A Qualitative Analysis of Interest in Camp

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This study explored how interest in camp was formed in girls with little previous experience at camp. Basic Needs Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that interest (i.e., feeling intrinsically motivated) in engaging in activities requires supports that meet individuals' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. A qualitative case study approach was used to explore the experiences of twenty-one 12 to 15 year-old girls who attended a residential Girl Scout camp. We collected data through semi-structured interviews that were based on Basic Needs Theory, yet remained open to other possible influences on interest. The results showed that experiences of relatedness most strongly influenced interest in camp. Additionally, interest in camp arose from the setting of camp, namely engagement in new and unique experiences, feelings of flow, and connections with nature. We discuss implications for designing and implementing youth development programs.

KEYWORDS: adolescent girls, basic needs theory, camp

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more self-determined and confident to explore interests. The need for competence is met when one feels capable and confident in a goal pursuit, such as when receiving positive and informational feedback, rather than negative, controlling feedback. When people experience autonomy, relatedness, and competence, they are best positioned to internalize positive values and attitudes associated with an activity. These internalized feelings can spark interest in an activity and ultimately enhance overall psychological health and well-being.

Krapp (2002) suggests that when people experience interest, their actions acquire intrinsic qualities because personal enjoyment is stronger motivation than extrinsic factors. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggested that interest can lead to flow which is a positive affective state when optimal arousal arises from appropriate matching of challenge and skills. Several studies situated in school and academic contexts have confirmed connections between interest and support for basic needs, particularly autonomy (e.g., Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Reeve & Jang, 2006). For example, interest was a significant predictor of intrinsic motivation in learning about various academic subjects (Schiefele & Csikszentmihalyi, 1994). Additionally, in a study on interest in school settings, Tsai, Kunter, Ludtke, Trautwein, and Ryan (2008) found that situational factors (i.e., perceived autonomy support and control) combined with intrapersonal variability predicted students’ classroom interest experience.

While several studies have examined academic-based interest, only a few studies have explored interest in out-of-school time settings such as after-school programs (e.g., Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls, & Smith, 2004; Sharp, Caldwell, Graham, & Ridenour, 2006; Simpkins, Vest, & Becnel, 2009; Watts, Witt, & King, 2008). However, these studies did not explicitly examine connections between the concept of interest and support for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Additionally, no studies were found that examined interest in summer camp, which is one type of out-of-school time setting that can promote positive youth development (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007; Henderson, Bialeschki, & James, 2007).

Camp provides an intensive, intentional structure of activities and relationships that can support campers’ basic needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ellis & Sibthorp, 2006; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). At camp, youth can feel challenged, express themselves, and develop interests that inform their developing identity (Goodwin & Staples, 2005). Camps that are successful in identifying program elements with potential to influence interest will likely have a greater chance to influence engagement and appreciation for the types of activities offered within the camp. Conversely, inability to develop these interests can lead to participant dropout and program failure.

This study explored camp supports for basic needs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) of campers who were not initially enthusiastic about their attendance (i.e., not interested). The purpose of this study was to see if Basic Needs Theory could explain how adolescent girls developed or sustained interest in camp based on their camp experiences.

In this study, we conceptualized interest as a combination of increased willingness to learn, curiosity, emotion, flow, and intrinsic motivation. Understanding the elements of camp that promote or inhibit the meeting of basic needs of campers can provide a framework and implications for camp professionals as they strive to provide optimal opportunities for youth development.

Method

We conducted a qualitative study of girls who showed trepidation in participation or homesickness at a Girl Scout camp in northeast Pennsylvania during the summer of 2006. An interview methodology was chosen to fit the exploratory nature of the research because it could elicit description and explanation of experiences that girls had at camp. The successful use of in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method required several conditions including time, interviews with multiple informants, attention to communication and emotions, flexibility, and guidance from ongoing interaction with interview participants (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997).

