Positive Youth Development: A Wilderness Intervention

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The purpose of this interpretive case study was to explore how a wilderness challenge intervention was experienced by "at-risk" youth, to uncover the meanings of those experiences, and to assess the generalization and transfer of their experiences beyond the intervention. Two motivational frameworks involving theory of optimal experience and self-determination were used to guide the study. Forty research participants involved with a therapeutic wilderness program were interviewed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the main source of data collection. Using constant comparison as the method of analysis, three themes encompassing the topics of challenge, community, and key player relationships were constructed from the data. Data analysis led to the construction of optimal experience, self-determination, social capital, optimism, and youth initiative resulting in a grounded theory of positive youth development. Implications for practice include encouraging greater parental involvement in the overall program and offering sustained, challenging follow-up activities.

KEY WORDS: *youth, adventure, flow, self-determination, social capital, optimism.*

Youth in today's society face a number of challenges. Inadequate family-support struc-   tures, peer pressure, and the disappearance of social norms have contributed to problems

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such as underachievement, delinquency, and overall poor judgment. Young people who are ill-equipped to deal with the pressures and forces around them frequently suffer from low motivation and low self-esteem, failure to act responsibly, and an inability to satisfy needs appropriately (Pommier & Witt, 1995). At this vulnerable developmental stage, youth who face such pressures may be at-risk for social, psychological, and behavioral challenges that manifest into problems such as school dropout, suicide, delinquency, substance abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases (Serna & Lau-Smith, 1995).

At-risk youth who are not adequately equipped with skills to generate self-motivated, meaningful activity are often prone to boredom (Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991). Lacking skills to independently seek complex, challenging situations in leisure and discretionary time, youth become vulnerable to peer pressure and activities of immediate gratification. In turn, young people are often inclined to alleviate boredom through dysfunctional leisure such as skipping school, illegal substance use, risky sexual activity, and delinquent behavior.

Alternatively, youth equipped to engage in complex, internally rewarding experiences in their leisure (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) are likely to perceive such experiences as a sense of freedom and self-determination, and they may be more likely to persist in such behaviors (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; McCormick & Dattilo, 1995). Similarly, individuals who feel autonomy, competence, and social support in daily activity tend toward self-determined behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Optimal or "flow" experiences have been found to produce feelings of well-being, freedom, positive affect, and self-affirmation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Voelkl & Ellis, 1998, 2002; Voelkl, Ellis, & Walker, 2003). The ability of young people to engage in complex, rewarding, flow-producing behaviors is additionally associated with personal growth tendency and potential (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

Therapeutic adventure programming is widely used by therapeutic recreation practitioners working with adolescents in mental health settings. As recreation, adventure activities are thought to facilitate optimal or "flow" experiences through the purposive facilitation of challenging activities that require skills, and provide clear goals and immediate feedback (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Freeman, 1993; Haras, 2003). Though documented with general ropes course programming (Freeman; Haras), such experience has not been studied within the context of therapeutic wilderness programming. Likewise, self-determination, also thought to be an attribute central to adventure education philosophy (Hill & Sibthorp, 2004; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988; Sklar & Gibson, 2004), is not well understood as it pertains to therapeutic wilderness programming. Therefore, the problem of interest for this study was the lack of research in this area. Specifically, it is unknown whether graduates of these programs are better equipped to engage in self-motivated, complex, and rewarding experiences upon completion of a challenging wilderness experience.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to describe how a wilderness program for at-risk youth was experienced by program participants, as understood through the theoretical frameworks of flow and self-determination, and how these experiences impacted transition back to the home. Specifically, this study aimed to explore program factors and conditions that both promoted and inhibited flow and/or self-determined experiences. Additionally, this study aimed to ascertain the meanings of these experiences to the youth participants. A final purpose was to assess the generalization and transfer of the youth's experiences relative to flow and self-determination. Such knowledge can inform practitioner training, development, and practice, as well as overall design and structure of therapeutic recreation adventure programs.

Problems Facing Contemporary Youth

The well-being of society depends on the ability of communities to prepare well-adjusted, responsible, well-educated young people to step forward as the older generation passes, yet many of today's youth are falling by the wayside (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2004). Risky sexual behavior, rising rates of teen pregnancy, youth gang involvement, poverty, crime, drug use, social isolation, physical violence, poor access to healthcare, physical inactivity, obesity, and depression are among the multitude of problems confronting contemporary youth. Faced with such issues, young people are challenged by numerous obstacles to achieving healthy psychosocial development.

Among the many problems confronting young people is the challenge of structuring time in productive pursuits. Adolescents spend nearly 40% of their waking hours as discretionary time (Bartko & Eccles, 2003), and the times when youth seem to make the poorest activity choices are when they are not in school (Pawelko & Magafas, 1997). Experience sampling studies show that large portions of adolescent daily life are experienced as boredom (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Freeman, 1992; Larson & Richards, 1991), even among those teens with the least amount of risk factors (Larson & Richards).

According to Witt and Crompton (1996), developing skills for the constructive management of discretionary time is paramount to youth development. However, for all youth, avoiding boredom by finding constructive and interesting ways to occupy time can be challenging (Witt & Crompton, 2002). Those who have been exposed to the excitement of illicit activities and the action and entertainment of video games and popular media, may require interesting, challenging activities to retain their attention in developmentally positive pursuits (Witt & Crompton, 2002).

The ability of youth to engage in growth-oriented, appropriate, meaningful, self-motivated pursuits is an underlying concern of the current study. The absence of skills for such engagement can lead to boredom; which, when prevalent, may signal a deficiency in positive development (Larson, 2000).

Optimal Experience

The concept of boredom has been studied extensively from a socio-psychological perspective. Research in this area has been a prevalent theme in the field of leisure studies for nearly two decades. Researchers have been particularly interested in the concept of optimal experience, the state of high psychological involvement or absorption in activities or settings (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of flow is particularly useful for defining optimal experience, since it identifies various features of mental activity that can be used to identify perceptions of optimal experiences.

