

Regular Paper

Retaining Camp's Most Valuable Resource: A Study on the Fulfillment of Counselor Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness and Their Impact on Willingness to Return

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Executive Summary

Within the United States, recruiting, hiring, and retaining seasonal staff continues to be a major concern for the summer camp industry. In fact, retention of qualified seasonal staff was the number two (of seven) top emerging issues among American Camp Association professionals. Low staff retention rates are problematic because training is expensive, re-hiring consumes resources, and too much turnover creates instability. Camp administrators need solutions and tools to better understand, and support components of counselor needs, which in turn could improve staff retention. The current study utilized Basic Needs Theory (BNT), a sub theory of Self Determination Theory (SDT), to explore how the degree of need fulfillment and counselor experiences impact a staff member's willingness to return to work the following summer.

Data were collected at a large rural coed residential summer camp and a total of 114 staff (mean age = 20.5, SD = 2.07) participated. The Work Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale (W-BNS) was administered to understand the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness among camp counselors throughout the summer. A quasi-experimental design was used and baseline responses (pretest) for W-BNS items, dosage (weeks worked), camper years, counselor years, and willingness to return to work at camp were compared to posttest responses using independent sample t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA). Multiple regression analysis was used to develop the process and final model to understand the predictors for the dependent variable of staff willingness to return the following summer.

Results indicated that dosage was not a significant predictor of willingness to return the following year. In addition, the number of years working at camp was negatively related to staff retention ($\beta = -.402$) and camper years positively predicted retention ($\beta = .282$). Relatedness (not autonomy or competence) was the most salient basic need predictor of staff retention ($\beta = .288$). Camp experience predictors

of dosage, camper years, and staff years did not relate to measures of W-BNS but were the only predictors directly related to willingness to return. Results indicated that camp experience and W-BNS items were separate and distinct predictors of a staff member's choice to return to work. This study expands upon a model for understanding need fulfillment and motivation amongst emerging adults within a summer camp work setting. Camp managerial and programmatic implications related to need fulfillment, training, and culture are discussed.

Keywords

Staff retention, basic needs theory, work motivation, organized camping, camp counselor, self-determination theory

Introduction

Within the United States, summer camps hire roughly 1.5 million staff for a variety of roles each year (American Camp Association [ACA], 2016). Most residential and day camps employ a handful of year-round staff and therefore must heavily rely upon seasonal employees for most programmatic needs. Seasonal camp employees are typically between 18–25 years old and within the developmental phase of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Duerden et al., 2014). During this phase of life, significant cognitive, biological, and social changes and needs are experienced by counselors. First, counselors experience identity exploration, which focuses on self-reflection and subjective experience based on the camp context (Johnson et al., 2010). Second, young employees have a desire to seek out new possibilities related to their passions and perspective, which may impact their workforce development and future choices (Duerden et al., 2014). Third, emerging adults have a need for direction and support through mentorship and guidance (Arnett, 2000).

Prior research indicates that summer camp generally impacts employee social and emotional learning, community development, sense of belonging, self-exploration, and identity development (Goodwin et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2010; Povalitis et al., 2021; Whittington et al., 2017). However, year after year, camp directors struggle to hire qualified camp counselors and employee retention remains a top issue (Wilson, 2017). Low staff retention may be due in part to several controllable, uncontrollable, program-specific, or larger systematic factors (Richmond et al., 2020). For instance, busy camp directors may focus most of their time on campers and parents rather than staff well-being, which may lead to ineffective management techniques and increased turnover rates (Duerden et al., 2014; Richmond et al., 2020). In addition, young staff members may be presented with other life opportunities such as internships, study abroad semesters, or full-time work in a different industry (Allen et al., 2010; McCole, 2012). Interestingly, over the past 40 years, there has been a significant decrease in the percentage of teens working in the summer labor force. For instance, in 1978 there was an all-time high of 71.8% of teens working during the summer and in 2017 that number fell to 43.2% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Research conducted by the ACA reflects this sentiment and indicates that over 65% of camps reported having trouble retaining qualified staff (Wilson, 2017). Although some staff turnover is healthy, high rates can be problematic in terms of re-