The interview guide incorporated Deci & Ryan’s (2000) Basic Needs Theory, which proposes that people are self-determinedly or intrinsically motivated to engage in activities that meet their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Additionally, theories of interest development in educational settings (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Krapp, 2005) influenced the creation of the interview guide. Questions sought to draw out girls’ experiences of autonomy, relatedness, competence, and possible shifts in interest, as well as pre-camp expectations and feelings, in-camp flow experiences, and intentions to attend camp in the future. Examples of interview questions included: “Describe your feelings about camp before you got here”. “You mentioned that you especially liked doing X, what made you like it so much?” “Did you get to make decisions about what you did? And what would you have liked to make decisions about?” All interview questions employed pervasive use of clarifying and probing questions.
The first author worked as an administrative staff member at the camp, and campers saw her as a familiar person within the camp setting. This provided a higher level of trust and rapport because campers appeared to view her as a camp insider and easily referenced camp-specific people and experiences. Conversely, the knowledge of the first author’s camp staff position could have constrained interview participants who might have felt compelled to give socially desirable answers or to hide sensitive or negative feelings or experiences.

These potential limitations were mitigated in several ways. While study participants observed the first author in camp-wide settings such as the dining hall and campfires, she had very little personal interaction with the groups and individuals involved in this study and spent the most time with other groups or in the office. Additionally, the first author presented herself to study participants as detached from the counselors and campers, as more of a friendly yet peripheral staff member at camp with few people-centered responsibilities. This stance allowed her to be more familiar to the campers when she approached them toward the end of their camp sessions. Several campers expressed satisfaction at finally finding out that her role at camp was to do “a school project,” and were very willing to participate and “talk about camp from their point of view.” Campers received a pen after their interviews as a token of appreciation.

Research Site

Camp Hidden Falls (CHF) is a traditional all-girls resident camp located in the Pocono Mountains on 1,000 acres of rugged hardwood forest. Campers come from a variety of backgrounds in the Philadelphia area. The demographic and socioeconomic profile of CHF approaches the diversity of the general population of the Philadelphia area.

Participants at CHF have the option of enrolling in a program that has one of three distinct themes: horseback riding, outdoor adventure, or general programming. Girls register for a particular session based on their age, interest in the primary theme, and availability. Sessions range in capacity from 12-24 girls, and each themed group is called a ‘unit.’ All camp programs feature one or two structured all-camp activities, as well as unit cookouts, campfires, rest time, swimming, and crafts. A unit meeting held on the first day of each session engages girls in deciding what activities they want to do in addition to their program theme activities, as well as establishing group agreements or behavior guidelines.

Camp Hidden Falls follows traditional Girl Scout camp programming intentions, particularly in the focus on relationships and auton-
in horseback riding programs and those in other programs emerged during interview participant selection.

The twenty-one interview participants ranged in age from 12 to 15 (M = 12.7). Eleven participants were European American, eight were African American, one was Latina, and one was Chinese. Participants were reflective of the diversity of the camp in terms of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status demographics. All participants were enrolled in two-week sessions that focused on either horseback riding (n = 8), outdoor adventure (n = 8), or general camp activities (n = 5).

Each interview took place during down time in camp activities or in rest time after lunch on the last day or second-to-last day of each two-week session. Each interview lasted 12 to 18 minutes. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Campers chose their own pseudonyms.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data analysis followed the approach suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), and included organizing data, generating themes, coding, memo writing, developing interpretations, searching for alternative understandings, and representing the inquiry. Analysis was continuous, reflective, and cyclical. The transcription process included an initial overview of the data in order to glean an idea of the scope of concepts, and separated data into relevant and irrelevant information.

Atlas.ti.5.2 (Scientific Software, 2007), a qualitative analysis software package, was used to code the data and to develop themes. We grouped data into categories and organized those categories based on the relationships between them. The initial open coding structure was created using the structure of Basic Needs Theory (i.e. examples of girls’ feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence) and interest (i.e. examples of girls’ feelings of flow and intentions to engage in future experiences), but also remained open to other possible theoretical structures by which to understand the data. An examination of relationships between coding categories revealed initial themes. A discussion with two faculty members, two graduate students and the first author clarified the coding structure and further refined and differentiated the codes. As Yin (2003) suggests, the use of multiple reviewers is one way to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. After grouping the codes into themes, we examined how well the themes related to the intent of the study. Finally, Girl Scout staff members who oversaw summer resident camp programs reviewed the themes. The staff members agreed that the description of the themes seemed sensible, and were receptive to the implications, even in regards to the negative cases as described below.

