

The Psychological Profiles of
Project Hahn's Probation
Referrals:
'Gung-Ho', 'Wild as the Wind',
'Arms Length' and 'Bong'

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Forum on International Youth Studies. Hobart, Tas. 1993

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Introduction

Since 1983 when Project Hahn first commenced activities, over 700 young people have participated in the program. About 120 of these individuals have also been associated with the Probation Service which more recently is known as Community Corrections.

In February 1990, an empirical evaluation of this latter population commenced in order to identify the actual impact the program was having on these individuals. This assessment has concerned itself with needs-based and risk-based features of youth at-risk, which have been correlated to the Project Hahn program components. More specifically the needs-based features have considered issues of self-concept, self-esteem, locus of control, alienation and family relationships, while riskbased features have considered age, offence, parental status, gender and source of referral.

These variables were correlated to perceived levels of arousal and stress, features of applied or generalized learning, level of commitment to the program, awareness or sensitivity to the wilderness environment and finally, a reoffence or recidivist register.

It had been recognised by previous researchers that multiple measures more accurately reflect youth at-risk responses to these types of intense programs, which focus on the participant's psychological development rather than specific skill acquisition.

To date 45 of 120 probation participants have been interviewed on a summative basis at various times since they partook in the program. The variables have been correlated on S.P.S.S. at the Research Section of Tourism, Sport and Recreation; and the statistically significant results have been clustered into profiles. On a bi-polar scale, they represent different peer orientations and levels of independence or locus of control. Instead of reciting a list of statistical findings four stereotypes have been created based on the data and they've been given them life as Gung Ho, Wild as the Wind, Arms Length and Bong.

Gung Ho

Our first character Gung Ho, described himself as a follower within his neighbourhood peer group making up 11.9% of this sample. He had a similar background to 59.7% of our sample by being raised in a fractured family, that is, his parents were either separated or divorced; or he was raised by a single parent.

Gung attended Project Hahn in 1986, when he was aged 17 and was interviewed in 1991 in his housing department home with his defacto wife and two children.

Prior to Gungs participation in the program he had completed grade ten and was spending the majority of his time these days at his local C.Y.S.S. Another commonality he had with his peers was a court appearance for risk-taking offences of burglary and stealing, like 73.4% of this sample; and as a consequence, like the entire sample, a supervision order with the Probation Service. His new probation officer had suggested that Gung participate in Project Hahn, but didn't articulate why and couldn't have explained anyway because he basically knew little of the program himself. But his mates convinced him to try having dared each other.

On the morning of the program, only three of the five showed up, the others backing out with a mention of a party at the weekend. (As a guide, only 25% of males and 10% of females actually appear on the morning of the program.) The trio hopped into the back of the Project Hahn landcruiser (that was in desperate need of new shock absorbers), with five other male participants who were also referred by Probation and they headed off to Freycinet Peninsula for 10 days.

Perhaps it was due to the pre-existing peer structure or the homogeneous nature of the group, but the bucks party approach was not an appropriate avenue for creating positive group dynamics or individual behavioural change.

At the interview with Gung Ho five years later in 1991, he still had a vivid memory of the time, place, and events; which reflected the high level of arousal the risk-recreation activities had on his memory. However, he finished the program not with a heightened level of self-awareness, but rather an inflated ego.

Gung Ho was basically unable to assimilate the experience into his character because firstly, he was not adequately prepared for the course or had a sufficient understanding of how the processes could benefit him. Secondly, the pre-existing negative peer structure had a diminished effect on the development of positive group dynamics, a critical feature of program success. Thirdly, the detached coercion of his probation officer had Gung attending the program thinking it was a part of a supervision order. What Gung needed from him was an information package of what the program was about in order to make an informed decision whether to volunteer. The conversation could have taken the idea of developing some skills to become his own person rather than at the whim of his peers prodding.

Unfortunately, Gung Ho who still claims to have enjoyed the course 5 years later, failed to acquire any effectual learning or personal insights because he was never committed to anything but a good time which he undoubtedly had. Gung represents the group most prone to reoffend; least likely to continue Project Hahn type activities post-course; and by the way, one of the prime targets of the cigarette companies.

Wild as the Wind

Our second character named Wild as the Wind, is taken from the co-operative leadership profile or 45.3% of our sample and was 20 years old when she attended the program in 1990. Wild had recently been placed on a supervision order for a spate of drunk and disorderly offences or more appropriately stated breaches of good conduct, which female probationers are more likely to receive than their male counterparts.

Also, different from Gung Ho, Wild as the Wind had a supervising officer, who took the time to "explain how experiential learning can result in more self-control and better judgement from a clearer perspective." She sat through the Project Hahn promotional video with Wild as the Wind and joined in the one-day activity course prior to the longer program. This single event had a more profound effect on their relationship than any event that happened over the next 12 months.

Wild decided to see how much she could find out about herself and consciously volunteered to continue the five day course in a fortnights time as well as the follow up program of three days in two months. A contract between Project Hahn and Wild as the Wind was established prior to the commencement of the course detailing what was to be expected from both quarters and confirming an understanding existed. The longer program had participants of equal mix of gender from a range of community referrals throughout the State and as a consequence, on day-one positive group dynamics were able to be nurtured.

Wild as the Wind learned to use the stress and arousal of the risk recreation activities to find out about her psychological parameters and turned her previously negative internal dialogue into positive self talk.