source allocation and maintaining a stable camp culture. To address retention, camp administrators may need to focus on more nuanced personal factors such as counselor basic need fulfillment throughout the summer season. Understanding employee need fulfillment may provide a clearer picture of overall motivation and staff perceptions and variables associated with willingness to return to camp employment (DeGraaf, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Recreation professionals and camp researchers are aware that the heavy demands of camp employment can lead to staff burnout, emotional exhaustion, and lack of engagement (Bailey et al., 2012). These motivational factors have been previously linked to the demographic variables of age and experience level (Browne & D'Eloia, 2016; Ko et al., 2012; Maslach et al., 1996). In other words, emotional exhaustion can heavily influence workplace motivation and proactive behavior throughout seasonal employment (Ko et al., 2012). The components of employee motivation, engagement, embeddedness, professional development, and well-being have been systematically studied in summer camp settings (Browne & D'Eloia, 2016; Duerden et al., 2014; Garst et al., 2009; McCole et al., 2012; Richmond et al., 2020; Thurber et al., 2007). However, few studies have empirically investigated change in need fulfillment and its influence on willingness to return from the beginning to the end of camp. The current study used Basic Needs Theory (BNT), a subtheory of Self Determination, to investigate changes in basic need fulfillment and counselor experience variables and their impact on employee willingness to return to work the next summer. Results add to the literature and suggest managerial and programmatic recommendations for camp and outdoor recreation professionals.

Review of the Literature

Theoretical Foundation

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains overall motivation and need fulfillment in relation to a person's willingness to be engaged and self-regulate positive behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation is described as an "energizing state" and explains certain proactive or disengaged behaviors related to human needs (Dickinson & Balleine, 2002; Niv et al., 2006; Olafsen, 2018). A sub-theory of SDT, Basic Needs Theory (BNT), posits that the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are innate and universal and through their fulfillment they help to support feelings of intrinsic motivation, proactive behavior, and engagement, rather than being passive, distant, or disengaged (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Ryan and Deci (2002) define the basic psychological needs as:

- Autonomy: Psychological ownership and choice (feeling freedom and independence)
- Competence: Effectiveness in individual pursuits (feeling capable and needed)
- Relatedness: Concern for others and reciprocal care (feeling warmth and care)

This study used the Basic Needs Theoretical framework to understand the relationship between counselor needs and the relationship these needs have to perceptions of camp and willingness to return. BNT asserts that humans have innate psychological necessities required for psychological and physical health, social wellness, and energized behavior (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). In fact, people who feel competent and

supported also believe they have more choice and autonomy and in turn may be more engaged and proactive in their environment (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). For instance, people who perceive feelings of connection and care can be self-determined in their choices in work (plus other settings) and behaviors appear to come from within rather than being controlled by external factors such as demanding bosses, judgmental co-workers, or rigid structures (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Williams et al., 1998). Importantly, if one of the basic needs is not fulfilled then overall psychological health and well-being will suffer (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Feeling cared for and connected to others is important for most humans, young or old, working or retired. This is incredibly true for summer camp staff. Counselors tend to be more motivated by job impact and decisions that come from within rather than being externally controlled (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Richmond et al., 2020; Williams et al., 1998).

Camp Staff

The role of camp staff cannot be overstated. Camp staff are a central piece of a camp's identity, culture, and reputation. Ultimately, the counselor role provides a foundation for a camp's overall success (Gregg & Hansen-Stamp, 2015). At residential camp, counselors are entrusted to act in loco parentis (in place of the parent) for the duration of the camper's stay. Their responsibilities include teaching activities, providing a safe environment, resolving social issues (i.e., homesickness and bullying), and many more. Furthermore, the position of camp counselor is a common first-time job for many young adults and provides opportunities for risk management training, personal growth, interpersonal skills, and decision making (Bialeschki et al., 1998). Ultimately, the camp setting has the potential to provide a rich educational environment for both campers and staff alike.