Results and Discussion

Basic Needs Theory is a useful framework to understand how interest in camp developed in adolescent girls. In addition to evidence of support for the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and especially relatedness, a grounded theory-based approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) revealed three additional themes: (1) engagement in new and unique experiences, (2) experiences of flow, and (3) connection with nature. Thus, opportunities for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, combined with engagement in unique camp activities, flow, and nature connections supported campers’ interest in camp.

Support for Basic Needs

Results from this study supported Basic Needs Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The data revealed an order of salience to support for basic needs: relatedness, competence, and then autonomy. With two exceptions (discussed below), data from campers who had entered camp with trepidation indicated that the three needs were successfully met during their camp experiences. Most significantly, girls valued feeling related to others at camp, and these relationships influenced their perceptions of support for their competence (gaining confidence through positive feedback) and their autonomy (feeling like they had a choice in the activities they did).

Relatedness

Strong bonds formed within the close living environment supported campers’ needs for relatedness. Interactions with others formed a major part of the in-camp experience of building relationships, and constituted an important reason that camp was interesting to girls. This was particularly evident in each girls’ copious use of the word “we” when describing in-camp experiences. Relationships demonstrated the qualities of friendship development and bonding, addressing interpersonal and group conflicts, and engagement in camp activities with friends. “For me, [making and having] friends was really great. And like, just getting to know everybody and then like, fighting with them and making up with them was really fun. ‘Cause then they become your family and then you don’t miss your [real] family so much” (“Angie”).
Campers bonded within the activities in which they participated, and through sharing the excitement of engaging in new activities. For example, “Janine” explained how she bonded with others in her unit: “I think it was all the things that we have in common, like we all love horses and other things.” Bonding also was evident through group norms of unity: “I think just everybody respecting each other was just a thing everybody did” (Giggles).

Not all girls had entirely positive experiences, however. Negative experiences tended to arise from personality differences:

Most of the tents fought a lot, including my tent. These girls had different, like, personalities. Some were really weird and funny. Some were serious. Some, like, threw hissy fits. Like in my tent, there was a girl who kept throwing stuff at me because she had temper, temper tantrum problems, and she would dis’ the rest of us, just for her own sake (“Sarah”).

Sarah and “Vanessa” related peer interactions that were pervasively negative. These two campers constantly felt thwarted in their efforts to get along with others in their groups. All other interview participants shared more temporal and acute instances of group disharmony. Conflict tended to arise from misunderstandings, impatience, and differences in personality and opinion. With the exception of Sarah and Vanessa, interview participants discussed gaining competence in dealing with conflicts that arose through the intensive living environment found at resident camp. Campers most often ameliorated negative experiences by ignoring the issue, switching tents or cabins, or by involving a counselor. Some girls explained how they acted as peacemakers in the group and encouraged others to resolve their feuds.

Even so, the structure of camp was generally conducive to supporting positive relationships. For example, the opportunity for girls to engage in activities with peers supported their relationships with each other. “Priscilla” tied friendships to camp activities:

Like it’s sad, because we weren’t really tight until like the end when we went on our hike. But at the end we were really really close and really sad to leave each other... Because, like, we did the walking, like, a lot longer [on long-distance hikes and backpacking trips], so you got to talk to people a lot longer and so we would, like, mess around. Like on our trips — I got to know a lot of people through the outdoors.

Counselors particularly set the stage for the development of group norms by nurturing relationships through their support of campers’ efforts at building skills in activities, overcoming homesickness, and gaining confidence. Through this supportive environment, connections were encouraged between the girls and the adult counselors, who existed in a unique space between parent, teacher, and friend: “Like they don’t feel like your parents or any thing, but you feel like you’ve known them for a while...for years. And you’ve known them for seven days,” (“Butterfinger”). All but two of the participants felt that they could talk to their counselors about anything, and about half of them did talk to them about interpersonal and group issues. Additionally, counselors supported positive relationships by creating an atmosphere of fun; the most commonly cited adjectives used to describe counselors were “fun” or “funny.” However, this did occasionally create a barrier to communication: “They were sometimes a bit hard to talk to...They were so funny, it was kinda hard to talk about something depressing in front of them” (Sarah).

All interviewees specifically mentioned the counselors as one of the reasons they liked camp, frequently citing counselors as the first reason. Because counselors selected participants based on their perceptions of homesickness, it was not surprising that several participants mentioned that their counselors were there for them when they were feeling badly (particularly at night when homesick feelings peaked). Counselors typically talked to them about coping strategies to overcome homesickness, such as helping them realize that their time at camp was short, finding activities to preoccupy them, and talking with them about their feelings.

