

UNIQUE PROGRAMMING: AN EXAMINATION OF THE BENEFITS OF A FREE CHOICE PROGRAM

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Abstract: This study was an investigation of a free choice program and the benefits free choice yields on the developing characteristics of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation among adolescent girls. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at Brown Ledge Camp, an all girls summer camp outside of Burlington, Vermont, during the summer of 2000. Quantitative results indicate that intrinsic motivation increases over the course of the free choice program. The qualitative data appears to support the literature that both intrinsic motivation and self-esteem increase when participants are given the freedom to make their own recreation participation decisions.

Introduction

Adolescence has been identified as a time of dramatic developmental change (Henderson, 1995; Larson, 2000; Marcia, Waterston, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993; Shaw & Kemeny, 1989; Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995). During this time, social ideals are impressed upon adolescents through families, friends, peers, teachers, government and media, to name just a few. Young girls in particular are faced with issues tied to femininity as well as their role in society (Eskes, Duncan, & Miller, 1998; Kane, 1990; Wearing, 1992). Such overwhelming and bewildering pressures often result in low levels of self-esteem.

One approach proven to be effective in increasing levels of self-esteem among young women is leisure engagement (Diener, Emmons, & Larsen, 1986; Shaw et al., 1995). More specifically, the free choice, self-direction and intrinsically motivated behavior associated with selecting leisure activities may significantly enhance self-esteem and opportunities for self-expression (Larson, 2000).

Self-esteem and Intrinsic Motivation

Diener et al. (1986) contended that people's personalities develop and are expressed in leisure experiences; that personality expression is at its best in an unrestricted

situation that allows for freedom of choice. Hence, highly structured leisure programs (e.g., many summer camps and extra-curricular school activities) that rely heavily on external motivating factors such as public recognition and awards do little to foster the development of intrinsic behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Young people who are given the opportunity to participate in activities in which they are intrinsically motivated may lead to many other positive developmental benefits. For example, Larson (2000) suggested that intrinsically motivated participation, high involvement and concentration in activities encourages the development of initiative, thus leading to creativity, leadership and altruism in addition to many other elements of positive development. Additionally, Eskes, Duncan, and Miller (1998) found that young women who have high levels of intrinsic motivation may have enhanced levels of self-esteem and feel a sense of empowerment.

While intrinsic motivation has proven to be important to the successful development of adolescents, so too has freedom of choice. The notion of freedom of choice is not new to leisure research, and has been identified as a fundamental element in a leisure experience (Datillo, 1999; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Mannell, Zuzanek, & Larson, 1988; Samdahl, 1986). That is, in order for an experience to be considered true leisure, it must to some degree be freely chosen, free of constraints, free from social roles, freely self-determined, etc. Ellis and Witt (1984) posited that freedom of choice in leisure consists of four major elements: 1) perceived competence, 2) perceived control, 3) intrinsic motivation, and 4) playfulness. Moreover, Mannell et al. (1988) contended that perceived freedom, intrinsic motivation and self-expression are closely linked. If a person lacks the freedom to choose an activity, then their intrinsic needs will not be met, and they will have difficulty expressing themselves and their personality.

Individuals have different interpretations and definitions of what freedom is and how it exists in a leisure experience. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that freedom has been examined as a state of mind, therefore making it difficult to operationalize and measure (Hemingway, 1996). Freedom as a program structure rather than as a state of mind is truly unique and yields a rich field of as yet untapped data.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the benefits of a free choice recreation program and the extent to which free choice increases intrinsic interest and motivation to participate among adolescent girls. This study purpose was based on the theory that when individuals are given the freedom to choose their recreation activities, their motivation for participation will either be, or overtime become, intrinsic and that participants will benefit from increased self-esteem and possibly other positive developmental outcomes. Two exploratory questions guided the study: 1) do young women experience increased levels of self-esteem over the course of a free choice program? and 2) do young women experience increased levels of intrinsic motivation over the course of a free choice program?

Methods

Sampling Site

The site for this study was Brown Ledge Camp, an all girls camp located just outside of Burlington, Vermont on Lake Champlain. Known as the "different camp," Brown Ledge offers an unrestricted (i.e., free choice) program schedule in which activity selection and duration of participation is entirely elective for the campers. Campers are free to decide in which activity to participate in at any time on little more than a moments notice during activity hours. Staff members are hired as counselors in a specific activity and are available at all times during activity hours to receive campers.

