

IMMERSIVE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES:
AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to invite fifteen women to explore memories of their immersive wilderness experiences. Based on this writer's own wilderness experience, the central question was whether participants would be drawn to partake in an immersive wilderness experience because of a recognition of its inherent benefits. Fifteen women were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format, guided by a set of eleven questions, their definition of wilderness, the role the wilderness played in their experience, any therapeutic or health related benefits, the impact of these benefits and whether there were any distinctive aspects of participating in a woman-only immersive wilderness experience. Interestingly, major themes emerged which related more so to the activity, than the synergy between human and the wild elements. Major themes included activities, women only wilderness experiences and the qualities of wilderness as a setting, which included elements of escape and an altered state of being.

Keywords

Adventure Therapy, Benefits, Immersion, Outdoor Education, Wilderness, Women.

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This journey began long ago with the knowing that nature held the answers to many of my questions. I'll never forget the day I went to see my professor, Marie-Luce Garceau in 2000, to talk to her about my ideas relating to nature and wellbeing. She excitedly introduced me to another professor, Leah MacEwen. After an hour and a half session discussing research possibilities into wilderness, women and nature, I felt the many years of privately held beliefs and ideas had been validated. I had never experienced such an overflow of confidence. And thus began seven years of ups and downs, starts and stops. I could not have succeeded without the many strong womyn who guided and believed in me. Their belief in me encouraged me to see the strength and wisdom within myself. *“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”* Albert Schweitzer

Matante Judith, il y a longtemps, tu m'as donné ta bague de diplômé. Pour ce geste symbolique, ton amour et ton support continu, je te suis reconnaissante.

Playing in nature and exploring wilderness settings have been integral parts of my life. Before I even knew about the research regarding the benefits of contact with nature/wilderness, I knew it was beneficial to me. Prior to learning of my Métis ancestry and about blood memory, I was connected to Mother Earth. I learned lessons from Her, before I knew how they applied to my life. I was reminded of how integral She is to the cycle of life, while visiting my aunt in hospice, as she gradually succumbed to cancer.

Pour ma matante Michelle, qui a vécu son amour de la nature, durant sa vie et pendant sa convalescence à l'hospice. Même le cancer ne t'a empêché d'être dehors pour ressentir le vent sur ta peau et d'entendre la cacophonie de grenouilles et d'oiseaux. Merci de cette leçon...

I am grateful for the many lessons learned throughout this journey. May I continue to be open to the Wisdom of the natural world...

Judith

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Introduction

“...I think we just need connection sometimes. Like bad cell service, you have to wander around trying to find it. I think that connection is to our natural selves. The nature within.” (Holly)

Background and context

Wilderness conjures up images of vast expanses of forest, majestic mountains, clean air and potable water. Historically, humans have had a varied relationship with the wilderness. From the time of the early Homo erectus 1-2 million years ago to the beginning of modern industrialization, our survival has depended on how we understood our place within the web of life. Tuning into the natural world's rhythms was a prerequisite for surviving in the wilderness. Being in a wilderness setting was anything but a recreational and fun. Activities based in the wild were related to the need to find nourishment and building materials. Elements in the wilderness had the capacity to provide medicines and sustenance to those who acquired the necessary knowledge. The wilderness was also fraught with numerous dangers which had to be understood and treated with deserved respect. Humans had to master a variety of skills, which would allow them to eke out a living in the wilderness. Every generation passed on their wisdom to the next, thus making survival easier as groups expanded their geographical reach. Previously nomadic peoples survived by hunting and gathering, living in communal groupings.

Around 10,000 BCE, humans began to practice sedentary agriculture (Wadley & Martin, 1993), which eventually led to permanent settlements. Agriculture and trading of goods became the machinery of civilizations' market-based economies. By the time the Industrial era began in the early 18th century, the relationship between humans and nature had changed from a symbiotic

affiliation to one based on resource extraction to feed the growing demands for food and goods (Spirkin, 1983).

The role of the wilderness setting gradually morphed from being our home, to one that we visit for recreational purposes. Attitudes towards and usage of the wilderness changed from adversarial to recreational, offering the opportunity for enjoyment (Nash, 2001). Governments began setting aside large tracks of land by creating national parks, for reasons ranging from protecting its natural resources to promoting tourism (Watter, 1997).

Women did not historically venture into wilderness settings for recreational purposes. They tended not to seek out adventures in the untamed wilderness due to the misogynistic influences, which portrayed women as physically frail, passive and emotionally unstable, thus unsuited for the rigours of outdoor pursuits (Bialeschki, 1992). This began to change in the mid-19th century, as the early feminist movement began to influence Victorian mores, roles and expectations regarding women and outdoor activities (Bialeschki, 1992; Lynch, 1987; LaBastille, 1984).

In today's modern world, the wilderness has taken on a sort of 'otherworldliness'. How does the shrinking patchwork of wilderness vestiges fit into our convenience-filled, comfort driven existence? We are over-stimulated and sleep deprived. Heart disease and stroke are the second leading cause of death in Canada. (Heart and Stroke Foundation, 2015) Mental illness touches Canadians at alarming rates. (Government of Canada, 2006) In 2012, Canadian childhood obesity affected 29% of the population between the ages of 7-11 years. (Public Health Agency of Canada. *Curbing Childhood Obesity; A Federal, Provincial and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights*, 2012.) Escaping to the wilderness has become "a dream place that you never actually get to go to, but you always want to go there." (Kate). Wilderness

offers the possibility of enjoyment, learning, personal and social growth and therapeutic outcomes. (Miles, 1986; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983)

The latter part of the twentieth century saw the creation of various outdoor experiential educational programs, such as adventure therapy programming and outdoor education. Group and individual physical challenges are planned and facilitated in a backdrop of a natural setting, such as a rock face for rappelling, a water way for canoe trekking and a mountain, park or desert for hiking. The group processes lie at the very core of wilderness therapy approach (Gass, 1993). The therapeutic value generally comes from the activities planned to occur in a natural setting, which lead to an enhanced sense of connection and personal competence as a result of difficult physical challenges (McBride & Korell, 2005). There is mounting evidence of the benefits that come from an immersive wilderness experience, whether the explicit goal is to learn a skill, build one's confidence or self-esteem or to develop team building strategies. (Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997)

An immersive wilderness experience need not have a competitive edge to it to provide an environment that supports the emotional well-being of participants (McBride & Korell, 2005). The "wilderness environment offers peace, tranquility and simplicity; many of the distractions that prevent a client from looking at her issues and challenges, are removed in the wilderness setting" (Todesco, 2003, p. 96). Women in particular, "tend to be more relationally focused and are more likely to experience a sense of power and mastery by successfully connecting with others, rather than by overcoming adversity" (McBride & Korell, 2005, p. 4).

Research objectives

The purpose of this phenomenologically influenced, exploratory study, was to find out how a small sample of women described their immersive wilderness experiences. The concept of humans attributing beneficial qualities from contact with nature or immersion into wilderness settings has been researched by various fields of study. The following literature review is a brief summary of findings referencing the impact that contact with nature or wilderness has on human beings, as well as how humans are utilizing wilderness as a tool in the betterment of health and social challenges. Due to the broad purpose of this study, the literature review presents a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches from a variety of fields such as medicine, psychology, education and outdoor recreational programming.

Literature review

Interest on how contact with nature or wilderness impacts humans has been studied by a range of scholars, through lens as varied as post-operative healing times to therapeutic tools when working with teenagers in conflict with the law. As indicated previously, the broad nature of theories which support the findings of this study, requires a wide-ranging literature review. The review begins with an overview of some biological-based theories, then continues with a summary of some emotional and psychological perspectives. The lengthiest review involves an examination of outdoor wilderness programming and its multi-faceted theories and uses. I explore the research related to women and wilderness, and complete the literature review with a brief summary of gaps in research. In conclusion, I review research on the differences between natural environment and wilderness.

The Human/nature connection

The biophilia hypothesis, first introduced by Harvard entomologist Edward O. Wilson (1984), emphasizes the existence of a genetically based human need and inclination to associate with life and its natural processes. He first used the term biophilia in an article by the same title in the New York Times Book Review in 1979 (Wilson, 1984, p. 147). Wilson (1992) points to examples of the existence of biophilia, such as when people go to national parks to experience natural landscapes or when individuals are known to travel long distances just to stroll along the beach for reasons they cannot articulate at times. He believes that “as we come to understand other organisms, we place a greater value on them, and on ourselves” (Wilson, 1984, p. 2). Stephen Kellert has further explored Wilson’s biophilia hypothesis, positing that our biophilic expressions show the interdependence of our physical, material, intellectual, emotional and

spiritual well-being to nature (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Extrapolating from this theory, he has researched the connection between greener architectural designs and improved productivity where humans live, play, work and learn (Kellert, Heerwagen & Mador, 2008). This theory of biological connection was tested in the field of medicine in a seminal study by Roger Ulrich. In 1984, his experiment showed how a view through a window might influence recovery for post-surgical patients, as compared to those who had no view. Post-operative patients who had a view through a window required less pain medication, and were released from hospital sooner than patients who had a view of a wall or who had no window. He posited that there was a restorative effect elicited by natural views that reduced fear and stressful thoughts.

Years later, Kaplan (1995) proposed a similar restoration theory with the principle of Attention Restoration Theory (ART). He suggested that natural environments provide a wealth of restorative experiences which lead to recovery from fatigue. Studies looking at the benefits of contact with nature showed positive results such as relaxation, stress reduction and mindfulness (Korpela, Hartig, Kaiser & Fuhrer, 2001; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, 1984). The benefits of nature are increasingly being studied by researchers working in the field of immune-related diseases and conditions. (Sternberg, 2010)

Physiological/biological impacts

Researchers exploring the psychological benefits of contact with nature have discovered benefits in a variety of populations (Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Hartig, Mang & Evans, 1991; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Cognitive findings supporting a link between contact with nature and improved mental processes such as attention, creativity and problem solving have influenced fields such as architecture, city planning and office design (Hartig 2003; Whitehouse, Varni,

Seid, Cooper-Marcus, Ensberg, Jacobs & Mehlenbeck, 2001; Ulrich, Simons, Losito, Fiorito, Miles & Zelson, 1991). However, research has also demonstrated strong correlations between contact with the natural environment and quantitatively measurable physiological effects to the body (Ulrich, 1984; Orsega-Smith, Mowen, Payne, & Godbey, 2004).

Dr. Esther Sternberg, is recognized for her research into brain-immune interactions and the effects of the brain's stress response on health: the science of the mind-body interaction (Sternberg, 2010). Her research is a prime example of how recognizing the interconnectedness to ones lived experience, emotions and setting can impact wellbeing. Her studies explore how pleasing surrounding, including the natural environment, can profoundly impact a person's health.

The Japanese have long engaged in *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, which involves taking short and leisurely trips to a forest environment. Research by Li (2010) demonstrated significant increase (50%) in the activity of cancer-fighting white blood cells after only spending two to four hours on two consecutive days in the woods. Much of this type of research is focused on the impact that phytoncides (wood essential oils) have on the immune system. In western terms, this equates to aromatherapy. The phytoncides, which are released by trees in the forest, seem to have a positive impact on cell activity blood pressure (Li, Nakadai, Matsushima, Miyazaki, Kresnky, Kawada & Morimoto, 2006; Kawakami, Kawamoto, Nomura, Otani, Nabika & Gonda, 2004), systolic, diastolic and serum cortisol levels in college students (Nam & Uhm, 2008). In addition to medical applications, the use of wilderness settings in experientially-influenced activities has led to the creation of what is now referred to as adventure therapy. The blending of ecology, psychology and philosophical influences has contributed to the emergence of eco-therapeutic models.

Emotional/psychological impacts

Ecopsychology “places human psychology in an ecological context, and is aimed at healing the divisions between mind and nature, humans and earth” (International Community for Ecopsychology, 2016). At its core, ecopsychology suggests there is a collaborative relationship between planetary and personal well-being – that the needs of the individual are equally relevant to the other (International Community for Ecopsychology). Theodore Roszak has delved into how psychological health is related to the ecological health of the planet. (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995) Generally, Ecopsychologists believe the destruction of the natural environment negatively affects the physical and mental health of humans. The paradigm of ecopsychology supports the healing value that occurs when people are in nature and demonstrate an attentive respect for the natural world (Mitten, 2009). Humanity’s physical and psychological wellbeing is inextricably linked to the status of the planet’s condition.

Rozzak believed that humans lack balance in so many facets of their lives. He recognised what Earth-based cultures have known for centuries, that reconnection with nature is vital not only for the maintenance of the physical world (habitats, animals, plants, landscape, and cultures) but also for people’s well-being and happiness (Pretty, 2004; Roszak, 2001; Roszak et al., 1995; Totton, 2003).

Howard Clinebell (1996), a pastoral counsellor, coined the term ecotherapy based on his belief that there was an artificial separation or disconnect between the self and the natural world. In an effort to bring wellness and healing to the human spirit and mind, he incorporated nature-based activities such as gardening, walking while appreciating scenery and spending time with animals, when working with individuals (Chalquist, 2009).

Eco therapy or eco counselling is the application of ecopsychology to therapeutic practice (Clinebell, 1996). It is an umbrella term for a gathering of techniques and practices such as wilderness therapy and nature-based therapies, which emphasize the circles of mutual healing between the human mind and the natural world (Chalquist, 2009). Such interventions have a fundamental belief that contact with elements of nature has a positive impact on well-being (Beringer, 2004) which leads to increases in environmentally sustainable practices (Davis, 2004).

By caring for the earth, some have surmised that individuals are also engaging in self-care, including their spiritual self. This hypothesis has led to the creation of the field called horticultural therapy, which is utilized with a wide range of physical and psychological conditions. It is defined by the American Horticultural Therapy Association (2013) as “the engagement of a person in gardening and plant-based activities, facilitated by a trained therapist, to achieve specific therapeutic treatment goals” (American Horticultural Therapy Association, 2013).

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who has a Ph.D. in molecular biology, is a professor of Medicine Emeritus and the founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He is the author of several books and scientific articles on the relationship between mindfulness and wellbeing. In his book entitled, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (1994), Kabat-Zinn speaks about interconnectedness and the need for balance in the web of life. “We might appreciate life more, people more, food more...if we perceive, by our own looking more deeply into them, that everything we are in contact with connects us to the whole world in each moment, and that things and other people, and even places and circumstances, are only here temporarily” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 62-63). Bardwell (1992) noted that “the natural environment plays an invaluable

role in enhancing our everyday well-being, our receptiveness to other people, our learning as well as our overall quality of life” (as cited in Mitten, 1994, p. 68-69). The definitions of what constitutes a natural environment can vary significantly. In this study, I envisioned the term wilderness, to mean: “a tract or region uncultivated and/or uninhabited by human beings or an area essentially undisturbed by human activity together with its naturally developed life community”. (Merriam, 2013)

Utilizing the natural environment to effect change

Outdoor experiential education is a broad umbrella term that includes outdoor education, recreation and adventure therapy. (Warren, Mitten, & Loeffler, 2008). All utilize the natural environment as a fundamental component to achieving their intended goal. The essential difference between programs lay in their intended goals, and how they structure the activities to achieve the learning or therapeutic outcomes. Adventure therapy targets a range of clients from adolescents completing a ropes course to rape survivors participating in a therapeutic wilderness experience. The role of the wilderness or natural setting depends on the value the guiding philosophies of the program and its facilitators assign it.

The domain of adventure therapy is influenced by multiple educational and psychological frameworks. Although various definitions exist, the one identified by Gass et al., is contemporary and comprehensive. They define adventure therapy as “the prescriptive use of adventure experiences provided by mental health professionals, often conducted in natural settings that...engage clients on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels” (Gass, Gillis & Russell, 2012). Programs exist for a variety of populations, although many target high risk groups such as at-risk youth. Outdoor education programs have transformed from a military

styled “school of hard knocks” to one influenced by psychological and education theories. However, the overarching goals have remained unchanged throughout the field’s transformation, creating opportunities for individuals to gain self-esteem and a sense of responsibility towards others by participating in real and powerful experiences (Outward Bound, 2013). “Through successfully facing and accomplishing these challenges within a succession of increasingly difficult asks, participants chart their way toward higher self-esteem, an internal locus of control (Wilson & Lipsey, 2000), a greater sense of self-efficacy (Russell, 2003) and a more resilient identity (Unger, Dumond & McDonald, 2005). One such program is Outward Bound, founded by Kurt Hahn in 1941.

