The Impact of Families Camping Together: Opportunities for Personal and Social Development

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the camping experience on a community of families. The research questions were: What is the meaning of the camping experience? How does the camping experience influence its participants? We used an auto-ethnographic method (two of the authors participated in the camping program) and a questionnaire to conduct the investigation. The research occurred in the Czech Republic with nine families composed of 14 adults and 14 children. Our findings indicate that the interplay among community, spirituality, nature, and family defines such a camping experience. In turn, this leads to stronger family bonds, confidence and self-reliance in the outdoors, and a greater sense of adaptability for the individual.

Introduction

We all stand in a circle facing the fire pit in the center with a great pile of wood prepared with dry branches intertwined between larger logs. The campfire is well prepared, the firekeeper and his helpers have done their afternoon job perfectly. We all arrived single file, quietly, without a word, in warm clothes and with ceremonial sashes we have artistically decorated to express our own personal identities wrapped around our shoulders.

The firekeeper approaches the campfire carrying a torch he has lit without matches – using only friction, following an ancient tradition handed down from generation to generation. It leaves an even stronger impression than our usual practice of starting the new fire by blowing on hot coals brought on a piece of bark.

We sing a plaintive opening song to the accompaniment of guitars and violins while the fire grows. As we finish the song the fire is blazing brightly, we sit down on the prepared benches, and the last event of this year’s multi-family camping outing has begun.

What is the significance and meaning of a summer camping experience in the wild, with a community made up of one’s family and the families of friends? Why do we steadfastly cling to collective family camping at a time when the institution of the family in general is undergoing such radical changes? Further influences on the family include various trends such as the postponement of marriage and reproduction, peer pressure among teenagers, and an increasing divorce rate (Matoušek, 1993). Considering these factors, there is a need to consider various ways to strengthen the family unit. Today in Europe, families consisting of a married couple and their children make up only one-quarter of the total number of
households (Možný, 2006). In contemporary Western society, family structures have taken a number of forms, and the contemporary family has a tendency to become a mosaic of various relationships (Matoušek & Pazlarová, 2010). In the broader sense, family members are not necessarily related only by the bonds of kinship but may also come into existence through legal bonds (adoption, registered partnership) or by the mere declaration of a family partnership on the basis of mutual affection (Matoušek, 2008). Camping is one way for a family to interact, grow, learn, and develop in a natural environment. The act of living outdoors allows room for the members of the family to relate to one another in a way that recalls an earlier and simpler era. By moving outside the routine comfort of an urban environment, the family that camps must come together to assure a safe and successful experience. This process of relating to and depending on one another while camping promotes family interaction.

The stars are shining and I am inside in a tee-pee with my three children. It’s a humble abode, with a fire ring in the center, hastily assembled beds made of wood with mattresses woven from branches. Yes, the first night is usually not easy until your body gets used to the change. It is night, and the scent and warmth of the fire burning in the middle of the tent permeates the entire interior. And I’m lying next to our 3-year-old youngest son who is pressed up against me as I gaze at the fire and the stars visible through the smoke flaps thorough which the smoke escapes. I am a member of a community which it is difficult for us women to join, because its only rightful and unchanging members are men. This forces us women remain flexible and allows us to undergo an internal transformation, which can enrich us and bring us both instability and balance.

Goodale and Godbey’s definition of leisure states: “Leisure is living in relative freedom from the external compulsive forces of one’s culture … to act from internally compelling love in ways which are personally pleasing, intuitively worthwhile, and provide a basis for faith.” (Goodale & Godbey, 1988, p. 9) In this sense, leisure is the free time to pursue activities of interest, and in the case under consideration the leisure activity is two weeks of camping. During this leisure time of camping, it is possible to engage in many activities, such as sports, games, campfires, swimming, and writing in one’s journal, the outputs of which should be seen as informal learning (Păduraru, 2013, Schwier & Seaton, 2013). Therefore the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of a communal family camping program. The research questions addressed were as follows: What is the meaning of the camping experience? How does the camping experience influence its participants?

