

MEN'S WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY: FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

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Abstract.—Most previous research on wilderness experience and spirituality focuses on women only or mixed male and female groups. This qualitative research study investigated the spiritual impact of participation in a men-only wilderness canoe trip. In-depth interviews were conducted after the trip with six participants. Interpretive analysis identified five themes: spiritual friendships, friendships facilitated by conversations, openness facilitated by the men-only group, spirituality facilitated by wilderness as God's creation, and space for spirituality facilitated by wilderness.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

While quantitative studies (e.g., Heintzman, 2002, 2003) document that some wilderness users are interested in the spiritual dimension of their wilderness visit, qualitative research studies provide in-depth information about the factors that contribute to the spiritual impact of wilderness experiences. Stringer and McAvoy (1992), in a study of male and female participants in wilderness adventure programs, concluded that wilderness experiences were conducive to spiritual development. They identified two influential factors that contributed to the participants' spiritual experiences during the wilderness trips: (1) having other people on the trip with which to share experiences, opinions and ideas; and (2) being in a wilderness environment that did not have the constraints and responsibilities of the participants' everyday world. Fox (1997) examined six women's perceptions of a solitude wilderness

experience in Australia. The women regarded *nature* as being spiritual and *solitude* as important to their spirituality. Many of the women experienced the emotions of awe and wonderment of nature that contributed to their *spiritual experience*. Fox also discovered that the women experienced a sense of spirituality by being part of a women-only group and that working as a team with other women enhanced their spiritual experience. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) examined how the qualitative dimensions of the wilderness experience might be a source of spiritual inspiration for women who participated in a wilderness canoeing or hiking trip. They found that being in a *bona fide* wilderness along with aspects related to being part of an all-women's group (i.e., group trust and emotional support," "sharing common life changes," "noncompetitive atmosphere") were sources of spiritual inspiration. Fredrickson and Anderson suggested future research with male-only groups. Subsequently Heintzman (2007) investigated the spiritual impact of participation in a men-only canoe journey into a remote wilderness area. In-depth interviews with six participants after the trip indicated that the short-term impact of participation in the wilderness trip was a sense of peacefulness while the long-term impact was characterized by recollection. The wilderness setting along with the diverse social settings during the trip, were viewed as important to spiritual well-being. Most of the participants did not identify the scheduled spiritual activities as having a large impact upon their spiritual well-being. A few, but not all, of the participants viewed participation in a men-only group as important to their spiritual well-being.

1.1 Purpose of Study

This study, similar to Heintzman's (2007) study, investigated the influence of wilderness experience upon the spirituality of participants in a men-only group.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What is the influence of participation in a men-only wilderness trip upon spiritual well-being?
2. How do the various components of the wilderness trip (activities, settings) affect spiritual well-being?
3. What is the influence of the “wilderness” environment upon spiritual well-being?
4. What is the influence of the “men-only” group upon spiritual well-being?

2.0 METHODS

This qualitative study investigated the spiritual impact of participation in a men-only wilderness canoe trip. The trip, organized annually by a men’s group at an Anglican church that the researcher attended, was 3 days long and took place in a designated waterway park in central Canada. Six men plus the researcher participated in the trip. The participants’ ages ranged from the 40s to 60s, most were professionally employed or retired, all came from a large metropolitan area, most were involved to varying degrees in the church, and all but one had previously been on one or more canoe trips organized by this group. The canoe trip had no formal structured program or spiritual components, although there was a very informal Sunday morning worship time. The participants were informed of the research project prior to the trip and after the trip all six of the participants on the trip volunteered to be interviewed.

Previous studies on wilderness experience and spirituality (e.g., Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992) have been criticized for focusing on the immediate experience of the wilderness trip and not including a longitudinal dimension (Haluza-Delay, 2000). Thus interviews in this study were conducted 8 to 10 months after the completion of the trip to determine the long-term impact of the wilderness experience on spiritual well-being.

