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Exploring Early Twenty-First Century Developed Forest Camping Experiences and Meanings

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This study examines experiences and associated meanings of 38 family groups participating in developed camping. The analysis is guided by discursive social psychology in which expressed meanings reflect interpretive frames campers use to explain experiences. Key elements of camping experience include nature, social interaction, and comfort/convenience. The most common associated meanings are restoration, family functioning, experiencing nature, special places, self-identity, social interaction, and children's learning. Comparing these experiences and meanings to findings from the 1960s and 1970s suggests that meanings associated with experiencing nature, social interaction, and family have evolved to reflect their greater discursive importance in contemporary society.

Keywords discursive social psychology, experiences, forest camping, interpretive frames, meanings, recreation

Camping is a way that many Americans interact with nature. For many Americans, camping may be one of the only ways they experience an extended stay in the outdoors. At a time of great concern that human contact with nature is becoming limited (Louv, 2005), camping is a vital mechanism whereby children and adults can experience the outdoors.

Camping was a central topic of leisure research in the 1960s and 1970s but has received little attention since then. Recognizing that socio-cultural, technological, and consumer-driven changes may have altered the nature of forest camping over the past 40 years, the purpose of this study was to understand developed forest camping experiences and

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associated meanings in the early 21st century. The primary research questions in this study were: (a) What are the salient elements of developed forest camping experiences? (b) What meanings do people associate with their on-site developed forest camping experiences? (c) What meanings do people associate with developed forest camping across the greater context of their lives?

Background

Over the past forty years, the number of forest campers has grown from 13 million in the 1960s to approximately 83 million in 2000 (USDA Forest Service, 2000). Camping is now one of the most common ways Americans spend time in the outdoors, with more than one-fourth of the U.S. population participating (USDA Forest Service, 2000).

From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, researchers studied elements of developed camping experiences such as activities (King, 1966), social interaction (Burch, 1965; Shafer, 1969; Hendee & Campbell, 1969), and characteristics of campers (LaPage, 1967; Shafer). These early studies explored the relationship between camping and socio-cultural variables such as family size, age of children, marital status, type of community, resident, camping frequency, education, and occupation.

Research into activity patterns of campers suggested the importance of campfires for facilitating social interaction during camping (Hendee & Campbell, 1969). Hendee and Harris (1970) observed that developed campgrounds reflected complex social systems among groups, and both Etzkorn (1964) and Hendee and Campbell (1969) found that campers often cared more for social interaction than access or exposure to natural resources.

Early camping research used the term *meaning* interchangeably with motive (Burch, 1965), value (Burch; Etzkorn, 1964), and importance (Buchanan, Christensen, & Burdge, 1981). The meanings of camping typically identified in these early studies included escape. For example, Burch's study of family camping described how campers escaped by leaving behind daily commitments. He was also first to discuss family togetherness as a social meaning of camping. Etzkorn examined the social meanings of camping groups and conceptualized a value-syndrome including three clusters of values related to camping participation: rest and relaxation, meeting congenial people, and outdoor life.

Bultena and Klessig (1969) suggested self-identity meanings when they described the difference between Spartan campers and convenience campers of that era. Spartans camped with only a minimum of gear and were happy to meet the challenges of nature with knowledge rather than technology. On the other hand, convenience campers "take the soft life of home out to the woods and with the travel trailers and campers meet nature on wheels" (p. 349). Thus, campers expressed personal meanings related to their self-identity through their possessions—the camping gear and equipment that they purchased.

Research about the nature of the early 21st century developed forest camping experience is limited with no recent studies of camping experiences and only a few studies related to camping meanings (e.g., McIntyre, 1989; Patterson, Williams, & Scherl, 1994; Shaw, Havitz, & Delamere, 2002). For example, in their study of family *Avacation*, which included some family camping, Shaw et al. found that escape was the second most prevalent theme. Specifically, fathers wanted to escape from the stresses and strains of paid work and mothers wanted to escape daily household chores.

Comparisons of developed camping in the 1960s and 1970s with early 21st century camping suggests that some aspects of developed forest camping have changed considerably over the past 40 years. These aspects include demographic changes, technological advancements, camper preferences, and campground management models.

For example, camper demographics have shifted. In the 1960s, camping was essentially an inexpensive lodging option for families on vacation (Outdoor Recreation Resources

Review Commission, 1962). In contrast, 21st century campers tend to be retirees camping in motor homes or recreationists using camping to gain access to specific recreation activities (Cordell et al., 1999).

Technological advancements also have changed the camping experience. Synthetic materials have replaced natural fabrics in many types of clothing, tents, and sleeping bags (Tilin & Grudowski, 1997). Advancements in equipment such as weather-resistant tents, portable cook-stoves, self-inflating pads, collapsible water bladders, and solar-heated showers have made camping more comfortable (Cordell et al., 1999).