Review of the literature

There is a sizeable amount of literature examining the topic of camps for children in need as well as their families. Most of this research examines camps as leisure services (Apter, 1977; Emira & Thompson, 2011; Huber, Walsh, & Varman 2005; Jeanes & Magee, 2012; Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010; Taber & Proch, 1988). There have also been studies looking at specialized camps, including ones for children with hemophilia (Thomas & Gaslin, 2001), cancer (Mosher, 2006; Wellisch, Crater, Wiley, Belin, & Weinstein, 2006), diabetes (Hunter, Rosnov, Koontz, & Roberts, 2006), vision impairment (Day & Kleinschmidt 2005), and chronic diseases (Bekesi et al., 2011). More important for this research, we have found that there are no studies focused on family camping as a highly valued leisure experience.

History of family camping in the Czech Republic

Within Czech culture, there is a considerable history of spending time in the summer in the outdoors with one’s family. During the era of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, at the
beginning of the 20th century, the Czech writer and educator Eduard Štorch established a group with several families who camped together on the shore of the Adriatic Sea (Šantora, Nosek, Janov, & Dostál, 2012). Over time, this led to the development of so-called “family scouting,” and Štorch became its passionate founder and promoter. In 1921 he wrote a handbook for family camping (Štorch, 1921).

In the Czech Republic today, family camping continues to draw participants and there are a variety of informal gatherings of families who go camping together. For example, there are the members of the Woodcraft League (Liga lesní moudrosti) who founded the ‘Family Tribes of Woodcraft,’ and there are the members of the Czech Scout organizations who also engage in family scouting.

Camping for recreation

Active family leisure has been studied in different environments and under various contexts, including technology, such as video gaming (Chambers, 2012) active and healthy lifestyle (Taylor, Ward, Zabriskie, Hill, & Hanson, 2012), and looking for the meaning of family leisure (Shaw, 2001). However, the experience of family camping as a component of leisure in an active and healthy lifestyle is lacking in the literature.

The rare exception to this is research by Garst, Williams, and Roggenbuck (2010), who focused on groups of campers in outdoor settings. They point out how camping has received only a small amount of research attention since the 1970s.

There is a difference between attending a camp and going camping (the focus of our research). There are many camps which resemble large hotels or motels located in the wilderness. This is somewhat different than the actual experience of sleeping in a tent; cooking by a fire; and not having access to a flush toilet, Internet, or television. In our literature, we found information or books concerning scouting or backpacking; but rarely was there detailed and scientific information concerning the general topic of camping out or family camping.

In the literature we have examined, camping is dealt with as a form of active recreation. That is, it is connected with active leisure time, relaxation, and fun during vacations. However, there are different types of camping, with different significance in terms of place, program, scheduling, contact with nature, and material equipment. We see a lack of literature and research concerning the very humble and modest life style associated with camping, which should be understood in contrast to the usual material and technical conditions campers are accustomed to in their everyday lives. In contrast, our study focused on camping in nature (not at camp sites with brick buildings, electricity, Internet access, running water etc.) as a form of leisure and mode of experience. The word “camp” in this article is taken to mean a two-week-long stay together on a greenfield site (outside of civilization), sleeping in tents, where there are only primitive cooking facilities, and the washroom and latrine are constructed from poles and canvas by the participants themselves using only human power (not using machines or electricity). The area used is rented from the land owner.

Role of camping in family bonding and personal development

Parent-child leisure time varies substantially among countries, reflecting the average time mothers spend in paid work and the amount of time dedicated to shared parent-child leisure, particularly outside the family home (Craig & Mullan, 2012). Family camping represents
an effective way for parents to spend leisure time together along with their children and with other friends. Ward and Zabriskie (2011) discuss the value of family leisure and place it in context. They emphasize how this type of leisure contributes to the development of youth. This shows the value of a family spending time together camping in nature. Haber (2011) discusses the example of the Satir Family Camp. This article shows the positive psychological influence of bringing a family together in a commune style experience. Although this is focused on psychological development during the time spent camping, they also discuss personal development, creativity, relationships, and community. This sense of community is discussed by Celsi, Rose, and Leigh (1993) in their look at high-risk leisure activities. Although camping is not in the same rubric as skydiving, this sense of community, this camaraderie, results from a similar bond that brings people or campers together. This experience transcends everyday life and creates a new situation where new roles emerge and normal life is suspended. Lee and Graefe (2010) assert that intergenerational family camping promotes the healthy development of the individual. This primarily helps to give the individual a more natural way to develop in response to the situations posed by outdoor life rather than the modern trappings of urban life, especially from television or hand-held devices. They discuss how camping helps to promote the family unit's ability to work together as well as certain skills such as perseverance, physical endurance, teamwork, and cooperation.

