

SENSE OF PLACE IN OUTDOOR-PURSUIITS TRIP GROUPS

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Abstract.—Studies have revealed that sense of community and group cohesion increase significantly over time in outdoor-pursuits trip groups. This study sought to understand similar development of sense of place. Do people simultaneously become more attached to or dependent on the natural environment as they grow closer to each other? Results from a study of college students participating in a 13-day Outdoor Education Practicum course in the Adirondacks (New York) indicate that sense of place is not significantly correlated to sense of community or group cohesion. Sense of place scores remained relatively high across a 2-week course, but did not significantly increase over time. However, beginners had significantly lower scores than intermediates and those with advanced skills on Day 11; no differences were detected among levels of development (e.g., skill, experience, commitment) by Day 13. Perhaps the course was not long enough to cause a significant change. Alternatively, placing as much emphasis on developing an attachment to the natural world as on building a sense of community might influence similar growth in sense of place.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1990s, McAvoy et al. (1996) noted only a small number of studies had focused on outdoor groups from a group dynamics perspective, and those that did utilized samples from the general population or corporate training groups on challenge courses. Since then, research has increasingly addressed group dynamics in outdoor education or recreation contexts. Programs have focused on outcomes at many levels, from personal (e.g., increased self-confidence) to group (e.g., enhanced problem-solving skills, accomplishment of common goals and objectives, development of positive group experiences and interpersonal relationships) to environmental (e.g., appreciation of the natural environment) (Ewert and McAvoy 2000, Martin et al. 2006).

1.1 Sense of Community and Group Cohesion

Experiences in outdoor-pursuits trip groups have also led to enhanced sense of community among group members (Mitten 1999). Sense of community was initially operationalized as an objective, geographical construct determined by physical proximity to others, such as in a town or neighborhood (Lyons and Dionigi 2007). However, Sarason (1974) shifted sense of community beyond physical location to emphasize subjective psychological feelings of belongingness and connection with others. McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a theoretical framework for sense of community characterized by four elements: (1) sharing an awareness of group membership or identity; (2) integrating and fulfilling individual and group needs; (3) being emotionally connected; and (4) influencing each other. Part of the transactional process of the fourth element includes validating individual perceptions of the world while simultaneously affecting how members as a whole group interpret their surroundings.

Group cohesion, defined as a sense of belonging, attraction, and unity that a group has toward its members (Wilson 2002), has been found to influence the creation of community, and vice versa (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Glass and Benshoff (2002) found that group cohesion increased among adolescents as a result of participation in challenge courses. Beyond outdoor recreation, research has shown that cohesive groups perform better than noncohesive groups (Evans and Dion 1991, Mullen and Copper 1994).

In an ongoing series of studies, Todd et al. (2007) examined psychological sense of community and group cohesion in university outdoor-pursuits programs. Although both dependent variables increased significantly over time, the rate and pattern of increase varied by trip group. In follow-up focus groups, Breunig and her colleagues (2007) discovered that factors such as level of challenge, appropriate debriefing of experiences, weather, and a sense of “getting away from it all” contributed to positive feelings of community. Factors such as the short length of the outdoor-pursuits trip experience, perceptions of ineffective processing, and being too focused on goals (such as canoeing a specific number of miles per day) detracted from building community.

1.2 Leadership Style, Sense of Community, and Group Cohesion

Sharpe (2005) suggested that trip leaders are intimately involved in facilitating sense of community in integrated wilderness trip groups. She found that participants positively viewed sense of community upon completion of a trip, with program design elements and implementation of integration strategies influencing feelings of community. Since the trip leader is in a unique position to influence group members, O’Connell and others (2008) explored the effects of leadership style on sense of community and group cohesion in outdoor-pursuits trip groups using Hersey et al.’s (1996) Situational Leadership Theory. This model suggests that leadership style is based on concern for either the task or relationship function of the group.

O’Connell et al. (2008) measured trip leaders’ preferred styles of leadership plus their effectiveness in choosing appropriate leadership styles (telling, selling, participating, or delegating) for various situations based on the followers’ maturity, willingness, and readiness. Supporting the focus group findings mentioned above (Breunig et al. 2007), a main effect for leadership style was found for sense of community. Groups having a leader with a preferred selling style (high task/high relationship) recorded lower mean scores for sense of community than did groups with either a participating-style leader (high relationship/low task) or a leader preferring a combination of both styles. Although no interaction between leadership style and time resulted, gains in sense of community and group cohesion seemed to be greatest for groups with participating-style leaders and lowest for groups with selling-style leaders. When gains in sense of community and group cohesion were compared to leadership effectiveness scores, there were no significant correlations. Thus, the change in the dependent variables was not related to the leader’s relative ability to adapt his or her style to the one most appropriate and effective for the situation.