The roots of adventure therapy can be traced to the influential program and practices of Outward Bound. German Educator, Kurt Hahn, developed Outward Bound as an experiential learning program based on his belief that character development was just as important as academic achievement. “Hahn found that people who were put in challenging, adventurous outdoor situations gained confidence, redefined their own perceptions of their personal possibilities, demonstrated compassion, and developed a spirit of camaraderie with their peers.” (Outward Bound, 2013). Today’s Outward Bound mission is “to help people discover and develop their potential to care for themselves, others and the world around them through challenging experience in unfamiliar surroundings” (Outward Bound, 2013). Although several similar programs exist throughout the world, Outward Bound remains the most common model and one that can be applied to diverse groups of people. This type of programming is rooted in the idea that stressful situations, combined with support from group members and facilitators, will compel participants to overcome their fears, which will lead to growth.

The Comfort Zone Model's basic features involve moving a person beyond their comfort zone into an area they are uncomfortably unaccustomed to feeling. "By overcoming these anxious feelings and thought of self-doubt while simultaneously sampling success, individuals move from the groan zone to the growth zone." (Luckner and Nadler, 1997) In his 2008 paper entitled *Comfort Zone: Model or Metaphor?* researcher Mike Brown presents an overview of the model's theoretical underpinnings and suggests it no longer be used as a program model, but rather as a post-activity metaphor to assist participants in bridging their learned experience to real-life situations. (Brown, 2008). Part and parcel of the Outward Bound model is the element of adaptive dissonance, or discomfort.

Adaptive dissonance creates an intentional disequilibrium, which stresses participants and is essential to the outdoor educational models (Neill, 2008), including Outward Bound's. Walsh and Golins (1976) developed the Outward Bound Educational Process Model, suggesting that specific features be present in order for the participant to learn. "The learner is placed into a unique physical environment and into a unique social environment. They are then given a characteristic set of problems solving tasks which lead to a state of adaptive dissonance. To which they adapt by mastery, which reorganizes the meaning and direction of the learner's experience, continuing to be oriented to living and learning." (Martin, nd)

http://www.outwardbound.fi/tiedostot/Kirjallisuus/Adding_Value_to_the_OB_Educational_Process.pdf Done in a purposeful way and in a supportive environment, "participants are believed to experience positive, short and long-term benefits." (Neill, 2008)

Participants must also adapt to the increasingly challenging tasks, which are sequentially built into the programming. Coping skills or strategies, which may have worked in previous situations are, no longer valid. (Neill, 2008). This type of intentional disequilibrium strategy has been

utilized in various types of groups and individuals. With support from staff, and encouragement to seek other avenues to resolve the issue, the individual finds a solution, thus improving their coping skills. The intentional disequilibrium equation is broken down like so: a challenge + support = growth. (Neill, 2008; Neill & Dias, 2001) Up to this point in the literature review, there has been little of the wilderness or of the natural environment, except for its use as a backdrop for the learning activities.

One criticism of adventure therapy programming is that “contact with the wilderness environment is rarely included as an important variable associated with positive outcomes and change” (Taylor, Segal, & Harper, 2010). Instead, positive results are attributed to a combination of “experiential learning, challenge activities, novel experiences, group work and other psychological theories” (Taylor et al. 2010). Beringer (2004) is concerned with the lack of appreciation of the role of wilderness, upon which wilderness based programming relies (Rutko & Gillespie, 2013). Some say that viewing the wilderness setting as a “benign backdrop” (Besthorn & Saleeby, 2008) in the wilderness therapeutic model is anthropocentric (Unger et al. 2005; Beringer 2004) and fails to recognize a key aspect of the model.

The eco-feminist approach takes the anthropocentric critique further, by highlighting that the lack of balance between genders and domination of women and non-human nature is recreated in many adventure-based programming. Eco-feminism combines feminist and ecological values in an attempt to reconcile humanity’s relationship with nature (Mitten, 1994; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991) and find a balance.

Wilderness and women

Although research into contact with the natural world has demonstrated positive results in stress reduction (Ulrich et al., 1991; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983), contact with nature still tends to be a purposeful recreational activity. It is challenging in today's hectic world to balance work and play. Traditionally, nature-based recreational activities have tended to be middle to upper class endeavours, and have tended not to be activities ascribed to women. Outdoor opportunities for women only groups are growing, but can remain beyond the financial reach of lower income earners. Generally, it is no longer frowned upon for women to partake in wilderness activities. This small sample of women included participants from varied socio economic strata as well as women who have had varying levels of prior wilderness experiences. Some had partaken in trips as paying customers with an outfitter, whereas others had participated with friends or acquaintances.

The primary difference between women-only recreational wilderness activities versus *typical* wilderness adventure experience, lies in a reduction in emphasis of a conquering "us versus them" attitude (McBride & Korell, 2005; Pohl, Borrie & Patterson, 2000). "All-women activities can provide a safe environment for growth and transformation" (Copland-Arnold, 1994, p. 44). "An all-woman group provides a community free of typical gender roles of a mixed group" (Copland-Arnold, 1994, p. 47) such as lack of competition for men's attention and opportunity for healing and connecting with their bodies in a positive way. Chivalric norms and cross gender distractions (Neill, 2008) tend not to exist in woman-only groups.

The reasons why women seek out wilderness experiences vary as much as the women do. For some, the experience may have restorative effects (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The challenges associated with a wilderness experience can also be seen as a therapeutic metaphor of their lives.

As they gain strength and confidence in the outdoors, they are able to experience strength and confidence in other areas of their lives (Copland-Arnold, 1994, p. 25). This type of activity focuses on the participant's strengths, capabilities and potential, rather than their own perceived impossibilities or limitations (Todesco, 2003, p. 95). "Feeling competent, trusting oneself and others, asking for what one needs, making choices, setting boundaries, confronting conflict, moving through fear, are giant steps towards healing" (Asher, Huffaker & McNally, 1994, p. 163).

Although the benefits of such activities are anecdotally and qualitatively supported, this study seeks to further enhance our knowledge about women's immersive wilderness experiences. Additionally, much of the research has focussed on the effectiveness of outdoor education and adventure therapy on specific mental health risk factors in specific population. As women's societal roles have changed, so has their participation in recreational wilderness activities (Bialeschki & Henderson, 1993), hence creating ample fodder for researching their reactions and/or perceived influences.

Clare Simpson suggests that "women have a tendency to view their outdoor experience as a "journey" rather than a "quest" (Bialeschki, 1992). A woman's "journey" tends to be thought of as a process focused on the inner experience of self-realization and aesthetics rather than on the more product-oriented "quest" traditionally associated with men. Women involved in outdoor activities may describe their love of the outdoors for its beauty, the freedom found in these environment, the peacefulness and solitude, and feeling of the out-of-doors as a spiritual home. The outdoor experiences become a source of personal fulfillment and tranquility where beauty brings peace to the soul. (Bialeschki, 1992)

A sense of gender role empowerment may arise from outdoor experiences. Socialization fosters the belief that girls are less capable, less physically skilled and poorer in decision-making than males. Denise Mitten, one of the founding members of Woodswomen Inc., believes that outdoor experiences may be one of the best ways to counter this view. Often the benefits may be recognized in retrospect as the women acknowledge the strengths, skills and self-esteem they have gained.

Women involved in outdoor recreation often speak of experiencing a shift in their perceptions of self (Pohl et al., 2000), often offering immediate feedback (Powch, 1994). Successfully facing challenges encountered in outdoor setting may help women reduce self and societally imposed limitations. Going beyond these limitations results in higher self-esteem and self-reliance which, in turn, leads to a greater sense of personal empowerment (Bialeschki & Henderson, 1993). However, the way women are socialized leads to limitations in the field of leisure, especially involving the participation in wilderness experiences.

Time and money are often noted as limitations to spending time in natural settings. This is further magnified by gender issues, such as family responsibilities and women's status in society. "Most women are socialized into an ethic of care, thus may be constrained in her own personal leisure and in participating in outdoor activities if she is continually putting the needs of others ahead of her own" (Wood & Danylchuk, 2012).

The element of isolation is known to provide an ideal setting for inward self-reflection (Cole, Erdman & Rothblum, 1994). The group setting offers a distinct contrast to normal life, such as the promotion of shared decision-making; they are given options, and participants are trusted with their own process. This contrast, occurring in a remote physical place offers physical

challenges with the support of the group members, allowing the women to process, thus facilitating change (Beringer 2004).

Experiencing wilderness

Many qualitative and quantitative studies have demonstrated that contact with greenspaces or immersion into natural environments and wilderness have restorative qualities. (Hinds, 2011; Cole & Hall, 2010; Herzog & Strevey, 2008; Hammitt, 2000; Kaplan, 2001; Kaplan, 1995; Hartig et al., 1991; Ulrich et al., 1991) This study explored women's recounting of their immersive wilderness experiences, and analysed the content of their interviews. As the "conceptualization of wilderness is indeed subjective" (Lutz, Simpson-Housley & de Man, 1999), the definition of wilderness utilized in this research will be: "a tract or region uncultivated and/or uninhabited by human beings or an area essentially undisturbed by human activity together with its naturally developed life community". (Merriam, 2013) Equally subjective is the concept of wellness and well-being.

Research into the impact that contact and/or immersion into a wilderness setting has on humans abound. Anecdotal reporting of deep, spiritual (Fredrikson & Anderson, 1999; Kellert & Derr, 1998) or transcendental (Kaplan, R., 1984) experiences are recurring themes in this field of study. Hartig, Kaiser and Strumse (2007) found that women were more likely than men to perceive the natural environment as being more restorative. However, although the health benefits of contact with nature parallel research findings of the benefits of contact with a wilderness setting, studies exploring the impact of the length of time spent in a wilderness environment (Rutko & Gillespie, 2013; Williams, 2003) are not as abundant. Nevertheless, there does exist a growing body of knowledge. Hartig et al's 1991 study measured difference between

wilderness and non-wilderness vacations with duration of 4-7 days, with a follow-up measure of affect 21 days later. It confirmed previous findings (Cole & Hall, 2010; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, S. & Talbot, 1983) by showing that extended wilderness experiences have restorative effects. Kaplan (1984) described the term “being away” as extended restorative opportunities (Rutko & Gillespie, 2013). Being immersed in a natural setting with a group “allows for informal and spontaneous discussions...” (Russell, 2006, p. 53), as well as individual reflection, which can facilitate positive outcomes (Rutko & Gillespie, 2013). Williams (2000) argued that wilderness setting offers “...an intensity and duration of interpersonal interaction...” that exceeds that of therapeutic programming in an office setting. (Williams, 2000, p. 48) Cole and Hall (2010) found that several restorative components of environment were experienced to a significantly greater degree as the length of the trip in natural settings increased. An obvious observation from the plethora of studies which include humans and wilderness, is the fact that there is an interactivity between the two. Adding the variables of group dynamics and challenging situations, can impact the lived experience.

This literature is by no means exhaustive. It does reflect the fact that various fields of study are involved in research into the health benefits of contact between humans and nature.

Nevertheless, programs that utilize nature as a tool in the therapeutic setting are few and far between. Additionally, there is a scarcity of research findings to support that such programs improve the person’s wellbeing. Many of the studies involve elements of outdoor educational programming or adventure therapy, which occur in a natural environment. These differ from the concept of utilizing nature as a co-facilitator in a therapeutic process. The findings in this study attest to the common elements which appear when humans recreate in a wilderness setting, whether the goal of the activity be therapeutic, educational or leisure.

There is an abundance of both qualitative or quantitative research studies but not many that examine the perceptions and lived experiences of the individual. There is a dearth of peer reviewed studies involving women's response to non-adventure based wilderness experiences (McBride & Korell, 2005; Pohl, Borrie & Patterson, 2000) and equally limited number of findings related to this population's perceived impact on their well-being.

Gaps in research

A review of the literature does reveal gaps in research. Recurring issues relate to the dependence of participant's anecdotal evidence as well as the use of smaller groups of participants. Studies that assess the treatment efficacy of therapeutic program are often plagued by the lack of reliable, unstandardized measures (Russell, 2003; Cason & Gillis, 1994; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994). Some divergences in findings are due to the inherent values participants place on nature, or the role that nature plays in the study itself. The literature on women and wilderness reveals a scarcity of findings which look at their response to immersive wilderness experiences. The differences in the fields which study the phenomenon of human contact with nature, leads to findings which remain isolated, and unintegrated into practical applications.

Researchers from different fields such as biology and urban planning have explored the human/nature affiliation. A significant observation is that there is a lack of integration of the varied results which could render findings more statistically relevant, making comparison between studies difficult. Researchers in the medical fields have conducted studies which quantitatively measured immune function, blood pressure and stress hormones levels during contact with nature. Psychologists have explored how a human's attention span and anxiety

levels have increased or decreased following contact with nature. Relevant findings remain isolated to their fields of research, rather than be integrated to create alternate programming.

The complexity of the human being necessitates a multifaceted approach when trying to understand the implications of the research findings. No one experiment or study can control for all variables. Historically, there has been discord between qualitative and quantitative researchers. This in turn leads to fractured efforts in the creation of proactive programming, because peer reviewed, statistically significant findings remain hidden in Master and PhD thesis' on university bookshelves. Based on personal experience writing funding proposals, assimilating research findings into present-day programming requires multi-faceted steps.

The advent of wilderness adventure programs was marred by earlier programming weaknesses and biases, as their effectiveness was often based solely on anecdotal evidence from participants, not by long-term, peer reviewed outcome studies. Many of these programs were classified under experiential education, recreational or therapeutic activities, some accredited and some not. Such programs proceeded with inconsistent standards, rarely based on clinical findings and lead to serious harm and sometimes, to the death of the participants (Martin & Wagstaff, 2012; Hogan, 2002). An element of risk remains primary in several adventure-based wilderness programs, where nature is relegated to a backdrop. Such "Boot Camp" programs aim to alter behaviours and instill discipline in high risk populations such as young offenders. They are tools utilized by the courts to either punish or attempt to reform the offender. There is little to no therapeutic value to such programs, as the focus is on the behaviour, not the root causes of the misbehaviours (Russell, 2006). When treatment occurs in a wilderness setting, the wilderness becomes a tool for personal growth.

“Outdoor behavioral healthcare is an emerging treatment service in mental health practice for adolescents with emotional, behavioural, psychological and substance use disorders”. (Russell, 2003) Treatment programs which include eco-therapeutic approaches are still faced with challenges when attempting to control for so many variables. "It is difficult to determine what changes in the pre and post intervention measures are attributable to the program and what are attributable to other factors" (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 56). Mitten reminds us that "it isn't known if it is the accomplishment of a high risk activity, being in the outdoor environment, the group experience, the leadership or some combination of the above that contributes to the therapeutic benefits" (Mitten, 1994). The role that nature plays clearly depends on those creating and running the programs, as well as those partaking in the activities.

In earlier research by Ulrich, he utilized a view of nature, rather than an actual immersive wilderness experience. Studies confirm that humans tend to prefer natural views to barren environments, and green spaces over urban areas (Wilson et al., 2009). A person's motivation, access to green spaces and specific length of time are also identified as variables which need to be included in future studies (Davis & Gatersleben, 2013).

However, there are few studies which have focussed on female participants, who have experienced an extended immersion into a wilderness setting. Therefore, this study invited women who had partaken in a three day or more recreational wilderness experience, to share their thoughts and feelings about their experience.