Camp staff typically fall within the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (18–25 years old), where identity development is the most important developmental factor (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults have specific needs related to identity, which include exploration of possibilities, sense of belonging, and experimentation (Arnett, 2000). Camp can be a powerful developmental context for this demographic because it can help to promote personal growth, self-confidence, and skill building (McCole et al., 2012). Residential camp provides a 24-hour work setting, which can create a strong communal bond between staff members who must live, eat, and work together for extended periods of time. Camp can also serve as a positive venue for emerging adults in their pursuit of a sense of belonging, identity formation, increased self-confidence, and problem-solving skills (Bialeschki et al., 1998; Garst et al., 2009). One key component of emerging adults is their pursuit of independence and identity, which may relate to the SDT concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Summer camp can provide a home away from home for young staff members to develop resilience, explore their identity, form interpersonal relationships, and impact future work choices (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Duerden et al., 2014; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). Other research highlights how camp embeddedness amongst staff members relates to friendship, relationships, and culture as key factors in a counselor's decision to return (Richmond et al., 2020). Despite the heavy responsibilities placed on seasonal staff only 29% of camp studies focus on workplace well-being, while 25% focus on employee motivation and retention (Warner et al., 2021). Previous studies have investigated counselor disposition in connection to camper outcomes using Self Determination Theory (Roark et al., 2010). However, no known camp studies have specifically used Basic Need Theory to understand employee willingness to return the following summer.

Workplace Environment

People are embedded in culture, economies, and workplace settings that span beyond the individual and impact their behavior (Broeck et al., 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Gagne & Deci, 2005). The quality of social contexts (i.e., work, recreation, school, etc.) vary and can either help or hinder motivation and predictions of psychological well-being, emotional experience, and satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2012). Humans in every work setting have innate psychological needs that must be met in order to obtain self-fulfillment, satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These basic needs must be continuously satisfied to achieve optimal health and well-being over time. Workplaces vary in the degree to which managers or work climate either support perceptions of autonomy and freedom, versus control, restrict, or micro-manage behaviors, feelings, and actions (Kasser et al., 1992).

Well-run organizations that intentionally support the needs of employees help to produce intrinsically motivated staff who internalize the goals of the organization (Gagne & Deci, 2005). One direct result of proactive and motivated employees is that customers are more satisfied with their experience (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Supportive workplaces are settings in which employees can make choices (instead of being controlled or micro-managed), managers provide meaningful rationale for tasks, and an acknowledgement that employees may not find the tasks always enjoyable (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Residential camp provides a context for young adults to live and collaborate, and prior research has shown that camp employment influences future life goals, career choice, and an affinity for certain work industries (Garst et al., 2015; Kahn, 1990). In addition, camp is unlike typical work venues because many staff, who attended camp as a youth, may have stronger connections and motivation to return as an employee (DeGraff & Glover, 2003). The connection between camper and staff creates a legacy of attendees and suggests a level of autonomy, competence, and relatedness unlike other work venues (Digby & Ferrari, 2007).

Work settings that do not support the needs of employees may create an environment in which staff lack motivation and have poor psychological health, which results in sub-optimal performance (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Optimal functioning is enacted when creativity, flexibility, sense of purpose, co-worker relatedness, and positive supervisor relations are considered vital for task performance and behavior (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Kasser et al., 1992; Shalley et al., 2004). These feelings are subject to change depending on work variation and employee engagement (Bakker & Bal, 2010). Environments that support basic needs help participants develop a sense of purpose, meaning, and belonging, because they have more choice and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Hill & Sibthorp, 2006; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). However, autonomous settings are not simply 'do whatever you want' but instead have realistic structures in place to allow for a sense of freedom (Amabile, 1997; Amabile & Gitomer, 1984; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). For example, a camp director could either dictate (restrict) which activities counselors teach or allow them to choose (autonomy) what they teach. Residential camp provides a setting in which these basic needs can be met for both camper and staff if proper instructional style and programmatic delivery is enacted (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). This study proposed that well-run summer camps are like what Deci & Ryan (2002) describe as an autonomy supportive setting, in which conditions are present to support employee basic needs.

