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ABSTRACT

This study identified characteristics of adventure programs valued by adolescents in treatment. Subjects included 11 experts in the field of adventure programming and 207 participants in adventure programs at 12 adolescent treatment programs. The experts, through a modified Delphi process, identified valued program characteristics. Program participants showed their agreement with these items through a questionnaire administered at the conclusion of their program involvement. Participants and experts were significantly in agreement regarding valued characteristics. However, participants did appear, in contrast to experts, to value items related to "process" more highly than items related to "content." "Helping/assisting others" was the characteristic most valued by participants. Gender and age were significantly related to perceptions of value for several characteristics. Items perceived as more valuable by males related to leadership, risk, and learning from failure. The item perceived as more valuable by females concerned "trust." Younger participants rated "doing ropes course activities" higher than older participants. The study supports that "process," not just "content," needs to be considered in staff training and program implementation. (KS)

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# Characteristics of Adventure Programs Valued by Adolescents in Treatment

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine what characteristics of adventure programs were valued by adolescents in treatment. Subjects of the study included 11 experts in the field of adventure programming and 207 participants in adventure programs at 12 adolescent treatment programs. The experts, through a modified Delphi process, identified valued program characteristics. Program participants indicated that their agreement with these items through a questionnaire administered at the conclusion of their program involvement. Participants and experts were significantly in agreement regarding valued characteristics ( $r_s = .55, p < .01$ ) though participants did appear, in contrast to the experts, to value items related to "process" more highly than items related to "content". "Helping/assisting others" was the characteristic most supported by participants. Gender and age were significantly related to perceptions of value for several characteristics. Implications of the study for research include the need to further specify findings and to relate them to outcomes. In regard to practice the study supports that "process" not just "content", needs to be considered in staff training and program implementation.

One medium gaining popularity in adolescent treatment is adventure programming. Adventure programming, as defined in the Experiential Challenge Program (ECP) model (Roland, Summers, Friedman, Barton & McCarthy, 1987), includes a sequence of activities/experiences including goal setting, awareness activities, trust activities, group problem-solving, individual problem-solving, and processing/transfer. Ropes courses are the setting for some activities. Many treatment programs have become involved with building ropes courses and

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initiating adventure programs (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988). The marketing and promotional efforts of treatment programs sometimes focus on adventure programs (Gillis & Simpson, 1991). the proliferation of adventure programs has not, however, been matched with expanded efforts in determining the value of such programs. Specific impacts of participation remain speculative (Gillis, 1992). While adventure program involvement has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes (Witman, 1992), the causes of such changes have not been identified.

The study described in this paper was designed to provide a grounded perspective on what characteristics of the adventure experience are most valued by participants. The rationale for the study was the work of Conrad and Hedin (1982). In their study of experiential education impacts they determined that "the most powerful predictors of (student) growth were the characteristics of the experience" (p. 74). Examples included autonomy and a collegial relationship with adults. Ewert (1987) observed that research in adventure programming needs to move beyond what happens as a result of programs to determining how and why it occurred. Determining salient, valuable characteristics of programming can serve as a blueprint for further research which links characteristics and outcomes. The purpose of this study was to identify valued program characteristics of the adventure experience. The perceptions of experts in adventure programming and of participants in such programs were determined, compared, and analyzed. A variety of adventure program characteristics have been proposed as valuable to adolescent treatment. The include process characteristics such as limit-setting (Kerr & Gass, 1987), accepting personal responsibility (Kimball, 1983), setting and accomplishing goals (Raiola, 1986) and debriefing which identifies transfer to participants' lifestyles (Jordan, 1987). Content characteristics seen as valuable to treatment have included communication activities (Marx, 1988), cooperative and trust activities (Ziven, 1988), problem-solving experiences (Kimball, 1986), ropes activities (Feed, 1991) and opportunities to help/assist others (Obermeir & Henry, 1989). These assertions of value have neither been developed systematically nor validated by program participants. The intent of this study was to do both.

### Method

Subjects of the study include 11 experts in the field of programming and 207 participants in adventure programs at 12 inpatient psychiatric

adolescent treatment programs. The experts, through a modified Delphi process, identified value adventure program characteristics. Program participants indicated their agreement with these items through a questionnaire administered at the conclusion of their program involvement. Analysis of their responses was both descriptive and comparative.

### Subjects

A "snowball" (McCall & Simmons, 1969) approach to selecting subjects was employed beginning with those experts and adventure program sites identified in the literature. The initial point of reference for experts was the list of participants from the 1988 Institute on Innovations in Camping and Outdoor Education with Persons Who are Disabled held at Bradford at Bradford Woods Outdoor Center in Indiana. The initial resource for program sites was the directory of the Association for Experiential Education (Goldwasser & Beer, 1985) which focused on special populations. A description of the study was mailed to listed individuals/agencies. Screening and selection occurred among the twenty-two who expressed interest in the study as well as four individuals/agencies who were suggested by these initial contacts. "Informed consent" procedures were completed at all sites.

