A qualitative exploration of sense of community through reflective journals during wilderness outdoor education curricula

Garrett Hutson
Brock University

Lynn Anderson
SUNY Cortland

Mary Breunig
Brock University

Tim O'Connell
Brock University

Sharon Todd
SUNY Cortland

See next page for additional authors

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Lynn Anderson, SUNY Cortland
Mary Breunig, Brock University
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Sharon Todd, SUNY Cortland
Anderson Young, SUNY Cortland

Abstract

There has been repeated encouragement in the literature for researchers to examine the various mechanisms that make up group experiences in outdoor education contexts. As a result, positive sense of community is often one of the implicit or explicit goals of programs and organizations that utilize outdoor settings to deliver educational and/or therapeutic programs. The purpose of this study was to understand how participants understand and experience sense of community formation during participation on outdoor education curricula (OEC) programs. Qualitative data, in the form of 124 participant trip journals, were analyzed and revealed two core themes illuminating sense of community structure and process. Implications for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: sense of community, outdoor education, reflective journaling, wilderness

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For almost 20 years, the literature has repeatedly encouraged researchers to examine the various mechanisms that make up group experiences in outdoor education and outdoor pursuits settings (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000; McAvoy, Mitten, Stringer, Steckart, & Sproles, 1996). Interest continues to grow in exploring aspects of group dynamics in these contexts related to intergroup relationships such as social capital (Beames & Atencio, 2008; Yuen, Pedlar, & Mannell, 2005), communitas (Sharpe, 2005), and cohesion (Glass & Benshoff, 2002). Additionally, there has been recent burgeoning attention paid to the development of sense of community in outdoor education and outdoor pursuits groups in a variety of contexts (Austin, Martin, Yoshino, Schanning, Ogle, & Mittelstaedt, 2010; Breunig, O'Connell, Todd, Anderson, & Young, 2010; Lyons, 2003).

Outdoor and wilderness settings provide excellent opportunities to examine the community construct, as these environments allow for the emergence of shared goals (White & Hendee, 2000), facilitate sense-making of personal and community identity (Austin et al., 2010), and create temporary communities that are often reflective of society at large (Quay, Dickinson, & Nettleton, 2000). As a result, positive sense of community is often one of the implicit (Priest, 1990) or explicit goals (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000; Russell, Hendee, & Phillips-Miller, 2000) of programs and organizations that utilize outdoor or wilderness settings to deliver educational or therapeutic programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how participants understand and experience sense of community formation

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during participation on "wilderness" outdoor education curricula (OEC) programs. Wilderness herein is used not technically to refer to legally designated Wilderness areas, but descriptively to refer to backcounty settings associated with semiprimitive and primitive ranges on a recreation opportunity spectrum (USDA Forest Service, 1982). Qualitative data, in the form of 124 reflective journals, were analyzed for this paper.

Literature Review

When mentally picturing a "community," most people imagine a group engaged in a collective endeavor or think of various buzzwords and phrases, such as "communitas," "community of practice," and "sense of community," among others. This literature review will provide a brief overview of each of these concepts with an emphasis on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community that guided this study as well as the use of reflective journals in research and practice in educational contexts.

Community. The nature of a community is often defined by its members (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1996), as well as by the community's long term commitment to its members (Shafer & Anundsen, 1993). A community usually refers to a social unit that shares common values and has social cohesion. In human communities, intent, resources, needs, risks and other conditions may be present and common, affecting the identity of participants and the group's degree of cohesiveness. The word "community" is derived from the French word, communite, which is derived from the Latin communitas (Esposito, 2009).

Communitas. Communitas is the sense of sharing and belonging that develops among persons who experience liminality as a group (Esposito, 2009). According to Sharpe (2005), communitas emerges when people step out of their structural roles and obligations and into a sphere that is decidedly "anti-structural." In this anti-structural sphere, people are thought to be "betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life" (Turner, 1974, p. 273), and the rules of everyday life can be altered, inverted, and rearranged according to a community's norms.