Brown Ledge is an eight-week camp. Campers can enroll at Brown Ledge for their choice of three sessions: 1) July, 2) August, and 3) full season. The July and August sessions are each four-weeks long, while the full season, as the name implies, is the entire eight-weeks. Of the 180 campers, approximately half stay for the full season each year. Full season campers tend to be older than four-week session campers, and also tend to have more years experience at Brown Ledge.

Brown Ledge was founded in 1926 by Harry E. Brown (H.E.B.). In implementing the unique philosophy at Brown Ledge, H.E.B. established three fundamental ideas that fostered the free choice program: 1) "Play-life" is considered to be one of the most important factors in the development of personality, 2) Brown Ledge Camp deliberately chooses a wide range of sports or "play" activities to use as means to an end, and 3) these "play" activities are used as vehicles by which to arrive at health, poise, self-confidence – in a phrase, increased personal power.

Selection of Subjects

Brown Ledge campers range in age from eight to eighteen, and come from several countries around the world. Subjects for this study were young women enrolled at Brown Ledge during the summer of 2000, aged 12 through 18, and residents of the United States. These delimitations were established so as to better facilitate understanding of the questionnaire and communication during the interview process.

Collection of Data

Because the benefits of freedom have traditionally been difficult to operationalize, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to measure the benefits of the free choice program. The quantitative element was meant to address the original issues of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation and to provide baseline data, while the qualitative element was meant to add depth and richness to developments that may or may not have contributed to self-esteem and intrinsic motivation over the course of the summer. That is, the qualitative data may either challenge

or reinforce quantitative statistics resulting from the quantitative data.

The study was conducted in three phases: 1) a self administered questionnaire was mailed to the subjects approximately three weeks prior to their arrival at camp, 2) during the summer, those who agreed to complete the questionnaire were asked to participate in the qualitative aspect of the study, and 3) a second self-administered questionnaire was mailed to the subjects approximately three weeks after their departure from camp. The first phase of the study, or "pre-camp questionnaire", was meant to measure levels of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation prior to experiencing the free choice program. The third phase, or "post-camp questionnaire", was meant to measure levels of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation after experiencing the free choice program. During analysis, the two phases could be compared and analyzed accordingly. Third phase surveys were mailed not only to subjects who had responded during the first phase of the study, but also to all subjects in order to encourage a high response rate.

Quantitative Data Collection

Both the pre- and post-camp questionnaires consisted of three sections. Section one consisted of The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) designed to measure self-esteem in adolescents. Section two consisted of the Weissinger and Bandalos Intrinsic Motivation Scale, designed to measure self-determination, competence, commitment, and challenge among participants in recreation activities. In section three, subjects were asked a series of questions about their background such as age and number of years they have spent at camp, whether or not they have sisters or friends from home at camp, and how they heard about camp.

Approximately 49% (n=92) pre-camp questionnaires were returned, 31% (n=52) post-camp questionnaires were returned, and 16% (n=29) returned both. Subjects ranged in age from 12 through 17 with a mean age of 14 years. The mean number of years spent at Brown Ledge ranged from 0 through 8, with a mean number of years of 2.7.

Qualitative Data Collection

Subjects volunteered to participate in the interview process early in the camp season. A total of 25 individuals volunteered; 9 full season campers, 10 full season, 1st year Junior Counselors (JC's), 4 July session campers, and 2 August session campers. Interviewees ranged in age from 12 through 17. Interviews did not impinge upon nor conflict with camp activities. Interviewing was therefore limited to only a few hours a day. To simplify the logistics of setting up interview times with all 25 interviewees, five focus groups and two one-on-one interviews were established. Two of the groups consisted only of full session campers (i.e., one 5-person focus group, and one 4-person focus group), one consisted only of full season 1st year JC's (i.e., 8-person focus group), one consisted only of July session campers (i.e., 4-person focus group), and one consisted only of August session campers (i.e., 2-person focus group). One-on-one interviews were established with

the oldest volunteers, both of whom were 2nd year JC's and were experiencing their last summer at Brown Ledge. The researcher felt that the two year JC program, and the fact that 2000 was going to be the last summer at camp for these participants, constituted a far different experience for these two interviewees and therefore warranted individual interviews.

Interviews were conducted shortly after campers arrival, and just before their departure from camp. Therefore, interviews were conducted the first week of camp for the July session and full season campers, at "switchover" (i.e., the four-week point when the July session campers leave and the August session campers arrive), and at the end of camp. Because interviews were being done at "switchover" with the July and August focus groups, the researcher took advantage of the opportunity to meet with some of the full season groups as a sort of 'progress report.'