Campers today seem to use electronic technologies for communication and entertainment that were not a part of camping in the 1960s. Two-way radios and cellular phones designed to be small, compact, and water-resistant appear increasingly among 21st century developed campers. Televisions, DVD players, and even satellite dishes have become commonplace.

Campers also appear to have different expectations for campground facilities when compared to 1960s' campers, and campground managers have responded to these apparent shifts in expectations. The trend among public-managed campgrounds seems to be moving away from rustic campgrounds that provide only a tent pad and a fire ring to camping facilities that provide a range of amenities such as full hook-ups with water, sewer, and electricity.

Changes in the nature of developed forest camping may influence the camping experiences and meanings associated with camping. The purpose of our research was to explore the experiences and meanings associated with early 21st century developed forest camping, which was defined as a recreational activity in which a person spends at least one night outdoors in a designated managed setting using a tent, trailer, pop-up camper, or recreational vehicle. Camping experiences were defined as emergent qualities of camping participation that are dynamic, constructed, emotional, multisensory, important in people lives, and related to the natural setting. Camping meanings were defined as symbolic, emotional, and emergent interpretations of camping experiences that are culturally and socially shared.

Methodology

Theoretical Context

This study was situated within an interpretive theoretical approach in which experiences and meanings were viewed as personally and socially constructed. The constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (i.e., multiple realities), a subjective epistemology (i.e., the researcher and the study participants create an understanding together through communication, interpretation, and negotiation), and uses a hermeneutical/dialectical methodology (i.e., qualitative procedures such as interviews; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

This study was grounded in constructivist assumptions (Bruner, 1990; Driscoll, 2000; Schwandt, 1994). Individuals and groups socially construct reality and shared experiences, language, and meanings that create a basis for knowledge and understanding. Based on discursive social psychology, individuals interpret their worlds in part by drawing from a cultural repertoire of interpretive frames or scripts to characterize and evaluate events (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Potter & Wetherell, 1997). Leisure meanings can also be understood as a process of constructing and negotiating meaning by appropriating selected interpretive frames as a way to explain experience (Van Patten & Williams, 2008). This process of meaning-making continually shapes how people view their world. Although a range of meanings can relate to a specific experience, some interpretive frames are more widely adopted than others.

Site and Participants

Data for this study were collected during the summer of 2003 at the USDA Forest Service's Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (MRNRA) in southwest Virginia. The MRNRA, a major recreational destination for the eastern United States covering more than 120,000 acres of high mountain lands, was selected because it contained developed campgrounds suitable for this study.

Stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to identify 42 camping groups (i.e., one or more campers in a specific camp site) from three different campgrounds that ranged in the type and level of on-site amenities from less developed to highly developed. Ravens Cliff Campground was less-developed (i.e., tent pads, fire pits, pump station for water, and no other amenities) and managed by the Forest Service. Hurricane Campground was moderately developed (i.e., tent pads, fire pits, running water, flush toilets, electricity, and showers) and also managed by the Forest Service. Grindstone Campground was highly developed (i.e., tent pads, fire pits, running water, water hook-ups, sewage hookups, electricity, showers, flush toilets, playground, satellite reception, and family programs) and managed by a concessionaire. Grindstone was the largest campground and Ravens Cliff was the smallest.

Data Collection

Campground hosts at Hurricane and Grindstone assisted in the identification of summer weekends when campers were most likely to be on-site. The decision regarding when to collect data at Ravens Cliff, which had no campground host, was based on USDA Forest Service provided visitor use data. Campers were informed of the study via posted signs at the entrance of each campground. In addition, face-to-face explanations and distributed flyers were used at the two campgrounds with hosts.

The principal researcher camped on-site for several days at a time to conduct in-depth open-ended interviews with campers at each of the campgrounds. Campers were approached during daylight hours and asked to participate in the study. Agreeable participants were given the opportunity to either be interviewed immediately or to schedule the interview within 24 hours prior to the end of their camping trip.

Because this study was grounded in a constructivist approach, each interview was treated like a directed conversation (Charmaz, 1991). In this way, the interviews were flexible and variable to accommodate the way that participants understood, described, and talked about their camping experiences and meanings. General questions were used to evoke participants to share narratives or stories about their camping trip. Probes allowed for deeper exploration of expressions related to experiences and meanings. Some of the questions included:

1. Describe what you did on this camping trip and the importance of those activities.
2. What is your history with this place? What influenced your decision to camp here?
3. Describe in detail the high and low points of this camping trip.
4. Describe what you brought and used on this camping trip. How did these items influence your camping experience?
5. Has this camping trip been meaningful or important to you? If so, then describe the most meaningful aspects of your camping trip in as much detail as possible.

Data Analysis

The goal of the inductive data analysis used in this study was not to predict forest camping experiences and meanings for the population of campers, but to make the findings

understandable in ways that might be relevant to managers. Thus, the goal of analysis was to gain an in-depth understanding of groups of people who were camping in specific places (Patterson et al., 1994; Patton, 2002).

