

Identity Awareness Through Outdoor Activities for Adolescents with Serious Illnesses

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Recent research on youth, adolescent, and emerging adult identity in camps has found that camps can promote achievement and sense of accomplishment (Holman, McAvoy, Rynders, & Goldenbe, 2003), positive identity (Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2006), identity-supportive interactions (Dahl, Sethre-Hofstad, & Salomon, 2013), and identity development (Johnson, Goldman, Garey, Britner, & Weaver, 2010). Research on adolescent wilderness and outdoor programs has found identity-related outcomes such as increased self-confidence and new self-perceptions (among others; Duerden, Taniguchi, & Widmer, 2012), self-exploration and self-development (Kaly & Heesacker, 2003), and positive sense of identity and purpose in life (Norton, Wisner, Krugh, & Penn, 2014). However, identity awareness in the specific population of adolescents with serious illnesses is rarely examined in research on outdoor-based youth programs.

The conceptual framework for this study was identity development (e.g., Arnett, 2006; 2012). One major task in adolescence and emerging adulthood is forming a stable and viable identity with which to make commitments to markers of adulthood such as career, romantic relationships, and family (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). While much of the active “work” of identity development occurs during emerging adulthood, adolescence is a distinct time for identity awareness and exploration (Arnett, 2006). Identity exploration can be described as a process of “sorting through various identity elements in an attempt to identify a set of goals, values, and beliefs to which one will commit” (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 131). Youth programs can provide structure for identity awareness because they serve as a moratorium environment, which can facilitate the process of identity exploration (Erickson, 1968).

The purpose of this study was to (1) identify which activities in a seven-day outdoor-based program most related to adolescents’ identity awareness and (2) investigate potential changes in participants’ identity awareness.

Methods

The study setting was Hero’s Journey (operated by The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp), a free outdoor adventure-based camp program for youth aged 16-18 living with serious illnesses such as hemophilia, sickle cell, HIV/AIDS, cancer, and metabolic disease. Major activities included training in wilderness first aid and search and rescue, teambuilding, backpacking, and outdoor living. Specific activities included personal challenges such as climbing a tower and ziplining at night, various self-awareness activities and ceremonies, journaling, and solo time. In 2015, Hero’s Journey served 74 adolescents aged 16-18 with illnesses. Parents or caregivers provided study consent for all participants. Participants completed surveys on their last full day.

To examine which Hero’s Journey activities related to participants’ identity awareness, an open-ended question was included in the survey: “Identity is defined at The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp as ‘discovering who I am.’ Please describe a time at Hero’s Journey when you discovered who you are.” Data were coded by two people and then inductively analyzed through thematic coding and comparison.

To examine potential changes in participants’ identity awareness, an identity scale was created. This 11-item scale included six adapted items from the Youth Experiences Survey 2.0 tool (YES 2.0; Hansen & Larson, 2005) and five adapted items from the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP; Search Institute, 2013). The stem to these items was “How much, if any, has this

session at Hero's Journey changed you?" Examples of items were "Trying new things," "Feeling good about myself," and "Thinking more about my future because of Hero's Journey." Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, reliability assessments, and principal components analysis. This study applied an exploratory and concurrent mixed methods research approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010) to explore the concept of identity awareness across both data types.

Results

The most frequently reported activity related to identity was the night climb and zipline (n = 24). Second, while not specific activities, participants reported identity awareness through personal reflection (n = 23) and through communication with other participants and counselors (n = 14). Other activities commonly reported were the nightly fire council (n = 10) and key ceremony (n = 9). One to four participants each described nine other activities. The night climb up a tower represented physical and emotional challenges faced in participants' daily lives for which there were no clear solutions. Upon reaching the top of the tower, participants ziplined into the dark "abyss," practicing the courage to move forward and leave 'things' behind. The fire council encouraged participants to share their answers to a meaningful question and reflect on the day. In the key ceremony, staff described positive attributes of each participant's character and provided a word or phrase that embodied the description. Notably, the three structured activities took place at night in which participants concentrated on what they thought about themselves and their experiences both in life and at Hero's Journey. Additionally, identity awareness was experienced through internal and external processing but not through specific activities. Certainly, the structured and unstructured activities of Hero's Journey allowed space for these types of processing to occur, but this theme seemed to transcend specific activities.

Principle component analysis was conducted on the 11 items with orthogonal rotation (varimax). One component comprising all 11 items explained 50.47% of variance, with all items loading above .40. The identity scale had high reliability ($\alpha = .893$). The mean score for all participants was 2.23 (SD: .68) on a scale of -1 (decreased) to 3 (increased a lot), indicating that identity awareness increased some or a lot for nearly all participants. Eighty-five percent or more participants reported increases for every scale item.

Discussion

Merging the results of the two data types, this study showed that participants' identity awareness increased and related not only to the specific activities of the night climb, fire council, and key ceremony, but also to self-reflection and interacting with others. This research contributes to the literature because of its inclusion of a population of adolescents with serious illnesses who increased their identity awareness in an intensive residential outdoor-based program. First, compared to their peers and because of health-related concerns, adolescents with serious illnesses typically have fewer opportunities for outdoor-based challenging experiences in which identity awareness can occur. In this study, participants were medically supported in their outdoor experiences, which facilitated identity awareness - an important developmental process. Second, this study provides theoretical links between activities and the developmental process of identity awareness. Finally, the study's identity scale can be used in other settings.

The night climb, fire council, and key ceremony were program activities that appeared to be major drivers of identity awareness. Program staff should continue these activities, consider how these activities contain essential program features that drive participants' identity awareness, and integrate similar features (e.g., emotional and physical safety, reflection) into other program activities. Structured and unstructured opportunities for internal and external processing can potentially magnify or serve as the main conduit for identity awareness. More

research is needed to better understand links between activities and youth outcomes, and to further explicate processes within identity development for similar populations in similar settings. Representative quotations, limitations and further implications for both research and practice will be discussed.

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