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## **SENSE OF COMMUNITY ON INTEGRATED WILDERNESS TRIPS: A PILOT STUDY**

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### **Introduction**

A primary purpose of many wilderness trip programs is the development of positive interpersonal relationships and group experiences that lead to enhanced sense of community among group members (Mitten, 1999). The development of a strong sense of community is in fact a common theme found within the mission statements, goals, and objectives of many wilderness trip programs. Sense of community has been characterized as the "feeling an individual has about belonging to a group and involves the strength of the attachment people feel for their communities or group" (Halamova, 2001, p. 137). Additionally, a main factor in developing a sense of community is group cohesiveness, which has been defined as the "bond that links group members to the group, the degree to which the members are attracted to one another and the group, and the unity a group has towards its members" (Wilson, 2002, p. 238).

Heightened feelings of community may be a direct result of participation in a wilderness trip program. However, Hill (1996) noted a distinct lack of research related to psychological sense of community and involvement with nature. Additionally, a review of the literature has provided little conclusive and recorded evidence to support this outcome (i.e., increased sense of community) explicitly.

Creating a sense of community on wilderness trips presents its own set of unique challenges. Factors such as participant experience level, imbalances in power, and negative feelings of self-worth may create unhealthy relationships that impede the development of a sense of community (Mitten, 1999). Creating a sense of community on integrated wilderness trips (trips for people with and without disabilities) may be even more challenging as people with disabilities often have less than adequate community-building skills (Mitten).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine sense of community on integrated wilderness trips. First, differences in perceived sense of community and perceived sense of group cohesion were analyzed from the viewpoint of the group as a whole to determine if there was any significant change over the course of a wilderness trip. Second, differences, if any, in perceived sense of community and perceived sense of group cohesion between people with disabilities and people without disabilities were determined.

### **Literature Review**

Almost ten years ago, McAvoy, Mitten, Stringer, Steckart, and Sproles (1996) noted that relatively little research had been conducted on outdoor groups from a group dynamics perspective. These authors identified group process and structure as one of the six general dimension categories of group dynamics research in outdoor education/recreation. Further, they noted that "Group cohesion is an especially important research topic for the outdoor education field" (p. 54). However, few of the studies cited in this article utilized outdoor education groups other than corporate training groups on challenge courses as the sample population; most were

conducted with participants from the 'general population.' Additionally, McAvoy, et al. failed to mention the notion of perceived sense of community, a potentially powerful and inherent part of any group experience (Sarason, 1974). Since then, there have been efforts to address group dynamics in outdoor education/recreation contexts, but only recently has sense of community received much attention from researchers.

### *Psychological Sense of Community*

Developing positive psychological sense of community was first championed by Sarason (1974) as a primary goal of community psychologists. Sarason suggested that creating sense of community was one of life's major accomplishments. Early researchers examined psychological sense of community from a geographical perspective; they assumed sense of community was bound by neighborhood or physical proximity and research instruments reflected this notion (Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Heller, 1989). However, as Halamova (2001) aptly stated, "Several authors have strongly suggested that the communities that are most important to people may not be defined by a geographical sense, but often consist of groups of individuals who have common interests and who may not ever physically meet one another" (p. 138). As a result, Hill (1996) and Halamova (2001) recommended that sense of community needs to be examined in a variety of settings to more fully understand its impact on both the individual member and the group as a whole.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) revisited and expanded upon Sarason's (1974) concept of psychological sense of community. They hypothesized that psychological sense of community was comprised of four elements. The first element is membership; membership is the feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness. "The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to the members" (McMillan & Chavis, p. 9). Reinforcement is the third element and includes integration and the fulfillment of needs. The final element is a shared emotional connection that postulates that members will share history, common places, time together and similar experiences. Most, if not all, of these elements are commonly found in wilderness trip groups. A group that is able to create a positive sense of community among all members provides an enhanced arena for personal learning and effective cooperation (Halamova, 2001); these are goals of most wilderness trips.