Communities of practice. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a norm, concern, passion, or practice for something they do and learn how to do it better when they interact regularly. Some communities of practice are informal and unstructured, resonant with communitas' anti-structural spirit. Others are more formal and structured. The concept of community of practice has found a number of practical applications in organizational design, government, education, recreation, professional associations, and civic life (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Sense of community. Sense of community has been characterized as the "feeling an individual has about belonging to a group and involves the strength of the attachment people feel for their communities or group" (Halamova, 2001, p. 137). McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified four core factors in sense of community. First, *membership* refers to group cohesiveness. Second, *influence* is a bidirectional factor of sense of community where individual group members ideally feel that they have some sense of power to sway the group as a whole, while also being open to the group's authority. Third, *integration and fulfillment of needs* calls for a certain level of conformity to group norms. Finally, *shared emotional connection* is fostered through a common past and/or identification with the community's history. According to Sharpe (2005), postmodern communities embrace these four core factors given they are less often focused on instrumental relationships and more often centered on shared

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interest and emotion—what Shields (1992) characterized as a shift from the "contract community" to the "contact community."

Given the context of this study (wilderness OEC) and the above insights, the theoretical framework forwarded by McMillan and Chavis (1986) related to sense of community guides the present study's purpose, which is to explore how participants understand and experience sense of community formation during participation on OEC programs. Although some studies to date have explored the above concepts of community as a component of outdoor experiences, research is lacking that specifically employs "sense of community" as the theoretical framework.

Relevant studies. Lounsbury and DeNeui (1995) suggested a positive relationship between sense of community and group members' involvement in basic living or survival matters. This feeling of 'getting back to the basics' is often an inherent part of wilderness trip experiences where participants must focus on fundamental human needs such as travel, shelter, and food. The shared sense of purpose and the shared goals (i.e., mission and reciprocal responsibility) that result from participation on a wilderness trip experience lend themselves to sense of community development (Jason & Kobayashi, 1995). Further, Yuen et al. (2005) suggested that the short-term structure of some outdoor leisure experiences, such as youth camping programs, may be more accurately described as *proto-communities*. Proto-communities encompass all aspects of community except for the shortened time span in which they develop (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993).

More directly linked to the present study, empirical work (see Breunig et al., 2010; Lyons, 2003; Todd et al., 2007) indicate that participation in outdoor pursuits trips can lead to enhanced sense of community, which is shaped by a variety of factors. For example, the leadership style that fits best with the trip context and group, combined with exhibiting an ethic of care, has been shown to positively contribute to students' perceived sense of community on wilderness trips. Contrarily, a primary leadership style that is too laissez-faire and involves a less deliberate approach to building sense of community may detract from participants' sense of community on wilderness trips. Results from previous components of the present study also suggest that program structure and delivery designed to promote community-building among participants is successful in accomplishing a strengthened sense of community over time (see Breunig et al., 2010; O'Connell, Todd, Breunig, Young, Anderson, & Anderson, 2008). In fact, many program alumni have cited their experiences in these outdoor pursuits trips as a seminal part of their university experience and maintain lifelong friendships with group members. The aim of the present study is to gain further insight into the sense-of-community formation process as perceived through the reflective journal writings of participants to continue to deepen understanding of community 'in-the-making' during wilderness OEC.

Reflective Journals

Reflective journals are defined as "... written documents that students create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning" (Thorpe, 2004, p. 328) and have often been used in a number of academic disciplines as both a pedagogical and research tool (O'Connell & Dyment, 2011). There are several benefits of reflective journaling, which lend them to the dual use described above. First, journals enable students to mark a starting point for themselves in a learning experience by providing space to record basic observations of fact, context, and community (Boud, 2001; Fulwiler, 1987). Second, journals assist in centering the student in the learning process by placing his or her experience front and center (Mills,

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2008). Similarly, students can become more active and engaged in learning, as they are able to control the depth, breadth and direction of what they write. Third, reflective journals foster metacognition, or "thinking about thinking" (Cornish & Cantor, 2008, p. ?) and may include "thinking about learning" or "thinking about professional process" (O'Connell & Dyment, 2011). Hubbs and Brand (2005) posited that reflective journals serve as a "paper mirror" providing a replay of the writer's experience, him or herself, and others. Finally, reflective journals offer a creative outlet for self-expression (Hiemstra, 2001) as students can convey information in a variety of formats including prose, drawings, songs, and poetry (among others).

