

**A critique of neo-Hahnian outdoor education theory. Part one: challenges to the concept of ‘character building’.**

**Abstract**

Within the diverse and sometimes amorphous outdoor education literature, ‘neo-Hahnian’ (NH) approaches to adventure education are exceptional for their persistence, seeming coherence, and wide acceptance. NH approaches assume that adventure experiences ‘build character’, or, in modern terminology, ‘develop persons’, ‘actualise selves’, or have certain therapeutic effects associated with personal traits. In social psychological terms NH thought is ‘dispositional’, in that it favours explanations of behaviour in terms of consistent personal traits. In this paper I critically review NH OAE in an historical context, and draw on Ross’ and Nisbett’s (1991) seminal review of dispositional social psychology to argue that OAE programs do not ‘build character’, but may provide situations that elicit certain behaviours. For OAE research and theory, belief in the possibility of ‘character building’ must be seen as a source of bias, not as a foundation. The conceptual analysis I develop provides not only a basis for critique, but also offers a way forward for OAE.

**Brookes, A. (2003). A critique of neo-Hahnian outdoor education theory. Part one: challenges to the concept of ‘character building’. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 3(1), 49 – 62.**

## **A critique of neo-Hahnian outdoor education theory. Part one: challenges to the concept of ‘character building’.**

### **Introduction**

When the term ‘character building’ is used contemporarily it is as well to check for irony. ‘It was character building’ may well refer to an experience that seemed pointlessly unpleasant or difficult. Nevertheless the idea that personal traits (character) can be acquired in one setting – the outdoor adventure – which will then persist in other settings, remains foundational to much outdoor adventure education theory (OAE), research and promotion. It is striking how enduring this idea has been in OAE. Its persistence is all the more remarkable when the weight of evidence against the possibility of ‘character building’ or ‘personal trait development’ is considered.

The task for this paper is to critically review the place for ‘character building’ in contemporary OAE in the light of evidence, mostly from outside the OAE field, that the very notion of ‘character traits’ (let alone ‘building’ them) should be treated cautiously, if not sceptically. Character traits, by definition, are supposed to manifest themselves consistently in diverse situations: trustworthiness on the mountain implies trustworthiness at work. The lazy person can be expected to prove their indolence time and again in the outdoors, in the workplace and in the home. By the end of the 1980s a major review of decades of social psychology research, much of it attempting to prove the existence of consistent personal traits, compelled a surprising conclusion: individuals are different, but differences in their behaviour in new situations cannot be defined by, or cannot be predicted by context-free ‘character traits’ (Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Shoda & Mischel, 2000). The fact that an individual is honest in one situation tells *very little* about whether that person will be honest in a different situation. The person who tends to be brave on the mountain may tend to be a coward in business and exhibit a mixture of cowardice and courage in personal relations. And so on. ‘Character building’ must be re-considered in the light of the fact that ‘character’, in the sense it is often used in OAE research and philosophy, is almost entirely illusory.

The main task of this research is a conceptual analysis to ‘join some dots’ between OAE research and important but neglected research in other fields. I draw on historical studies of some OAE antecedents for insights into how ‘character building’ has been construed, and on

an emerging convergence between social psychology and personality research (Shoda & Mischel, 2000) to provide a critique of ‘character building’ as a researchable claim. On the crucial issue of how ‘the person’ and ‘the situation’ shape human behaviour, I draw heavily on Ross’ & Nisbett’s (1991) seminal review. For reasons of scholarly caution I have not attempted to present any original insights into the fields I have drawn on; rather I have confined myself to using reviews and syntheses that have been the subject of peer review and critique in the relevant fields. (I recommend that interested readers do not go straight to primary sources for personality or social psychology research conducted more than ten years ago, but instead first check recent review articles or texts to place such work in a contemporary context. Developments in social psychology and personality research are such that some ‘foundational’ research must be substantially re-interpreted in the light of subsequent work.)

I also outline some ways forward for theory-building and research in the field. I contend that in many respects ‘character building’ has been a yoke which once cast off, opens the way for more defensible theory, research, and practice in OAE.

In this, the first of two a two-part series, I establish a conceptual framework for critiquing ‘character building’. In the second article, I undertake the task of reviewing how ‘neo-Hahnism’ influences contemporary OAE discourse, and examine in more detail the question of how and why the fallacy of ‘character building’ has been so widely held.

### **Character building as rhetoric, and as literal claim**

In understanding contemporary use of the term, it is important to consider both ‘character building’ as both a specific, literal claim, and ‘character building’ as a vague but appealing component of OAE rhetoric. In practice clear boundaries between the two uses may be hard to identify, but it is a useful analytical distinction.