Interviews were audio recorded on-site and later transcribed. Each interview was read and re-read to provide a general understanding of the whole. Content analysis (Patton, 2002), the process of breaking down large portions of text (e.g., a camper's response to a question) into meaningful blocks of words, was used by the principle researcher to analyze the transcribed interviews. These blocks of words were then conceptually grouped into categories using a constant comparison coding process to capture what participants said about their experiences and associated meanings. While coding the data, the principal researcher was sensitive to *indigenous concepts* (i.e., key phrases, terms, and practices; Patton, 2002) that were special to campers.

Once the categories for each narrative were identified, the interviews were re-read to identify relevant themes across participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This process was used for each question independently. The process of reading and re-reading led to either the development of new themes or the collapse or subdivision of existing themes. The principle researcher introduced *sensitizing concepts* (Patton, 2002) during this step, which are relevant categories from the supporting theoretical literature. Sensitizing concepts served as a reference when identifying the relationships among themes. For example, sensitizing concepts in this study included restoration, family functioning, and place.

Several procedures were used to validate the results of data analysis including systematic procedures, the use of participant review, and identification of negative cases. Participant review, which is a form of analytical triangulation (Patton, 2002), involved sending each participant a copy of the results and interpretations so that they could confirm or deny that their experiences and associated meanings had been accurately recorded and represented within the text. Negative cases were "instances in which the cases did not fit within the pattern" (Patton, 2002, p. 554). For example, if a camper shared something about his/her camping experience that was inconsistent with other reported expressions, this expression was identified as a negative case. In this study, negative cases were identified during the data analysis process and used to better understand variations and diverse patterns in the results.

Results

A total of 38 camping groups were interviewed. Twenty camping groups were interviewed from Grindstone campground, twelve from Hurricane, and six from Ravens Cliff. The variations in the number of interviews collected from each campground reflected the differences in the numbers of camping groups participating at each campground. Sample size was not considered a limitation since the purpose of this study was not to generalize to the population of developed campers but rather to obtain saturation around an understanding of the camping experiences of specific groups of people in specific places. In qualitative sampling, saturation is the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data, identified by repetition in the information obtained and confirmation of previously collected data (Morse, 1994).

Interview participants tended to be male (55%) and between the ages of 40 and 49 (33%). Almost all were white (99%). Participants tended to be experienced with camping with 13% having 21–25 years of experience and 41% having more than 25 years of experience. Participants had travelled to the MRNRA from nine states with most participants (37%) from Virginia.

Camping Experiences

One research questions explored the salient elements of early 21st century developed camping experiences. To identify salient aspects of camping experiences, participants were asked to describe aspects of their developed forest camping experiences. To be considered salient by the researchers, an element of forest camping experience had to be mentioned repeatedly or be connected to some important aspect of participants' forest camping trip. For example, simply stating that it had rained that day was not necessarily sufficient for "rain" to be identified as a salient quality of a forest camping experience.

Nature was one of the most salient elements of developed forest camping experiences that emerged from expressions about activities and the campground setting. Campers in the all of the campgrounds engaged in a range of nature-based activities including chopping wood, building and watching their campfires, fishing, hiking, swimming, skipping rocks, walking through the forest, exploring the creeks, biking the Virginia Creeper Trail, biking, and birding. Descriptions of camping activities suggested that nature-based activities were prevalent among developed forest campers regardless of their campground type. Campers in the moderately developed and highly developed campgrounds seemed to engage in a greater diversity of nature-based activities, which might be attributed to the additional equipment that highly developed campers were able to carry in their trailers, campers, and motor homes.

Social interaction was a second salient aspect of camping experiences. Camping activities were almost always social, and a majority of participants stated that "who they were with" was most important than what they were doing. Consistent with Hendee and Campbell's (1969) findings that developed forest campers spent time in social settings around their campfire, in our study the campfire was often the center of social interaction. As a participant from the moderately developed campground explained, "we gather most of the time here, there's sometimes twenty or thirty of us that are around the campfire. We talk, we sing, we play cards, tell jokes, play some more cards." Another participant called the campfire, "the center of everything . . . that's our energy."