The notion of community seems to be important in the literature and in our camping research. For a better understanding of the conceptual work we will add some words about communitas, since there seems to be a significant misunderstanding connected to this notion. Although there is a widely accepted understanding that has been inserted into the social sciences by Turner (1967, 1969) from his research on ritual and exploration of the liminal phase and anti-structure, our understanding reaches back to Aristotle (1999) and his search for a good life. Aristotle described the polis as the whole made of parts such as the family and the village. And only the polis could be a “perfect community” because this social arrangement can achieve happiness more effectively than any part (for example family). The goal of the good life is leisure, scholé, and public life is more virtuous than the private, because a human being is a social being. This understanding is also known in Christian Catholic doctrine under the Latin term communitas perfecta. In a group of families camping we can also see such a social ordering, which makes the camping experience richer than it is merely on the family level. Thus our use of communitas does not correspond to Turner's concept, which is based on the study of ritual, but rather to a collaborative process in which people work with each other in service of the camp community. In a symbolic way, we can say that communitas is the heart and spirit of community.

**Methodology**

**Methodological framework**

The aim of our investigation was to understand more about communal family camping from the perspective of the experience of both adults and children. This exploratory research adopts an auto-ethnographic style whereby two of the authors directly participated in this communal family camping trip. A questionnaire was also distributed to the participants. This approach is often used for examining one social unit (such as a school or community), typically using a combination of data collection methods. The reason for choosing the auto-ethnographic approach concerns the nature and character of the examined phenomenon, namely the search
to understand cultural identity (which requires the attentive focus of the researcher), to understand the lives of others without prejudice and bias “primarily by watching them, listening to them, and participating with them” (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 218).

As auto-ethnographic techniques and methods, common practice in leisure studies (Anderson & Austin, 2011), developed in the 1960s and 1970s, research began (in connection with the abandonment of the positivist ideal of objective science and the strengthening of the role of subjective experience in knowing) to increasingly emphasize the difference between the outside and the inside, since observations about racial, religious, sexual, or political differences offered by members of these groups themselves brought fresh perspectives on the reality being examined (Merton, 1972). An auto-ethnographic methodology can help one to understand another life world. There are different techniques and methods that can be used with this type of research design. The essential principle when using such a methodology is to understand that human behavior is fundamentally influenced by context and has more meanings than observed facts (Willson, 1977). Two members of the research team have been involved in the family camping program since the third year of its existence, which means they have 12 years of family camping experience. Still, we are reluctant to move completely to the side of those researchers who are fully dedicated to auto-ethnography in its evocative form, that is, those who step out of scientific discourse in the direction of literature, art and therapy (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2000). Instead, we try to make a connection in the form of “analytic auto-ethnography” (Anderson, 2006, 2011), that is a combination of narrative and analysis, as we do not take lightly objections concerning the validity and reliability of these procedures (Buzard, 2003).

We arrived at the data for this research by reflecting on participation and subsequently incorporating this insight into a survey which was used to verify the findings in this specific community. We created a questionnaire to identify the meaning of family camping for both parents and their children, so we focused on exploring the nature of this particular social phenomenon.

The family camping group

The subject of the study is a group of adults that has organized camps for their families and their friends since 1998. Annually, the group has had approximately 30–50 participants from infants to grandparents. The beginnings of this social group dates back to the 1980s when, after completing their compulsory military service, the adult members of a children's scouting troop organized a theatrical play for a Saint Nicholas Day celebration which became an annual part of their town's cultural life. A decade later, these same men, who had bonded in childhood and as young men, decided to revive the idea of summertime camping and to invite their families. This idea had its origins in the positive memories of camping and being outdoors they had formed during their childhood and teenage years.