The origins of the term ‘character building’ go back at least to Edwardian England, when Baden Powell envisaged scouting as a ‘character factory’ (Rosenthal, 1986). It is not clear the term was intended to be taken too literally, and it was certainly not intended as a scientific claim. Specific, researchable claims that OAE builds character appear to have emerged as

OAE became linked to fields such as corporate development, therapy, or formal education. It is arguable that the *roots* of ‘character building’ were never intellectual; rather, the term helped build support for the scouting movement (perhaps *because* it was rather vague), especially among the middle class, and resonated with contemporary hopes, beliefs and fears. To ask whether scouting actually built character might be less useful than to ask how adoption of the term helped build *the scouting movement*, through the term’s appeal to social networks and prevailing cultural dispositions (MacDonald, 1993; Macleod, 1983; Rosenthal, 1986).

Character building (or personal trait development) is an explicit educational aim for many contemporary programs, and seems to be an uncontested assumption in some OAE research. For example, many of the studies reviewed by (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997) included personal trait development. I examine ‘character building’s’ contemporary role in detail in the next article (Brookes, 2003), but any doubts about the contemporary importance of the term are easily dispelled by a web search combining terms such as ‘outdoor, education, character, and building’. The fact that cross-situational consistency in behaviour (i.e. character traits) cannot be empirically demonstrated may have created “years of debates and crises regarding the nature of personality consistency” (Shoda & Mischel, 2000, p. 407) within the fields of social psychology and personality research, but within the OAE field even research that finds no evidence of personal trait development has tended not to dispute the *possibility* of such outcomes.

Tracking the idea of ‘character building’ requires attention to its different guises, and must take into account some ambiguity in the term and its synonyms. The language may vary – terms such as ‘personal development’ or ‘self actualisation’ will be familiar to most readers, and often seem to at least imply character (personality) building (development). The idea of ‘character building’ may simply be implied, as it is in ‘adventure’, which can be read as the *personal transformation* of a central figure (character) in the course of a testing journey (Zweig, 1981). Persistence of the term ‘adventure’ in outdoor education itself invites consideration that the idea of ‘character building’ remains as the bedrock under large parts of the outdoor education landscape, including places where overt ‘character building’ has long been discarded from the surface.

### **‘Neo Hahnian’ OAE defined**

A convincing argument for ‘character building’ as a specific outcome of OAE programs requires a demonstration that,

1. Personal traits (such as honesty, trust, loyalty, compassion, care for nature or for that matter, ruthlessness) can be *developed* in an individual in one situation (the adventure program) and
2. These traits will persist when that individual is in other, different situations (often the workplace, or everyday life).

There is an intriguing contradiction between the ideas of traits as relatively fixed (surviving the transition from the OAE program to everyday life, and persisting, perhaps for years) while also being relatively malleable (changed by a three-week expedition). OAE could thus be held to provide a ‘magic key’ for changing personal traits that are (by definition) normally fixed. The need for a ‘magic key’ to achieve an apparently contradictory outcome vanishes if the implications of Ross’ and Nisbett’s (1991) review are taken in to account. I discuss these in more detail below, but the important implications can be summarised as follows,

1. ‘Traits’ tend to be relatively stable in given situations. This is the origin of their apparent fixity. For example, I may be relied on to respond impatiently if asked to do some menial task just when I have sat down to drink a cup of tea (I have put ‘traits’ in quotes because traits are inferred from observed behaviour);
2. ‘Traits’ can be changed within a given situation. I can learn to treat the drinking of tea as less sacrosanct.
3. Changed and unchanged alike, traits evident in the OAE (or any) situation are so weakly predictive of trait-related behaviour in other situations as to be practically unrelated. My newly learned tolerance for cold tea tells virtually nothing about my tolerance or lack of it in other situations or in relation to other things. Observed for long enough, I will continue to exhibit a range of patient and impatient behaviours in a way that largely defies attribution to some consistent underlying trait. If I am more prone to impatience than average, there will be overall differences between the frequency of my impatient behaviours and those of other

individuals, but these differences in averages will be relatively slight in comparison to variation most individuals exhibit over time. Most people will exhibit a *range* of patient and impatient behaviours, with even the most saintly exhibiting more impatience than the least saintly on some occasions or in some circumstance.

4. I may be *persuaded* to agree that cold tea is a metaphor for other things I should learn to tolerate; but the effect of this on my demonstrated tolerance in other situations should be treated circumspectly. Metaphoric connections *may* be little more than wishful thinking – I may believe I have become more tolerant, but the fly on the wall carefully monitoring my behaviour may disagree.

