

CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT IN OUTWARD BOUND: THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

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ABSTRACT¹

Adventure education philosophers have argued that controlled exposure to challenge can enhance participants' psychological resilience. This study supports this claim, demonstrating significantly greater gains in resilience for 41 young adults participating in 22-day Outward Bound programs than in a control group. Resilience describes a psychological quality that allows a person to cope with, and respond effectively to, life stressors. All Outward Bound participants reported positive changes in their resilience and their overall change effect size was three times larger than the average outcomes in adventure education research (Hattie, Marsh, Richards & Neill, 1997). Most interestingly, social support was positively related to the growth in resilience during the Outward Bound program. More specifically, the perceived support from the *least* supportive group member was the best predictor of growth in psychological resilience. This highlights the importance of considering the relationship between group process and individual growth. Perhaps leaders should be more wary about negative group members who may retard the potential growth of other group members.

This article is summary version of Neill & Dias (2001)

INTRODUCTION

Psychological Resilience

Much adventure philosophy emphasises the need for humans to encounter the edges of their physical and psychological possibilities in order to enhance their capacity to deal with everyday life (Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, I., 1990; Ewert, 1989; Hunt, 1990; Priest, 1990). Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound claimed that:

Expeditions can greatly contribute towards building strength of character.

Joseph Conrad in Lord Jim tells us that it is necessary for a youth to experience events which 'reveal the inner worth of the man; the edge of his temper; the fibre of his stuff; the quality of his resistance; the secret truth of his pretences, not only to himself but others

(<http://www.kurthahn.org/quotes.htm>).

This approach represents a 'development-by-challenge' educational philosophy and provides an underlying justification for adventure education. In psychology it is known as 'stress-inoculation training' and is seen as analogous to the physical immunisation process (Rutter, 1993). Just as immunity to infections is gained through the controlled exposure to a pathogen (rather than avoiding the pathogen), so too successful encountering of difficult challenges, it is reasoned, can provide a form of psychological inoculation.

'Psychological immunisation' is a phrase which Kurt Hahn might well have used in the 21st century. Hahn, for example, described the Outward Bound process as a double-edged sword which cuts a person and then heals stronger than before (Richards, 1977). Hahn's lament was that post-industrial lives were becoming devoid of inoculative, resilience-enhancing challenges which had previously been a natural part of pre-industrial living.

Currently there is particular interest in the both physical and psychological health fields in the concept of 'psychological resilience'. Psychological resilience has been described as an individual's capacity for maintenance, recovery or improvement in mental health following life challenges (Ryff, Singer, Dienberg Love, & Essex, 1998), successful adaptation following exposure to stressful life events (Werner, 1989), and an individual's capacity for transformation and change (Lifton, 1993). Closely related concepts which have received research attention include hardiness (Kobasa, 1979), resourcefulness (Rosenbaum, 1990) and mental toughness. In simpler terms, this is about a person's capacity to not just survive, but to thrive on life's challenges.

Despite the popular interest in psychological resilience little has been discovered from research about programs which can develop this capacity in people (Rolf & Johnson, 1999). Thus, one of the main purposes of the current study was to investigate the enhanceability of resilience through a challenging Outward Bound program.

Social Support

Simply providing people with a series of challenges, however, may not be an optimal approach for enhancing psychological resilience. For example, it is known from psychological work with individuals and growth groups that unconditional positive

regard and social support are critical for personal growth (Carver & Scheier, 1999). According to Rogers (1980, p.116), “as persons are accepted and prized, they tend to develop a more caring attitude towards themselves”. What’s more, social support has been found to be one of the best predictors of psychological resilience (Blum, 1998).

In the absence of appropriate support, a challenging experience can be harmful. This was what Kurt Hahn meant by referring to the ‘double-edged sword’ -- challenge cuts deeply into a participant’s psyche but in an environment of intense support, the psyche is able to heal even stronger and thus the person is ‘inoculated’ against future stressors. So, challenge and support must work together in order to produce effective change in a stress-inoculation approach. Indeed, in a major review of the effects of Outward Bound programs we proposed ‘support’ (via feedback) and ‘challenge’ (via goals) as two major ingredients of the positive effects, along with the ‘immediacy of experiences’ and ‘reassessment of coping strategies’ (Hattie et al., 1997).

Thus, investigation of group support and psychological resilience could provide valuable insight into the causal processes of Outward Bound programs. In the current study, we hypothesised that: (a) a 22-day Outward Bound program would enhance participants’ psychological resilience and; (b) that the growth in psychological resilience would be positively related to perceived social support during the Outward Bound program.

METHOD

Participants

In an experimental group, there were 49 young adult participants who completed an Outward Bound program, 41 of whom returned complete data. There were 22 males and 19 females, with a mean age of 21 ± 3.1 years. The control group comprised of 31 students in an undergraduate psychology subject at the Australian National University (4 males and 27 females; $M_{age} = 24 \pm 7.1$ years).

Instruments

To measure resilience, this study used 15 self-report items from the Resilience Scale (RS) by Wagnild and Young (1993). Concurrent validity has been supported by correlations with measures of morale, life satisfaction and depression (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Resilience was measured on the first and last day of the Outward Bound program.