Sample

The number of camp participants has varied over time, but each year approximately 10 families participate. Our research focused on the summer camping experience in 2012, in which 13 families participated in a two-week camping experience. This included 24 adults and 22 children. The questionnaire was completed by 14 parents and 14 children from 9 families. (See Tables 1 and 2).
Table 1. Families and the Participants.

| Family Number | Age of participants (NF,NFM) | Who completed the questionnaire | Number of camps attended |
|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| One           | 48 (1.1), 41 (1.2), 13 (1.3), 11 (1.4), 3 | 2 parents, 2 children           | 12                       |
| Two           | 48 (2.1), 45, 19, 16, 8                  | 1 parent                         | 15                       |
| Three         | 43 (3.1), 38, 9 (3.2), 7 (3.3), 3 (3.4) | 1 parent, 3 children             | 9                        |
| Four          | 47 (4.1), 18 (4.2), 15 (4.3), 11         | 1 parent, 2 children             | 12                       |
| Five          | 33 (5.1), 36 (5.2), 4, 2                | 2 parents                        | 5                        |
| Six           | 41 (6.1), 40 (6.2), 10 (6.3)             | 2 parents, 1 child               | 4                        |
| Seven         | 47 (7.1), 47 (7.2), 15 (7.3), 12 (7.4), 9| 2 parents, 2 children             | 3                        |
| Eight         | 39 (8.1), 39 (8.2), 9 (8.3), 6 (8.4)     | 2 parents, 2 children             | 9                        |
| Nine          | 44 (9.1), 9 (9.2), 6 (9.3)               | 1 parent, 2 children             | 10                       |
| Totals        | Adults: 16; children: 22                | 14 parents, 14 children           | 79                       |

NF = number of family; NFM = number of family’s member.

Questionnaire

The survey used in our research was derived from the researchers’ auto-ethnographical observation and experience. Therefore, the questionnaire allows us to assess similarity in experience, and the questions should complete a deeper understanding of the camping experience.

The researchers created a questionnaire (in Czech) in order to answer the research question. How does the camping experience influence the participants? This online survey contained open and closed questions. The answers were later translated into English so that all of the authors could participate in the analysis of the data.

The findings are supported by quotes from the participants. The number following the quotes indicates the family and the individual found in Table 1. For example (3.1) refers to the third family and participant one. If there is more than one number after a quote, the statement was made by the first participant, and then the others expressed a similar idea.

Data collection

Data from the family camp were collected by recalling personal experiences, reviewing photos and notes written by the leader of the camp, and the record of the daily program. These notes included the “watchword” for the day, the kitchen crew, the leaders of the program, the content of the program in the morning and afternoon, and the short theatre skit.

Table 2. Socio-demographics.

| Adult participants | Sex | Education | Occupation | Population of place of residence |
|--------------------|-----|-----------|------------|---------------------------------|
| Of camp (nonanswering) | 4 M + 6 F | 7 University + 3 secondary | 1 University teacher + 2 teachers at elementary school and remedial school, 1 ballerina, 2 businessmen +1 editor + 2 employee + 1 on maternity leave | 3 up to 3000 inhabitants + 1 up to 20 000 + 3 up to 100 000 + 3 more than 1 billion |
| Of camp and research | 8 M + 6 F | 14 University | 2 University teachers + 7 businessmen + 2 manager + 2 educators + 1 accountant | 3 up to 3000 + 2 up to 10 000 + 1 up to 30 000 + 7 up to 100 000 + 1 more than 1 billion |

M = male; F = female.
The questionnaire was created by the researchers and sent by them via email to the participants in the camping club. Data collection for the questionnaire was conducted from October to December 2012 by means of e-mail communication with the members and friends of the camping club who had attended at least three family camps. Each family answered in their own unique way. In some families, one of the parents may have answered the questions after asking their family members, and in other situations each member of the family added their own comments. This research met the ethical guidelines of the researchers’ university and each participant willingly agreed to be a part of this study.

**Data analysis**

We applied a constant comparative analysis which involved a line by line reading of the data and focused coding centered on the purpose of the study and the research questions (Merriam, 1998). The emerging codes were then compared and sorted into categories exploring the various ways they were connected. We moved back and forth constantly re-examining the data.

Researchers analyzed the results of the questionnaire and coded them into themes. Each of us read the findings considering how they related to the purpose of the study as well as the research questions. After some revision and agreement on the results, all three authors collaborated on the findings. The findings were read several times by the researchers and grouped according the obvious themes. We analyzed the data by how its content related to the purpose of the study. This paper reflects all the categories of themes the researchers identified from the survey.

