
Emerging Adults' Identity Exploration: Illustrations From Inside the "Camp Bubble"

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Abstract

The study investigates the experiences of emerging adults who had worked as counselors at overnight summer camps; identity-related issues emerge as most salient in the analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with 12 women and 8 men from 8 camps. Their descriptions portray the identity exploration that took place within the camp context, through opportunities to try out roles and responsibilities ranging from the adult-like role model to the more child-like entertainer, and many counselors specifically remark on the role of camp experiences in their identity development. The role of camps as one type of facilitative venue for emerging adults' identity exploration is discussed.

Keywords

identity development, identity exploration, emerging adulthood, summer camp

Erikson (1968) argued that a period of relatively free experimentation, in which individuals have the opportunity to explore various aspects of their

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identity before assuming enduring responsibilities, is psychosocially beneficial. He believed that this psychosocial moratorium was the domain of adolescence; however, he also commented that, for some individuals, this period of identity development appeared to be extended well into the chronological age associated with adulthood at that time. Many scholars now agree that currently, for at least some young people in developed countries, this extended period of identity exploration and development is widespread. Indeed, this characteristic has been identified as a key component of the concept of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2006).

Although the importance of identity development during emerging adulthood has been acknowledged, researchers disagree about the extent and nature of identity explorations that may take place during this time. Arnett (2006), for example, has argued that identity issues are so central to emerging adults that they come up in response to a wide variety of issues and interview questions. In contrast, Côté (2009) has contended that if such extended identity exploration takes place at all, it is within a small subset of the population. He further argues that although emerging adulthood

has stimulated considerable research, the question that remains to be answered empirically is just how much *active* identity exploration takes place during this extended transition to adulthood. The issue of *active exploration* is important due to Arnett's claims that emerging adulthood is a new developmental stage. If the transition is delayed for economic or social reasons, many young people may simply be waiting for age-based opportunities to become available and may not be active in their identity formation beyond what they experienced during their teens. Instead, identity changes may be more on a trial-and-error basis than as a result of deliberate explorations. (p. 296; italics in original)

These viewpoints appear to be in opposition; however, they hold points of similarity. Côté (2009) maintained that relatively few people—namely, those who have the luxury or desire for it—engage in active identity exploration; these individuals may well be within the emerging adult population on which Arnett (2006) has focused. In either case, a subset of the population, and hence a subset of emerging adults, appears to be engaged in active identity exploration. Thus, investigations of emerging adults' identity development and exploration can inform the growing body of research on emerging adults in general, their identity development in particular, and how identity development during this time fits within a lifespan developmental perspective.

Although Arnett's original research on emerging adulthood consisted of in-depth interviews (e.g., Arnett, 2004), more recent research on emerging adults' identity development has been more heavily focused on the measurement and correlates of identity instruments (e.g., Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006). Qualitative studies of these same processes can deepen researchers' understanding of identity development during emerging adulthood, through examination of individuals' own perceptions. In the present study, we used in-depth interviews to investigate the identity development of a subset of emerging adults who might be involved in active identity exploration: those who had worked as counselors at overnight summer camps. Although we investigated the potential of the camp experience to influence a wide variety of developmental outcomes, issues of identity emerged as the most salient in emerging adults' narratives.

Each summer, day and residential camps employ more than 1 million adults, the vast majority of whom are college students, in seasonal counselor and administrative positions (American Camp Association [ACA], 2009). Emerging adults work at camps despite low wages, limited time-off, and a demanding schedule. They typically describe their experiences in glowing terms and often are willing to talk for hours about the role that camp has played in their lives. Counselors' passion for what they do suggests that this context may be especially meaningful for those in the age range designated as emerging adults. Clearly, camp has been an important experience for them, but very little is known about how working at camp influences their social and emotional development.

Counselor positions cater to the "in-between status" of emerging adults (e.g., Arnett, 2006) through their emphasis on both exploring life experiences and assuming some responsibility. Given the distinctive nature of the camp counselor position, camps are an appropriate venue for examining identity issues in emerging adulthood. Camps also have the potential to provide a type of moratorium environment. In Erikson's (1968) view, some settings serve as moratorium environments, which can facilitate the process of identity exploration. Although colleges and universities are the most commonly considered moratorium environment, other experiences may serve as psychosocial moratoria for emerging adults. These environments can promote identity exploration in ways that are complementary to or different from college experiences. Thus, in addition to investigating emerging adults' perceptions of how their camp experiences had affected them, another purpose of this study was to investigate how the counselors experienced the camp environment. Results presented here are based on interviews conducted with 12 women and 8 men between the ages of 18 and 28 who had worked as counselors at overnight summer camps during the summer prior to the interview.

Research Context

Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood

Although issues related to identity development have long been considered to be central to adolescence, scholars such as Arnett (2006) have argued that identity development now continues well past this period into the time now termed emerging adulthood. Indeed, Arnett has contended that emerging adulthood is the setting for most of an individual's identity work, given that issues of identity arise for emerging adults in all areas, because emerging adults must "know what kind person they are—that is, what their likes and dislikes are ... what they enjoy doing and what they are good at ... how their worldview is similar to and different from the one held by their parents" (p. 8) before making choices related to careers, relationships, and ideologies. Thus, although a considerable number of 18- to 25-year-olds may have made enduring choices, either with or without the period of searching, many emerging adults still are potentially engaged in active identity development.

Furthermore, Arnett (2006) has maintained that the identity development experiences of emerging adults are qualitatively different from those of adolescents because emerging adults are free from many of the constraints, such as compulsory education and living with one's parents, which most adolescents experience (i.e., they are able to be more self-focused). Although there have been few empirical investigations of this assertion, it is consistent with Kenniston's (1971) conceptualization of identity development during the period he called "youth." Kenniston supported Erikson's (1968) proposition that identity development is the primary task of adolescence, but he also felt that identity explorations, albeit of a different kind, continued to take place during the period he designated as youth. In Kenniston's view, adolescents pursued broad questions about self-definition; in comparison, those in the youth period were thought to have developed some sense of identity and were engaged in testing it in new and more adult-like settings.

Exploration has been conceptualized as one of the basic processes that may contribute to individuals' identity development in both adolescence and emerging adulthood (Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, & Berman, 2001). Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, and Rodriguez (2009) described identity exploration as a process of "sorting through various identity elements in an attempt to identify a set of goals, values, and beliefs to which one will commit" (p. 131). In keeping with Marcia's identity-status tradition, Schwartz et al. maintain that engaging in such exploration before making enduring choices about one's identity results in commitments that "are often more flexible, more responsive to changing social circumstances, and more strongly

associated with the self-direction and agency that is required for successfully navigating through complex and unstructured Western societies” (p. 131). Thus, identity exploration is thought to be a critical process underlying the development of stable commitments that will guide emerging adults through their transition to adulthood. In the present study, we focus on emerging adults’ identity explorations because these experiences emerged as most salient in the context of their employment as counselors at overnight summer camps.