In this article I refer to contemporary approaches to OAE centred on personal transformation ('character building') as neo-Hahnian (NH). I have used this term because it makes three important distinctions from the idea of character building as exemplified in earlier youth movements in Britain and the United States,

1. NH approaches largely de-couple character-building from adolescent development. For the youth movements, character was considered to be formed in adolescence (Macleod, 1983; Springhall, 1977). The idea that traits could be developed, but then persist, can be seen as reflecting the irreversibility of the processes that occur as youth matures. The persistence of such changes simply reflected the arrow of time. The extent to which experiences in childhood or adolescence are deterministic is contentious (Kagan, 1998), but the point here is that there was a certain logic to it. The youth movements sought to steer a process already happening in adolescence. NH approaches assert character can be built in adulthood, and introduce into personal traits the contradictory notions – character as robust yet malleable – alluded to above.
2. NH approaches link character building with a single episode, or series of episodes, of adventure (for example attending an Outward Bound course). The earlier youth movements were, at least in conception, concerned with on-going, regular engagement (joining a movement rather than attending a course) (Springhall, 1977).
3. NH approaches emphasise *differences* between the OAE context and everyday contexts (although they may attempt to draw *metaphorical* connections). Earlier youth

movements made less of the differences between the context of the OAE experience and context in which character would be expressed. Scouting activities extended into the communities from which it drew its recruits, and in its outdoor activities attempted, at least prior to WW1, to contrive situations that were intended to resemble the military situations that it was supposed boy scouts would graduate into (MacDonald, 1993; Rosenthal, 1986)<sup>1</sup>.

With the development of NH OAE came not only the idea that character building was a specific, researchable outcome of OAE, but also (as the three points above show) a stronger dependence on the idea of personal traits. Compared to earlier forms of ‘character building’ NH OAE intensifies *disconnections* between the OAE situation and the ‘everyday life’ situation. The critique of ‘character building’ developed in this paper therefore applies particularly to NH OAE. Table I summarizes the essential features of NH OAE and the critique developed below.

The Neo Hahnian OAE position:		
<b>Individuals exhibit ‘character traits’ i.e. behavioural consistencies</b>	<b>NH OAE programs can change or develop ‘character traits’</b>	<b>These changed ‘character traits’ are relatively persistent</b>
What the research summarised by Ross and Nisbett (1991) supports:		
<b>Individuals exhibit a range of trait-related behaviour, according to the situation. How an individual behaves in one situation is not a good predictor for how they will behave in a different situation.</b>	<b>So-called character traits change in OAE programs because individuals respond to the OAE situation. These responses <i>can</i> be changed <i>within</i> the program. Over the years OAE practice has been refined to achieve this.</b>	<b>Neither the traits evident in the OAE situation, nor trait changes observed over the course of the OAE program, are strongly predictive of future behaviour in situations other than OAE.</b>

**Table 1. NHOE and the alternative position based on situationist social psychology research**

---

<sup>1</sup> Putnam (2000) has collated a great deal of evidence to track the overall decline of social movements (such as scouting) in the United States; similar trends may be true in all Western countries. The transition from youth movements to NH OAE can be seen as partly a consequence of community change, with less willingness to volunteer to help, or to join, a ‘movement’, and more willingness to pay for a specific service in the form of a course.

It is important here to separate ‘character building’ from other educational claims. ‘Character traits’ are not the only conceivable outcomes of OAE programs. (1) Knowledge and skills may be learned during OAE. If I learn to ride a bicycle as part of an OAE program, I will no doubt still be able to ride a bicycle when I return home. I may learn some strategies for dealing with conflict, and I can choose to apply the same strategies in other situations. (2) Beliefs may be shaped, especially if I am coached or persuaded. I may develop, and retain, religious or political beliefs while on an OAE program. I may *believe* that the program has made me more honest, or more loyal, and I will say so if asked after the program. I may decide to join a church or vote for a certain political party, and I may maintain these commitments for life.

It should be noted that a shift in emphasis from ‘character building’ to ‘transfer of learning’ does not necessarily put OAE on a sounder footing. Referring to the problem of transfer in education generally, Haskell (2001, p. xiii) observes: “research findings over the past nine decades clearly show that as individuals, and as educational institutions, we have failed to achieve transfer of learning on any significant level.” Nevertheless, the critique of ‘character building’ developed here does not rule out the possibility that OAE may offer particularly effective ways to develop certain skills or knowledge, or to change beliefs.

It may be difficult to distinguish between trait-based claims for OAE and skills, knowledge, or belief claims. For example, when a program claims to develop ‘attitudes to nature’ the first task is to establish what that claim means. ‘Attitudes’ are no doubt inferred from behavioural tendencies (traits), but also involve knowledge, skills, aptitudes and beliefs. My contention here is that making analytical distinctions between personal traits, knowledge, skills, beliefs, and physical or mental aptitudes is useful; that is not to say that these categories correspond to clearly divided domains of human behaviour. Recognising and resolving such difficulties is one of the consequences of moving beyond NH understandings of OAE.