Because reflective journals provide students with these benefits, it is plausible to surmise that the entries, when considered as 'data,' are a relatively accurate description of the students' experiences. In this regard, reflective journals make an excellent information source (and as such, have been used in a multitude of studies across academic disciplines), particularly when structured by the researcher to assist the student in avoiding "the blank journal syndrome" (Gulwadi, 2009). Blank journal syndrome occurs when students feel intimidated by having limited direction on what and how to write. This is particularly salient for novice journal writers, and those that are simply handed a journal and expected to reflect (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010). As Epp (2008) noted, it can take several years for students to develop critical reflection skills. Structure may range from specific prompts or questions with step-by-step instructions to "food for thought" statements to which the writer responds (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010). Semi-structured journals, such as those used in this study, fall somewhere in between.

The semi-structured approach to reflective journals implemented in this study served two distinct purposes. First, the prompts were designed to help students (most of whom had little or no experience keeping a journal) reflect more authentically on their experience. Second, from a methodological perspective, the prompts directed some of the writer's attention to his or her perceptions of sense of community as well as variables impacting that community.

While reflective journals have certain benefits in this dual capacity, there are some potential concerns as well. First, many students are reluctant to express themselves honestly and deeply if they know an instructor or researcher is going to read the journal (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010). Paget (2001), in a study involving 600 nursing students, determined it was perceptions of trustworthiness of the instructor that was the pivotal factor in supporting critical reflection. Additionally, student perceptions of journal entries as "high stakes" or "low stakes" (Elbow, 1997) contributions toward a course grade have been noted to impact what is written. For this study, students were informed that their journals would count as part (5%) of their grade and would be copied with all identifying information removed prior to analysis. A final limitation with student reflective journals is that students will often write a majority of their entries just prior to when they are due to be turned in (Dyment & O'Connell, 2003). This may impact both the quality of reflection and the reliability of the information shared in the entries.

Method

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection, involving 124 students. Questionnaires, focus groups, and journals were used. The focus of this particular paper is on the results from the journal data (124 journals in total).

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Participants

Participants were undergraduates from a 4-year comprehensive university enrolled in a 13-day outdoor education practicum (spring of 2008, 2009, 2010). Students spent five days in a residential outdoor education setting, six days on a wilderness canoe trip, and two days back in the residential setting. Students were assigned to one of 21 trip groups designed to be as equivalent as possible in terms of gender, personalities, experience, and skill level. Development of community was one goal, among others, of this outdoor program. Students were asked to complete daily trip journals and were given prompts to help frame their open-ended journal entries. By using a semi-structured approach to reflective journals, students were supported in their journaling and guided in their processing of those aspects of the experience related to sense of community. Prompts in the journal included a question about perceived change in sense of community from the previous day, as well as a prompt about experiences that may have affected the way they felt about themselves, others, or the natural world.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was inductive and emergent in nature and guided by the theoretical framework of grounded theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Data analysis began with one member of the research team reading each journal and using a process of constant comparison and the identification of underlying uniformities, inductively comparing the data, examining the relevant literature, and generating a precursory theory of the relationship between participation in organized outdoor group experiences and perceived sense of community, resulting in the establishment of numerous thematic codes. Two members of the research team then conducted and compared independent analyses to form final thematic codes.

Results

The qualitative data analysis of participant trip journals revealed two primary and interconnected themes: 1) The ways sense of community emerges during a wilderness OEC; and 2) Factors that shape the development of sense of community. The first theme illuminated descriptions of group membership, group influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. The second theme emerged more as a process shaped by challenge, communication, and sense-of-place expression. Given that the focus of this study is about sense of community *formation*, the majority of the results highlight positive aspects of the groups' experiences. That is not say that every group functioned harmoniously all the time – they certainly did not. In fact, rival explanations and negative cases were revealed within both primary themes (e.g., examples of too much structure or too much challenge) and help to show how OEC can, at times, limit or constrain sense of community for some participants. These themes will be illuminated through data that clearly put into focus the ways sense of community emerges and the factors that shape the sense-of-community process during participation in a wilderness-based OEC.

