

An exploratory analysis of anticipated benefits and their importance in outdoor adventure recreation programs: are outcomes equitable across gender?

Dr Alison Voight

Abstract

The history of outdoor education programs has long espoused a litany of benefits for the participant. They have included hard-earned personal and physical victories, emotional and psychological development, and also sociological advantages of rehabilitation and assimilation. But are these benefits “real” and are these benefits equitably distributed across gender? Do outdoor education programs cater to a predominantly male-type of agenda and focus on benefits primarily conditioned from activities that require greater strength, endurance and other outcomes typically related to males?

An historical review of the literature, as well as recent research, indicates that benefits from outdoor education participation points to varying areas of outcomes regarding male and female participants. While changes in self-concept, self-confidence and perceptions of peer/social acceptance are promoted as likely outcomes from participation, are they experienced similarly in both females and males? This paper explores these questions from two perspectives: (a) past literature, and (b) personal perspectives. The paper will conclude with a case study example using data from a recently completed study in an outdoor education program.

Introduction

The history of outdoor adventure recreation programs has long espoused a litany of benefits for the participant (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Gibbons, 1999; Miles & Priest, 1999; Outward Bound, n.d.). They have included hard-earned personal and physical victories, emotional and psychological development, and also sociological advantages of rehabilitation and assimilation. Outdoor adventure education programs are generally developed around those benefits which will reflect the program’s overall mission, goals and objectives. These goals, however, may not always account for differences between male and female participants in terms of desired benefits, and how they are achieved. Despite the current, perceived climate of equanimity and universal access, there still exist differences between the needs of men and women, and their ability to achieve these needs, respectively (Collins, 1999). Post-modern feminism has not obviated the need to address or recognize how outdoor adventure programs can approach these differences.

Adding to the complexity of meeting participant outcomes, is the idea that many outdoor adventure programs seek a particular target audience, or demographic group that has established a strong desire, or become associated with, pursuing the type of outcomes or benefits ascribed by the agency. For example, Outward Bound has traditionally championed a highly structured approach to outdoor adventure activities as a modality to glean the benefits of enhanced self-efficacy, personal insight, and self-reliance, through “purposely tackling obstacles” (Outward Bound, n.d.). The student must ultimately be responsible for his or her own self-improvement,

and the level of personal challenge is often pushed to the extreme. It is because of the perceived benefits, in this exacting pedagogical format, that Outward Bound has attracted or incorporated youth, and at-risk youth populations (predominantly male) in its programs. But Outward Bound has also established outdoor adventure programs which attract other demographic groups (such as women's issues, educators, etc.) that may aid in promoting skill building, self-reflection, and group interaction in a less "exacting" format.

Other target groups for involvement in outdoor adventure programs, seeking specific benefits, have included couples (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002), the mentally ill (Kelley & Coursey, 1997), adolescent girls (Autry, 2001), and college students. Bentley (2003) explored motives of participation for students in college-based outdoor adventure programs. The three most significant outcomes and/or motives sought from involvement in outdoor adventure activities from this demographic group included: (a) meeting new people, (b) enjoying nature, and (c) escaping one's daily routine and social pressures (Bentley, 2003).

Gender Differences

Many outdoor adventure programs, due to the nature of the activities, have often catered to a predominantly male-type of agenda. These programs have focused on benefits primarily derived from activities that require greater strength, risk, endurance, and other outcomes typically related to males (Bunting, 1995). As a result, women may be seeking the same benefits as their male counterparts, but have been reluctant to participate in outdoor adventure programs. Collins (1999) describes such factors as, outdoor activities being too competitive, too action-based, and "task-oriented rather than process oriented" (p. 78) as a deterrent to female involvement. Men have also, traditionally, been regarded as having a more "risk-taking" nature than women (Kohler, 1996), while the perception of risk is often greater for women than men (Pinch, 2003). As such, activities which involve a high degree of risk, and are frequently the cornerstone of many outdoor adventure programs, may often preclude or deter women from participating.

Additional thoughts regarding differences in gender revolve around the relationship of benefits, or outcomes, that male versus female participants may anticipate when participating in the same outdoor program. Women may be seeking the same benefits as men, such as enhanced self-esteem, fitness, catharsis, and self-empowerment (Bentley, 2003; Henderson & Roberts, 1998; Pohl, Borrie, & Patterson, 2000), but may not be able to attain these benefits to the same degree in outdoor adventure programs as their male counterparts. Unfortunately, a clear picture of the outcomes from outdoor adventure programs, for both women and men, is not always self-evident. The current status of research from the literature regarding the perceived and achieved benefits from participation in outdoor adventure programs often proffers as many similarities as it does differences. For example, Leise (2003) describes female participants' reactions to outdoor programs as being in a place where "there's no discrimination in nature. It doesn't matter if you're male or female" (p. 13).

