Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of
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MSW (University of Utah, 1995)
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“Meaning-making and the wilderness experience:
An examination using a constructive-developmental lens”

School of Child and Youth Care

Wednesday, April 3, 2019
9:00 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B007

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Nevin Harper, School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Douglas Magnuson, School of Child and Youth Care, UVic (Member)
Dr. Christopher Lalonde, Department of Psychology, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Prof. Johan Potgieter, Department of Psychology, North-West University

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Cecilia Benoit, Department of Sociology, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Wilderness Experience Programs (WEPs) take youth into wilderness settings in order to teach wilderness travel and leadership, expand personal capacity, and equip youth with coping skills in order to manage life’s difficulties. Though considerable research has been conducted on WEPs, no one has sought to understand the student experience these programs provide through a constructive-developmental lens (Kegan, 1982, 1994). The purpose of this case study was to explore, describe, assess, and understand—using the framework of Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory—the impact a 21-day wilderness backpacking experience had on five participating youth. The researcher believed that understanding how participants in a wilderness backpacking course make sense of their experience through the lens of their constructive-developmental perspective might help inform the theories of change that underpin WEPs, the means by which desired change is facilitated, and the reasons why some youth thrive and others struggle. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What constructive-developmental perspective does each participant bring to this wilderness backpacking experience?

2. How does each participant make meaning of his experience, and what experiences appear significant in this process?

3. How does each participant’s constructive-developmental perspective appear to influence the meaning he has made of this wilderness experience?

4. What changes, if any, are evident in pre-trip and post-trip applications of the Subject-Object Interview (designed to determine constructive-developmental perspective) for participants completing this experience?

This exploratory study utilized a case study approach. The researcher embedded as a participant-observer for the duration on a 21-day backpacking course with Outward Bound Canada in the Ghost River Wilderness, Alberta, Canada. Nine youth participated in the expedition, with five male students volunteering as research participants. Pre-trip and post-trip administrations of the Subject-Object Interview and post-expedition semi-structured interviews were conducted with each research participant. Additionally, the researcher made field observations and wrote field notes. The subsequent analysis produced in-depth profiles of each research participant’s experience of the course, pre and post expedition scores from the Subject-Object Interviews, and a description of how each research participant’s experience might be understood through the lens of their constructive-developmental perspective. Although no significant changes to constructive-developmental perspective were realized, implications of these analyses were discussed, conclusions were drawn, and recommendations were made.