Theme 1 - The Ways Sense of Community Emerges during a Wilderness OEC

Study participants wrote in their journals about the variety of ways that sense of community can emerge while on a trip. *Group Membership* was clearly part of the foundation to sense-of-community formation with particular emphases on group cohesion and feelings of attachment to the collective. For example, one participant wrote about the happiness that came with feeling like a member of the trip group: "I'm so happy to be on this trip with these 7 people and I haven't laughed like that in years." Another commented on emerging group cohesion, which provided comfort and strengthened over time: "I think our group does well together…I feel that they make me feel more and more comfortable every

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day." Feelings of attachment were also described in the context of familial relations (e.g., "This (group) is definitely like a family") and through reports of deep care and affection: "I never thought that in just five days I could learn to care about and love 7 complete strangers." Overall, *Group Membership* appeared to provide participants a broad grounding within their groups and appeared to be a constitutive part of participants feeling comfortable in receiving and expressing influence within their groups.

Group Influence emerged in the writings of participants through bi-directional expressions of influence both to and from the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Some positive expressions of influence were reported to be the result of "leader of the day" responsibilities. One participant remarked, "I was leader of the day, and people listened!" Participants consistently reported that having an opportunity to positively influence others (particularly for those new to leadership situations) helped to create an encouraging social environment for participants to feel like valued and influential members of their trip group community. Conversely, failed attempts at influence during leader of the day responsibilities caused some participants to take pause and reflect on how to improve group decision-making processes:

> I feel like as a team if we would group-up and come to a solution to our situation, it would be easier than talking in circles or only half the members hearing what is going on. We were all trying to decide whether to portage today or in the morning. As leaders I felt that our voice meant nothing and the other members would do what they wanted to do regardless.

Similarly, other group members viewed *Group Influence* as a learning process from which to potentially grow. One participant wrote: "It was very educational to see how different personalities and the like influence group dynamics both positively and negatively." Another remarked, "It's difficult for me to see where other people are coming from. Being out here gave me the chance to evaluate myself." *Group Influence* also emerged as participants became increasingly comfortable in offering each other feedback. One participant boasted about an attempt to talk with another participant about his attitude: "I got to pull (name omitted) aside and bond with him and kind of explain to him what I felt myself and the group felt about his 'poopy butt' attitude (in a nice way of course)." For others, this learning process came as a realization of how participants felt the group needed to be influenced during challenging moments. One participant wrote,

> It started to pour at one point and despite how cold and miserable I was I had to keep paddling, for myself and the group. Through these past five days I really learned a lot about myself and the 7 other people that are constantly around me.

Overall, reports of *Group Influence* ranged from descriptions of the tension caused by lack of influence to peak experiences that came with feeling influential as a group leader to putting the perceived needs of the group ahead of one's own during challenging group experiences.

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs helped to define sense of community in participant journals through descriptions of evolving group norms (integration) and expressed recognition of transformation of groups into high functioning supportive communities (fulfillment of needs). One participant described group integration when she felt the group became a "well-oiled machine":

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We, as a group, are becoming a well-oiled machine that is being powered by heart, determination, fascination, passion, tom-foolery, kindness, and most of all togetherness. We are doing something special that will stay with us for the rest of our lives.

Another participant commented on different members' contributions to group dynamics and highlighted how individual characteristics helped build a holistic and unique sense of community from her perspective:

We all gave something to the group, like (name omitted) always made us laugh, (name omitted) always helped, (name omitted) was always asking questions, and (name omitted) was always happy, no matter what. We all bonded and had an awesome time full of laughs that we will never forget.

In a similar vein, another participant reflected on hiking a peak and wrote about how she felt that her needs were supported during a personally challenging situation:

It felt good to feel the support of the group. I knew I was slowing them down but no one minded and no one made me feel like I was less of [a member of] the group. I was so proud of myself and the group for getting up there (top of a mountain) together.

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs were also realized in the intentions of group members. One participant wrote about a challenging day and commented, "We all helped each other through it the best we could." The phrase, "the best we could" suggests this participant had an openness and understanding of group strengths and limitations while taking comfort in the intentions that seemed to promote collective support. In summary, the sub-theme of *Integration and Fulfillment of Needs* helped to show how groups developed their own norms and identity. This was accomplished through groups effectively finding ways to fit people together that allowed for an individual group member to meet other members' needs while the group also met her or his own.