The loss of sense of community, or the inability to develop sense of community, has been cited as a contributing factor to many contemporary social problems. The rise of individualism as a result of the Industrial Revolution slowly severed individual bonds with tradition, the land, culture, and ritual – most of which perpetuated connections to others and assisted in cultivating sense of community (Glynn, 1981; Jason & Kobayashi, 1995). This is not to say that people did not create and foster communities within the industrialized, urban context, but that individuals thought first of themselves and getting ahead, and then thought of creating bonds with others. Authors such as Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone* (2000), have extensively examined this loss of social ties in contemporary society.

Wilderness trip programs, especially those offering integrated trips for people with and without disabilities, are particularly suited to encouraging group members to develop a sense of community while on the trip, and perhaps more importantly, once the trip is over. Many of these

individuals and groups exhibit characteristics of enhanced sense of community as suggested by Halamova (2001). These include:

- a) Members make a *commitment to communicate* with one another on a deep and authentic level.
- b) There is a *secure and safe atmosphere* respecting and appreciating the diversity of all members.
- c) The group and its members *accept and show respect for each other*.
- d) There is *freedom* to express one's own view of reality and so to achieve closer approximation to the truth or to find out the best solution for a task.
- e) All these characteristics help to develop a climate where *creativity can flourish*.
- f) These groups are *groups of all leaders* which means that all members share the responsibility for the group. The authority is decentralized and *leadership is situational* according to the members' individual potential.
- g) The conflicts which, of course, emerge in every group, are here treated with tact, openness and honesty.
- h) Participation in such a group is a *healing* experience. (p. 139)

### *Group Cohesion*

Group cohesion is considered to be the result of all forces acting on members to remain in a group (Festinger, as cited in McAvoy, et al., 1996), and has been defined as the "bond that links group members to the group, the degree to which the members are attracted to one another and the group, and the unity a group has towards its members" (Wilson, 2002, p. 238).

There are relatively few studies examining group cohesion related to groups participating in outdoor education/recreation activities. A recent study by Glass and Benshoff (2002) determined that group cohesion among adolescents increased as a result of participation in challenge course activities, and that age, gender, and race were not factors in perceptions of cohesion. Studies outside the realm of outdoor education/recreation have found that cohesive groups performed significantly better than non-cohesive groups (Evans & Dion, 1991). Mullen and Copper (1994), in a meta-analysis of 49 studies, concluded that this was especially true for groups that were committed to completing the task at hand and had high levels of interdependence and interaction during this time.

Cohesion has been linked to the concept of community (Felton & Shinn, 1992). Communities often "function to provide a sense of cohesion, feelings of belongingness, and other socially reinforcing outcomes" (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1995, p. 271). Conversely, McMillan (1996) noted that sense of belonging (i.e., cohesion) was a critical factor in creation of community. In fact, McMillan and Chavis (1986) recognized this relationship as bidirectional – community creates cohesion and cohesion creates community.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Sixty-six participants were recruited from a non-profit organization offering integrated wilderness trips. Individuals went on several types of trips at various locations in North America including, sea-kayaking ( $n = 25$ ), flatwater canoeing ( $n = 39$ ), and horsepacking ( $n = 2$ ). These trips were an average of five days in length. A typical group consisted of 10-15 people, including

people with disabilities (sensory, cognitive or physical), people without disabilities, and trip leaders. The mean age of the participants was 47.28 years, with ages ranging from 19 to 69. There were 37 people (56.1%) who reported they had no disability. Of the 29 people (43.9%) who indicated they had a disability, 2 (3%) had a sensory impairment, 15 (22.7%) had a physical disability, 6 (9.1%) had a cognitive disability, and 5 (7.6%) had an emotional disability. One person did not report his or her type of disability. Many of the participants ( $n = 38$  or 57.6%) had previous experience on integrated wilderness trips with this organization. The remaining individuals ( $n = 28$  or 42.4%) had no prior experience with this organization, but may have had previous outdoor group experiences. All of the participants indicated they were Caucasian.