Research Questions

1. How do the counselor's basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness impact their willingness to return to camp employment the following year?
2. How do the camp experience variables of years as a camper, years working, and dosage (weeks worked) predict counselor willingness to return to camp employment the following year?

Methodology

Setting and Participants

Data were collected at a large coed residential summer camp in the New England region of the United States. This camp was of interest because it offers a variety of traditional activities such as swimming, archery, and arts and crafts and encourages staff to create new activities. Staff are required to take part in a week-long training course prior to campers arriving. The camp season is 8 weeks long, broken up into four 2-week sessions. The camp hires staff as camp counselors but also for a variety of other roles such as management, kitchen crew, and maintenance. Camp counselors, with varying years of experience, were the main demographic for the current study. A total of 114 counselors (Mean age = 20.5, $SD = 2.07$, Table 1) participated in the study. Participants were 36% female and 62% male and were primarily enrolled in college (72%).

Data Collection

Participating camp counselors completed one survey at the end of the week-long training, but before the arrival of the campers, and then again at the end of their summer employment. Consent was obtained via the camp director in an email to staff members before their arrival at work. All surveys were administered in the camp dining hall using paper and pencil, and each survey took around 15 minutes to complete. The pretests, administered during staff training, were matched to the posttests for each staff member and then de-identified to provide anonymity. Staff provided demographic information pertaining to their age, number of employee/camper years, and questions related to their status as an enrolled college student (i.e., year in college, major; Table 1).

Instrumentation

The Basic Need Satisfaction Scale is a family of scales that addresses need satisfaction in general, as well as need satisfaction in specific domains. The scale has evolved since its first use as a 15-item scale in the Kasser et al. (1992) study on employee motivation and supervisor discrepancies. The scale has been primarily used in various work contexts (Deci et al., 2001; Ilardi et al., 1993). For this study, the Work Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale (W-BNS) was administered to understand staff perceptions and fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The W-BNS consists of 21 items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all true*) to 7 (*Very true*). Example items include: There are not many people at work that I am close to (relatedness), I am free to express my ideas and opinions on the job (autonomy), and People I know tell me I am good at what I do (competence).

The Work Basic Needs scale provides well-developed construct validity, factor structure, and internal consistency over time (Ilardi et al., 1993). A reliability analysis was performed for the Work Basic Need satisfaction scale to test for internal consis-

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	% or <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>N</i>
Age (years)	<i>M</i> =20.5 (2.07)	114
19-20	39.5%	45
21-22	31.6%	37
23-24	21.9%	25
25-28	6.1%	7
Gender		
Male	36.0%	41
Female	62.2%	71
Other	1.8%	2
Schooling		
High school	1.8%	2
College	72.8%	83
Other ¹	25.4%	29
	<i>M</i> = 5.36 (<i>SD</i> = 3.69)	114
Years as camper		
0	28.1%	32
1-5	11.5%	13
6-8	37.7%	43
9-11	22.8%	26
	<i>M</i> = 2.46 (1.62)	114
Years as staff		
Dosage (in weeks)	<i>M</i> = 3.61 (1.16)	114
Nationality		
International ²	17.6%	20
Domestic	82.4%	94
I plan to work at camp next summer	<i>M</i> = 5.26 (1.8)	114

¹Includes: college graduate, gap year, did not attend college

²Countries of international staff include Australia, England, Germany, Poland, Wales

tency. A Cronbach's alpha score was recorded for each sub-domain as well as the recalculated alpha scores if each sub-item was removed. Each sub-domain for W-BNS received acceptable Cronbach's alpha scores, with the lowest being competence ($\alpha = .69$), which is still considered to be an acceptable value in social survey statistics. The next lowest sub-domain was autonomy ($\alpha = 0.71$), which is considered a moderate value. The remaining sub-domain of relatedness had a high Cronbach alpha score ($\alpha = .80$).