Identity Development in Context

In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Adolescence* on contextual influences on identity development, Byers and Çok (2008) stated that each social context in which individuals interact “has roles, norms, and rules that shape individual development” (p. 148). Thus, the potential contributions of contextual factors to identity exploration and development should not be overlooked. Erikson conceptualized identity development as the product of person–context interactions (Adams & Marshall, 1996), and he posited that such interactions could take place within a psychosocial moratorium, in which individuals could explore new ways of interacting with and behaving in their environment without having to make enduring commitments to these roles. Through these interactions with the social environment, individuals assess their abilities, interests, and strengths, and they engage in a process of self-selecting among opportunities to find a match between their desires and goals and the opportunities available to them (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Thus, moratorium contexts can provide gradually increasing demands and opportunities, which encourage such self-assessments and explorations.

The most commonly identified type of moratorium environment for emerging adults is the college or university (Schwartz & Pantin, 2006). A long tradition of research (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, for a review) has established that attending college does affect students, particularly in terms of cognitive variables and measures of well-being. Although college students are frequently sampled for identity-related studies, it has been difficult to determine whether and in what way attending college, in contrast to other experiences and environments, affects students’ identity development (Côté, 2009).

More conclusive evidence has been found in studies of how parenting and familial contexts are related to identity development, at least in adolescence. In this area, as in many other domains of psychosocial functioning, adolescents with parents who grant them psychological autonomy but exercise behavioral control evidence more positive outcomes. According to Côté (2009), research to date in this area suggests that family contexts that include

“a moderate degree of connectedness, reflected through shared affection and acceptance of individuality” (p. 281) are the most conducive to adolescents’ identity exploration and development.

Several scholars (e.g., Côté, 2000) have noted that the social environments in which adolescents and emerging adults currently exist are less structured than they were even a few decades ago, which means that the roles, norms, and rules that shape identity development within certain contexts may be less clear. This requires emerging adults to utilize more personal agency in the development of their identities (e.g., Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). Thus, contexts that provide high levels of supports and opportunities for identity exploration may be particularly meaningful and important to emerging adults, especially those who are engaged in active identity exploration.

Overnight summer camps are one such potential venue. Working as a counselor at a residential camp, as previously noted, may be particularly appealing to emerging adults given their “in-between” status (e.g., Arnett, 2006) as neither completely adolescents nor yet fully adults. Summer camps provide emerging adults with a venue in which to experience, express, and explore both sides of their “in-between-ness” through built-in opportunities both to continue adolescent- or child-like practices of being silly and to experiment with more adult-like roles such as assuming responsibility for creating programming and taking care of children.

Summer Camp Counselors

Recently, the ACA has undertaken several large-scale studies of campers (ACA, 2006), but the counselor experience remains understudied. Some studies have focused on 4-H camp counselors (e.g., Garst & Johnson, 2003; McNeely, 2004); however, they are usually of high school age and, therefore, more closely represent the adolescent, rather than emerging adult, population. The small amount of existing research on counselors older than 18 primarily has examined them in their status as employees (i.e., recruitment and retention; McCole, 2005), with relatively few studies investigating the personal impact of the counselor experience (e.g., Bialeschki, Henderson, & Dahowski, 1998; DeGraaf & Glover, 2003) and virtually none utilizing an explicitly developmental perspective (see Jacobs, 2004; Sweet, 2005).

Within studies of the personal impact of being a counselor, researchers have identified a variety of positive outcomes, of which the most common have been increased self-confidence or self-esteem (Bialeschki et al., 1998; DeGraaf & Glover, 2003; Dworken, 2004; Sweet, 2005). Other frequently

cited outcomes included personal growth in areas such as understanding oneself (Sweet, 2005), appreciating nature (DeGraaf & Glover, 2003), and an increasing sense of responsibility (Dworken, 2004). Jacobs (2004) reported significant increases in emotional intelligence in counselors from immediately prior to immediately after the camp season. Another major positive outcome has been the relationships that counselors developed with other staff members and with campers. In many studies, participants reported making close friendships with other counselors and sustaining them after the end of the summer, as well as mentoring relationships with campers (Bialeschki et al., 1998; DeGraaf & Glover, 2003; Dworken, 2004).

Many of the benefits of the counselor experience identified in previous studies can be, at least at a surface level, related to identity. For example, counselors surveyed in several studies indicated increases in self-confidence or self-esteem, which can be viewed as related to aspects of personal identity (e.g., Schwartz & Pantin, 2006). As yet, however, these benefits have not been placed within the context of any developmental theories. In the current study, we attempt to address this need.

The Present Study

Residential summer camps provide a developmental context for a subset of emerging adults, but little is known about how those who have worked as counselors perceive the camp environment or how they experience the impact of this employment on their own social and emotional development. In light of these aims, the research questions that guided this study were

Research Question 1: How do emerging adults experience the camp environments where they are employed as counselors?

Research Question 2: How do emerging adults experience the impact of working at camp on their personal development?

Research Design and Method

In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with emerging adults who had worked as counselors at overnight summer camps during the summer prior to the interview. The data were analyzed using grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2006; Morse & Richards, 2007), which often are used in exploratory studies to provide an initial picture of the phenomenon under investigation.

Sampling and Participants

For this exploratory study, we chose to use a purposive sampling strategy (Morse & Richards, 2007), in which participants are recruited because they have experiences pertinent to the research question; the goal of such a sampling strategy is not to produce findings that are generalizable to the larger population but rather to inform research about a particular phenomenon. Participants were recruited during two separate periods. The first wave took place during the summer of 2007, when counselors were recruited from five overnight summer camps located throughout New England. All five camps operated using a “traditional” model of summer camping with cabin or tent accommodations and a variety of activities, including hiking, swimming, sports and games, arts and crafts, and nature awareness, but session lengths differed from 1 to 8 weeks of attendance. Two of the camps were operated by nonprofit organizations (e.g., the YMCA), whereas the other three camps were privately owned and operated. Three of the camps were coeducational, and two served girls only. Two of the camps also offered a day camp option (see Table 1, Camps A through E, for specific information).

In all five of these camps, the first author gave a presentation regarding the study either during the staff-training period before the campers had arrived or at a regularly scheduled staff meeting during the camp season. Because the camps served varying numbers of campers, the number of staff employed as counselors at each camp ranged from 15 to approximately 50. Counselors were eligible for the study if they were 18 years of age or older and resided in New England during the school year. The sample was limited in this way for the practical purposes of obtaining consent and traveling to conduct interviews. From these 5 camps, a total of 48 counselors volunteered to participate in the study. Because we did not collect information regarding age and school-year residence from all counselors, we were not able to determine the number of eligible counselors at each camp; thus, the percentage of eligible counselors who volunteered to participate is not available. Of these 48 counselors (9 from Camp A, 8 from Camp B, 8 from Camp C, 18 from Camp D, and 5 from Camp E), 31 were unable to participate (17 did not return e-mail and phone communications regarding scheduling an interview, 10 counselors were too far away to complete an in-person interview, and scheduling difficulties prevented the remainder from participating). This resulted in a final sample of 17 counselors from these camps (see Table 1 for information about the distribution of participants across the five camps).