#### *Procedure*

Data were collected during the summer 2003 season. A cover letter, informed consent form, and pre-trip survey including the Perceived Sense of Community Scale (Bishop, Chertok, & Jason, 1997) and Group Cohesion Evaluation Questionnaire (Glass & Benshoff, 2002) were incorporated into confirmation packets that were mailed to participants by the organization. Participants completed the survey before going on their wilderness trip and returned them to the organization via a postage paid envelope that was included in the mailing. A similar procedure was implemented to gain post-trip data from the participants. For the pre-trip survey, participants were asked to comment on what their perceptions of sense of community and cohesion were at that time, regardless of whether or not they knew anything about other group members, or had prior experience on integrated wilderness trips. For the post-trip survey, participants responded to the survey questions based on their experience with their trip group. Demographic data such as age, gender, disability status and type, and previous experience were provided by the organization for participants who agreed to take part in this study.

#### *Instruments*

The Perceived Sense of Community Scale (PSCS) was used to measure sense of community. The PSCS consists of 30 items rated on a 5 point Likert scale (1 – Not At All True, 2 – Somewhat True, 3 – Pretty Much True, 4 – Very Much True, 5 – Completely True). Six items are reverse coded, and three factor scores may be obtained (i.e., Mission – pursuit of a common purpose, Reciprocal Responsibility – members receive and give aid to one another, and Disharmony – the negative attributions associated with a group). Sample statements include: 'Members know they can get help from this group if they need it,' and 'Some people feel like outsiders at meetings.'

Bishop, Chertok, and Jason (1997) extensively examined this scale, including a factor analysis and multiple regression analyses of the total score and factor score variables. They found the scale to be both reliable and valid. The PSCS is one of the only scales available that measures psychological sense of community without regard to the context in which the group under study operates (Halámova, 2001). The authors of this paper found the PSCS easy to use. As it only has 30 items, it may be completed in a short amount of time. Future researchers in outdoor education wishing to use the PSCS may consider rewording some of the questions to more adequately represent the nature of the group(s) they wish to study.

Group cohesion was measured by the Group Cohesion Evaluation Questionnaire (GCEQ), which was originally intended for use in challenge course research. This instrument was "designed to assess group members' evaluations of how well their group was able to work together..., and

whether the activities helped to foster a sense of group cohesion" (Glass & Benshoff, 2002, p. 271). The GCEQ consists of 9 items using a 4 point Likert scale (1 – Not at all like me/my group, 2 – A little like me/my group, 3 – A lot like me/my group, and 4 – Exactly like me/my group). Factor analyses conducted by Glass and Benshoff confirmed the statistical significance of the 9 items and the scale was proven reliable as well. Like the PSCS, the GCEQ is a short, easy to use instrument. It may be easily adapted for most group situations.

## Results

### Data Analysis

Of the 66 participants, only 41 completed both the pre-trip and post-trip surveys. Data were analyzed using this sample. Descriptive statistics were calculated for both pre-trip and post-trip scores on both the PSCS and GCEQ. Results are shown in Table 1. Reliability of both the PSCS and GCEQ was satisfactory, as Cronbach's alpha scores were all greater than .73. A paired-samples t-test determined there was a significant change in group cohesion over the course of the trip for all participants. There was a 5.15 gain between pre-trip and post-trip GCEQ mean scores. Results of the t-test are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables for Entire Sample and Paired Samples T-Test for GCEQ*

Descriptive Statistics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Pre-trip Cohesion (GCEQ)	26.34	6.32	
Post-trip Cohesion (GCEQ)	31.49	4.78	
Pre-trip Perceived Sense of Community (PSCS)	107.41	21.17	
Post-trip Perceived Sense of Community (PSCS)	122.41	21.18	
Paired Samples T-Test	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre-trip vs. Post-trip Cohesion (GCEQ)	40	-5.01***	<.001

Note.  $n = 41$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

In order to determine if there were differences between pre-trip and post-trip perceived sense of community for the entire sample, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) using the pre-trip GCEQ score as the covariate was utilized. Lounsbury and DeNeui (1995) and McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggested that cohesion and community are intimately related, justifying use of cohesion as a covariate. Additionally, the authors' personal experiences on integrated wilderness trips encouraged the use of cohesion as a covariate. The pre-trip GCEQ score was significantly correlated with both the pre-trip and post-trip PSCS scores. A statistically significant increase from pre to post-trip PSCS scores while using the pre-trip GCEQ as a covariate was found. The results are displayed in Table 2.