It should also be noted that some ‘traits’ are not meaningful out of context. ‘Loyalty’, for example, is not an abstract quality but a quality of particular relationships. One person may see loyalty where another sees fanaticism. Moreover loyalty to one (the state; the employer; a spouse; a friend) often entails disloyalty to others. Thus when advocates of character building

do so in the context of particular claims about certain communities (often in terms of a perceived ‘decline’ in desired traits across a whole community (Outward Bound Australia, 2002)) it is necessary to attend to the ideological aspects of the norms being advocated.

Not all OAE and not all outdoor education is NH. It is possible some whole programs and approaches could be categorised as either NH or non-NH. There is a distinction to be made, for example, between a program that uses one or more episodes of outdoor experience for personal development, and a program that attempts to incorporate outdoor experience into individual and community life (for example (Dahle, 2000)). More commonly NH influences will be manifest in different ways and to different degrees in particular practices.

### **Previous critiques of ‘character building’ OAE**

NH OAE and its precursors have always had their critics. It is reasonable to surmise that the popularity of terms such as ‘personal development’ has grown in response to negative baggage acquired by the nearly synonymous ‘character building’

Springhall (1977, p. 11) noted that outside studies of youth movements had been uncommon, as some of those within the field observed: “ ‘Because the apologetics of youth movements are callow, their arguments crude, and their practices puerile, ‘ wrote Leslie Paul self-depreciatingly in 1951, ‘they are dismissed or ignored by scholars’”. Such dismissals were not without reason. Springhall (1977, p. 141) noted that the Scouting literature had been “flawed until recently by either excessive concern for the movement’s public image or by an over-adulation of its founder . . .”

Three previously made criticisms are important in the context of this article.

#### ***1. ‘Character building’ is (conveniently) vague***

Roberts, White, and Parker (1974), in a study of what they termed ‘the character training industry’ in Britain had also criticised ‘in house’ research, that purported to demonstrate the effectiveness of character building programs, on three grounds, including vagueness: “many of the key questions . . . were not entirely meaningful. What does it mean to have ‘gained in maturity’ . . .” (Roberts et al., 1974, p. 19). Previous research, they pointed out, was open to

bias because it was not conducted by researchers independent of the OAE organizations studied, and should be treated with caution because it relied too heavily on the self-reports of participants. It is one thing to *believe* that you have developed improved character traits; it is another for these claims to be verified.

Drasdo (1972, p. 34) had earlier pointed out that the language then used by NH OAE was inflated and meaningless: “the search for meaning becomes exhausting”.

Roberts et al. (1974, p. 19) contend that the vagueness of the terms in which character building is expressed may suit both sponsors and course organisers alike, for different reasons: “[f]or course organisers, the vagueness of the aims . . . is useful because it conceals the extent to which their private visions differ from sponsors’ objectives. For sponsors vagueness . . . [meets] the need . . . to despatch employees for training without fully disclosing the firm’s ulterior motives” (Roberts et al., 1974, p. 100).

Macleod (1983, p. 29) also encountered vagueness: “This was no narrow mandate . . . definitions of balanced development were somewhat arbitrary . . . [s]o character builders took refuge in comprehensiveness, piling up plans and statements in muddled profusion. Indeed, they never managed a clear definition of the word ‘character,’ assuming instead that everyone knew what they meant”.

The extension of OAE to management development has attracted similar criticism. Irvine (1994), for example, observes: “When definitions [of outdoor management development (OMD)] are offered they tend to be so broad that almost any activity could be included.”

## ***2. ‘Character building’ is appealing rather than convincing***

It is clear that the idea of ‘character building’ is, and has been, taken seriously and believed within OAE. But the success of youth movements, such as scouting, can be understood as having been achieved on several levels, through appeals to different constituencies, and by gaining adherents without necessarily changing individuals. MacDonald (1993, p. 131) explains how the appeal of the Scout Handbook worked,

One voice in the handbook is rhetorical, the other symbolic. The first carries the social injunctions, the instruction in Scout Law, in good citizenship. It refers to the social codes; it is explicit, and announces itself in imperative voice, as orders to the reader: 'every boy ought to learn how to shoot and to obey orders'. The other discourse works in a different way, through pictures, by association. It is essentially iconic, its meanings carried by implication: the weight of the word 'scout', the meaning of the campfire, the significance of the war dance. This discourse refers to the code of adventure and to its associations with the imperial frontier. The two discourses support each other, the meanings of one reinforcing the values of the other, although logically, they are often in contradiction. Together, they carry the ideology of scouting.

