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Camping: A Tool for Relationship Maintenance?

Abstract

Purpose: To investigate individuals' lived experience of camping, and to explore the effects of camping on relationships.

Design: The research adopted a descriptive phenomenological approach (Langdrige, 2007). Guided interviews were carried out with four participants, recalling their most memorable camping experience, with the aid of photographs to elicit memories. Analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) seven stage analysis and findings were discussed in relation to Duck's model of relationship dissolution (1981).

Findings: Findings concern how camping provides an opportunity for couples, and friends, to re-connect with each other, reinforcing existing bonds and strengthening weakened ones. Other findings included enjoyment of the tranquillity and relaxation the natural environment provided, and for some the sense of adventure was encouraged, and the idea of 'being away' from the usual surroundings was reported to be of relational benefit.

Originality: The discovery of the benefit of camping on relationships is a unique and valuable contribution in this field because it has shown that camping can maintain, and evolve, relationships. As such, camping could be used as a bonding or relationship support intervention.

Literature Review

There is a small but growing amount of literature surrounding green exercise, and as such the concepts and ideas are constantly evolving. Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) is amongst this literature, and suggests that spending time outside could help individuals restore their capacity to concentrate. Kaplan proposed that nature provided the four elements that were important for restoration of the capacity to direct attention, and that nature could restore this more effectively than sleep. The four elements were: being 'away', paying involuntary attention to surroundings, maintenance of this attention and a compatibility with the chosen environment.

Additional theories regarding the benefit of nature on health and wellbeing include Ulrich et al's (1991) more general model of restoration through stress reduction, which is supported by research on populations in hospitals. Patients undergoing gall bladder surgery were matched according to age, weight and health history. Patients that were given a room with a view of nature were compared with those given a view of a building wall. Patients who had a window view, overlooking a natural environment scene showed a quicker recovery from surgery, as well as a more positive mental attitude following surgery (Ulrich et al, 1984).

Wilson's Biophilia hypothesis (1984) suggests that humans have an innate affinity with nature, and thus will benefit from exposure to the natural environment in which we evolved. He suggested that individuals are biologically predisposed to learn to respond positively to a non-threatening natural environment. That said, he also explained that despite the biological predisposition, the positive response will not always come naturally. This means that individuals' might not necessarily feel an immediate natural affinity to the outdoor environment (Wilson, 1984).

Researchers Cimprich and Ronis (2003) have utilised Kaplan's theory in researching physical health, by taking a sample of breast cancer patients and exposing the experimental group to 120 minutes of 'green exercise' a week, finding support for Kaplan's theory. White (et al, 2013) studied over four thousand people to try and determine the most 'restorative' environments. They concluded that coastal locations offered the most restorative experiences, closely followed by forests and mountainous locations. Urban parks offered the least in terms of restoration (White et al, 2013).

Green exercise is the term often used by researchers and academics to describe taking part in physical activity in outdoor green spaces (King, 2012; Pretty et al, 2005). This can include many different activities, but topics often studied include gardening and horticulture, walking, cycling and horse-riding (Haubenhofner, 2010). Camping is related to green exercise as it usually takes place in an outdoor, natural environment, and quite often there is an element of exercise involved. This could range from taking part in activities whilst camping, such as walking, climbing or cycling, or even the tasks of putting up the tent and starting a fire.

Green care is a related term often used when describing how principles of green exercise have been adopted and applied in a therapeutic manner; making use of the environment in counselling and recovery from illness (Green Exercise, online). Therapeutic horticulture, just one example of green care methods, is increasing in popularity both in the UK and the United States, with charities such as MIND (2007) championing the benefits of the natural environment on mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Camping has been suggested as a form of green exercise before (Haubenhofer, 2010) but has only been studied in relation to clinical populations. Summer camps for non-clinical populations are increasingly popular in the United States with projects such as Camp America, which has been in business for more than forty years, and for clinical populations too.