Social support was measured by creating four items to assess the perceived support received from the group, the instructor, the most supportive group member, and the least supportive group member. Social support was measured on the last day.

Program

The 22-day multi-element Outward Bound programs was conducted in Australia. This ‘standard’ program is based on the original Outward Bound program conducted in Wales in the 1940’s and is characterised by its physical, emotional and social intensity in the context of a long wilderness expedition (Richards, 1977). The primary focus was on personal development. A guided experiential education approach was used, following a do-review-plan learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). Typical activities included expedition and food planning, a ropes challenge courses, initiative tasks, navigation, bushwalking, communication skill sessions, goal setting, group debriefings, caving, rafting and/or

canoeing, rockclimbing and abseiling, solo (3 days alone), a final expedition without an instructor, and a cross-country run. Group development activities included initiative tasks, debriefing, and individual and group feedback sessions, with participants increasingly taking on responsibility for running the program themselves. Previous outcome research has identified the Australian Outward Bound programs as highly effective in enhancing self-concept and related outcomes (Hattie et al., 1997; Marsh, Richards & Barnes, 1986, 1987).

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Resilience

To date, there has been limited research evidence on the enhanceability of resilience. In the current study, all 41 participants reported increases in resilience scores. Remarkably, all participants in the Outward Bound groups reported positive Resilience Scale changes. The overall change was very large ($M_1 = 7.61$, $SD_1 = .88$; $M_2 = 8.58$, $SD_2 = .73$; $ES = 1.10$) and was significantly larger ($F(1,68) = 6.39$, $p = .01$) than changes in the control group ($M_1 = 7.33$, $SD_1 = 1.54$, $M_2 = 7.86$, $SD_2 = 1.28$, $ES = .34$). The amount of change in the Outward Bound groups was three times larger than the average outcome in other adventure education research (Hattie et al., 1997). Thus it appears that the Outward Bound Australia 22-day programs have a very strong effect on enhancing participants' psychological resilience.

Social Support

Overall, participants reported very high levels of perceived Social Support during the Outward Bound programs, with their ratings as follows (out of 10 maximum support):

- From the most supportive person in the group ($M = 9.38$, $SD = .95$)
- From the 'instructor' ($M = 9.21$, $SD = 1.08$)
- From the 'group' ($M = 8.87$, $SD = .95$).
- From the 'least supportive person' ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 2.26$)

Most interestingly, perceived social support was positively related to the growth in resilience during the Outward Bound program (accounting for 24% of growth in resilience, $F(4,38) = 2.70$, $p = .05$). More specifically, the perceived support from the *least* supportive group member was the best predictor of growth in psychological resilience ($\beta = .40$, $p = .02$). In other words, the perceived influence of the lowest supporting group member had a big impact on participants' growth.

This highlights the importance of considering the relationship between group process and individual growth. It may suggest that instructors should be wary of negative group members who may retard the potential growth of other group members. Certainly many feel the temptation to 'hang in there' with negative groups members and rationalize their continued inclusion because 'they will good' and that 'it is a challenge for the rest of the group'. However, instructors 'must not only understand the process of group development; we must also understand how the individual is affected by the group' (McAvoy, et al., 1996: 59).

Thus, it is important that leaders nurture a caring attitude towards each individual in the adventure education setting (Mitten, 1995). The 'elements of a humanistic approach, such as respect for the dignity and individuality of each member and belief in each

member's potential for growth and development, are essential in all group work efforts' (McAvoy, et al.: 59).

It is worth considering ways in which this 'unconditional positive regard' can be fostered in situations where there are group members who offer low or negative support to others. Prevention is better than cure, so early intervention, involving feedback to individuals who provide others with low or negative support, as well as to those individuals who perceive that they are receiving low support, is recommended. If chronic negative social behaviour persists, an ethical dilemma is faced in choosing between the optimisation of learning benefits for a whole group versus some individuals. Removal of participants who are retarding the growth of others seems justified on the basis of the results in the current study.

For a pro-active approach to building social support, a sequential process to developing social support can be suggested (Neill & Dias, 2002). For example, plan activities to bond people early on in programs, including such as name games, get to know you activities and then trust activities. In the middle parts of a program, deeper social development activities can be conducted, such as sharing life stories and journal entries. Towards the end of a program, participants can get more involved with providing direct, safe, honest feedback to one another.

In some ways, the findings from the current study invite more questions than they answer. For example, this study only involved young adults in long Outward Bound Australia programs, so it would be useful to know more about the effectiveness of other programs in order to better assess the relative efficacy of the Outward Bound Australia program. The transferability of the remarkably large resilience gains to everyday life also warrants investigation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides encouraging empirical support for the philosophy of stress-inoculation training as implemented in an Outward Bound program. The cutting edge of challenge, it seems, can and does make people stronger, particularly when the salve of social support is applied. Being in a learning environment which is both challenging and supportive can be recommended as a powerful formula for growth and is well utilised in Outward Bound programs.

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