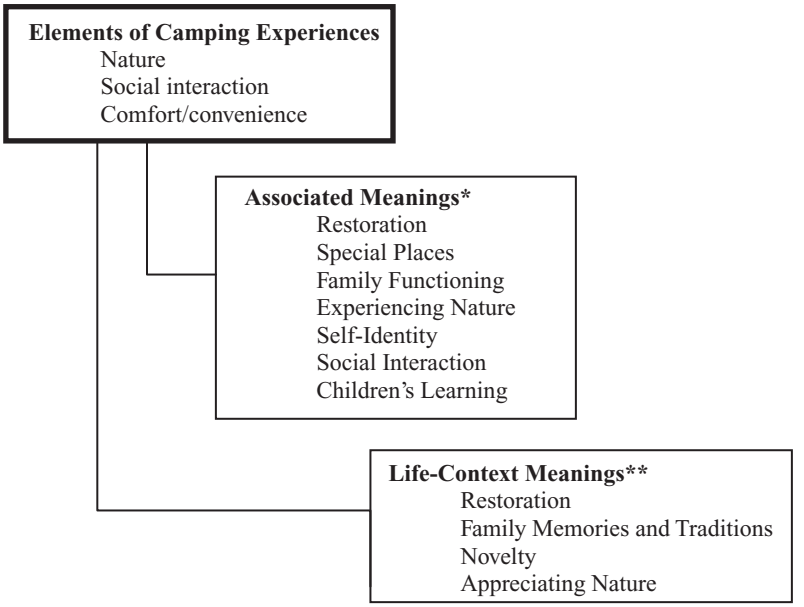
Participants spoke about the items that they brought on their camping trips highlighting expressions of comfort and convenience. These items included televisions, radios, VCRs, personal gaming devices, cell phones, microwave ovens, CD players, satellite dishes, coffeemakers, refrigerators, DVD players, electric blankets, weather radios, air conditioning units, electric grills, digital cameras, and even a ham radio. Campers used technologies to make their camping experiences more pleasant and less laborious. A participant from the highly developed campground explained:

> We wouldn't be here if we didn't have waterproof tents and nylon bags to put all our stuff in, and plastic coolers to keep our ice frozen . . . This kind of stuff is what we need. It really makes camping more comfortable.

Associated Camping Meanings

Another research question in this study explored the meanings of developed forest camping experiences. Participants were asked about the meanings associated with their on-site developed forest camping experiences (i.e., associated meanings; see Figure 1). The most common associated meanings were: restoration, family functioning, experiencing nature, special places, self-identity, social interaction,and children's learning.

Restoration. The most common theme of camping meanings across all three campground types appeared to be restoration. The recreation and environmental psychology literature suggests that restoration is a reduction in stress, arousal, or anxiety that results from being removed from one's home environment and being placed in a natural setting



* Symbolic, emotional, emergent, and negotiated interpretations of developed forest camping experiences that were communicated through social interaction.

**Interpretive frames important in the greater context of campers' lives.

FIGURE 1 A schematic model of interpretive frames used by Mount Rogers NRPA campers.

(Kaplan, 1995; Knopf, 1983; Hartig & Evans, 1993). Based upon campers' responses about the associated meanings of their forest camping experiences, restoration included the categories of "rest," "escape," and "recovery."

Campers discussed how camping was restorative because it provided a mechanism for them to get away or escape some aspect of their home environment. As a camper in the less developed campground shared, "[Camping' is] a way of relaxing, getting away from the stress of everyday life. That's real important—no phones out here, you don't have to worry about it. I think that's the main thing. Escape from working and everyday rigors." Another camper from the moderately developed campground explained camping as a form of escape:

> I'm on fire and rescue, and there are always pagers going off. Out here there are no pagers and I can really concentrate a lot. Camping is a little time away from the hustles and bustles of everyday life. When you're at work, it's just a push to get everything done . . . and they want it done now. Camping, there's no time schedule. You don't have to get something completed in ten minutes. I mean, it's just, get away.

For others, camping represented an opportunity for physical, mental, or emotional recovery from various ailments. A camper from the moderately developed campground suggested that camping improved his state of mind:

> Camping, whether by myself or with my friends, allows me to re-energize. It just energizes me. It gets me back to, it's a center, is what it is, it pulls me back to center. Back to where I should be, everything is right. OK, I'm focused again, I'm back in balance, where I can go back and face everything else that has to be done and know that I can deal with it the way it ought to be dealt with.

Another camper, from the highly developed campground shared how camping helped him physically:

> I come camping to get out of the dust from working on the farm, which I'm allergic to, and to get away from a lot of the pollen. When I'm at home for a few days I get a small respiratory infection and it just gradually gets worse because I won't give up working. Now when I come camping and we're a long ways from any factories, and there's not a great deal of pollen, the respiratory problem goes away in about 48 hours, and I'm just much healthier here.

Special places. Special places were the second most common theme of camping meanings associated with developed forest camping experiences. In most cases, campgrounds came to be viewed as special places because of family traditions and memories that were closely associated with them over time. For example, a camper from the highly developed campground shared:

> I would have to say that camping means tradition, here at the [highly developed campground] more than anything. Well, [my dad] started bringing us here when we were kids before it was even finished. We got a lot of stories. We've kept the camping tradition alive. A lot of the other families . . . everybody goes their separate ways, but we've kept this tradition alive . . . it's part of who we are.

According to campers, these place-related traditions and stories were almost always family related and developed over a period of years.