1.3 Sense of Place

Previous discussions of group outcomes, formation of community, and consideration of the situation in terms of choosing leadership styles all alluded to a common factor: the role the environment plays. An underlying assumption held by outdoor educators is that natural environments enhance the achievement of program outcomes. In particular, backcountry or wilderness settings are usually chosen for outdoor-pursuits trip group programs. According to many outdoor educators, stripping away distractions and forcing the group to focus on basic outdoor living and travel skills best facilitates outcomes such as sense of community, group cohesion, and personal development. Would these environments likewise enhance sense of place?

Scholars have defined “sense of place” as emotional and symbolic attachments between an individual and a particular place (Williams et al. 1992). Sense of place

is often characterized in terms of “place dependence,” or functional attachment to an environment, and “place identity,” or emotional attachment to a site (Williams and Vaske 2003). Studies have established relationships between sense of place and many other variables, including management preferences and user behavior (e.g., Bricker and Kerstetter 2000), leisure satisfaction and demand (e.g., Wickham and Graefe 2002), and activity involvement (Moore and Graefe 1994, Kyle et al. 2003).

2.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In this study, we examined the development of sense of place in outdoor-pursuits trip groups, specifically, whether participants simultaneously become more attached to or dependent upon the natural environment as they grow closer to each other and build a sense of community. Three objectives were pursued: 1) to investigate the association of sense of place and sense of community/group cohesion in outdoor-pursuits trip groups; 2) to examine the development of sense of place over time in these trip groups; and 3) to examine the effects of level of development (e.g., skills, experience, and commitment) on sense of place among outdoor-pursuits trip groups over time.

3.0 METHODS

3.1 Treatment

Participants were primarily sophomores and juniors from a 4-year comprehensive college in upstate New York enrolled in a 13-day Outdoor Education Practicum course during the summer of 2007. Required of all recreation majors regardless of specialty (outdoor, therapeutic, management, or general recreation), the course focused not only on teaching outdoor living skills, but also on building a sense of community, both as a larger centralized camp and in smaller decentralized trip groups. To achieve these goals, students spent 7 days in a residential camp-like outdoor education center and 6 days on a wilderness canoe trip in New York’s Adirondack Park.

Fifty-four students were assigned to one of seven trip groups designed to be as similar as possible. Various factors were balanced among the groups, such as

gender, certifications (e.g., First Aid, Wilderness First Responder, Lifeguard), personalities (e.g., extroverts and introverts), medical issues, experience, and skill level. Students who were already good friends were intentionally separated, resulting in trip groups that contained five to seven students who were initially acquaintances. One student staff person who had previously taken the course, and one senior staff, recruited for his or her experience and expertise in leading outdoor pursuits trip groups and/or camps, were also assigned to each group. The majority of senior staff members had been involved in the course for 10 to 30 years, were well trained, and were comfortably familiar with the course structure, its objectives, and their expected roles.

Group membership was assigned on the evening of Day 3 of the course. The group members met frequently over the next 2 days to review their assigned trip routes, plan their equipment and food needs, set group and personal goals, and work together to practice their technical skills, as well as their problem-solving and communication skills. On the morning of Day 6, the groups embarked on their 6-day canoe trip, returning to the base camp on the morning of Day 11 for 2 days of debriefing as a larger centralized camp.

3.2 Instrumentation

All student staff members and students enrolled in the course ($n = 54$) were asked to complete questionnaires three times during the course to assess changes in sense of community, group cohesion, and sense of place in their trip groups: on the first night that trip groups were formed (Day 3); on the first night the trip groups returned to base camp (Day 11); and on the last morning of the course (Day 13). Instruments were administered by senior staff members during trip group meetings on Days 3 and 11 and by the course director on Day 13. Each set of questionnaires contained the Perceived Sense of Community Scale (Bishop et al. 1997), Group Cohesion Evaluation Questionnaire (Glass and Benshoff 2002), Sense of Place Scale (Smith 2002), and supplemental questions (e.g., demographics and level of development).

