Activity Engagement Scale) was created for this study and asked raters to evaluate how each participant appeared while completing, or attempting to complete, each task. Subjective well-being was assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

Results

To determine the relationship between level of challenge and subjective well-being, a series of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks tests and correlation analyses were used. Perception of challenge level was rank ordered with “1” being given to scores closest to the “optimal challenge” score of zero, and “4” assigned to scores furthest from zero or “optimal challenge.” Rank order was also assigned to PA and NA scores from the PANAS with “1” being given to scores reflecting the most positive (closer to 50) or least negative affect (reverse scored so closer to 0), and a ranking of “4” for scores associated with the least positive (closer to 0) or most negative affect (reverse scored so closer to 50). Spearman’s *rho* correlations were then conducted on these rankings per participant. These correlations were in turn analyzed using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test.

Results provided partial support that optimal challenge experiences produce significantly more positive affect than non-optimal challenge experiences, but only under the condition of being assessed immediately after participation ($W = 1.878$, $p = .030$). No differences were found between predicted and actual perceptions of challenge levels in their effects on subjective well-being. In addition, results did not show a significant correlation between self-report and observer-ratings of challenge levels.

Discussion

The results that optimal challenge experiences are better than non-optimal experiences at producing positive affect when assessed immediately after participation do seem consistent with theoretical and practical foundations of AT/AP. Unfortunately, interpretation of these results must be done cautiously, as this only provides moderate and conditional support rather than the expected strong relationship between optimal challenge and positive well-being and growth outcomes. Regardless, this lack of unequivocal support is a noteworthy contribution as it raises questions regarding the theoretical mechanisms by which adventure therapy always has been assumed to operate. These results, along with measurement limitations encountered, also provide a challenge to proponents of the field to find a better measurement scheme by which to assess challenge level. In addition, findings highlighting the fact that observers might not be able to accurately assess participants’ experienced challenge level are interesting in light of common practice for facilitators to use their observations to determine and adjust level of challenge for individuals and groups.

For more than 25 years, researchers have called for more methodologically sound methods as well as research that examined the process of adventure therapy and programming. Although findings in this study were minimal and/or inconsistent, as one initial attempt to utilize rarely used methodological design and examine a critical ingredient within

AT/AP, this investigation has contributed to the empirical research and literature. Clearly more studies need to be conducted as the process, content, and quality of participants' experiences in adventure activities will continue to prove to be a worthwhile arena of research as popularity in adventure experiences and rate of participation continues to rise.

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