Family functioning. Family functioning, the third most common theme of camping meaning associated with developed forest camping experiences, referred to expressions of how developed camping positively influenced social interactions among family members. Family members shared that they got along better after a multiday camping trip. Developed forest camping improved family functioning, which was attributed to family members spending time together, being active together, and listening to one another. A mother from the highly developed campground explained:

> . . . we've been together for a week in such small confines, and that just lingers over once you get back home. You can talk about what you did, your experiences. Share the fishing and the stories and how big the fish was, how many millipedes you found on the trail. You share what you did and what your fun parts were and maybe next year we can do this, and what you're looking forward to next year. This kind of closeness happens every year.

Family functioning was often catalyzed by the camp setting, which provided fewer distractions than campers' home lives. A camper from the moderately developed campground shared, "When we're camping there's no TV. We talk more. We talk, sit around and just talk. You communicate a little better . . . get a little closer maybe. When you're camping

you're all in one little tiny box and you get close." Thus, campers need to get away from their home environments to realize the family functioning benefits of camping.

Experiencing nature. In addition to natural features being a salient aspect of developed forest camping experiences, experiencing nature also was a significant meaning. Campers expressed how this meaning was symbolized by nature's aesthetic beauty. For example, a camper from the moderately developed campground stated, "Where I work, I'm inside of an office sitting at a computer. We don't have this kind of scenery like this there. So when the weekend comes, we're ready for this. This is our sanctuary . . . this gives our camping trip meaning."

Nature-based meanings were related to features of the natural landscape as well. As a camper from the less develop campground shared, "I love the wilderness feel here . . . this feels more wild here because the forest is coming right down to the edge of the river, yes. So it's not created . . . to me that's wilderness and it's very meaningful."

Campers often described nature-based meanings with the phrase "getting back to nature," which is reminiscent of "escape" meanings and the perspective of moving from one's home environment into a more preferred setting. A camper from the highly developed campground expressed:

> It's just pleasant to be communing with nature. To me the woods is, you're getting back . . . it's a good feeling to get back into wilderness. We're kind of a two-timing society in terms of our natural surroundings. We tend to want things too easy, we're too convenienced by modern technology. Modern technology is great . . . but there's a point, you've got to find a nice balance, and [camping] does that.

With the exception of one camper from the highly developed campground, every camper in this study expressed that they did receive nature-based experiences, even if they were experiencing camping via a recreational vehicle or in a highly developed campground. Campers looked to the outdoor setting as a novel quiet context for personal restoration and social interaction, and they constructed nature-based meaning even as they surrounded themselves with equipment and electronics that limited direct contact with nature.

Self-identity. Some campers indicated that meaning could be found in how camping experiences allowed them to express an aspect of their identity. Expressions of camping meaning around self-identify were often related to camping gear and equipment. Gear and equipment were an outward expression, that is, a symbol, of self-identity. When explaining how camping was meaningful, a camper from the moderately developed campground compared his current camping identity with his past camping identity:

> Fishing, bow hunting, and camping used to be huge in my life. They still are, but I don't do it the way that I used to. When I was younger I did it with a real drive, a real push to get very good, and I dedicated a tremendous amount of time and money to it. I had to have all of the best gear and stuff so that I could be the best . . . and that's not the case anymore. I don't have the same motivation. Camping here reminds me of that part of myself. To regroup and to do this again . . . . I don't want to say like a rebirth, but it is an opportunity to drift back and remember . . . to kind of touch base with who I was before.

Social interaction. Camping meanings were commonly associated with the social aspects of the developed forest camping experience. Social interaction was different from

the family functioning theme. Social interaction referred to social-based camping meanings related to friends and people in other camping groups. A camper from the highly developed campground shared how camping was a social experience with her old friends:

> I like seeing all the people that were here last year come in. Several couples . . . it's kind of nice to realize that they're still here, they're coming in . . . re-connecting with people that you saw last summer. It's always good to see couples come in that you've seen camping over the years.

Children's learning. Campers associated meanings with having their kids develop new knowledge, skills, and an appreciation for nature during the camping experience. For example, a camper from the less developed campground discussed how the knowledge that her kids learned had made her own camping trip meaningful:

> This camping trip has been meaningful because it's been an educational experience for my kids in that they've learned . . . like we were talking about Leave No Trace. The daddy longlegs, now they're just picking them up and moving them. When we first got here they would shriek and freak out and they just kind of appreciate nature more and understand how it all works together. I think this camping trip has taught them more about nature and that they're just a part of it and there's a chain to life. We did this scavenger hunt we learned a lot. We did collect a bunch of leaves that we're gonna go back and look them up and see what they go with. That's kind of fun, so I think it'll be a big learning experience for them.

Campers also described how teaching their children new skills was the most important meaning of their experience. A camper from the moderately developed campground explained:

> They're using their imaginations more and we feed off that and play along with whatever they're imagining or playing. And you're teaching them how to put up the tent, how to cook, how to clean . . . always trying to teach them the camping skills.