According to Halamova (2001), the Perceived Sense of Community Scale (PSCS) is one of few scales available that measure psychological sense of community regardless of group context. The PSCS consists of 30 items measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). The 30 items can subsequently be broken down into three subscales: Mission, composed of 12 items revolving around group goals and responsibilities (e.g., “There is a sense of common purpose in this group”); Reciprocal Responsibility, with 12 items reflecting how group members look out for and depend on each other (e.g., “Members know they can get help from the group if they need it”); and Harmony, composed of six reverse-coded items centered on a theme of how well group members get along with each other (e.g., “Some people feel like outsiders at meetings”). Testing extensively through factor analysis and multiple regression analyses, Bishop et al. (1997) established acceptable reliability and validity for the total scale and all three subscales. Results of the current study confirmed the high reliability, with Cronbach’s alphas registering .96 for the overall scale, .93 for the Mission subscale, and .96 for Reciprocal Responsibility. In this particular study, however, the Harmony subscale’s reliability was calculated at a much lower level of acceptability at 0.59.

Originally designed for use in challenge course research, the Group Cohesion Evaluation Questionnaire (GCEQ) (Glass and Benschhoff 2002) consisted of nine items measured on 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). Glass and Benschhoff (2002) verified the reliability of the 9-item scale, which held true in the current study (Cronbach’s alpha = .96).

The Sense of Place Scale consisted of six items using “the Adirondacks” as the place, each measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Three items reflected place identity or emotional attachment to the Adirondacks, while the other three assessed place dependence or functional attachment to the park. One place-dependence item

(“The things I do in the Adirondacks I would enjoy just as much in another place”) was reverse coded, but the scale’s reliability increased significantly when this statement was deleted. The resulting 5-item scale posted Cronbach’s alphas of .87 on Day 3, .94 on Day 11, and .95 on Day 13, demonstrating very high internal consistency and stability.

Level of development was operationalized using Todd’s (1997) single-item self-assessment: “How would you characterize your current stage of development as an outdoor-pursuits recreationist (which includes activities such as backpacking, canoe tripping, rock climbing, whitewater paddling, etc.)? 1 = beginner, 2 = intermediate, 3 = advanced, 4 = expert, or 5 = ‘post-expert’ – not the expert I once was.” This item accurately reflects corresponding measures of skill, experience, participation, knowledge, commitment, amateur/professional status, and equipment owned. Specifically, each factor significantly increases with level of development from beginner to expert, with post-experts dropping back to the level of a previous stage in a curvilinear fashion (Todd 1997).

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Participant Profile

Of the 54 students eligible to participate in the study, 51 consented (94-percent response rate). Sixty percent were female, and ages ranged from 19 to 52, with an average age of 23. A third of the respondents classified themselves as beginners ($n=17$), a quarter were advanced ($n=12$), and the remaining students marked themselves as intermediates ($n=21$ or 42 percent).

4.2 Dependent Variables

Verifying previous studies, dependent t-tests revealed that mean scores for overall sense of community and two of the three subscales (mission and reciprocal responsibility) all significantly increased from Day 3 to Day 11, Day 11 to Day 13, and Day 3 to Day 13. Mean scores for the subscale harmony did not differ significantly over time. For group cohesion, scores significantly increased from Day 11 to Day 13 and

from Day 3 to Day 13. Like the harmony subscale, sense of place remained relatively high (approximately 3.00 on a 4-point scale) with little change over the three testings (Table 1). Of the five items, the three measuring place identity were consistently rated highest (“The Adirondacks mean a lot to me,” “I would prefer to spend more time in the Adirondacks if I could,” and “Being in the Adirondacks is an important part of my life”), followed by the two place-dependence items (“The Adirondacks are the best place to do the activities I like to do” and “I get more satisfaction out of visiting the Adirondacks than from visiting any other place”).

4.3 Sense of Community/Group Cohesion and Sense of Place

Pearson product moment correlations showed that sense of place was not significantly associated with sense of community or group cohesion, with one exception: Sense of place was moderately positively correlated to the harmony subscale on Day 13 ($r = .37, p < .01$). Upon further analysis, only the three place-identity items were significantly correlated to the harmony subscale on Day 13: “The Adirondacks mean a lot to me” ($r = .35, p < .01$), “I would prefer to spend more time in the Adirondacks if I could” ($r = .39, p < .01$), and “Being in the Adirondacks is an important part of my life” ($r = .47, p < .01$). Thus, as harmony within the group increased on the last day of the course, so did emotional attachment to the Adirondacks.