A previously established set of questions such as "why is _____ your favorite activity?" and "how do you decide which activity you want to participate in?," guided each focus group and interview, until and unless the conversation took on its own personality. Similar questions guided the interviews in the middle and at the end of camp.

To ensure sufficient data collection and triangulation, data was collected from many sources in addition to campers. Observations, informal interviews with long-time counselors and parents, historical documents written by the founders of the camp, photos depicting many aspects of the camp environment, and current records of the camp reputation and philosophy were collected and evaluated. Many of these sources provide additional insight to the success of the free choice philosophy with which the camp operates.

Discussion of Results

The first result of this study indicated that intrinsic motivation level increased for young women who participated in the free choice program offered at Brown Ledge (see Table 1). Intrinsic motivation has been identified repeatedly as an essential element to a true leisure experience. Further, in order for intrinsic motivation to exist, activities must be freely chosen by the participant, free from all external motivating factors. The

philosophy of the Brown Ledge program caters to this notion. Young women enrolled in the program are required to make decisions for themselves, with little outside influence or judgment from family and friends. Though campers are encouraged to participate in activities, they are also given the freedom not to choose, rather to spend time in their cabin or talking with friends, etc. Thus, when activities are chosen, they are free from external pressure, reward or judgment, and are therefore intrinsically motivated.

The data for this study however, did not show a significant increase in self-esteem for participants in the free-choice program, though it was approaching significance (see Table 1). This finding is contrary to what may have been expected, as previous research repeatedly suggests that participation in recreation activities, and furthermore, freely chosen leisure activities greatly increases self-esteem among participants (Diener, Emmons, & Larsen, 1986; Larson, 2000; Shaw, Kleiber & Caldwell, 1995. Thus, the result that subjects experience increased intrinsic motivation would also suggest that subjects would experience increased self-esteem. Results from prior research in this regard, in addition to the nearing significance found here indicate that further research is warranted.

Emerging themes from qualitative data appear to support the literature that participants in a free choice program benefit from increased levels of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation. Elements of self-esteem and intrinsic behavior emerge from the data.

Self expression (self-esteem):

My friends at home are different than my friends at camp. [My camp friends have] confidence...I can sum it up in one word. Confidence. (Anna, 17)

Perceived control (intrinsic motivation):

I'm able to be on my own, make my own decisions... there's a lot of trust. They trust that you know what you are doing. Between the counselors, and campers, and trust in yourself, too. (Zoe, 15)

Table 1. Paired t-Tests of Pre- and Post-Test Means for Self-Esteem and Intrinsic Motivation

	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	N	df	t
Self-Esteem	3.23	3.29	35	34	-1.002
Intrinsic Motivation	5.04	5.19	36	35	-2.078*

sig. @ .05 level

Competence (intrinsic motivation):

Brown Ledge helped me work through things because it helped me see that I could excel in things. I can do things, I am talented. (Zoe, 15)

Results of this study suggest that the free choice program offered at Brown Ledge provides participants with increased levels of intrinsic motivation, and the potential for increased levels of self-esteem with no discrimination against individuals who spend less time in the program. A limitation to this study was that it was short-term in nature. That is, this study evaluated the benefits received by the participants in the free choice program only immediately after leaving Brown Ledge. There are some limitations to this study that must be considered. First, the researcher was and is an avid Brown Ledge. This may have affected both the quantitative survey responses and qualitative interview responses of the participants. Additionally, because campers volunteered to participate, those who had negative feelings toward camp may not have been well represented.

Future Research

There are several opportunities for future research within this current project. It may be interesting in the future to assess the long-term benefits of the program by surveying subjects months, and even years after their participation. Following campers from their first years at camp at age ten or younger, through the Junior Counselor program (i.e., ages 16-18) may yield some interesting developmental results. Additionally, Brown Ledge has a strong and devoted alumnae following. A project evaluating this group, their feelings toward camp, and an investigation of the benefits they perceive themselves to have received from camp, may provide valuable insight into some long-term benefits the Brown Ledge program provides. An exploratory study of parents' opinion of Brown Ledge Camp and whether their daughters are effected by it may present some interesting findings. Further, the Brown Ledge philosophy may naturally attract adolescent girls are motivated, confident individuals. In order this possibility, it may be valuable to conduct a comparative study between Brown Ledge Camp and its unique philosophy with a camp with a more structured, planned program.

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