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“Growing Without Limitations:” Transformation Among Young Adult Camp Staff

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Abstract: A strong body of research has developed over the last decade regarding the developmental outcomes of camp experiences of children and adolescents. However, few formal studies have taken place to determine how camp experiences lead to deep personal change in young adults. Mixed methods were used to better understand how camp is transformative in lives of young adult camp staff and to identify conditions in the camp setting that facilitate change. A change model and conditions of change model were developed. Recommendations for future research are provided.

Introduction

The positive impacts of the camp experience on positive youth development in children and adolescents is well documented (Bialeschki, M. D., Henderson, K. A., & James, P. A., 2007; Thurber, C., Schuler, L., Scanlin, M., & Henderson, K., 2007). This body of research links involvement in day and resident camps and exposure to specific elements that promote youth development with enhanced developmental outcomes. Research has also documented how camp experiences contribute to leadership-related life skill outcomes in staff (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007; Garst & Johnson, 2005; Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007).

Although helpful as a basis for understanding how camp influences staff outcomes, these studies have not examined how camp may be transformative in the lives of young adult leaders

who work in camps. Specifically, research to determine the degree to which the camp environment promotes transformative learning or deep change in young adult staff is limited. The purpose of this study was to examine how young adult camp staff experience transformative learning and how the camp context influences personal growth. The following research questions were explored:

1. How does camp involvement promote transformation in young adults?
2. What conditions in the camp environment promote personal change?

Positive Youth Development

Youth development includes the processes that prepare young people to meet the challenges of transitioning into adulthood by providing the supports and opportunities that are needed for healthy social, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual growth. The concept of "positive youth development," emergent over the past decade, is based on human development theories that associate positive youth outcomes to specific conditions in a child's environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, & Theokas, 2005). The positive youth development approach recognizes that all youth have strengths and that they will develop in positive ways when their strengths are aligned with appropriate family and community resources (Zarrett & Lerner, 2008).

Positive youth development models move beyond the short-term outcomes that youth may receive from program participation to examine the characteristics of program settings that contribute to appropriate, healthy development (Witt, 2002). The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine summarized the features of positive youth development settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) as: physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

Developmental Impact of Camp Experiences on Children and Adolescents

Research indicates that children and adolescents involved in several out-of-school activities are developmentally healthier than their peers who are not involved at all or who participate in only one activity (Zarrett & Lerner, 2008). Camp is unique when compared with other youth development settings in the following ways: youth live outdoors rather than merely visiting it, youth attend one to eight week periods of intense experiences rather than short experiences spread out over time, staff and campers are with one another for long periods of time, and ratios of staff to campers are low (Henderson, Thurber, Scanlin, & Bialeschki, 2007). Thus, camp is a particularly impactful out-of-school activity due to the duration and intensity of the experience for children and adolescents (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007).

The American Camp Association (ACA) (2006), conducted a national benchmarking study using a developmental framework created by Klem, Gambone, & Connell (2002) that included four support and opportunities areas: supportive relationships, physical and emotional safety, youth involvement and decision-making, and skill building (Henderson, Thurber, Scanlin, & Bialeschki, 2007). ACA found that camp experiences lead to positive developmental outcomes in children and adolescents, particularly in the area of supportive relationships. These results are affirmed by state-level studies showing that camp participation promotes positive outcomes in children and adolescents (Arnold, Bourdeau, & Nagele, 2005; Garst & Bruce, 2003; Garst & Johnson, 2005; Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007).

Developmental Impact of Camp Experiences on Young Adults

Across the United States each year, thousands of late adolescents and emerging adults work as staff in day and resident camp settings. Approximately 65% of these young staff members return to work in camps over multiple summers (American Camp Association, 2007). Trained as front-line mentors, counselors, and leaders, these staff members ensure the safety of youth and bear much of the responsibility for making camp a setting for positive development.

Although research has documented the youth development outcomes received by campers, very little attention has been paid to the impact of the camp experience on camp staff development; particularly as it relates to helping this group of late adolescents and emerging adults grow to be “fully functioning adults.” Furstenberg (1999) suggests that being a fully prepared and fully functioning adult includes the ability to find remunerative employment, form a lasting and gratifying partnership, and become contributors in a community. The concept of a fully functioning adult is supported by Erikson’s (1963) life cycle model of human development. Erikson proposed that as a young person moves from childhood to adulthood, they consciously create a multi-dimensional image of their self, and they look to have their identity validated by others. Furthermore, as a person moves into young adulthood, they seek companionship and love with another person.

