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## **Back to Basics: Can Unstructured Camping Promote Wellbeing?**

### **Abstract**

**Aims:** To explore the perceived wellbeing benefits of the unstructured camping experience for young adults.

**Design:** A cross-sectional descriptive phenomenological study.

**Methods:** Young adults between the ages of 21 and 30 years with recent experiences of camping were invited to participate in the study. A descriptive phenomenological approach was taken; involving photograph guided semi-structured interviews and Colaizzi's seven stage analysis framework. Ethical approval was granted by the university where the study was managed.

**Findings:** Four female participants were interviewed; each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes in duration. Unstructured camping holidays were perceived to heighten general perceptions of health and wellbeing. Five themes emerged; 'Getting away', 'Appreciation of the Natural Environment', 'Relationship Maintenance', 'Tranquility and Relaxation' and 'Freedom and Adventure/Exploration'. The unstructured nature of the activity encouraged participant's freewill to appreciate the natural environment and to engage in physical activity. The escape from everyday stressors to a tranquil environment provided the space and time to think and talk, relax and be active.

**Conclusions:** Green care initiatives could use the unstructured camping experience, framed as the 'back to basics' model of camping, as a tool to promote general health and wellbeing in clinical and non-clinical young adult populations. Further research is needed to substantiate the evidence base, especially to probe further around the benefits of the spontaneity of the 'back to basics' camping experience, in contrast to the structured group camp experiences advocated in the UK and overseas for children's leisure or health purposes.

## Introduction

Kaplan's (1995) Attention Restoration Theory (ART) is one of the earliest theories exploring the restorative capacity of nature. Kaplan (1995) suggested that individuals have a limit on their capacity to concentrate and after long periods of concentration, this capacity depletes and requires restoration. Though sleep is an effective restoration activity, there are other ways. Four criteria need to be met in order to successfully restore the capacity to concentrate. Firstly, being 'away' - emotionally, mentally or physically, from the drain on your concentration and/or usual environment. Secondly, engaging in a task that does not require direct attention or focus- doing something you do not need to concentrate on but instead can work with on a relatively surface level of operation. Thirdly, the task chosen must keep your attention- there should be enough to experience in order to keep your interest. Finally, the chosen environment or task needs to be compatible with the individual- it needs to be facilitative of the chosen activity and suited to the individual's likes/interests/nature.

Kaplan's (1995) ART can be linked with elements of green exercise in that 'green' environments often meet the criteria set out; you can move away from the office or home to a local green environment, there is often enough going on for you to see in the changing landscape and nature but the level of concentration required to experience this is low. The final criteria clearly will be down to the individual and their preferences, though to introduce Wilson's (1984) Biophilia hypothesis, individuals may feel an innate affinity with the natural environment. Wilson (1984) proposed that individuals were predisposed to positively respond to non-threatening natural environments and living things.

Historically, the introduction of the 'Q Camp' just before World War Two saw the beginning of the therapeutic community. Initially aimed at adults, it reopened after the war in 1944. Young people who had been evacuated, but too troubled for a family to cope with, were invited to live at Q Camp (Roth, 2006). The initial concept was seen as radical; little to no rules or boundaries, and children were in charge of their own agendas, living with nature and being cared for by staff unconditionally. Though the camp was closed down some years later, some still consider it a success despite criticisms and the camp being declared uninhabitable (Roth, 2006).

Within the leisure and tourism discipline, academics have become interested in exploring the meaning and impact of the camping experience. The oxford dictionary definition of camping is detailed as 'the activity of spending a holiday living in a tent'.

Whilst spending holiday time living in a tent, unique experiences that relate to being at one with nature, enjoying community spirit and observing personal growth in health and wellbeing are said to be possible (Triantafillidou & Siomkos, 2013). Sometimes this is

evidenced as a result of the unique challenges herald by camping and the activities associated with it (Pomfret, 2006).