Research question

From Wilson and Kellert's human to nature connection, to Roszak and Clinebell's eco-therapeutic models, the common denominator is connection. Humans are inextricably linked to

their natural world, no matter how they choose to interact with it. (Ritchie, Wabano, Corbiere, Restoule, Russell & Young, 2015) Although some eco-therapeutic models were borne out of non-scientific philosophies, science seems to support positive impacts on one's physiology and mood. Utilizing natural settings as a co-facilitator for purposeful activities undertaken in natural settings could prove to be a low cost adjunct (Turner, 1976) to addressing some mental health issues. Many of the studies reviewed involved adventure-based wilderness activities with specific populations such as high risk adolescents and adults. This study proposed to explore how a diverse group of women recalled and described the story of their most significant immersive wilderness experience. Its intent was to contribute to the mounting knowledge about women's experiences in non-therapeutic wilderness activities.

Methodology

Qualitative research

The research question, which was presented in the Introduction, was focused on participant's views and meanings they ascribed to their statements. Therefore, the qualitative inquiry influenced by a phenomenological approach was most suitable for this type of study, given the prominence of participants' narratives. (Creswell, 2009) True to the governing criteria of qualitative research, I positioned myself (Creswell, 2007, p. 18) by utilizing reflexivity and self-awareness to report on values and biases which I held. Qualitative research is often an inductive form of inquiry, and this study followed the bottom up approach to detect emergent patterns and themes. The chosen methodology, collection and analysis of the data in the study was shaped by my experiences as a female having spent considerable time immersed in wilderness settings. As indicated by Côté (1999, p. 98), "the goal of qualitative research is not to eliminate biases, but to consider them part of the field being studied".

Sampling and recruitment

This study sought women aged 18 years and more, who had experienced a wilderness immersion of more than 4 nights. The sample was obtained from women who identified as having participated in an immersive wilderness experience in the past two years. Request for participants was disseminated via Wild Women Expeditions' Facebook page and as well as by word of mouth. This company is in their 25th year of business, offering women-centered outdoor trips. As expected, participants' wilderness experiences varied between veteran and relative beginners. I proposed to examine respondents' subjective experiences of their most recent

immersive wilderness outing. The owner of WWE granted permission to post the link to my proposed study on their Facebook page, inviting readers to view the research poster. Possible participants contacted the researcher, and those who met exclusionary variables were sent a consent form to complete. Once the consents were returned, a date and time was chosen to conduct the semi-structured interview.

Participants were not provided with financial remuneration of any kind. However, Wild Women Expeditions did request that the general research findings be made available for public viewing on their web site. I have agreed to share the conclusions reached with members of their website once this study has concluded. All participants were advised that pseudonyms would be used rather than their real names, in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

There were three criteria that prospective participants had to meet: 1- that they identify as female, 2- that they had experienced an immersive wilderness experience lasting more than four nights and 3- that they be 18 years or older. The intention of this study was to give women an opportunity to speak about their immersive wilderness experiences. Because the intended focus of this study was to study the phenomenon of the immersive wilderness experience, the interview question in which I asked them to reflect on any distinctive aspects of having participated in a woman-only wilderness experience was placed near the end of the interview. Of the 15 participants, twelve had had the opportunity to participate in both co-ed and woman only immersive wilderness experiences.

Semi-structured interviews

As indicated above, the interviews were conducted either in person, via Skype, Facetime or by telephone. An interview guide with 11 questions (Appendix B) guided the discussions. The first

question asked participants to describe the differences (if any) between nature and wilderness. This helped to clarify context since this study wanted to explore participant's relationship to the wilderness.

There are advantages and disadvantages to conducting semi-structured interviews. The main advantage was that I was able to ask the questions in an open-ended style, which encouraged some of the participants to share additional, unexpected details. The length of the interviews ranged significantly, mostly due to each participant's ability to reflect on the questions being posed as well as their capacity to express themselves. Some participants might have been able to provide more rich details had the style of the interview been more structured. However, only one participant seemed to struggle with this style of interview. In retrospect, that particular interview was done by telephone, with a house full of people in her home. Her communication style and timing of the interview limited my ability to obtain information I had hoped. In general, though, this style encouraged the women to tell their story "to their natural conclusions". (Roberts, 2005)

Ethics

As the research involved human participants, approval was granted by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board on January 13, 2015, prior to entering the field for recruitment and data collection.

Data collection

Patton (1990) outlined three types of data collection in qualitative research: open-ended in-depth interviews, direct observation and written documents. (Patton, 1990) The semi-directed interviews and open-ended questions sought to optimize free flowing and in-depth responses

regarding their immersive wilderness experiences. The individual interviews were expected to last between 1 to 1.5 hours. The interviews were recorded utilizing a digital voice recorder, and occurred in person, via Skype and by telephone for convenience. Locations for the individual interviews were determined by participants. I then transcribed the interview recordings verbatim.

Data analysis

A phenomenological approach

Since the focus of this study was to explore the lived experience of a common phenomenon (immersive wilderness experience), extracting the noteworthy accounts from participant's narratives, one could say the approach to the data analysis was influenced by the phenomenological inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) wrote that the person's narratives should undergo a "thematic analysis to search for common themes, patterns and common narrative threads within or across individual's personal experiences." (in Roberts, 2005, p. 94) The analysis was guided by Butler-Kisber's (2010) adapted versions of Colaizzi's (1978) and Riemen's (1986) guidelines for phenomenological analysis. As the interviewing process spanned many months, reading and rereading all interview transcripts allowed me to reacquaint myself with their content. I extracted significant statements which related to the phenomenon of the wilderness experience, and excluded material. Once the significant statements were highlighted, these were grouped into themes, thus "revealing common patterns across the experiences." (Butler-Kisber, p. 53)

Thematic analysis

The data analysis was guided by the thematic analysis approach, as it is flexible without losing its theoretical and methodological soundness (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as:

“a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”
...allowing the researcher to minimally organise and describe the data set in (rich) detail... often going further by interpreting various aspects of the research topic
(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6).

Themes or patterns were identified by searching data obtained from the in-depth interviews.

Six primary steps were followed in the data analysis: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generation of initial codes, 3) searched for themes among codes, 4) reviewed themes, 5) defined and named themes and 6) produced final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis allowed me to make sense of the data gathered from the information contained in the transcripts of the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Key words and trends were identified prior to analysing the data.

Strategies for validating findings

The strategies which were utilized to enhance validity of the findings include: peer debriefing (a recent MSW graduate, who has extensive experience in wilderness guiding) and member checking (follow-up contact interviewees to share initial findings and obtain feedback). I had planned on using a reflexivity journal, to reflect on my own thought, feelings and beliefs. However, this fell by the wayside as the study progressed.

In order to increase the rigor of this project, bracketing occurred between a faculty member and myself, from the initial research proposal, prior to and whilst gathering the data as well as during the peer debriefing phase. Although bracketing originates in the phenomenological approach, it is increasingly utilized to “mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process” (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). I hoped that this additional deliberate effort would not only identify, but help me to understand how my own beliefs and lived experiences could be impacting this study. Another tool utilized to increase rigor was to add a peer debriefing following the analysis of the clusters of themes. The results of the peer debriefing showed how another person’s lens could vary considerably from another’s interpretation of the findings.

Prior to describing the themes obtained from the participants, a qualification must be made. I have great appreciation for the physical qualities of wilderness, but am also acutely aware of the perceived benefits I have gained from being immersed in the wilderness. Due to these long-held beliefs, I had anticipated that participants would have corresponding values and insight into their immersive wilderness experiences. As the interviews progressed, it became apparent that every participant was not the same in terms of their understanding and processing of their immersive wilderness experiences. The belief that there is a difference between contact with nature versus an immersive wilderness experience, shaped my choice of questions. This position also ensured that I asked additional questions during the interviews, when the distinctions weren’t so clear to me.

Findings

Demographic variances

Unravelling the principle themes from fifteen unique stories of wilderness experiences was an enriching venture. Fifteen women with varying demographic characteristics spoke of wilderness activities ranging from hiking in the Nepali mountains with a brother to participating in a guided kayaking trip in the North Channel of Georgian Bay. One woman spoke of a two week paddling excursion on the Yukon River with a small co-ed group, whilst others recounted time spent kayaking and camping along the Baja Peninsula in Mexico with a women-only outfitter. One participant runs a wilderness travel company, taking customers on winter snowshoeing excursions for extended periods of time. Ceci, who lives in the United States, returns several times a year to her family's remote cabin, which sits on multiple acres of land in northern Ontario. Although the activities and seasons were wide-ranging, the majority of experiences recounted by participants occurred during non-winter seasons. Although demographic information was not requested, certain demographic information was gleaned from their responses. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 62 years (N=12 as 3 were unknown) with a mean age of 47 years. Of the fifteen, six were part-time or occasional wilderness guides. All of these women also worked in other fields off-season. Two participants were professional musicians, one was a teacher, four worked in the helping fields such as nursing, social work and youth programming, one was in insurance, two owned their own wilderness travel companies, one was a journalist, one was a Scout Leader and there was one university professor. Twelve (12) were Canadian citizens and three (3) were American citizens. Five (5) of the women lived in Northern Ontario, five (5) lived Southern Ontario, one (1) in eastern Ontario, one (1) in Ohio,

one (1) in British Columbia, one (1) in Alberta and one (1) in North Carolina. This sample contained one (1) woman who was separated, eight (8) who were married, four (4) who identified as being single and two (2) who's marital status was unknown. And finally, of the fifteen (15) participants, all had had prior co-ed wilderness experience, whilst thirteen (13) had also had women-only wilderness experiences. As is evidenced by this demographic range of variables, this small sample is not representative of the larger female populace. However, this varied sample revealed an array of initial themes which parallel findings from previous studies.

Distinctions between nature and wilderness

This study did not directly ask participants whether they had a preference between nature and wilderness. However, because the focus was to explore their immersive *wilderness* experience, the second question posed during the interview was meant to clarify whether participants distinguished between the two terms. This had three purposes. Firstly, I could use the words interchangeably for those who did not make a distinction between the two. Secondly, I wanted to gain an understanding of how they defined wilderness. And finally, I wanted to ensure that there was a clear delineation between the two terms, fitting the essence of the definition of wilderness used in this study.

The Merriam-Webster definition of nature is: “the physical world and everything in it (such as plants, animals, mountains, oceans, stars) that are not made by people.” (Merriam-Webster, 2016). Some descriptors of nature included biological elements such as flora and fauna, found in both urban and rural settings. Max explained that “nature is plain being outside, whether it's urban or rural or just being in my garden, growing my flowers...nature is just the trees and everything. Nature is everywhere, the trees, the grass. Nature is all around you in all different

forms...there's nature in the concrete of a city.” (Max) Jordane parroted the idea that nature could be found in an urban area: “I believe you can find nature in the city...you can go out your back door and have a beautiful garden...a city park.” (Jordane) There was also the theme of domestication and human footprint which further clarified the distinction between nature and wilderness. “I think it's very much about being on a spectrum and it's for me all wilderness is natural, but not all nature is wild...there can be natural states in nature that is very domesticated, very bridled by human control or intervention...a park in a very groomed manicured case of course that's nature.” (Jen) Surprisingly, a popular apprehension about the perils of wilderness, were reflected in one of the participants' definition when she proposed that: “nature is less harsh...more gentle, to go see the birds and the bees...” (Dyna)

As indicated previously, the Merriam definition of wilderness is being utilized in this paper. Wilderness is “a tract or region uncultivated and/or uninhabited by human beings or an area essentially undisturbed by human activity together with its naturally developed life community”. (Merriam, 2013) Several participants echoed elements of Merriam's definition, expressing the importance of the absence of the human footprint. “Wilderness is just a natural state...unsullied. There's no human presence, like structures or things.” (Kali) or “giant buildings and ... no telephone wires and is hasn't been dug up.” (Zoe) Not only was wilderness an absence of an over-developed environment, some participants specified the need for isolation from the overwhelming and constant presence of human activity. Kali explained that not seeing people was a necessity for her. Zoe went further, stating that “if you go somewhere, you're seeing people at times you almost feel robbed of your experience. There's always all these other people.” (Zoe) Some expressed that wilderness had to be difficult to access in order to get away “from all those signs of humanity”, acknowledging that “it's a hard place to get at these days.”

(Kate) Dawn explained that "...you think about there being very little contact with the outside world...it's quieter, more remote." (Dawn) Some participants defined wilderness as the absence of amenities, technology and conveniences one would purport to find in technologically advanced societies. Tye indicated that the wilderness "seems to imply a certain sense of removal from the everyday, and implies a removal from the comforts of modern life and retreating to a more grounded and less technological way of living." (Tye) With the absence of humans comes the absence of stress-inducing activities and habits, which led some participants to extol the virtues of a wilderness setting as being a purer, more elemental type of experience. "When we're in the wild we just feel like, wow, this is the life, this is real life...that we feel more resonant with something that is unfettered..." (Jen) Max smiled as she explained what it was like for her to be in the wilderness, saying "it's a great, great feeling." (Max) Jen offered a somewhat philosophical explanation, delving into the connection between a purer wilderness experience and a healthier sense of wellbeing.

There is an energetic, and I do think that there's a scientific explanation for it that when something is in a more pure state...there's a mystery to it...the power of a wild space is in that, the purity of that force that is uninhibited and unfettered, or less so and that connecting with that, there's a sort of great sustenance there that our homogenized, watered down world where...we've really sucked the life out of a lot of our environment so I think that it's palpable... (Jen)

Of the fifteen participants, only one made no distinction between the two terms. Based on respondent's answers, a principal component differentiating wilderness from nature involved the lack of human footprint such as residential and industrial development. The definitions of wilderness included a lack of stimuli such as noise from cars and the presence of people, and a

lack of amenities created by civilization, such as running water, cell service and computers. Recurring key words clearly associated wilderness with elements of wild and unpopulated regions left in their organic state. Interestingly, some used adjectives such as gentle and tamer to describe nature. And finally, participants frequently spoke of being away from civilization as being a key difference between the two terms.

Themes

By and large, it was not surprising to find themes from the interview questions (see Appendix C) replicated in the data. Experiences relating to wilderness activities, relationship to wilderness, emotional and physical reactions to challenges in the wilderness and women-only wilderness experiences featured throughout the initial reviews. The semi-directive interview style lead to flexible and dynamic conversations, producing rich and meaningful material. The initial reviews of the interview transcripts reflected an array of lived experiences as the table below reveals.

Table 1 - List of initial themes

| |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities (sense of accomplishment, challenges, rewards, emotions, discomfort) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptability |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beauty of nature |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being away from (usual, stress, conveniences, expectations, busy-ness, stimuli) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits (self-care, centered, grounded, freedom, simplicity, health, spirituality, connection, creativity) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges (activities, physical, comfort zone, group dynamics, interpersonal, weather) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discomfort, sense of accomplishment) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definitions (wilderness, nature) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions (fear, joy, confidence, pride, frustration, excitement, self-doubt, discomfort) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring (freedom, child-like, imagination) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender roles (freedom) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group dynamics (benefits and challenges) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idealism |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinions |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical challenges |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualities of the wilderness (isolation, quiet, reflection, sense of space, solitude, relaxing, unplug, elemental, back to basics, simplicity, escape, spirituality, mindfulness) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recharge/reboot |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminiscing |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resilience |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selflessness |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spirituality |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women only (group dynamics, togetherness, friendship, safety, vulnerable, fun, empowerment) |

As is evidenced by the extent of themes in the initial reviews, further systematic refining was necessary to organize the overarching themes into groups. A chart demonstrating the refining and reorganizing of themes can be found in Appendix E. Through repeated reviews of the data, common threads were arranged into nine groupings: activities, adapting, benefits of being immersed in the wilderness, benefits of women only groups, challenges, emotions, escape/being away, qualities of the wilderness and reminiscing. Table 2 illustrates the predominant themes and subthemes that were isolated from participant's responses.

