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PREVIEW

**THE ROLE OF CHALLENGE AS A
MOTIVATING FORCE IN ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT
FOR AT-RISK YOUTH:
OUTWARD BOUND REVISITED**

by

Scott Husted

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Interdepartmental Area of
Major: Community and Human Resources

Under the Co-Supervision of
Professors W. James Walter and Daniel Wheeler

Lincoln, Nebraska

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THE ROLE OF CHALLENGE AS A MOTIVATING FORCE IN ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT FOR

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**The Role of Challenge as a
Motivating Force in Academic Engagement
for At-Risk Youth:
Outward Bound Revisited**

Scott W. Husted, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska, 1998

Advisors: James L. Walters; Daniel W. Wheeler

Past studies of adventure based programs for at-risk youth have focused on positively affective outcomes related to self concept and/or reduced recidivism of delinquent behaviors. In this quantitative study, the Outward Bound wilderness model was used to examine the malleability of goals motivated behaviors, and the linkage between goals "orientations" and academic performance. *Mastery* and *performance* goals orientations are examined. Responses of at-risk high school students to a Goals Orientation/Hope questionnaire, prior to and after completion of a 28-day Outward Bound course, are compared and contrasted to the collective responses of a singular administration of same, to "normal" mainstream students. The findings expand upon previous descriptions of a social and cognitive approach to motivation and personality.

Discriminate analysis of a small subsample of mainstream and at-risk students, revealed a very strong positive association between adoption of both mastery and performance goals orientations and superior levels of academic achievement. Results indicate that Outward Bound positively influences both, but especially affects greater acceptance of mastery driven goals among at-risk students, tethered to an equally greater sense of goal directed commitment (agency).

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Acknowledgements

"If you think education is expensive—try ignorance."

—Anonymous

As a prelude, it is my personal opinion and strong conviction, that the greatest threat to a society, a civilization—is not the ravages of warfare, disease or famine—but rather; the greatest threat we face stems from the destructive consequences of ignorance. In our earlier history, native American tribes were the stewards of this continent. One of their customs involved the selection of tribal elders—chosen for their archival knowledge, and for the express purpose of passing along the virtues, history, traditions, collective wisdom, and the tongues of their tribes. These elite elders were called "*wisdom keepers*."

I would like to especially acknowledge and extend my profound thanks to a few special wisdom keepers (not implying elder) on this campus, whose support and guidance enabled me to negotiate the pathways leading to this dissertation.

Thanks to Edd Clemens who has counseled me from the very beginning, and to Al Blezek who tried to teach me Politics 101. Thanks to Jim Walter and Dan Wheeler who "rescued" me; and special gratitude to Mary Beck—who thought she was just going to review a paper—and suddenly found herself immersed in a cascade of administrative hurdles to my other degree. My profound thanks to all of you, for your contributions.

"It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty. To the contrary, I believe that it would be possible to rob even a healthy beast of prey of its voraciousness, if it were possible, with the aid of a whip, to force the beast to devour continuously, even when not hungry, especially if the food handed out under such coercion, were to be selected accordingly"

Albert Einstein

"Without any doubt we have in the past been the unconscious oppressors of this new human seed which bursts forth pure and charged with energy. And we have superimposed ourselves upon it without admitting the needs of its spiritual expansion. So the child has remained almost completely hidden - or very much overshadowed - by this unconscious egotism of the adult".....

Maria Montessori

Chapter 1

Introduction

Daily headlines reveal the scope of the problem—juvenile crime is increasing at an alarming rate and is involving younger participants and prey alike. This is not entirely a matter of individual aberrations but rather, can be viewed as a cultural and societal indictment as well. The headlines also depict a disturbing trend; that being a general loss of civility and the increasingly turbulent nature of the social dynamics at interplay in our society today.

The current state of juvenile crime across this country can be attributed to any combination of factors, not the least of which include: poor school performance, loss of hope, absence of purpose, and resignation. Clearly, these are but a few predisposing factors, which collectively, manifest themselves in truancy, delinquency and other aberrant patterns of behavior. Substantial numbers of these youth eventually drop out of school, falling easy victim to a sequela of embitterment, illiteracy, drift, crime and recidivism. Left unattended, this cycle of decaying potential threatens to undermine the very foundation of our society (and our future) as we know it. Few would argue against the proposition that, when individuals' "hope" diminishes to the point of despair, of resignation, then a separate cycle of crime and recidivism evolves, with scant *realistic* potential for rehabilitation and productivity.

Decisions to behave in an aberrant manner, apart from the mainstream of society, are in essence, decisions born of rebellion, often involving a sense of identity. Some are defensive or reactionary, made in haste with little thought given to the possible consequences while others are more deliberate ("rationalized" so to speak) and with strong conviction. Clearly, an early

attempt at cognitive and behavioral modification is indicated, in order to negate the first stage of decay i.e., dropout.

