

Commentary

The Case for a New Classification System for Summer Camps Based on Variation in Their Physical, Social, and Activity Structuring

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Abstract

The camp community understands that participation in camp produces a variety of impacts; what is less understood are the causal mechanisms leading to outcomes. In the past, research on the camp experience treated causal mechanisms as monolithic; this commentary argues that a weakness in existing camp research is the assumption that “camp” is “camp” and that there is a lack of attention to how components of camp interact to produce valued developmental outcomes. Using two indices from complementary fields (Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment [HOME] and Healthy Sports Index [HSI]) as exemplars, a framework exploring variation in the elements of tri-dimensional offerings between camps is proposed. What the HOME index and HSI have established in other fields is what the camp community could have: a tool that initially helps researchers examine how the structural variations within and between individual camps may eventually help explain the quality and strength of outcomes for campers and counselors.

KEYWORDS: Classification system; challenge commentary; physical setting; social milieu; activity profiles

The camp community has made a case that participation in camp impacts most campers in a normatively desirable way (Henderson et al., 2006-2007). What is poorly understood is how and why camps produce these outcomes (Garst, 2010; Sibthorp et al., 2020). Given the state of camp research, this commentary argues that a main weakness in existing camp-related research is the assumption that “camp” is “camp,” essentially stating that if a child attends a summer camp, regardless of the design of a camp, developmentally important growth will occur. While there are many common elements of the camp experience that exist across camps and camp programming, there are both nuances and major differences in how camps are implicitly and explicitly structured. This commentary argues that a new classification system in the form of an index would allow researchers to classify camps based on differences in design, allowing researchers to make inferences about how varying designs affect camper outcomes. The classification scheme should allow systematic comparisons between research studies on summer camps, as any researcher should be able to quickly and accurately classify the camp(s) using the proposed index where they are conducting research. The index should become one explanatory tool in developing an understanding of how and why camp-varying platforms produce varying outcomes. Lastly, after much testing of the validity of the proposed index, it may provide camp directors and parents useful information about the implications of different designs of summer camps.

The field needs a framework for describing how variations in the multi-dimensional structuring of each camp can shape a camper's experience. Precise classification systems have already been developed and used in related fields (Aspen Institute Sports & Society, 2018; Elardo & Bradley, 1981). Better descriptions of the varying elements of the camp experience will allow comparison and contrast of camper outcomes in research. Comparative case study methodology is an accessible method for making inferences about what constitutes an archetype of summer camp by systematically investigating the variation in camp dimensions as predictors of outcomes for campers (Aus, 2009; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The proposed index seeks to describe only the inputs that may have an effect or induce outcomes on campers.

Social skills, responsibility, positive identity, and a sense of belonging have been identified as developmental outcomes for the individual camper as a result of the camp experience (Arnold et al., 2005; Garst et al., 2016; Gillard et al., 2010; Henderson et al., 2007; Klem & Nicholson, 2008; Meltzer & Rourke, 2005; Snider & Farmer, 2016). The documentation of these developmental outcomes has supported the stance that camps are a valid context for positive youth development (PYD) (Garst et al., 2011; Sibthorp et al., 2020). However, what is less clear are the sources of variability in these and other outcomes (Garst, 2010). An understanding of the sources of these outcomes will provide a deeper, more robust, and defensible explanation of the inner workings of summer camps. The purpose of an index is to isolate specific variables and tease them apart so that users can quantify the differences and make informed decisions for targeted goals based on data. An index-informed categorization of research on camps should distinguish how summer camps are different than other settings and programs designed to foster youth development, as suggested by recent research (Wilson et al., 2019).

Current Classification Systems

Camps are currently classified in three ways: 1) business model, 2) day versus overnight (i.e., sleepaway or residential) camps, or 3) traditional and specialty camps (American Camp Association, 2018; Ball & Ball, 2012). The first classification is based on the business model each camp is operated under, such as government/non-profit, private non-profit (501c3), or for profit (American Camp Association, 2018; Ball & Ball, 2012). This classification exists for other purposes than producing or explaining why or how summer camps impact campers or counselors. Also, it is a valid classification system for many other human-service sectors (e.g., museums).

The second classification considers time spent at camp. The two modes are day camp versus overnight camp. This classification acknowledges the singular distinction that children at overnight camps have left home and their parents for a few days, weeks, or months. Length of contact with camp programming is also longer in the overnight classification (Ball & Ball, 2012). This classification addresses differences in the global structure of camps and focuses on a variable that is unusual in most other youth development programs.