MSPP Interface (online, 2013) acts as a referral scheme in the United States for children and adolescents with additional or educational needs, matching them with an appropriate camp that caters for them. The UK is quickly catching up with our American counter-parts, opening camps for a variety of populations; standard camping experiences, camps for children with obesity, military experience camps and sport camps to name but a few (MoreLife, online; BOOTCamp Physical Training, 2013). That said, the camps have yet to be academically evaluated and so the value of camping as an intervention is yet to be established.

Research surrounding the psychosocial benefits of camping contains international contributions, with the current evidence base focused on clinical populations. For example, Martiniuk (2003) summarized findings from camping programmes for children with cancer in Canada and their families, reporting positive results overall. Warady (1994) reported great success on the use of summer camps for children with end stage renal disease in California. Bekesi (et al, 2011) collected data from children with cancer, diabetes and juvenile immune arthritis to understand the quality of life benefits of taking part in a camping programme in Hungary. They reported positive results, showing an improvement in at least one of the questionnaire subscales for 27.8% of the children participating.

The theories put forward by Kaplan, Ulrich and Wilson, subsequent supporting research evidence provided by Cimprich and Ronis (2003) and the Ecotherapy

report published by MIND (2007) offered a sound rationale for further research to be carried out on the benefits the outdoors can provide for both clinical and non-clinical populations, to help demonstrate the positive effects of many different forms of green exercise. With this in mind, and considering camping as a form of green exercise, the wider research project addresses many other points related to the psychosocial experience of camping for non-clinical populations of adults. In contrast, we wanted to find out what camping had to offer in terms of the impact it could have on relationships- both romantic as well as friendship- in non-clinical adult populations.

Method

The key aim of the wider research project was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of camping.

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the effect camping can have on relationships, exploring all aspects of the experience with reference to relationships.

We used a qualitative research design. The phenomenological paradigm chosen led to an epistemological focus on constructionism; each participant constructing meaning and each experience being a different reality. Phenomenological philosophy, originally founded by Edmund Husserl in the 1900s, aims to elucidate the individual lived experience. At its heart is the notion that each person's perceptions will be shaped by their own engagement with reality; based upon their previous experiences and ways of viewing the world. Phenomenology suggests that there is no 'real world' or knowledge of such, and instead objects enter our own reality when we choose to perceive them. By employing phenomenological concepts within research, such as bracketing off our own ideas, and focusing on 'intentionality'- the connection between what we perceive and how we perceive it, we can build an understanding of the way a person sees the world in which they live. This necessitates, for the present study, a subjective, involved methodology, and guided interviews were used. Topics for the interview schedule were determined in advance, but a flexible approach was taken throughout the interviews. Although all thematic areas needed to be covered, the order of questions differed with each participant and other thematic areas were introduced where relevant.

Phenomenological approaches typically require small sample sizes, allowing individual experiences to be analysed in considerable depth. In this study, four

participants were interviewed by the main researcher (RM) over a two month period. Participants were recruited through an opportunity sample and were briefed on the aims of the study prior to signing consent forms. Interviews took place in participants' homes or a public place, and were recorded for the main researcher's reference only. All interviews were then transcribed. Ethical approval was sought from the conducting university before the research took place, adhering to BPS standards. All participants have been allocated pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Our aim was to elicit a description of the essential features of the camping experience, therefore we chose a descriptive phenomenological method of analysis- Colaizzi's (1978) seven stage method. This approach is less well-known than that proposed by Giorgi (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). However, it has been used successfully in other phenomenological studies in the health and wellbeing field (e.g. Gallagher & Jasper, 2003; Salmela et al, 2010). Its step-by-step nature allows accounts to be analysed in depth, with opportunities for critical reflection, while at the same time keeping the process manageable. Giorgi (2006) is particularly critical of Colaizzi's requirement to take the analysis back to the participants in the seventh stage, arguing that participants cannot be expected to judge the work from the perspective of a trained and experienced researcher. We felt, however, that in this little-researched area, re-engaging with the participants in this way could add depth to the final analysis.