**Findings**

There are two primary types of results from the study. First, from an auto-ethnographical perspective, two of the authors shared their history and experiences of camping. Second, there are the results of an on-line survey with open ended questions.

**Auto-ethnography**

I stand with my legs slightly apart; I am holding two spruce poles that form the frame of a traditional Indian tee-pee. Already fastened to the last upright pole is the canopy, which already encircles the frame and we are trying to attach the edges to one another. My ten-year-old son is standing on my shoulders, sometimes he holds on and sometimes he teeters as he tries to pin the two edges of the canopy together by passing pegs made from twigs through the holes at the edges of the canvas cover. “It’s not working,” he complains while attempting a task that stretches the limits his powers. “Wait, I’ll help you,” I say, and I try to pull the two sides of the canopy closer together while maintaining a stable stance. “Yeah, I’ve got it,” my son triumphantly reported the successful completion of the task.

When all the tee-pees are standing, each family prepares their interiors: I tighten the canopy using a sailing knot on each post; the two older children along with my wife prepare a fire pit in the center; the youngest, who is three, plays with the other kids his age in the common area at the center of the camp.

This group’s usual procedure for establishing a camp is to rent a meadow, transport all the necessary materials, set up a circle of tee-pees, construct a kitchen and dining tent, dig the latrines, and build a washroom and other camp facilities. Setting up and taking down
the camp is an integral part of the camping experience. The families arrive on the first day; the children are expected to participate by helping others during the erection of the camp, work in the kitchen, or taking part in organizing the program. Team work and cooperation is encouraged.

My 12-year-old daughter sometimes helps me at home in the kitchen. That helps at camp when she has duty with her team. No one from our family is on this team with her. Along with the other children, she helps the other adults, who have different habits than ours. Thanks to her openness to new sensations and feelings, she understands that the way we cook at home is not necessarily the best, these new experiences can be enriching. This year, she learned to work with raw meat. It was for her a new and powerful experience, and at home she used to refuse to do that work.

The camp is run by small groups of fellow campers chosen from among the family groups. All of the chores, including cooking and cleaning, are assigned according to a list of all the participants. This process is intended to help to build community across the families. In addition to all of the work involved in setting up this two week camp, an integral part of the camp is the program.

The creators of the program use well-proven sources such as scouting activities and the principles of experiential learning. The goal of the program is to dedicate time not only to providing entertainment but also to achieving personal growth. Some of the games and physical activities include swimming, hiking, volleyball, and softball. The children improve their skills in handling tools (such as a knives, saws, and axes), practice building fires and tying knots, and learn to recognize plants and trees. The program is usually prepared in advance with a theme to frame the individual program points within a legend or a story such as short stories by Otakar Batlička (1968), or the journeys of the Czech traveler Jan “Eskymo” Welzl to Siberia, Alaska, and Canada, or Greek myths with an Olympic theme. All of the programs also promote the concepts of appreciation of nature, personal resilience, cooperation with others, and the importance of physical activity and personal health.

Elements of the program include structured games, usually prepared by the men; time dedicated to the creation and production of handicrafts, which is prepared by women; and various rituals, such as the sweat lodge. Tonight it is the women’s turn in the sweat lodge. We undress, slightly shocked by the civilized comforts of urban saunas, and leave our clothes in the cold woods near the water. Together with the other women, I enter the small enclosed domed structure woven out of branches and covered with canvas sheets.

Another integral part of the camping program is the tradition of ceremonial campfires. These campfires contain several rituals such as the ceremonial lighting, special conversations, singing and playing the guitar and other instruments. Each participant has an equal voice at the campfire, so every camper regardless of his or her age is heard and respected.