Studies of youth development have used the flow framework to research the adolescent daily experience (Kleiber, Larson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1986; Mayer, 1978), as well as youth adventure experiences (Haras, 2003). Although youth flow-like experiences have been documented in adventure education programs such as ropes course programming, the flow experience has not been studied in the context of a wilderness-based youth intervention. Furthermore, little is known about the generalization and transfer of flow-like experiences from adventure-based settings back to everyday life. The question thus remains, does the ability to engage in flow during a therapeutic wilderness experience have an impact on young people following the program?

Research on youth experience has used the flow framework to illuminate issues related to healthy adjustment of teenagers. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) suggested the ability to engage in flow promotes positive psychosocial development of adolescents. Those who are able to engage in complex flow-producing activities are less prone to boredom and anxi-

ety and may have developmental advantages over those who are less inclined to have such experiences. The adolescent who readily engages in pro-social flow-producing activity, and is internally motivated to seek more of the same, may face substantially fewer risk factors than the adolescent prone to anxiety and/or boredom.

Self-Determination

The theoretical concept of self-determination has been related to the concept of optimal experience (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Wehmeyer (1992), self-determination refers to "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influences or interference" (p. 17). To the degree that one consistently exhibits self-determined actions, he or she can be considered to be self-determined.

Many young people lack the competence necessary to act in a self-determined manner (Pommier & Witt, 1995). Among other problems, the most vulnerable youth may face peer pressure, isolation, and family stress, complicating efforts to satisfy basic developmental needs. An effective response to the developmental requirements of youth includes an approach that helps teach young people to choose alternative, acceptable behaviors (Eron, 1987), and to develop skills that advance self-determination (Pawelko & Magafas, 1997). The foundational concept of challenge by choice (Gillis & Simpson, 1994; Schoel et al., 1988), for example, is widely used in therapeutic adventure. Challenge by choice links the two concepts through a common emphasis on participant autonomy and control. Of specific interest to this research is how the application of these theories may converge among wilderness-based interventions for at-risk youth.

Therapeutic Adventure Experience

Therapeutic interventions based on wilderness challenge experiences have been widely used to help young people who have serious difficulties in a number of psycho-social areas (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1999; Russell, 1999, 2002). Included among these are low self-esteem, poor self-image, poor decision-making skills, repeated failures, refusal to take responsibility for actions, lack of motivation, ambivalence, susceptibility to negative peer pressure, and impulsive behaviors (Hurricane Island Outward Bound School, n.d.). Considering the definitions of self-determination and optimal experience presented earlier in this paper, it would be expected that such youth might also be poorly self-determined and inadequately equipped to satisfy the need for flow. Therefore, the youth would likely benefit from the facilitation of self-determined, flow-producing experiences.

Flow experience is arguably a target goal of wilderness challenge programming. Similarly, facilitating self-determination is central to adventure education philosophy. The therapeutic adventure literature, however, lacks substantial research on these concepts. Whether therapeutic adventure programs for at-risk youth are purposefully addressing self-determination and flow, and whether programs are impacting these adaptive skill areas has not been determined. How these experiences can be generalized and transferred is also unknown. Researching this knowledge gap will better inform the fields of therapeutic recreation, therapeutic adventure and youth development as to how youth can engage in and generate intrinsically motivated, self-rewarding, active, growth-oriented experiences. This study addresses this void in the literature.

Method

The interpretive paradigm of naturalistic inquiry (Henderson, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) guided this research. Within the interpretive paradigm, a case study method was used to research the specific phenomena of self-determination and flow within the contexts of program participants' lives both during and after a therapeutic wilderness interven-

tion. The program of interest is offered once annually, and the research focused on the experiences of one group of participants of a given trip. Therefore, the study of self-determination and flow phenomena was limited to the experiences of these one-time program participants. It was the context specific nature of this intervention, combined with the exploratory nature of the research questions, that called for a case study approach (Yin, 2003).

Program

Community Family Services (CFS) is a not-for-profit community-based counseling agency serving a diverse population in the suburbs of a major city in the American Midwest. The Adventure Challenge Experience (ACE), an intervention offered by CFS, is a therapeutic wilderness program targeting youth considered at-risk of problematic transition to high school. Participants of ACE may have difficulty with uncooperative/non-compliant behavior at home or school and may be seen as socially isolated, ineffective, and/or severely lacking in self-esteem. Additionally, youth struggling with family or peer problems are commonly referred to the program. ACE participants include youth from lower income, divorced or re-married families with histories of family problems. Many of the youth participants have, at the very least, experimented with drugs and alcohol and may be at-risk of developing substance abuse problems (Doc, personal communication, May 11, 2004).

An 8-day canoe experience was led by agency therapists and adult volunteers. As a way of teaching life coping skills and empowering youth to face future life challenges, an "expeditionary learning" model was applied. Participants were encouraged to continually challenge themselves both physically and mentally in the unfamiliar and often uncomfortable context of a wilderness environment (Doc, personal communication, May 11, 2004).

During the wilderness expedition, participants camped nightly and traveled 27 miles, mostly by canoe. Throughout the trip, participants encountered numerous physical, mental and social demands posed within the natural environment and group context. The youth were immersed in a backcountry experience facing challenges such as route-finding, negotiation of rapids, foul weather, swarming mosquitoes, capsized canoes, wet gear, meal preparation, camp setup/take-down, and canoe loading/unloading. The group was also frequently confronted with arduous portages in which canoes and gear were precariously transported over rough terrain. Portage trails varied in condition from compacted dirt to extremely rocky, overgrown, steep, trails of sometimes waist-deep mud. Often more of the latter, portages were considered some of the most physically and mentally challenging aspects of the experience. Successful portages required significant cooperation, physical stamina, and determination, as did other challenging aspects of the trip.