Later (p. 132) he discusses the glamorisation of militarism in the early days of scouting, through the uniform and its associations, and the appealing hint of ritual and secret society, the promise of freedom and boyhood world while at the same time offering an opportunity to take an adult role.

A number of studies have looked at the appeal of youth movements, especially scouting, in Britain and the United States, both in terms of broad cultural appeal (for example through associations with adventure and the frontier) and to anxieties and beliefs specific to particular groups, especially the middle classes. The appeal of youth movements ranged from fears that masturbation would sap the virility of youth (MacDonald, 1993) to anxiety about the decline of the British Empire (Rosenthal, 1986). Youth movements contrived, or unintentionally succeeded, in appealing to different groups on different levels. On one level scouting offered 'character training', on another discipline and training in obedience. Youth movements offered tempting images to youth, but more importantly activities, many of them originally devised by Ernest Thompson Seton, that appealed (Rosenthal, 1986).

There is evidence that the role of 'character building' (and citizenship training) in the formation of the scouting movements was to put what now would be called 'spin' on militaristic aspects that would have been controversial if canvassed openly. Springhall (1987) has shown that official scout positions were contradicted by private correspondence and local

practice. Likewise Summers (1987) has argued that at a grass roots level both Scouting and Guiding were seen as part of war preparations.

‘Character building’ *did not need to be factually true* for the youth movements to succeed. The activities and images appealed to youth, the symbols and rhetoric appealed to adults; youth joined, adults approved. None of this depended on the idea of character building being literally true. Over time images, symbols, activities, and rhetoric could be reworked to maintain the appeal of the movements. For example, the specific image of military scouting that emerged from Britain’s experience of the Boer War was finally buried in the mud and mass slaughter of the trenches of WW1. While Baden Powell admired the Hitler Jugend, international scouting rejected it (Rosenthal, 1986). The Outward Bound movement used Kurt Hahn’s opposition to nazism to achieve further distance from militarism, but the groundwork had already been laid by the capacity of ‘character building’ to denote activities structurally similar to military training but connote peaceful intentions.

More recent research following the migration of OAE to management development has also found that commitment to OAE approaches is driven by belief in its effectiveness, rather than evidence. Badger (1997, p. 324-5) concluded:

[C]urrent users’ firm beliefs in the benefits [of OMD] for personal, team and leadership development are used as justification . . . What was not clear was how such conclusions were arrived at other than through anecdote and intuition . . . adherence to the outdoors as a management development technique may be based, at least in part (as the present study suggests) on acts of faith rooted in nothing more than perceived wisdom and anecdote . . .’

Persuasive rhetoric, appealing images, flexible symbols, and attractive, satisfying activities may be sufficient to explain the success of NH OAE. It may not be necessary for character building to actually ‘work’ for NH OAE to succeed as a movement, although it may be necessary that it be *believed* to work. It doesn’t.

### **3. NH OAE doesn't work**

Direct criticism of NH OAE arises from studies of OAE that point to a lack of evidence that 'character building' is achieved by OAE programs, or that offer actual evidence that OAE programs do not build character. I discuss such research in the next article (Brookes, 2003). What I contend here is that such results are to be expected; individuals can become a 'different person' in certain situations, but those differences are not predictive of behaviour in other situations.

#### **Neo-Hahnian OAE and the situationist accounts of behaviour**

Character attributions are both explanatory and predictive. Ross' and Nisbett's (1991) *The person and the situation* summarises evidence from decades of research into the predictive power of personal traits; it remains the definitive work on this issue (Vaughan & Hogg, 2002). Ross and Nisbett (1991) note that previously observed individual differences correlate *at best* 0.3 with differences observed in a novel situation. Even in the best cases, most variation in behaviour from one situation to another cannot be explained by personal traits. (It should be noted that much of the research in this area has used controlled experiments, in which behaviour has been observed. This kind of research should be distinguished from research that examines (for example by questionnaire) *beliefs* about behaviour.) Recent work in personality psychology has accepted the empirical evidence that "cross-situational variability, rather than consistency, is in fact the norm" (Shoda & Mischel, 2000). (More complex models of personality, which recognise that, in effect, personality consists of stable patterns of situation-specific behaviours (Shoda & Mischel, 2000) may have something to offer future OAE research, however I will not pursue that possibility here.)