Powell (2004) suggested camp professionals know that many young adults who have worked at camp gained the skills and confidence that made major impacts in their personal lives, careers, and the leadership roles they hold in their communities. Limited research has explored these impacts. Garst and Johnson (2003) conducted focus group interviews with camp staff, who expressed developing an increased awareness of themselves and a wide range of social and life skills related to leadership and understanding children. The life skill outcomes of the camp experience for camp staff is supported in studies by Dworken (2004) and Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson (2004). Too often, youth outcomes research, such as the studies previously cited, focused on short and medium-term outcomes rather than exploring long-term conditions that can positively change as a result of providing youth with the developmental supports and opportunities they need. It is particularly important for youth development providers to understand the long-term impacts of youth programs such as camps, to better understand these conditions of change.

Contribution of Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory may inform our understanding of the long-term impacts of camp experiences for young adult staff. Transformative learning is defined as, “the development of revised assumptions, premises, ways of interpreting experience, or perspectives on the world by means of critical reflection” (Cranton, 1994, p.vii). Thus the process of transformation, or deep personal change, occurs when individuals, groups, and/or organizations arrive at new perspectives and actions that greatly differ from their past views and actions. Transformative learning contrasts with instrumental learning, defined as technical and skill-based, and communicative learning, which focuses on understanding others (Kreber & Cranton, 2000; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999).

Transformative learning requires shaping over time (Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 2000) and interactions between individuals different from each other (Daloz, 2000). Camp experiences are powerful because they involve prolonged exposure to persons, places, and spaces in an experience-based learning environment. If camp experiences are contexts for positive development in young adults, then it seems likely that transformative learning may also be influencing received outcomes. Unfortunately, little research has explored how transformation

among young adults occurs in a camp setting. The purpose of this research was to explore how camp experiences promote transformation in young adults and to identify conditions in the camp environment that promote personal change.

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

Data for this two-phase study were collected during the summer of 2007 from summer camp staff employed at six residential camps in Virginia. In phase 1, male and female camp staff ages 18-28 years old with at least five years of summer camp experience were selected to participate in a series of focus groups. Phase 2 consisted of a survey of experienced male and female camp staff ages 18-28 employed at six residential camps in Virginia.

Four focus groups with 33 camp staff were conducted using a semi-structured approach. Sample questions included, "How does the camp experience change how you see/act in the world and who you are?" and "Describe critical events that take place at camp that changed who you are/how you see/act in the world." The focus group questions were pilot tested with a group of camp staff prior to the study.

An on-line survey was developed using SurveyMonkey and pilot-tested with a small group of camp staff. Eighty-four members of the Virginia 4-H Camp Staff Alumni Association were invited to participate in the survey via direct email and link from the Association's MySpace webpage. The survey included questions related to transformative learning that were developed based on data collected in the focus groups. Twenty one staff members completed the survey for a response rate of 25%.

Data Analysis

Focus group data were transcribed by research team members. Content analysis (Patton, 2002), the process of breaking down large portions of text into meaningful blocks of words, was used to analyze the transcribed interviews. Blocks of words were then conceptually grouped into categories using a coding process to capture how participants described their camp experiences and associated personal transformation. Themes based on category groups were identified by individual researchers and then by the research group. Common themes were organized across focus groups into two theoretical models. The first model addressed individual changes and the second addressed conditions of change.

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and triangulated with focus groups transcripts, focus group facilitator notes, and research team observations. A participant review of the results was used as a trustworthiness procedure (Patton, 2002).

Results

Personal Changes Associated with the Camp Experience

The first research question was, "How does camp involvement promote transformation in young adults?" See Table 1 for the list of emergent themes related to this question.