Challenges were further influenced by purposive facilitation of staff, the social living environment, and one's own self-perception. Staff persons routinely provided feedback to participants regarding individual and group attitudes, values, and behaviors. During the final days of the wilderness trip, the staff began preparing the youth to transfer learning by facilitating personal goal-setting for the transition back to home (Doc, personal communication, July 24, 2004). About three weeks after the youth participants' return home, a follow-up component to the wilderness program began. Follow-up consisted of a biweekly social group facilitated by a CFS counselor/ACE staff member. Meetings occurred at various sites and revolved around a range of recreational activities such as dining out, bowling, and community special events. The group was intended to facilitate transfer of learning from the wilderness experience into real-world contexts, and to provide ongoing opportunities for shared recreation, leadership opportunities, peer support, and further development of friendships between group members. The social group met on an ongoing,

biweekly basis throughout the subsequent school year.

Research Participants

The primary sample was initially drawn from one group of youth, ages 13–15, enrolled in the ACE program. Following a case study method, the case being the group of youth, parents and staff members involved with a single ACE trip, all 25 youth enrolled in the program were recruited. One parent or guardian of each youth participant was also asked to participate in the research. The final sample included 15 youth, four of whom were returning as peer leaders who had been participants in ACE during the prior year. Additionally, 17 parents and one guardian were recruited. Seven staff members were also recruited to the study.

Statement of Subjectivity

A framework was needed to guide the inquiry to investigate the issues related to youth motivation. The authors agreed two specific theoretical frameworks, optimal experience and self-determination were applicable. The selection of these frameworks were based on their relevance to the specific research problem (i.e. the lack of research on relationships between challenging wilderness experiences and the ability of adolescent graduates to engage in self-motivated, complex, and rewarding experience). This determination was also based on the first author's intimate knowledge of the ACE program and discussions with the ACE program directors who concurred that these frameworks represented a foundation for the wilderness program.

Therefore, the authors' knowledge of these theories, and their use in constructing semi-structured interviews, were influences on data collection and interpretation. The theories of optimal experience and self-determination provided a necessary frame of reference for investigating the problem. However, as an interpretive design, the authors used these frameworks as theoretical foundations for the research without making specific predictions about what might be discovered (Samdahl, 1999).

Procedure

Data were obtained and triangulated through multiple qualitative methods including post-trip open-ended questionnaires, active semi-structured interviews (Henderson, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), and a staff focus group interview. Additional triangulation occurred by obtaining data from multiple sources, including the youth, staff members, the youth's parents, and field notes. The post-trip open-ended questionnaires were completed by the youth and used to guide the youth interviews. Individual and focus group interviews were audiotape recorded for later transcription. Data collection was divided into two categories: (1) the wilderness experience, and (2) follow-up.

Youth participants completed the post-trip open-ended questionnaires at the conclusion of the wilderness experience. Starting 3 weeks following the trip, 34 interviews were conducted, including individual interviews of 15 youth and 18 parents, and a group interview of seven staff members. These interviews occurred over a 3-week period, Additionally, two staff members were interviewed individually 3 months later in follow-up.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative approach (Henderson, 2006). Using the three major stages of constant comparison, categories of data were first coded and incidents fit within categories. The categories and their properties were then integrated by comparing them to one another and with the data. Finally, the categories were delimited for parsimony and scope and the process of comparison continued until saturation was achieved. The focus of this technique was to compare individuals, groups of individuals, and the data to enhance the overall trustworthiness of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). *N-6,* a computer assisted qualitative data analysis soft-
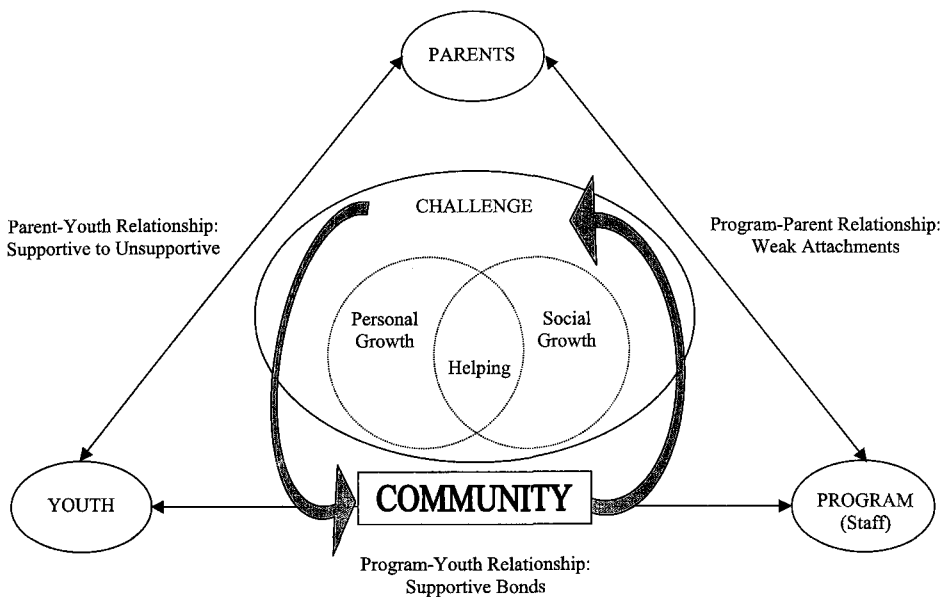
FIGURE 1. THEMATIC RELATIONSHIPS

ware package designed to relate to the logic of the constant comparative method was used to this end.

To further enhance the trustworthiness of this research, member checks were carried out throughout the data collection and analysis process. Trustworthiness was also addressed through investigator triangulation in which the authors separately read through the interview transcripts and questionnaires to produce initial coding, categorization, and broad data themes (Henderson, 2006). Throughout the data analysis, the authors met to discuss and compare emerging codes, categories, themes, and theoretical concepts.