Upon Wild as the Winds post course interview in 1992, she stated that Project Hahn was the single most important event in her life and the reason why she has stayed out of trouble post course. She was able to articulate generalised or applied learning from the experience on the program to other areas where she achieved post course. Her positive attitude, new found motivation, and sense of independence were the prerequisites to achieving an employment ethic. Plus Wilds heightened interest in personal achievement was the catalyst to continue Project Hahn type exercises (particularly caving); as well as trying new urban risk recreation activities post course.

She was among the group most likely to have been involved in organized team sports prior to the course and perhaps as a consequence did not perceive a great deal of stress from the activities. Wild as the Wind possesses the characteristics of the sample which have not reoffended after the program making up 46.6% of the 120.

Bong

Our third profile used to be called Bong by his past associates, which was short for TABOO or Tomorrow Another Bong Odds On. He represents the contingent of participants who are the domineering members of their peer group; 21.4% of the sample, generally older than 19 years, not empathically oriented and better known in the wider community as 'users'. Bong described himself at interview as tough-minded; having a negative orientation to authority and embracing similar attitudes towards the police, his teachers, his parents and the law in general.

Interestingly, he also is more likely to have tried risk-recreation activities previously and thrives on the individual pursuit challenges. He hated football and cricket; and wouldn't have been caught dead playing organized team sports unless he was bored out of his brain.

Like Gung Ho, he had his share of family problems due to his lack of sensitivity for others needs. He is also a prime candidate for the cigarette marketers; as he enjoys indulging in sensation seeking arousal jags without thinking of the dangers involved.

His drinking and dope smoking patterns tend to be occasional and binge in style, but also more frequent as he has gotten older due to greater tolerance levels being acquired.

Bong did not perceive a great deal of stress from the activities on the program and remarkably, Bong also shares with Wild as the Wind a profile which shows a positive correlation to finding alternative activities to keep out of trouble post-course; and in fact is significantly related to non-offending post-course. His personality traits of independence and internal locus of control mean his change of lifestyle post-course does not require the gaining of previously unpossessed personality attributes. Rather, the reason why Project Hahn is so effective with this group is that all they require is a change of attitudinal focus by a non-authoritarian mentor. By the way.. Bong represents the participants most likely to continue high risk recreation type exercises post-course.

Arms Length

Our final identity is known as Arms Length and she also represents 21.4% of our sample. As she was growing up her parents smothered her with protection, keeping her out of harms way, which unfortunately for her, was found to be negatively correlated to her academic performance. Arms is best described as a situational introvert; who had numerous amounts of household moves as a child and was never able to catch up socially or to establish friends easily. Prior to participation in Project Hahn at age 22, she spent the majority of her leisure time in front of television, even though she wasn't comfortable being alone and saw such a pastime as aggravating her loneliness. Arms had been placed on supervision after her second arrest for shoplifting.

Arms Length represents the most challenging population to gain a commitment from to attend Project Hahn. A great deal of trust and rapport are needed because of her personality, plus she seldom has participated in any high-risk recreation activities in the past. Her reserved nature did not enable her to achieve great gains from the program and she claimed at interview a lower perceptual level of personal positive impact.

However, Arms did rate the highest on measures of stress from the program which is not surprising considering the novelty of the experience; her limited personal attributes; and her confrontational perception of the group dynamics.

Project Hahn has been found to be most useful for this population, if the Project Hahn leaders are able to put them in touch with others of their own age who can become their friends and help provide a supportive peer group network. Also suggesting a family mediation referral as a part of the follow-up process is recommended as her parents must understand Arms basic need to establish her own identity, while encouraging them to let go.

The Dry Results

In summary, let me give you some demographic details to clarify the muddy water. To date Probation referrals to Project Hahn (1983 -1992) have been made up of the following...

1. The average age of participants is 17 years.
2. Only 35.5% have come from intact family units.
3. 87.9% have been male; 12.1% have been female.
4. 71.4% state that Project Hahn has given them a clearer picture of who they are.
5. 85.7% perceived the program not as activity skill acquisition, but rather a more profound experience which effected change in their lives.
6. 90.5% claim to have found alternative activities to keep them out of trouble post-course.
7. 82.9% were able to remember what year they attended the course.
8. 88.1% felt the activity course was appropriate for their needs.
9. 97.6% are able to state a clear career direction postcourse. Of this group 43.9% state an inclination to follow a technical path, 31.7% a vocational career, 14% have expectations of university qualifications and 9.8% perceive a future in manual work.
10. 48.8% felt that Project Hahn was the most single important event in their lives.
11. Kayaking was considered the most stressful activity making up 35.5%, followed by rockclimbing at 32.3%. It is interesting to note that for this population abseiling and caving do not engender such as high degree of stress/arousal making 12.9% and 9.7% respectively.
12. Respectively, 90% of all participants stated they completed that most stressful event.

Conclusion

John Holt wrote in 1964 in his novel 'Why Children Fail:

"to rescue a man in the woods, you must get to where he is."

I think that really captures why Project Hahn is so successful. Adolescents need emotionally accessible practitioners who can nurture their maturation and self empowerment by meeting them on their own psychological turf.

I hope these insights have given you a greater understanding of the power and importance of Tasmania's Project Hahn.

Reference

Holt, J. (1964) Why Children Fail. NY: Penguin Books