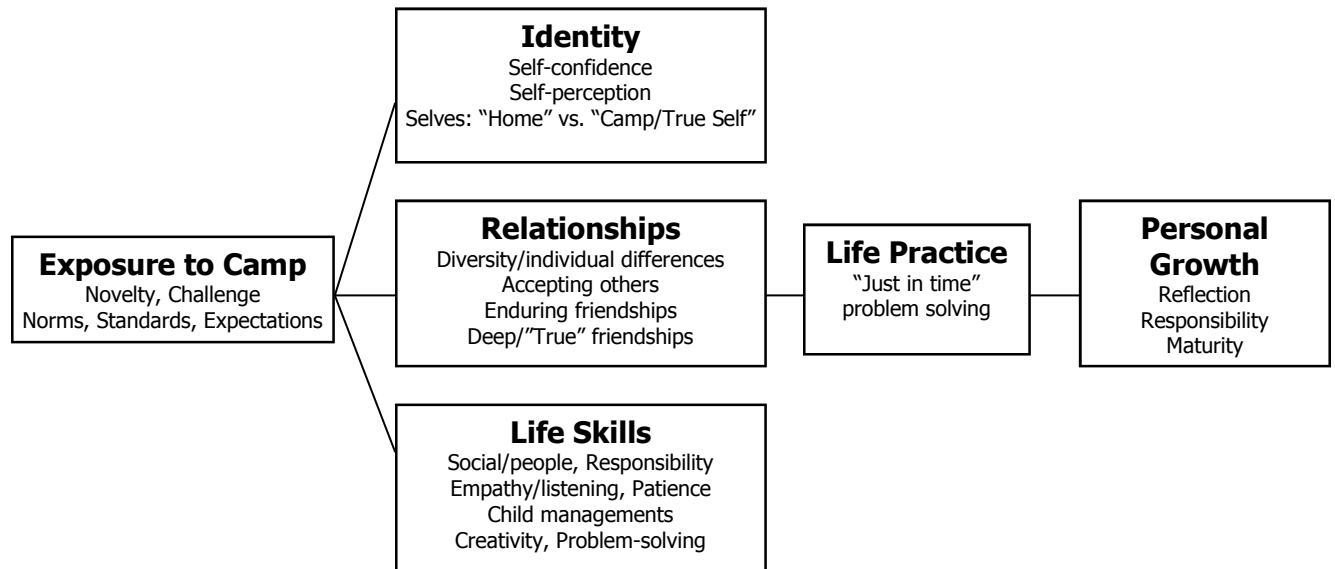
Table 1

Emergent Themes Related to Personal Transformation Resulting from Camp Experiences

<p>Transformation (Deep Personal Change) Associated with Camp Experiences</p>	<p>Increased confidence Skills Closer relationships Working with Children Camp as an entity/identity True self Respect/trust-mutual contract with self and others Belonging Broaden horizons Hold self to higher standards Solve problems Enhance learning Enhanced reflection Maturity/responsibility/growth/independence Career direction</p>
<p>Camp Conditions That Promote Transformation (Deep Personal Change)</p>	<p>Relationships Common group goal Camp culture Traditions/ritual Success with challenges Camper focus Simple lifestyle Context comparisons/high standards Life practice Safe environment Short period over several years Escape/disconnect Support development of mastery</p>

An exploratory change model was developed based on common themes across the four focus groups (Figure 1). The model describes how the camp experience in this study transformed the lives of young adult staff (ages 18-28).

Figure 1
Change Model for Transformative Learning in Camp



Young adults are exposed to the camp experience, which includes unfamiliar settings, challenging experiences, and diverse relationships. As one focus group participant shared,

“I also think it’s the diversity because we are bring a whole bunch of different counties together so that kids from different backgrounds, different communities, are interacting with each other so they are meeting people they wouldn’t meet before and for them to get used to different types of cultures...”

The camp community contrasts most staff members’ home communities, particularly the camp environment as an emotionally safe place. For example, 86% of respondents to the survey indicated as a result of camp, they are more willing or able to include and accept others who are different than them. The camp community brings with it norms, standards, and expectations that immediately create dissonance for many staff. Eighty-six percent of staff responding to the survey “agree” or “strongly agree” that as a result of camp they are more willing or able to hold themselves to higher standards of behaving and talking.

Staff bring with them an identity, yet this identity is modified through camp experiences as staff learn that they can “be themselves” at camp. In the survey, 82% of the respondents agree or strongly agree they are better able to show their identity—“their true self”—at camp. One participant said, “I’m accepted at camp and now am not afraid of showing my ‘true’ self at camp.” Staff gain confidence showing this “self” (86% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed) and enhance self-perception. As one focus group participant said, “It boosted my confidence so much in the...years to come because my kids and my fellow counselors had so much confidence in me.”

