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ABSTRACT

Many outdoor educators and adventure therapists share the belief that adventure experiences improve participant self-esteem. Recently, researchers have begun to question this widespread belief, suggesting that a mismatch between the level of physical or psychological risk and the level of client readiness may produce negative outcomes. A study of 61 college students in South Australia examined the effects on self-esteem of participation in an adventure learning course based on Group Adventure Initiative Tasks (GAITS). The experimental group participated in a 15-week college course on group dynamics incorporating GAITS, a series of group adventure tasks such as "spider's web" that require minimal equipment and no specialized skills from participants. Each 2-hour task was followed by a debriefing that explored the processes used to complete the task and participant behaviors within the task. A control group studied group dynamics in a lecture/tutorial format. Pretests and posttests with the Coppersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) found no significant change in self-esteem in either group. Experimental participants were categorized as very low, low, moderate, or high self-esteem according to their pretest SEI scores. At posttest, self-esteem was unchanged in the very low group, increased in the low and moderate groups, and decreased in the high group. Subgroup behaviors and participant perceptions of course effects on their own self-esteem are discussed. (Contains 17 references.) (SV)

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Panacea or Poison? Building Self-Esteem through Adventure Experiences

By Travis Kemp, M.A.

At first glance, the title of this paper may appear to question one of the apparent axioms of adventure education and therapy: that being the strong belief shared by many outdoor educators and adventure therapists that adventure experiences serve to improve the self-esteem of participants. Before I address this issue more completely however, a brief introduction is in order.

Carl Jung, in his 1963 work, *The Integration of Personality*, wrote a passage, which for me captures the essence of my own personal growth and journey. More importantly it captures one of the fundamental notions that I believe we as outdoor educators, counsellors and therapists attempt to grapple with in adventure-based work. He wrote, "the vast majority of mankind do not choose their own way, but convention, and consequently develop not themselves but a method and collective mode of life at the expense of their own wholeness"(cite not provided). It occurs to me that what we, as emerging and developing adventure therapists, are currently pursuing is our own unique path: defying convention in the traditional fields of therapy and psychology, and creating a new and exciting paradigm of human growth and development.

In addition to the "hands-on" practice of adventure therapy, there are also many of us interested in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding through research in this field. Here once again, many of us choose to adopt a methodology in our research, which is predominantly inconsistent with the established conventions of the scientific-empiricist model traditionally employed in the realms of psychology and therapy. Indeed, in the qualitatively based research methodology known as naturalistic inquiry, it is vital that researchers acknowledge and address their own unique experiences and biases (or preferences) as they report their observations and their insights gained through their investigations. I draw attention to this point because while presenting the current topic and subsequent research, it is important that the reader have a picture of the "filter" through which I make my own subjective observations and conclusions.

Without labouring on this point, I began my experience of adventure learning when I commenced teaching outdoor education at a well known boy's school in Melbourne, Victoria and later as an outdoor leader for several secondary schools in Adelaide, South

Australia. After spending two years either on camp with kids or sleeping to recover from camp, I had gained a clear insight into the vast opportunity for growth that adventure experiences appeared to provide young people. Many of these experiences seemed to leave indelible marks on these young peoples' psyche, with observable behavioural change being reported not only by the kids themselves, but their families and friends around them. For many educators, these outcomes would have been enough to sustain their continued passion for outdoor education for a lifetime. Unfortunately though, along with the great highs I observed during the ropes course or while abseiling or doing initiatives, there were also a substantial handful of negative outcomes which became obvious. These prompted my interest in the study of adventure, and eventually facilitated my movement from outdoor education per se into the fields of counselling, therapy and psychology. As a result of this path, I have been able to experience adventure the perspective of an educator, a therapist, an adventure enthusiast, and an adventure therapist.

In this paper I will present the results of a study I recently conducted with a group of young adults who were participating in a one semester adventure learning program at a large university in Adelaide, South Australia. The goal of this paper is to more critically refine our understanding of the constructs of self-esteem and adventure. My goal is to explore the boundary between personal growth and psychological injury.