Five campers related how they experienced some less-idealized, negative interactions with counselors, such as when they “yelled” at the group to hurry up, clean the unit, or turn off their flashlights and go to sleep. These campers did acknowledge that the counselors were sometimes justified in doing so, however. Two girls commented that some of the counselors “played favorites” with the campers, but did not mind because they enjoyed that status themselves. Vanessa felt that her counselors’ efforts to help a small group of homesick campers were endlessly ineffective, for the homesick and scared girls continued to cause problems in the group and for her. Sometimes counselors were too loud at night and kept awake some campers who wished to sleep. These experiences seemed to be isolated, however, and participants perceived them to be much less salient than the positive experiences campers had with their counselors.

The strong focus on relatedness found in this study was not surprising, given that the setting was a camp for adolescent girls. Studies involving adolescent girls have consistently highlighted the importance of relatedness to their involvement in the activities (Carruthers, 2006; Culp, 1998; Loder & Hirsch, 2003). Although Basic Needs Theory suggests that intrinsic motivation and interest are most actualized when needs are equally met for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, the
data from this study suggest that relatedness may hold particular significance in the development of interest.

Competence

Opportunities for competence were the second most important reason that girls formed interest in camp. People helping each other in activities and encouraging confidence supported campers’ needs for competence. Such feelings of competence arose within specific activities and from being able to “survive” the overall camp experience. Campers received positive feedback and encouragement from their friends and counselors as they struggled to learn new things or to cope with the challenges of camp life. Challenges included fear of heights or water, missing home, and difficulty in coping with a communal living environment in the rugged outdoors. Camp experiences that afforded opportunities to gain confidence from succeeding at difficult endeavors, increasing skills, and coping successfully with challenges met campers’ needs for competence.

Campers followed the lead of the adult counselors and instructors by role modeling, demonstrating, and teaching each other how to accomplish difficult tasks, such as cantering on a horse, diving, candle-making, pitching tents, and canoeing. Free-time swimming (and to a lesser extent, arts and crafts) were unstructured activities frequently mentioned as being contexts for competence and skill building through relationship development.

Still, relationships provided the primary conduit for competence building: “My one friend, she’s the better rider because she takes lessons and stuff, and she told me about how to, you know, seat yourself properly...It made me feel good because I’m glad she told me how to ride better” (Una). Feedback from others was also important: “They were out there, they were looking at me, they were clapping, they were cheering, they were like giving me two thumbs up, and...I was just so happy that I had friends who would do that for me” (“Monica”). Campers felt “pushed” in their competence-building efforts, but in an affirming way. For example, “J.J.” shared how she decided to climb a rock face: “I felt safe after everybody did it. I went last so I watched where everybody put their hands and stuff. Then I felt better and I did it.” Several girls from the adventure programs explained how trust-building activities conducted early in the session helped them to trust others, give and receive help, and challenge themselves.

Building confidence through becoming competent in specific activities or contexts was another theme. The activity of rock climbing provided a particular context for building confidence for many of the girls in the outdoor adventure programs: “But once I do something like that that involves heights or something like that, then I realize I’m glad I did it,’ and if I didn’t like it, at least I tried it.” (“Holly”). For girls who fell from horses, the process of deciding to get back on was the conduit for confidence building: “[Camp] made me more confident, like toughen up. Like if I fell off the horse, I’d toughen up and get on the horse the next day” (“Grace”). The overall camp experience also led to more generalized confidence for some campers. Giggles shared:

It was fun. I got to meet a lot of people, and got to do different things that I can’t do back at home….I got to go hiking at the falls, and I got to, like learn more respect for other people, and get to know myself, even a little bit more. [Interviewer: What did you learn about yourself?] That I’m not usually just a quiet person, like I usually am at school, that I can just break out and be myself...I feel like I’ve gotten stronger and more confident about myself, and that I can be away from home for, like, a long time.