Table 2 - List of final themes and subthemes

| |
|--|
| Activities |
| • Challenges |
| • Benefits |
| Wilderness as a setting |
| • Qualities of the wilderness |
| • Emotional response to |
| • Escape/away from |
| • Shift |
| Women only wilderness experience |
| • Group dynamics |
| • Freedom from gender role expectations |
| • Safety |
| • Empowerment |

Within the recurring theme of activities, participants spoke of the challenges they encountered whilst learning new skills in the wilderness environment. They were also just as likely to describe positive outcomes related to the same activities. As the theme of activities reliably surfaced associated with challenges and benefits, the first final theme was activities. Within this grouping, sub-themes of challenges and benefits were explored as they related to activities and interpersonal issues. Since this study asked participants about their relationship to wilderness, a significant amount of data emerged, and was organized into the second theme of wilderness as a setting. This grouping encompassed qualities attributed to the wilderness, the emotional responses of participants to that environment along with sub-themes of escape and a shift in awareness. And finally, the third theme to be generated relates to women only wilderness experiences. This was not a surprising finding since the recruitment poster had been posted on the Wild Women Expeditions social media page, which is frequented by past and present clients.

Activities (challenges and benefits)

Mid-interview, I asked participants the following question: Recalling your most recent wilderness experience, what would you say were some of the challenges you encountered? The purpose was to explore whether participants had had a positive or a negative experience overall. There was no shortage of descriptive and rich responses, as participants described a range of emotions they felt while participating in wilderness activities such as canoeing, snowshoeing, kayaking, hiking or living in wilderness settings. Participants gave examples of situations they encountered which invoked strong emotional and physical responses. Whilst engaging in various activities, how challenging one found the activity seem to correlate to their level of experience or prior exposure to that particular type of activity. Additionally, the women who had prior wilderness experience, whether professionally or personally, recounted challenges related to

interpersonal or organization issues, rather than to learning new skills. A surprising association surfaced between challenges and benefits. Participants commonly shared revelations they had had following the completion of a challenging activity or task. Although they experienced discomfort, many were able to articulate how empowering they had felt having pushed past pre-conceived limitations. The most striking example of having experienced the full circle of fear and trepidation, to discomfort and frustration to exhilaration and pride was recounted by Tye. She compared learning how to kayak in large swells of Lake Huron with childbirth.

I mean a number of these things all sort of teach the same lesson in some ways. You know things that had previously scared me actually when I tackled them and I did them, I found that I was more capable than I realized I was. And that I didn't...it's not that the fear was misplaced exactly. I mean, those were big waves. It was dangerous. But the feeling like I could...that I had capacity for dealing with that kind of thing that I didn't have before. And I mean...the physical experience was not the same but the sort of emotional experience of realizing that I am physically capable of something. That I didn't realize I had it in me to do. The only other thing that I think I can compare it to is when I had my son. When I was like in labor. Labor is painful...this wasn't painful. I mean, even with the hip situation...It was just unknown and it was like I would come through a contraction and I'd be like: "I am totally handling this. I am awesome!" I didn't know that I was physically capable of this. I didn't break and it was kinda a comparable emotional feeling in the same way and it was like I didn't know I had it in me physically to do this...to tackle these waves and to paddle 26 kilometers in a day and so, when my son was born I was like, "I am super woman", like, "I am pretty strong and amazing!" (Tye)

As indicated earlier, participants in this small sample had varied wilderness knowledge. All choose to partake in the wilderness activities they recounted, knowing where their abilities lay, and attuned to their comfort zones. One of the participants commented that it was challenge by choice, and it would appear that most participants knew they were embarking in activities which would push them to or past their physical limits. Kali, speaking about a lengthy and particularly challenging hiking trip stated: “It is hard. It’s like: “Let’s climb up a mountain...let’s go down a mountain...Oh my God, there’s a marsh here and the bridge is fallen in how are we going to cross without killing ourselves and my feet hurt.” (Kali) This same person then acknowledged that her challenges and perseverance lead to gratefulness at finding a camping spot “of absolute heaven” then “looking out on a lake” and seeing a beaver. Even though the majority were able to provide ample examples of when they had experienced discomfort due to challenges, none stated they regretted partaking in the activities. Max reflected: “Ya, there was often fatigue. So we would push ourselves though, you know, like one of the guides would say we could stop there but we always seemed to push ourselves a little further. It was great!” (Max)

Some women tenaciously participated in activities which forced them to face their anxieties and fears. They spoke of purposefully partaking in stress-inducing activities, and how these situations helped them overcome fears. One in particular, Tye, had always wanted to go on a kayaking trip. She chose to celebrate her 40th birthday with a multiple day kayaking trip on Lake Huron.

I was kinda apprehensive in a lot of ways. I didn’t feel like I had the skills or the know-how... three days ago, if someone had showed me a picture of this water and told me I was going to paddle it, I would have been like HELL no!! No way! (Tye)

This was a powerful recounting of the lessons she learned whilst tackling her fears, which led to an increased sense of accomplishment, which in turn could be applied to her life upon her return.

This pattern of discomfort/accomplishment/reward are foundational elements in experiential learning models, which will be reviewed in the Discussion section.

The majority of participants' (14) immersive wilderness experiences involved groups. Whether it is with a friend, partner, classmates or with strangers, how the personalities of these individuals come together can significantly influence the overall experience. Since six of the fifteen participants had guided group wilderness activities, it was interesting to hear about challenges they had encountered which differed from those who had not guided. Here, Pati recounts a difficult experience with another guide:

I found it challenging one summer, when I actually had a co-guide... she was a very militant personality. She believed things needed to be done a specific way and as you and I both know, there's more than one way to proverbially skin a cat in the wilderness... I found that to be very stressful...that was the most difficult experience I've had... was not actually from a client but from a co-guide. It's sort of forgivable that clients will, you know, be uncomfortable and maybe take it out on others because, maybe this is their first time. But for a co-guide to cause me pain was very jarring. (Pati)

Some found it challenging to ensure that the design of the trip was going to be the best experience for the majority of their clients, or in some cases, family members. Jordane, a guide and mother of two, described the challenge she often encounters:

I've done mostly group trips...So group dynamics is always a big thing, and managing groups and not to say that, well I guess family trips like managing my children, and the thing is when you take your family out, you have to think from

kids...was it going to be fun for them like, when you're designing your trip, you don't want to do then portages in one day, right? (Jordane)

When a group gets together for a paid wilderness trip, the company will ensure that there are guides in place who are not only well trained, but who will essentially design, plan and actively ensure that the experience is as close to expectations of the paying customers. However, when one embarks on a wilderness trip with friends and even strangers, much preparation and communication must occur prior to and whilst out on the trip, to ensure the safety of all.

Zoë explained that the biggest challenge was dealing with people with less experience who weren't really aware that they didn't have experience." (Zoë) Although she was a guide, she made this particular comment in relation to being on a lengthy canoeing trip with three other persons, two of whom had little extended back country canoeing experience. These persons' lack of wilderness knowledge not only created overwhelming emotional strain for Zoë, but actually placed the group in danger.

For some who were used to solo trips, the added element of group dynamics gave them pause. Kali, who admitted to being more of an introvert, worried her as she was not used to group tripping.

I was a little hesitant about it...I'm a self-contained person...I'm very shy in a group situation, I really am very shy. I don't know why it's just who I am. Plus the fact that you don't know who they are, right? Like am I gonna hate these women? (Kali)

She shared further on in the interview that it had all worked out, and that she had enjoyed herself and the people she travelled with. For the most part, participants in this study had found ways to manage conflicts which arose from group dynamics while out on their wilderness trip. Zoë spoke

of how she dealt with a disagreement with someone differently while on a trip as compared to being back home, precisely because she did not have the option of getting away from the person or to ignore the behaviour. In order to maintain group cohesion for the remainder of the trip, she felt a sense of immediacy to address the troubling behaviour during the trip. Some spoke of adapting to the people they were with in order to make it work for all. In one example, a group of eight women was kayaking in British Columbia. It became evident that half the group wanted to explore their surroundings, whereas the other half wanted to relax and stay put.

...it was interesting dynamics in the group because even with eight women it did break apart and there was one group that wanted to do different things than the other group. So I had that physical challenge. Emotionally, I would say umm...there was a bit of angst about the splitting of the group as to some of them wanting to just sit around and drink and the rest of us were there to kayak and enjoy the wilderness right? (Ali)

For those participating in group wilderness activities, challenges were encountered around communication issues, the egos of peers or leaders and overall group dynamics. Evidently, such challenges are apt to exist in any group situations, whether they are in the wilderness or not. Participants recounted a level of, or a desire to, resolve misunderstandings in a timely manner, as the enjoyment and success of the outing was directly correlated to the group being cohesiveness. Some women identified their lack of comfort or confidence in social situations, but purposefully choose to place themselves in an environment where they would be isolated for an extended period of time, with people they didn't necessarily know. The challenges that participants recounted could be seen on a spectrum. The severity of the discomfort created by the stressors noted above were in direct relation to the lens through which they viewed and experienced the

activities. Ultimately, the women were able to connect these stressful situations with beneficial outcomes.

When formulating the question related to benefits of an immersive wilderness experience, my intention was to lead the women to reflect upon the possible benefits of their immersive wilderness experiences. However, a great majority of examples given by the participants revealed a strong association between the activities, which happened to have occurred in a wilderness setting and the rewards perceived to have ensued from those activities. The wilderness was the setting, which created situations, which led participants to recognise the extent to which they had chanced upon a benefit or reward. These benefits seemed to be directly linked to the challenging and uncomfortable situations. With the loss of modern conveniences, being in a wilderness setting created back to basics scenarios, and in some cases, exponentially increased participants' level of discomfort. Even so, participants were clearly able to reflect upon the perceived rewards of participating in the wilderness-based activities.

Wilderness as a setting

Many participants outlined their primary reason for wanting to participate in an immersive wilderness experience was to partake in a specific activity, such as a canoeing trip or hiking. Although participants seemed to know that being in a wilderness setting would require adjustments in all areas, some spoke of being challenged by discomforts related to an isolated, back country setting. However, with the lack of amenities and usual stimulation associated with civilization, the wilderness setting offered a juxtaposition of sorts. Participants spoke of becoming more creative and resourceful. Some explained that they were able to shelve some of their problems temporarily. Being present and mindful allowed them to pay attention to what

was going on inside them, as well as in their immediate environment. For some, the immersive wilderness experience eventually allowed them the opportunity to connect with the land and to reflect on their place in this reality. Being away from the urban setting and stressors, participants spoke of the wilderness setting being restorative physically and emotionally. That shift offered a different lens through which to view their life and needs.

Although participants engaged in wilderness activities which offered a degree of risk, simply being in a wild, isolated space with no amenities offers opportunity for trepidation and misgivings. Jen spoke of participating in a wilderness workshop and having to live in an earthen lodge.

...we had no soap and we had to bathe in the lake...it was an experience that was one of the more challenging experiences not because the activity was difficult. I mean, when we talk about wilderness experience, and when we get into outdoor adventuring, we're climbing the mountains and doing these you know, these rigorous physical challenges. It wasn't hard but emotionally, it was very intense, you know, to lie on your belly and wiggle in a little burrow and sleep underground...there's a lot of aspects of living that way, um, that were, for over 10 days, were really, really pushing my buttons. (Jen)

The extreme experience Jen recounted was unique to the immersive experiences described by the other participants. Many participants fretted about how they were going to go to the bathroom in the bush. This task left Kate feeling uneasy as she explained some of her pre-trip concerns: "I was really up for it. I was totally psyched. I didn't know if I could actually go and pee and shit in the bush, so it was just, psyching yourself over it. I just thought, I don't know..." (Kate)

Although apprehension about relieving oneself in a wilderness setting is deserving of entire

chapters in back country books (and they do exist), the unpredictability of the weather can certainly offer its own challenges.

There are many things that remain out of your control when you're in a wilderness setting. The best laid out plans can easily be derailed when the weather doesn't cooperate. Tye did make a point of speaking about the unpleasantness of being wet all day.

So that was the biggest thing and after the first day I was like: I don't know how I am going to get through another four days of this 'cause it was really bad...we had a lot of rain, which I think...you know we had some wet tents and we had some...I mean once everything is wet, it is wet, it doesn't get any wetter. (Tye)

No one exclaimed that being wet or cold during an immersive wilderness experience is a positive experience. Interestingly, how a person experienced the discomfort seemed to depend on their personality as well as their level of experience with wilderness. Some women saw the discomfort as a challenge to overcome, thus opening themselves up to the rewards of the situation.

You know, there's the adversity too you know? But facing challenges that we don't have to face here, you know... the challenges you face on trips are not the thing that you face at home and I mean to think creatively and to think outside the box...so, it sorta forces you to face discomfort, rather than run away from it. And then how you deal with it, you know, you just live with it? Maybe you have to...and that's okay.
(Zoë)

Ultimately, the interpretation of the level of discomfort experienced by each participant, truly depended on personal traits and the lens through which they viewed and lived the challenge.

Dawn, who not only lives in the wilderness full time, but also runs an outfitting business with her husband, had a unique, wisdom-laden response to the question about challenges.

I would say that most of my challenges in the wilderness are very primal. It's like, my muscles are tired, I need to stop, or I'm hungry, I need to eat, I'm thirsty I need to drink. Being in the wilderness, brings me back to the basics. There are no complicated issues like how you're going to balance your books, or you know, or how you're going to figure out how you're going to fix your car, whatever. If you need to do any repairs, it's like: "I have a hole in my moccasin that I need to patch. I need a needle and thread." (Dawn)

Some of the fears expressed by participants related to unknown elements, such as animals, safety or weather. Depending on the level of knowledge of the guides (if a guided trip) or of the individual (if not guided), such misgivings are significantly reduced. Jordane, who has extensive guiding experience in Northern Ontario spoke of an instance when she was out of her comfort zone, but still found ways of enjoying the experience anyways.

I've made a career out of guiding in the wilderness in my own home. Being in Baja, it was outside my knowledge and my comfort zone. So I had to take more of a being guided role I guess, right? Which is (laughter) great! I love it! (Jordane)

Although some found the wilderness settings to be rife with challenging or uncomfortable situations, some participants were also able to articulate the positives of such challenges. Ceci, for example, spoke about being forced to adapt and to think outside the box when doing physically laborious work on the isolated family homestead.

...those things that need to be done or I need to figure out a different way to accomplish something...you are far away, you have to figure out maybe how to use long logs to be able to lift something or you know, you have to make do with what you have to get your tasks done so maybe that is where the mental comes in but mostly it's physical.” (Ceci)

The idea of being far from any conveniences, and having to manage with what is available in that environment, introduced a concept that is unique to remote environments, in this case a wilderness environment. Not having access to a hardware store, to first aid or to online instructional booklets, created the need for mindfulness or a pause, to assess a situation and one's environment. Tye, an inexperienced outdoorsperson, described how she applied her newfound knowledge and began to shift how she interacted with her environment. Here, she enthusiastically recounts in wonderful detail the moment of this realization:

You're making decisions that factor in aspects of, well...you're having to deal with nature in a way that you don't when you're in your daily life. Like, your access to technology is much more limited. You have to make use of what's around you, and pay attention in a way. I certainly noticed and started to emulate the guides in some ways that they would pay attention to the clouds and the wind and the way the water was behaving way over there, to give them clues as to what was coming and how to strategize around that. And, you know, little things like where are you going to put in your tent. Like, just paying attention to a lot of things that are things that normally because I don't need to think about those things on a daily basis, they totally escape my attention but now I am paying attention to like what's the slope here...how much shade is here...if it rains is this tree gonna shelter me or is the tree going to dump a

while bunch of water onto the tent. When way are we going to put the door, which way is the wind coming...all these questions and things that shape our activities...in a way that usually...I think usually our environments are usually much more tailored to our comfort, and nature is not tailored to our comforts (laughter)... (Tye)

Although the wilderness had been seen as challenging due to its lack of conveniences, participants recognised their creative abilities and resourcefulness in the face of discomfort. As they settled into their environment, they began to pay attention to the environment they found themselves in.

They began to connect with the rhythms of their environment, of those around them as they disconnected from their usual. Kali described how wilderness was a recharger for her.