Data Analysis

A quasi-experimental design was used for the current study. Baseline responses (i.e., pretest) for W-BNS items (autonomy, relatedness, and competence), dosage (number of weeks worked), camper years, counselor years, and plan to return to work at camp were compared to posttest responses using independent sample *t*-tests and

analysis of variance (ANOVA). Multiple regression analysis was used to develop the process and final model to understand the predictors for the dependent variable of willingness to return the following summer. Descriptive and correlational data were reported and analyzed using the most recent version of SPSS. To help mitigate internal validity concerns all participants were administered the instrument by the researcher using the same protocols and process. For example, to provide consistency, the pre- and post-test were administered in the same location and at around the same time of day.

Results

To address Research Question 1, pertaining to psychological needs and staff willingness to return, Pearson correlations and paired t-tests were performed (Table 2). The pre- and post-tests indicated that autonomy stayed roughly the same, whereas competence significantly decreased, and relatedness significantly increased. Pearson's bivariate correlations were performed based on BNT and camp experience variables and willingness to return (Table 3). To address the strength of the predictor variables on willingness to return, regression analysis was used to create a process and final model for the predictors of camp experiences and BNT constructs.

Table 2
Pearson Correlations Among Basic Needs Theory Variables and Willingness to Return (N = 114)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Autonomy	-	.567**	.620**	.132
2. Competence	.567**	-	.627**	.202*
3. Relatedness	.620**	.627**	-	.271**
4. Willingness to return	.132	.202*	.271**	-

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3
Pearson Correlations Among Camp Experience Variables and Willingness to Return (N=114)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Camper years	-	-.088	.421**	.163
2. Dosage (weeks worked)	-.088	-	-.037	.003
3. Employee years	.421**	-.037	-	-.254**
4. Willingness to return	.163	.003	-.254**	-

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

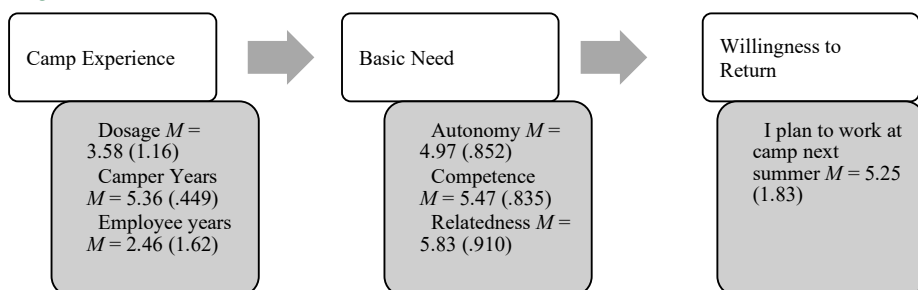
Table 4
Pre-Post Comparison With Basic Needs Theory Constructs

SDT Construct	N	Mean (SD)	Pre (SD)	Post (SD)	T	Significance
Autonomy	114	4.97 (.852)	4.95 (.694)	4.96 (.851)	.143	.887
Relatedness	114	5.83 (.910)	5.62 (.551)	5.82 (.910)	2.42	.017
Competence	114	5.47 (.835)	5.79 (.683)	5.46 (.834)	-4.23	.000

Note: 1 = Not at all true, 4 = Somewhat True, 7 = Very true

Regarding Research Question 2, based on prior literature, it was hypothesized that autonomy, competence, and relatedness and variables associated with camp experiences would have varying degrees of impact on staff willingness to return to camp (Figure 1, regression process model). Camp experience predictors included number of years working at camp, number of camper years, and dosage. Dosage was not a significant predictor; however, the number of years working at camp was negatively related to staff retention ($\beta = -.402$) and camper years positively predicted retention ($\beta = .282$).

Figure 1
Regression Process Model



Note: Process model includes camp experience and BNT constructs as the main predictors of counselor willingness to return.