Within this environment of trust and belonging, a range of life skills are learned, practiced, and sometimes mastered, including: public speaking, leadership, followership, listening, empathy, self-responsibility, problem solving, reflection, working with children, and people skills. Staff explore new ways of talking, behaving, and expressing themselves. New friendships are created, and some eventually become what participants described as “true” or deep friendships. One focus group respondent explained, “Camp has helped me create a second family...that I know I can depend on whenever and wherever.”

Thus, staff described that personal change at camp was related to the developmental outcomes they experienced around the dimensions of identity, skills development, and trust-based relationships that led to significant impacts on maturity, responsibility, and independence. A focus group participant shared, “...my life at camp was like a microcosm of the world. I grew as a leader and developed other skills that will carry me through life.” Another focus group member described, “Camp has helped me develop into my adult self. I can better make decisions for myself as well as for a group. I have a better sense of self.”

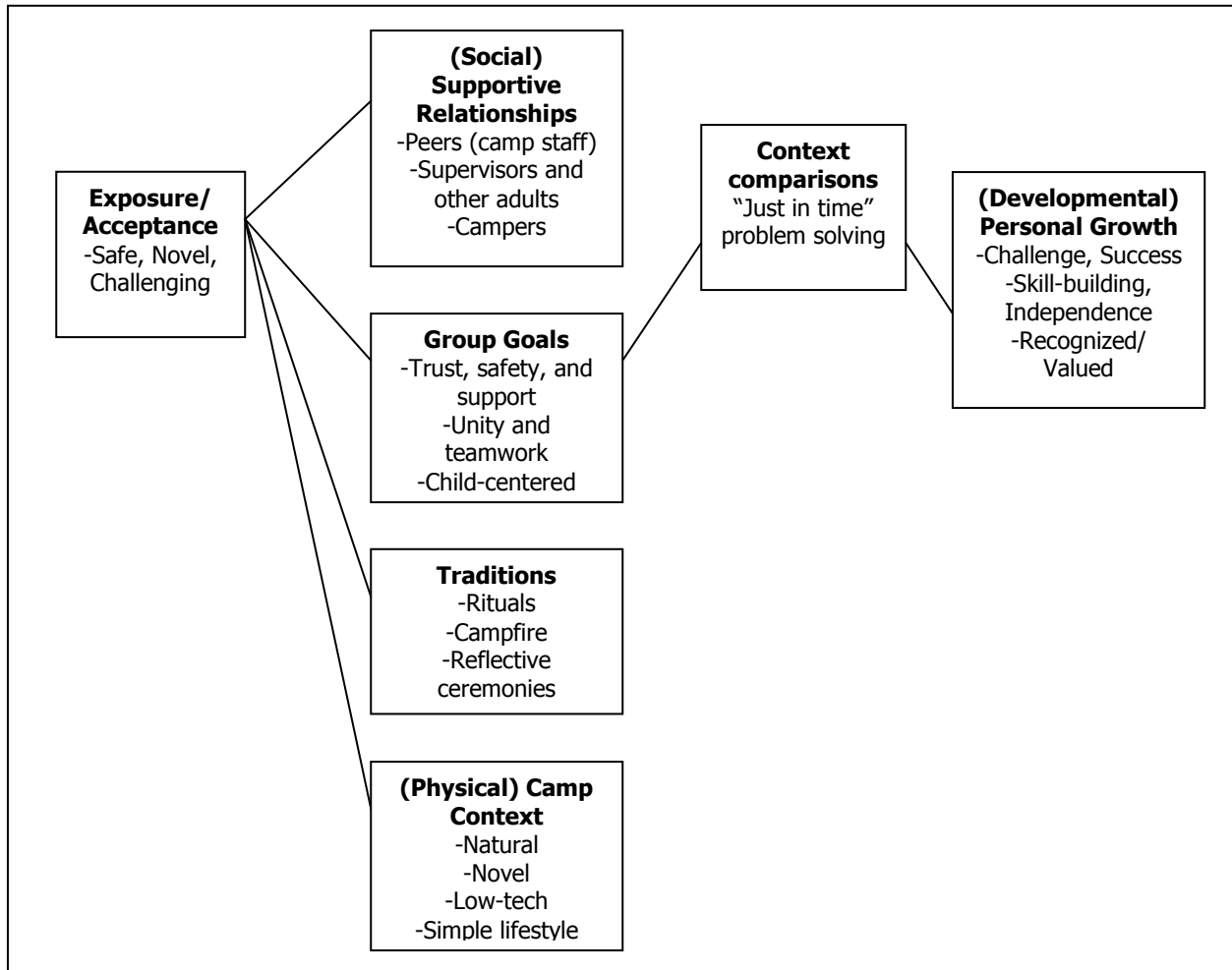
Some staff also changed occupational goals or involvement in school and civic groups based on their camp leadership experience. Seventy-two percent of survey respondents said that as a result of camp, they are more aware of what they want to do for a career. In addition, 52% said they are more likely to change what they plan to do for a career due to their camp experience. For example, several focus group participants mentioned they switched from a career path based on financial gains to one focused on positively impacting youth.

