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# Reflections by Youth following a Wilderness Challenge Program

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*To have experiences is a given part of life. But to be able to make coherent sense of these experiences, to experience a coherence between oneself, the world, and the source of life does not seem to be a reliable part of the modern package (Fox 1983, p.3).*

### **Wilderness-Based Programs, Delinquency and Behavioural Change**

Substantial anecdotal support for the value of wilderness-based challenge programs for Australian youth-at-risk is currently available (see Mason & Wilson 1988); however, attempts to evaluate the impact of such programs is surprisingly limited. Overall, there is a lack of substantial evidence as to what actual long-lasting changes are most likely to occur with particular types of youth following completion of these programs and which particular elements are considered most crucial in promoting observed behavioural and attitudinal changes.

By and large, factors of behavioural and attitudinal change have only been examined within non-delinquency samples. Furthermore, the relationship between key components such as program design, structure and leadership styles are yet to be integrated within existing theoretical frameworks of adolescent delinquent behaviour (Kelk 1991). The act of labelling delinquent behaviour as such, creates its own validation of social control (Sarri 1985), which subsequently excludes other contextual factors at play within the wider environment.

It is widely considered that sole attention to the rate of recidivism following behaviour change interventions with this particular client group tends to oversimplify the impact of such programs. Mukherjee categorises a number of shortcomings in the use of this "success" indicator:

1. an unknown number of offences and their perpetrators are never discovered;
2. of the offences reported to or discovered by the police, some are not accepted or recorded.,
3. only a fraction of the offences recorded are ever cleared by an arrest (Mukherjee 1985, p.20).

Current statistics in Australia show that overall only one in five offences recorded is cleared. Program success for offenders solely on the basis of recidivism only is indicative of the criminal justice systems recorded perspective. Therefore, participant self-reports which assess participants behavioural change upon their return to the community, although

imperfect, are seen in conjunction with recidivism figures, as 'cumulatively more balanced sources of data.

Seldom has analysis of delinquency samples taken the wider perspective of psychological development as a key to prevention. Concerning outdoor physical recreation as a venue in achieving this goal, Jobling and Cotterell (1990) comment that rarely have researchers attempted to connect and relate theories of psychology with the developmental effects of leisure. They propose a range of avenues for research and the need for greater understanding of the relationship between the development of competence, self-esteem and achievement and the mastery of a variety of physical skills, the development of social responsibility through acceptance by a group and the quality of attachment and influence exerted by the group in relation to later behaviour within the community.

### **Program Focus**

The focus taken historically by many correctional programs with this age group has been the emphasis on the adolescent offender to the exclusion of positive community influences such as non-offending peers and other community resources (Rutter & Giller 1983). Of particular importance to the design of this wilderness challenge program, Project Hahn, is the view posited by Lewin (1948) that direct involvement and engagement in the learning process are critical components in the promotion of positive behavioural change.

Project Hahn is an example of a wilderness experience that attempts to address the needs of a range of young people in a manner that offers them the opportunity to develop personally and in relation to group dynamics. This program does not aim specifically to reduce offending behaviour but rather to facilitate learning and development. The focus of the program is preventive rather than rehabilitative. The general goal is to enhance and strengthen the psychological development of individuals as they undertake a variety of challenging physical skills. It is characterised as broad-based and community-oriented and the program attempts to promote an holistic approach to positive behavioural development for each participant through a process of applied learning. An intention is that the challenge and stress induced during participation in the various activities will bring about the interaction of positive internal dialogue (self efficacy) upon other facets of participant's lives (applied learning) (Bandura 1977; Connell et al. 1975).

## **Features Of The Sample**

The project is derived from Kurt Hahn's Outward Bound program (see Marsh, Richards & Barnes 1986) and is Government-sponsored to provide placements for adolescents who would not be able to attend due to financial hardship. The majority of attendees in the program thus far have been disadvantaged youth, referred directly from schools, support agencies for at-risk individuals and community-based agencies. Since 1983, 115, participants have been subject to at least one supervision order and participants for this study were currently on community supervision orders through the Tasmanian justice system.