Criteria for the experts' panel included commitment to the project, a minimum of two years' experience in leading adventure programming with adolescents in treatment and familiarity with the Experiential Challenge Program (ECP) model of adventure programming (Roland et al., 1987). The majority of the experts had received either a master's or doctorate degree with education, recreation, outdoor education or psychology as their field of study. Specialized "adventure" training had been obtained by the majority most often from either Outward Bound or Project Adventure.

The twelve study sites represented all geographic regions in the United States with states in the Southeast most represented. Activities/experiences in the adventure programs at all twelve sites include all of the ECP levels -- goal setting, awareness activities, trust activities, group problem-solving and processing /transfer. All twelve sites considered their program philosophy and practices to be more focused on treatment than on recreation.

Characteristics of the 207 adventure program participants at the twelve study sites included: (a) 56% males and 44% females; (b) varied diagnoses including substance abuse (44.9%), affective disorders (30%), conduct disorders (11.6%), and others (13.5%); and (c) varied age groups including 12-14 (19.8%), 15-16 (50.2%) and 17-19 (30%) year olds. Specific to adventure program participation the majority of participants were involved with programming 10 or more hours and 74.4% attended all scheduled sessions.

### Procedures

The experts were asked through a mail survey, to identify through an open-ended response, those 4-10 program characteristics which in their experience had been most valuable for participants. Their responses were refined through two rounds of rating the various characteristics. Those items supported by a majority of experts were redrawn as a questionnaire to be rated by participants.

Prior to the main study two pilots studies were conducted at sites and with subjects similar to those involved with the main study. The first included twelve participants. The intent was to determine how understandable the questionnaire was for adolescents in treatment. The failure of more than half of the participants to complete the rank-ordering of characteristics resulted in revision to simply agreeing or disagreeing with items. The second pilot study involved twenty-one participants at two sites. It establishes the test-retest reliability of the questionnaire as  $r = .89$ . These participants responded twice to the questionnaire at both two hours and fifty hours after the completion of an adventure program.

Participants from twelve adventure programs in inpatient psychiatric programs, as detailed in the previous section, were involved in the main study. At the conclusion of the final session of their adventure program experience they identified those program characteristics they found to be valuable.

### Analysis

Data generated from the research process were analyzed descriptively and comparatively. Descriptive analysis was utilized to

show the relative level of agreement regarding the value of various program characteristics. The relationship between certain independent variables (gender and age) and the program characteristics was determined using Chi Square comparisons. Additionally, participants' and experts' ranking of the various characteristics were compared through ran-order correlations. While the .05 level of confidence was selected for reporting significance, findings in the .06 to .10 range are reported as approaching significance.

### Results

The experts' panel generated more than thirty items when asked to identify the characteristics of adventure programs perceived by adolescents as valuable to treatment. Redundant/repetitive items were combined by the researcher resulting in a list of twenty-five items. Sixteen of these items were supported by the majority (six or more) of experts and were subsequently presented to participants.

Table 1 summarizes participant responses. The percentage of participants citing particular characteristics as valuable ranged from 60.4% for "being a leader" through 92.8% for "helping/assisting others". Analysis of the relationship of perceptions of the value of characteristics to participants gender and age are reported in the sections which follow.

Gender differences approached significance in relationship to the perceived value of four characteristics. Three of these characteristics were more often perceived as valuable by males. These included "being a leader," (Chi Square = 3.41,  $p < .06$ ), "choosing levels of participation and risk," (Chi Square = 3.32,  $p < .06$ ), and "learning from failures" (Chi Square = 3.21,  $p < .07$ ). The item more often perceived as valuable by females was "doing trust activities" (Chi Square = 2.62,  $p < .10$ ).

The relationship of differences in age and perceived value of characteristics was significant (Chi Square = 6.91,  $p < .03$ ) only with "doing ropes course activities" characteristic. Among participants 12-14 years old, 82.9% valued the characteristic. Among the 15-16 age group and the 17+ age group the percentage valuing the characteristic dropped to 73.1% and 59.7%, respectively.