The opportunity to see ourselves through the eyes of others can give us an unexpected power and energy, especially if we can stay out of our “I” tossed by emotions. We can develop our capacity for perception here in the middle of nature, without the disturbing noise of civilization. As children, when we did not understand the world and words, we paid attention to nonverbal signs and markers. If we can revive our instincts, we can renew again our inner sense of what is good for us. Here, under the firmament, with free space around us, it is “the hearth of our pure thoughts”, our worries have gone away, and we have an opportunity to gain insight about the direction of life, where we are going. What remains is the family and friends with whom we live here in reality.
Questionnaire

Findings from the adult campers

The findings from the questionnaire can be placed into four general categories; we found that the main impact of the camping experience for adults was from the community of other campers, spirituality, the involvement with nature, and family. In the findings one will see a number representing which family member made this statement, and if there is more than one number the other statements were almost identical.

Community

We used the term “community” to represent a specific kind of fellowship. This is a sharing not only of similar interests, but also similar values. For example, this can be heard in this statement from one camper: “If people are willing to wish the best to one another, it does not matter where we go, because the camp is made by the people—and their energy” (1.1). Coming from the Latin word *communitas*, it implies the equality of people, solidarity, togetherness, and a specific spirit of community. As we already stated, we understand “communitas” in line with Aristotle’s notion as a common possibility to provide more good life in leisure, “scholè,” that goes beyond what a family on its own could. This is not possible to arrange without personal participation and mutual help which contributes to the benefit for the whole community.

For the adults, the topic of community seems to be the most prevalent topic; in the questionnaire they spoke more about this area than any other topic. This idea of community is evident from their comments about meeting with friends, being around interesting and inspiring people, as well as being with the entire group. All of the respondents state they participate in the work and operations of the camp. For example, some of the members of the sample said they enjoyed “friendship, relationships among our peers as well the between generations” (4.1) and “the community of people” (1.2, 3.1). These bonds between satisfied workers help to create a comradery within this natural setting. The adults also stress the value of meeting with others who have a similar mindset. This two week retreat helps to create a “sense of belonging” (8.1); another says “meeting together, supporting each other” and “we have similar values” (3.1); also “we know what we can expect from each other” (1.2, 6.1, 6.2); and the camping experience brings about “the circle of closest friends” (2.1); being with “old friends who are great to sit down with at the campfire” (5.2).

The adults also mention that, as a result of the community of families coming together, there is even a spiritual dynamic within these relationships. The participants stated the following: There is a “transcendence with mutual enrichment” (6.1, 6.2); also a “friendship, realizing how small we are” (5.1); we experience a “selfless help” (6.1, 6.2); and “I can sometimes feel the synergy which is not planned, yet empowering, I can feel the fullness in the camp, being aware of the fact of how important the human community is, that we have identical values” (1.1).

Spirituality

We decided to use the term spirituality to reflect the spiritual dynamic. We understand it as a nonreligious type of spirituality if we adopt the philosophical anthropology of Scheler (1981). Scheler questions the principle of the human way of being and compares it to animals. He chooses the term *spiritus* as a basic difference, as a personal uniqueness which is neither substance nor object but only action, self-actualization, and self-realization.
The subject of the spiritual is perceived by respondents in ideas such as “the new inflow of energy—recharging the batteries” (6.1, 6.2), “being anchored” (2.1); experiencing “a different course of life” (3.1), or “something constant in this changing world” (1.1); and “stability” (4.1). The adult respondents perceived a “desire to seek the ideal” (2.1); a sense of “purity—I respect that and want my kids to grow up in a spiritually pure environment” (1.1, 8.1, 8.2). Some of them state that they feel unity “with the genius loci” (6.2); or a “unity with the whole universe” (9.1); and “it should be unity not something superior to the individual, but coming from his or her belief” (5.1); and “it does not happen always and it takes some time, it cannot be planned, but when it happens—I feel unity with the universe, I become love itself, within as well as outside myself” (1.1). The campers discuss a natural type of spiritual dimension which adds to the sense of togetherness creating an enlightened congregation of campers.

**Nature**

There were many comments about nature and spending time in nature as a separation from civilization and from everyday life. The participants wrote about the beauty and attractiveness of being in nature. The trees, the colors of green-blue-brown, the sky, the weather, and the quiet all contributed to the overwhelming sense of being outside. This break from their normal schedule plays an important role for the respondents. This is reflected in statements such as “we like staying outdoors” (7.1, 7.2); we are “more in touch with nature” (5.1); and there is a “detachment from civilization” (1.1). The camp’s participants have a common base of experience due to the influence of nature. “There is nature which can exist without us and it will be here after us” (2.1, 1.2, 3.1).