The third classification is traditional and specialty camps that vary based on program offerings. Traditional camp involves campers participating in varied activities once or sporadically. For example, at traditional camps, fishing is something that campers can participate in during their free time or as a scheduled activity. With specialty camps, programming focuses on one or two types of activities throughout the duration of the camp. A camper would attend a fishing camp with the dominant goal of increasing the camper's expertise as an angler. While traditional and specialty camps may offer similar activities, specialty camps will focus on one main activity, often in the style of a clinic (Ball & Ball, 2012). This classification system focuses solely on characteristics of programming. This classification system is not unique and could be applied in other sectors (e.g. museums, after school programs).

A vast majority of summer camps can be readily classified with these three categories, yet only one of the three is based on a characteristic that distinguishes summer camps from other youth development sectors, and two of the three make only simplistic distinctions that might explain outcomes for participants at summer camp. A robust and actionable classification scheme should illustrate the variation within camps, while helping to distinguish camps from other youth development venues.

Shift the Conversation

Existing classifications of camps were created for varying reasons, but those focused on what camps provide for campers tend to reference programming. If new classification systems focus on multi-dimensional structural variations within and between camps, future studies of camper experiences may have stronger explanatory power. An index-based classification system would keep the focus on the camp structures rather than the individual differences among campers that is often used in traditional survey research.

This project emerged from discussions among faculty and graduate students at Clemson University, hypothesizing that the uniqueness of the overnight summer camp experience comes from immersing children/youth simultaneously in a tri-dimensionally novel social, physical, and activity environment. At one extreme, campers arrive at camp not knowing each other. The physical environment is (often) wild nature with (often) primitive living quarters. Programming consists of activities not widely available to campers during the school year. The camper has little choice but to rapidly and simultaneously adapt to this tri-dimensional social-physical-activity environment. Almost every aspect of camp is at least moderately unfamiliar, and these three dimensions are experienced simultaneously. The hypothesized causal structure of simultaneous adaptation to physical, social, and activity dimensions differentiates overnight camps from most other youth development contexts. Because there is wide variation in how camps are structured across these three dimensions, it should be possible to use comparative case study research methods (Creswell, 2014) to both test this causal definition of camps and develop an understanding of how variations in camp structure across these dimensions differentially contribute to camper outcomes. For instance, and in contrast to the earlier example, a clinic-oriented overnight sports camp might be held in air-conditioned college dorm rooms, on athletic fields similar to what is available in the child's home community, with food provided in a cafeteria similar to school, and focused on a sport that the child has already participated in for several years. Yet peers at the sports camp are complete strangers on the first day of camp. These sometimes stark variations

across camps provide opportunities for strong inferences about the causal and interactive role of the physical, social, and activity dimensions of a camp. An index that allows classifications of camps across these three dimensions would support these comparative studies. Additionally, such comparisons may suggest other outcomes than the somewhat generic social psychological outcomes used in many previous studies of summer camps that fail to differentiate summer camps from other more accessible and less expensive to operate youth development contexts.

Structuring an index around the three dimensions (i.e., physical, social, and activity) allows for the observation of single variables within camp structure, the overall variability within one dimension of the index, and the additive effects of two or three of the dimensions and the interactions among dimensions. An index should allow systematic comparison between single disparate studies and inferences in a large sample study across several camps.

The physical dimension of the camp would include degrees of naturalness, layout, water features, lighting, etc. For most urban and some suburban campers, going to camp might be the first time they are in a totally dark environment where they can see the stars in the night sky (Bixler et al., 1994; Bixler et al., 1995) and must learn to function using their night vision. In contrast, a rural population of campers would likely find little novelty in the darkness of a camp. Outdoor lighting at camps is a physical feature that can be varied by management, allowing its contribution to the camp experience to be analyzed.

The social dimension of camp is often influenced by the other dimensions. For example, a sports camp held at a university campus might have low scores for physical novelty and activities, but the campers are strangers to each other. The campers are disproportionately interested in a single sport and already are more skilled in it than a cross section of similar-aged children in their neighborhoods. The social dimension of these sports camps, a highly skilled, homogeneous-in-interest population may be the overriding structural aspect of the camp that is predictive of outcomes. Those outcomes may be different than a traditional nature context summer camp.

The activities dimension identifies activities offered at camp that are readily available to the camper in their daily home/community/school environment. In other instances, a camp may use these same familiar activities (readily available at home) but provide different rules, strategies, or equipment, forcing the camper to adapt to new challenges even though the basic activity is familiar. As mentioned earlier, in a specialty camp, a camper may attend a sports camp where the training is from an expert. In contrast, at a traditional camp, the training is less likely to be from a camp counselor who is an expert. The activities provided at camp require different levels of adaptation depending on, but not limited to, the degree of play, level of expertise, and implementation. Table 1 provides one example for each dimension.