Through the constant comparative process, themes emerged into a system of relationships, or grounded theoretical concepts, that were built on the continuity of participant responses, data categories, and their properties (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Theory development occurred through the construction of diverse conceptual categories and themes, and these themes were illus-

trated through interview excerpts. The theory was further studied for similarities and convergences with concepts from the literature and modified as such. As the theory was delimited, relatively universal concepts and relationships emerged that were informed by and supported with concepts from new literature as well as by concepts that were presented previously in the literature review section.

Results

Data analysis resulted in saturation of three major themes including 1) challenge; 2) community; and 3) adult-youth relationships. Conceptually, the three themes that were constructed from the accounts of the youth participants, the parents, and the staff members, were joined with one another as an interdependent system of relationships (Figure 1).

To develop a deeper understanding of the emergent themes, the authors went through a process of constantly comparing the themes and categories with one another and with the

data, and tested these themes and their relationships as they fit within the two temporal phases of the ACE program addressed by the research questions. These phases were "wilderness trip," and "post-trip." In-depth understanding of the interrelationships between and among the three themes ultimately developed within the contexts of both phases. Each theme is presented within these contexts to provide a conceptual overview of the emergent system surrounding the wilderness intervention for its youth participants (Table 1).

Challenge

The first among the major themes was that of "challenge," which was divided into the three interrelated sub-themes of "personal growth," "social growth," and "helping." It was no surprise that the concept of challenge would be a major theme of the research results. Indeed, the method of the intervention program under study was to purposefully use a major group challenge experience to facilitate positive development among the youth participants. However, what emerged from the data was a strong contrast between the characteristics of *wilderness trip* challenge versus *post-trip* challenge.

Challenge: Wilderness Trip. Wilderness trip challenge was largely viewed as physically strenuous and sometimes mentally and/or socially taxing. Overcoming these challenges, both as individuals and as a group, was perceived as both personally and socially rewarding. As sub-themes of challenge, both personal growth and social growth seemed to develop by nature of surmounting challenges as a group and by the overlapping roles of youth necessarily helping one another.

Among the reports of personal growth experiences was talk of accomplishment, confidence, and perseverance. Marge, for example, a mother of a male peer leader, spoke about how her son had grown and gained confidence through his perseverance and success with the program.

[He] has always had the problem of

being scared of doing new things. . . . And, it definitely has shown him he's capable of accomplishing a lot. He just needs to set his mind to it. And that type of self-confidence, he did not have before.

While the youth reported perseverance in multiple forms, staff member Rudy connected this concept to perceptions of competence among the program participants. "Well my sense is that typically their life is involved with failures and they're excused from the experience, or they escape from the experience, or cop-out of the experience." Yet the ACE program offers youth a different experience, Rudy continued:

. . . the chance to stay with a challenge and see themselves succeed on the other side of it . . . that's kind of one of the critical elements of the trip. "Well I don't know how to get from here to there unless you just do it!" And simply sailing by, sitting here, and doing nothing is not an option . . . Forced into succeeding, they begin to see themselves as competent.

The process of taking-on, negotiating, and overcoming challenges as a group further contributed to the solidification of group bonds. While growth was evident in the personal domain, social growth also emerged as a salient sub-theme of the challenge experience.

As indicated by the youth profile, participants tended to lack socially supportive networks. Candace was a current staff member and former middle school guidance counselor with experience in referring youth to the ACE program. She stated:

I think socially, making friends [during the trip] gives them so much confidence. 'Cause a lot of these kids come from . . . experiences where they don't have friends. And they work and work and work to get into a group, and

<div align="center">Thematic summary*</div>

	Theme 1: CHALLENGE				Theme 2: COMMUNITY	Theme 3: ADULT-YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS
	Descriptions of Challenge	Sub-theme 1A: Personal Growth	Sub-theme 1B: Social Growth	Sub-theme 1C: Helping		
Wilderness Trip Phase	Future/goal oriented	Strength	Social skills	Overlaps with personal growth & social growth	Trust	Program-youth: strong supportive bonds
	Physical	Accomplishment	Social confidence	Solidifies social bonds	Group support	Program-parent: weak attachments
	Psychological	Confidence		Contributes to community	Friendship	Parent-youth: ranges from supportive to unsupportive
		Personal control Perseverance				
Post-Trip Phase	Passive	Ranges from active pursuits (limited) to passive (predominant)	Ranges from having friends to social isolation	Eagerness to help others	Weak outside of follow-up group	Program-youth: supportive bonds, though follow-up lacks challenging activity that facilitates transfer
	Emotional	Strength (for household chores)	Follow-up group: (see community)	Actual helping is limited to household work	Stronger within follow-up group	Program-parent: weak attachments
				Helping is unconnected to community		Parent-youth: ranges from supportive to unsupportive

*Table 1 is a representation of themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data; however, the complexity of the relationships among the data are demonstrated in Figure 1.

they're shut out . . . almost everywhere they turn.

The ACE trip, however, gave youth opportunities to establish new friendships. Candace continued, "They'd make friends. They're a part of the group, and I think that confidence carries over into just how they approach school. It doesn't have to be the socially scary place."

Candace's observations were additionally reflected by the statements of several youth participants. Iroquois, a returning ACE participant and peer leader, related his feelings of self-confidence in the current year to his experience as an ACE participant in the prior year.

It seemed like no pressure, really . . . . 'Cause I know I'm funny enough and I'll end up being liked. . . . So I guess, from the last year it helped me realize it shouldn't matter how I act, because everybody's gonna like me no matter what.

Taylor more specifically disclosed her view of how the wilderness trip had helped her become a more socially confident individual.

I am less shy. I'm more talkative . . . . I'm more confident to be me. I don't have to be there and act like everybody else is, or dress however everybody else does. I'll do what I want to do.