The first stage in Colaizzi's method involved becoming familiar with the data. This is often done by reading and re-reading the transcripts, but also the process of transcription itself assists with this stage. The second stage involved extracting significant statements from each of the transcripts; anything that related to the topic under study. This meant picking out the benefits, effects and highlights of camping, and indeed spending time outside. Thirdly, significant statements were re-read and the formulation of meanings began. It is essential to stay close to the participants' accounts here, whilst reading into the meaning behind the statements. The fourth step sees the formation of clusters of themes from the formulated meanings. Transcripts were checked to ensure these were consistent. The fifth stage involved the production of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and the sixth condensed that exhaustive description into a fundamental structure. The seventh stage allows the participant to view the analysis findings, approving the findings if

they agree it is an accurate account of their experience.

In the wider research project, five themes were found in total: being away, tranquillity and relaxation, appreciation of the natural environment, freedom/exploration and adventure and relationship maintenance.

Findings

The theme cluster chosen to focus on for the purpose of this paper is 'Camping as a Relationship Maintenance Strategy'.

Participant one is Nicola, a 30 year-old full-time charity worker. She is a frequent camper and goes with her husband. The second participant, Catherine, is a 27 year-old administrative assistant who regularly goes camping with her partner. Jane, 21, is a student who went camping with her ex-partner, and now goes with friends. Lydia is a 25 year-old marketing manager who frequently camps with friends and her partner. All participants camp in the UK.

Each participant recalled a camping experience that they remembered well, and part of the interview schedule encouraged participants to compare it to other experiences they had of camping. This allowed participants recalling holidays with partners to compare this experience with breaks away with friends and vice-versa.

Following Colaizzi's (1978) 7 stage method of analysis, the transcripts were read several times. A reflexive journal was kept by the main researcher (RM) in order to minimise the impact of their presuppositions, and the second stage began.

Significant statements were taken from each transcript that pertained to the idea of relationship maintenance. Some examples include a statement by Nicola who said 'We wanted to get away, we needed to get away together' and went on to say about how she and her partner went camping to 'Reinforce our bond that we had'. This is an interesting statement because Nicola is keen to make the change from 'want' to 'need' when referring to getting away. Although she outlines later in the interview that the relationship wasn't in difficulty, the 'need' to reinforce the bond that they had was met by camping. Nicola also describes how she finds the quiet environment often encountered whilst camping encourages calm communication without the usual interruptions, stating 'it's just us two and we get chance- there's no distractions- you get chance to speak to each other and have a conversation'. Nicola talked about

how she usually stayed in hotels or Bed and Breakfasts, but camping gave her the proper feeling of being away. Escaping the distractions of modern life to the calming natural world allowed Nicola to spend time with her partner in a stress-free environment, a contrast to her home life at the time, for them to re-connect with each other.

Catherine explained that she likes camping and other outdoor activities with her partner because 'I literally have his undivided attention'. She went on to say 'We just go to spend time together really. It's somewhere we can escape to'. For Catherine, it's important to her that she spends uninterrupted time with her partner to reconnect with him, and when they go camping she gets that time. She explained how although she likes home comforts, there are so many distractions at home that 'it's too easy to escape each other'. Catherine explained that at home, there were too many ways of avoiding each other so she found that any arising conflict wouldn't be resolved, leading to feelings of negativity. As well as regular camping trips, Catherine states 'At home, we go for quite a lot of walks, and it's mainly for spending time together'. Spending time outdoors as a way of maintaining happiness and communication, and therefore the relationship, is effective for Catherine and her partner. For Catherine and her partner, it is important that the quality time they have to maintain their relationship is spent outdoors. The simplicity of the natural environment grants them the peace they need, as well as allowing their conversations to be undisturbed.

For Jane, the camping trip she chose to reflect on was when her relationship was breaking down. She stated 'We both needed a weekend away and some together time' and said how when they were away they felt close again. Although the relationship did break down in the end, Jane was eager to talk about what a great time they had whilst camping; from the excitement of choosing where to go to playfully bickering about putting up the tent. She explained that in the months leading up to the camping trip, they hadn't really spent time together 'without any animosity' and so the trip was good timing. Jane also discussed a camping trip that she went on with friends, and noted similar ideas, stating 'we got to bond and get along better' and 'I think it's a good bonding thing'. Jane felt that camping experiences with friends or a partner allow the time to get together properly, away from the usual environment, and re-connect. Although Jane's camping trip was encouraged by her

financial situation, she felt that camping was a more exciting alternative to a hotel, an adventure that her and her partner were embarking on together.