Adventure has been defined in numerous ways; however, most agree that the process utilises some form of risk as a vehicle for learning and personal development. Dr. John Cheffers in the forward of Rohnke's (1984) *Silver Bullets* outlined this assumption, clearly stating:

People are at risk when they learn. The risk may be physical, social, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual in nature. One of the primary objectives of new games, initiative tasks, ropes courses, trust activities and inclusive co-operative competitive games is to help participants deal with the process of risk and the product of behavioural change (p.7)

It is also commonly accepted that an adventure must involve "the undertaking of an unsure outcome; a hazardous enterprise; and exciting or very unusual experience" (Leroy, 1985, p.228).

However in many adventure-related discourses there remains conjecture over how this risk manifests itself. Traditionally, adventure education definitions have centred on the physical risks inherent in an activity as the catalyst for the growth process. The traditional outdoor pursuit activities satisfy these criteria for many participants. The beginning rock climber generally has little difficulty perceiving a physical risk inherent in climbing a vertical rock face. However what of the experienced climber? Does she view the same rock face with the same trepidation or perception of risk? This subjective perception of risk raises questions about the use of outdoor pursuits as an all-inclusive medium for the provision of adventure experiences to many potential clients.

When there is little or no subjective perception of physical risk from the participant, how then is an adventure experienced? In addition to the diverse level of ability and multitude of subjective perceptions within our clients, another crucial variable, that of the instructor also contributes to this delicate dynamic. In many cases, instructors in outdoor pursuit activities have acquired a high level of skill and competence in the activity being presented. The associated confidence and perhaps in some cases a certain

“desensitisation” which occurs with high levels of skill development and experience may serve to “dull” their empathy of the fears and concerns experienced by the beginning climber. How do I know that both the level and reasons for the anxiety in my client? How do I know how to address these issues most effectively? It is only recently that I have begun to recognise that these situations and their solutions are more often than not, beyond the experience and skill base of the traditional outdoor pursuits instructor, instead calling on the specialist skills of the therapist or counsellor. Further, Hyde (1985) raises the fundamental issue facing our stating, “It is questionable whether the traditional outdoor pursuits (climbing, canoeing) are necessary or even desirable vehicles for teaching pupils for their personal development” (p. 16).

Stansfield (1986) had indicated that high skill levels required in the “traditional” outdoor pursuit type activities mean that for most individuals, the tasks that they are completing must be instructor controlled and directed. In many cases, the decision making process becomes an autocratic one, shifting control of the outcome from the participants themselves, to the instructor. The situation often arises where, rather than empowering our clients and nurturing the development of proactive behaviours, we essentially create a relationship of dependence, effectively limiting our client’s growth.

Currently however, a broader awareness and understanding of adventure is emerging through adventure based counselling (Kemp, 1995). While traditionally, adventure education has been seen to consist primarily of these “outdoor pursuit” type activities, adventure learning programs utilising high ropes courses and initiative tasks as the primary tools for adventure have developed significantly in the last 30 years (Doughty, 1991). Although much anecdotal and some experimental research based data exists for the “traditional” pursuits and ropes courses, to date little research has been undertaken on the specific effects of participation in Group Adventure Initiative Tasks (GAITS) (Kemp, 1995).

From a therapeutic perspective, GAITS appear to be a practical and valuable alternative to the more traditional “outdoor pursuit” adventure activities for several reasons. Firstly, they are simple to implement. Unlike more technically demanding adventure activities such as ski touring or kayaking, GAITS require no specialised skills from participants before a high level of participation is possible. Similarly, the time commitment required to gain technical competence in a skill such as kayaking, and the subsequent participation in an expedition is a severely limiting factor preventing the experience from proceeding. Alternately, GAITS require very little preparation time, take relatively little time to complete and require minimal amounts of readily accessible equipment. It was for these reasons that this study focussed on the possible benefits of utilising GAITS in the adventure learning process. Furthermore this study sought to isolate these activities from other outdoor pursuit activities in an effort to limit any confounding variables in the interpretation of outcomes between these two very different types of adventure based activities.

Miner (1991), while referring to initiative tasks and adventure programs, made a highly pertinent observation. This area, he suggests, is in serious need of research to provide empirical data and substantiate claims regarding its effectiveness. He further suggests, however, that before this is possible, there must be a clearer understanding, and more widespread agreement, as to what actually constitutes adventure training and initiative tasks. Further research has continued to be extolled and encouraged (MacRae, Moore, Savage, Soehner and Priest, 1993) but to date, these issues are far from resolved.