Conditions in a Camp Setting that Promote Personal Changes

The second research question was, “What conditions does a camp environment provide that promote personal change? See Table 1 for the list of emergent themes related to this question. The “Conditions of Change” model (Figure 2) describes conditions a camp provides that impact how the camp experience is transformative in the lives of young adult staff. In order for transformative change to occur, focus group participants explained that staff must be exposed to and accept a camp culture and a group identity.

Figure 2

Conditions of Change Model for Transformative Learning in Camp



Staff must also develop supportive relationships with peers, supervisors, and campers that provide safety, belonging, membership, and self validation. Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents said they received support and encouragement from their supervisor at camp. Eighty-three percent said camp was a safe place that supports personal change. One staff member said,

"I've told my non-camp friends about how camp has changed me and they tend to not fully understand. My camp friends and I, however, talk often about how camp has changed us and how it has impacted our lives. It's not something we can easily explain because it truly affected our very person. I tried to tell friends that camp has been a positive experience and that once you work on staff, you're a family and you can never change that."

The camp setting is unique compared to the stimulus-rich settings where most young adults spend their time. The low-tech, nature-based, and comparatively simply environment at camp provides a place where staff focus on relationships with peers and children. One focus group participant said, "I [learned] a lot from the experience by having to live a simple life at camp."

That is something I have brought with me to college.” In this simplified, context, staff often come to consider the needs of the camp community over their own needs. Ninety-five percent of survey respondents indicated that being part of a group working towards a common goal enhanced personal change at camp, and 83% believe being part of a unified camp group promotes personal change.

Staff learn and adopt the camp culture, including its norms, standards, goals, and traditions. The vast majority of staff believe elements of the camp culture including: feeling welcome, being part of a group that respects them, reflection, being part of a diverse group, being part of a group that supports new ideas and openness, and being part of a group that does not have cliques promotes personal change. Ceremonies like campfire programs enhance personal reflection and recognition that strengthen staff members’ connection to the camp community. They also believe camp traditions and rituals such as camp fire programs, singing and song leading, and meeting campers’ needs promotes personal change. One focus group participant said, “I wish the rest of the world was like camp so I could be the person I am at camp everyday: very high energy, always singing, and always laughing.”

Staff adopt the often higher standards of talking and behaving that differ from how they act in settings (such as school, work, and home) outside of camp. Eighty-four percent of survey respondents indicated camp surrounds them with others who have similar high standards. In addition, 78% said camp gives them an opportunity to compare camp life with home life. Focus group participants mentioned that they hold themselves to this higher standard outside of camp due to the camp experience.

The combination of these conditions, along with the new, challenging tasks, successful experiences, and many opportunities to be recognized, valued, and validated, lead to personal growth and development. The vast majority of survey respondents indicated that camp provides opportunities to be challenged and pushed outside their comfort zone that enhances personal change. As one focus group participant explained,

“...I understand myself in ways I never thought I could. I actually enjoy pushing myself as far as I possibly can now. I can even see a huge difference in my grades from before and after camp. My time management skills are amazing. If I need to do something on the spot it’s not a problem at all. Like most other staffers, improvising is a new way of life. I’m not as strict to a schedule anymore either. They’re more “guidelines” than schedules now. I’m a lot more efficient in the work that I do, as well. I’m more outspoken and not afraid to ask for help when I need to. Camp has changed me in too many ways to write down. There are probably things that changed that I don’t even notice. Camp staff is a life-altering event.”

Discussion

Camp as a Change-Agent

Camp has always been a place for young people to learn and grow as individuals. This study suggests that young adults do experience deep personal change and development as a result of long-term camp experiences. Along with this transformative learning, young adult staff gain an enhanced sense of self, confidence, and a drive for success that may not have been present prior to their involvement in camp.

