

## The Journey Home: Psychological Adjustment Symptoms following Wilderness Expedition Programs

By Ulrich Dettweiler

Recent empirical research on outdoor education programs describes adjustment symptoms that instructors suffer from after the programs have come to an end. Post-course effects are also documented for students, but those are normally scientifically coded in measured changes in “skills” or “learning effects.” In this paper, I compare the adjustment processes of staff and students, and offer a philosophically motivated explanation for these processes with reference to my own experience of Outward Bound wilderness expeditions.

### Back from Work in the Wilds

Ellie Lawrence-Wood, researcher in the School of Psychology at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia, and Ivan Raymond, principal psychologist at Connected Self in Adelaide, examined “specific adjustment symptoms” of staff reported after wilderness programs. They find that all 62 respondents experienced

both pride and achievement after the program completion, with the overwhelming majority (97%) of staff reporting that their minds wandered “back to the experience.” Sixty-five percent of staff experienced “a sense of loss” or “missing the participants and/or adult staff.” Seventy-four percent of staff also indicated that they had “difficulties in adjusting back to normal life” and “felt different, just not my normal self” after program completion. Other responses included “becoming upset more easily,” “difficulty in relaxing,” “difficulty in concentrating,” “sleep difficulties,” “being quieter than normal,” “having less energy than normal,” and, for a small number of respondents, “periods of crying,” “increased irritability,” “being in a daze,” and “withdrawing from others” (Lawrence-Wood & Raymond, 2011, p. 331).

In short, the symptoms can be summed under three classes: 1) feelings of pride and achievement, 2) feelings of loss, 3) feelings of having their minds drawn back to the experience. However, it is not at all clear to what extent positively connoted feelings such as “pride” and “achievement” experienced after course completion (reported by 100% of respondents) interfere with the more negative, pathological symptoms (class 2: feelings of loss), leaving the authors to conclude that the post-course adjustment process “has the potential to be distressing” (Lawrence-Wood & Raymond, 2011, p. 335). It furthermore remains an open question whether feelings/states of mind of class 3 are to be seen positive or negative. The latter are probably contingent on the given situation and can oscillate between negative and positive feelings/states of mind. At least, that is what I would surmise based on my own experiences coming home from an exciting field trip and diving back into normal family life, including two young daughters competing for my attention and my wife feeling entitled to a deserved break from housework after having managed the family alone while I was enjoying a “holiday” in the wilds.

### The Effects of Wilderness Programs on Students

I know of very few studies that explore participants’ post-course adjustment symptoms. Far more common are studies that measure aspired changes in participants’ behaviour, for we know about the pedagogic value of expeditions, which include feeling part of a team, understanding group dynamics, enhancing leadership skills, and improving planning and organizational ability and attention to detail. The students learn to make real decisions and accept real consequences, they obtain a sense of achievement and satisfaction by overcoming challenges and obstacles, and they develop

self-reliance and independence. Last but not least, the students can experience and appreciate nature: The open sea, sunrises and sunsets, the stars in the sky, rain, wind, riffs—encounters that send shivers down the students' spines—they can feel the joy of being in nature (Dettweiler & Kugelmann, 2010).

In such studies as these, negative outcomes are described as the absence of changes, for the measured items rely on a catalogue of desirable (pedagogical) effects. For example, Tim Stott (Liverpool John Moors University) and Neil Hall (University of Greenwich) conducted a study on the participants' self-reported personal, social and technical skills during an extended wilderness experience. They found that participants reported

statistically significant changes (p 0.05) in their ability to avoid depression, avoid loneliness, set priorities, achieve goals, solve problems efficiently, . . . enjoy isolation, manage time efficiently, maintain physical fitness, be enthusiastic, demonstrate confidence and set goals. (Stott & Hall, 2003, 164)

My guess is that, if they had been asked, participants in Stott and Hall's study would have reported post-course adjustment symptoms similar to those reported by the staff members surveyed in Lawrence-Wood and Raymond's study. This is in line with the findings of Claudia Kugelmann, Chair, Department for Sport Pedagogy, Technische Universitaet Muenchen, and Gabriele Lauterbach, Research Associate at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen/Nürnberg, in their report to Staedtler-Stiftung reviewing the Classroom Under Sail (KUS) project ([www.kus-projekt.de](http://www.kus-projekt.de)). These researchers note the students have difficulty readjusting to the "old" learning situation at their home schools after having been on a six-month cruise and experiencing completely different modes of learning (Kugelmann & Lauterbach, 2011, p. 21). The data from the KUS-project suggest that the adjustment experiences of the students are similar to those experienced by the teachers in Lawrence-Wood and Raymond's study; such experiences seemingly "have

*the potential to distress"* both types of participants. Pete Allison and his colleagues (2011) offer an explanation as to why students might feel "a sense of isolation:" after a prolonged outdoor experience:

The expedition and the various subgroups inevitably develop their own culture and when students return to the UK they have reported a sense of isolation that is contrasting to their experience on expedition. We refer to this as "expedition reverse culture shock." (Allison, Davis-Berman & Berman, p. 13)

However, the students themselves reported that they were

more "chilled out," tolerant of others, less judgmental, pursuing opportunities for further travel and considering life to involve a mass of opportunities and endless options. In summary, it appears that people take the intense learning experiences of the group, who they did not know before the expedition, into their home community to inform their "way of being" in the world. (Allison et al., 2011, p. 11)

Again, these findings are similar to those in the KUS-Projekt, where the accompanied transition from youth to adulthood emerges to be the major pedagogic topos after three cruises (2008–2010) have been scientifically examined.