Shared Emotional Connection was reported in participant journals through sharing a common past, common challenges, and/or identification with the community's history. Participants described interpersonal connections through a variety of emotional registers often at the end of the trip through focused reflection. Participants often expressed genuine surprise about how closely connected they felt to other group members by the end of the trip: "Being the last night I hate to think of leaving my group. This trip has bonded me closer to people I never thought I would be friends with. Great experience." Other participants used metaphors when they wrote about their emotional connections to the group:

(name omitted) had us go out and find an object that represented the group and I found a curled up leaf for my object. It represented the collection of memories with the mid-line being the group headed for the same goals and the sides were the individual goals.

Participants reported showing appreciation for sharing the "ups and downs" and challenges of the experience and reported this helped build group cohesion that may extend into a post trip sense of community:

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I didn't want to come here, but now I'm glad I met these people and we all smell gross together. We had many ups and downs and we ended on a good note. The people I met in our group...I won't forget and will be friends with for a long time.

For some participants, shared emotional connections were difficult to put into words, but instead were expressed as "so many different emotions" that will remain as permanent fixtures in this participant's memory:

If there were words to describe this whole trip I would write them, but there were so many different emotions - but it was all worth it. [Our team] will always have a place in my heart and I think it will be impossible to forget this trip experience.

Overall, *Shared Emotional Connection* in participant trip journals may best be represented as a reflective culmination of the other sub-themes. In many instances within participant writings, depictions of *Group Membership, Group Influence,* and *Integration and Fulfillment of Needs* represent the shared process of sense of community in-the-making. Making it through the trip together, with all of its peaks and valleys (both figurative and literal), was often described in the end as a realization of strong and often surprising group emotional connections that were the products of shared experience.

Theme 2 - Factors that Shape the Development of Sense of Community
While theme 1 shows how participants described sense of community taking structural form, theme 2 illuminates specific aspects of the trip process that fueled, enhanced, and constrained the evolving sense-of-community process. *Challenge* played a consistent role in helping to shape sense of community. Participants reported that physical challenges associated with backcountry travel and camping helped to unify the group: "Although these challenges arose (flipping the canoe, bear bag snags), we still overcame them and are more unified than before." Participants also commented that simply spending time in challenging situations helped to build group cohesion: "The challenging day spent together brought us very close." *Challenge* also seemed to signify increasing skill development, resilience, and use of teamwork. One participant commented, "I love the fact that we as a group continue to seek out tougher challenges each day and amazingly we utilize each others' strengths." Similarly, another participant wrote: I think the long, frustrating, cold, rainy, breezy day was an awesome experience for our group. Definitely made us stronger. However, it wasn't all fun. At times I wanted to cry.

Overall, the everyday physical challenges of trip life brought many groups together and helped to fuel the sense of community building process.

Furthermore, social and intrapersonal challenges also shaped sense of community while on the trip. One participant remarked how the trip helped her learn patience:

Even with the rough last day, I wouldn't change a thing. I still love my trip group and I hope that we all stay in contact. I was tested A LOT the past week. I had to be patient, something I struggle with, I had to put others before myself and learn to rely on them at the same time.

For other participants, challenges were overcome by thinking about significant others: "When we were in the hardest conditions today, I thought about her [my girlfriend] and pushed my way through it."

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And still other participants seemed nearly overcome with intrapersonal challenges: "I am covered in bites and bruises. I can't wait to wash up and wear makeup and high heels. I feel dirty and ugly. I want to feel pretty." For many participants, successful negotiation of challenges was the crux to staying engaged with the group and with the trip as whole.

Communication was another prominent factor that shaped sense of community. Participants commented that simply making time to talk, laugh, and share personal stories helped them to feel more a part of the group early on the trip. One participant remarked, "We sat and ate dinner and laughed and joked and felt good about all we had accomplished." Similarly, another participant wrote about the need to feel free from other trip related responsibilities in order to engage in bonding communication:

> Our group has created a bond quickly. Today added to it because we were able to share small facts and stories about ourselves without being rushed with planning and packing and other things.