Due to the reasons outlined earlier, a number of counselors were not able to participate in interviews; thus, the original sample included a large number of

Table 1. Camp and Participant Information

Camp	Name	Age	Number of summers		Working at same camp he or she attended as a child?	
			Camper	Counselor ^a		
A	Maine; private, girls only; 4- to 8-week sessions	Annie	19	1	1	Yes
		Jennifer	18	3	1	Yes
B	Massachusetts; organization, girls only; 1-week session	Beth	21	0	2	No
		Elaine	21	0	3	No
		Paula	22	5	3	No
C	Vermont; private, boys and girls; 8-week sessions	Chad	19	5	1	Yes
		Olivia	28	0	10	No
D	Connecticut; organization, boys and girls; 1- or 2-week sessions	Diane	26	0	5	No
		Helen	21	7	3	Yes
		Kevin	19	3	2	Yes
		Lisa	20	4	3	Yes
		Matthew	20	3	3	Yes
		Nina	18	0	2	No
		Rachel	22	5	5	Yes
		Sean	18	4	2	Yes
E	Connecticut; private, boys and girls; 1-, 2-, or 4-week sessions	Greg	18	2	1	No
		Tracy	21	4	4	No
F	New Jersey; organization, boys and girls; 1-week sessions	Vince	20	1	3	Yes
G	New Hampshire; organization, boys and girls; 1- to 2-week sessions	Will	20	6	3	Yes
H	Connecticut; organization, boys and girls; 1-week sessions	Yvonne	19	2	2	Yes

a. Counselor refers to the total number of summers at all camps where the participant had worked.

counselors from one particular camp (Camp D). Although saturation of information was reached on the basis of this original sample of 17 counselors, concerns about the homogeneity of the sample led to an additional, smaller, wave of recruitment. A second group of three counselors from three different camps were recruited during October and November, using posters advertising the study throughout the University of Connecticut campus. One participant had worked at a “traditional” camp run by an organization (with a format and curriculum similar to that of the original five camps), a second had been employed at an academically focused camp held on a university campus, and the third had volunteered at a camp run by a branch of the military. From the two waves of recruitment, a total of 20 emerging adults from 8 camps participated in the study.

Data Collection

Interview process. During September, October, and November, the first author conducted all interviews, most of which lasted an hour and were conducted in a campus office or at another location—such as a bookstore or a coffee shop—selected by the participant. The interview guide for this study was created to cover a variety of areas of the camp counselor experience, which were addressed using a flexible style of interviewing (Weiss, 1994), in which questions were discussed as the subject matter came up or when it seemed appropriate during the course of the interview. Consistent with the aim of grounded theory, this interview technique allowed the participants to emphasize the aspects of their camp experiences that were most meaningful to them without the artificial introduction of topics considered more important by the researchers.

Transcription. The first author transcribed each interview using Digital Voice Editor 3.0 software. Before transcription began, procedures and a transcription key were established using suggestions provided by Poland (2002). Participants’ phrasing, pauses, and changes in voice such as whispering or laughing were preserved as much as possible with notations in the transcript; however, quotes presented here have been edited for readability and space concerns. In all transcripts, the names of participants, the camps where they were employed, and the names of other employees or persons were changed to ensure confidentiality. These changes are preserved in the quotes presented here.

Data Analysis

The first author conducted all initial coding. Preliminary codes were generated using the grounded theory procedures, advocated by Charmaz (2006), of proceeding relatively quickly through the data the first time, coding for

action, and going with initial impressions. The codes developed at this stage were intended to provide early ideas about concepts that were present in the interviews. Next, each code was refined through comparison with other instances of the same code; these comparisons were discussed with the third and fifth authors as part of the peer-review process to promote the validity of qualitative research (Johnson, 1999). Related codes were grouped and designated as categories during this phase. Codes and categories also were compared with concepts from existing theories and research on adolescence and emerging adulthood.

The first author engaged in free writing and clustering (Charmaz, 2006), to develop ideas about the properties of different categories and how these categories might be related to each other in a larger framework. As analysis progressed codes and categories were refined and changed as needed through comparison with the data and with each other. Other members of the research team (primarily the third and fifth authors) verified this process. Once categories were established and refined, the final stage of analysis focused on the relationship between the categories and the larger context of each interview. In some cases, categories and codes were refined or reworked in light of the developing theoretical relationships.

Results

The first purpose of this study was to investigate and describe how emerging adults who had worked as counselors at overnight camps experienced the camp context; the first section of the results is devoted to this. The second purpose was to explore how emerging adults experienced the impact of working at camp; the second and third parts of the results section address this.

“It’s Just This Really Separated Place”: The Camp Bubble

In this study, we were interested in how the counselors experienced the camp environment. Despite the diversity in camps where the emerging adults had worked, they all described common views of camps as distinct worlds, with very little connection to the outside and several distinguishing characteristics. Several counselors used the term *camp bubble* to describe the camp environment. Annie, a 19-year-old first-year counselor, explained:

There is this bubble at camp ... you’re in this world; nobody knows that you run around, sing songs all day, and do silly things! You’re in

this really closed environment, and your day is so regimented. It's just this really separated place.

On the basis of counselors' descriptions, we identified five characteristics of the residential summer camp environment that contributed to the sense of the "camp bubble": (1) the physical and psychological separation of camp, (2) its organizational structure, (3) camp traditions, (4) camp activities, and (5) the establishment of a camp culture built around acceptance.

Physical and psychological separation. Isolation from mainstream society is one of the hallmarks of an overnight summer camp. This isolation facilitated the nearly complete immersion of staff in their particular camp. During the rest of the year, the counselors encountered a variety of settings and groups of people as they went about their work, school, leisure, and social pursuits. During a summer spent at camp, all of these happened in one place and with the same group of people. Camp staff members may have left for brief periods during their time off, but they were at camp, and on the job, for the vast majority of the summer.

With one exception (Camp H, which was held on a university campus), the summer camps where participants in this study had worked were located "off the beaten path." Being physically far away from "civilization" certainly contributed to the sense of separation that many counselors in this study felt at camp, but physical separation was measured in more than just miles. For the most part, counselors experienced the outside world only on nights or days that they were not working and were free to leave; at most camps, this was once a week.

The counselors, however, did not refer often to the physical separation between camp and other aspects of society. For them, the psychological distance of camp from the rest of the world was much more significant. The counselors reported that specific relationships, such as those with their non-camp friends or parents, were more difficult to maintain at the usual intensity while they were at camp. Most counselors had no or very limited access to e-mail, and cell-phone reception frequently was terrible. Although counselors did maintain some connection with the outside world, the overall technological disconnection was often welcomed as a respite from the pressures of their everyday lives, as Beth, a 21-year-old second-year counselor, explained: "I love not being able to check my e-mail, because I don't want to respond to e-mails in the summer! It just gives you an excuse, I guess. It's an escape from your own life." Nina's description echoed Beth's: "I have camp life and that world, and then real life, and I love that. When I'm at camp, I can separate myself from the crazy things going on, like time and technology, and I can ... just live at camp."