Asked to describe how challenge had been satisfying to the youth, the topic of helping was brought up repeatedly. Megan, for example, told about how her group had encountered a set of rapids. She had suggested that paddling up the rapids would be dangerous, and that someone would need to physically get into the water and pull the canoes up against the current. Megan took the leadership and sacrificed staying dry for the benefit of the group. "I know I did a big thing for the group . . . . So, I just got in. It was freezing . . . . The [satis-

faction] came from keeping them dry, . . . knowing that I kept people dry and knowing I saved them from tipping." Megan exemplified an ongoing helping dynamic that facilitated reciprocity and the formation of community among the peers and staff members.

Challenge: Post-Trip. In contrast to the wilderness trip phase, post-trip challenges—meaning the kinds of challenges youth faced in their everyday lives after the trip had concluded—had a largely different set of characteristics. In terms of pastimes, or how youth were spending their time, a mixture of active and passive activity was reported. Feelings of anxiety and avoidance of emotional challenges were also reported, as was boredom and frustration in the absence of challenging activity. Nicole, for example, related how her time at home following the trip had been characterized by family conflict. Her attempts to deal with the conflict were described as a mental challenge. Nicole admitted:

I haven't really had to go through a lot that's been too challenging for me, no. Other than—my whole family situation is kinda', really sorta' messed up. And that's more of a mental challenge that we were talking about earlier. Where I have to get along with my mom. And that can, at times, get really hard for me. . . . That's where I tend to get out of the house. So, I avoid that when I can.

Personal and social growth, while prevalent throughout the wilderness trip, was somewhat weaker among the post-trip accounts. When asked what her daughter had been doing with her free time post-trip, Summer, for example replied, "She's by herself. She entertains herself by watching TV, playing games on the computer, and those little hand held video games. She really doesn't have any friends."

Additionally, compared to the wilderness trip, opportunities to act as helpers among peers were substantially less prevalent among most post-trip accounts. The act of helping

was instead characterized as youth willingness to do chores and help around the home.

Community

As a second constructed theme, "community" emerged as a major topic of talk among the research participants. The combination of personal and social growth, having developed through challenge, fostered an environment of interdependence and reciprocity in which youth felt satisfaction in contributing to their group. These ingredients, combined with a staff intent on supporting participant growth, developed into a community of youth and staff that seemed to represent deep meaning for the program participants.

Community: Wilderness Trip. Among the meanings of community experienced during the trip were characteristics of trust, social support, and friendship. Trust, for examples, as a salient aspect of the community experience, was clearly articulated by Hal.

> Well, the people that you're with on the trip kind of be, sorta become your family on the trip and you learn to share what you can't really share at home with them. Because you know it's going to be confidential. And at home or specifically at my house, you know it's probably not gonna be confidential and it's just gonna get around. And usually come back and bites you in the butt.

Within the context of physical challenge, Bruce talked about how supporting one another in the group was central to getting the group over a beaver dam.

> The communication skills. Trying to have one person at the top of the beaver dam. Guiding the canoe while the other person at the bottom pushed it up in order to get it to the top. . . . Some people were strong enough to do it, some people weren't. . . . If you

couldn't do it, then you had somebody else help you.

Friendship development during the wilderness experience was an additional indicator of community development. Various indications were relayed suggesting friendship development was an important aspect of the trip. Jeff related how a major goal for his trip was to make a friend. "I met a couple a new people . . . and they became my friends. Someone we could talk to on the trip, about our private, personal stuff without people knowin'." Megan, just as Hal stated above, further described a sense of family developing among the youth and adults on the trip. "My group became, like a family and I liked it."

Whereas the act of necessarily helping one another related to overcoming physical and psychological challenges of the wilderness experience, youth helping one another also contributed to the creation of a community environment. This sub-theme of helping, from the first theme further overlaps and links personal and social growth during the trip. The group norm of helping became a unifying force that facilitated the solidification of group bonds and strength of community. As an example, Hal, a youth participant explained:

> There was always someone to help. Even if they were doing something, they would always come and help you if it was hard. . . . [If] you were carrying a canoe and couldn't really do it, someone would come up . . . It makes it easier on you because you know there's always someone to help even in a rough situation.

Trust, friendship, and social support were among the strongest indicators of community during the wilderness trip. This community experience, however, was not fully sustained post-trip.

Community: Post-Trip. As discussed earlier, helping had developed as a normative behavior among the members of the wilder-

ness group. As a product of the challenge experience, the group norm of helping had become a unifying force that facilitated the solidification of group bonds and strength of community during the wilderness experience. Indications of helping behaviors, however, were lacking among post-trip accounts which were described as a mixture of attachment to, and detachment from, community.

Many of the youth returned to day-to-day lifestyles in which social engagement was lacking. Chip, for example, had set a goal for himself to "Get more friends . . . " upon returning home. However, he was not successful. In addition, his mother indicated the family had not had time for him to attend the follow-up group, nor did she suggest parental encouragement to help Chip stay connected with the friends he had made during the trip.

Among the youth, the primary post-trip link to peer community was found in their participation in a "follow-up group." As suggested by Brett, a staff member, the follow-up group was instrumental to reducing youth risk of social isolation.

> I think they just, as a group of kids, they just love to be together. If we could be doing any activity, they just love it, because they're together, they trust each other. Um, a lot of these kids don't have a lot of friends. So the group that we're doing now is essentially their peer contact outside of school. So, they have a sense of belonging and identity.

The group meetings served to reinforce social bonds and community established during the wilderness trip, however, meetings lacked activity with the kinds of physical, social and mental challenges that helped to solidify the sense of community built in the wilderness. As Karlita stated, the follow-up gatherings were largely social and passive in nature (e.g. attending a baseball game, having dinner). "We went out for pizza. . . . But I just thought . . . I really want to find other ways where we can have . . . more activity-oriented

things where they can have a challenge." Karlita suggested challenging pursuits could have multiple benefits to the group including ongoing skill development and the ability to transfer physically challenging experience to coping with emotional challenges.