**Table 1**

**Percentage of Participants Citing Particular Program Characteristics as Valuable (N=207)**

| Characteristic   | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| Helping/assisting others                                 | 92.8       |
| Taking risks/meeting challenges                          | 89.9       |
| Realizing the importance of caring about self and others | 87.4       |
| Getting support of other participants                    | 85.0       |
| Doing trust activities                                   | 82.6       |
| Feeling like part of the group                           | 82.6       |
| Setting/accomplishing goals                              | 81.2       |
| Being playful/having fun                                 | 78.3       |
| Learning from failures                                   | 76.8       |
| Doing problem solving activities                         | 72.9       |
| Having group discussions                                 | 71.5       |
| Doing cooperative games/activities                       | 71.5       |
| Doing ropes course activities                            | 71.0       |
| Doing communication activities                           | 62.8       |
| Choosing levels of participation and risk                | 61.4       |
| Being a leader   | 60.4       |

Table 2 provides a comparison of the ranks of program characteristics by participants and experts. A significant, positive correlation of moderate strength ( $r_s = .55, p < .01$ ) was found. Those items on which the participants' and experts' ranks differed most were:

"doing ropes course activities" (ranked 13 by participants, 5.5 by experts)

"Helping/assisting others" (ranked 1 by participants, 8 by experts)

"being playful/having fun" (ranked 8 by participants, 1 by experts)

**Table 2**

**Participants' and Experts' Ranks of Program Characteristics**

| Characteristic   | Participants | Experts |
|--|--------------|---------|
| Helping/assisting others                                 | 1            | 8       |
| Taking risks/meeting challenges                          | 2            | 2       |
| Realizing the importance of caring about self and others | 3            | 7       |
| Getting support of other participants                    | 4.5          | 3.5     |
| Doing trust activities                                   | 4.5          | 5.5     |
| Feeling like part of the group                           | 6            | 3.5     |
| Setting/accomplishing goals                              | 7            | 13.5    |
| Being playful/having fun                                 | 8            | 1       |
| Learning from failures                                   | 9            | 15      |
| Doing problem solving activities                         | 10           | 10      |
| Having group discussions                                 | 11.5         | 13.5    |
| Doing cooperative games/activities                       | 11.5         | 10      |
| Doing ropes course activities                            | 13           | 5.5     |
| Doing communication activities                           | 14           | 12      |
| Choosing levels of participation and risk                | 15           | 16      |
| Being a leader   | 16           | 10      |

**Discussion**

Findings of the study revealed that adolescents in treatment do view some characteristics of the adventure experience a more valuable

than others. Furthermore, their perceptions of value, while similar, do differ on some characteristics form those of experts in adventure programming. Gender and age also influenced perceptions of some characteristics.

Findings suggested that participants value "process" over "content". Activity items (e.g. doing ropes course activities, doing communication activities) were less valued than items related to the context or process of the program (e.g. taking risks/meeting challenges, getting support of the other participants). The distinction participants made between "process" and "content" characteristics is germane to practice. Specifically, program leaders need to develop their "soft skills" which Swiderski (1987) has defined as "interpersonal and human relations skills; in other words people skills" (p. 31).

He cited examples of such skills as the understanding of group dynamics, building a climate of trust within a group, knowing how to stimulate motivation, and interpreting nonverbal expressions. These social, psychological and communication skills, in contrast to the "hard skills" of adventure program leadership (e.g. administrative, technical or safety skills), are more difficult to teach and evaluate. Nonetheless their integration into staff development activities seems vital. Participants' valuing of process over content is also relevant to agencies and individuals considering adoption of adventure programming with their treatment programs. Contrary to the message of some consultants/entrepreneurs in the field, a fully developed and expensive ropes course may not be a prerequisite to the initiation of programming particularly with older adolescents. Activities other than the ropes course are perceived as valuable (e.g., trust activities) and process characteristics (e.g. getting/giving support) are not dependent upon it.

Findings regarding gender and age are also of importance to program development and implementation. Finds related to gender seem consistent with reported gender differences in development and affiliation (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982). Females more often supported the value of "trust activities" but were less supportive of several items related to power or dominance. These differences may simply reflect that higher percentages of women in treatment are working on issues related to trust/disclosure (Crane, Henson, Colliver & MacLean, 1988) while males are more often focused on power/control concerns (Hartmann, Glasser, Greenblatt, Solomon & Levinson, 1968).

In regard to age the perceived value of ropes course participation was lower among older participants. Perhaps the challenge or impact of such courses is diminished as individuals mature. Creation of a more ropes-course-focused adventure group for younger adolescents is perhaps indicated as is consideration of age in any sub-grouping of participants.

An expanded understanding of the various characteristics identified in the study is an important goal for further research. For example, future research could address a characteristic such as "doing cooperative games/activities" with the intent of discovering what participants perceived this characteristic to entail and which specific games or activities were most valued. Beyond knowing what characteristics are valued and what outcomes they produce. Knowledge of these concerns could enhance the diagnostic/prescriptive potential of programs. If, for example, a program leader knew that the ropes course involvement promoted trust, programming for a group particularly deficient in this area might be heavily weighted toward ropes course involvement. The quality of either program or diagnosis centered protocols would be enhanced through this awareness. Adventure programming could better serve adolescents in treatment.

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