These separations were reinforced by the inability of friends and relatives who were not there to understand what it was like to be at camp. Counselors often did not attempt to keep up other relationships during the summer because those who were not “camp people” just did not understand, and it was often frustrating to make attempts to explain. With experience, the counselors had learned to expect confusion, disinterest, or occasionally even hostility when trying to include others in their camp lives; they often quit trying. Most counselors, like Helen, a 22-year-old third-year counselor, chose to spend time with fellow counselors during time-off rather than face the barriers between themselves and others who were not at camp:

None of my friends at school know anything about camp. I tell them funny stories, like when I do something that reminds me of a certain camper that is crazy, I will try to tell them. And it’s NEVER as funny; it’s just very weird.

The counselors reported that their parents usually were more supportive and accepting than their “noncamp” friends, but they still were not able to comprehend the camp experience entirely. Nina, an 18-year-old second-year counselor, described herself as being close to her parents but said that despite their relationship, it was difficult to talk about camp in a satisfying way:

I explain it to them all the time. I tell them all the stories. They try to keep up with it but they just don’t. You don’t really get the camp experience and you don’t understand it unless you’ve been through it.

Yvonne, a 19-year-old who volunteered at a leadership camp for a week each summer, received a similar reaction from her parents after her return:

I talk non-stop about camp ... every detail like down to one day we saw this really cool squirrel or something. My parents are like [monotone voice] that’s great. Glad you like it ... I guess they don’t appreciate it as much because they weren’t there.

These counselors’ comments illustrate their perceptions of the camp environment as being separated—both physically and psychologically—from the rest of the world.

The organizational and supervisory structure of camp. Similar to most companies or businesses, summer camps have an organizational structure. Camps vary considerably in the amount and type they have, but there are some

commonalities. At all of the camps in this study there were at least three distinct groups: (1) campers; (2) counselors, who lived in cabins with the campers; and (3) administrators, who did not. The counselors were directly responsible for the daily operations of their cabins and the well-being and positive experience of the campers within them. For the duration of the session, which lasted anywhere between 1 and 8 weeks, counselors took on many tasks that ordinarily were completed by the campers' parents; they did this, however, in a group format, with 8 to 14 campers per 2 or 3 counselors. Most counselors said that they did not experience the amount and intensity of responsibility they felt at camp anywhere else. Vince, a 20-year-old who volunteered each summer at a 1-week camp sponsored by an organization, thought that camp was unique in this aspect.

It's definitely just a feeling that happens there. Here at school I have to fend for myself, but I don't have the responsibility I have there. I'm responsible for these kids. If one comes out with a broken arm, it's my fault. I can't think of anywhere else that I have nearly as much responsibility as I do there with those kids.

However, the organizational and supervisory structure of the camps ensured that counselors did not toil alone. They were embedded in a network of support systems that included their fellow counselors, unit leaders, seasonal program directors, and year-round administration. Unit leaders and other supervisors were there to provide support when needed, and most counselors took advantage of these mechanisms. Diane, a 26-year-old who had been a counselor for 5 years, remembered how support staff had helped when she and her co-counselor had a difficult camper: "We used our unit leader a lot. She had been coming previous summers ... so she already had kind of a relationship with the girl, which helped. We had resources there that we drew upon." Tracy, a 21-year-old fourth-year counselor, felt that the positive camp environment made it easier for her to ask for help: "It's more of an intimate environment, I'm more likely to be like um, crap, I've got a problem, [director], can you help me?"

Most counselors also felt that the type of guidance they received from their supervisors differed from that of most other jobs and activities. Beth, a 21-year-old second-year counselor, described how she felt her supervisors at camp were different:

I think it's an interesting opportunity to grow and learn new things in a protected environment. They'll take you aside and say, "This is what

you're doing wrong." No one takes me aside as president [of a sorority], and says, "Hey, you need to speak up a little more and bang your gavel more!" At camp, it's my job to become a better person ... performance reviews are on how you act towards other people, and that's the main skill you're going to have to use for your whole life. So it's really important that they're telling you what you have to do better.

Beth's comments are emblematic of many counselors' perceptions that camp provided opportunities for new experiences and growth within a supportive and encouraging environment.

Activities. Another key feature of the camp environment was the variety of activities that counselors were able to take part in, learn how to do, and teach to the campers. Counselors reported enjoying the times when they could "be a camper" and take full advantage of skill-building opportunities. This especially was important for the female counselors. Annie's description is typical of the female participants' accounts of these opportunities: "I rode horses and swam, I learned to sail ... you have the opportunity to be around all these activities you normally wouldn't be able to do."

Diane believed that exposure to different types of activities during her first year as a counselor helped her gain confidence:

I've never been particularly coordinated ... athletics have always been a challenge for me ... [but] as the summer went, because we did so many activities with our cabins ... I could shoot a bow and arrow and I could steer a canoe, and I learned a [heck] of a lot that summer that I had never done before, alongside the kids.

Although nearly all the counselors described taking advantage of activities offered at camp, some participants more explicitly described how they used the different activities to promote their own development. At the beginning of the summer, Lisa, a 20-year-old third-year counselor, had set a goal for skill development:

I went into this summer wanting to try a lot of new things. I tried advanced biking, and I've never like biked on anything that wasn't like a flat surface, so that was really intense! And I learned to sail this summer, by myself, and just do a lot of stuff like that that I had never tried before. I was really proud of myself at the end of the summer.

Although the participants described varying levels of intentionality regarding their involvement in activities as contexts for exploration, almost all of the counselors mentioned the availability of activities as a defining feature of the camp environment.

Traditions. In addition to opportunities to experience new activities, counselors also participated in the traditions and rituals of the camps where they worked. Several types of rituals and traditions happened at the camps: everyday practices, such as singing at meal times; weekly traditions, such as opening and closing ceremonies; and those that happened only once or twice over the course of a summer. Learning these rituals and traditions and taking part in them helped counselors feel like they were part of a distinct community and, in some cases, provided recognition for their contributions to the camp community. These rituals often held special significance, especially if the counselors had attended the camp as a child. Holding a leadership role in a camp tradition, for example, was often cited as a favorite memory.

Daily traditions, such as lining up before meals or singing a special song before the morning weather report, often were used as schedule markers or to signal upcoming activities. At Olivia's camp, where she had just completed an unusually long tenure of 10 summers as a counselor, the daily schedule was organized through the ringing of a bell:

We hear a rising bell, a warning bell [laughs] ... there are eighteen bells a day at [camp]. We have a lot of fun joking about them; this summer we had a nineteen-bell day. And we even had a TWENTY-bell day once, because special things kind of all happened on the same day.

At most camps, campers attended sessions of 1 or 2 weeks in length. Special rituals, usually called opening and closing campfires, were held to mark the beginning and end of these weeks. Kevin, who was a second-year counselor at the camp he had gone to as a camper, recalled when he was selected to perform a special duty at one of these events:

There's a [camp] tradition, where one of the counselors, we crown them Chief at opening campfire, and you just put on the headdress and everything. It's really solemn, and you paddle across the lake and light a torch and tell the story, you know. I did that third session, and the camp director said that's the best Chief I've ever seen. Just [laughing] like if you didn't go to [camp] it would seem ridiculous, it would have no significance, it's just you're dressing up as an Indian. But it was a really cool moment for me.