Communication was also described in the context of people becoming more comfortable with each other. Consider this participant's remarks that also highlight a shift in group development: "I see everyone getting a lot more comfortable with each other, which is good because we are becoming friends and bad because we will say things we are thinking we normally wouldn't." Participants' writings also indicated, at times, that this increasing openness led to conflict: "Got to camp and was upset on what (name omitted) had mumbled under his breath about me. Sick of everyone at this point. Can't wait to get home." Another participant identified communication tension based on gender: "I have actually gotten along with girls so well for so long. Unfortunately, I'm not agreeing so well with the boys." Indeed, different styles, types, and situation specific communication practices and strategies appeared to shape sense of community both in positive and negative ways.

Overwhelmingly, participants reported in their journals that reflective structured interpersonal communication, in the form of focused reflection at the end of the trip, solidified and strengthened sense of community. One participant reflected on a final debriefing exercise in his journal in this way:

> We reflected for a while about the trip and how happy we all were that we were in a group together. Things got deep. [I] Love my group for life. This was an experience I will never forget and the memories will always be with me. We came together as 7 strangers and I left with 7 friends.

Other participants reflected on their role in and contributions to the group during these end-of-trip reflections:

> At the end of the night, we did some group things and reflected on the week. This week has been awesome and the people will be friends for quite some time. I only hope I brought as much to the table as they all did for me.

Overall, participants wrote about communication as a factor that continuously shaped sense of community – many participants commenting that they learned a lot about themselves through communication and the ways they chose to communicate. While many groups appeared to have found

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structured interpersonal communication strategies that strengthened group dynamics, other groups struggled to find communication balance throughout these trips.

Sense-of-Place Expression was another influential factor on sense of community through both emotional and functional depictions of the natural surroundings. Sense-of-place expression was commonly reported in participant journals as an outward love of place:

> The natural beauty and noises of the Adirondacks made me appreciate this trip. Currently, I am sitting next to open water. The loons are howling and the birds are chirping. I just saw a fish jump, which made the mirror-like water ripple. The sun just past the horizon and the sky is purple and blue.

However, participants also commented on distractions to feeling connected to the place. The same participant who wrote the vignette above commented, "My only complaint is that of the human voices that surround me [the group] and of course the black flies and mosquitoes." Sense of place was also expressed as a way to escape from group dynamics:

> I am writing on top of a huge rock right in front of the water with a snake sunning itself about ten feet away. Although the group is not tight, I am enjoying the beauty of nature and I love being outside.

And finally, sense-of-place expression was written about in the context of a reward after a challenging day: "The highlight of my day is when it stopped raining and the clouds parted half grey, half blue and you could see the reflection of the trees in the water. Beautiful. That made all the pain worth it." While sense of place was written about in a variety of ways, participant journals also suggest that shared group experiences combined with sense-of-place expression helped to strengthen sense of community.

A prime example of sense of place and sense of community working together was evidenced by descriptions of shared experiences in observing wildlife:

> There was a baby bear in a tree. It was so cute! It must have been so scared though and mama had to be nearby because it was staring in one direction the whole time…. The falls were beautiful, playing with frogs, first real day of sunlight. Everyone was loving it.

Furthermore, participants made reference to the place in the context of providing a backdrop to put group skills into action:

> Being out in nature with friends putting our skills to the test is great and very challenging…I am so lucky to be learning all of these skills in the Adirondacks because it's so beautiful and well maintained.

Sense-of-place and sense-of-community integration was also evidenced in participant journals through an apparent fusion of people, place, and process:

> Overall, [I] am loving this experience. Incredible group, amazing place! Sore shoulders/upper back tonight, but definitely worth it. I am thoroughly convinced that a paddle moving through

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the water and laughter are two of the best sounds that exist. And they are both really common here!

Finally, place and sense of community coalesce in the words of one participant as "home" and "family." One participant remarked in his journal, **"**The trees are my shelter. This campsite is my home. These strangers are my family." Overall, experiencing place alone and with others was something many participants craved, wished more time was devoted to, and, at times, expressed feeling too rushed to fully enjoy: "I wish we could just float a while and take it (the place) all in."