Recently, several researchers have begun to question the widespread consensual belief that simply by participating in adventure experiences, improved self-esteem, personal growth and development would automatically occur. Priest and Baillie (1987) explored the possibility that the stated outcomes of adventure programming could only be achieved should the "peak adventure" state be reached. They describe this via a constructed model of adventure education, suggesting that when the skill development of the individual is matched with the appropriate level of challenge, then the outcomes will be maximised. If however the skill, or "readiness" level, of the participant is below the level of the task being required of them, the participant may experience adverse outcomes and progress to the stage of misadventure. The physical form of misadventure may be falling from a rock face and injuring oneself or ejecting from of an overturned kayak in rough water. The psychological equivalent however, may mean that the participant is confronted by an issue or issues which may be emotionally painful, psychologically harmful or which the participant does not or cannot adequately address with their current coping mechanisms.

In many adventure discussions there is little or no mention of the many psychological, behavioural or emotional risks that may confront individuals during their experience in adventure activities. The risks associated with personal disclosure, identifying and confronting the perceptual fear of personal change and growth have traditionally not been considered primary sources of adventure in many experiential programs. Recently however, a number of authors have begun to address and acknowledge these issues (Gass, 1993). It is from this viewpoint that a wider understanding of the construct of risk and adventure has developed and Priest and Baillie (1987) succinctly captured the essence of the prevailing risk paradigm when they wrote, "the adventure experience is a state of mind... An adventure in time and place may be experienced by one individual, but not by another" (p. 12). In light of these points, it was the purpose of this study to empirically investigate whether an adventure learning program based on participation in GAITS could influence the self-esteem levels of tertiary aged students.

Study Methodology

To meet the requirements of appropriate research design in social science, the current study utilised quantitative methodologies, but relied heavily on qualitative analysis of participants' self reports and journals. Technically then, a quasi-experimental, two-way (2x2) factorial design was employed for the quantitative analysis with the dependent variables being self-esteem and gender and the independent variable the adventure learning program. Self-esteem data was gathered using the Coppersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) (Coppersmith, 1987) and analysed.

An illuminative evaluation (Hamilton, et al., 1977; Tesch, 1990) qualitative approach was also utilised employing an ethnographic methodology (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Tesch, 1990). Observable behaviours displayed by subjects throughout the study period were recorded, group processes and interactions were observed and noted and subjects completed weekly journals. Self-description questionnaires were also administered at the completion of the treatment period.

The experimental group participated in a 15-week course incorporating the study of group dynamics through participation in an adventure learning program utilising Group Adventure Initiative Tasks (GAITS). The control group completed their study of group dynamics in the standard lecture/tutorial format. The control group was not involved in

any form of adventure learning or GAITS during the study period. An emphasis on personal growth and development was made apparent to the experimental group and participants were encouraged to reflect deeply on their experiences and feeling throughout the course. The subjects for this study comprised 34 male and 27 female tertiary students (N=61) at a large University in Adelaide, South Australia. The student's average age was 20.7 years.

The program began with a series of simple icebreaker activities then progressed through elements of trust building including activities such as "wind in the willows" and trust falls. The second half of the program involved participation in GAITS. One GAIT per two hour session was completed with a debrief consisting of an exploration of the processes used to complete the task and the behaviours exhibited by participants within the task. GAITS included "spiders web," "blocks and boards" and 3 other composite and adapted tasks called "river crossing," "over the falls" and "island hopping."

Results

Pre and post test self-esteem scores were analysed using a repeated measures T-test for a single factor design with the Coopersmith SEI mean score as the dependent variable (global self-esteem) and the delivery method for the Group Dynamics program (GAITS) being the independent variable. Results are presented in Table 1. There was no statistically significant difference between the control group and the experimental group between pre-test and post-test self-esteem scores on the Coopersmith SEI. There was no statistically significant change in self-esteem scores as a result of utilising GAITS.

Table 1

Paired Samples T-Tests for Experimental and Control Groups, Pre and PostTest S.E.I. Scores.