#### ***The power of situations: character or conformity?***

The resistance of Kurt Hahn, the founder of the Outward Bound movement, to Nazism, is routinely invoked to symbolise a supposed distinction between the militaristic aspects of pre-WWII youth movements and OAE. Outward Bound, according to the standard account, was developed to build the character of *merchant* shipmen in WWII. It would be a mistake to treat what may be little more than an attempt to 'position' OAE as careful analysis. But it is reasonable to suppose that there is at least an implied assumption that 'character', in its NH form, is somehow opposite to (militaristic) conformity. Rosenthal (1986) wryly observed that six of the original nine scout laws mean obedience to authority. Read in their historical

context, this obedience was not owed to just any authority, but to scout masters representing military officers and the British Empire. NH OAE, on the other hand invoked an image of shipwrecked sailors calling on inner resources to survive adversity. If anything, it was implied weakness of character that gave rise military obedience, or for that matter acquiescence to the Nazis. Thus while in Baden Powell's usage, " 'character training' is . . . a misnomer . . . [it] is the simple acceptance of the scout laws" (Rosenthal, 1986, p. 106), NH OAE might be seen to correct this emphasis, by associating 'character' with individual self-reliance. But such a conclusion may be too hasty.

Ross' and Nisbett's (1991, p. 53) reinterpretation of a famous experiment, the implications of which were not fully appreciated at the time, helps explain how NH OAE may also develop conformity rather than 'character'. What became known as the Milgram experiments caused controversy in the early 1960s, coming, as they did, at a time when it was widely held that moral behaviour was a matter of individual responsibility (and not partly circumstantial), and amidst widespread concerns about 'conformity'. Milgram planned a series of experiments intended to help understand why Germans had what was supposed to be a particular cultural disposition towards obedience to authority. It was supposed this would help to explain why so many failed to resist Nazism. He devised an experiment to test obedience to authority, first testing his procedure on ordinary Americans "a people rich in cultural tradition of independence and distaste for authority" (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 53). The experiment involved persuading a subject to administer painful and evidently dangerous electric shocks to another person (actually a stooge), out of sight in the next room, under the guise of an experiment about the effects rewards and punishment on learning. Few if any believed that Americans would continue to cooperate with the experiment when it became clear that the procedure was distressing or harming the 'victim'. The results "confounded Milgram . . . and everyone else" (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 55). Nearly 70% of subjects continued past the 'danger: severe shock' level through to the '450-volt XXX' level. Many variations of the experiment were conducted to remove possible objections. The conclusion remained largely the same: in certain situations, most ordinary people could be induced, quite readily, to do evil. Obedience had little if anything to do with character traits,

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse . . . And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end (Milgram, 1963, p. 377, in (Ross & Nisbett, 1991))

There was no need to conduct the follow up research intended to find out what made the German people particularly susceptible to Nazism. The Milgram experiments showed that no particular susceptibility was needed, just particular circumstances.

Ross and Nisbett (1991) point out that the Milgram results can be attributed to some quite *specific* aspects of the situation. The subjects of the experiment were not particularly ‘conformist’ in everyday life. In the Milgram situation, important aspects of the situation included incrementally increasing the level of electric shock from an innocuous base, a lack of a channel for refusal (the experimenter kept stating “you must continue”) and a situation that defied comprehension.

### ***Conforming to OAE situations***

Ross and Nisbett (1991) summarise other experiments that showed strong conformity effects could be demonstrated in other situations. The Asch conformity studies showed that in certain circumstances up to a third of experimental subjects could be induced to state the opposite of what they could see (for example in matching the lengths of lines). The required conditions included a peer group who had each in turn previously made identical but false assertions (i.e. giving a clearly wrong answer to a simple visual test) and circumstances that allowed the subject no logical explanation as to why the others had said, in effect, that “black is white”.

Other studies of the power of situations cited by Ross and Nisbett (1991) include Sherif’s manipulation of the relations between separate groups of adolescents on a summer camp through the selective use of cooperative and competitive activities. These situational factors strongly influenced inter-group relations. “Sherif also could not resist mentioning that mere

informational campaigns, even those couched in appeals to moral values, were universally unsuccessful in reducing enmity” (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 39-40). Other studies looked at the phenomena of bystander intervention, especially those in which no member of a large group intervenes to help someone who clearly needs help. Numerous studies have confirmed that your chances of receiving help are greater if there is only one bystander than if there is a group.

One of the most remarkable demonstrations of the power of situations Ross and Nisbett (1991) review occurred in an experiment conducted by Darley and Bateson. Seminary students were asked to give a lecture (in some cases on the parable of the Good Samaritan). En route to give the talk, the experimenters had arranged that the student would pass by a person in obvious need of help. Of all the personal and motivational factors that were examined, the *only* factor that made a significant difference to the probability that the student would stop to help was whether the student had been told they were early or late to give their talk: 63% of those with plenty of time stopped to help; 10% of those running late stopped to help (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). According to Ross & Nisbett (1991) these and other studies demonstrate strong situational influences and weak character trait influences.