Discussion

Overall, and perhaps most importantly, the results from this study and the larger study as a whole are contributing to Ewert and McAvoy's (2000) "call" for additional research related to documenting and critically discussing the process and outcomes of participation in organized wilderness trip programs. The results from this study can be summarized into four broad conclusions. First, these results resonate with the results from its parent study, that the OEC program enhanced participants' sense of community (Breunig et al., 2010). Second, these results continue to document the studied program's intended outcomes related to community-building. More specifically, these results support the OEC program's structure and delivery, which has been designed to promote community-building among participants. Third, these results support the use of participant journals as a successful means to understand the sense of community formation process from participant perspectives. And fourth, these results provide this OEC program with a deepened understanding of community-building processes from participant perspectives that were previously unknown and which bring to life the dynamic nature of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theoretical framework. The sections that follow extend from the fourth conclusion and address implications for theory, a translation to practice, and recommendations for future research as well as the limitations of utilizing participant trip journals.

Implications for Theory

McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 15) suggested "sense of community is not a static feeling" but instead is dynamic, transactional, and context specific. This study's findings help to highlight the dynamic and interactive nature of McMillan and Chavis' four core factors with each other, with other aspects of the sense of community process, and with other OEC program factors. For example, *Group Membership* and *Challenge* were intertwined considerably. As participants worked through the hardships of the trip they reported feeling they had earned their place in their respective groups as valued members whose influence mattered (McMillan, 1976). Moreover, feeling supported, spurred by group membership, helped to facilitate the overcoming of other challenges while on trip. In other words, some participants used challenge as a way to find their own sense of membership and identity within their trip-group community and at times relied on the positive feelings associated with sense of community as a way to cope with other challenges. This relationship is consistent with past and present research on resilience and coping during outdoor experiences (see Ewert & Yoshino, 2011; Neil & Dias, 2001) and highlights part of the dynamic quality of McMillan and Chavis' theory within an outdoor experiential context.

Another salient example of this type of theory dynamism was highlighted by *Shared Emotional Connection*, which seemed not only to be the result of group members finding meaningful ways to emotionally connect with one another, but also to the shared community-building processes that took place over the course of the wilderness trips. *Shared Emotional Connection* was especially fueled by

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group members who reported a recognition and acknowledgement of the shared group efforts of building and maintaining a sense of community. A shared collaborative built history (although brief) was reported by some to be intense, important, and worth protecting. Similarly, McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggested shared emotional connection results from a combination of interpersonal contact and "high quality interaction" (p. 10). Interpersonal contact was fueled by *Communication*, and also overlapped with *Shared Emotional Connection*. McMillan and Chavis define "high quality interaction," in part, through events that have successful closure, shared meaning, and honoring of participants within groups – all very similar characteristics to many of the wilderness trip events reported in participant journals in this study.

Furthermore, the efficacy of factors such as "sharedness," "closure," and "honoring" reiterates the importance of focused reflection at the end of the trip as a means to solidifying *Shared Emotional Connection* and sense of community as a whole (Breunig et al., 2010). This point is especially noteworthy given that these trip groups function more as proto-communities (Yuen, Pedlar, & Mannell, 2005) that spend a relative short amount of time together. Overall, it seems plausible that successfully facilitating focused reflection, which highlights shared meaning, closure of events, and the honoring of groups may be the crux to sense-of-community formation and closure processes during a wilderness OEC.

Translation to Practice

While there are many resources available to guide outdoor leaders in fostering a positive group dynamic and a sense of community, the results of this study suggest new and reinforce time-tested strategies to support sense-of-community formation in a positive light. First, and consistent with its parent study (Breunig et al., 2010), the findings from this study reinforce the importance of creating time for social interactions at a basic level early on wilderness trips (e.g., extra time to complete meals, extra time installing camps, social time during group meetings). This time can give participants a foundation for community-building, which may carry through to other aspects of the wilderness experience. Second, these findings serve as a reminder that intentional pre-trip and post-trip community building activities can help to solidify interpersonal group connections with frequent and varied debriefing experiences facilitated by the leaders. Not only are structured community-building activities valuable for what they accomplish interpersonally, but when facilitated on a regular basis they can help to build a ritual of community-making, which may become a celebrated part of the group's community identity. Finally, the findings from this study highlight again the importance of seeking balance between the challenges encountered on trip and the skill level of the group to enhance sense of community. While balancing challenge and skill is a commonly known prerequisite in facilitating positive outdoor experiential programs, outdoor leaders may find it helpful to use sense of community as an indicator to know when to turn the intensity of a trip up or down.