4.4 Sense of Place over Time

As noted above, although relatively high, sense of place did not increase over time at the same rate as

sense of community/group cohesion. Dependent t-tests revealed no significant differences over time. Mean scores for sense of place remained relatively flat from Day 3 to Day 11 to Day 13, whether the overall scale or the individual items were examined.

4.5 Effects of Level of Development on Sense of Place over Time

To test the third research question, data were analyzed using a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with sense of place as the dependent variable and level of development as the independent variable. Specifically, a 3 x 3 mixed-design ANOVA was calculated to examine the effects of level of development (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) and time (Day 3, Day 11, and Day 13) on sense of place. Paired-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVAs were also utilized as follow-up tests.

As shown in Table 2, there was no main effect for time ($F(2,90) = 1.63, p > .05$), but there was a significant main effect for level of development ($F(2,45) = 4.747, p < .01$). Beginners had significantly lower mean scores for sense of place than intermediates or advanced (2.65 vs. 3.14 and 3.32, respectively). While there was no significant interaction between level of development and time ($F(4,90) = 1.95, p > .05$), the pattern of scores was interesting (see Fig. 1). Dependent t-tests documented no significant differences in sense of place across time by level of development, but beginners’ scores tended to dip on Day 11, intermediates tended to increase slightly at a steady pace from Day 3 to Day 13, and advanced participants tended actually to decrease over the three time periods. One-way ANOVAs revealed that

Table 1.—Paired samples t-test results

Variable	Time			<i>t</i> -value (<i>df</i>) (Day 3 to 11)	<i>t</i> -value (<i>df</i>) (Day 11 to 13)	<i>t</i> -value (<i>df</i>) (Day 3 to 13)
	Day 3 <i>M</i> (<i>sd</i>)	Day 11 <i>M</i> (<i>sd</i>)	Day 13 <i>M</i> (<i>sd</i>)			
Sense of Community Scale	3.50 (.77)	3.85 (.83)	4.06 (.71)	3.08** (48)	3.04** (48)	5.13** (48)
Mission	3.28 (.93)	3.63 (.97)	3.90 (.81)	2.89** (48)	3.57** (48)	5.21** (48)
Reciprocal Responsibility	3.41 (.96)	3.91 (.98)	4.17 (.82)	3.47** (48)	2.97** (48)	5.48** (48)
Harmony	4.09 (.63)	4.15 (.71)	4.17 (.74)	0.39 (48)	0.19 (48)	0.50 (48)
Group Cohesion Scale	2.98 (.69)	3.16 (.82)	3.39 (.64)	1.45 (44)	2.76** (48)	3.19** (48)
Sense of Place Scale	3.08 (.60)	2.98 (.75)	2.99 (.82)	1.04 (49)	.08 (48)	1.17 (49)

Note: The community scales used a 5-point scale, while the group cohesion and sense of places scales used a 4-point scale. $n=49$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2.—Repeated measures ANOVA results for level of development on sense of place over time

Source	df	F	Eta ²
Between subjects			
Level of Development	2	4.75*	.17
Within-Group Error	45	(0.98)	
Within subjects			
Sense of Place over Time	2	1.63	.04
Sense of Place X Level of Development	4	1.95	.08
Within-Group Error	90	(0.17)	

Note: Values in parentheses represent mean square error. *n* = 49. **p* < .05.

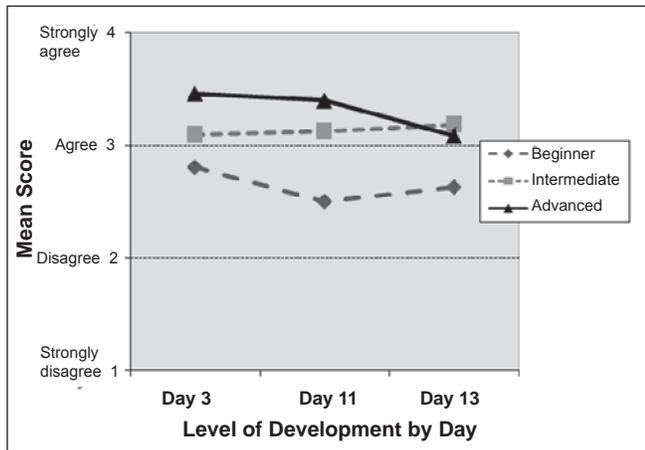


Figure 1.—Change in sense of place by level of development over time.