A review of the literature indicates that benefits from outdoor education participation points to varying areas of outcomes regarding male and female participants (Cook, 2001; Henderson & Roberts, 1998.) While changes in self-concept, self-confidence and perceptions of peer/social acceptance are promoted as likely outcomes from participation, are they experienced similarly in

both females and males? This paper explores these questions, and presents the results of an exploratory study which examined anticipated benefits in a college-based outdoor adventure program.

This study was conducted to examine the possibility of differences between men and women in terms of the benefits they seek in outdoor adventure education programs. In addition to anticipated outcomes, another element was explored that directly related to expected outcomes for participants. Not only were participants asked to rate the anticipated benefit from participation in the outdoor adventure program, but also the *importance* of that anticipated benefit. In other words, an anticipated outcome or benefit of participation in an outdoor adventure program might be increased physical strength. But for some, while an expected benefit, it would not be considered of high importance. For others, increased communication or group problem-solving skills may be an anticipated benefit achieved through outdoor programs, and would also be considered highly important.

Methods

Three overarching research questions guided this study. First, is there a relationship between specific benefits and the levels of importance placed on these benefits? Are levels of importance congruent with levels of agreement on specific benefits? In other words, if a respondent indicates a high level of agreement with expecting or achieving a specific benefit from an outdoor adventure experience, will the respondent also place a high level of importance on that benefit?

Secondly, will these benefits and their concomitant degree of importance, be the same for the women participating in the group, as for the men? Are there differences in anticipated benefits between men and women, as well as the degree of importance placed on these benefits? Thirdly, if these differences exist, are outdoor adventure programs adequately addressing the disparity in their program mission, goals or activity development?

Sample Population

The population sample in this study consisted of eighteen college students enrolled in a semester-long outdoor adventure education program in the Department of Recreation and Park Administration at Indiana University. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 34 years. One participant was a graduate student. There were 10 males, and 8 females participating in the study. The program entitled "CORE" (Conservation in Outdoor Recreation Education) culminated in a three-week long expedition to Colorado and the Henry Mountains of Utah. The expedition involved rock climbing, snow school techniques, long walks in the desert, and climbing Mt. Ellen. The intent of the CORE program is to develop outdoor leadership and instruction skills, through various outdoor activities and certification programs.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire, containing 30 question stems, related to anticipated benefits upon completion of the three-week expedition, and the corresponding importance of each benefit, was administered to all eighteen students two days prior to the expedition (see Appendix). The 30 questions relating to anticipated benefits from an outdoor adventure program were derived and clustered from the following domains: Psychological, Educational, Social, Spiritual/Ethical, and Physiological. The responses to the question stems were measured on a 10 point centimeter length scale. The scale was represented by a “line” positioned below each question stem. There was one 10 point scale for anticipated and achieved *benefits*, and another 10 point centimeter line representing the *importance* scale for each benefit (for the purpose of statistical analysis the 10 centimeter scale was converted to a 100 point scale, where 5.0 would become 50). Each participant was asked to strike a “mark” on the line where it best represented his or her beliefs about a particular benefit. For instance, a mark in the center of the line (around five cm) would indicate a “middle of the road” attitude about a particular benefit. The participant was also then asked to rate how *important* this particular benefit was to him or her. A posttest containing the same 30 question stems relating to benefits the participants felt they *actually* achieved after completion of the expedition, and their respective perceived *importance*, was administered approximately one week upon returning from the CORE expedition. All eighteen participants completed the posttest questionnaire.

Results

With respect to the *benefits* from participation in outdoor adventure programs, using univariate analysis of variance, no significant effects were generated, or observed in the data. However, a significant effect of time (pre/post) was noted for item number two, “enlightened spirituality,” where $p = .09$, and for item five, “greater sense of catharsis and relaxation,” where $p = .10$. With respect to *gender*, significant effects were noted for item one, “feeling physically stronger,” with a p value of $.08$; for item two, “enlightened spiritually,” where $p = .04$; for item eleven, “enhanced sense of self,” with $p = .06$; item 24, “acting on my ethical beliefs,” with $p = .09$; and for item 30, “experiencing a therapeutic renewal of mind, body and spirit,” with a p value of $=.09$ (see Table 1).

With respect to the perceived *importance* of expected benefits or outcomes, significant interactions were noted for item five, “greater sense of catharsis and relaxation,” where $p = .05$; and for item 24, “willing to act on my ethical beliefs,” a p value of $.05$ (see Table 2). Relative to time (pre/post), significant interactions were noted on item 12, “willing to seek greater risks in my life,” with a p value of $.06$, for item 17, “improved overall quality of life,” where $p = .07$, and for item 28, “enhanced body image,” with $p = .07$ (see Table 2).