A profile of subjects had earlier been established on the basis of existing literature and prior observations of project participants. These criteria for offenders required ideally that: the supervision order was in response to a first offence involving risk-taking behaviour; possessed a non-institutionalised past; were in adequate physical health; showed absence of any psychiatric disorder; and, at the time of undertaking the program were between the ages of 15 to 25 years. Of this number who were subject to a community supervision order, 90 (78 per cent) reported being raised in "fractured" families (for example, separated, divorced, single parent), 102 (89 per cent) were male and 78 participants (68 per cent) had recently offended through convictions of burglary, stealing or theft. Of female participants under supervision order, the majority (7) had also come from within these latter categories. This sub group generally represents one-quarter of the population of each Project Hahn expedition, having within this sample a mean age of 19.4 years with ages ranging from 14 to 28 years.

Each expedition group consists of between 6 and 12 participants; with a leader-participant ratio of 1 to 4. Attendance in the program is strictly voluntary; a principle applied to all participants regardless of their referral source.

Courses frequently consist of mixed gender groups, participants represent a cross-section of Tasmanian youth, and, in the past have come from all geographical parts of the State. Each project session occurs over a three-month period consisting of an introductory activity day, a five-day wilderness immersion program and a three-day follow-up expedition.

Recognising the need to attempt to substantiate some of the issues concerning the effects of wilderness-based camping with difficult youth, an exploratory study of Project Hahn (Tasmania) was commenced in

February 1990. This paper presents an expanded analysis based on the original study (Sveen 1991) and incorporates information obtained from interviews with a number of participants in their home community after attendance in the program. The purpose of this study was to isolate any long-term attitudinal and behavioural affects reported by participants which may be attributed to the experience of attending this type of wilderness challenge program.

### **Method and Subject Selection**

As interventions during these type of programs may range from the structured to the non-structured producing a range of effects in participants, it is widely agreed that such effects are more suitably gauged through the implementation of multiple measures (Kelk 1991, Marsh, Richards & Barnes 1986). However, with this approach, limitations are still apparent and some statistical caution needs to be exercised taking into account the number of measures used, balancing the statistical alongside the practical significance of the results (Hall & Bird 1985). Consequently, the findings on the basis of multiple measures are often considered as reflective of trends within the target group rather than established points of fact.

In preparing a standardised instrument for this study, the following domains emerged: peer relationships, pre - and post- program self-esteem, level of program commitment, indicators of positive and negative self-concept and program components which created an environment in which behavioural change was more likely to take place. Successive drafts of the questionnaire were tested with adolescent offenders ineligible for involvement within the study.

Questions were clustered in three domains: needs based dependant variables (self-esteem, self-confidence, self-concept, internal/ external locus of control, alienation, anomie and family and peer relationships), risk-based independent variables (parental status, source of referral, gender, education, age and offence and a recidivist register post - course), and program components (leadership styles, level of awareness and sensitivity to the environment, level of stress perceived, commitment to the program, mastery of difficult tasks, perceived level of success and features of applied learning).

The questionnaire surveyed subjects who had attended the program from 1983 to 1992. Of the 115 participants, 46 (40 per cent) were contacted and agreed to twenty-minute interviews. Whereas subjects were encouraged to view their participation in the interview as a follow-up

component of supervision, verbal and written consent was obtained, involvement was on a voluntary basis and anonymity was assured. Interviews took place over a two-year period (1990-1992).

Demographic information included employment and activities following participation on Project Hahn, current living situation and peer relationships.

## **Results and Discussion**

### The importance of volunteering

Forty-one subjects (89 per cent) stated that their participation was uncoerced. These participants claimed to have a clearer picture of themselves as a consequence of the program as compared to those coerced. Twenty of the participants who volunteered (48 per cent) stated that the program had been the most important event in their lives.

A distinction should be recognised between compulsory or coercive attendance and the actual ability to volunteer to participate. Participants who felt they were coerced to attend had a lower level of commitment to the process of personal development and had a negative impact on group dynamics as observed by the leaders. The procedure which is recommended is the creation of a sensory-based information package which offers a total picture of what is involved, how they may benefit and the various roles of leaders and participants. Further, it is suggested that they speak with peers who have attended the program prior to confirming their participation. Once committed, an agreement is cocreated to confirm all parties roles and specific focuses, with the aim of reinforcing the personal development aspects of the program.

As many of the justice-oriented wilderness programs throughout Australia and the world tend to be compulsory, a shortcoming may be the reduced "actualisation" of participant potential. Thus, it would be asserted that the few participants who did not attend by choice, were not as receptive to the components of experiential learning within the program.