This study supports the body of knowledge that has developed around the developmental outcomes of camp experiences for camp staff. Comparing the results of this study with recent studies of the outcomes of camp experiences for adolescent camp staff, it seems that the outcomes for young adult camp staff are similar. Given the expansion of the definition of adolescence into the mid-to-late twenties into what was once young adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Bynner, 2005), these results are not surprising. What seems interesting is that the outcomes for young adult camp staff are being received and perceived within a context of greater experience, maturity, and perhaps wisdom. Furthermore, the additional camp exposure over multiple years provides a comparative context for the identification of personal change characteristics.

Camp was a positive developmental setting for young adult camp staff. Many of the elements or features of positive youth development settings found in the child and youth development literature, such as confidence, supportive relationships, safety and belonging, competence and mastery, also emerged from this study. Other important elements for positive development emerged, including life practice and just-in-time problem solving. The "conditions of change model" suggests how these real-world situations facilitated personal growth. Also suggested by the model was the importance of transformative learning conditions, including the role of rituals, traditions, and a simple lifestyle. These conditions need further study to determine how they catalyze transformation.

The importance of camp experiences for identity development was particularly impactful for young adults in this study, supporting other evidence of the influences of camp experiences on self-identity. The American Camp Association's (2005) national camp outcomes study found that impacts on campers' positive identity were one of the most salient. Adolescent camp staff in Garst and Johnson's (2005) expressed how they were able to show their true personality at camp when compared with other settings. Identity impacts appear to continue to be salient for staff as young adults.

In this study participants explained how they were profoundly changed from the person they were before camp to a more grown-up and well-rounded individual. Recalling Furstenberg's (1999) concept of a fully functioning adult, there appears to be evidence from this study that camp experiences facilitate in young adults the transition into becoming fully functioning adults. Camp provides an opportunity for the development of deep friendships with peers and other adults, supports a focused and positive self-identity, provides multi-faceted skill development, stimulates career exploration and reflection, and provides opportunity for young adults to be a contributing part of a community. This by no means suggests that camp is the only setting that can facilitate such transformation, but the duration and intensity of camp experiences may be particularly critical in influencing this growth towards adulthood.

Study Limitations

Several limitations were identified in this study. First, due to the confidential nature of data collection we do not know to what degree there is overlap between focus group and survey participants, which may bias the results. Second, the impacts identified in this study may be attributed to normal maturation effects in the young adult participants rather than to personal transformation. Third, since this study was conducted with a small sample of camp staff, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other camp contexts and young adult camp staff populations.

Implications

A positive trend has been slowly emerging in camp research, a trend away from short-term outcomes towards structural and programmatic factors that result in intentional short, medium, and even long term outcomes. For example, Henderson, Thurber, Scanlin, & Bialeschki (2007) recommended that researchers determine “how different program formats within camps and among other youth development organizations result in greater developmental growth” (p. 9).

This study, particularly with the exploration of conditions of change, makes a contribution to what we know about social, physical, and contextual elements of positive change settings. However, much more needs to be understood. If the camp experience can be so impactful, can we somehow let the “genie out of the bottle” so that other youth development programs and settings can benefit from the qualities that make camp unique? What qualities about camp settings may be replicable in non-camp settings? If there are certain conditions in camp that lead to deep personal change, how might this information translate into recommendations for changes in practice via the standards, such as those developed by the American Camp Association?

An opportunity also exists to explore transformative learning among larger samples of young adult camp staff, and to explore the influence of demographic and related variables on perceptions of deep learning. Do male and female young adult camp staff members experience transformative learning similarly? Do certain leadership roles make transformation more likely to occur? Why might some young adult camp staff experience transformation while others do not?

Conclusions

This study explored how young adults experience transformative learning in the context of the camp setting and how camp promotes deep personal change in young adult staff. Pittman, Martin, and Yohalem (2006) argue that “achieving long-term positive outcomes for adulthood (e.g., young people who are ready for college, work, and life) requires systematically defining more immediate outcomes (eg, offering key supports and opportunities)” (p. S24). Based on this study, camp can be an important setting for key supports and opportunities for young adults, suggesting the important role that camp experiences play, in conjunction with well-rounded experiences in other aspects of community and family life, in helping young adults to become productive, successful, contributing citizens.

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