In terms of *gender*, significant interactions were noted on item 2, “spiritually enlightened,” where $p = .02$. Item 28, “enhanced personal body image,” also showed significant effects with a p value of $.08$ (see Table 2).

Upon further statistical analysis, t tests revealed several differences with regard to gender and anticipated benefits and/or outcomes from participation in the CORE expedition. Significant

differences on the pretest were indicated, at the .10 alpha level, between males and females for question stem two, “becoming spiritually enlightened.” (The alpha level was set at .10, as the author was concerned with not committing a Type I error.) Males indicated a higher anticipation of “spiritual enlightenment” after participation in the CORE expedition than did females (females mean score equaled 62.2, and males = 74.0). The significance level was .02 (see Table 3).

For pre-scores regarding *gender*, and the *importance* of the benefits, two items were significant. Males indicated significantly higher levels of importance on question 24, “willing to act on my ethical beliefs,” and for question 26, “I will feel a greater sense of self-empowerment and ability to fix any dysfunction in my life.” The mean score regarding “ethical beliefs” for females = 62.3, and for males 77.6. For “feeling a greater sense of self-empowerment and fixing any dysfunction in my life,” females reported a mean score of 43.4, whereas the males reported a mean score of 64.1. For the question stem, “willingness to act on my ethical beliefs,” the p value was .03, and for the question stem, “greater self-empowerment,” $p = .10$ (see Table 3).

Post score differences for achieved *benefits* after participation in the CORE expedition, at the .10 level, revealed that the males reported a “greater sense of catharsis and relaxation” with a mean score of 65.9 for males, versus a mean score of 46.1 for females. The p value was .08 for a “greater catharsis.” In terms of *importance* of the benefits, at the .10 level, three items were significantly different. In this case, males reported being “more spiritually enlightened” after the expedition (males mean score = 77.6, and for females = 57.0, $p = .05$). Conversely, females reported higher levels of *importance* on “enhanced sense of self” after participation in the expedition (females = 88.1, males = 74.8, $p = .10$). Likewise, females also placed greater importance on the benefit “enhancing my personal body image” after participation in the expedition, with a mean score for females of 58.3, and for males = 33.1, with $p = .07$ (see Table 3).

Implications

Several implications might be inferred from the results of the data analysis. Firstly, there appears to be an overwhelming trend for participants to be more alike than different for *gender* in terms of specific levels of agreement for anticipated *benefits*, and for the *importance* individual respondents have place on those benefits. In other words, both males and females, in anticipation of benefits gleaned from participation in the CORE expedition, reported similar expectations for the thirty benefits listed on the questionnaire.

Secondly, there were significant correlations between the relationship place on anticipated *benefits* and their respective *importance* of these benefits. This is not wholly unexpected. The benefits a participant anticipated from the CORE expedition were also examined for their respective importance to the individual. A high degree of agreement, regarding the anticipation of a benefit, also resulted in a high degree of importance for the participant, in most cases. This was indicated fairly consistently in the data analysis.

Thirdly, while the significant differences might be spurious (due to the small sample size), they do cast some interesting questions regarding stereotypes typically placed on these types of outdoor adventure courses. For example, in this study, males reported higher levels of spirituality and self-enhancement after participation in the CORE expedition than did females. The program implication is that stereotypical thinking about how females and males will respond to a course may not be as consistent as historically thought. Women reported higher importance on an enhanced body image, which may reflect stereotypical thinking about women and their obsession with body image. But it also proffers the connotation that outdoor adventure recreation programs may provide a context in which females may feel better about their bodies. From the data, feeling a greater sense of self-empowerment was not indicated as a result of participation in the expedition for women, but instead was rated higher for men. This may reflect on-going inconsistencies regarding how women actually perceive outdoor adventure activities, and the benefits they anticipate receiving after participation.

Conclusion

Further research regarding the benefits and perceived importance of these benefits, between males and females in outdoor adventure programs, is recommended in order to discern the integrity of the results found in this study. This could be done through replication of the study, administered to subsequent participants after additional CORE expedition programs have been conducted. It would also be advisable to repeat the study, using the 30 item questionnaire, but with a larger number of participants, in future explorations. This may necessitate using participants other than the CORE students, as the number of participants enrolled in the outdoor adventure program is rarely above eighteen, due to administrative and staffing contingencies.