An index allows researchers to systematically describe the variation in the dimensions of camp. For example, overnight camps are one of the few youth development contexts where participants consistently stay the night at the program location. Staying overnight adds an element to the experience that requires campers to make rapid adaptations. Campers having to sleep, dress, and take care of hygiene with 5 to 20 different children they may or may not know will be a vastly different experience than most children encounter at home. Likewise, children are typically assigned to sleeping quarters, creating a social group that would not naturally form under other conditions.

In a somewhat different vein, Sibthorp et al. (2020) sought to identify the “ingredients” of summer camp. This is one of the few studies where the stated objectives were to identify what characteristics make summer camps unique from other youth development contexts. A large sample of adults (>500), who as youth attended summer camps, were asked to recall and then explain if and then how summer camps affected them. This study identified eleven different themes that adults reported “learning” at camp. Some themes were seemingly unique to camps such as “separated from home”, while others were shared by other youth development program settings.

Table 1
Tri Dimensional Examples Reflecting Variations in the Dimensions of Camps

Physical	Input Variation	Potential Adaptation	Adaptation to Home
Nighttime Lighting	Electricity throughout camp	Campers will be able to control light levels inside and outside areas are mostly illuminated	Low
	Only certain areas in the camp	Minimal lighting to help navigate to key areas in camp, otherwise camper uses flashlight	Medium
	Almost no electrical lighting throughout camp	Campers will learn to use night vision and/or depend on flashlights	High
Social			
Sleeping Arrangements	No Roommate	Campers will have their own space to dress, shower, change, use the restroom	Low
	1-2 Roommates	Campers will have to adjust to a few campers living habits, they will learn to communicate about dressing, showering, etc.	Medium
	Multiple Roommates	Campers will have a small space for all their stuff, will have to negotiate routines with others, will have to get dress around multiple campers	High
Activity			
Soccer		Campers will have access to a ball and playing field at regular intervals; A majority of kids will know how to play soccer	Low
Sewing		Sewing equipment might be readily available to some at school or home but many campers may not know how to sew	Medium
High Ropes Course		Most campers will not have access to a high ropes course in their neighborhood, activity is largely unfamiliar and challenging	High

The proposed index could provide a complementary tool to this self-report recall study. Sibthorp et al. (2020) acknowledged an important limitation of their study in that respondents may not recognize characteristics of camps that influenced them. Psychology has long recognized and demonstrated that the socio-physical setting has a dramatic effect on human behavior without humans being aware of that effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Wilson's (2004) book titled *Strangers to Ourselves* is an excellent summary of these implicit phenomena. The proposed index, in combination with measures of summer camp outcomes, should provide a systematic means for testing for camp structure effects that may not be readily recognized by participants in the camp experience. Another value of the index is that the measures are independent of reports of outcomes. Survey research is riddled with validity issues such as cognitive priming which are reduced by using independent measures of independent variables (Graves, 2013; Sudman et al., 1996).

To better understand the three areas of comparison and showcase the variation among camps, it is helpful to explore some examples. For physical setting, the sleeping arrangements provide one continuum. Some campers may sleep in a tent, while other campers sleep in a residence hall on a college campus. The college campus will be the most similar to most campers' home environment. A college residence hall will still require some adaptation in comparison to the home environment but not to the degree as the camp where campers sleep in tents. The degree of adaptations required between these two camp environments suggests that there are differences among overnight camps that need to be explored. Another physical setting input is the landscape of the camp. For example, some camps are held in remote locations with several hours of travel time needed to reach the destination. Other camps are held within city limits and campers have

access to shopping centers and necessities; additionally, the camp may be more manicured (e.g., mowed lawns, scattered trees, little underbrush) than a more distant camp. The variation among these dimensions illustrates that each camp has similarities and differences in dimensions requiring/inducing different responses from the campers.

When considering the variations in social environment, it is important to recognize if campers know each other before they come to camp or if campers do not know the other campers. For example, campers may come with their 4-H club, sport team, or scout youth group. In other situations, campers do not meet the other campers until they arrive. Their ability to explore their own character and skills could be very different based on how well they know their camp mates. Campers who are strangers to each other may introduce themselves by who they want to become, instead of who they are, requiring them to strive to be that person during camp.