Building confidence is an integral part of experiencing competence and is related to experiences of autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Moller, 2005). Importantly, girls felt encouraged to strive for competency in various endeavors because of the relationships they had with adults and peers. Holly stated:

[I learned to] have a lot of courage, doing something beyond what you wanted to do. [Interviewer: What do you think helped you to develop that courage?] I think the fact that everyone was there to support you. And also, like, it was safe, the people who were in charge of it made sure that I was tight on the ropes and everything. It made you feel like you had confidence in yourself. They said that you can’t say you can’t do anything. You can do it. And that put something in your head, in a positive way.

The development of skills through supportive instruction was strongly felt and appreciated by campers, and was instrumental in girls’ deepening of interest in camp. Campers enjoyed the activities that they were good at and challenged them, and provided detailed descriptions about how their skills improved. For example, several campers shared how they increased specific swimming skills during their time at camp and how proud they were of themselves for doing so. Some campers felt that they were already competent at certain activities and that camp helped them to refine their skills.

Campers realized in a broad sense that supporting competence was a major goal of the camp. While most studies of competence have been situated in more formal educational and training settings have examined competence in specific skills (Ntoumanis, 2001; Sarrazin, Guillet, & Cury, 2001; Shapiro, Moffett, Lieberman, & Dummer, 2005) our
study suggests that young people can experience competence in more generalized ways, such as coping with challenges.

**Autonomy**

Campers felt supported in their needs for autonomy because they had individual choices within activities, as well as options for different group activities. Peers did not appear to be a major source of support for autonomy. However, for the two girls who experienced chronic conflicts with peers, the lack of autonomy from peers was expressly felt: “They really only listened to each other ‘cause they were all friends. Most of them were already friends so they just listened to their friends and did what their friends wanted” (Sarah). Vanessa shared her frustrations with several girls who were very homesick and afraid of things such as the dark and bears. These girls constrained Vanessa’s abilities to sleep and relax by being very disruptive to her. Engagement in individual activities could provide respite from negative peer interactions by providing something else on which to focus. Sarah specifically mentioned her feelings of deep engagement during horseback riding, but Vanessa never did find an activity to take her mind off her frustrations with her group.

Counselors were generally supportive of girls’ needs for autonomy. They gave the groups power to determine what activities they would do and when they would do them, what food they wanted to have for cookouts, and how many times they would do particular activities (such as swimming or boating). None of the interviewees indicated that they felt that the counselors were too controlling, or that they wished they had allowed them to make more decisions. However, some campers expressed preferences regarding camp organizational practices, such as wanting to adjust dining hall menus, sleeping arrangements, and group sizes.

Counselors afforded autonomy within activities as well. “Persephone” discussed her rock climbing experiences: “If we thought it was too high, or if we got halfway up and decided we didn’t want to do it, they would just let us come down. They wouldn’t say ‘No, you have to stay there and go higher.’” Girls in the horseback riding programs particularly felt autonomous when they were on their horses because they were able to decide how much they wanted to challenge themselves while working within the boundaries of the riding rules. Still, opportunities to experience autonomy were not a basis for the development of interest in camp. Campers likely would not have initiated examples of opportunities for autonomy had this topic not been part of the interview guide.

The lack of emphasis and attention by study participants on autonomy was surprising. While many SDT-based studies examine autonomy, this study suggests that girls felt their opportunities for autonomy were sufficient. One possible reason for this finding is that girls readily accepted that counselors told them what to do and guided their camp experiences. Another reason is that campers focused on their feelings of relatedness and to a lesser extent competence when relating the reasons that camp became interesting to them. Perhaps adolescent girls are accustomed to adults telling them what to do in their lives. A lack of opportunities for autonomy was part of the status quo.

**Additional Supports for Interest**

In addition to support for basic needs as described above, findings showed three components that characterized interest in camp: engagement in new and unique experiences, experiences of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) within activities, and connections with nature. While distally related to Basic Needs Theory, the connections between these three components and the three basic needs suggested by the theory are not clear-cut. For that reason, these three themes are considered separately from those found within the framework of Basic Needs Theory.