...the wilderness wherever it is, and it's just, you're surrounded. I'm not, I don't believe in God as per say, but I am a spiritual person and I find that when I'm out in the wilderness it's just right. You know, I feel like I get centered and all of it. The best part to it is that there are no phones, there's no computers, no telephone, there's nothing and so you don't have that instant talk, chat. (Kali)

Some, like Ali, noticed how the silence and stillness facilitated a reflective state. As she sat by the side of an remote tarn, watching a float plane with its passengers fly off, she spoke of how the contrast from busy and loud to quiet and alone, had impacted her.

Well for me, the quiet of the wilderness made me more reflective. There's no distractions from life. And you know, like I landed up working through some of those feelings that I wouldn't without that, that setting. I don't think I would have done that. That was the very strange thing. It just, when it became quiet again and

they were gone, it was just like a release of something in me and I just, just to know that, you know it was like the, when the world of the everyday world has been and went away... I think...my emotional being...that part of me that can just sit on a rock and cry for no apparent reason other than just being there. (Max)

Another of the qualities of wilderness is the absence of human activity. Ali explained that when she is alone in the wilderness, she can hear the subtle changes in the wind. She went on to say that because it's a lot quieter in the winter, she was able to stop and listen for the little animals quietly working away. "I find it's slower when you're alone because not only do you need to be slower to be safer, but you just find more interest in the little things. (Ali) It is those little things, such as sunrises, sights and sounds that participants spoke about. Their time immersed in a wilderness setting allowed them to pay attention to the environment they found themselves in. They had time to be in the moment if they choose to be. Out of this pause came opportunities to experience the goings-on and to appreciate their beauty. Ceci reminisced about her favorite part of the day on the family homestead:

...watching the water and being out on the water and looking at...the foliage...the sunsets, sunrises. One of the best parts of the day is when the water, the steam is coming up off the water. It's coming off the water and as it starts to clear...and the sun's coming up, it's just a really special part of to the day. (Ceci)

For those participants able to see past the challenges and discomfort of being in a wilderness setting, they spoke of the qualities or benefits of their immersive wilderness experience. When asked about the role that wilderness has played in their life, participants listed an array of qualities of the physical environment, such as flora, fauna and wildlife. They also spoke of less tangible existential elements, such as spirituality. For Wanda, being immersed in a wilderness

setting reinforced the vision she had of an external power that creates things. (Wanda) Jen initially struggled to put into words how the wilderness had impacted her life, but was able to eloquently say:

I think the role is...oh gosh...it's almost like a reminder of, you know, that you're part of it. You're not...ya. You're part of the whole right? When you're immersed in something bigger than you. Not just with the everyday bustle of human life. I think, when you're immersed in a wild setting, ya, you find that connection in that you're part of the whole...have you ever had a feeling of being very connected with my Creator? (Jen)

Immersion into a wilderness setting allowed participants the opportunity to pay attention to not only their environment, but to their own, internal musings. And for some like Tina, the need to escape the city and its hustle and bustle was, in her words was “primordial”. However, it wasn't enough to simply leave the city and its trappings. She explained that she needed to “bring peace into her life, to just reset” and that going to the wilderness would do just that. For some like Tina, going to the wilderness was purposeful as it allowed them to set aside the everyday. Zoë explained that the isolation and having time with her thoughts allowed “time for things to percolate in your mind and in your body” and that “problems...can just be put on the backburner. Just let them simmer.” These moments allowed her brain to work things out subconsciously, so when she returned from her immersive wilderness experience, “it's like you've got sort of like cleaner lenses or something to look through.” (Zoë)

Participants' narratives clearly contain rich information about observations they made as it related to wilderness as a setting. The benefits they took from their immersive wilderness experience wasn't solely based on the lack of the human footprint or of civilized stimuli. Being

away allowed an elemental existence, or as Wanda stated, ones' existence is boiled down to just rudimentary things, such as creating the food, washing your clothes, finding shelter. Therefore, not only did the immersive wilderness experience offer a reprieve from their usual, it also offered participants unconfined opportunities for reflection. The thread of escape or of being away was evident as participants related the role that wilderness played in their lives. Consequently, this became a sub-theme worthy of further exploration.

The Merriam-Webster definition of escape is: "to get away from a place, a situation or from something difficult or unpleasant. To get free of, or to avoid..." Only one participant actually used the word escape when describing her need to escape construction projects in her neighbourhood. However, as the women spoke about why they sought out immersive wilderness experiences, three distinct but interconnected concepts permeated their stories. Participants shared that the wilderness experience allowed them to be away from stressors typically found in urban settings, such as noise, construction and people. It also offered a setting conducive to restoring their physical and emotional energies. This in turn lead to a shift of sorts characterised by recognition of the elemental self.

Tina, who lives in a large Canadian urban city, commented that she knew deep down that she needed to escape "the poor construction projects that are going on outside my window right now. I needed long, sustained periods out in the wilderness and I know that's what I needed, I can't explain it. (Tina) In this case, she clearly indicates that it's not only about escaping but also about meeting an inherent need to go into the wilderness, a phenomenon which she had difficulty articulating. A few women spoke about the relief they felt at being away from the expectations of instant phone messaging, emails which needed to be answered, instant chat conversations and social media. Zoë stated that: "...just to get out of, away from computers and away from work

and just immerse yourself in the wilderness... the need to turn off that, you know, internet... you cannot email me or have contact with me for the next five days.” (Zoë) Equally as important as being away from the technological aspects of modern society, was the need to experience the lack of human footprint, which the wilderness offered. Kate reflected that:

... away from humanity and just being in that place that’s so quiet, so calm. And just the quiet, just real, true quiet. That’s an awesome thing that we don’t see very much in our life, you know? Just to get away and not...and to see a natural setting, and just to see something...like a beach that’s totally, like nobody’s done anything to it you know? Just to feel that total absence of anybody else or any other influence... (Kate)

For this participant, the disconnection reduced external stimuli, which led to the restoration of her energies. Distractions of everyday problems seem to drift away when immersed in the wilderness setting. This is not to say they go away as Ceci put it, but “it’s easy to forget you know.” (Ceci) For many, it offered the opportunity to leave some problems behind and experience a kind of reset, as life in the wilderness is stripped down to basic necessities. Zoë explained that she:

...left some things that maybe weren’t that big of a deal, but suddenly you know, when your home they feel so big and then you get out there and you’re like: “Who cares?” You know? Like, out here, I think about, like out in the wilderness I think about am I warm? Am I dry? Have I drank enough water? Have I eaten enough food? (Zoë)

Zoë and many others described how their immersive wilderness experience allowed them to reflect on the necessities of survival. Some noted how certain problems were no longer as

important as they had seemed. The experience permitted some of the women to reflect on their life. It gave them permission to temporarily shelve their issues or concerns. Being away from their reality, also offered participants an escape from their responsibilities. It wasn't just that they were away from their everyday existence. They experienced a conflicting reality as the immersive wilderness experience offered isolation, quiet, safety, time to reflect and to be mindful. Once there, they seemed drawn to the simplicity of their new reality. Jordane reflected:

The shift...what is it? I think it is...the deeper you get in there, I don't know, you leave everything else behind. I think you get more into the moment, ya...you leave troubles behind. And then, it's not to say you don't have issues to deal with while you're there, but that's all you have to deal with right? You're in the moment. All that you have to do is, you know, find shelter, feed yourself, stay warm and hopefully have fun right? (Jordane)

Some of the women reflected about the dissonance they were experiencing. Many spoke of the freedom they felt when faced with the simplicity of just subsisting.

As participants' ability to reflect upon their wilderness experiences and to express themselves were on a continuum, this last sub-theme wasn't obvious initially. Although it is the last finding to be discussed, it is by no means the least significant. Themes such as gender role expectations, stressors of timelines and multiple responsibilities as well as fatigue of their overstimulated existence began to surface. Former burdens gradually lightened as they entered the wilderness. Subsistence was stripped down to its basic needs, such as finding shelter, water and food. As superfluous aspects of their existence were deemed unnecessary in such an environment, they adjusted. What was important prior to arriving seemed less so, for the moment. They were in the moment, mindful of the space they inhabited. They spoke of feeling vulnerable, but of also

feeling safe to put their guards down. Tye explained how social correctness wasn't seen as important in this context:

I meant I revert back. I mean, I think of it when I am sort of like fluffing. It really doesn't matter. I think it made me realize just the extent to which it's really about social context. It's not really that I hate having my hands dirty, it is just something about...there are certain contexts in which it does not feel acceptable... and when you sorta step outside of those contexts just different ways of being become normal and acceptable and comfortable in a way that I wouldn't normally get to experience in my day to day life. (Tye)

They connected to the wilderness setting and found a part of themselves from long ago. They relived some of their childhood:

So, the wilderness for me became more of a, um, a kid feel, it felt like the other. It felt like a place to go to and get away to and I remember as a child my most, um, my most profound experiences I think in my life where I felt most happy and free and just you know, just felt the best, was when I was on camping trips you know, with my family or when I was doing you know a solo kind of sojourns into wild areas, and just being in the woods and being out on a boat, and those kinds of experiences were, I mean that was my happy place where I felt most secure and healthy and positive. (Jen)

They explored, they laughed and they had fun. They let go and "enjoyed people". (Kali) They started thinking out of the box, becoming more resourceful and self-sufficient. When they

weren't working or playing, participants reminisced about their awe of certain elements found in varied wilderness settings.

Kali recalled waking up in the early morning without the fly on the roof of her tent, and looking out and seeing the stars everywhere. She spoke of seeing the northern lights whilst hearing the owls calling and the wolves howling in the background. She couldn't even find the words in the interview to explain what she had felt, but instead, she let out a deep sigh, temporarily mesmerized by her account of this poignant scene. For some, like Kali, the wilderness provided opportunities to experience the natural world they were immersed in.

For some, just being surrounded by the strength and the majesty of the expanse, whether it be mountains, large water or hectares of forest, touched something inside them. Jen expressed feeling very connected with her Creator when she's in a wilderness setting. Wanda explained the draw she has to being in the wilderness with others. "Part of me, is the touching of the divine in other people because you've got all of your crap stripped away." (Wanda) This experience, for her, "reinforces the vision I have of an external power that creates things." (Wanda) Dyna, who was the youngest participant, tapped into the essence of how being in the wilderness affects her.

There's definitely that connection. I don't know if this sounds hippy or not, but there's definitely a connection between you and like, the earth. Um, you know, the fact that you can make tea that gives you energy, so it gives you life. Or the water...water gives you life so you should respect it. I don't know if I mentioned this earlier but there's a huge respect aspect to it. You know, like ah...like I said, with the Natives, you respect the water because water can take your life, you know? (Dyna)

This individual, who was the youngest of the sample, evidently understood the impact of interconnectedness between human and the natural elements. As indicated at the onset of this chapter, group dynamics surfaced as a minor sub-theme under challenges. Group dynamics, and more specifically, women only group dynamics in wilderness settings, provided sufficient data to support its inclusion as the third, and final theme.

Women only wilderness experience

Many of the women extolled the benefits of women only wilderness activities. Information shared by participants support a range of key concepts outlined in outdoor education, adventure therapy, experiential education and female only wilderness literature. Many of the participants utilized distinctively positive language when recalling women-only wilderness experiences as compared to their co-ed ones. Although the focus of this study was to explore women's relationship to the wilderness, the abundance of positive qualities assigned to the woman-only wilderness experience demanded special attention. Of those who had had co-ed and women-only wilderness experiences, the vast majority of participants expressed a clear preference for women-only groupings. The women's responses were grouped around three sub-themes: gender specified expectations, connection and comfort.

Pati theorised that the differences in dynamics were rooted in socialization and expectations of gender roles.

...if it's a co-ed trip, I feel like...I don't want to admit those weaknesses and I want to hold my own in the presence of the men who I perceive are stronger than I am, or perceive aren't as thirsty as I am. (Pati)

Some women described how they had easily fallen into the roles they were most comfortable with, which extended to their behaviours in a co-ed wilderness setting. Dawn stated: “I don’t think that it’s an assumption, but I actually think that it’s actually where the role that genders feel more comfortable.” (Dawn) Holly noted that men are often “...expected to know how to do that...and they probably don’t want to pipe up if they don’t know how.” (Holly) Aside from the gender roles playing themselves out, there is always the potential for sexuality to insinuate itself into the behaviour of individuals in a co-ed group. Wanda, who had guided extensively with co-ed adult and teenager groups commented that:

It’s different...there’s all sorts of sexual overlays going on, there’s who likes who, who doesn’t like who, who’s flirting with who, who’s not flirting...this was a trip with much younger people on it. Then, it was a whole different story to watch that dance that they have with each other. The flirtation, as opposed to a bunch of old fogies like us. (Wanda)

Tye recounted an instance in which her women-only kayaking group had set up camp for the night on an island in Georgian Bay, and how the dynamics changed as soon as men arrived on the scene:

...at some point the sail boat came and these two guys came...we were laughing as we saw them coming in right ‘cuz we had sort of established ourselves there at this campsite...and it was rather late in the day when they arrived...the conditions were such that they would not be able to make it to another camp before dark...we actually had leftovers from dinner so we shared dinner with them...and they made some kind of sexist jokes about it. I mean, not in a malignant kind of way. We were laughing about it, being like, men landing on this island with a mythological

character to it. So that was one point where it became particularly evident to us...but there were a number of times where we talked about the dynamics in a woman-only group...you could see the dynamic...I mean people stopped swimming with no clothes on...the dynamic changed. Yup. (Tye)

Dawn expressed a need to not be perceived as being inadequate, not wanting to be seen as helpless by her male counterparts:

Like, when I'm on a co-ed trip, I'm constantly thinking about whether or not the men are perceiving me as the weak link. Even though I'm clearly one of the stronger participants on the trip, like physically and emotionally. I can never show any vulnerability because then, I don't know if it's true or not, you know. I'm sure men are supportive, but it just feels like if I show my weakness, it's almost like: "We already knew that." (Dawn)

Max vividly recounted the differences she experienced when building a Sweat Lodge on two separate occasions: one with women and one in a co-ed scenario.

I reflect back to having one time built a Sweat Lodge with a group of women and we bent trees and built a gigantic Sweat Lodge. We did all the hard work and we did it all, and it was awesome. Then I went to do a Sweat Lodge and there were men there and the men, they wouldn't let the women bend the trees. We couldn't touch the big trees because that was their job. And it was subtle right? Like I say it like it was black and white but it wasn't like that. It was like the women were over, they sort of got shuffled over to cutting the little cedar things right? So the roles of men and women are subtly immersed into everything... I was in the bloody Sweat Lodge I

was so pissed...I finally gave up. I kept on trying to nudge my way into bending the trees...they just wouldn't let me in-I'm like "this isn't going to work", so I went with the women and I cut the cedars. Like this is awful. (Jordane)

Even as she recounted the story, she was fiery and clearly still perplexed by the incident. These narrative snapshots highlight the connection and comfort many felt during their women-only immersive wilderness experiences. They also underline how learned gender-specific expectations can play out even in a wilderness setting.

A sub-theme that repeatedly appeared when women spoke about their single gender wilderness experiences related to a sisterhood of sorts. "You just have a feeling of (pause) great affiliation. You understand each other. You know, if somebody is menstruating, you understand each other." (Holly) Participant's narratives were permeated with descriptors such as cooperative, supportive, inclusive, comfortable, connection, equality and sensitive.

...there wasn't anybody who just sat back and watched everybody else do the work.

Like everybody pitched in. Everybody did what they were supposed to do. If someone was having a problem, everybody was there to help them, it wasn't just:

"Oh look, too bad she's way back there eh?" (Kali)

An element of safety was also evident in their stories. Because they felt safe, they could allow their vulnerabilities to show. With the lack of judgement from others, individuals felt secure to attempt tasks outside their level of knowledge or comfort. Holly shared that: "I think women are just encouraging and so accepting if you don't know how to make a fire. We will teach you." (Holly)

There was a sense of empowerment at having to depend on one another to figure things out. Women spoke of decision-making being democratic and how tasks were cooperatively accomplished. “The women just pick up the roles easily. You know, it’s a matter of oh, we need water. Ok, I’ll go get water. Or we need a tarp set up, I’ll set the tarp up. Like, it doesn’t faze them.” (Dawn)

They spoke about a level of comfort that one only experiences when surrounded by other like-minded women. One woman compared the interactions to what happens at a girl’s sleepover. There’s a sense of cosiness that allows women to throw down their guard, leading them to try new things, to step outside their usual comfort zone. Freedom from being sexualized, free from judgement, free from societal expectations. Kate offered her opinion on the matter by saying: “Women tend to act more like themselves, when there’s just women there. Ya. I think it’s just less stressful.” (Kate)

Although the findings in this study parallel results from research on organized experiential education, outdoor education programs, adventure therapy and nature or wilderness-based therapeutic models, it is interesting to note that none of the participants in this study were partaking in such programs. The data gleaned from these fifteen interviews of immersive wilderness experiences showed similar findings supporting theories such as ART and cognitive/adaptive dissonance.