The Summer camp movement (predominantly in the USA) has long recognised the potential health and wellbeing benefits of the structured camp experience. The structured camp experience usually entails a daily or regular programme of organised activities, food prepared by staff and access to modern day pleasures, for example televisions, arts and crafts and so forth. Positive observations and feedback are used to promote the structured camp experience for young people and especially clinical populations. Benefits have been found to be focused around improvements in self-esteem, improved cognition through learning new skills, behavioural modification, improved physical, social and spiritual wellbeing (Brannan & Fullerton, 1999; Henderson et al, 2005).

Camping holidays can also be very nostalgic, where even difficult camping experiences can be remembered against a backdrop of fun or self-development. Garst (2010) explored the experience of forest camping and concluded that campsites are viewed as special places and related experiences hold strong nostalgic memories. Schouten et al (2007) equate camping experiences with what they term as transcendent experiences. In this way, it can be seen that a camping holiday has the potential to include a mix of high and low experiences that can encourage satisfaction, intense emotional reactions, a sense of extraordinariness and escapism, self-awareness, and personal renewal.

White (et al, 2013) studied four thousand individuals after visiting various natural locations. The study aimed to discover which natural environment types could provide the most restorative experience. They found coastal locations came top, with urban parks at the bottom. They also examined forest and mountainous environments, finding the latter two shared similar levels of restoration.

Haigh (2014) explores the survival of the therapeutic community against the odds, explaining the difficulties therapeutic communities face when it comes to management and measurement. In mainstream psychological research, importance is placed on the ability to prove specific outcomes and measures, however therapeutic communities are not always specific about what they do or achieve; rather, they maintain elements of spontaneity and

creativity, deemed vital for the success of the community (Haigh, 2014). From a care perspective, Haigh (2013) also notes that the optimum conditions for emotional development can be facilitated in therapeutic communities, including communication and inclusion.

Given our understanding of the restorative capacity of natural environments (Kaplan, 1995; White et al, 2013) and the potential developmental and health promotion capacities of therapeutic communities, it is interesting to note that green care initiatives so far in the UK have not targeted the camping experience. Green care as a concept relates to any form of intervention that promotes a connection with nature or the environment; the aim to promote a stepped change in an individual or groups perceived health and wellbeing. Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH), Horticultural Therapy (HT) and Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) have so far been the main focus of this movement (Haubenhofner et al, 2010).

Related health promotion initiatives have been very much focused on healing gardens/environments and physical activity, such as Whitehouse (et al, 2001) who carried out research in a children's hospital to determine whether a garden provided a stress-reducing benefit for patients and their families. They found that, although more needed to be done to promote the gardens presence, the overall impact on stress-reduction was effective; it was perceived as a place of healing and restoration (Whitehouse et al, 2001). This is to the exclusion of considering how camping holidays themselves can be situated in healing or natural environments and that campers have the potential to engage in physical activity. To this end, the current study explores the perceived wellbeing benefits of the camping experience for a non-clinical sample of young adults. Rather than trying to extend our understanding of the impact the structured camping experience can have on individual's perceived wellbeing, our focus is on the unstructured camping experience. The unstructured camping experience is defined in the current study as habitation in a tent, in an outdoors space, with no modern day aides to daily living in close vicinity. So, for example, cooking may be done over a camp fire and there will be no camp pre-organised (by others) activities or nearby built social spaces to frequent.

## **Method**

### *Descriptive phenomenology*

Edmund Husserl (1999) was the founding father of this approach to both philosophy and the related eidetic or descriptive methodology. He asserted that consciousness was central to all human experience and his 'Logical Investigations' (Husserl, 1970) explored further how we as researchers can arrive at the essential nature and meaning of experience. Husserl's ideas around transcendental subjectivity argue that researchers can suspend their presuppositions and through direct interaction with the researched (to include listening and musing), enter into their life worlds and both identify and analyse the meaning of these life worlds or lived experiences, and unravel the essential structure of the phenomenon under study.