### Impact of the program on career focus

A linkage was found to positive employment orientation following successful completion of the program. Specifically, this relationship appeared to be connected to the participant's development of independent living skills, positive self-efficacy and enthusiasm for new individual and group recreation options. This latter category was divided into areas of..

1. high risk outdoor individual recreation activities (ie. rock climbing)
2. high risk urban individual recreation activities (ie. rollerblading)
3. socially competitive team pursuits (ic. Aussie Rules Football)

These features of independence, self-efficacy, and individual or co-operative physical and mental exertion all represent holistic characteristics of health maturation. Further, it is argued they represent the effective components of the esteem-building aspects of youth job programs for the long-term unemployed. In Tasmania, Skillshare and job Train utilise Project Hahn as a preliminary step for many of their young males and females who seem alienated from the competitive nature of current employment practices.

#### Effects of stress-arousing activities on self-efficacy and applied learning

Sanders (1983) regards stress as the negative emotional response to doubts about coping which often results in an avoidance reaction; while arousal, on the other hand may be regarded as the availability of mental resources. A product of these programs should see participants learning to approach difficult tasks in a calmer and more deliberate manner.

A journal entry by one male subject noted after successfully negotiating the face of Whitewater Wall on the Freycinet Peninsula, was particularly expressive:

*There were parts when you really wanted to scream your head off 'cause it was so tough but instead of doing that you used it to get up the rocks that looked so impossible.*

Another participant wrote:

*There were places where I had to imagine there was somewhere to put my hands or feet and believe they were there to get myself up.*

Forty-one (90 per cent) of those interviewed recalled the need to exert maximum perseverance whilst in the midst of an extremely stressful activity.

A mild relationship between those project activities rated as "stressful" by participants (for example, abseiling, canoeing, kayaking, rock-climbing) and application of learning to other aspects of the participant's life was

observed.

Using this as a theoretical basis, the risk-recreation activities within this program are designed to initially "disequilibrate" the participant's cognitive system. It is intended that any success felt following completion of the event is more likely to become assimilated and accommodated into the participants psyche, thus attributing to development of positive self-efficacy within their wider environment. Indeed, a cluster of successful components of participants reactions to the program showed an association with their completion of stressful events.

#### Impact of arousal on participant memory

A summative analysis of participant experience fails to gauge changes of emotion before, during and after activities. However, emotional states of arousal and stress play a role in determining the level of interaction and significance of the program in terms of memory (Nettleton & Dickinson 1988). Within the contents of the survey, subjects were asked to discuss the most stressful and challenging aspects of the course and 38 (83 per cent) were able to describe in detail specific events. This feature did not significantly diminish for participants when compared over time.

#### Relationship with probation and rates of reoffending

Participant's successful program completion seemed to influence their Probation Officer's subjective rating of participants terminal supervision success. Remarkably, only nine (12 per cent) of the seventy-eight participants who had previously offended through risk-taking crimes of burglary, stealing, and theft received an unsuccessful Probation Officer rating upon their completion of supervision. These subjective assessments by Probation Officers generally are indicative of the level of cooperation, amenability to counselling and guidance, prognosis of future behaviour and actual observed reduction in offending during the order.

According to accumulated data from self-reports and police conviction records over the 9 year period 25 (54 per cent) of those 46 interviewed had reoffended. The 17 and 18-year-olds were found to be most at-risk of reoffending post course, while non-offending participants were more likely to be older than 19 years of age. The transference of learning was indicative of the participant's behaviour who ceased offending post course. In contrast, the individuals who perceived the program to be simply a series of physical activities did not acquire this transference in learning.

The implications of these mild associations may be that participants are more likely to achieve positive behavioural change if they can understand what is trying to be gained through the processes of the program. It is argued that potentially the programs impact on this target population may be counterproductive if their perception of the course is simply one of skill acquisition. Further research is required with a larger sample of sub-populations to offer an insight and to gain levels of statistical significance as to appropriateness for each individual group.

### **Peer Sub groups**

At the outset, subjects were asked about their peers and current peer status and on the basis of their responses, the sample was later clustered into the following peer subgroups: 5 (12 per cent) were classified as followers, 21 (45 per cent) as co-operative leaders, 10 (21 per cent) as dominant leaders and 10 (21 per cent) as having no peer influence.