For many campers, camp was a place where they could do new and unique activities for which they had few opportunities at home. Most indicated that they wished to return to camp to try new activities or to build skills. The allure of camp included the opportunity to try new things, such as sailing or river canoeing, or to progress to the next level such as cantering on a horse. Engagement in camp activities was perceived as preferable to being bored at home, or doing the same activities they could do at home, particularly for urban girls: “[At camp] we do stuff everyday. We don’t just sit on the step and walkin’ to the store every five minutes. Like, we go hikin’ and we go places and stuff” (“Shamina”). Giggles stated that “[At camp I get] to interact with other things I can’t interact with at home…like the outdoors, ‘cause I live in the city.” For Janine, interest in camp came from “learning how to do new things and just the chance to be outside in the fresh air in the summer instead of being in your house and watching TV and stuff.” Providing engaging experiences in the outdoors has been a topic of great interest (e.g., Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Louv, 2005). Our study shows that interest in camp arises in part from new and unique outdoor experiences.

Similarly, the experience of flow occurred when campers engaged in new and unique camp activities. Campers experienced flow during intense concentration on challenging tasks or while relaxing with
friends, and these experiences led to interest in camp. Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhameh, and Nakamura (2005) defined flow as “a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself.” The authors also explained that three characteristics found within flow experiences include the merging of action and awareness, a sense of control, and an altered sense of time. Research has linked flow to interest and intrinsic motivation (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005).

Campers’ descriptions of particularly engaging experiences fit the concept of flow, and campers often described these experiences as the reasons for why they became interested in camp. Horseback riding, rock climbing, and swimming with friends were the most frequently cited examples of flow-inducing activities. For example, when discussing how it felt to ride a horse, “Megan” shared that “I just felt really calm about it, just felt really loose, as opposed to feeling tense sometimes.” Additionally, “Chrysta” explained that during sailing,

It was kinda like a terrifying but exciting feeling...It was terrifying in a way ‘cause, like, sometimes when there was like really big gusts of wind, you coulda swore that you were just gonna tip over, but then like when you were like speeding along really fast, it was just lots of fun.

Campers described the desire to have these types of peak experiences again as their reasons to return to camp, especially for those in the adventure and horseback riding programs. Flow frequently occurred during skill-building activities such as horseback riding or boating. However, campers in more general programs did not articulate such clear descriptions of feelings of flow.

Interest in camp also stemmed from interest in connecting with nature. Many campers lived in an urban area and had few opportunities to connect with nature. The natural environment of camp was a place for them to do so. Angie discussed why she enjoyed the nature around Hidden Falls: “Cause there’s a lot more trees...that’s why I decided not to go to [another less rustic camp] ‘cause [there] it’s just like, more cemented. [Hidden Falls] is like trails that haven’t been taken yet, and just more, like, wondrous.” Four campers explained how the camp environment was preferable to their home environments:

I liked being out in the wilderness, not being able to sit on my bum and be on the computer. I’ve changed about it. I used to be like ‘Oh, I’m away from my computer, I want to go back home!’ Now I’m like, I wanna be here, I’m open (Sarah).

Holly explained “It got me to go outside again though. ‘Cause at home, I don’t really go outside anymore...Like after school, during school, in eighth grade, I just didn’t feel like going outside. Now I do. Just like exploring and everything.” Other camp researchers have documented significant increases in outcomes related to adventure and exploration (Henderson et al., 2007). Our study suggests that youth development settings themselves may contain nature-based features that lead to interest. Additionally, interest in camp may arise from biophilia, defined by E.O. Wilson as the “innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (Wilson, 2007).

Conclusions

While this study supports findings of other researchers who have studied interest development and contexts that support basic needs (Ainley et al., 2002; Krapp, 2005), it also suggests several new perspectives. First, this study showed that experiences of relatedness most strongly influenced interest in camp. Second, this study showed that campers developed interest in camp by engaging in experiences contingent on the activities and natural setting of camp.

Autonomy, relatedness, and competence appear to hold different levels of influence on interest in camp. Opportunities for relatedness were the primary factors that generated campers’ interest, and they discussed relatedness far more frequently than opportunities for either autonomy or competence. It appeared that while girls were satisfied with having limited autonomy at camp and with setting and achieving certain competence goals, relatedness was the thread that tied together these experiences. Without the connections with other campers and counselors that girls experienced, the activities would have meant little. The inclusion of relationships in activities strengthened interpersonal bonds while supporting interest in camp as a whole.