A key concept in descriptive phenomenological research is epoché, which essentially involves bracketing off any pre-conceptions about the phenomena under study, in this case 'camping'. Langdridge (2007) discusses the 'natural attitude'; how we generally see the world, and how this can influence how a phenomenon is researched. By 'bracketing off' or acknowledging my pre-conceptions about camping, it is possible to prevent simply re-presenting my understanding of it, and instead reveal new features and create a 'phenomenological perspective' using the participants' experiences. The process of bracketing or reaching a state of transcendental subjectivity is aided by keeping a reflexive journal. This is used prior to and throughout data collection and drawn upon at the point of analysis, so that the researcher can separate out their observations and assumptions so as not to affect the findings by their own Being.

### *Procedural Method*

In the current study four campers were recruited via opportunity sampling, on the grounds of them being young adults and having recently been on an unstructured camping holiday. The participants were not known to each other and each has been assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity, in keeping with the ethical guidelines set. The originating research agenda was to explore the lived experience of unstructured camping. A non-clinical sample was chosen on the grounds of there being a dearth of research that has looked at this

experience, and related wellbeing, for non-clinical adult populations. The chosen data collection method was individual guided interviews. The interview schedules were loosely constructed around knowledge of previous theory and to prompt and probe around individual unstructured camping experiences and related meaning making. The participants were invited to bring to interview photographs of their camping holidays, to aide memory and the re-living of events. This was a novel addition to the research design with the purpose to collate more real time or nostalgic data; understanding that time as considered in subjective terms can be influential to the outcomes of any phenomenological study.

Four females aged 21-30 agreed to participate in interviews relating to their camping experiences. Each brought photographs to discuss experiences that involved good and bad memories. Interviews lasted around an hour and the interviews were conducted in the participant's homes or a public space, to encourage rapport and for participants to feel comfortable in disclosing their experiences. It was concluded after the fourth interview that saturation had been reached; similar concepts were cropping up in the interviews and, due to their length, the data collected was rich. The credibility of the research was considered in relation to ideas put forward by Todres (2005) including gaining quality descriptions of the phenomena, discussing the research with external sources (colleagues) and using appropriate methods. All interview data was recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Colaizzi's (1978) method of analysis, although involved on the part of the researcher, was utilised here. The approach is used widely with health related phenomena.

The following seven procedural steps were followed (Colaizzi, 1978).

1. Each transcript was read and re-read to get a general feel about what had been said.
2. For each transcript, significant statements were identified that had some perceived relationship with what it meant to go camping and what the impact on wellbeing is. The statements were copied on to a separate document and indexed.
3. Meanings were then generated from the significant statements, which involved going into more detail about what the participant meant without reading beyond the text.
4. The meanings were then arranged into categories and sub categories, forming clusters of themes.

5. The findings of the study are given by the identified categories which were then distilled into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.
6. The essential structure of the lived experience of camping is described, which is a short yet all-encompassing description of the lived experience of camping.
7. Finally, validation of the findings was given by the research participants who agreed that the descriptive findings were congruent with their experiences.

## **Findings**

Five main themes were found: 'Getting away', 'Appreciation of the Natural Environment', 'Tranquility and Relaxation', 'Relationship Maintenance' and 'Freedom and Adventure/Exploration'. For the purpose of this paper, three main categorical areas identified to be integral to the reported lived experience of unstructured camping will be discussed.

## **Discussion**

### *Tranquility and Relaxation*

Participants intentionally sought tranquil spaces to camp. A tranquil space was discussed as a prerequisite for relaxation. Lydia explained how busy, noisy environments would be counteractive for her desire 'to relax whilst on holiday'. Again, Catherine also spoke about how the potential tranquility of unstructured camping environments can be an aid to relaxation. Interestingly, each participant defined tranquillity and relaxation using different terms of reference, supported by talk around different experiences.

Nicola equated tranquillity with the simplicity of the natural environment, 'the peacefulness of being outside in nice places' was reported to be an enjoyable part of the unstructured camping experience. In her reporting of different experiences she mentioned her awareness of the subtle sounds; 'the river trickling away', 'all you can hear are your own footsteps'.