NH OAE seems largely to have rejected overt commitment to conformity in the form of obedience to authority so evident in the scout code (Rosenthal, 1986). However Ross’ and Nisbett’s (1991) conclusions (and subsequent work, such as (Shoda & Mischel, 2000)) suggest that it is timely to examine what conformist effects might be embedded in OAE practices, and what power these situational factors have to explain what could otherwise be taken as OAE programs success at ‘changing people’. The ‘initiative games’ widely used in programs such as Project Adventure (Rohnke, 1977) illustrate this point. In these games a facilitator provides a task to a group. The task can only be completed by the group demonstrating some desired individual traits, such as cooperation and initiative. The language of the activity invites participants to avoid treating the ‘facilitator’ as an authority. But there may be conformist effects in the activity, in the form of group norms and the consequences of going against them, and lack of channels for dissent (for example if the person who rejects the game is seen as not being a ‘good sport’, or whether programs which offer ‘challenge by

choice'(Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988) offer real, valued alternatives to the 'challenge'. The term 'challenge' itself is loaded; what *kind of person* would avoid a challenge?).

### **Concluding comments**

OAE is hardly alone in taking the idea of personal traits for granted. Decades of research in social psychology was premised on the assumption that each normal individual had personal traits that would manifest themselves consistently across a range of circumstances (Shoda & Mischel, 2000). The ability to test for dispositions such as honesty, assertiveness, loyalty, and so on would be useful in areas ranging from employee recruitment, through educational counselling to recruiting spies; it is not surprising that so much research sought to validate such tests. 'Trait' statements ('y is a bastard' or 'x is nice') are the most common way of describing behaviour, and probably reflect how observations are perceived and remembered (Ross & Nisbett, 1991); it is understandable that the research was expected to succeed. (A widely observed tendency to prefer trait-based explanations of behaviour over situation-based explanations is sometimes referred to as the *fundamental attribution error*(Ross & Nisbett, 1991) – see (Brookes, 2003).

Situationist studies add plausibility to claims that OAE programs change how individuals behave; but they severely undermine accounts of OAE that claim such changes are dispositional, not situational. Changes observed in OAE situations are not predictive of changes observable on leaving the OAE situation. 'Character building' has been a remarkably persuasive and appealing slogan, but is flawed as a basis on which to base substantive claims for OAE.

Staff and many of those who participate in NH OAE may be convinced their programs 'work'(Roberts et al., 1974, p. 82). Undoubtedly OAE programs draw on years of accumulated knowledge about how to gain the cooperation of groups and individuals and how to change behaviour. Ross' and Nisbett's (1991) review of situationist social psychology research not only affirms that this should be so, but provides some frameworks for analysing how such programs 'work'. But my reading of this research also suggests that the attribution of changes in observed behaviour should not be to 'trait development', but to the (temporary) OAE situation. OAE programs probably do 'work', at least temporarily, but not in the way

that the advocates of neo-Hahnism imagine. Conformity to expected norms is observed because certain situations elicit conformity, not because certain situations develop or bring out latent character traits.

This analysis has not attempted to exhaustively review the implications of situational social psychology for OAE. I have indicated some areas where more work could be done. I will however, make three more points,

1. Only some situations have strong effects on behaviour. Ross & Nisbett (1991) discuss the Cambridge Somerville study of delinquency , that made extensive and ambitious interventions in the circumstances of average and at-risk youth over a five-year period, including provision summer camp experiences, and involvement with the Boy Scouts or YMCA. If anything the program slightly *increased* delinquency.
2. Situations may shape current behaviour, but this does not determine future behaviour, even in the case of strong events such as teenage pregnancy, P.O.W. camp indoctrination, or lottery wins (Kagan, 1998; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Shoda & Mischel, 2000), and
3. ‘The situation’ includes social, cultural and geographical elements. Whereas ‘character’-based schemas for understanding OAE encourage universalist applications of OAE and individualist explanations of OAE (Brookes, 2000, 2002); situationist research emphasises the importance of theory and research that accounts for the geographical, historical, social, and cultural location of OAE practice.

This critique of NH OAE raises serious questions for some OAE programs, some OAE theory, and some approaches to OAE research, particularly research that is ‘too close’ to what might be called the NH OAE ‘movement’. Uncritical references to the legacy of Kurt Hahn and ‘character building’ must be seen as a potential source of bias in research reports, rather than as ritual acts of homage to sound foundations. However, this critique also points to some ways forward for OAE research:

- \_ The collapse of ‘character building’ as a substantive claim highlights the historical effectiveness of ‘character building’ as a rhetorical claim. Here the way is opened for more attention to the social and cultural construction of OAE.
  