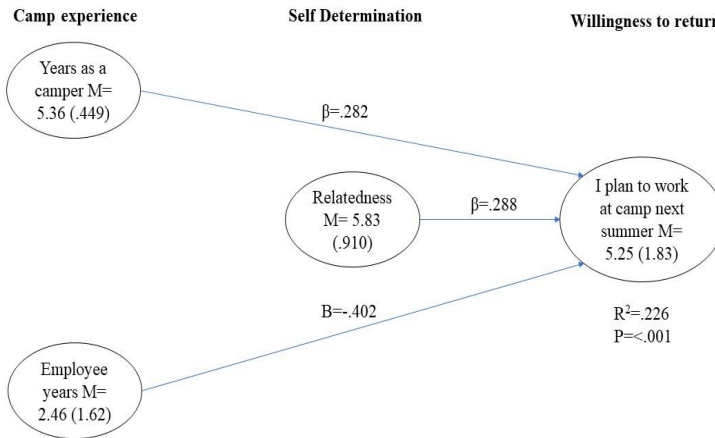
In the final model, relatedness (not autonomy or competence) was the most salient BNT predictor of counselor willingness to return ($\beta = .288$; Table 5, Final Regression Model). Camp experience predictors of camper years and staff years did not relate to measures of BNT but only directly to willingness to return. These results indicate that experience as a camper and BNT are separate and distinct predictors of willingness to return.

Table 5
Final Regression Model (N = 114)

Model	Predictor	β	R squared	Significance
	Relatedness	.288	.226	.001
	Employee years	-.402		.000
	Camper years	.282		.003

*** $p < .001$. Only significant variables were used in this model.
 Note: Predictor variables: autonomy, competence, and dosage (weeks) were not significant.
 Note: Dependent variable: willingness to return to work the following year.

Figure 2
Final Regression Model



Note: BNT predictors of autonomy and competence were not significant predictors of willingness to return.

Discussion

In a systematic scoping review on seasonal summer camp staff experiences from 1900-2020, Warner et al. found that 25% (n=17) of camp related research focused on employee motivation and retention (2021). One key takeaway was a need for future research to identify career related learning in relation to camp employment (i.e., human services, education, social sciences). Furthermore, studies indicated losing camp staff due to external factors may be a natural progression in the ‘lifespan’ of seasonal camp employees. For example, prior research suggests “the nature of seasonal camp work leaves it vulnerable to losing employees to life scripts like graduating college, seeking work more closely related to one’s education, or prioritizing other life events like starting a family” (Richmond, 2020, p. 197). However previous studies on staff retention showcase nuanced motivational factors which influence employees’ willingness to return (Ellis et al., 2020; McCole et al., 2012). Therefore, a clearer understanding of in-camp season employee factors could better inform managers and camp directors to

focus on specific training and development techniques to improve retention and work satisfaction in relation to basic needs.

The purpose of the current study was to empirically explore perceptions of basic need fulfillment and camp experience variables and their impact on a camp counselor's willingness to return to work at camp the following summer. Aside from camp experience variables, the construct of relatedness was the most significant BNT predictor of a counselor's decision to return the following summer. Other notable findings include that sense of competence decreased and autonomy stayed roughly the same. The camp's experience predictor dosage (number of weeks worked) was not a significant factor. However, camper years positively impacted the decision to return, whereas staff years significantly negatively predicted willingness to return. The interpretation of these results is discussed in the ensuing sections.

Managerial Implications

Work settings have been extensively researched and theoretical frameworks such as motivation, role hierarchies, social context, and self-efficacy have been shown to influence employee performance, motivation, satisfaction, and well-being (Steers et al., 2004). Prior research indicates that effective managers take the perspective of employees, seek out feedback, and continuously adjust and adapt their methods to help people feel welcomed and engaged (Kahn, 1990). Under these conditions, a person feels supported, satisfied, and motivated in their respective work environment (Baard et al., 2004). In other words, effective leaders, who support the basic needs of employees can directly impact employee performance and motivation (Baard & Aridas, 2001; Baard et al., 2004). Results from the current study indicated that camp experience and W-BNS variables are distinct and separate predictors of a staff member's willingness to return the following year. Due to its significance, camp directors should organize ongoing training, practice need support strategies, and provide personalized feedback to support the fulfillment of counselor needs (see Table 6). At the same time, directors should pay special attention to returning staff who may not be as challenged or may desire opportunities to try new things. Specific recommendations for autonomy, competence, and relatedness support within a summer camp context are discussed below.