The researcher used a qualitative in-depth interview schedule as a guide during the interviews, which were approximately 45 minutes long. Interviews were

recorded on audiotapes for later transcription and data analysis. Interpretive analysis, which involved the transcripts being carefully read, reread and coded, was used to determine recurring patterns within the data (Patton, 1990). Analysis was done independently by both the researcher and a student researcher to verify the accuracy of the patterns. During this process, themes were observed that represented commonly shared explanations of the impact of participation in the wilderness trip upon spiritual well-being.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Spiritual Friendship

The theme that characterized the impact of the canoe trip was spiritual friendship. Ed stated that as a result of the trip he “knew a few more guys,” and Dan noted that the benefit of the trip that would motivate him to go again was “potential friendships.” Andrew explained that this friendship was spiritual friendship:

[The impact] has got to do more with the people I met on the trip that I didn’t know as well as or hadn’t met before and now I know them. That’s probably the lasting, you know that is something that is still reverberating in my life more than anything else as a result of that trip....the people who are involved...view their spirituality as being important. It is always there in the forefront being there with that group of people versus, say, a group of people who watch hockey...it was more than just friendship...because we had that common purpose.

Bruce also elaborated upon the spiritual impact of the trip: “A sense of getting to know each other better I think. Not only as people, but as Christians, as brothers...having contributed to their spiritual life and getting a sense of their heart and mind.”

3.2 Conversation Facilitated Spiritual Friendship

Spiritual friendships developed through the trip and were facilitated by informal conversations and discussions. The most frequently mentioned context of these conversations was the evening campfires:

“I think the sort of evening activities around the campfire was probably the most profound aspect of that particular trip. Conversations with other guys, around the campfire...helped to sort of ground, if you like, some of my own beliefs and thoughts...that was very helpful.”
(Dan)

A sequence of the interview between Dan and the interviewer explains how and why these informal conversations were important for the participants’ spiritual well-being. When the interviewer asked Dan why the campfire conversations were so helpful to his spirituality, he responded, “It’s not very often in life that I find...opportunities to discuss one’s beliefs or explore other people or listen to other people expressing their thoughts.” Then the interviewer asked Dan why this happens on the canoe trip; Dan replied, “...there’s a different dynamic in that situation. I think there’s a non-threatening environment...Some environments are not that way.” He went on to explain:

“We have a lot of very different views and points of view and very different concepts on our faith but it’s a non-threatening environment. The dynamic seems to be right for that kind of expression. And also I suppose there’s no hurry, there’s lots of time, we’re not on schedule, and that really helps too.”

Other participants also commented on the openness of the discussion. Charles observed, “It was definitely more of a bonding experience, I mean people just open up, some people were quite open actually with things that were on their hearts and on their minds...” Andrew noted, “Even though, if I remember correctly, we had theological disagreements on certain points, that wasn’t the issue you know, the issue was that we could talk about those things. There were matters to be talked about and they were important.”

3.3 Men-Only Group Facilitated Openness

Participants observed that being part of a men-only group provided a different dynamic than if it had been a mixed group. There were a number of interrelated dimensions to this dynamic. Charles felt that if wives and children were on the trip, then he would feel

a sense of responsibility for them and there would be less opportunity for him to focus on his spiritual needs: “You didn’t have to look after anybody in any particular way. You had to look after yourself and help the group as a whole...from a spirituality point of view it just allowed me to center a little more attention on myself as a man in God’s eyes.” Dan added, “There are certain perspectives that the other guys have that we have in common.” Bruce noted that a men-only group “simplifies social interactions in a way. There’s an ease of conversation that might not be there perhaps in a mixed group.” Similarly Ed stated “there are times when I think it is useful to be together and experience stuff. I think men have spiritual needs, which are often unmet because of the difficulty of sharing those needs...” He went on to state, “I think guys act differently when women are present. They’re macho, show off when they’re with women... [When it’s men only] a lot of times, you get to see the real guys and they’re not putting on any masks.” Charles believed that “the canoe trip provided the chance for men to get together and let their hair down, not be judged.” Andrew elaborated:

“We talk about things...that we wouldn’t talk about if there were women present...or maybe we wouldn’t talk about it in exactly the same fashion. And so that creates a different experience. I think that can help build your spirituality in a way...I suppose that we’re able to address certain issues that we would probably be reluctant to address in a male/female environment and therefore we’re able to do certain things with a male-only group...Sometimes people are willing to open up about an issue and they might not open up if there were women present. Talk about something that’s bothering them or whatever you know...you know we’ve sort of developed a sort of comfort level with each other, and a trust level with each other.”