### **Are Wilderness Programs Pathogenic?**

To continue this exploration a little further, it is interesting that Lawrence-Wood and Raymond *pathologize* the experience of outdoor instructors at the end of a course, describing their feelings as "psychological adjustment symptoms," while these same experiences when attributed to students are welcomed as "pedagogical effects" of the programs.

It is the very idea of an outdoor program in a pedagogical setting to find analogous structures in the experiential education field

(i.e., what Stephen Bacon calls “isomorphic framing”) (Bacon 1983) where behaviour patterns are practised in a course that shall (in theory) outlast the program duration and become effective in the chosen “real-life” situation. But if those behaviour patterns become effective, I would assume that the participants feel “different,” that they have also “difficulties in adjusting back to normal life,” and they even have to change “normality” for the “abnormal,” trained, new pattern.

Researchers and practitioners can count on the positive outcome of their outdoor programs, as Hattie, Neill and Richards show in their meta-analysis comparing 1,728 effect sizes drawn from 151 unique samples from 96 studies. They state that in “remarkable contrast to most educational research, these short-term or immediate gains were followed by substantial additional gains between the end of the program and follow-up assessments” (Hattie et al., 1997, 43). Negative results are rarely reported; when they are it is only indirectly as non-achievements of the set goal.

### **The Danger of Being *Out There***

In my past experience as National Director of Program and Safety at Outward Bound Germany I have spent many a day out in the field in staff-training expeditions. There I witnessed various effects that suggest underlying pathological post-course psychological adjustment symptoms as experienced by the participants; the results were significant, including the end of marriages, jobs quit and living habits altered. Going into the wilds is dangerous, and not only because we are exposed to rapids, cliffs or avalanches. Going into the wilds brings us face-to-face with the scrubs and weeds of our selves; the armour of our personality is torn apart by the group we are bound to for weeks on end with little privacy and less comfort. We might experience something being out there that challenges our whole lives.

In addition to major life shifts, there are also small habits we may have to adjust after a

long wilderness experience. After weeks of abstaining from a shower, do you return to taking one daily upon returning to your regular life?

You’ve experienced how much effort and energy it takes to melt snow with your Primus and prepare tea (using a single tea bag for the third time). And you’ve enjoyed your supper in a snow shelter – both of which you prepared yourself and looked forward to the whole day. In light of this, what do you think when you see others consuming fast food on the subway, or toting a Starbucks cup in hand amidst running errands?

Standing at the airport, wearing the same clothes you’ve had on for weeks and carrying your expedition gear, do you feel a little alienated amongst all those business people in their grey suits totally engaged with their smartphones?

### **The Joy of Being *in Nature***

Recent field research I have conducted in Norway on concepts of meaning of nature experiences suggests that people seek the wilds to gain some distance from their “normal life.” Participants of wilderness expeditions ascribe cathartic qualities to the experience of being in or going into nature. In the beauty of the landscape, the simplicity of their daily tasks, and the little weight they carry on their shoulders (and I take it that they are metaphorical here and not referring to their literally heavy backpacks), they experience “the real life” in contrast to “back home” where distress resulting from everyday routines and duties seems to diminish the quality of their lives.

This “domestic” quality of “free nature” is the substratum of Nils Faarlund’s characterisation of “nature as the home of culture” (Faarlund, Dahle & Jensen, 2005). Whereas most adventure-seekers go “out” to come back “in” again and see wilderness trips as a welcome time out of their normal lives, the Norwegian guardian of the traditional “friluftsliv” (the untranslatable Norwegian word for being in nature)

points at the anthropological value of being “inside” nature:

As the Norwegian tradition of friluftsliv is about identity, expensive equipment, long approaches, arenas and indoor training are not needed. It is about touching and being touched by free Nature and thus the threshold for taking part is low. What is needed does not cost money nor has it any impact on free Nature. Leave no trace, make no noise and choose your way according to your experience! And remember—friluftsliv also has a value in itself!” (Faarlund et al., 2005, 395).

And it might well be that this very value is so deeply rooted in our selves and in our phylogenetic history that we cannot but suffer from a hangover when we return from the field and should consider it rather as a gift. In the end the personal attitudes of both participants and staff in wilderness programs will determine whether they experience readjustment symptoms after a program’s end. Instead of feeling “sick” we should rather be glad about the little itch we feel after wilderness experiences, for this helps us to become open to nature’s concerns as the home of our culture. It reminds us of what is really important in life and creates within us a healthy distance from our so-called civilized lifestyles.

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