Other traditions, however, only happened once each summer. Annie described the special ritual that took place at her camp on the 4th of July:

It's such a big deal at our camp. There's like the British general, and the American General, and you fight! I was the British general, so I got to lead all the activities, and I got to run around and motivate all my team and stuff.... I had a British flag tied around my neck, and we're all dressed up [laughing], it was just really, really fun.

Olivia's, Kevin's, and Annie's experiences show how camp traditions helped counselors feel valued in their roles as counselors and a sense of belonging to their camp community.

The camp culture: "It's like we're members of a secret society." Separation, a distinctive organizational structure, and special activities and traditions combined to influence the culture of each particular camp. Counselors agreed that camp culture was especially unique and different, but they had an extremely difficult time describing it in a way that they felt did justice to the experience. There was unanimous agreement among all of the counselors that camp simply is something that must be experienced in order to be understood. Diane was particularly thoughtful about what made camp so different:

It was a cumulative experience that you just had to experience. You know, between the kids and the sunshine, and the fresh air, and the physical activity, and the peers and the social aspect, and the days off together, the nights laying out on the waterfront, talking about the meaning of life or whatever else. All of those things just add up to something that you couldn't really put like a price tag on, for me.

At the conclusion of her interview, Diane suddenly said that she had figured out how to describe camp: "It's like we're members of a secret society that no one understands." As the connotation of this phrase can be negative, she was quick to clarify that she meant this in the most positive sense. Her use of this phrase captures the sometimes intangible nature of what makes camps so different: Summer camps often seem like secret societies built around special rules, traditions, and conventions that flourish within the sequestered nature of the setting.

Across camps, the counselors reported that being supportive and nonjudgmental was one of the most important aspects of camp culture. Although this value-based environment was created primarily for the benefit of the campers, counselors repeatedly referred to this aspect of the culture as benefiting

themselves as well. Yvonne, a 19-year-old second-year counselor, said, "There's a big thing on acceptance. For our talent show, we've had some very untalented people get up there, but there's still lots of cheering and support. You get the feeling that everyone is behind you, no matter what you do."

Several counselors, like Matt, a 19-year-old third-year counselor, noted that the camp culture was designed to support those who might be dismissed elsewhere. Describing the generally wacky and strange rituals and conventions that operated at his camp, he said, "If you acted this way at home, people would think you're a nerd or a loser! But at camp, you get mad respect if you go all out like that." Lisa agreed,

People say they're like not really ... I don't know how to say it. They'll say that they're not really well liked at home or that they don't have a lot of friends at home, but at camp they're really cool. I think that like everyone has an equal opportunity at camp to be cool [laughing], if you want to put it like that ... it's more about your personality.

Most counselors commented on the importance of the culture established at camp and recognized how the environment of acceptance, which was built for campers, benefitted them as well. This camp culture, when combined with the activities and rituals of camp, its organizational structure, and its separation from the outside world, resulted in the phenomenon of the "camp bubble." This term summarizes the counselors' views of the camp environment as a whole.

"You're Everything Sometimes": Roles of the Counselor

The environment of the camp setting created opportunities for the counselors to experience and explore a variety of roles, some of which may not have been available to them outside of camp. These roles ranged from the familiar to the new and from the adult-like to the childish. The variety of duties that counselors were required to perform as part of their day-to-day activities meant that they needed to enact different types of roles at different times, as Beth described, "At camp, you take on every role sometimes, you're the mother, and the sister, and the teacher, and you're everything sometimes." From the counselors' descriptions of their experiences at camp, we identified eight roles, some in reference to campers (caregiver, disciplinarian, entertainer, and facilitator), some with staff and other counselors (friend, team member), and some with both campers and staff (role model and mentor).

Caregiver. An important basic role for the counselors was that of a caregiver for the campers. Many instrumental tasks, such as making sure campers woke up in the morning, brushed their teeth, and had enough to eat, fell under the jurisdiction of the counselor-as-caregiver. By the time they became camp counselors, most of the emerging adults in this study had experience taking care of those who were younger than themselves, whether this was in a child care setting, through volunteering or babysitting, or in relationships with younger siblings.

The necessity of being responsible for campers, and the challenges that went along with it, were discussed frequently. In addition to keeping campers healthy and getting them through the day, the counselors also had to orchestrate cabin activities and make sure that everyone got where they needed to be on time. Rachel succinctly described the myriad of responsibilities that counselors needed to juggle: “You’re REALLY the one in charge. You’re the one who has to bring the markers and the crayons and the tape, and everything ... bug spray and extra flashlights, and it’s your responsibility to be like a mom, so that’s pretty cool.” Like Rachel, many counselors compared the responsibility of being a counselor to being a parent. According to Vince, “I don’t have a kid so I don’t know what it’s like to be a parent, but it drives a point home of what it’s like to be an adult and to have responsibility of lives ... these kids’ welfare depends on you and your actions.” Although the responsibilities of caregiving were not new to many counselors, participants shared Vince’s belief that the *nature* of this responsibility was different at camp than during more common situations such as babysitting, which were time-limited and less intense. Thus, the pervasive nature of the caregiving role at camp differentiated the counselor position from the emerging adults’ responsibilities in other settings such as college.

Disciplinarian. Another role was that of disciplinarian, which the counselors sometimes called “enforcing the law.” This role was invoked, for example, when counselors needed to get campers from one location to another or in dealing with a challenging camper. In this role, counselors felt they were giving orders, and they did not necessarily like it. However, there was an interesting contrast between male and female counselors in regards to the role of disciplinarian. Three of the seven male participants specifically mentioned an aversion to the role of disciplinarian, whereas none of the 13 female counselors did. Kevin tried to avoid becoming a disciplinarian, even with challenging campers:

You can always sit down with them and talk. I really don’t like having to bring it to upper levels of discipline, because then they think that

you're the "bad" one, you know what I mean [laughing], the one who only wants them to behave.

In contrast, female counselors seemed to be more comfortable in the disciplinarian role. They mentioned that using discipline in conjunction with other techniques could help them develop a better relationship with their campers. Jennifer, a first-year counselor at an all-girls camp, expressed views of discipline that were consistent with those of the other female counselors: "Kids will respond to you better if you have rules set up. . . . They will respect you more and end up liking you more as a counselor because you can still have that relationship with them and have that boundary."

Entertainer. A role that the counselors frequently occupied was entertainer. Most of the counselors thoroughly enjoyed this role; they "brought the show" and created fun in the camp. The counselors were acutely aware that the campers looked to them to provide the games and fun and wacky things to do, and, as Annie describes,

You always have to be on top of things, and always have to have things in the back of your mind that you want to do. If there is a lull in activity, you need to be the one who has stuff to do.