New insights from the findings of this study extend from the dynamic nature of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community in an outdoor trip context. Outdoor leaders should use to their advantage the intertwined factors that shape sense of community formation. For example, and as previously discussed, the results of this study suggest that *Group Membership* and *Challenge* are connected. While some participants expressed an awareness of this connection, others did not. Outdoor leaders may find it useful to help participants recognize these connections through periodic debrief questions and prompts to the group (e.g., "How do you think this hard day on the water affected the group's dynamic?"), through verbalizing and modeling a community formation narrative (e.g., "I really

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sensed a special type of closeness within the group after that long and hard portage."), and through verbalizing participant recognition to the group (e.g., "I really appreciated Sam's encouragement to everyone during the bad weather we experienced – I think it helped the group to stay positive through the day."). This type of questioning and verbalizing can take place at a variety of times both in formal and informal contexts.

Furthermore, *Shared Emotional Connection* was woven into the broad community-building processes and collaboratively built group histories within participant journals. Statements along the lines of "after all we've been through together I feel so close to the group…" bring this point to life. Leaders can remind participants that building and maintaining a sense of community can be challenging, and the process itself is worthy of recognition and celebration. Additionally, leaders should work hard to inclusively recognize all group members in their contributions to a group's collaborative history. When participants see themselves within the mosaic of a built and shared history it seems plausible that this will help them feel a stronger sense of their place and role within their trip-group communities.

In summary, the findings of this study contextualized within McMillan and Chavis' (1986) framework can be used in various ways to inform practice. While numerous concrete examples were made explicit within the findings of this study, it seems reasonable to suggest that the dynamic qualities of sense of community within an outdoor experiential context unfold in myriad other ways. Outdoor leaders should strive to continually refine the sensitivity of their perceptions toward trip-group interpersonal processes. This increased sensitivity may help outdoor leaders tune into the interconnected nuances within the unique dynamics of every group they work with to shape sense of community in a positive light.

Limitations and Future Directions

This project has similar limitations to other qualitative research approaches. A few points are worth highlighting within the context of utilizing trip journals as qualitative data. First, as highlighted in the review of literature, participants were aware that other people (including their instructor) would be reading their trip journals, which likely affected the type of content they were willing to share within their writings even though trust was purposefully built into the framing of the journaling process. However, it is also noteworthy that some participants reported that knowing that they were writing "to someone" provided a sense of purpose related to their writing. Second, some participants clearly found it challenging to express their feelings through writing even with the journal prompts; their points of view were not captured in the journal data or in the overall results of this study. In future work utilizing participant trip journals, it would be advisable to follow up specifically with those individuals who did not write much to gain clarity into their trip perspectives. Third, some participants expressed being too tired, too exhausted, or too distracted to write much of anything while on their trip. Although time was specifically devoted to journal writing in the field, the unpredictability of wilderness trips (e.g., weather issues, bugs, route challenges, injuries) often challenged the journal writing process. And finally, demographic characteristics were not explored as part of this analysis, but certainly warrant further exploration in future work.

In closing, while journals are often used as a component of OEC programs, outcomes specific to their deliberate use have been inadequately documented, and this study may serve as a framework from which others may choose to work. There is a paucity of research regarding the ways in which journals impact students' interactions with and in the natural and social environments that wilderness offers

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(Hammond, 2002). The intent of this study was to deliberately employ journals as both a reflective tool for student use and as a conscious research design element to explore participants' understanding of the sense-of-community process while on trip. Given this, the authors remain curious about how journals might effectively serve that dual function. Journals can be an effective medium for facilitating reflection on field courses but are not necessarily and certainly not automatically so (Bennion & Olsen, 2002). However, from the researchers' experiences working in the field, through learning gained from this ongoing project, and through a review of related literature, it seems that too often students are simply handed a journal and asked to write about their field experience with little or no structure provided (Dyment & O'Connell, 2003). Thus, future work warrants further exploration of the ways in which journals are employed during OEC.

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