#### Followers

Participants who defined themselves as "followers" rated high scores in areas of dependence, external locus of control and were generally younger than 21 years of age. Compared with members in the other three sub groups, "followers" rated highest in terms of their perceived level of positive impact from the experience. This perception is mitigated by the fact, however, that they also scored highest in the area of re-offending post course. "Followers" were the least likely to continue engagement in wilderness program activities post course or to maintain contact with other participants.

Although they rated this as a powerful experience, it appeared to have little impact on their behaviour post course. This strongly suggests absence of applied or generalised learning from the experience. What is more likely is that for participants matching this type of profile, to become engaged in physical high-risk and high stress activities, runs the risk of strengthening ego at the expense of self-awareness and any future lasting behaviour change (Hogan 1991).

#### Cooperative leaders

These participants rated higher on scores of internal locus of control and independence as compared to other participants. They also indicated a positive relationship to organised sport prior to undertaking the program and showed a positive orientation to career direction. They did not perceive a great deal of stress from the risk-recreation activities. Unlike the followers, they were more likely to continue risk-recreation activities

post course, were unlikely to engage in impulsive behaviour and were least likely to re-offend.

### Domineering leaders

These participants rated higher in the areas of internal locus of control and independence, held an aversion for organised sport, yet thrived on individual pursuit challenges. They were found to be of a general negative disposition, were all older than 19 years, and, like the "cooperatives" did not perceive a great deal of difficulty from the activities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this group included participants most likely to continue risk-recreation activities post course. Other commonalities with the cooperative group include a positive relationship with finding alternative activities to crime and who exhibited a negative relation to re-offending. This latter feature may have a predictive relationship combined with their higher internal locus of control and expressed sense of independence.

Unlike the "followers", dominating leaders' non re-offending lifestyle change may be in fact, easier to achieve. This hypothesis may have some validity given their distance from peer influence and their possession of the internal strength necessary to redress behaviour. It is also suggested the non-authoritarian leadership styles of project leaders serve as positive role models which may assist the development of attitudinal changes. More specifically, a non authoritarian performance based program such as this, seems to be an effective means of gaining positive behavioural change with this population, as compared to verbal and physical persuasion from an authoritarian based setting.

### No Peers

This profile is made up of participants who claim to have no peer influences and who rated high in the areas of dependence and external locus of control. They are the group least likely to have been involved in previous risk recreation activities and quite reasonably, experienced the greatest deal of stress from the activities and the group dynamics. It is recognised that an inert lifestyle may be due to a lack of opportunity as much as an unwillingness to attempt new challenges with this sub-group.

Follow-up strategies seem particularly appropriate for this group, in order to nurture other positive social and recreational pursuits while they are experiencing a level of post-course euphoria.

Like those categorised in the cooperative group, the "no peers" showed a positive orientation to post career direction as well as positive impact from the program. Thus, this wilderness challenge program appears to be beneficial for this sub group, particularly if they are able to make positive contact with peers with whom they can develop friendships.

## **Conclusion**

A notion of delinquency prevention currently debated in Australia states that crime is prevented by the fabric of social connectedness between people, their community and their physical environment. On the other hand, alienation or disconnectedness provides the basis for breach of social norms (O'Connor 1991). A social nexus is achieved by breaking the emotional treadmill caused by the psychological conditions of anomie and alienation and through nurturing self-growth by removing the barriers to its development.

In discussing wilderness programs (specifically for offenders), Cave and Rappoport (1977) found that participants who were superficially gregarious apparently became more genuine and self-disclosing; those who were socially inhibited tended to open up and relate more appropriately to the group. This reduction in social alienation was felt to be the result of the intense, cooperative group living experience.

The Project Hahn model engenders social connectedness through instilling positive self-efficacy within an environment of positive group dynamics, thus reinforcing the individual's heightened abilities in relation to their social structure. It also serves to increase stamina and endurance in the participant's later approach to seeking employment and generalises coping responses to other facets within the context of their personal environment.

This aspect can be noted in the following participant's post-course evaluation: *"Before I used to think they were a danger, they may hurt me in some way. Not all people are horrible. Once you get past any fear it's easy, or easier than if fear was with you. There are a lot of good people around if you keep thinking people are bad, they are most probably the only ones you will find."* What Project Hahn is not, is a panacea for preventing juvenile crime. Rather it is best utilised in a facilitative role to accelerate maturation with certain youth-at-risk who may respond to and may benefit from a demanding but short-term physical and psychological challenge.

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