A second ANCOVA was used to examine differences between pre and post-trip PSCS scores between people with disabilities and people without disabilities. As with the previous analysis, the pre-trip GCEQ score was used as the covariate. There was no significantly different change in pre-trip and post-trip scores. Please see Table 3 for results.

TABLE 2  
*ANCOVA for Perceived Sense of Community (Entire Sample) with Group Cohesion*

Source	Df	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>	p
Between subjects				
Pre-trip Cohesion	1	46.14***	.54	<.001
Within Group Error	39	(305.24)		
Within subjects				
Perceived Sense of Community	1	24.89***	.39	<.001
Perceived Sense of Community X Pre-trip Cohesion	1	15.46***	.28	<.001
Within Group Error	39	(181.61)		

Note. Values enclosed in parentheses represent mean square error.  $n = 41$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE 3  
*ANCOVA for Perceived Sense of Community (Disability Status) with Group Cohesion*

Source	Df	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>	p
Between subjects				
Pre-trip Cohesion	1	45.46***	.55	<.001
Disability Status	1	.53	.01	.48
Within Group Error	38	(308.99)		
Within subjects				
Perceived Sense of Community	1	24.27***	.39	<.001
Perceived Sense of Community X Pre-trip Cohesion	1	15.11***	.28	<.001
Perceived Sense of Community X Disability Status	1	.06	.002	.81
Within Group Error	38	(186.11)		

Note. Value enclosed in parentheses represents mean square error.  $n = 41$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Exploratory ANCOVAs examining differences between pre and post-trip PSCS scores using pre-trip GCEQ scores as a covariate for the variables age, disability status, previous wilderness trip experience with this organization, and gender yielded no significant differences. When examining differences in group cohesion using paired-samples t-tests for age, previous wilderness trip experience with this organization, disability status, and gender, the only significant finding was that women showed a statistically significant increase as compared to men. Women reported a greater increase in group cohesion. This result is reminiscent of previous studies which found that females had greater feelings of sociability, 'affiliativeness,' and intimacy while in groups (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1995).

### Discussion

Results of this study suggest that participation in an integrated wilderness trip experience enhances group cohesion and perceived sense of community among participants. These results substantiate Wilson's (2002) contention that cohesiveness may be described as the sense of connection group members have for a group, the extent group members are attracted to the group, and the overall sense of unity held by group members. Additionally, it supports the notion

that connection (i.e., group cohesion) leads to the perception that one is accepted by members of a particular group. Connection to others is an outcome of social integration, one of the primary purposes of the wilderness trips examined in this study.

The findings from this study suggest that people with disabilities may perceive cohesion much the same as people without disabilities, indicating that wilderness trips may be an ideal context for encouraging social integration. Generally, it appears as though participants perceive positive changes in group cohesion over the course of a wilderness trip, regardless of demographic background. Although women reported a significantly greater change in perceived group cohesion, it is important to note that men indicated a positive change as well.

Results of this study suggest that all participants' (i.e., regardless of disability status) perceived sense of community increases over the course of a wilderness trip experience, while controlling for pre-trip group cohesion. The findings from this study support the contention of Bishop, Chertok, & Jason (1997) that sense of community is an experience and that sense of community is not bound by geographical space. The findings intimate that people with disabilities perceive sense of community much the same as people without disabilities. The results show no significant difference between people with disabilities and people without disabilities in perceived sense of community over the course of the trip while controlling for group cohesiveness. While some research shows that people with disabilities may have less than adequate community building skills and may therefore find it more challenging to develop a sense of community (Mitten, 1999), our findings suggest otherwise.

This finding also supports the positive effect of socially integrated wilderness trips. Surprisingly, the results of this study show no significant differences in perceived sense of community based on gender, age, and previous wilderness trip experience. These results are contrary to the contention of Hill (1996), who postulated that these variables were correlated to different perceptions of psychological sense of community.