Discussion

Even before starting this project, I believed that spending time in wilderness settings allowed me to reconnect to the basic, unadulterated person I am meant to be. The longer I was away from the responsibilities of my job and personal commitments, and immersed in the wilderness, the more balanced and centered I felt. I believed this prior to knowing there was a growing field of research into the benefits of wilderness and nature. All I knew was that something positive happened to me when I was out there. In time, these experiences have provided me with opportunities to reflect on how to strive to find balance in my life, tapping into one of the many benefits I extrapolate from my wilderness experiences.

Prior to delving into the comparisons between the findings of this study and the literature, it is important to remind the reader of my original area of interest for this study. The purpose was to explore women's immersive wilderness experiences. Upon analysing the findings, a good portion of the information communicated by the women fit into elements of outdoor education, adventure therapy programs, experiential education or nature-based approaches. These types of programs represent a vast collection of differing philosophies, values and goals. Furthermore, they are developed for specific populations who have particular needs. Fields such as counselling, education, corrections, corporate team building and leadership development all use some combinations of elements found in the programs summarized in the literature review. None of the participants in this study spoke about participating in such courses or programs.

The majority of the activities the women participated in would be classified as leisure wilderness activities, which they all voluntarily took part in. Yet, the theme of discomfort and challenge repeatedly surfaced during interviews in the guise of pre-activity anxieties or doubts and/or being

outside their comfort zone due to fatigue, pain and sickness during activities. Some spoke of experiencing discomfort related to functioning in a wilderness setting and identified certain interpersonal difficulties encountered during the excursions. Overwhelmingly, participants who had identified challenges related to activities were also able to validate the experiences as being beneficial. The wilderness as a setting also offered its share of challenges, but participants' response overwhelmingly reflected upon the benefits. Those participants, who had the opportunity to partake in women-only immersive wilderness experiences, told the

Activities (challenges and benefits)

Participants were asked to reflect on any challenges they might have encountered during their most recent immersive wilderness experience. Therefore, it was not surprising to hear stories of challenges encountered while participating in wilderness activities. Words such as painful, frustrating, uncomfortable and fatiguing were interpreted as falling into challenges. Although participants maintained that their immersive wilderness experiences were enjoyable, some also expressed how the activities impacted them due to discomfort or self-perceived limitations. Many were clearly able to recall their emotional reactions such as self-doubt, fear and frustration when struggling to complete or to learn certain skills. Some of the women expressed how stress-inducing some of the activities had been, at times leading to self-described, short-lived, emotional breakdowns. As animated as they were recounting the challenges they had encountered, many touched on how acknowledging their discomfort, then pushing past pre-conceived limitations, ultimately resulted in them feeling good about themselves and empowered. Participants purposefully chose activities that required them to push past their comfort zones, which mirror research on adventure and wilderness-based therapeutic programming. Participants take physical risks, choosing the level of risk "as a means to take

control of their environment and feel empowered”. (Tucker, 2009) The difference is in the intended goal. That a wilderness activity can be viewed both as a challenge and a benefit is not a revelation, as the literature supports this outcome. (Holman & McAvoy, 2005; Pohl et al., 2000; Kaplan, 1995; Driver, Nash & Haas, 1987; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983)

In organised outdoor education, wilderness adventure or adventure therapeutic programming, each program has their own guiding concepts and practices, which are based on an assortment of philosophies, goals, methodologies and target populations. (Neill, 2008; Priest & Gass, 2005). Built into the structure of these programs is a purposeful sequencing of activities, meant to build up skills and sense of accomplishment prior to moving on to more challenging tasks. These activities “promote social skills like cooperation, communication, assertiveness and problem-solving.” (Tucker, 2009) The majority of participants did not indicate that their intended goal was to feel empowered, to increase self-confidence or to experience a sense of accomplishment. The exception was Dyna, who was in her second year of an Outdoor Adventure certificate program. She had acknowledged that most of the experiences she recounted in her interview were associated to her course, which involved several co-ed group wilderness trips. She felt fiercely motivated to maintain an air of confidence, even in the face of adversity. She often spoke of the frustration of having to physically keep up with her stronger male classmates. Her trips were solely meant to apply the skills she had learned in-class, and to be graded by her professors. Participants reported that completing the task increased their self-esteem as well as their sense of accomplishment, which are results cited in outdoor education and therapeutic wilderness studies. (Warren, 1996; Mitten, 1992) This type of formula is often seen in experiential learning models, which are at the root of wilderness adventuring programs.

Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound program, believed that when people were placed in challenging, adventurous outdoor situations, that they would gain confidence, and be able to redefine their own perceptions of their personal possibilities. (Outward Bound, 2016) In outdoor education and adventure therapy, participants are purposefully challenged to push past their comfort zone, in order to reach a goal. This is done in a supportive environment, not unlike group camping trips some of the participants recounted being on. Although the goal of their trip was not to participate in a therapeutic wilderness activity, similar elements were in place to outdoor education and adventure therapy, which created parallel outcomes. It is in those moments of stress that change and learning can occur. Depending on the person's prior coping mechanisms, two people will report different responses.

Prior adventure education studies (McKenzie, 2003; Hattie et al., 1997; Walsh & Golins, 1976) showed a strong correlation between being challenged and coming away from the activity with a heightened sense of accomplishment and confidence. Many of the participants in this study were able to articulate an understanding that stress-inducing activities they encountered whilst immersed in a wilderness setting, were lessons and opportunities. For some, these lessons or breakthroughs were adapted to their daily lives, which is an identified strength of outdoor education objectives. (Neill, 2008)

But what was it about that setting, which made it beneficial to them? Did it have anything to do with being in the wilderness? Walsh and Golins (1976) felt that wilderness settings encouraged self-awareness and self-responsibility, and encouraging mastery which leads to increased self-concept. (McKenzie, 2000). A person can learn how to kayak in a pool, or at an urban lake. Was it the sum of or the entirety of the exposure to the wilderness activities which added to their subjective account of the benefits? For some, the challenging circumstances, such as hiking or

paddling long distances were necessary endeavours, in order that they might be able to relish in a true wilderness experience, far from their everyday urban life. The challenges experienced during the guided wilderness activities occurred in wilderness settings, surrounded by supportive peers and knowledgeable guides. Such conditions are reflected upon by Kellert and Derr (1998) in their paper entitled *A National Study of Outdoor Wilderness Experience*. They wrote that “challenge and immersion in pristine nature in the shared company of others generally produces major and sometimes profound changes in self-concept and enhanced capacity for coping and adapting.” (Kellert & Derr, 1998)

Unlike the programming involved in outdoor adventure education, the activities these women participated in were not designed to master skills or to build character. However, it is evident that the challenges involved in the activities recreated a familiar formula outlined by wilderness adventure researchers. The challenges in the activities created a state of dissonance in the participants, which they eventually overcame to feel successful. (Gass, 1993; Walsh & Golins, 1976) Many demonstrated a level of awareness of their self-perceived anxieties. The women were all engaged in recreational activities of their choosing. Some experienced pre-activity anxieties, but persevered while being encouraged by peers and knowledgeable guides, which often lead to successfully completing the task. Some researchers critique this template often utilized by those in the adventure therapy or outdoor education fields, arguing that the “...best scenario for growth and change is the one in which participants feel safe, secure and cared about.” (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002) Although participants expressed feeling safe and supported, they were not partaking in an organized therapeutic program. Researchers such as Denise Mitten believe strongly and promote the importance of “creating a safe atmosphere for participants, as... the greatest amount of change and growth comes from a place of comfort,

security and acceptance.” (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994) As in other therapeutic fields, I believe that practitioners need to be familiar with many theories and philosophies, in order to tailor their approaches to the individuals they are working with.

Although there were significantly more positive statements related to interpersonal exchanges, I believe it is important to touch upon the idea of conflict or discomfort related to other human beings during the wilderness experiences. In one study into the emotional coping responses to hassles and stress experienced in wilderness settings, “eighty-seven percent of respondents indicated that some sort of hassle had been experienced and that the majority of the sources of the hassles was due to interactions with other people.” (Schuster & Hammitt, 2002) One respondent spoke of the frustration she and her female peers felt when the male members of their group dispersed when it was time for their group to cook supper. I would posit that a contributing variable at play in this scenario was *goal interference*. (Watson, 2001; Beard & Ragheb, 1980; Jacob & Schreyer, 1980) The goal was to prepare a meal together, and part of the group did not adhere to that goal. This type of conflict is supported by Jacob and Schreyer (1980) who attempted to build a therapy of recreational conflict and to identify its characteristics. Another example of goal interference was provided by a participant who expressed her frustration at the fact that some of the members of their kayaking group wanted to spend some down time at the beach, whilst she and others wanted to further explore their surroundings. The matter was resolved by splitting the group into two, with one guide going with each group. Negative reactions were elicited when two groups of individuals had two competing recreational goals: one to relax on a beach and the other to explore neighboring islands via kayak.

Group dynamics are always at play when travelling with others, whether they are acquaintances or strangers. Some participants acknowledged that behaviours which weren't conducive to group

cohesion had to be dealt with on the spot. Certain individuals who were likely to ignore certain behaviours decided to address them whilst in a wilderness setting. Due to the isolation and lack of a quick fix, some felt it necessary to confront the person who was causing discomfort, instead of letting it simmer. Although this example did not occur during an adventure-based group therapy trip, the scenario presented itself as a learning opportunity, which led to the strengthening of the group cohesion. As in adventure-based group therapy, it gave the participants the opportunity to deal with problems in the here and now which lead to clear and immediately applicable experience. (Tucker, 2009) In the experiential wilderness programs, the group process or interpersonal learning are vital components.

It is evident that the activities participants engaged in while immersed in the wilderness pushed them emotionally and physically. The challenges outlined by participants related mostly to activities, which occurred in remote wilderness settings. The lack of amenities, discomforts due to inclement weather and interpersonal conflicts rounded out the remainder of the sub-themes identified by participants.

Wilderness as a setting

Wilderness activities inherently involve some level of risk. People perceive and evaluate risk through their subjective lens. This unique lens through which they evaluate risk is influenced by past experiences, by media representations that tend to sensationalize natural disasters or because of their predisposition to anxiety. (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002) It is important to note that I did not ask participants to quantify their level of discomfort, nor did I ask about pre-existing predispositions to anxiety disorders or other mental health disorders. Research into anxiety or perceived risk during outdoor programs shows that it is a “cornerstone, encouraging practitioners

to heighten participant's perception of risk" (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002), in the hopes that it will be a catalyst for change. (Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Gass, 1993) Participants might have been apprehensive about certain elements of the wilderness experience, but none reported being paralysed by anxiety or by fear to the point that they had to extricate themselves from the excursion. Although some experienced fears about the activities themselves, they also communicated their pre-trip worries related to elements of wilderness camping such as going to the bathroom in the bush, wild animals, the remoteness of the settings and poor weather conditions. The level of discomfort experienced by participants seemed to depend on the relationship they had with nature and wilderness. Contemporary humans "come to feel deeply ambivalent toward wilderness, finding it both beautiful and terrifying, both awesome and awful." (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005) Stress experienced by a human being is a highly subjective phenomenon. The Oxford Dictionaries defines it as "a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances." (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.)

Generally, we see the presence of stress in our lives as having negative impacts on our health. Dr. Esther Sternberg has written extensively about brain-immune system interactions and the brain's response to stress on health. I was unable to find evidence of longitudinal research which measures sustained, challenge by choice impacts on the brain or body. For some participants, challenge did equate to stress. I was unable to find evidence of longitudinal research which measures sustained, challenge by choice impacts on the brain or body. The reality of this study is that the benefits derived from the challenging activities were based on uniquely subjective anecdotes from participants, whose life experiences are distinct. Does challenge equate stress? These results parallel the comfort zone model, which is generally utilized in outdoor educational programming. This learning model purposefully places people in a state of disequilibrium,

forcing participants to mine past their usual responses, leading them to develop personally and intellectually (Brown, 2008). I wondered whether a state of disequilibrium equalled stress, as none of the participants stated they felt stressed out. Instead, some used words describing the theme of discomfort.

This cycle of feeling discomfort, pushing past pre-conceived limitations, overcoming fears and acknowledging growth repeated itself throughout the women's narratives. Initial anxieties about not having certain amenities were quickly alleviated, as they successfully completed the undertaking. Once a participant learned how to properly place a tent or tarp, the immediate result was them being dry. Receiving guidance on how to pack and what functional clothing to wear answered some questions they might have had, which had created pre-trip hesitations or stress. This also led them to see they could function with less, and highlighted the importance they placed on the style and esthetics of their clothing, rather than their function. Wearing the same clothes for a week, caked in seat, bug spray, sun block, food and dirt was uncomfortable for some. However, a few women were able to recognize how their choice of clothing was made to communicate status in the hopes of influencing how others perceive and behaved towards them. McDermott (2004) used the term physicality to describe the physical experiences of the self, lived through ones' sexuality, health and appearance." (McDermott, 2004, p. 283). Based on this sample's narratives, many of these discomforts seemed to appear at the beginning of the trips, and I would posit that they gradually abated as the women learned to cope.

Being immersed in a wilderness setting, with none of the amenities of urban life, participants expressed how they had to figure things out with the materials they had. When a problem arises, and you don't have the necessary tools, one generally heads off to the closest hardware store to purchase what is needed. When one encounters a problem in the wilderness and has limited tools

to fix said problem, you figure it out with what is available. Some of the participants spoke about being forced to think out of the box, to use their imagination, to make-do with what they had. The women acknowledged that superfluous clothing, gear and behaviours did not equate to a terrible wilderness experience. Inasmuch as a wilderness setting can be remote and far from conveniences, at times creating anxiety or discomfort for some, participants eloquently described how the wilderness setting ignited a shift in how they felt.

Escape

Since this study specifically attempted to obtain information about participant's relationship to the wilderness setting, I had anticipated that motivation for seeking out the wilderness experience would reflect prior research, which outlined a variety of motivating factors such as being away (Hammit, 2000; Kaplan, 1984), privacy (Hammit, 2000), beauty (Bauer, 2005), affective connections (Hinds & Sparks, 2008), past experience (Watson, Roggenbuk & Williams, 1991), spiritual or introspective opportunities (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003) or biophilic urges (Wilson, 1992). As indicated previously, the question wasn't posed to the participants about what motivated them to participate in a particular immersive wilderness activity. Based on the content of the interviews, participants' reasons varied. However, words describing being away, taking pause and resetting, surfaced on several occasions. The women spoke of being away from elements related to both urban features as well as personal life elements, which may or may not have been viewed as stressors by the participants.

Ulrich et al.'s (1991) psycho-evolutionary theory (PET) proposes that contact with nature reduces stress, because nature settings "evoke moderate levels of interest, pleasantness and calm." (Herzog & Strevey, 2008) These states of being were reflected in the data extracted from

the interviews. Participant's mentioned peacefulness and stillness, which lead to increased opportunities for reflection. Wilderness settings are certainly appealing, as there aren't the typical distractions related to urban environments.