Activity offerings vary as well. Campers may be exposed to activities new to them and different from what they commonly have available at home (e.g., high adventure course, surfing, rocketry, wood working, nature study, experimental archeology, camp craft, international activities). Alternatively, some camps offer mostly activities readily available at home (e.g., basketball, soccer, arts and crafts, socializing). These different activity profiles could prompt comfortable or challenging experiences yielding different developmental outcomes.

Exemplar Indices from Other Fields

The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) index and the Healthy Sport Index are examples of indices that have been effectively used in their respective fields (Aspen Institute Sports & Society, 2018; Elardo & Bradley, 1981). The indices provide two resources for the proposed summer camp index: 1) the HOME index provides a robust example of how classifying an environment's contents, but not using the characteristics of the person living in that environment, could be developed and 2) the Healthy Sport Index allows the user to weigh physical, psychosocial, and safety characteristics in choosing sports that will produce desired outcomes for participants. Neither index is appropriate for summer camps. They provide examples of how other fields have been able to classify relevant or actionable phenomena. These specific indices are referenced to showcase how structural inputs can be predictive of outcomes.

The HOME index is a widely used index that predicts the effects of the quality of a child's home environment on development (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Elardo & Bradley, 1981). The HOME index tool is continuously being modified to fit the changing and current dynamics of the home environment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). This is important to keep in mind, as the camp index development will require several versions before it adequately represents the camp landscape. Development of the HOME index started with collecting literature on home environments to explore the subtle effects of the structure of a child's home on development. In the beginning, researchers created a list of items that could be used to identify a home environment. Literatures were identified to provide support for each item. The final index catalogs physical items providing cognitive, social, and emotional support that could reasonably be available within the child's physical environment setting (Bradley, 1989; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Elardo & Bradley, 1981). This same process could inform the development of a camp index.

The second exemplar index is the Healthy Sport Index. The Healthy Sport Index, developed by the Aspen Institute Project Play, is a tool to help parents choose the best sport for their child based on the parents' desired outcomes (Aspen Institute Sports & Society, 2018). The index identifies the health benefits and athletic skill development that parents might seek for their child. The study used research data and expert analysis for the top-10 favorite high school sports for girls and boys and rated them with three categories: physical activity, safety, and psychological benefits.

Once a parent makes a decision on the desired emphasis of physical activity, safety, and psychosocial benefits for their child, the tool sorts the sport activities based on existing empirical data and offers recommendations, tips, and other resources to assist in the decision-making process (Solomon, 2018). Similar to the aim for a camp index, the Healthy Sport Index does not claim one sport is better than the other; rather, it suggests that based on a parent's desired outcome for the child, they should consider certain sports over others. For the camp index, the parent would identify what level of adaptation they would want their child to experience, and the tool would sort camps that fall within that category that would best fit their needs.

The HOME index and Healthy Sport Index provide models for developing a method for classifying summer camps. Their usefulness has been demonstrated and provides some confidence that effort in creating a camp index would be productive.

Conclusion

The camp context is a place where campers may experience an array of novel social, physical, and activity phenomena (Olsen et al., 2018). We hypothesize that the process whereby a camper simultaneously needs to make sense of these three dimensions is the unique experience that helps explain many of the developmental outcomes attributed to summer camp. Further, we suspect that there are several currently unrecognized structural aspects of camp design that also promote desired youth development outcomes. Identifying and researching these unrecognized components of camp will require research methods other than self-report measures.

A camp index that allows a systematic description of any summer camp should provide researchers with new insights. First, any research study at a summer camp, regardless of purpose, could easily include the index profile for that camp. As research accumulates on summer camps that have been categorized with the index, more powerful meta analyses can be conducted across studies. Secondly, researchers working on large studies across several or many camps would be able to analyze the variation in camp dimensions, thereby increasing explanatory power of their singular studies. Thirdly, the interaction of the three dimensions of camp can be statistically tested in terms of their combinatory ability to uniquely motivate and drive rapid developmental growth. Lastly, the index has the potential to effectively explain how the added time and expense involved in providing summer camp experiences provides a unique opportunity for youth development not found in other youth development contexts. The HOME index and the Healthy Sport Index are examples of what the camp community could have—an index that helps the entire community better understand the varying impacts that camps may have on the developmental growth of youth. Once tested and validated, the lens provided by this type of index could assist parents in making choices that account for their specific desires and addressing the unique needs of the child. Current systems do not provide enough detailed information for different structural characteristics that have been identified as developmentally important to be evident to participants, parents or researchers. Camp does not mean the same thing to all people and does not have the same effect on all people. Further, each camp has nuanced differences that contribute (or inhibit) to the development of its participants. It is time for the industry to differentiate and communicate what makes camps different from each other. An index tool would accomplish this objective.

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