Opportunities to practice self-control, communication skills, conflict resolution, caring for others’ well-being, and identity development exist within relationship contexts (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998; Kiewa, 2001). These developmental opportunities are particularly salient for adolescent girls. As girls move through adolescence, their levels of participation in outdoor and physical activities decrease (Culp, 1998; Warren & Loeffler, 2006). This is due in part to gender constraints such as expectations of “appropriate” activities for girls, caregiving responsibilities, body image issues, loss of confidence and self-esteem, and lack of information about potential opportunities (Girls Inc., 2006; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996).
Additionally, there was a strong confluence of relatedness and competence. For example, if an adult riding instructor’s informational (not controlling) feedback was perceived by a camper as supportive of her need for competence it was difficult for her to extract the positive relationship-based feelings she had about that instructor (relatedness support) from the informative directions the trusted and knowledgeable instructor gave her (competence support).

Moreover, girls did not seem too concerned with feeling autonomous at camp. When discussing choices girls frequently mentioned being able to choose between activities or within activities (such as deciding how high to climb on the rocks), but felt that the level of autonomy support they were provided was sufficient. Perhaps 12-15 year old girls are not at the developmental stage in which they fully understand what it means to have opportunities to be autonomous.

The second conclusion of this study is that support for basic needs as described in Self-Determination Theory is not enough to influence interest in camp. This study showed that camp’s outdoor setting contains elements that lead to interest, namely engagement in new and unique experiences, feelings of flow, and connections with nature. Inherent within camp are opportunities to experience nature and engage in outdoor-based recreation. In an increasingly urbanized society, such opportunities become more and more rare. However, as Kellert (2002) explains, experience in, and contact with nature are important influences on affective, cognitive, and values-related development in youth. Additionally, Kaplan and Kaplan (2002) suggest that including opportunities for social connectedness can strengthen adolescents’ appreciation of nature.

**Limitations**

This study has a few limitations. First, our study included a purposive sample of campers who entered camp with trepidation and thus does not represent the experiences of all campers or even all hesitant campers. Second, campers were interviewed at the end of their two-week sessions, and could have been experiencing the elation that comes at the end of an intensive experience. Third, we did not interview any of the four campers who left early due to profound homesickness or physical ailments. Certainly, these campers had qualitatively different experiences than those who persevered to the end. Fourth, this study was cross-sectional. It is unknown if girls actually returned to camp in the ways that they planned. Future research could elucidate the distinctions between satisfaction of basic needs and the other potential characteristics that led to interest in camp, and could examine longitudinal changes in interest and participation patterns in camp.

**Management Implications**

Camp and other youth program administrators often find themselves with participants who are uninterested in being involved in their programs. The findings from our study suggest three primary implications for practitioners. First, camp directors can intentionally train and instruct staff to create positive healthy opportunities for relatedness that can lead to greater interest in camp. Second, offering campers opportunities to connect with the natural environment throughout camp activities and in free time periods can promote interest. Third, although most camps do offer a variety of activities, unique or progressive activities that offer campers the ability try new things or continually strive for new skill levels can further advance interest development. By considering these implications, camp and other youth program administrators can generate interest in their programs.

Consideration of the length of the programs appeared as a minor theme in the data. For example, some girls (especially those in horseback riding programs) became more interested in camp by knowing that they could make it through two weeks at camp. Others felt that a two-week long program was just too much of a challenge due to their intense feelings of homesickness, and planned to attend one-week sessions in the future. Similarly, Thurber, Sigman, Weiss, and Schmidt (1999) found that in a group of girls at a two-week summer camp, higher levels of pre-camp expectations of homesickness, negative separation attitudes, low decision control, and little previous separation experience predicted in-camp levels of homesickness. The study also found that during camp, homesickness was associated with insecure interpersonal attitudes, negative initial impressions of the new camp environment, high-perceived distance from home, and low perceived control. Prior to camp, campers and their families should consider the possible effects of different lengths of time spent away from home. Coping methods can also be discussed within families before camp, and with counselors during camp.

Camps can apply the findings from this study in situations in which participants demonstrate reluctance or disinterest in the program. Building interest in positive activities and the social connections and developmental opportunities that are inherent within them is necessary for optimal youth development. The findings from this study enrich the body of literature concerning programming for camps and other contexts for positive youth development. More generally, research with
young women is scant, and this is a group whose voices are often under-regarded. We must continue to strive to hear their voices, to understand how interest is created in various contexts, and to learn how best to support youth development for all through positive endeavors such as camp.

References