Autonomy Support and Camp

Autonomy is not just 'do whatever you want' but it involves the ability to feel a sense of freedom and control. BNT suggests autonomy supportive work contexts provide choice, are well organized, and are responsive to employee needs (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). To support autonomy, camp directors can provide more choice and an acknowledgment of feelings (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Autonomy supportive settings provide people with clear expectations and quality interactions (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Williams et al., 2002). This feeling provides an allowance to achieve a sense of mastery within the realistic constraints of a setting. Ultimately, choice creates a sense of ownership and organizational support, which can lead to opportunities for creativity, passion, and motivation (Lynch et al., 2018; Lynch et al., 2020).

To support autonomy, camp directors should organize training to have a clear purpose, which involves learning both theoretical (e.g., camp culture, experiential learning, history of camp) and practical (e.g., teaching methods, behavior management, homesickness strategies) performance tools. Varied training can provide counselors with opportunities to broaden their scope and perspective of the camp industry. Finally, camps should invest in the professional development of counselors by funding con-

ference attendance, participation in relevant courses (e.g., Wilderness First Responder, mental health first aid), and visitation to other camp programs (broaden network).

Competence Support and Camp

Competence is when a person feels effective interacting with the environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Van den Broeck, 2010). To feel competent, a person needs routine and opportunities to repeatedly practice a skill (Kahn, 1990). For the current study, competence significantly decreased among counselors from the beginning to end of employment. This decrease could be due in part to training not matching the lived experience and demands of the work required to be a camp counselor. For example, behavior management strategies, activity lesson planning, or performance expectations may not have adequately reflected a counselor's expected experience. Alternatively, this discrepancy could be due in part to the camp not having enough resources, time, or trainers to support effective competence building throughout the summer.

Strategies for enhancing competence includes providing effectiveness-relevant feedback and appropriately challenging tasks (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). For example, counselors need opportunities to explore their work environment in relation to prior experience and confidence in abilities. A work setting that allows for flexibility and choice and matches personal interest and passion helps to build competence. To support competence, camps should survey counselors before camp to ascertain their skill sets. Next, camps can strategically hire professionals for advanced training based on staff needs. In addition, new staff should be paired with experienced mentors at the beginning of camp to provide support for understanding the camp lived experience (e.g., support for teaching methods and behavior techniques).

Relatedness Support and Camp

Work environments involve a period of adjustment, which may impact new employee performance and comfortability. When a person feels a sense of relatedness in their workplace, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, seek out feedback, and complete tasks (Baard et al., 2004). Previous research indicates that camp staff with a sense of involvement and belonging relates to a greater willingness to return each year (McCole et al., 2012). Summer camp can be an intimidating environment for new staff members (both domestic and international), and a positive camp culture can assist in the adjustment and performance of employees. The construct of relatedness primarily focuses on the components of warmth, care, and respect within a given social context (Olafsen et al., 2018). The fulfillment of these constructs throughout the summer could aid staff during the unstable and exploratory stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

For many counselors, summer camp is a first-time job, which can be intimidating (Bakker & Bal, 2010). To better support a culture of warmth and connection, camp managers should create intentional mechanisms for support and feedback such as the implementation of mentorship programs between new and experienced staff. Taking care of others and being cared for is a key component of connection and relatedness (Olafsen et al., 2018). When someone feels cared for, they are more likely to feel intrinsic motivation and have higher levels of performance. Prior studies show that employees who show high levels of resilience and support have less emotional exhaustion and burnout (Wahl-Alexander et al., 2017). Residential camp is a strenuous work environment and counselors need regular time for self-maintenance, breaks, and signs of approval. Incorporating logical breaks throughout the day such as after mealtimes,

during transition periods, or during all-camp games will help support counselor well-being and care. In addition, camp managers should provide personalized perks and incentives such as additional time off, staff appreciation, and acknowledgement of work.