Teaching children how to improvise, play, and "make do" with something basic was important. Campers indicated that their children often had many conveniences at home that were not available when camping. This seemed to influence the degree to which teaching their children was meaningful. A camper from the less developed campground stated:

> For me it's been time to show the kids that they don't need a lot of stuff that we have at the house—that they can "make it" without a lot of conveniences. They take for granted what they do have. I mean, like, some of the stuff that they consider they have to have, they may get out here and you realize, really you don't need nothing except food, something to drink, and something to keep you warm. That's it.

Another aspect of children's learning was that campers wanted their children to be able to survive in the outdoors and to enjoy the outdoors. They expressed the hope that the knowledge, skills, and appreciation for nature that they taught their children during camping trips would translate into future behaviors.

These camping meanings of restoration, family functioning, experiencing nature, special places, self-identity, social interaction, and opportunity for children to learn were often interrelated. For example, family functioning meanings were related to the opportunity that participants had to "escape" and restore from the stresses of their home environments to focus on members of their family during their camping trips. Another example was special places, which evolved from participants spending time in nature and then developing family traditions focused around their attachment to a particular campground. Another example was appreciation for nature, which evolved from experiencing nature and restoration meanings. As participants spent time in nature and were restored through contact with nature, they expressed appreciation for nature.

Life-Context Meanings

Another research question explored the meanings that were important in the greater context of participants' lives (i.e., life-context meanings). Expressions of life-context meanings were sometimes overt and resulted from specific questions and probes about the meaning of developed forest camping across campers' lifespans and how camping had influenced campers' lives. Other expressions of life-context meanings were couched within participants' narratives of their developed forest camping trips and the importance of those experiences in their lives. The major themes of life-context meanings were: restoration, family memories and traditions, novelty, and appreciating nature. In some cases, these themes were consistent with the associated meanings (e.g., restoration). Other themes were uniquely important across campers' lives (e.g., family memories and traditions, novelty, appreciating nature).

Family memories and traditions. The sharing of family memories and traditions that had evolved over time while camping were closely associated with social interaction and the importance of passing positive traditions along to younger members of one's family. As a camper from the less developed campground stated:

> Camping just adds one more family life experience to what we intend to provide many of in the future to the kids so that they have great memories of being outdoors and experiencing nature . . . another life experience. We want them to remember those experiences and look forward to going camping again. We have great memories of camping with our families as kids, and want them to have that, too.

Novelty. Novelty referred to life-context meanings that arose from experiences that were new, unique, or unfamiliar. A camper from the highly developed campground explained the difference between developed camping and a family vacation.

> Camping is so different than really anything that you do. You experience more from [camping] and get much more out of it than on other types of trips. This is just so vast, and like I say, this puts me in the game as opposed to other types of trips where you just show up and are entertained. . . . I feel like so much more of a participant because there's typically much more to do in these environments. I mean, you know, from the standpoint of hiking, biking, you know, all the things there are to do in the mountains. We find more with camping environments where we can actually participate in these activities, things that we can't normally do.

In this way, camping provided families with new, active experiences as opposed to passive, entertainment-based experiences that were usually found in a noncamping vacation.

Appreciating nature. For some campers, the life-context meanings of camping experiences were found in the natural setting and the way in which campers developed a greater appreciation for nature through developed forest camping experiences. A female camper from the less developed campground explained how participation in camping influenced her appreciation for nature and her desire to protect natural areas. She said:

> [Camping] continues to reinforce your appreciation of the outdoors, and nature, and the beauty that surrounds it, more so than taking a walk at your neighborhood park. It's a natural setting and I think it continues to provide a level of respect in that by experiencing it you gain more respect for nature and the outdoors to protect it and preserve it.

Appreciating nature was related to the "restoration" theme in that campers had to get away from home to experience and appreciate a more nature-based environment. A camper from the highly developed campground explained how his appreciation for nature was dependent upon leaving his day-to-day environment. He noted:

> Everybody's in the hustle bustle of work, their livelihood. They don't slow down to respect or to listen to the birds sing or be amazed when a hummingbird flies right up to your tent when you've got a feeder hanging there. Those are things that you just don't pay attention to when you're in your busy life.

Discussion

Recognizing the prominence of camping as an American leisure pursuit, the purpose of this study was to explore early 21st century developed forest camping experiences and meanings. Although comparisons of developed camping research from the 1960s and 1970s with the results of this study suggest that many aspects of forest camping have remained the same, important elements of 21st century camping have evolved to reflect the increasing relevance of certain camping meanings in American life. These results also offer insights into the subtle shifts in the interpretive frames used by both campers and researchers to account for and explain the experience.

Dimensions of Camping that Have Stayed the Same

Restoration. Forest camping continues to be an important source of personal restoration. Restoration was the most commonly expressed meaning of developed forest camping experiences, encompassing participants' responses related to escape, rest, and recovery. Camping was seen by the campers we interviewed as restorative because it allowed them to get away from telephones, televisions, phones, and other unwanted stressful sources of arousal and stimulation and to immerse in a novel nature-based setting. The importance of this meaning was not surprising, given that themes of escape and restoration have been intertwined with the history of camping (Sutter, 2002) and nature-based recreation (Knopf, 1983). Further, the restorative meanings associated with developed forest camping experiences and the importance of escape for participants in this study provided additional support for the studies from across the last 40 years that have reported the nature of outdoor recreation and leisure as an escape (Burch, 1965; Shaw et al., 2002). The importance of

escape in our study supports Burch's findings that family camping groups wanted to leave behind their daily commitments.