The counselors were aware that it did not really matter *what* they did as much as *how* they did it, and the *how* often involved just doing something crazy and "ridiculous." This gave the counselors the opportunity for creativity and self-expression without many of the limits that are imposed on them in their lives outside of camp. Matt describes how this process worked at his camp during "open activities," when counselors offered activities of their choosing for the campers:

You have like an hour to think, make a skit, and make up a cool fun activity that you can run with kids for an hour. And it's real chaotic, you're scrambling around to make up a skit and stuff, and it's just a ridiculous activity. One time I did townie hunting, I had two counselors dressed up like townies, people who live in [name of town near camp], and I had a group of kids, and we had water balloons and squirt guns chasing them. I had a ton of kids for that activity!

Elaine, a 22-year-old third-year counselor at an all-girls camp, provided an especially vivid description of how she entertained her campers:

Being able to run through mud puddles ... sliding in the dirt ... rolling around in the dirt at 6:30 in the morning. Getting dirt in crevices that dirt should not be, just because [the campers] want you to do it with them ... I would never be rolling in dirt here [at school], at 6:30 in the morning!

Kevin and Elaine's comments illustrate the freedom that many counselors felt within the entertainer role, whereas Annie's comment demonstrates that even such a fun role carries a level of responsibility.

Facilitator. The role of facilitator was particularly salient for several counselors. Being a *facilitator* meant organizing activities and overseeing the group processes involved in completing them. This term was often used to refer to group and whole-cabin activities rather than one-on-one relationships between counselors and campers, which were more often referred to as mentoring. In some camp settings, such as those involving classes or organized activities, being a facilitator closely resembled being a teacher. However, most counselors believed that teaching in a camp setting was different than might happen in a regular classroom. At the all-girls agency camp where Beth worked, they taught the counselors to use a particular technique called *guided discovery*.

Guided discovery is basically where you're not just throwing information at the girls, but you get them to come up with their own answers, themselves, and you get the answers to come out of their mouths. You do that through asking them guiding, leading questions, and it's really important to have them discover things on their own.

Counselors also recognized that being a facilitator went beyond the context of the particular class or activity they were involved in teaching. Several participants described being a facilitator in the context of general interactions among the campers, which often involved strategically stimulating and encouraging conversations and exchanges among them. This came into play at Jennifer's camp, where counselors were assigned seats at the heads of tables during meals: "You had to facilitate, especially at the beginning of camp when no one knows each other and it's really pretty awkward. You just have to be there to kind of loosen things up and talk. I think that's important."

This role sometimes also involved directing or rerouting interactions. Sean described how he attempted to do this during the ritual of reflections,

which took place before the campers went to bed, when a counselor posed a question that campers were encouraged to answer in a thoughtful way:

We were trying to get them to say who's your hero... One of the kids was like, "I love David Beckham." I said, "Why is he your hero?" He said, "Because he's really good." I was like, OKAY, I'll go now! I said that my hero was my grandfather and I got into a deeper meaning and whatnot, and then I was like, do you want to change your answer? And he said, "I'd pick Beckham because he went through a lot of adversity to play soccer" [laughing] and I'm like [hits forehead] are you kidding me? With the younger kids it's really hard.

Even though being a facilitator was one of the more enjoyable roles for many counselors, not everyone was thrilled about it. Greg felt that he had not done enough to facilitate the growth of relationships between campers in his cabin, but the difficulty and uncertainty of it discouraged him from pursuing this role more actively.

The more fun times are when you don't have to really manage a group. It's hard to take an initiative, because you know that they're having fun [by themselves]. There's a risk that even if you find a good game, they might not love it. So I felt bad a lot, like there is probably some game that might involve all of them and get them to know each other even more, but it's hard.

Greg's comments illustrate the idea that although their camp environments provided opportunities to experience many kinds of roles, not all of the counselors took advantage of these opportunities, in some cases, because they viewed the roles as too challenging.

Friend. Friendships between counselors were one of the most important aspects of the camp experience for the participants. They enjoyed the opportunity to work with others who were around the same age and shared many of the same interests and were able to make friends with people from other areas of the United States, and, in some cases, other countries. Spending significant amounts of time together during time-on-duty and time-off, as well as helping each other through difficulties, intensified these relationships. Every counselor mentioned at least one close friendship with another staff member. Annie's views on her camp friendships were typical of all the counselors:

A really big thing was the friends that I made... That was one of the greatest parts, bonding with this group of people who's all there for the same purpose. Kind of the same as you, but they have different backgrounds. That was definitely cool.

Similar to Annie, many counselors recognized that the environment of an overnight summer camp might attract people with similar interests. Paula commented on this:

When you're a camp counselor you have a little bit different personality than most people because you're willing to go away and live for an entire summer; you're willing to be incredibly goofy for absolutely no reason other than to be goofy. Especially like at my school, which is a more pretentious university, you don't find a lot of people like that. So it's really cool to go hang out with people who just want to have fun. Every camp person that I've met is a little more outgoing, a lot less afraid to be silly. I don't feel like they care as much about people's impressions and thoughts of them.

Lisa felt that although camp people were similar in many ways, the other ways in which they were different helped expand her circle of friends:

All different kinds of people are counselors ... the funniest crew of people that probably never would have been friends at home, but we just get along so well now. And it just allows you to be friends with people that you wouldn't have otherwise, like at home or school, so I think it just opens you up more.

The counselors' comments demonstrate the importance of camp friendships, which were not only affirming to counselors in that they met other people "like them" but also were an opportunity to expand their horizons through meeting others with different backgrounds.

Team member. A large part of working at camp was learning how to work with others as part of a team. Although working with others of similar age and interests often was fun, it could also be difficult. Nina described how she had learned to work with counselors with whom she was not as close:

You have to work with people you may not like, people that you don't agree with ... there were a couple people that I wasn't as close to. It was awkward, teaching all day every day with [them]. It helped me to

be more outgoing, because I needed to get to know them in order to work with them.

Similarly, Olivia believed that working with people who were different from her was a necessary experience:

There's a lot of counselors I've worked with that are just generally people that I have learned things from, but ... realizing that people do stuff differently than I do, it's not bad. When I was 20, that was a big lesson to learn!

In addition to learning to work with others who "did stuff differently" than they did, some counselors also experienced more explicit disagreements with other staff members. The nature of the camp bubble, however, encouraged addressing these types of problems, although this could be very challenging. Olivia, who was very aware of the counselor dynamics at her camp, described how the camp environment encouraged counselors to address issues:

That intense community living piece, where you can't retreat to yourself at the end of the day. I can leave school at 4 o'clock and be done, be like whatever happened, happened, and now I'm going to go and do my own thing that I've always known is right. At camp, you can't walk away from it, because it's going to face you when you're in front of it again. That stuff that needs to come up is going to come up, and you're going to have to deal with it, rather than retreat from it.

Having round-the-clock responsibility for campers meant that when disagreements did arise, the counselors needed to be especially aware of how they handled them. Matt, for example, described how he encountered difficulty in controlling his emotions after he had a significant disagreement with a member of the support staff, but his sense of responsibility toward his campers kept him from expressing it as he might have in a different setting:

I've never been that mad at camp before in my entire life, I was steaming. You have to deal with that, but you can't let your campers know about it. I just wanted to cuss out [everyone] and walk around angry. My campers are there, and they're like, what's wrong? I can't be like you know kids, [expletive], we're doing our own thing. You have to do it another way.