- \_ The collapse of the notion that *single episodes* of experience can change personal traits (‘big bang’ theories of OAE) opens the way for more careful consideration of programs that *construct on-going relationships* between individuals, particular groups, and particular places in the outdoors. The self that emerges in the outdoors can be reinvoked by returning to the outdoors, and in this way changes observed in the outdoors could be said to be enduring.
  
- \_ The collapse of dispositionist accounts of behaviour turns attention from the psychologised individual to detailed consideration of the situations that arise or are constructed in the outdoors. Some of the situations that OAE has used traditionally may be seen to be coercive or manipulative when subjected to more careful study; but there is also potential to pay more attention to how outdoor experiences construct meaning and shape knowledge.

These ways forward compensate for the loss of ‘character building’ as an OAE foundation.

### **Acknowledgements**

An earlier version of part of this paper was presented at Whose Journeys? Where and Why? The Outdoors and Adventure as Social and Cultural Phenomena: April 8-10 2002 Buckinghamshire, Chilterns University College. Two anonymous reviewers provided helpful criticism and suggestions.

Funding for this research was provided by the Department of Outdoor Education, the School of Arts and Education, and the Bendigo Faculty of La Trobe University.

Badger, B., Sadler-Smith, E., & Michie, E. (1997). Outdoor management development: use and evaluation. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 21(9), 318 -- 325.

Brookes, A. (2000). *Dwelling in the details: the fallacy of universal nature experience and the myth of the essential self*. Paper presented at the Friluftsliv i et nytt århundre - friluftsliv i et internasjonalt perspektiv [Outdoor Life in the Next Century---Outdoor life in an International Perspective], Norges idretthøgskole, Oslo.

- Brookes, A. (2002). Lost in the Australian bush: outdoor education as curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 34(4), 405 -- 425.
- Brookes, A. (2003). A critique of neo-Hahnian outdoor education theory. Part two: 'the fundamental attribution error' in contemporary outdoor education discourse. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 3(2), 119-132.
- Dahle, B. (2000). *The Management of Nature and Socialisation into Friluftsliv*. Paper presented at the Encountering nature: Norwegian ideas and Scottish experience, St Andrews University.
- Drasdo, H. (1972). *Education and the Mountain Centres*. Tyddyn Gabriel, Denbighshire: Frank Davies.
- Haskell, R. E. (2001). *Transfer of learning: cognition, instruction, and reasoning*. London: Academic Press.
- Hattie, J., Marsh, H. W., Neill, J. T., & Richards, G. E. (1997). Adventure education and Outward Bound: out-of-class experiences that make a lasting difference. *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 43 - 87.
- Irvine, D., & Wilson, J. P. (1994). Outdoor management development - reality or illusion. *Journal of Management Development*, 13(5), 25 -- 37.
- Kagan, J. (1998). *Three seductive ideas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- MacDonald, R. H. (1993). *Sons of the Empire. The frontier and the boy scout movement 1890 - 1918*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Macleod, D. I. (1983). *Building character in the American boy. The Boy Scouts, YMCA and their forerunners 1870-1920*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Outward Bound Australia. (2002). *Hahn and Beyond*. Retrieved September 16 2002, 2002, from <http://www.outwardbound.com.au/symposiumpost.html>
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Roberts, K., White, G. E., & Parker, H. J. (1974). *The character-training industry*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles.
- Rohnke, K. (1977). *Cowstails and Cobras*. Hamilton, Massachusetts: Project Adventure.
- Rosenthal, M. (1986). *The character factory. Baden Powell and the origins of the boy scout movement*. London: Collins.
- Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991). *The person and the situation. Perspectives of social psychology*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Schoel, J., Prouty, D., & Radcliffe, P. (1988). *Islands of healing; a guide to adventure based counselling*. Hamilton: Project Adventure Inc.
- Shoda, Y., & Mischel, W. (2000). Reconciling Contextualism with the core assumptions of personality psychology. *European Journal of Personality*, 14, 407--428.
- Springhall, J. (1977). *Youth, Empire and Society. British youth movements, 1883 - 1940*. London: Croom Helm.
- Springhall, J. (1987). Baden-Powell and the Scout Movement before 1920: Citizen training, or soldiers of the future? *English Historical Review*, 102(October), 934 -- 942.
- Summers, A. (1987). Scouts, Guides and VADs: a note in reply to Allen Warren. *English Historical Review*, 102(October), 943 -- 947.
- Vaughan, G. M., & Hogg, M. A. (2002). *Introduction to social psychology* (3 ed.). Frenchs Forest N.S.W.: Pearson Education.
- Zweig, P. (1981). *The adventurer*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