Statement of Purpose

Wilderness intervention is widely heralded as a cost effective and efficacious means of igniting positive “attitude adjustment” together with accompanying constructive behaviors. This study explores several of the social-psychological variables which come into interplay in this behavioral equation, and focuses on a unique means to reorient the moral compass of troubled young adults, with stronger alignment toward internal attributions, and “identity” markers such as: integrity, core values, intrinsic motivations, sense of purpose, goals, and goal directed commitment.

A review of the literature however, reveals the absence of empirical studies related to the direct transferability of wilderness derived skills and attitudes, for example, exploring the degree to which enhanced self concept and confidence translate into improved performance in the classroom. Specifically, the purpose of this study focuses on this void, i.e., whether or not—wilderness derived discoveries of “self” (upon at-risk students), translates into intrinsic motivation, attitude changes, and behaviors associated with academic engagement.

Context of Problem

Students who drop out of school represent an illiterate and probable resource draining segment of society, and therefore, become a major concern of family, educators and policy makers alike. For the nation as a whole, costs of dropout illiteracy are reflected in higher welfare expenditures, lost tax revenues, and increased crime and prevention costs. In a recent report, the Heritage Foundation defines functional illiteracy (by today’s standards) as having a level of comprehension at the sixth grade level or below. The report

revealed the scope of the problem, citing a federally funded survey of 3,600 young Americans between 21 and 25 years of age, in which only 27% could make inferences from a lengthy feature story in a newspaper (Bauernschub, 1989).

While there is no typical dropout, youth from low socio-economic and minority backgrounds, tend to leave school at disproportionately higher rates than their counterparts on the other end of the socio-economic scale (Pallas, 1987; Williams, 1989). And most would agree that illiteracy, delinquency, crime and recidivism are tightly linked, in fact, the Business Council for Effective Literacy in 1989 forwarded the proposition that "No one would argue that there is a direct causal relationship between illiteracy and crime, but a look at a broader picture points to a hot connection" (Anderson & Miller, 1991).

Near the end of the volatile decade of the sixties, a new technological revolution was just beginning and a disturbing national trend of increasing illiteracy was recognized in a New York Times editorial in 1969, captioned: A Nation of Illiterates? The article pointed out that

The youth who leaves school without being able to read enters society crippled. Worse, his deficiency is likely to impel him to become a dropout, a frustrated, embittered and easy victim of delinquency, drift and crime. At present, an estimated one third of the nation's school children are embarked on such a dismal course, and in the nations big cities, the hopeless army is probably closer to one half of the total enrollment. (Zuckerman, 1995)

However, the economy of the times contributed to complacency, for even then and well into the mid seventies, over 75% of the work force in well paying mass production jobs such as auto workers and steelworkers, were indeed, high school dropouts (Zuckerman, 1995).

Two years following the Times editorial, Chief Justice Warren Burger, of the United States Supreme Court, in a speech before an audience of the National Conference on Corrections in 1971, addressed the growing problem of crime and recidivism, and referred to society's "moral obligation, . . . common sense and self interest to provide the motivation for self improvement for these individuals." Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since Justice Burger's admonition and the outlook has not improved, rather, it has worsened. Both the New York Times and Justice Burger foresaw the potential impacts of diminished hope and resignation.

Significance of Study

Worldwide competition has diminished the well paying mass production jobs of days past. Today's dropouts have much greater difficulty in finding and holding similar employment. Only ten years ago, estimated unemployment for dropouts shortly after they leave school, was more than twice that of same age students who graduated (Pallas, 1987). A review of research literature pertaining to juvenile offenders, coupled with interviews, was undertaken (Brunner, 1993) to determine the effect of "sustained frustration" (rather than academic failure per se) as a predisposing factor of juvenile delinquency. Brunner found ample evidence of the often reported link between reading failure, academic failure, and delinquency. And when poor employment prospects are tethered to Brunner's findings, it is easy to imagine how behaviors which derive from sustained frustration, can become compounded or amplified to the point of criminal behavior (and recidivism) as a "last resort" so-to-speak.

And while Justice Burger's admonishment to society's "moral obligation, . . . common sense and self interest to provide the motivation for

self improvement for these individuals” may carry tacit agreement by most, some specifics serve to illuminate the urgency of the problem.

In the above study, Brunner warned “If a recidivism rate is a barometer that measures the success of correctional institutions in reducing criminal activity, the data as of 1989 are predicting stormy weather.” His findings revealed that over eighty-five percent (85%) of juveniles and sixty-five percent (65%) of adults incarcerated are functionally illiterate and overall juvenile recidivism rates range from 60-84%. Public juvenile facilities held 56,123 juveniles in Feb. 89, representing a 14% increase since 1985. Adding further significance, is the fact that the country’s juvenile population decreased over this period, meaning that a greater proportion of juveniles were being incarcerated. Only one birthday separates juvenile court from adult adjudication and incarceration. Adult recidivism within one year after release is equally staggering, reported to be as high as 70% (Anderson & Miller, 1991).