Nicola suggested that this sensory awareness is something you cannot gain from all settings. Catherine, also discussed her fondness for simplicity afforded by the unstructured camping experience, but rather than reporting such in just sensory terms she focuses on the free will of activity; 'all you want to do is sit down and chill out...sat there watching the sun set with a beer, all warm in my jacket'. Thinking about watching the sunset draws us to think about



peacefulness and relaxation, and although Catherine likes walking when she goes camping, being able to relax is deemed as an activity with as great importance for her perceived wellbeing.

Lydia's talk around different camping experiences was of particular interest. In terms of event recollection and living through less positive experiences, Lydia suggests that 'if you can't chill, the negatives about camping will get to you'. Lydia, here is suggesting that there can be 'a getting used to it' period where you perhaps need to embrace the unstructured camping mind-set – a tranquil space to relax can perhaps promote this. Relaxing was a major part of the unstructured camp experience for Lydia and she spoke about how life at home cannot afford her the same type or level of relaxation that unstructured camping can, 'when you're at home you don't chill out properly because there's always something to occupy you'.

#### *Getting Away/Upliftment*

This was the most common theme, with twenty five related significant statements and related meanings. The unstructured camping experience allowed Nicola a 'getting away from all the distractions of modern life'. She used camping as an opportunity to 'get away without the stresses and without the worries'. Nicola's partner was 'at one with outside' which gave her some comfort in embarking on new adventures. Unstructured camping gave her 'the proper sense of being away'.

Nicola and Catherine in contrast spoke predominantly of a physical escapism. Catherine commented on how she likes to 'get away from it all round here' and mentioned how 'it's nice to get away from gadgets...I work in an office, so I spend every day staring at a computer, cooked up'. Escaping technology complimented Catherine's desire to escape from her usual environments to an outdoor space, saying 'it was just so nice to be outside'. Catherine seemed to want to escape gadgets and her physical environment in order to relax/restore whereas Nicola needed to escape the mental stresses that her home environment represented at the time. Camping allowed this because it was a completely different environment and experience to previous breaks/holidays. The unstructured nature of the trip meant she could take each day as it came, with a positive outlook and embracing the challenges of living outside because they were manageable/simple. At home she

worried about what the future held and what the seemingly impossible challenges the next day would bring.

Lydia's focus on escapism was quite different; it was about a physical moving away from the everyday. Being able to escape mentally and to not be so focused on time was important. The unstructured camping experience meant she was free from her everyday world where 'there's always something to occupy you, whether it's the telly, your phone or your work, you rarely just stop and leave stuff'. Unstructured camping 'forces you' to leave things.

Jane saw the therapeutic benefits of the escapism that unstructured camping created. This type of holiday was said to get her relationship back on track. Everyday life and stressors would make her relationship drift and time together would be limited. By escaping the usual environment and enjoying focused unstructured time together, they could talk and re-establish bonds.

#### *Appreciation of the Natural Environment/Embodiment*

Nineteen significant statements and related meanings attach to this theme. Each participant reported how they appreciated the natural environment and discussed times where they felt the environment they inhabited was embodied. It was the environmental appreciation that seemed to dictate how they conducted themselves day to day and was influential in terms of deciding what activities they chose to participate in.

Nicola discussed how uncomplicated nature was, how she could breathe in the scenery and appreciate its beauty; 'the scenery is beautiful...it's just quiet and tranquil and all you can hear are your own footsteps and the river trickling away next to you'. The peacefulness of the camp setting enabled Nicola to lose her worries and to find feelings of positivity. Whilst looking at her photographs, Nicola recounted her increased appetite for outdoor pursuits as she spoke of building up her natural energy and appreciation for such through the course of her holiday, 'yearning to be outside more and more'. Catherine also recognised the positive psychological effect unstructured camping has on her Being: 'There's nobody else most of the time and you've got your own space and you can shout if you want to and nobody is over-hearing you'. Like Nicola, she spoke about feeling the environment and consciously being aware of its natural elements: 'fresh air is probably the biggest draw'. The natural

environment for Catherine was appreciated further as a contrast to her busy township living and working office environment. Unstructured camping provides an alternative experience. Jane talked about how camping moved her away from the mundane and into an exciting outdoor world, a new place, with the challenge of being away from the gadgets and technology that guide our usual everyday living.