Dimensions of Camping that Have Changed

Although the restorative aspects have remained somewhat the same, several dimensions of forest camping seemed to have changed over the past 40 years, including experiencing nature, social interactions, and family functioning. These changes reflect shifts in the cultural and discursive context of both campers and researchers.

Opportunity to experience nature. Experiencing nature was another commonly expressed meaning of developed camping experiences in this study. References to nature in some form were evident throughout the results of our study. Nature-based activities were the most commonly mentioned elements of developed forest camping experiences. Experiencing nature was an important meaning of camping. Developing an appreciation for nature positively enhanced participants' lives. Almost every participant including those in the highly developed campground expressed that they received a nature-based experience, even if their experiences were more passive than active.

In contrast, researchers studying developed camping in the 1960s and 1970s interpreted their results as indicating social resources and social experiences were more important than natural resources and nature-based experiences (Clark, Hendee, & Campbell, 1971; Etzkorn, 1964). Hendee and Campbell (1969) noted that "few visitors engaged in activities that were dependent upon the natural environment or displayed any concern for the flora, fauna, geology, or natural history of the area" (p. 15). In this case the shift in meaning might be explained partly as a difference in interpretive framing among researchers regarding what constitutes a nature-based experience compared to a contemporary increase in the importance of nature. In the 1960s and 1970s, what appeared to be a lack of interest in natural history might have been considered an indicator of a lack of experiencing nature that reflected the researchers' ideologies regarding what constitutes an authentic nature experience.

Nevertheless, we found that campers expressed a clear desire for contact with nature. Perceptions of nature contact were relative to the amount of nature that most people experienced on any given day while at home. Simply having immediate and direct access to forests and other nature-based setting features like creeks, mountains, or birds created the conditions necessary for many campers to feel they were in wilderness or in a primitive type of setting. Even the most obvious indicators of human presence such as buildings, pavement, and the sounds of traffic could be overlooked because campers had the opportunity to walk down a trail surrounded in forests or to watch birds fly around in their campsites. Thus, the participants in this study interpreted what experiencing nature means differently and as important today given that they perceived relatively little contact with nature in their everyday lives outside of camping.

Part of that difference involved technology. For an American population accustomed to the comforts associated with contemporary life, the motivation to use technology to make spending time in nature more accessible was strong. As camping technology has become more sophisticated, the early 21st century camper appeared to have less direct active contact with nature. Camping technology can separate people from direct and extensive contact with nature, which made the human nature connection tenuous, less experiential, and less tactile. People interviewed wanted to have everything including contact with nature coupled with as many conveniences as possible. However, their contact with nature seemed less participatory and more sedentary. As campers lose the sensory connection to nature, a new "normal" may be created, defined less by active engagement and more by passive observation.

The interpretive frames of researchers need to be considered as well. In 1965, Gregerson published an article titled "Campurbia" in which he discussed the suburban nature of developed campgrounds. He noted that "people not only don't seem to want to get away from it all—they take it with them. Electric frying pans, irons, TV sets, and other electrical appliances are standard equipment with many campers" (p. 20). While, the same behavior appeared true for the participants in our study who used camping equipment and electronics as a buffer against inconvenience and boredom, the baseline of normal or standard equipment usage seemed to be higher today.

The notion of technology as a buffer for recreational experiences is similar to what Etzkorn (1964) and Clark et al. (1971) discussed. They noted that the campers in developed sites preferred the conveniences associated with modern campgrounds—conveniences that would seemingly insulate them from direct contact with the natural environment. The impact of modern conveniences as a buffer for more direct experiences in nature seemed more pronounced than described in earlier camping research.

Kahn's (2002) theory of environmental generational amnesia suggests that as the amount of environmental degradation increases with each ensuing generation, each generation takes that degraded condition as the normal experience. Perhaps a similar effect is occurring with successive generations of forest campers. As technology buffers them from contact with nature, each generation that follows finds a way to experience nature in its own way even if that contact is less experiential than in the past. This idea raises the question of what may be lost over time as less meaningful contact with nature becomes the norm.

Our research suggested the irony that people seek to escape from modern life but never fully divest themselves of the modern comforts that they say they are trying to elude. Perhaps the instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems, what Wilson (1984) has called the biophilia hypothesis, can inform future research to help better understand this dualistic quality in how developed camping experiences are negotiated. Even as campers may be drawn to nature, they may also struggle with the discomfort that accompanies a lack of conveniences, which had implications for social opportunities.