Adult-Youth Relationships

A third major theme of "adult-youth relationships" also emerged. This theme surrounds the interactions between and among the parents, staff members, and youth in the study. During the trip, relationships between the youth and the program staff were deep and meaningful to both parties.

As these relationships were explored, it became clear that wilderness trip bonds between staff members and youth were strong. However, a disconnection emerged between both staff-parent relationships and youth-parent relationships, as they pertained to the program. These links and disconnects are illustrated below.

Adult-Youth Relationships: Wilderness Trip. Supporting youth growth and development throughout the ACE trip was clearly a goal and priority of the staff program leaders. The effort to help the youth develop and discover their inner strengths was clearly communicated by Doc.

> You want them to think, that it was a really hard experience. And from that came some strength that you wouldn't have had otherwise. . . . And it seemed like the more we kind of told them how good they were doing, and how well they were dealing with the struggle, the better they did.

Doc exemplifies the authors' observations that bonds between staff and youth were strong and supportive of ACE participants' personal development during the trip. As Greg, a parent, observed of his son, "I think the encouragement and support he got from the group leaders went a long way towards making him maybe reevaluate how he saw himself."

While the youth's interaction with staff members and the program facilitated growth and community, the parents, in contrast, sat largely outside of the wilderness trip support equation. The absence of parents was evident, and a program-parent disconnect was manifest in the parents' non-participation and lack of knowledge about what occurred during their children's week in the wilderness. Parents were largely outsiders of the community that developed among the youth and staff members.

Many of the parents wanted to learn about the trip from their children, although the youth had not shared much information with them. As Mae, a parent, put it, "Gee. I'd liked to have known a little bit more about it. A little more details."

The lines of communication between staff and parents were further explored, and there emerged little evidence of a working relationship. This observation was made in stark contrast to the open and flowing relationship that existed between the staff members and youth. Most of the parents simply lacked information about the trip. As Summer pointed out:

> I was hoping one of the adult leaders in [my daughter's] group would have contacted me after they got back from the trip just to let me know any thoughts or things that they observed, or any instances they had with [my daughter]. . . . Because when she came home it was really hard to get a lot of stuff out of her. . . . As a parent I would like to have feedback as to what they observed [her] to be like on the trip.

Adult-Youth Relationships: Post-Trip. Post-trip links between the program and youth were further characterized by strong supportive emotional bonds. These relational bonds, however, were combined with program procedures disconnected from extending some of the stronger outcomes of the wilderness trip (e.g. opportunities for group-oriented challenge and opportunities for youth to act in helping roles). Additionally, post-trip communications between the program and parents were characterized by an extreme information gap as displayed by parents' limited knowledge of what their children had done or accomplished during the wilderness trip. This issue was illustrated by Mae who expressed disappointment at the lack of communication and follow-up with parents.

> I just felt like I wasn't really getting as much helpful information as I could have. I think maybe they could have stressed more of what your kids can get out of it. Or how we can best support them before and after.

Summer also expressed frustration over not being able to learn much about the wilderness trip from her daughter. Her tone, however, came across as condescending and controlling.

> Well, of course some of my first questions to her were—which put her off—were "Did you remember to wait your turn?" Or "not be so bossy?" Or "not get angry with others?" And of course those are the questions that she hates to hear from me, because they're constant questions from me.

The interest in supporting their children's accomplishments, yet lacking the information in how to do so, was a sentiment expressed by some parents in contrast to others who expected the program to change their children without parental assistance. Corcho, for example, expected more change in her son than she actually observed.

> Maybe I was expecting too much. . . . I guess because of what the counselors [said] that [he] would be a changed man when he got back. . . . I was expecting him to have made some friends. . . . I think he pushes people away because he's so impulsive. So I was hoping that he would be a little more calm.

However, Corcho did not suggest she might have a role in supporting her son's accomplishments. Her statement, above, demonstrates an observation discovered among multiple parent interviews. Many parents failed to see themselves as having a major role in supporting or extending outcomes of the ACE program.

Discussion

The theoretical frameworks used for this study were adopted to identify the psychological experiences of youth participants during the wilderness trip, and how their experiences during the trip were generalized beyond the wilderness experience. The emergence of the salient theme "community" suggested that social interactions exerted a major influence on youth experiences during the wilderness trip. However, the role of community attachment was not nearly as strong in their post-trip accounts. In examining the influence of community on the youth, social capital theory informs one's understanding of this theme.

Social Capital Theory

The central premise behind social capital theory is that social networks have value (Putnam, 2000). Social capital theory integrates two longstanding themes in social history. First is sociability, the idea that human beings manage better when bonded together. Also included is the idea of exchange, that human interaction involves the sharing and transfer of resources (Bowling & Hemingway, 2004). Specifically, the concept refers to social connections among groups of individuals in which norms of trust and reciprocity arise (Putnam).

Social capital theory conceptually interrelates with the self-determination construct, a theoretical framework that partially guided this study. As described by Ryan and Deci (2000), self-determination is not solely an individualistic construct. Rather, across the lifespan, self-determination is more likely to flourish in contexts characterized by a secure sense of relatedness (Ryan & LaGuardia,

2000). Especially for youth, acting in a self-determined manner is dependent upon one's ability to engage in social networks and collaborate with others (Serna & Lau-Smith, 1995). Therefore, as sociability, relatedness and social networking are indicators of social capital, the presence of social capital arguably facilitates the expression of self-determination.

Another guiding framework, flow theory, also conceptually overlaps with social capital theory. While flow is commonly understood as individual experience, the data suggest the concept has social relevance. Mitchell (1988) for example, proposed perceived competence, "the process of recognizing one's abilities and applying them meaningfully and completely," (p. 44), is a prerequisite of flow and resides within a social context. As youth and staff members talked about the trip, indications of "group flow" emerged, where the key ingredients were trust, reciprocity, and the value of being group members. Their accounts indicated that perceived competence was important not only to individuals, but also to the group. Competence enabled group members to engage in significant challenges as a group, and to support one another in the process. As youth and staff members came together to surmount challenges, they developed pride and vestment in the group. A relationship between flow and social capital, therefore, emerges where the group experience was characterized by the properties of both theories.