Other types of holidays were discussed and it was argued that structured experiences do not allow individuals to engender the freedom of being away from modern day living. If we move away from modern day entrapments, then it is possible that we can more fully appreciate nature and the excitement that that can bring.

Interestingly, Lydia did not frame her unstructured camping experiences in exciting and active terms, but they were still viewed through a liberating lens. The quiet, tranquil and just different setting experienced was reported to be the crucial element of a good unstructured camping experience. Such natural space, allowed Lydia to 'switch off' and focus her energies on what mattered most in her life. She would use time in camp to rebuild her own energies, to rebuild fractions in relationships and to help her to escape from her broken relationship and the upheaval that were sometimes too difficult to live through in the everyday settings she encountered.

#### *Fundamental Structure of the Experience*

Unstructured camping provides a great escape which intensifies bonds with friends or partners who have accompanied participants on their holiday. It encourages time to think and talk about the issues that matter. Unstructured camping allows participants to escape from their day to day lives and related stressors. This experience is not mirrored by other types of vacation experience. Being in a natural environment that is unstructured and involves physical activity of differing intensity (which again is unstructured), and done for leisure purposes, promotes a sense of wellbeing. This 'back to basics' camping model, allows for an appreciation of the natural environment and encourages enjoyment in outdoor pursuits.

#### **Conclusion**

The sample of participants were regular 'campers' who did not frequent organised package holiday type camping settings, neither had they participated in group structured summer camp type activities as children or adults. Their holiday agendas were very much decided by them, often spontaneously. The camping location would often be decided last minute and any physical activity would occur as desired throughout the course of a day. The chosen environment however, would always be free from modern day technology, for example there would be no club houses containing televisions or cafeterias. These characteristics of the reported shared experience of camping are important when considering health promotion strategies and green care initiatives. The camping experiences reported were unstructured and very much adopted a 'back to basics' ethos.

The lack of rules and boundaries seen at Q Camp (Roth, 2006) are echoed by the unstructured nature of the camp experience in the current study; relating to freedom and adventure thematically. It could be that this is an important element for improving feelings of wellbeing. Breaking away from the constraints of planning, preparation and measuring outcomes as proposed by Haigh (2013) is also reflective of the unstructured camping notion; having the freedom to participate in activities only as and when desired. This agency featured at Q Camp too, and could be an area for further research, supported theoretically by Kaplan's ART (1995), which suggests individuals must choose their own restorative environment and activity.

The use of photographs alongside the dominant data collection method allowed for nostalgia and the re-framing of negative experiences (at the time) to be reported with fondness. The reported feelings of escapism and upliftment resulting from the environmental appreciation were strong. This finding is consistent with the findings of Garst et al (2010) and Schouten et al (2007) who have noted the variance of experience through camping and how individuals reflect on times camping nostalgically.

It is evident that a holiday involving being outdoors and participating in physical activities is congruent with current health promotion strategies (MoreLife, online; Change4Life, 2013) and our understanding of how nature can impact positively on our wellbeing. However, if this simple 'back to basics' model of camping was adopted as a tool for health promotion or as a collective activity for groups within green care initiatives - it is clear to see how different

populations could benefit, not least from the escapism and freewill of activity that appears to impact positively on perceived wellbeing. A general Public Health response to educate and support access to campsites is needed. The current research highlights the potential for camping as a therapeutic activity, and the camp environment as a therapeutic community. With this in mind it could be useful for health practitioners to encourage individuals to use outdoor space in a health promotion capacity. However, to ascertain the more measurable findings as reported by structured camping initiatives, some thought would be needed around conducting interventional studies that have the scope to measure the effect of the unstructured camping experience on self-esteem, cognition, behavioural modification, improved physical, social and spiritual wellbeing (Brannan & Fullerton, 1999; Henderson et al, 2005).

Further research is called for which explores this 'back to basics' camping model for different user groups, the nostalgia involved in recounting camping times, and the types and levels of physical activity achievable on such holidays. Unstructured physical activity and habituating a natural camp environment, in a tent, interacting with nature, has the potential capacity to improve perceived wellbeing.

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