

Challenges to Field-Based Outdoor Research: Pitfalls and Possibilities

M. Deborah Bialeschki
American Camp Association

Karla A. Henderson
North Carolina State University

Laurie Browne
University of Utah

Benjamin Hickerson
Pennsylvania State University

Research can occur in many ways. The *gold standard* of true experiments (i.e., random samples, controlled interventions, and pre- and post-test protocols) is often considered the sine qua non of research. Yet, this standard is almost impossible to use in most social service and outdoor professions. Besides being highly difficult, it is also often not practical given the need to understand phenomenon within the context of the natural and social environment.

This narrow research design standard is troubling to many researchers both in and out of academia because of the challenges of applied research. In *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, Boyer (1990) articulated an expanded concept of scholarship that included prominently the scholarship of application. This scholarship of application generally is of most interest to scholars tied closely to social service professions. Application brings to bear the knowledge needed to address significant societal issues through development and change that impacts individuals as well as institutions. In the scholarship of application, the agenda for scholarship is defined by groups, organizations, communities, or emergent societal issues. Boyer clarified further his thoughts about application when he stated, “the term itself [application] may be misleading if it suggests that knowledge is first ‘discovered’ and ‘applied.’ The process we

have in mind is far more dynamic. New intellectual understandings can arise out of the very act of application” (p.23). Especially for outdoor field-based settings such as camps, research needs to be informed by the people and communities studied, and by their knowledge of development in the context of their routine and daily lives. This linkage insures the connection between the scholarship of knowledge generation and the scholarship of knowledge application.

For researchers working in field-based settings, the focus on application offers a rich opportunity for scholarship through the intersection of theory and practice. This scholarship offers possibilities to find concepts and phenomena of interest that are worthy of discovery *in context* (e.g., Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Lerner, 2006). However, doing applied field-based outdoor research is also fraught with pitfalls. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the pitfalls and possibilities of field-based outdoor research. Examples are based on a literature review and our experiences while conducting outdoor research projects. We address some of the problems encountered at all stages of the research process and offer suggestions to researchers that might help improve success rates for future research in these field settings.

Pitfalls

Identifying the pitfalls in field-based outdoor research is useful. The researcher can focus on designing applications from the start that may help mitigate these potential problems. In the paper we present case examples of some of the prevalent issues encountered in field-based outdoor research. These problems can be grouped into the general areas of: research with multiple organizations, the place of theory, perceptions of intrusiveness and gaining cooperation, IRB approval, sampling, staff support and training issues, appropriateness of instruments used in field-based outdoor research, fidelity of data collection, parent involvement if desired, use of incentives, statistical concerns, and translation of results to practitioners as well as academic publishing.

Within the limitations of this abstract, we illustrate two examples of pitfalls. First, research in multiple organizations is a growing trend in data collection and complicates some of the other pitfalls mentioned. Much of the previous research done in youth organizations and camps in particular has focused on single camps (Bialeschki, Henderson, & James, 2007). Although helpful, to understand a broad field-based phenomenon often requires data from more than one organization. In working with one organization such as a camp, a researcher generally has a high degree of control especially if he or she can be on site. However, when working with more than one setting, issues related to staff buy-in and assistance may be challenging. A second example centers on situations that require cooperation from parents. Parents often do not understand the necessity of obtaining informed consent and providing post-intervention feedback. Therefore establishing communication channels with parents is a critical step.

Possibilities

Despite all the considerations that might arise in doing field-based outdoor research, the benefits can outweigh the costs if intentional strategies are used. Doing research in situ enables the results to be directly applied to improve practice and provide higher quality experiences for participants. Depending on the approach used, theory can be grounded in the data. Further, involvement in the research can be a rich opportunity for staff to understand the research and evaluation process and its importance to practice and quality improvement. Often if administrators

have good experiences with research done in their settings, they will be willing to cooperate in future studies.

Regardless of the research design used, making sure the administrators of the outdoor setting and the researcher are clear about expectations is essential. The use of a contract has been successful when agreements specify the expectations for each party and the expected timeline. Examples of contract specifics for the researcher might include aspects such as subject selection guidance, intervention training, data collection protocols, coaching/support during the project, points of flexibility in process, and site-specific summary reports at project completion. Expectations for the organization should also be made clear. For example, parent assent could be written into camp registration forms. Other expectations could include staff training about the project and staff roles, administering interventions and surveys, transmitting data, and access to parent contact information. Whether quantitative or qualitative data are being collected may also influence the agreements and the roles that various individuals may have.

Summary

Much of the research presented in academic journals discusses methods as if no problems occur other than possibly a small response rate. Data collection, however, is not always as simple and straightforward as it might appear. A discussion of design, analysis, and translation issues is needed to acknowledge the varied pitfalls and possibilities of applied field-based outdoor research. We believe that discussing the issues surrounding field-based outdoor research and offering some guidance to future researchers may be helpful in improving the quality and quantity of the work undertaken as well as theoretical advancement.

References

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