Social interaction. For almost all participants in this study the developed forest camping experience revolved around an important social group. In 1970, Hendee and Harris observed extensive social interaction among camping groups. In our study, however, camping experiences revolved around a social group, defined according to who comprised the camping group. Campers still enjoyed meeting other people, but out-group socializing was not as important as interacting within their camping group. These changes in the relative importance of one's own social group compared with other camping groups may reflect a shift in how campers preferred to socially organize themselves while camping, or be indicative of the privacy and safety needs of 21st century campers.

The importance of camping for enhancing family functioning is a recent finding, and these meanings were not reported in the 1960s and 1970s. The results of our study suggest that camping is important for family functioning because of its novelty, the reduced access to stimuli that are distractions in home environments (e.g., televisions, telephones), time away from competing schedules, and the opportunity for family members to participants in activities that encourage closer contact and interaction.

Family functioning and children's learning. The family camping groups suggested that by spending time away from normal day-to-day distractions and participating in social experiences in which family members were able to focus on each other rather than being distracted by situations in their home environment, family members became closer to one another. Another example of this togetherness was the salience of children's learning, which

did not appear at all in earlier studies of camping meanings. These results are also supported by Williams and Van Patten (2006), who studied the meanings of seasonal homes. Some leisure settings (e.g., second homes, camping) "provides for family togetherness that is distinct from often segmented lives and schedules . . . daily paths and projects of individual family members are spatially bounded and more interwoven at the cottage . . . " (p. 38) compared to the more fragmented patterns of daily life in the modern urban household.

Interpretive Repertoires Then and Now

In the 1960s and 1970s, camping researchers were primarily focused on characterizing meanings and experiences and less concerned with the social-psychological processes for constructing these experiences and meanings. With few exceptions (e.g., Burch, 1965), these studies were based on quantitative studies. The qualitative approach taken in this study allowed us to examine how camping meanings were constructed in the words of the campers to provide accounts and explanations within the context of their lives.

Following discursive social psychology, people cognitively and socially construct their experiences and associated meanings by drawing from and selectively appropriate culturally available interpretive frames that help to make experiences meaningful to themselves (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Van Patten & Williams, 2008). Campers drew on and co-created descriptions and explanations for their experiences while camping. These experiences most often occurred in social group settings. The campers talked about their experiences while sitting around the campfire, participating in recreational activities, or eating meals together. A shared sense of meaning developed through group communication. Some experiences were then remembered and shared through stories. These stories were sometimes repeated to others including friends and family members long after the camping trip was over.

This process of communicating stories and memories, often around a campfire, kept the camping trip salient. During future camping experiences, the most memorable stories could be repeated again, and in some cases these stories may become a part of a family's traditions. The way camping experiences are constructed is supported by the research of Jacobi and Stokols (1983) and Tuan (1974), who suggested that campers may come to view specific places (e.g., campgrounds, campsites) as meaningful because of the family traditions and the emotional attachments that evolved and became associated with those places (Williams & Kaltenborn, 1999). The act of passing down family camping traditions through stories and shared memories may be an important aspect of place meanings.

Conclusions

Compared to Burch's (1965) and Hendee and Campbell's (1969) research about developed forest camping in the 1960s, some interpretive frames for developed camping experiences have remained relatively unchanged. Camping is still an important part of American life, and the restorative benefits are evident. Although earlier researchers took particular note of the social interactions among campers, campers continued to describe developed camping as a way to comfortably contact and explore nature and to satisfy important human needs for personal restoration and social bonding. Although the technologies have advanced, campers still looked to technology to facilitate their escape.

Some of the meanings of 21st century camping may reflect those of the 1960s and 1970s, but their intensity and importance seemed to have changed. The expressions of 21st century campers appeared to indicate a greater urgency and a deeper need for nature in a world in which some of the experiences afforded by camping have become fewer. As

noted, a new camping norm may have been created defined less by active engagement and more by passive observation. In addition, camping clearly served a function across the life course and as a catalyst for bringing family members together who may otherwise be separated by the 21st century life. Camping was a venue where people could reconnect with family traditions otherwise hard to maintain in a highly mobilized and globalized society as Williams and Van Patten (2006) also concluded. If family life is seemingly under greater stress, it may account for the salience of family-centric interpretive frames in 21st century camping compared to mid-20th century camping.

Finally, researchers should pose the question of how the interpretive frames that have dominated professional and academic discourse 40 years ago as well as today may have influenced the assessment of camping culture. What stands out about the mid-20th century research work is that investigators at the time seemed to be surprised at how important "social" camping was and noted that campers showed little interest in natural history or direct engagement with nature. Today, following 40 years of environmentalism in both culture and politics, perhaps "nature" as a discursive frame is more salient in the minds of both campers and researchers. How much behavior change has occurred in the experience of camping beyond the technological advances is difficult to say. However, at least some modest discursive shifts in how people think about camping and its role in modern life seemed to have changed.

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