As previously stated, norms that develop when social capital is present include the tendency of people to do things for one another. An environment that fosters social capital is one that supports networks of individuals acting together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 2000). In sharing goals, members of a social network are given opportunities to take on challenges, set goals, and demonstrate competence in activities to benefit the community. Flow-like experience is, therefore, more likely to occur when individuals have opportunities to demonstrate competence in such environments.

Social Capital and Youth Development

Research has shown where the presence of social capital among families has positively influenced youth outcomes. As a support to youth development, social capital is particularly effective when youth become actively involved in matters that directly impact their lives. Youth engagement in decision-making processes, whether in school, community groups, or youth organizations, has been recognized as an essential component to youth development (Zeldin, 2004).

While building community attachment is a key aspect of supporting youth development, parents and non-family adults play critical roles in the youth development-community attachment process. For example, research indicates that youth with stronger attachments to school personnel and family show significantly lower rates of emotional distress, violent behavior, substance use, and higher rates of altruism and respect toward others (Zeldin, 2004). Additional research has shown that children with high numbers of risk factors can succeed in life when their parents have enough social capital (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Putnam, 2000)

As suggested earlier, engaging youth to take active roles in community decision making reduces the likelihood of young people feeling isolated and engaging in risky behavior (Zeldin, 2004). Such interactions are critical to youth development, particularly when youth develop trusting and meaningful relationships in addition to attachments with supportive, non-family adults. Adults, however, do not always recognize the value of these relationships (Jarret, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2004).

Likewise, social capital within families has a powerful influence on developmental growth of young people (Coleman, 1988). Families that enjoy close social bonds and parents who instill the value of reciprocity in their children are more likely to achieve a greater degree of compliance and adherence to their common values (Putnam, 2000).

As the participants of this study clearly communicated, the community that developed during the wilderness trip arose from, and contributed to, the individual and social development of the youth. The wilderness experience provided the ACE participants with opportunities to build social capital within their community of peers and adult staff. Norms of reciprocity emerged, trust was developed, opportunities for leadership were seized, and resources of both physical and emotional support were shared among group members throughout the trip. Furthermore, youth were supported in their efforts by the encouragement of staff members, adults perceived as both caring and supportive of youth autonomy. Parents however, considered primary agents in youth and community development (Autry & Anderson, 2007; Coleman, 1988; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Jarret et al., 2004; Putnam, 2000; Zeldin, 2004), were left out of the community. The development and employment of social capital during the wilderness trip was limited to the youth participants and staff members. As there was limited dialogue between the program and parents, parents were not engaged in community experience. They were, therefore, limited in their abilities to connect with their children about the wilderness trip.

While social capital seemed to make gains among the youth during the wilderness trip, there was an apparent break in social capital after the trip concluded. Parent and youth accounts showed there was limited transfer of social capital to post-trip life.

Optimism Theory

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that youth participants gained strong feelings of personal competence through their accomplishments during challenges in the backcountry. This competence seemed to propel them through subsequent wilderness obstacles. It seemed to carry over for some into generalized talk about newfound self-confidence, social confidence, physical strength, skill develop-

ment, sense of trust, and the ability to cope with negative events. Challenging experiences were transformed into positive accomplishments, which in turn influenced the youth participants' attitudes toward future challenges.

A positive future orientation has been referred to as optimism (Tiger, 1979), a theoretical concept that informs interpretation of the major themes. As Peterson (2000) explained, optimism is a self-regulatory construct in which people may ask themselves about impediments to achieving the goals they have adopted. "In the face of difficulties, do people nonetheless believe their goals can be achieved? If so, they are optimistic; if not they are pessimistic" (p. 47). Pessimism leads to giving up whereas optimism leads to continued efforts to attain one's goal. The centrality of competence, goals, and challenges to optimism theory suggests conceptual correspondence with the guiding frameworks of this study.

Unifying themes between optimism, flow and self-determination include competence and goal-directed action. Having clear goals, for example, helps facilitate flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and the balance between challenge and skill is central to the flow model. As a facilitation of hope and optimism (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995), feeling flow is the experience of activity in which individuals feel competent and in control of challenging pursuits, goals are clear, progress toward those goals is clearly understood, and individuals are self-affirmed in the pursuit of such activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Voelkl et al., 2003). Likewise, the ability to set future goals, and the feeling one has the competence to achieve those goals is central to feeling self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Optimism and Youth Development

As a group, youth reflected the development of optimistic attitudes in facing challenges during the trip, and they left the wilderness trip with optimistic thoughts about

themselves. However, like social capital, expression of optimism following the trip was mixed. Activities that fostered further development of optimism were limited in number and strength. Furthermore, parental supportiveness for optimism was also mixed. While some parents used language that seemed "tuned-in" to their children's development and were actively supportive of such, others spoke in ways in which they were annoyed by and distrustful of their children.

Additionally, whereas hope for the future is facilitated by strong attachments to community (Autry & Anderson, 2007), the data have demonstrated how the follow-up group transformed what would have otherwise been a short-lived community into a lasting social network. Parents, however, were not included in this community, as shown by their lack of knowledge about youth experiences during the wilderness trip. Parents were unclear about the importance of this community attachment, and thus parental support for the youth community was mixed.

Theoretical Implications

The term "positive youth development" (PYD) has emerged from more than a decade of research concerned with the promise of youth potential. The study of PYD includes a research approach focusing on children's unique talents, strengths, interests, and future potential (Damon, 2004). In the view of positive youth development, young people are envisioned as resources rather than as problems for society. Within this framework, Larson (2000) proposed a refocusing of youth programming and research on *initiative* development—empowering young people to engage in self-motivated, goal-directed, complex activity. Initiative development should be a core quality of positive youth development, Larson argued.