CONDITION	PRE-TEST		POST-TEST		T-TEST
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	
CONTROL GROUP (N=29)	83.72	12.72	86.07	12.36	T-value = -1.91 df = 28 p = .067
EXPERIMENTAL GROUP (N=32)	78.38	16.57	77.75	16.63	T-value = .33 df = 31 p = .747

After recording no significant difference in pre and posttest self-esteem scores, participant's own perceptions of their self-esteem throughout the program were examined. To examine this, participants were clustered in the experimental group into four categories (very low, low, moderate and high self-esteem) according to their pre-test self-esteem scores on the Self-Esteem Inventory. Participants were then asked to draw a

graph, which represented their perceptions of their self-esteem. This aspect of the data was perhaps the most informative and illuminating in the current study.

The six students who were categorised in the very low self-esteem group (60 and below on SEI) all reported a subjective perceptual increase in self-esteem. However, all six students remained in the very low category on the post-test administration of the SEI. Each of these students in this sub-group reported feelings of insecurity and uncertainty surrounding their future. In addition to an apparent challenging of the self-concept, there appeared to be a unique and highly individual aspect to each of the subject's self-constructs, which revealed a discrepancy between their ideal or desired current behaviours and traits and their actual current behaviours and traits.

The GAIT program appeared to influence this subgroup in several ways. Firstly, the tasks provided subjects with an open and accepting environment in which they were "safe" to attempt new behaviours and express their feelings openly, free from judgement. The nature of the group tasks and group debriefing meant that a number of different perceptions of an individual's behaviours were examined and "fed back" to the subject. For several subjects, this opportunity helped not only to clarify their self-concept, but also to examine both their desired and less desired traits in a more positive and balanced light. This led to a perceptual increase in self-esteem but which, because of the size of the change or the sensitivity of the instrument, did not register as an increase in SEI score. In a sense, there appeared to be an acceptance of the self "for what it was." The main outcomes appeared to be the realisation of strengths and opportunities in their own "self," their behavioural and perceptual development and the development of the motivation and communication skills to continue their development.

These changes, although overtly observable, were far from significant, and to claim that subjects experienced any major improvement in self-esteem would be a misinterpretation. Indeed, any reported increases in self-esteem by subjects throughout the course may simply have reflected transient fluctuations in self-esteem reported by O'Malley and Bachman (1983). Kernis (1993) provides an explanation for this behavioural observation by examining the issue of self-esteem stability in relation to responses to evaluative feedback. Low self-esteem individuals who remain stable at a low level appear to respond to evaluative feedback from others with little attempt to either "soften the blow" of negative feedback or to integrate any positive evaluations of self from positive feedback. This, therefore, raises several concerns as to the value and appropriateness of such a program for very low self-esteem subjects, especially if full agreement and commitment to a "safe" environment is not achieved.

A common trait observed and shared by subjects in the very low group was an apparent resistance to openly involve themselves in the communication process and participation within the group. In all cases, where subjects scored very low on the pre-test SEI, there appeared to be an unwillingness to attempt new or unfamiliar behaviours in the GAIT classes. Baumeister, Tice and Hutton (1989) proposed that subjects scoring low on self-esteem scales may reflect an evasiveness and hesitancy to personally disclose feeling and perceptions about their "self." Behaviourally, this cohort demonstrated this reluctance to communicate on a personal or intimate level and hence, the opportunity to attempt any behavioural changes or to address ones prejudices or pre-conceptions in a safe and supportive environment were lost.

The four subjects categorised as low self-esteem (61-65 on SEI) appeared to respond somewhat differently to the GAIT treatment than the very low subjects. Of the four subjects in the low cohort (three female, one male), one subject remained in the low

category with no change in score from the pre-test to the post-test, while the remaining three subjects all recorded increases of between 12 and 20 points on the SEI. The quantitative data gathered from this cohort suggested that self-esteem levels were impacted markedly as a result of the treatment. The qualitative data revealed increased feelings of self worth through the realisation and acceptance of the many positive and valuable traits which others in the group acknowledged and pointed out to these participants. For this cohort, there appeared to be an "awakening" of positive perceptions of the many valuable elements in their self-construct which had remained until now, unacknowledged.

Subjects who scored in the medium range on the pre-test SEI (65-95) reported a perceptual increase in their level of self-esteem from their initial level at the beginning of the course. The major increases in SEI scores occurred from subjects with a pre-test score of between 68 and 80. These subjects appeared to quantitatively benefit most from the treatment. Subjects scoring above 80 on the pre-test appeared to remain somewhat stable with most recording slight decreases in score on the post-test. Many of these subjects were completing their degree course at the completion of this unit and many in this group described feelings of excitement and uncertainty for their new career in the future. Unlike the low self-esteem group who appeared to dread this phase of life, this group appeared to be thriving on it.