Some respondents express a theme of naturalness by using a tee-pee for living and camping. For example, “I have to get used to it. The environment is rather tough and my will to bear discomfort is always tested at the beginning” (1.1). Others state: “I think it stimulates our confidence that we can make it and that nature is the simplest source of energy, we are nature and nature is us” (9.1).

**Family**

One question (number 6) concerns the contribution of the camping experience to the family. The family slept together in a teepee and was constantly around each other in this natural setting for two weeks. All of these answers were associated with the idea of family; we do not repeat this fact in every item, but the context of the family must be kept in mind then reading them. The question for us was not if the family was in the camp, but rather the quality of the experience that a family’s coexistence in a camp in the countryside provides. Particularly bearing in mind the social changes in family arrangements which have been briefly recapitulated above. The respondents offered these examples as being something different from their everyday experience. “The whole day was a time for our family, waking up together, exercising, playing games, singing, collecting wood for the night” (4.1); another person said, “We have stuff to talk about” (1.1); one person mentioned she enjoyed “the moments before going to sleep” (2.1); and “experiencing together other situations than at home” (8.1, 8.2); we are “spending time together in the tee-pee” (9.1, 1.1); and we have “free evenings” (6.1, 6.2). This was also expressed in other answers: “It suits me, my wife and kids” (3.1); and, even though we live busy lives, during these two weeks “our family gets together” (1.1, 4.1).
Children and adolescents

Of the 22 children who attended the camp, 14 answered the questions. The children were of different ages, so their answers corresponded to their experience and maturity. Our findings indicated that the children focused on four areas of the camping experience: learning new topics, family, nature, and community.

Learning new topics
The children stated various examples of how they are learning new topics during this camping experience. “I will use my camping experience at school and in my scouting troop” (8.3); “I can deal with various situations in better ways” (1.3); “I have learned new skills such as tying knots, headstands, making playing sticks, and playing Hututu” (9.2, 1.4). One small camper claimed: “We learn how to behave in the woods” (1.3). Another said “after this year’s camp I don’t mind working with meat in the kitchen so much anymore” (1.4); I was “learning songs and games from which I learn more” (3.2). One parent added (some of the parents spoke or wrote responses on the questionnaire for some of the children; although it is the child speaking, it is the parent who is writing it down, etc.; in order to be ethical, we have said, that it is the parent, who is speaking for the child) “when my child arrives in the camp, she can rest up and learn new things, and then she leaves with all kinds of experiences and knowledge” (4.1). The children discuss how they have been learning new activities especially outdoors. “I can make a fire with no more than three matches” (1.4) shows how this one child is more resourceful and not as dependent on modern conveniences to light a fire for the heater or the fireplace at home.

Family
The topic of the family was mentioned by several of the children. These children enjoyed spending time within the family in this unique setting. “It is my mom and dad” (3.3); “I like them a lot; my whole family is together here” (3.2); “It is more fun with my parents, they’re hilarious” (1.4, 1.3). The children enjoy camping with their parents, but also enjoy the time when they are separated from their parents. “Most of the children are glad to have parents with them in the camp; this is what makes our camp different from the scouting camps” (4.2).

Nature
The children also discussed the topic of nature. “We can breathe the fresh air” (1.4); “I can grow there, wade in the water and cut the bamboo stalks” (9.2). Now, I have “more respect for nature” (4.2). Another parent speaking for their child said, “I prefer being on the grass rather than on the asphalt” (2.1). We have a “great experience from the tee-pee, from sleeping in the tee-pee, I can get used to the mosquitoes, I don’t really mind them, there are a lot of them in the camp” (3.4). Another one said, “I can’t fancy an Indian camp without the tee-pee, meadow and river” (4.3); and “Nature is important for me, it is the second best reason for going there, after the people themselves” (4.2). Another parent, speaking for their child said, “I am so happy in the middle of nature” (4.1). The children also mention their most interesting moments at camp such as making a fire in the tee-pee, the outdoor campfires, the farewell bonfire, and being around the trees.