The findings of this study are limited in several ways. First, the respondent size of 41 subjects does not allow for broad generalization. A small completion rate requires caution in generalizing the results even to the specific group sampled. Additionally, the authors received some comments from caregivers, parents, etc. indicating that some of the language within the survey was difficult for some individuals with disabilities to understand. Therefore, comprehension of the concepts of group cohesion and perceived sense of community may not have been fully grasped by some participants. The average length of the trip (i.e., five days) may have impacted the results as well; people may be able to 'deal with' others for this time period. People who chose to participate in this study chose to return two separate surveys. While merely speculation, perhaps the positive nature of their trip experience encouraged them to respond, while those who had less positive experiences chose not to participate. Finally, the participants were homogeneous in relation to ethnicity.

### Recommendations

McMillan and Chavis (1986) emphasize the importance of shared emotional connections as well as the integration and fulfillment of needs as key determinants of psychological sense of community. A key theoretical proposition concerning sense of community is that "it will be



higher in communities which have to invest considerable energies and resources just to survive" (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1995, p. 271). This feeling of 'getting back to the basics' is often an inherent perception held by individuals on wilderness trips. Participants have to focus on fundamental human needs such as travel, shelter, and food. This may help explain why there were no significant differences in perceived sense of community between people with disabilities and people without disabilities. The shared sense of purpose and the shared goals (i.e., mission and reciprocal responsibility) that result from participation on a wilderness trip experience lend themselves to the development of this sense of community (Jason & Kobayashi, 1995).

This implication is significant, particularly for people with disabilities, as many of these individuals do not reach their full potential for functioning in 'everyday society.' This may be a result of societal stereotypes, limits of a person's disability, and perhaps most importantly, psychological dependency (i.e., 'learned-helplessness') on others (Smith, Austin, & Kennedy, 2001). As the primary goals of integrated wilderness trips are to break down social stereotypes and encourage independence from others (especially psychological dependence), investigation into the process of community building is required. Additionally, past research has suggested that the absence of community has been associated with feelings of isolation and social dysfunction (Glynn, 1981). More research is necessary to further explore the potential of wilderness trips and the development of community.

Wilderness trip providers should also consider differences in how men and women perceive group cohesion and community and create structures to enhance cohesion for both. This may be of particular importance for wilderness groups where there are unequal numbers of men and women participants, especially when men outnumber women. There may not be appropriate social structures to encourage community building and group cohesion in this scenario. The popularity of all women's wilderness trips attests to the recognition of these differences.

Further research examining the factors influencing creation of sense of community and group cohesion on wilderness trips is needed. Leadership styles, gender of the leader(s), environmental factors and personality traits of group members should be considered in future research. Additionally, longitudinal studies that follow perceived sense of community and group cohesion in both wilderness and 'everyday' settings while utilizing a control group are warranted.

### **Conclusion**

Wilderness trips provide an excellent opportunity for creating psychological sense of community. The feelings, beliefs, and relationships gained from this sense of community may be transferred to "everyday life" and back to participants' broader communities. This potential exists for both people with disabilities and people without disabilities. A more recent goal of outdoor programs and adventure education is for participants to have positive group experiences including creating positive relationships and bonds among participants (Mitten, 1999).

Healthy relationships, connections based on mutual respect, and trust can add to group cohesiveness, enable people to feel good about themselves and provide people with opportunities to grow. With a positive group experience to serve as a model, wilderness trip participants can re-create communities for themselves in healthy ways (Mitten, 1999). Through this process,

people develop a sense of community that bring greater meaning and feelings of solidarity to their lives (Sarason, 1974).

The role of integrating individuals in any context is one of encouraging people to believe in their abilities and in themselves (Edington, Compton, & Hanson, 1980). The potential for people to then return to their own communities and promote healthy interpersonal connections exists (Hutchinson & McGill, 1992; Mitten, 1999). Overall, people with a sense of community recognize that the welfare of that group takes precedence over that of the individual because it is through a shared sense of community that the creative potential of the individual and the larger community will reach expression (Sarason, 1974). This is crucial if *all* people are to reach their full potential in society.

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