Recidivism figures such as these, combined with new and younger offenders entering the system, have created the current situation of case loads which strain Juvenile Court dockets across the country beyond capacity, and provide ample support to what is common acknowledgement i.e., that traditional after-the-fact attempts at vocational and remedial “rehabilitation” by correctional institutions and social agencies have had sparse success.

In a meta-analysis of nearly 500 juvenile delinquency studies, Mark Lipsey (1994) of Vanderbilt University divided treatments into three broad categories: *deterrent*—such as “Scared Straight” type programs, *insight oriented*—e.g., family therapy or rap groups and *structured and behavioral*—as in job training or behavior modification. His meta-analysis indicates that behavioral programs are the most successful, many reporting

20-30% reduction of recidivism. "They tend to be structured environments that rely on teaching things, not psychodynamic insights," according to Lipsey.

On the other hand, he adds, "when you do insight counseling for juvenile delinquents, you get more insightful juvenile delinquents. That's not bad by itself, but it's not where you want to put your tax dollar" (Lipsey, 1994).

Theoretical Base

Within the field of educational psychology, a great deal of attention has focused recently on Dweck and Leggett's (1988) social-cognitive theory of motivation, which forwards the proposition of a causal relationship between a person's conception of their abilities—which motivates them to set certain social or academic goals in life—and their behavioral response—in academic and social settings—to challenging situations or moments of difficulty or intimidation. The authors describe two basic types of orientation toward life in general and toward cognitive or formal education endeavors in particular: first, a *mastery* orientation, in which the student's primary concern or goal, is incremental improvement of one's level of skills, which in the face of a challenging situation, is commonly associated with adaptive type behaviors such as: strategy use, switching of strategies, increased effort, and persistence.

The other, a *performance* orientation, wherein the student's main concern or goal revolves around performing at a level which receives favorable judgment by others. Depending upon these individuals' *perceived* level of their immediate ability, commonly associated behaviors in the face of challenging situations, are more likely to be maladaptive in nature, including: self aggrandizement (if perceived ability level is high) or (if

perceived ability level is low), avoidance of difficulty, lack of persistence, external attributions, and/or learned helplessness.

In essence, some people choose to avoid challenging situations altogether if possible, and others seem almost eager to “take the bull by the horns” so-to-speak. Examples might include for instance, learning how to operate a computer, speaking before an audience or, reciprocally, choosing art class instead of algebra.

A 25-statement Goals Orientation Inventory (Schraw & Roedel, 1993), based on Dweck and Leggett’s generalized theory, was developed and tested for reliability and validity, in order to establish a standardized inventory by which to measure a person’s performance and mastery orientation (Appendix A).

Hypothesis

The behaviors associated with mastery orientation, intuitively appear to be most compatible with academic success. It is also reasonable to expect that participation in an Outward Bound wilderness course, might positively influence this particular orientation, in as much as mastery associated behaviors are taught and developed throughout the wilderness challenge.

Research questions. The hypothetical keystone of this research effort rests upon the possibility of molding or encouraging students’ goals, in a more mastery directed orientation. Might the effects of experiential stimulation, high expectations, and challenging, short term goals (such as occurs on an Outward Bound wilderness course), alter an individual’s Goals Orientation more toward *mastery*? It is reasonable to expect such a shift, in as much as strategy use, extra effort, determination, and incremental improvement—the commonly associated behaviors of mastery directed

individuals—are integral to and developed throughout an Outward Bound course.

Additionally, a very much related question to be explored, stems from a most intriguing finding of a survey commissioned by the NCAA, which revealed that an overwhelming majority of high school drop outs, did not participate in any athletic activities while they were in school (see National Education Longitudinal Study, 1988). An unavoidable inference is that participation in extra-curricular activities might somehow influence or effect one's orientation. Accordingly, the central research questions to be explored in this endeavor, are stated as follows:

1. Does one's overall Goals orientation change, as a function of successfully participating in an Outward Bound wilderness course?
2. Is a greater sense of agency and pathways (Hope) attained, as a function of participating in an Outward Bound wilderness course?
3. What are the relationships between goals orientations and hope, and do they change as a function of Outward Bound?
4. Are at-risk students goals and hope attitudes brought closer in line to those of their "normal" mainstream counterparts, as a result of Outward Bound?

Justification and Need

If drop out, illiteracy, drift, crime and recidivism (commonly linked in the literature), are viewed as stages in the cycle of the lives of at-risk students, then it is reasonable to expect that interrupting the first two stages (drop out and illiteracy) will significantly negate the latter deteriorative stages of crime and recidivism.

And although this might appear to be a myopic and rather naive solution to a complex problem, and implicitly obvious to most, such an