This is not to say that one cannot be distracted in a wilderness setting. I easily revert back to childhood behaviours, exploring every nook and cranny, and being delighted and curious of my discoveries, excited to show them off to others. This sense of adventure, carefree-ness and paying attention to minute details surfaced as women described a settling of sorts, which occurred once they acquiesced to being away. It wasn't clear how long participants took to detach sufficiently to be in such a state. Perhaps Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (ART) can offer an explanation for this finding. The Attention Restoration Theory proposes that "intensive or prolonged use of directed attention, the kind that requires effort, leads to fatigue" (Herzog et al., 2003). That state of mental fatigue was reflected as many of the women spoke about leaving behind stressors related to responsibilities, their employment or their roles as mothers or spouses. Participants expressed a sense of relief they felt at not having to put up pretenses in relation to gender expectations. Some spoke of the excitement of learning new outdoor skills, or of simply getting away from their usual. Removed from the context of an immersive wilderness experience, the rewards extolled by participants could relate to any kind of vacation. However, what was it about the wilderness setting that contributed to, or was the root cause of participant's sense that their experience was restorative? In effect, I did not pose the question of whether participants found their immersive wilderness experience to be restorative. I asked them whether there were any benefits to their experience. Within those answers came clear language relating to elements they could not have encountered in any other setting, aside from the wilderness.

Some researchers have concentrated on the restorative effects of urban forests (Hammitt, 2000) and wilderness settings, in relation to physical and psychological aspects. Others have researched the beneficial effects of nature on well-being (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich, 1984). I cannot generalize my findings to support a particular theory or hypothesis. The easy answer is that it appears this sample of participants experienced several of the elements proposed by prior researchers. Based on the presence of language and ideas relating to an altered state of being which resulted from Escape, a sub theme of Shift is worthy of mention.

The shift

The immersive wilderness setting offered participants the opportunity to be away from their 'usual', stress-laden life. Wilderness characteristics such as isolation, stillness and solitude increased the opportunity to reflect, relax and for some, to experience spiritual growth.

Participants used language such as reset, pause, balance, grounded, centered and reconnection and listening to self. I have said that I go to the wilderness to reboot my battery. Even though I am more physically active than I would ever be at home and am often sleeping poorly with one eye open, I feel rejuvenated upon my return from the immersive wilderness experience. I am busier in the wilderness than I am in the city, but it's a different busy. There is a lack of expectations, which allows me to just be. There's a sense that I have permission to eat when I'm hungry, and go to bed when I'm tired and wake-up when my body says it's time. The women spoke about things slowing down, which allowed them to pay attention to minute details.

Ultimately, this shift or reset restores, replenishes and invigorates.

Jordane, who has spent most of her life connected to nature and wilderness, said something significant about the shift she experiences when she is in a wilderness setting. Her word, 'the

shift' really sums up what I and many of the participants in this study have experienced. She said "the deeper you get in there...you leave everything else behind." (Jordane) This touches on the theme of escape, as the women clearly outlined a variety of everyday life elements they were able to leave behind during their wilderness experiences. With that I wonder whether they choose to be away from to experience that simplicity of existence the wilderness setting provides, or whether they were drawn to the wilderness setting through a biophilic urge? Perhaps both premises are taking place concurrently. For some who did not have a significant history of being in wilderness settings, I believe these benefits were unanticipated. Alternatively, those participants who had significant wilderness experience expressed their choice to leave their everyday life, seeking that shift. Jordane goes on to say that one gets more into the moment, leaving troubles behind. The shift created an invitation to be quiet, with no distractions. This reality allowed some to slow everything down, including their mind. This state of being mirrors language used in Pohl et al.'s study, as they described the benefits of spending time outdoors. They found that participant's reported "mental clarity, a sense of freedom and self-shaping" (Pohl et al., 2000, p. 427). The wilderness allowed for the shift, which was created when participants lived a mindfulness of sorts, encouraged by the un-busyness of the setting, leading them to see their elemental selves. For some, the simplicity of existing in the wilderness was surprisingly basic. This state of uncomplicatedness allowed for a replenishing of energy.

Nonetheless, the most plentiful of comments related to the benefits of women-only wilderness immersive experiences, using wilderness to get away, experiencing a reconnection to self and activities. This study was not intended to focus on the single gender group wilderness experience. I did not delve into participants' motivations for choosing to partake in women-only wilderness experiences. However, recurring language such as comfort, compassion, cooperation

and comradery seems to support some of the literature relating to why women seek all-women programming.

Women-only wilderness experience

Many of the participants in this study were recruited from the Wild Women Expeditions' website, which is a women-only wilderness touring company. Therefore, I was fortunate to obtain a majority of participants who had experienced both co-ed and women-only wilderness experiences. This scenario led to an opportunity to delve into some of the particularities of experiencing wilderness with other women. Having myself experienced women-only leisure wilderness tripping, I recognized much of what participants shared. Research into female only outdoor leisure has confirmed several positive outcomes such as: "physical and psychological empowerment, enhancement of body image and improved image of women and the female body". (McDermott, 2004, p. 284) Literature extoling the benefits of women only wilderness experiences also abound and support similar findings. (Warren & Loeffler, 2006; McDermott, 2004; Pohl et al., 2000; Hornibrook, Brinkert, Diana, Seimens & Priest, 1997; Henderson, 1996; Asher et al., 1994; Mitten, 1994; Powch, 1994) Overall, responses in this study were concentrated in the following areas: comfort, connection and freedom from gender-specific expectations.

This comfort resonated in their stories of feeling at ease with their bodies, skinny dipping for the first time or pushing through concerns about going to the bathroom in the forest, as is reflected in prior studies by Mitten & Woodruff, (2010), McDermott (2004), Pohl et al. (2000) and Arnold (1994). The women placed less importance on their appearance, not caring whether their nipples showed when they went braless, or hadn't washed their hair in days. For those who had

experienced prior co-ed leisure wilderness trips, they noted the absence of competitive and adversarial attitudes being substituted with cooperation and support. When women feel safe to choose between societal or gender-based expectations, they are better able to recognize the kinship they have with other women. Behaviour isn't sexualized, as there is no competition for a mate. There is only the task at hand, a job which must be done. How often does a woman have the opportunity to be herself? How often does a woman have the opportunity to be surrounded by other women? For millennia, cultures and religion have dictated gender based roles and societal norms. Participants seemed to appreciate the opportunities to challenge some of those expectations, to escape gender based violence, social norms and gender roles. In modern day, there are few opportunities available for women to come together, in a non-competitive way, to just be whom they feel they were meant to be prior to the influences of socialization.

One participant likened her experience to a girl's sleepover, as they talked about topics generally not broached in the presence of men. With their guard down, they spoke more freely and laughed heartily. Witnessing the compassion and support amongst the women in the group encouraged participants to try new things. Nolan and Priest (1993) suggested that women often find "learning skills in mixed-gender settings intimidating." (in McDermott, 2004, p. 287) The interplay between connection, comfort and support created a safe space to learn new skills. "Due to socially imposed and perceived constraints, some women are turning to all-women programs to gain a sense of empowerment, a sense that they have the freedom and the capacity to take action to improve their life situation" (Mitten, 1994; Pohl, 1998). However, in this study, I did not ask the women who had participated in all-female wilderness experiences, their reasons for wanting to do so. Participants spoke about experiencing freedom from gender-specified expectations and being given the opportunity to engage in a non-familiar tasks based on interest,

not gender-based expectations such as cooking. Instead, the women expressed a relief of sorts at being given a choice to take on any task they felt confident in attempting.

This study did not explore whether participant's immersive wilderness experiences influenced their everyday lives. This might have been an interesting area to explore to see whether Pohl and her counterparts' findings were supported. These researchers found that the impacts from outdoor recreational experiences could transfer into other aspects of daily life, which resulted in an increased sense of empowerment and social change for women (Pohl et al., 2000; Henderson, 1996).

The literature on group wilderness participation consistently shows benefits such as mutual support, social interaction, trust and communication. (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000) These elements surfaced in this study's interviews, and in particular, when participants spoke of women-only wilderness activities. This overlap of benefits may or may not relate specifically to women-only wilderness activities, but rather, to group dynamics in general. Research into women-only wilderness experiences, seems to consistently reflect benefits and motivational themes such as: freedom from gender roles, opportunity to bond with other like-minded women and interest in gaining skills in a supportive environment (Miranda & Yerkes, 1982) and an opportunity to connect with a wilderness setting. (Hornibrook et al., 1997)

Considerations and limitations of study

From the onset, I, like many of my classmates, had grand aspirations that our thesis and the resulting data would make a significant impact in our field of study. I learned to moderate my expectations and grappled with ways to maintain a high standard of accountability. My lack of

experience led me to ruminate over what and how I could have done differently. In retrospect, I would have done things a little differently had I known what I now know.

Financial and time constraints dictated the number of participants I felt I could utilize.

Consequently, this sample is not representative of the majority of women, leaving me unable to generalize the findings. I chose a purposeful sampling technique, because I knew I would find sufficient participants in a short timeframe, from the Wild Women Expeditions Facebook page. I realize now that I could have focussed more closely in my sampling criteria, to include women who had experienced women-only immersive wilderness experiences. This might have strengthened my findings in this area, adding to the woman-only wilderness literature.

Additionally, I had considered obtaining demographic information from the participants, hoping to see if certain socio-economic patterns emerged. This was based on the literature which supports that the majority of women partaking in recreational wilderness activities are not representational of all socio-economic and educational classes. (Kellert & Derr, 1998)

I had fully intended on utilizing a reflexivity journal to record my ideas, challenges and questions. However, I eventually stopped using it because I found it time-consuming. I believed that my time was better spent attending to the various tasks involved, rather than to use my spare time writing in a journal. In retrospect, not having a dedicated space to jot down ideas and questions which arose during the research process was imprudent. Ideas randomly came to me while driving, listening to a radio program or when speaking with others. I would write them down wherever I could, or will myself to remember. Inevitably, I would forget the ideas or lose the piece of paper, missing valuable opportunities to improve the final product.

My conviction that there were benefits from immersing oneself in the wilderness shaped the development of the study. I had wanted to add to existing studies on the benefits of the

immersive wilderness experience. However, I would have had to develop a tool to measure subjective wellbeing or borrow one from another author, and adapt it to my needs. As this process was outside my expertise, the focus of the study was broadened. In retrospect, I could have narrowed the focus of the study and sought to explore a specific aspect of the wilderness experience.

I strongly believe that the semi-structured interview was best suited for my style, as well as my goal to explore women's narratives. However, because of the broadness of my focus, there was much information left unexplored. As I began to review the interview transcripts, I realized I had not had the forward thinking or knowledge to account for so many variables. All fifteen women potentially had fifteen different reasons for participating in their immersive wilderness experience. Depending on their reason, what they took away from their experience made the difference in how they answered the questions.

I had no prior experience interviewing participants for a study. I did my best to prepare, reading what I could find on the topic. Some conversations got off topic, creating a significant increase in less usable transcript content. On a few occasions, participants weren't especially talkative, which made it challenging to obtain in-depth answers.

The analysis of fifteen interviews was completed without the use of data analysis software. I read and re-read, highlighting and cutting segments out of the text. I then grouped them into themes and subthemes and placed them into separate envelopes. This was a lengthy and tedious undertaking, and influenced by my "subjective perspectives". (Meyer, 2010)

The final product was exactly as I would have wanted it to be. It was, and remains about the fifteen women who took the time to tell me their stories. It is their narratives I was seeking. My

choice of semi-structured interviewing was purposeful, as I wanted to acknowledge their wilderness experiences. Although unintended, many interviews concluded by asking them if they could recall their earliest wilderness experience. It is those moments that I recall, when they were describing their childhood adventures. For a moment, they seemed adrift in carefree nostalgia, reminiscing in vivid detail, the exhilaration they had felt so long ago.

The acknowledgements made above are not an indictment of this study's findings. It is simply a statement of the limitations I recognized throughout the research process. It is my hope that future students will be mindful of this transparency, and pay attention to this feedback I have given.

Upon reviewing the interview transcripts, I reflected on the countless hours spent immersed in wilderness settings and wondered whether I had been seeking refuge in the wilderness. If this was the case, was I trying to get away from something, or was I being drawn by a biophilic instinct to reconnect with the natural elements? Not unlike my own questioning, the participants' understanding of the role the wilderness played in their life wasn't always clear to them. My intent was to explore the relationship these women had to wilderness. In order to do so, I encountered significant layers of variables, which I had not anticipated. I had defined wilderness and immersion, but overlooked defining *wilderness experience* and taking into account participant's reasons for seeking out the wilderness experience. Fourteen of the fifteen spoke of specific recreational experiences, which took place in a wilderness setting. Not only did it become apparent that the participant's reasons for seeking out a wilderness setting differed, but who was seeking it out varied significantly as well. Two women engaging in the same wilderness experience will not come away with the same lived experience, because they arrive with

cumulatively distinct makeups. As I sought to connect my findings to the literature, I found those connections in an array of philosophical and academic disciplines.

I utilized my extensive wilderness immersive experience, to generate questions which would, 1- allow the women to recount details of their wilderness experience, 2- permit them to consider the role that the wilderness as a setting, played in their experience. As my focus was on exploring participants' relationship to wilderness, the question which asked them to reflect on any distinctive aspects of women-only wilderness experiences, was created as an afterthought. Future research might explore women-only wilderness experiences. However, because the women-only aspect was not my primary focus, the question remained in the questionnaire.

Conclusion

In this study, the explicit goal was to explore women's narratives regarding their immersive wilderness experiences. Research and personal knowledge support that the experience can be restorative and that it promotes self-discovery, allowing a person to reconnect to simpler ways of being, away from everyday responsibilities and distractions. The natural world is self-regulating, and we are, whether physically removed from it or not, part of that world.

The idea of specifically utilizing wild settings as a therapeutic backdrop did not come up in my discussions with the participants from this study. Based on the information they shared about their immersive wilderness experiences, none of the activities were part of a wilderness therapy or adventure therapy programs. Rather, they were part of chosen recreational activities, to which most were fully aware of the challenges and risks which lay ahead.

Fifteen female participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Inclusion criteria were that she be at least 18 years old and that she had experienced an immersive wilderness experience of more than four nights. Participants' wilderness experience ranged from relative beginner to veteran. Having partaken in women-only wilderness immersive experiences was not a criterion for participation. Three overarching themes were gleaned from the content of these interviews. Participants spoke about situations which challenged them or which caused them discomfort. Such occasions occurred in relation to their activities, the wilderness setting itself and/or as a result of interpersonal conflict. The results from this study echoed existing literature on wilderness adventuring and group dynamics. Although participants described how challenging the wilderness activities were, they were able to identify how beneficial these had been to them. Many passionately recounted their women-only wilderness experiences and were

able to outline clear benefits they perceived from having had those experiences. The final piece, which was the intent of this study, relates to how the immersive wilderness experience impacted the individual. As could be expected, participants attributed some discomforts to being in a wilderness setting, ranging from lack of amenities to weather or environmental stressors. Overwhelmingly, participants described how certain qualities of the wilderness setting such as isolation and stillness, encouraged a mindfulness of sorts. This slowing down fostered a shift, leading some to reconnect to their elemental selves.

Relevance to social work

Although the size of this study doesn't lend itself to a generalization to all women, their rich descriptions of their experiences could inform the development of other wilderness and/or recreationally-based therapeutic processes. My vision is to develop a wilderness therapeutic recreational program as an adjunct to existing counselling and therapeutic models in Northern Ontario. We are surrounded by hectares of Crown Land and waterways. Wild natural settings offer the opportunity to be removed from personal and societal expectations and pressures. It also offers a stillness and simplicity, increasing the opportunities for reflection and self-care. Spending time in the wilderness compels a person to adopt a reductionist lens, focussing one's attention on the elemental components of survival: lodging, fire, water, food. Based on my lived experience, I tend to see life through an eco-therapeutic lens. I believe that humans have complicated and busied their lives, which has contributed to many of our physical and mental health challenges. This disconnection from our elemental self as well as our environment can be restored by returning to the basic rhythms of life, which nature or wilderness settings offer.