As the data suggested, youth can gain substantial growth benefit from a structured challenge experience that fosters development and
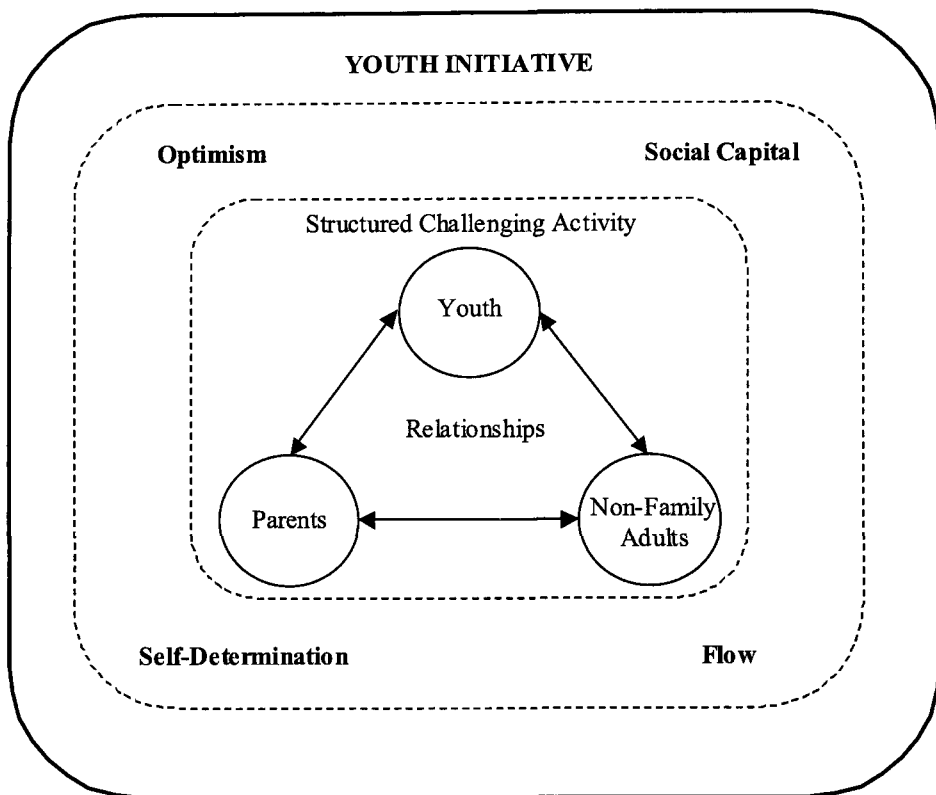
FIGURE 2. STRUCTURED YOUTH PROGRAMMING AS A MEANS FOR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

expression of initiative (Larson, 2000). When engaged in challenging activities together with supportive, non-family adults such as program staff persons, bonds develop and community emerges. Programs have the opportunity to include parents in this community by opening lines of communication and by inviting parental involvement. By engaging parents in program goals and activities, parent-staff-youth relationships are likely to develop that potentially support the youth in their endeavors, and quite probably benefit parents and the overall program as well.

By broadening the system of activity and communication to include and involve parents, a program builds social capital among partic-ipants. In addition to building social capital, this kind of program fosters flow, self-determination, and optimism among youth through structured and purposive application of goal-oriented challenging activities. These activities afford opportunities to express agency, feel intrinsically motivated, gain feelings of competence and control, develop self-confidence and hope for the future, and persist through and adapt to adversarial situations. Youth initiative development, a target goal of positive youth development (Larson, 2000), is proposed as an outcome of such experiences. In this way, structured youth programming becomes a means of fostering positive youth development (Figure 2).

Practical Implications

Based on the data and additional review of literature, therapeutic wilderness programs clearly have substantial potential to build social capital in tandem with facilitating flow-like experience and self-determination development among youth. Extending this kind of positive development beyond the wilderness program requires structured efforts on the part of a program and parents to consciously work toward that end. Programs such as those offered by CFS must offer continual opportunities beyond the wilderness trip for youth to voluntarily challenge themselves in goal-directed activity and to reap the developmental benefits of solving self-chosen problems. Ongoing programming approaches might include opportunities for youth-directed community volunteer projects and youth-directed recreational activities. As suggested by Ellis, Braff, and Hutchinson (2001), programs could encourage the development of ongoing youth planning groups and committees to determine programming directions and strategies for the larger group.

Additionally, parents must be given significant roles in supporting youth participation. A therapeutic wilderness program, for example, could invite parents' involvement through more intensive pre-trip and post-trip parent-inclusive participation. In such a dynamic, a program could help to build social capital among youth and parents by inviting parents to co-participate on some level, and additionally instruct parents as to how to best support youth prior to and following the wilderness trip. Youth-planned family recreational activities in which youth, siblings and parents co-participate could help facilitate parental connection to their children and the overall therapeutic program while fostering youth initiative. It would also be important for the program to solicit a solid commitment from parents to follow-through on participation, and perhaps make parental participation a condition of youth participation.

In this way, information channels could better flow between the program, parents, and youth, and parents could be better equipped to encourage their children's efforts, thus supporting child hope and optimism (Eisner, 1995). Additionally, efforts could be made to educate parents on the effects of positive versus punitive parenting styles on their children (Stormshak, Dishion, Light, & Yasui, 2005). Parent psycho-educational workshops, for instance, could target parental areas of concern, such as developing trusting relationships with their children, and supporting healthy youth development through positive parenting. Furthermore, shared family recreation activities, such as outdoor activities in which the youth participants take on leadership roles, could further provide non-threatening opportunities for parents and youth to support one another and practice both recreational and relational skills.

The results of this study indicate the need for further research identifying specific programmatic influences on social capital and optimism found in therapeutic adventure interventions. Additionally, future research examining the process of engaging parents and families would be beneficial to the field of therapeutic adventure.

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