Table 6
Basic Need Support Strategies for Camp Managers

Basic Need	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3
Autonomy <i>Psychological ownership and choice (feeling freedom and independence)</i>	Provide scheduling options, choice, and flexibility for counselors. Which programs do counselors want to teach? Instill a sense of control and ownership in the employee's role to boost autonomy.	Organization is key: Provide clear expectations, deliverables, and performance metrics for counselors. Regular review of work and feedback is essential for counselors to understand work structure, boundaries, and capabilities.	Provide professional development which spans beyond the camp environment. For example, make connections to practical and theoretical applications in school, family, and other work settings.
Competence <i>Effectiveness in individual pursuits (feeling capable and needed)</i>	Survey counselors to identify and resolve gaps in competency. Offer training beyond pre-camp orientations. For example, organize 'pop up' sessions on topics which match the camp lived experience.	Hire professionals, consultants, or alumni to discuss a range of topics such as psychological wellbeing, behavior strategies, teaching methods, conflict resolution, etc.	Create a mentorship program between new and experienced staff. Intentional pairing of staff will help develop skills, instill a sense of pride, and create a culture of mentorship and excellence.
Relatedness <i>Concern for others and reciprocal care (feeling warmth care, and respect)</i>	Designate time for inexperienced staff to process and reflect upon new responsibilities and duties. Organize training focused on first year counselor experience.	Provide logical breaks, staff appreciation, written and verbal feedback, and acknowledgement of work. Personalized appreciation and feedback are effective and motivating for staff.	Restrain judgment, create mechanisms for feedback, and recognize effort. Get to know counselors on a personal level and provide opportunities to try new things.

Note. Camp administrators can expand upon these support strategies.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study provides strategies to aid managers in their support of the basic needs of camp employees (Table 6). However, there were also several limitations to the current study. First, the study was delimited to the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (18-25 years old). The narrow age range, combined with small sample size, did not allow for an examination of interactions with age between counselors. Second, the camp drew staff from a limited geographic region (mostly New England, USA), and most of the camp counselors were college students. A more diverse sample, including additional geographic locations, age ranges, and educational backgrounds may enhance the generalizability of this study. Third, the study used primarily quantitative techniques to answer the research questions. Incorporating qualitative or mixed methods, such as follow up interviews and focus groups with counselors, could provide additional depth and understanding of the concepts of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Future research could address specific themes and camp traditions to further explain counselor motivations and Basic Needs Theory connections.

Per Niemec and Ryan (2009), to develop staff relatedness, camps should focus on warmth, care, and respect among counselors. Furthermore, differences may exist among first-year and more experienced staff in how needs are perceived (by the counselor) and met (by the organization). Future studies should replicate the current study using both quantitative and qualitative methods to further explore why competence and autonomy were not strong predictors on willingness to return. Camps should focus on building an autonomy supportive work setting for staff that places less emphasis on competition and structure and more emphasis on choice, freedom, and camper-centered activities (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Hill & Sibthorp, 2006; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). Camp experience predictors varied in their impact on willingness to return. Future research should further investigate the reason(s) behind the relatively large decrease in staff retention between the first-year and second-year counselors. Additionally, research should address differences between staff who were campers and those who were not in relation to differences in basic need fulfillment.

Conclusion

In a recent article highlighting camp research, Henderson (2018) asserts, “Camp experience can make a difference in people’s lives...and how those experiences come about must continue to be considered” (p. 323). This study expanded upon the previous literature related to how camp impacts workplace engagement and basic need fulfillment amongst emerging adult employees (Arnett, 2000; Browne & D’Eloia, 2016; Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ellis et al., 2020; Hill & Sibthorp, 2006; McCole et al., 2012; Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008). This study builds upon previous camp-specific research on how motivation influences sense of community, controllable and uncontrollable factors, and reflection on psychological needs (Ellis et al., 2020; McCole et al., 2010; Richmond et al., 2020). In addition, the results from this study informed managerial strategies that aim to support the needs of both experienced and inexperienced counselors (Table 6). Ultimately, the current research provided valuable information for camp directors as they look to address the rapidly diminishing pool of qualified seasonal staff.

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