The original intent of my research was to embed myself with a group of women partaking in an extended wilderness activity. I was to have been a participant observer, and willing participants would have been given a journal and camera to record their thoughts. Following our return from the trip, participants would have been interviewed. Combined with the researchers' observations and the tools given to them to enhance introspection, raw data to specific questions would have been collected. Not only was such a project possibly riddled with ethical landmines, but the scale of the project was more akin to a PhD than a Master's thesis. There is an abundance of smaller-scaled studies such as mine, which cannot generalise their findings to a larger population. However, the totality of the data shows evidence of the positive impacts contact with nature or wilderness has on human beings.

There is an agency in Colorado, called the Rape Assistance and Awareness Program (RAAP) that provides low-cost group therapy for women who have recently been sexually assaulted as well as for women with a history of incest. It incorporates a three-day Colorado Outward Bound School (COBS) experience into the program. The women participate in a 16-week structured course of treatment with the COBS experience occurring at the 10th week. Following the trip, much time is spent debriefing and processing, in order to facilitate the transfer of learning from the wilderness to the everyday lives of the women (Asher et al., 1994, p. 163). This program is one of many examples of an agency incorporating contact with nature into their programming.

Including nature or wilderness into therapeutic processes is an inexpensive way to promote self-care and reconnection with the environment. The collective wisdom shared by this study's participants highlight an important fact: that we humans are inextricably connected to the natural world. Whether we choose to dance with it is our choice.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Literature Review

| Themes | Author | Key Points | Gaps/Limitations |
|--|--|---|---|
| Biophilia hypothesis | Wilson, E.O. Author of book entitled Biophilia | -suggested an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems | -difficult to measure |
| Recovery, view of nature Restorative effect | Ulrich, R. (1984). View through a window may influence recovery from surgery. 224, 420-422. | -in comparison with wall-view group, patients with a view of a tree had shorter post-operative hospital stays, took fewer moderate and strong analgesic doses and had lower minor post-surgical complications | -the “built” view of the wall was rather dull and the results cannot be extended to all built views, not to other patient groups, such as long-term patients who suffer from low arousal or boredom rather than from the anxiety problems associated with surgeries |
| How the outside world can impact the healing chemistry of the mind | Esther Sternberg Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well Being. The Balance within: The Science Connecting Health & Emotions | -how interconnectedness of lived experience, emotions and setting can impact wellbeing -exploration of neurobiology of the senses -connection between stress and wellbeing | |
| Link between stress reduction and nature/wilderness | Kaplan, R. & KAPLAN, S. | -focus on relationship between nature and human nature | |

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| recreation | | | |
| Shinrin-yoku and phytoncides | N. Li (2010) | -research into the impact phytoncides have on cell activity, blood pressure, systolic, diastolic and serum cortisol levels | |
| Attention Restoration Theory (ART) Place attachment, solitude and natural settings | Korpela, K.; Hartig, T.; Kaiser, F.; Fuhrer, U. (2001) Restorative Experience and Self-Regulation in Favorite Places, Environment and Behavior, 33 (4), 572-589. | -natural settings were overrepresented among favorite places and underrepresented among unpleasant places -frequent mention of being relaxed, being away from everyday life, forgetting worries, and reflecting on personal matters indicated a link between favorite places and restorative experience Restoration was particularly typical of natural favorite places | -university students |
| Ecopscychology | Roszak, T. | blending of ecology, psychology and philosophy | |
| Eco-therapy | Clinebell, H. Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth. New York, NY and London, UK: The Haworth Press, 1996. Xxii. 293 pp. | -pastoral care and counselling, author -presents an ecological circle with three dimensions: finding ways to be nurtured by nature, need to nurture nature and the enjoyment of the experience of the creative source of all life that | -limited research into effectiveness of this approach |

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| | | many of us call God | |
| -Eco-therapy, nature-based therapies | Chalquist, C. (2009). A Look at the Ecotherapy Research Evidence, Ecopsychology, June 2009, p. 64-74. | -article provides summary of Eco therapy roots, along with an overview of select studies | -review limited to studies of green infrastructure and exercise, nature in healthcare settings, animal-assisted therapies, horticultural therapy and outdoor restoration |
| Transpersonal Psychology | Davis, J. (2004). Psychological Benefits of Nature Experiences: An Outline of Research and Theory | -professor and research at Naropa University (Boulder, Colorado) and School of Lost Borders -literature review | |
| Nature therapy | Berger, Ronen | Israeli researcher/therapist has developed a therapeutic framework utilizing Nature Therapy (NT) Therapy takes place in nature Integrates elements from shamanistic rituals, vision quests with elements of modern and humanistic therapies such as art and drama therapy, Gestalt, narrative approach, eco psychology, transpersonal psychology and adventure therapy | -less suitable for elderly, handicapped, young children or persons who may not feel comfortable spending time in a natural environment -some trauma has been known to occur in a natural setting, especially in war-torn countries, or in the case of sexual assault or familial molestation |
| Mindfulness & meditation | J. Kabat-Zinn | - interconnectedness and need for balance in the web of life | |

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| Review of outdoor wilderness experience | Kellert, S. & Derr, V. (1998). A National Study of Outdoor Wilderness Experience | <p>-Quantitative retrospective and longitudinal studies of three established US wilderness organizations</p> <p>-focussed on two major impacts of the outdoor experience such as effects of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours toward the natural environment and impacts on physical and mental development</p> | |
| Review of scientific and non-scientific literature on benefits of wilderness | Driver, B.L., Roderick, N. & Haas, G., (1987). Wilderness benefits: A state-of-knowledge review. In R.C. Lucas (ed.) Proceedings of the National Wilderness Research Conference, Ft. Collins, CO: USDA Forest Service General Technical Report INT-220; 294-319. | <p>- outlines types of benefits such as personal, social and inherent/intrinsic</p> <p>-Describes delimitations of these studies</p> | |
| Adventure therapy (AT) critique | Beringer, A.; Martin, P. (2003). On adventure therapy and the natural worlds: Respecting nature's healing, | <p>-Healing properties of the natural world</p> <p>-AT ignore the role that nature plays in successful results</p> | <p>-Few empirical findings to support claims</p> <p>-value in doing follow-up interviews with participants of AT who reported undergoing</p> |

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| | Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning, 3: 1, 29-39 | <p>-By acknowledging the “healing factor” of immersion into wilderness, AT can incorporate eco-therapeutic approaches</p> <p>-acknowledgment of the interconnection</p> | transformative experiences, to see if the positive effects have had a lasting impact on their behaviours, attitudes or beliefs. |
| Outward Bound | | | |
| Comfort Zone Model | Brown; Prouty, Jane & Collinson | | |
| Adaptive Dissonance | Walsh & Golins | | |
| Wilderness recreation | Brown, Perry and Haas. (1980). Wilderness recreation experiences: The Rawah case. Journal of Leisure Research 12(3): 229-241. | <p>-focus on defining wilderness recreation experiences in terms of psychological outcomes</p> <p>-identified eight psychological domains: relationship with nature, escape pressures, achievement, autonomy, reflection on personal values, sharing/recollection, risk-taking, meeting/observing other people</p> | |
| Group wilderness | Ewert, A., McAvoy, L. (2000) The Effects of Wilderness Settings on Organized groups: A State-of-Knowledge Paper. | <p>-literature review of research into characteristics of group wilderness research</p> <p>-outline of specific variables which consistently appeared,</p> | -reinforced prior research which supported the difficulty in ascertaining whether changes to participants were a result of the wilderness or if they manifested due to group dynamics, or other |

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| | USDA Forest Service Proceedings, RMRS-P-15-VOL-3. | such as mutual support, social interactions, trust, communication, stress reduction and/or coping, self-systems | non-wilderness setting variables |
| Women and wilderness Spiritual inspiration | Fredrickson, L.M. & Anderson, D.H. (1999). A Qualitative exploration of the wilderness experience as a source of spiritual inspiration, Journal of Environmental Psychology, 19, 21-39 | -association between expansiveness of setting and awareness of power of nature/strong feeling of spiritual exploration -women only group, created reduction in gender role | -lack of longitudinal studies on long term impacts -impacts same on mixed-gender trips? -having participants complete a spiritual self-assessment to create a “spiritual baseline” prior to trip would help quantify/situate subjective findings, thus comparing the two |
| Women/nature and body image Nature, women and body image Women empowerment | Hennigan, K. (2010). Therapeutic Potential of Time in Nature: Implications for Body Image in Women, Ecopsychology, 2:3, 135-140 Mitten, 1994; Pohl, 1998; Powch; Asher et al. | -ecopsychology exploring how connection to nature and wilderness experiences can be used a healing modality for psychological disturbances -results supported idea that spending time in natural settings improved body image by way of distancing women from the cultural context, increasing embodied experiences and supporting connection to nature | -small sample size (12) -bias included higher socioeconomic status, Euro-American ethnicity, liberal political beliefs -due to small sample size, results cannot be generalized to the broader population of women |

Appendix B - Recruitment poster

Title of study: Immersive Wilderness Experiences: An Exploration of Women's Narrative

Principal investigator: Judith LaRush, Master of Social Work Student

Institute: Department of Social Work, Laurentian University

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE? If you are a woman, 18 years or older, and have partaken in a wilderness outing in the last 2 years, lasting 5 or more days. For the purposes of this study, extended wilderness outings are defined as: a canoeing, hiking, snowshoeing or kayaking excursion, lasting a minimum of 5 days and 4 nights.

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT? I am a Master's student in the school of Social Work at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. I myself am an avid paddler, and have spent countless hours in wilderness settings. I hope to learn more about other women's experiences during and following their immersive wilderness experiences.

WHERE: In person, online (Skype) or by telephone.

COST: About one hour of your time.

WHEN: Winter/Spring 2015

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME? To have the opportunity to reflect on your wilderness experience, in a safe, respectful and receptive format.

SO WHAT'S THE CATCH? Well, because you will be part of a study, you'll be required to sign a consent form. Ten to fifteen participants will be contacted to participate in a one-hour interview to further discuss their experiences.

I will then transcribe all information gathered from the individual interviews and identify common themes. In order to minimize any undue influence on participants, I will refrain from sharing my findings until I have completed the research and submitted my thesis.

However, I fully intend to make a summary of my findings available on the Wild Women Expeditions' Facebook page for your reading pleasure once it is complete.

NOW WHAT? Drop me a line at jm_larush@laurentian.ca or by dialing 1-705-562-7776. I'll send you a consent form to sign and return to me, and we'll make arrangements to meet either in person, online or by telephone.

IS THAT IT? Nope...I want to thank you all in advance for your assistance. Be well!

Appendix C - Informed Consent



INFORMED CONSENT

Title of study: Immersive Wilderness Experiences: An Exploration of Women's Narrative

Principal investigator: Judith LaRush, Master of Social Work Student

Institute: School of Social Work, Laurentian University

Faculty Consultant: Dr. Daniel Côté, dcote@laurentian.ca (705) 675-1151 ext.5081

Introduction:

My name is Judith LaRush. I am presently completing my Masters of Social Work at Laurentian University, in Sudbury, Ontario. I am conducting a study, which will explore women's reporting of the impacts of their wilderness experiences. This project has been approved by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board.

Purpose of this research study

The sole purpose of this activity is to obtain women's narrative as it relates to their immersive experience in a wilderness setting.

Procedures

Once the consent form is signed, we will organize a time to conduct the interview, which should take no longer than one hour. Due to geographical distances, interviews may be completed via Skype or by telephone. Our discussion will be recorded and transcribed into text. Once the interview is transcribed, the digital recording will be erased, along with any connection to your true identity. Use of the material from your interview will be attributed to a pseudonym, which you will have chosen at the commencement of our interview.

Right of refusal to participate and withdrawal

You are free to choose to participate in the study. You may also withdraw at any time without any adverse effect. You may also refuse to answer some or all the questions if you don't feel comfortable in doing so. You will be provided with a transcription of our discussion prior to it being published. Should you choose to change or remove any information, you may do so at that time. However, please note that once your data is collated (mixed in with other's responses), it will no longer be possible to separate your responses from others'.

Confidentiality

The information provided by you will remain confidential. No one except this researcher, the transcriber and my faculty supervisor will have an access to it. Your name and identity will also not be disclosed at any time. However, the data will be published in a Masters of Social Work thesis or elsewhere **without** disclosing your identity. You will be asked to create a pseudonym for the purposes of this study. Any information you choose to share with this researcher will be attributed to your pseudonym, not your real name. However, you will be asked to provide some contact information, in order to facilitate the planning of our interviewed.

Please note that this researcher is unable to guarantee confidentiality if the interview is conducted via Skype, due to the non-secure nature of the Skype software.

Available Sources of Information

If you have any questions, you may contact the researcher Judith LaRush, Department of Social Work at Laurentian University at following email address: jm_larush@laurentian.ca. Additionally, if you have any concerns, you may contact my Faculty Consultant, Dr. Daniel Côté at dcote@laurentian.ca or the Chair of the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board, Dr. Rosana Langer at Ethics@laurentian.ca.

1. AUTHORIZATION

I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable federal, provincial, or local laws.

Participant's Name (Printed or Typed):

Date:

Appendix D - Interview guide

Tell me a little about yourself. (age, race, occupation, passions)

In your own words, can you describe the differences (if any) between nature and wilderness?

What role has nature played in your life?

Tell me more about your most recent wilderness experience. (setting, activity, length of time, solo/group)

Recalling your most recent wilderness experience, what would you say were some of the challenges you encountered? (physical, emotional, physiological)

Can you describe any feelings or emotions (positive or negative) relating to your most recent immersive wilderness experience?

Reflecting on your most recent immersive wilderness experience, did you perceive the wilderness as playing a role? If so, what role do you believe the natural environment played in your overall experience?

Did you perceive there to be any therapeutic or health related benefits from participating in this immersive wilderness experience?

If you did perceive there to be benefits, how did these impact your life afterwards?

If this was not a solo trip, was it a woman-only or a co-ed group?

Recalling a woman-only wilderness experience, can you reflect on any distinctive aspects of having a woman-only group of women sharing the experience together?

Appendix E - Table demonstrating how themes were refined and reorganized

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities • Adaptability • Beauty of nature • Being away from • Benefits (self-care, centered, grounded, freedom, simplicity, health, spirituality, connection, creativity) • Challenges (activities, physical, comfort zone, group dynamics, interpersonal, weather, discomfort, sense of accomplishment) • Definitions • Emotions (fear, joy, confidence, pride, frustration, excitement, self-doubt, discomfort) • Exploring • Gender roles (freedom) • Group dynamics • Idealism • Opinions • Physical challenges • Qualities of the wilderness (isolation, quiet, reflection, sense of space, solitude, relaxing, unplug, elemental, back to basics, simplicity, escape, spirituality, mindfulness) • Recharge/reboot • Reminiscing • Resilience • Selflessness • Spirituality • Women only (group dynamics, togetherness, friendship, safety, vulnerable, fun, empowerment) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Activities (Challenges, emotions, confidence, resilience) ➤ Adapting (creativity, resilience, emotions) ➤ Benefits of being immersed in the wilderness (emotions, self-care, exploring, creativity, recharge, reflection, connection, freedom, grounded, centered) ➤ Benefits of Women only groups (gender roles, selflessness, emotions, friendship, togetherness) ➤ Challenges (activities, physical, emotional, group dynamics, interpersonal, related to wilderness, activities, interpersonal, emotions, life stressors) ➤ Emotions (Idealism, opinions, self-doubt, comfort zone, discomfort, reminiscing) ➤ Escape (sense of space, being away, exploring, qualities of the wilderness, self-care, solitude, spirituality) ➤ Qualities of the wilderness (beauty, emotions, sense of space, spirituality, solitude, challenges, weather, self-care) ➤ Reminiscing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Activities ▪ Challenges ▪ Escape/being away ▪ Benefits ▪ Women only ▪ Emotions ▪ Definitions ▪ Qualities of the wilderness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Challenges ∞ Benefits ✓ Wilderness as a setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Qualities of the wilderness ∞ Emotional response to ∞ Escape/away from ∞ Shift ✓ Women only wilderness experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∞ Group dynamics ∞ Freedom from gender role ∞ Expectations ∞ Safety ∞ Empowerment |
|--|--|---|--|