The counselors' observations about working as a team illustrate that although they had many friends at camp, they also recognized that the nature of the "camp bubble" required them to develop skills in conflict resolution and working with others who were not necessarily their friends.

Role model. Several counselors recognized that simply by being a counselor they were role models for the campers. The sense was particularly strong for the counselors who had been campers. They remembered how their counselors had served as role models and understood that they now had this status themselves. Jennifer, who was working at the camp she had attended as a camper, said,

Counselors seemed really cool ... they seemed so old and they were always real role models. It's really cool to be in that position [now] and know the kids are looking up to you as a role model. They notice things that you do. I like to be in that position.

Olivia, who had spent 10 summers working at camp, first during college and then once she became a teacher, described the natural appeal that counselors have to campers:

They want to BE you, you are so cool. They can't wait to be 20, to have boyfriends and girlfriends, to spend their free time rock climbing and swimming and DRIVING, doing whatever you do. They have automatic buy-in with you.

Although many counselors enjoyed being role models for the campers, they also recognized that that position carried certain expectations for their own behavior. Counselors needed to be on time to activities and generally do the right thing at the right time in the right place. This wasn't always easy, as Lisa said,

We got up at 7:15, and we'd have to get our campers up, make sure that no one was still in bed, get myself awake! It was hard to get everyone else up when I still wanted to be sleeping! But you have to do it.

Rachel noted that being a role model meant

being appropriate, not swearing all the time, things like that. Being in a position where you have to control yourself and be a good example

forces you [to be] very aware of where you are socially and what you're doing.

Greg thought that being cognizant of his role model status motivated him to fulfill his counselor role:

It definitely makes you like, want to, I don't know, work harder and like. I mean, I was fine with doing whatever I had to do even if the kids didn't love me, but definitely, it's like an added bonus.

In addition to modeling appropriate behavior, several counselors also mentioned that they wanted to serve as a role model of being comfortable with themselves, which was often referred to as being "ridiculous." In addition to the fun factor, counselors believed that ridiculousness was a critical component of being a role model. In this sense, being ridiculous was serious business, as Kevin states,

Especially at the age where we get them [campers], see a lot of messages to be cool, without getting too cliché. Having ridiculous counselors that they look up to say this is ok, this is cool, putting on the skits or whatever [laughing]. I think it really gives them, sort of gives a more open vibe. That might be a little idealistic, but I do think that's what happens... . You're like, I want these kids to be ridiculous, so therefore I have to be, you know, extremely ridiculous.

All counselors described being a role model for campers; a few returning counselors also described being a role model to other staff, especially newer staff or staff who were younger than they were. Matt had been a "super senior" counselor at his camp, which referred to being in his second summer as a senior counselor. At this camp, only a few counselors returned in this position. This was a particularly demanding position for Matt:

The most challenging thing this summer was being a leader to the other staff ... people would ask me stuff, because they would feel that I was more approachable than a support staff member... . I became more mature from it. Being one of the older counselors has a lot to do with me growing and becoming more mature, because I had to be an example to them.

All of the counselors mentioned being a role model, or an “example” to others, in some way, and it was apparent from their comments that this was an important role for them to occupy as a counselor. Furthermore, the counselors believed that, by being a role model, they needed to hold themselves to a high standard of behavior, in terms of being “appropriate” as well as being “ridiculous.”

Mentor. Whereas *facilitator* and *role model* were used to refer to the counselors’ roles in group processes and activities, the counselors often used *mentor* when they were talking about one-on-one relationships with others at camp. Being a mentor was one of the most demanding yet most rewarding roles experienced at camp. Some participants recalled their former counselors as mentors; these memories inspired them to want to cultivate mentoring relationships as counselors themselves, and, as Helen explained,

I always wanted to be the counselor that I had when I was a camper. I still can name all of my counselors, where they were from. I wanted to make that one really good connection, obviously a lot of them, but at least one.

Most often, the counselors described making that “one really good connection” with a camper whom they identified as having difficulty adjusting to the camp environment, as Nina described,

There was this one camper who was really homesick. She was having a really hard time with it [so] I talked to her about her and her family, really got to know her ... [and then] she wasn’t like in the back corner, she was out having fun, because someone cared about her.

Jennifer said that a mentoring-like relationship she had developed with one camper during swimming lessons was one of the highlights of her summer:

I actually wrote my college essay about teaching one of my campers how to dive, and how much progress she made in swimming. Especially because this girl was like I’m so bad, I can’t do this, and I’ll never be able to do that. Eventually she learned how to do it. And it wasn’t just like an accomplishment for her, I was also really happy that I’d been able to teach her.

Sean was proud of the mentoring relationship he had developed with a camper who had been identified by others as “challenging”:

Patrick was just out there, too loud at the wrong times, tried to be funny at the wrong times; he just had no social skills. Patrick would come crying to me, “I hate this, I can’t stand it.” I had to try to understand what’s going on, to be like, “Alright Patrick you have to be a bit more understanding.” That was one of my biggest accomplishments because that was my trouble camper who was supposed to be difficult.

Many counselors described experiences similar to those that Jennifer and Sean related. Indeed, such accounts were common responses to interview questions about the counselors’ favorite memories of camp or most rewarding experiences.

“It Just Continues to Help Me Grow as a Person”: Counselors’ Reflections on the Impact of Working as a Counselor on Their Identity Development

As just described, the counselors experienced a variety of roles and responsibilities within the camp environment. Through these experiences, they felt that camp had influenced them in a number of ways. Many counselors spontaneously mentioned how working at camp had influenced aspects of their identities.

A few counselors remarked that their camp experiences, including working as a counselor, had influenced their overall sense of identity. Jennifer, for example, felt that being at camp had helped her find out more about herself and who she was as a person:

I don’t know if I can pinpoint what exactly it was ... this is so cliché, but I really think it just continues to help me grow as a person. How to find my identity or whatever, just to know what I like to do and how I make friends with people, how I interact with people ... you just have a more whole sense of confidence or something. Camp is that one place where hey, I’m like cool, you know! It’s nice to have that outlet, where you can just completely be yourself. And I think that really helps you find that identity and helps in regular life.

In a response to a question about the challenges he experienced as a counselor, Sean described his struggles to “make camp [his] own” and differentiate himself from others:

Um, my biggest challenge [was] coming into my own as a dominant figure at camp, because I wanted to do that, but first session I wasn't doing that great of a job. They told me I came out of my shell second session. Making camp my own was my biggest challenge, not trying to be like my old counselors, not like my friends, just being myself.

Other counselors remarked that working at camp had influenced particular aspects of their identities. Helen, for example, commented that the explicit focus on values at her camp carried over into her life at school:

The core values [camp] makes you think about them and you talk about them SO much, and then when I'm at school, we NEVER talk about our values. It's a reinforcement of how to be a good person. Literally we spend so much time talking about them at camp, and then I never talk about my values; it just doesn't happen. That is one thing that helps, that I definitely bring from camp.

Chad, who was a sophomore at a prestigious university, thought that being at camp had helped him reevaluate some of the values he had acquired during his first semester at college.