The examination of gender differences and outdoor adventure programs needn't be touted or perceived in a negative context. Nor does the participation by women in outdoor adventure recreation programs automatically assume the role of fixing a "deficit" in women's lives, or the need to ameliorate something wrong. Rather, the findings could simply reflect a demographic population whose needs may be *different*, and/or be *met* or *accomplished* differently with respect to the philosophical design of an outdoor program. The philosophical structure of outdoor adventure programs is reflected in the deliberate creation of their program mission, goals, activity development, and pedagogical methods, which may or may not promulgate meeting the needs of female participants.

Table 2

Univariate Analysis of Variance for Perceived Importance of Benefits (Outcomes) of Participation in the CORE Expedition

Question Stem	<i>df</i>	F	<i>p</i>
5. I had greater sense of catharsis and relaxation during the CORE expedition.	1	4	.052
24. I am more willing to act on my ethical beliefs after the CORE expedition.	1	4	.052
<u>Time (Pre/Post)</u>			
12. I am willing to seek greater risks in my life after participation in the CORE expedition.	1	4	.06
17. My overall quality of life was improved after participation in the CORE expedition.	1	4	.07
28. My personal body image was enhanced after participation in the CORE expedition.	1	4	.07
<u>Gender</u>			
2. I was more spiritually enlightened after the CORE expedition.	1	6	.016
28. My personal body image was enhanced after participation in the CORE expedition.	1	3	.08

Note. Alpha level = .10

Table 3*T Tests for Equality of Means for Anticipated Benefits of Participation in the CORE Expedition*

<u>Pre-test</u>				
Question Stem	<u>Mean Scores</u>			<i>p</i>
	Males	Females		
<u>Anticipated Benefits</u>				
2. I will be more spiritually enlightened after the CORE expedition.	74.0	62.2		.02
<u>Perceived Importance</u>				
24. I anticipate being more willing to act on my ethical beliefs after the CORE expedition.	77.6	62.3		.03
26. I will feel a greater sense of self-empowerment.	64.1	43.4		.10
<u>Posttest</u>				
<u>Achieved Benefits</u>				
5. I had greater sense of catharsis and relaxation during the CORE expedition.	65.9	46.1		.08
<u>Perceived Importance</u>				
2. I was more spiritually enlightened after the CORE expedition.	77.6	57.0		.05
11. My sense of self has been enhanced after participation in the CORE expedition.	74.8	88.1		.10
28. My personal body image was enhanced after participation in the CORE expedition.	33.1	58.3		.07

Note. Alpha level = .10

APPENDIX

FOLLOW-UP STUDY Perceived Outdoor Benefits of Participation in the CORE Expedition

Check one:

Male: ____ Female: ____

Last 4 digits of SSN _____

Read each question carefully considering the benefits you received or realized after participation in the CORE expedition. Please place a “mark” on the line which best represents your feelings regarding the following “realized benefits” (outcomes). The second scale represents how *important* the item is to you personally.

1. I feel physically stronger after participating in the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
2. I am more spiritually enlightened after the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
3. I now know a great many outdoor “technical” skills after the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
4. I learned a great many outdoor “leadership” skills after participating in the CORE the expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
5. I find more opportunities for a greater sense of catharsis and relaxation after the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
6. I am now more of a “team or group” member as a result of participating in this expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
7. I am better at social situations as a result of participation in the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
8. I am mentally stronger after participation in the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
9. I am less fearful leading outdoor groups after the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
10. I am willing to try new challenges after completing the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
11. My sense of self has been enhanced after participation in the CORE Expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
12. I am willing to seek greater risks in my life after participation in the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
13. I have greater environmental awareness after the CORE expedition.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____
14. I had a successful experience regardless of the expedition trip outcome.
Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree _____ Not Important _____ Very Important _____

15. Even if I did NOT have a successful expedition, it was most likely my fault.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
16. I have greater self-confidence after participation on the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
17. My overall quality of life is improved having participated in the CORE program.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
18. The benefits I received from the CORE program will be long lasting (> 1 year).
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
19. My relationships with other people have been improved after the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
20. My education is more complete after participation in the CORE program.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
21. I am better able to organize and manage situations after the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
22. I have stronger/better relations with my family members after participation in the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
23. I have a greater sense of compassion for other people after completion of the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
24. I am more willing to act on my ethical beliefs after the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
25. I am better able to balance my priorities (or sense of direction) in life after the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
26. I feel a greater sense of self-empowerment, and ability to fix any dysfunctional aspects in my life, as a result of the expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
27. I feel a closer connection with nature after participation in the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
28. My personal body image is enhanced after participation in the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
29. I have better problem-solving skills after participation in the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []
30. I have a therapeutic renewal of my spirit (mind/body/soul) after participating in the CORE expedition.
 Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree Not Important Very Important
 [] [] [] []

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About the author

Alison Voight, Ph.D.
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana
Email: avoight@indiana.edu