Lydia decided to talk about a camping trip she went on with a small group of friends, which provided an alternative perspective for the research. She still talked about how it was a great way to confirm her friendships with the girls she went with, and even how it helped to improve a relationship with one friend whom she felt 'least close to'. Lydia said that the camping trip allowed her to 'see a different side' and get to know her a bit better. Lydia states 'It's always nice to re-affirm your friendship with people by spending some quality time together' and the camping trip allowed that to take place. Lydia stated that before she went on the camping trip, 'as friends, I felt that we were really close', so she already appreciated her friends and the bond that they had; however due to other commitments, they found that at home they were seeing less and less of each other. Lydia felt that the camping trip was a good opportunity to spend some time with friends she already felt close to, and had the added bonus of becoming closer to somebody she previously found 'a bit over-sensitive'. Lydia and her friends had been camping before and enjoyed the experience, one that Lydia felt was not comparable to staying in bricks and mortar. Once again going back to the distractions that technology so often provides in the modern household, Lydia likes that camping 'forces you' to stop and leave everything and concentrate on each other.

The other four themes found in the wider research project relate more directly to the natural environment. The role this played in relationship maintenance was vital, from providing the therapeutic environment to encouraging communication and bonding.

The theme entitled 'Being away' relates not only to the escape from the usual home environment- the location was important to the participants. A hotel break would not have provided the same environment and therefore relationship maintenance would be less likely- though not impossible- to take place.

'Appreciation of the natural environment' was a common theme amongst participants, and related to how the location of the camping trip played an important part in overall mood and enjoyment of the holiday. Factors including perception of space, relative isolation and attractive scenery all contributed to a more pleasant experience, which in turn facilitated a therapeutic environment.

'Tranquility and relaxation' was of particular relevance to relationship maintenance; without such it would have been difficult for bonding to take place. Part of the feelings of escape arose from being away from stress, worry and problems and instead in an environment that promoted calm. This allowed the participants under study to look at any problems in the relationship from new perspectives, and the calming environment allowed reinforcement of bonds, without distractions or stress, to take place.

Finally, 'Freedom and Adventure/Exploration' related to how participants felt a natural sense of adventure and freedom when they went camping. For some participants this freedom was a spiritual feeling, for others it was more literal: space to run and shout and explore if they wanted to. This sense of release and awakening was an integral part of the camping trip and helped break down barriers, both personal and interpersonal. This allowed relationship maintenance and repair to take place.

The exhaustive description summarised the findings into multiple paragraphs, including all of the themes. The fundamental structure is as follows:

"Camping provides the ideal escape for friends and couples alike. The tranquil and relaxing environment provides the ideal setting for relationship maintenance and reinforcement with friends and partners, whether there are issues to resolve or otherwise. The freedom experienced by individuals encouraged adventure and exploration, which in turn allowed them to appreciate the natural environment"

Each participant has seen the analysis and agreed it is an accurate account of their experience, approving the findings and completing the analysis.

Discussion

Research has shown how the natural environment can benefit physical and mental health and feelings of wellbeing (MIND, 2007; Cimprich & Ronis, 2003), but this research paper has highlighted how camping can foster a therapeutic environment, in that it provides couples and friends the opportunity to maintain their relationships.

Of course, this breakthrough will not apply to everybody. Although camping may be a great way for couples and friends to confirm their bonds, this may have the opposite

effect for the population that do not enjoy camping. Catherine was the least enthusiastic camper, alluding to the idea that she only really went camping to keep her partner happy and to spend time with him. However, even though Catherine perhaps might not choose to go camping, she still reaps the benefits of it, reporting it has a positive effect on her relationship with her partner and her own feelings of wellbeing. Also, Catherine commented on other pursuits that had a similar effect; choosing to go for long walks with her partner when she felt they had an issue to discuss or wanted his full attention.