Subjects in the high self-esteem group appeared to benefit from the program in a unique way. Of the eight subjects in this cohort, six recorded decreased SEI post-test scores. Therefore, quantitatively, self-esteem appeared to decrease in most cases. However, qualitatively, subjects appeared to express feelings of increased self-understanding and a more balanced self-image. It is possible that many of those with high SEI scores on the pre-test were artificially inflated and the program provided these subjects with a more "realistic" impression of the self.

Although quantitative analysis of self-esteem yielded no significant effect, there appeared to be strong qualitative evidence to support improved feelings of self-worth as a result of the GAIT programming. It was evident that there was a generalised pattern of little change in SEI scores as a result of the GAITS programming. In contrast to this, the participants' self-descriptions and the observations made by others generally indicated the majority of experimental group experienced increased feelings of self-esteem.

Generally, there appeared to be a common pattern of reference to decreased feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence being associated with the approaching the end of university studies and uncertainty surrounding the future. These feelings, although expressed by a cross section of the experimental group, appeared to be most intense and prominent in the low and very low self-esteem group. This suggests that at this point of development, security and self-worth were major factors in the structure of the global level of self-esteem being reported.

The "ceiling effect" limiting any increase of self-esteem score on the SEI by subjects in the high self-esteem cohort was puzzling. However, rather than remaining stable at this high level, as may be expected if this effect should exist, the majority of high and upper medium level subjects recorded decreases in SEI score. One quantitative explanation would be statistical regression, however the qualitatively data suggested that they may have developed a more realistic and balanced self-image. This explanation is given further support as a similar pattern was discovered in the low self-esteem cohort. They also appeared to gain a more balanced self-perception, perhaps because they were able to acknowledge their positive self-traits that were previously ignored or overlooked.

There appeared to be a pattern resulting from the qualitative data analysis where subjects scoring in the low, medium and high categories of self-esteem, based on pre-test SEI scores, gained further insight into the way in which they presented themselves to others. This knowledge then formed a basis on which to modify their self-perceptions and consequently, adjustments associated with these new self-images were reflected in minor self-esteem fluctuations. These realisations appeared to contribute to perceptual increases in self-esteem but which were incongruent with the changes in SEI scores. Subjects in the very low self-esteem cohort appeared to benefit least from the program although qualitative data consistently suggested an overall increase in perceived self-esteem resulting from the GAIT treatment.

Many adventure educators have, for some time, purported the value of adventure education for developing self-esteem in participants. The ambiguity surrounding the term self-esteem and the lack of objective, quantitative and qualitative data analysis have both contributed to emotive rhetoric on the virtues and vices of adventure education. The results of the current study have highlighted the need for a more cautious and contemplative approach to the investigation of the adventure process and its impact on the individual. Furthermore, the focus in this study has been to examine the effects of GAITS participation on self-esteem development. The study did not investigate the many antecedents and structures of self-esteem, nor did it examine the many other aspects of the self which may be impacted upon by the adventure process. In light of the data gathered pertaining to very low self-esteem subjects, GAITS may not be the most desirable form of experience, due to the sometimes confrontational nature of communication and interaction between participants. Improving the self-esteem of this sub-group of participants through such an experience should not be presumed, as it appears to have been in the past, to be synonymous with adventure education. Indeed, the current study has yielded results which, depending on their interpretation, present little empirical support for the value of adventure education as a method for increasing subject self-esteem.

The key educational consideration that must be made in light of these findings is not the intrinsic value inherent in adventure education, nor is it the potential for personal growth and development through participation in this process. The qualitative data contained herein provides ample support for both of these proposed outcomes. Rather the findings of this study encourage a broader and more inquisitive investigation into the therapeutic opportunity that a GAIT program presents.

It would be unwise, in light of these findings, to structure a learning situation specifically designed to enhance global self-esteem, around a GAIT adventure learning program. Adventure programs generally, and group initiative activities specifically, are not the panacea for increasing self-esteem. Conversely, if the objective of such an adventure experience was to bring about greater personal awareness, clarity of the self-concept or an opportunity for group based counselling and development, a program that uses GAITS may be highly effective. These are the questions and directions for further research, which must be considered.

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