Community
The topic of the community is visible as the children discuss their bonds of friendship with the other children. “The camp means meeting with my friends; I have someone of my age
with me, so it’s not boring” (3.2); “loads of fun; we have a different kind of fun than with the grown-ups” (1.4); “I feel less lonely” (4.3); “I can play blind man’s bluff with Karo” (3.3). The children also discuss how the other adults are friends with their parents (8.2); “They like them and their company” (4.3); “They consider them friends” (3.3). “The adults help the kids with everything” (1.3).

**Discussion**

Similar to Garst et al. (2010) and Lee and Graefe (2010), we also discovered an overwhelming positive impact associated with camping. These authors discuss the benefits of camping for development and bonding within the family. As a result of our time camping, time, and as seen in the literature, there is the increased advantage of simply being in the outdoors or in a natural setting. Similarly our participants enjoyed this time in nature. A break away from the routine of urban life seems to be one of the dominant impacts of this program. Although European cities are known for public transportation, city parks, and walking areas, they are still crowded, and many people live in densely populated high-rise buildings. During the two weeks of camping, the participants spoke about a different experience during this time in nature.

One unique aspect of our study is that our participants openly acknowledge and even advocated spirituality. We would underline, however, that this kind of spirituality is visible in its non-religious form such as kindness to others, harmony, serenity and rituals. We use the term “spirituality” as a vertical dimension of life, as high ideals and deep ideas, such as looking for the purpose of life, or a transcendence of everydayness through ethical and aesthetic values, as well as other existential dimensions of life (Jirásek, 2013).

This camping program contained non-formal, and informal elements of education (Păduraru, 2013; Schwier & Seaton, 2013). Our participants encountered this important element of lifelong learning in learning outdoor skills, making new friends, and in certain programs such as Greek myths. The concept of “communitas” (Celsi et al., 1993) was also apparent in this group of communal campers. However, while the original research interpretation of communitas is based on Turner’s (1967, 1969) liminal aspects of shared ritualistic experience, our interpretation is based on Aristotle’s (1999) understanding polis as a “perfect community” which is concerned about the leisure, the scholé of its members and thus a meaningful aspect of the polis. Although each family slept in separate tee-pees, according to each family their feeling of being one community was, nonetheless, strong.

As previous research has indicated, camping in the outdoors has the ability to promote personal development and education among children (Apter, 1977; Haber, 2011; Miller, 2010; Ward & Zabriskie, 2011). The normal chores of everyday life seem natural while on a camping trip. This results in adapting to various situations as they arise, especially weather, other people, and personal needs. But even more than this may be the removal or separation from modern life. For example, there is no television, mobile phones, instant messaging, computer, thermostat, transportation, kitchen or bathroom, or chairs or sofas.

The very topic of family camping combines two potentially conflicting categories (family and leisure) into the harmonious and non-contentious context of experiential self-realization. This is why we see it as important share the topic of our research with others. Not our own auto-ethnographic reflection, but also the statements of the other campers demonstrates that the family factor is an indispensable element of this experience. Similarly, we could link together other categories, which we have tried to define, those of community and nature: the way in which nature is viewed, used and understood depends not only on the individual
but also the community-based level of experience (Marsden, Milbourne, Kitchen, & Bishop, 2003). Cultural and environmental values thus link the individual, cultural and social level of experience, an adequate understanding of which is not possible without a broader context, including language, which the people themselves to describe their experiences (Burgess, Limb, & Harrison, 1988). We perceive community, spirituality, nature and family as meaningful symbols of how “to understand the complex, multifaceted, contextual nature of individual and collective experience” (p. 324).

Conclusions and limitations

As a result of this research we can conclude several issues concerning camping. First, we came to understand from our participants that camping contributes in unique ways to the family, to the community of other campers, to the spiritual dimension of one’s life, and to an appreciation of nature. In addition it was evident the camping experience provides a structure for an in-depth leisure experience.

The implications of this study can set an example for one looking for a meaningful and unique experience with their family. Not only is this cost effective, but it is a natural alternative way of spending time with one’s family. According to the findings of this study, typical problems in western countries could be addressed through such camping programs. Especially that of separation from nature, alienation from other people, lack of family time, overweight children, and dependence on television. One application for this research could be the establishment of new camping sites, public or private. Areas could be set aside where this type of camping could take place. These camping education centers could offer a unique and natural time in nature for families, neighborhoods, and various groups of people.

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