3.4 Wilderness as God’s Creation Facilitated Spirituality

For the men on this trip, being in God’s creation helped them to focus on God and enhance their spirituality. Ed said, “Just being out in nature...

reminds me of God.” Likewise for Dan, “The fact that when we’re surrounded by God’s creation there’s a constant reminder of his great power and the infinity of God compared to human beings. It tends to be a humbling experience...” Charles also referred to being in creation as a humbling experience: “I think during the trip perhaps...when I get out into nature, I’m just in awe of the stuff that he created.... it’s humbling you know... I almost feel insignificant in the majesty of nature.” Being humbled helped Charles focus on God: “I get hung up on me a lot, way too much. I take myself way too seriously and being out on this canoe trip... You know, it’s just you. You and God. Yeah, humbling.” Being in creation also led to thanksgiving:

“There’s this general sense of God’s creation and God’s presence in creation, that creator that speaks to us through what he’s made. I think it is an opportunity for praise, opportunity to give thanks to God, to glorify God for who he is, as evidenced by what he has made.” (Bruce)

3.5 Wilderness Created a Space for Spirituality

Wilderness provided the opportunity to get away from the distractions of everyday life to focus on spirituality. For Charles, going on a canoe trip and returning to everyday life helps him put his life in balance: “Coming out of the bush and going back to ‘civilization’ you see some of the futility in the rat race.” For Francis, “The beauty, grandeur, remoteness, and lack of distraction and those sorts of things allow me to think more closely about the God that made all these plants, than I would normally consider in a place when I’d be distracted by lots of other stuff.” Likewise, Ed explained that “the remoteness, the quietness, the less distraction helps one to mentally connect with God.” Similarly, Bruce claimed that the spiritual impact of the trip “would have to do with a sense of detachment from being in the city....I guess it would be a connection through, detached from daily life, creating an opportunity to be more attached to God and to, even from a viewpoint of time and mental space, spend more time in prayer and meditation.”

4.0 DISCUSSION

Unlike other similar studies (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2007; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992) the main impact of this wilderness trip was spiritual friendships. Explanations for this outcome include the fact that the participants were fairly homogenous in that they were from the same city, the same church, and in many cases they knew each other before the trip and had opportunity to continue their friendships after the trip. Most of these conditions did not exist for participants in other studies. Unlike other studies, solitude was not a factor on this trip, most likely due to the very communal and social nature of the trip with no structured time for being alone.

The importance of the wilderness setting for spiritual well-being is consistent with research that suggests wilderness settings enhance spirituality (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2002, 2003; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). In the current study, unlike other studies, wilderness was important to spirituality as it was viewed as God’s creation; a finding which is consistent with the fact that the group was a Christian group. Another reason given was that the wilderness experience provided the opportunity to get away from everyday distractions. This finding is consistent with Stringer and McAvoy’s (1992, p. 17) observation that “the operative factor for some participants was being in a *different* environment, free from normal constraints on time and energy, as opposed to being *necessarily* in a *wilderness* environment,” and reflects the “being away” feature of restorative environments theory (Kaplan, 1995).

In previous studies on the wilderness experience of women-only groups, being part of a women-only group was a key factor in the spiritual experience of the women (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). In Heintzman’s (2007) study, only some of the men in the group viewed being part of a men-only group as an important factor in enhancing spiritual well-being. In the current study, all the men strongly believed that being part of a men-only group played a very important role in influencing the spiritual

outcomes of trip participation. A possible explanation was that the men in the current study had a common purpose and interest in spirituality while not all men in Heintzman's (2007) study were equally committed to the spiritual dimension of their wilderness experience.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although the results cannot be generalized and this study cannot be directly compared to previous studies, being part of a men-only group was important to the men in this study, as it was for women who were part of women-only groups in previous studies of wilderness experience (Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). Differences in the findings of this study and Heintzman's (2007) study suggest that there are a multitude of factors, such as characteristics of the participants, motivations of the participants, purposes of the trip, structure of the trip, that all influence the spiritual outcomes of wilderness trips. There can be quite a diversity of outcomes among different men's groups. Quantitative research on this topic is needed to generate findings that can be generalized. In terms of practical implications, this study suggests that designing wilderness experiences for spiritual outcomes requires consideration of a multitude of complex factors.

6.0 CITATIONS

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