beginners scored significantly lower than advanced on Day 3 (2.78 vs. 3.47), beginners were significantly lower than both intermediates and advanced on Day 11 (2.51 vs. 3.13 and 3.40, respectively), and no differences were detected among levels of development on Day 13 (see Table 3).

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest that although sense of place is relatively high for outdoor-pursuits trip groups, it does not seem to increase at the same rate

as sense of community/group cohesion. In fact, the two concepts are not even correlated in this situation, with the exception that place identity increases as harmony within the group improves. Not surprisingly, this study also showed that sense of place is higher for participants with higher levels of development. This result probably reflects the fact that those who are more advanced have spent more time in the Adirondacks or similar outdoor places, enabling attachment to and dependence on the resource to grow.

Perhaps this intense 13-day course was simply not long enough to cause a significant change in sense of place. Results may also have differed if different language had been used to identify the place. For instance, the specific name of the camp or lake may have evoked stronger feelings of sense of place in students than “the Adirondacks.” As a tradeoff, using those specific names might have run the risk of students’ limiting their evaluations to the in-camp portion of the course instead of the entire period, including the 6-day trip through other parts of the Adirondacks.

Interestingly, students have also tended to use the name of the lake as synonymous with the course itself. If the name of the lake had been used, would students

Table 3.—One-way ANOVA results for sense of place by level of development

Variable	Level of Development			F-value
	Beginner M (sd) (<i>n</i> = 17)	Intermediate M (sd) (<i>n</i> = 21)	Advanced M (sd) (<i>n</i> = 12)	
Sense of Place on Day 3	2.78 ^a (.64)	3.10 ^{ab} (.52)	3.47 ^b (.47)	5.49**
Sense of Place on Day 11	2.51 ^a (.73)	3.13 ^b (.74)	3.40 ^b (.45)	6.61**
Sense of Place on Day 13	2.63 (.84)	3.19 (.76)	3.12 (.84)	0.10

Note: Values with different superscripts are significantly different. ***p* < .01.

have conjured up a totally different set of feelings for this place, based on their feelings for the course and relationships they formed with other students and staff? It should be remembered that by the end of the course, the more harmonious the group, the higher the place identity scores. Evidence of this position was presented by Hutson (2008), who performed Q-sort analysis based on the question, "How do you find meaning in a place in the out-of-doors?" A relational factor emerged, in which attachments to ongoing relationships were the defining characteristics of place meanings. Group engagement and relationships with people and places over time, combined with a need to return to the setting to re-experience those positive feelings, gave a place its meaning for some outdoor recreation professionals.

In the current study, participants were not asked whether sense of community actually caused sense of place, or vice versa. They were simply asked to evaluate their perceptions of how they felt about their group and the Adirondacks at three different points in time. A detail to consider is that recreation students are commonly placed in group situations and expected to facilitate sense of community; perhaps more emphasis on attachment to the natural world in this course would influence similar growth in sense of place. The findings from this study can therefore help theorists and practitioners gain greater conceptual clarity of sense of community and sense of place. Our findings also can aid outdoor educators in program planning and design. What practices or educational strategies could intentionally integrate sense of place and sense of community in similar situations? What successful practices in facilitating a sense of community might help facilitate a sense of place?

It should be further noted that these results may have been limited by the small sample size. Other factors that may have hampered the development of sense of place include uncontrollable environmental factors, such as attending the course during the height of black fly season, experiencing unfavorable weather conditions (rain, wind, extreme temperatures), or facing difficult trip route conditions (going upstream against the river current, facing lengthy canoe

portages, climbing challenging mountain peaks). Future studies should take these intervening variables into account, particularly for beginners, who may be more sensitive to and less able to negotiate these constraints. In sum, being in community with an outdoor setting and with people during an outdoor educational experience provides an opportunity to further explore these concepts and potentially represents another way to facilitate meaningful connections to natural environments.

6.0 CITATIONS

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