Participants commented on how the camping environment helped to reaffirm their relationships, but the question of why this is the case still remains. Why can couples not reconnect and spend quality time together at home? This is addressed by each participant differently; for Catherine, gadgets and television seem to be the distraction. She explains that whilst camping, there's nobody else- relative isolation- and a lack of technology, effectively forcing you to spend time together and talk. According to Duck (1981), keeping lines of communication open is a key part of preventing relationship dissolution. Therefore, Catherine's use of camping as a way of talking to her partner without interruptions is an effective maintenance strategy.

Jane thinks that work stress and an ability to distance yourself physically and emotionally are issues at home that you can escape from whilst under canvas. She explains that her partner was under pressure at work, which was putting a strain on their relationship. As a result of this pressure, she found their relationship was deteriorating. By going away camping, she found that they felt close again, spent time just together and had the opportunity to relax; away from work and the associated stress, they could value each other and repair the damage caused at home. This concept of repair instead of preventing problems occurring is different to each of the other participants, who did not consider their relationships to be difficult, and offers a new angle. Camping can be used as a tool to help repair broken relationships too.

For Lydia, the camping environment provided an escape for a friend suffering bereavement, and inadvertently became an opportunity to get together and confirm existing bonds and strengthen a weakened friendship. Time constraints seemed to be an issue at home, with Lydia having started a new job and acquiring a horse. She

talks about how when they were at University and all single, they spent much more time together, but having left University and several members of the group entering relationships, she found that priorities changed and they saw less of each other. For Lydia camping was an excuse to get away with her friends, and the relationship maintenance was an unexpected bonus.

Nicola notes that although she was spending time with her partner at home, this time seemed to be filled with stress and worry. In a bad place financially, she found that the struggles at home were spoiling the quality time they wanted to enjoy. The isolation and change of environment camping and walking provided seemed the ideal resolution; the classic 'out of sight, out of mind'.

The commonality all the participants experienced with regard to relationship maintenance was that they needed to be away from the usual home environment, and everything that went with it, in order for the maintenance and repair to take place. Each of the themes found in the wider research project feed in to each other, and are arguably of equal importance; some participants for example could not experience tranquillity and relaxation without being away. In this respect, participants could not allow relationship maintenance to take place without being away, and for some it had to be in the natural environment with the tranquillity, freedom and escape from the everyday that it provided.

The 'Relationship maintenance' theme is arguably reliant on each of the wider themes. Without 'Tranquillity and relaxation', the therapeutic environment would be hindered. Without 'Being away', the same problems that exist in the home environment would remain. 'Appreciation of the natural environment' allows a 'back-to-nature' perspective to come forward, bringing an element of simplicity and stripping back to the essentials of living, letting go of the trivial tensions. 'Freedom and adventure/exploration' relates not only to the feelings of space and new places to discover, but also the sense that relationships can be explored and engagement on a new level can take place. Thus, the natural environment, with principles from green exercise and green care, is essential in this relationship maintenance strategy.

Duck's (1981) model of relationship dissolution suggests that 'mechanical failure' is a possible cause of relationship breakdown. He theorises that couples may experience mechanical failure in their relationship when communication is poor and bad

interactions are experienced. The participants under study seem to understand the importance not only of communication but of positive interactions too. Catherine talked about how conversations had no structure or agenda, they just talked. All four participants commented on the importance of the uninterrupted time spent with their loved ones. Therefore, as a relationship maintenance tool, it can be said camping breaks could be a possible efficacious intervention.

Camping as an intervention for couples in difficulty could be a suggestion at a clinical level; perhaps as a 'homework task'. As the wider research project was not an intervention study, further research needs to be carried out in this area, however used alongside traditional therapy it could be a viable prospect.

Conclusion

This research provides an interesting and unique insight into how camping may be utilised as a relationship maintenance strategy. The participants outline how communication and quality time, away from their usual environments and distractions; allow repair and reinforcement of bonds and in some cases a strengthening process to take place. The research has illuminated new ways in which the natural environment and green exercise can have a beneficial effect on individuals, and provide a new perspective on multiple social groups, from couples to groups of friends. Furthermore, the research has demonstrated possible therapeutic benefit for the non-clinical adult population.

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