I had definitely gotten caught up very much in ... I didn't have the same sort of vision I'd had before; I'd gotten more narrowed just being here [at school]. I felt that my vision here had just been so narrowed as far as what I should strive for and what I should want to attain. Going to camp just made me open that back up again, and view everything more critically than I had before, things that I had taken for granted.

Annie felt that her experiences at camp had helped her trust in her own decision-making abilities, and this had led to a decision to study abroad during the next academic year:

Now I have the confidence to be able to make decisions and do things on my own and not question them as much or not have to rely on other people's feedback. I trust myself to do what's best for me. Going

abroad is a big decision I made, and I made it, hoping it will be the best thing that I can do for me.

Other counselors remarked that they did not comprehend the effect that camp had had on them until they had left for the summer and gone away, or back, to school. Lisa commented that what she had learned about herself at camp had helped her during her transition to college:

I feel like a lot of people don't really know what they want to do, and who they are. I feel like camp helped me to find that out. I guess just the way [camp] made me be more like myself is just to not care what anyone else thinks. Because you're away from home for so long, and you're with so many different kinds of people, that teaches you. You just know what you want to be more.

Out of all the counselors, Will seemed to have the strongest view about the extent to which working at camp had influenced him, though he also commented that he did not realize the full extent of the change until after the summer was over:

I've decided that this one was difficult but the most educative summer of my life. I learned more about people and more about myself than I could ever have done anywhere else. I grew up this summer, I decided. I decided that I was no longer kid, that I was an adult... I realized that something was completely different, that I was a different person than I had started out as. But I didn't RECOGNIZE it, until I got home. When I got home, I realized that even though things were still not entirely settled, I was not afraid of it. I was confident that whatever happened, I could probably deal with it. I think that was the moment when I figured it out.

As the comments of Will and others illustrate, many participants believed that working at camp had played a role in their identity development; some pinpointed specific areas, whereas others such as Jennifer felt that the effect of camp was more holistic. For other participants, identity-related themes were not explicitly named as such during their interviews, yet the salience of these issues is apparent from the narratives of their experiences while working as counselors at residential summer camps.

Discussion

One purpose of this study was to investigate how emerging adults experienced the impact of working as camp counselors on their social and emotional development; another purpose was to explore the characteristics of the camp context that supported this development. In what follows, we briefly summarize the main findings, consider how they compare with prior research, and discuss how the results of this study add to research on emerging adulthood, with an emphasis on questions and areas of investigation to be pursued in future studies.

The counselors who participated in this study described the camp environment as being, in several participants' words, the "camp bubble." The psychological and physical separation of camps from the outside world, their organizational structure, activities and traditions, and culture of acceptance together contributed to participants' perceptions of their camps as distinct worlds. Within the camp environment, the counselors were able to experience and experiment with different types of roles and responsibilities. From the participants' accounts, we identified eight such roles, ranging from the adult-like role model to the more child-like entertainer, in which counselors described exploring aspects of their identities. In addition to role-related explorations, many counselors specifically remarked on their perceptions that working at camp had played a role in their identity development.

Identity Development in Context: The "Moratorium Environment" of Summer Camp

An important finding of this study is the role that the camp context played in facilitating the counselors' experiences of identity exploration and development. As they described it, the camp bubble has aspects that correspond well to the concept of the psychosocial moratorium (e.g., Erikson, 1968) as well as to characteristics of identity-supportive environments in general. Based on the counselors' accounts, the moratorium environment available in the camp bubble seems to be especially well suited for the developmental tasks of emerging adults.

In many respects, the camp counselor position promotes the feeling or experience of being "in-between"; the counselors were free to be playful, have fun, and even be "child-like," but they also were required to assume many adult responsibilities. Although emerging adults may experience these types of responsibilities elsewhere, such as through babysitting jobs, many participants were quick to point out how the intensive and prolonged duties

of a counselor went beyond those required in other types of childcare positions. Furthermore, although assuming such intense responsibilities during or perhaps even prior to the years termed emerging adulthood may be commonplace in many other cultures, such responsibilities are not as common among emerging adults, such as those who participated in this study, in developed countries.

In addition to matching the in-between status of emerging adults, interpersonal and supervisory aspects of the camp bubble correspond well to their developmental needs. Interpersonal aspects of the camp bubble are similar to parenting behaviors that have been found to promote identity exploration and development; these include high levels of acceptance of individuality and high levels of psychological autonomy granting (Côté, 2009). Although parenting behaviors are characteristics of individuals rather than contexts, the camp environments themselves—according to the counselors—contained similar elements. For example, the counselors described camp culture as being based, in many cases, on acceptance. The counselors were encouraged to “be themselves” at camp and also to promote those qualities in their campers, as shown in one participant’s comment regarding the support that was given to participants in her camp’s talent show, that even though some of them were “pretty untalented.” As a corollary to this culture of acceptance, the counselors were often granted considerable psychological autonomy. For instance, they sometimes were able to create their own activities, such as what Matt did during “open activities” at his camp. These built-in opportunities to pursue their own interests and express aspects of their personalities within a culture of acceptance were critical in supporting the counselors’ identity explorations.

Identity Development During Emerging Adulthood

The camp environment—as described by the counselors—encouraged their development in ways that are consistent with Arnett’s (2006) conceptualization of emerging adulthood. The counselors’ accounts of their experiences working at camp provide a window into the development that takes place during this period, particularly in the area of identity. Consistent with Arnett’s theory, the results of this study provide support for the idea that active identity exploration is an important developmental task for emerging adults. To varying degrees and in different ways, the emerging adults in this study described engaging in identity exploration through the roles and responsibilities available at the camps where they worked. Although the nature of counselor positions is not identical across camps, the wide variety

of duties required of most counselors provided plentiful opportunities for them to explore activities and responsibilities that they had not experienced or further others in which they had only limited prior experience. One participant's comment, "You're everything sometimes," illustrates this.

Some participants commented specifically about their perceptions of the influence camp had on their identity development. One counselor, for example, noted that being at camp had given her the opportunity to "find my identity or whatever, just to know what I like to do and how I make friends with people, how I interact with people." Not all identity-related themes and issues, however, were identified as such by the participants. For example, many counselors discussed how they were able to be "ridiculous" at camp and act in ways they would not normally do in other settings; the counselors did not specifically connect these experiences to identity development, but their accounts suggest that being silly was one way to explore facets of their personalities. This finding is consistent with Arnett's (2006) comment that identity-related themes come through in many areas for emerging adults, though they may sometimes be more subtle.

Another distinguishing feature of emerging adulthood identified by Arnett (2006) is the individual's sense of being "in between"; emerging adults are no longer adolescents but do not yet feel fully adult. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that identity development in emerging adulthood may differ from that which takes place in adolescence. The results of this study suggest one way in which this difference might occur, namely, the juxtaposition of child- or adolescent-like experiences with more adult-like experiences. While working at camp, the counselors were engaged in continuing and further exploring some of the adolescent-like aspects of themselves, which they often referred to as being "ridiculous," yet they also were engaged in taking on adult-like roles and responsibilities.

Another feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the "self-focused age" (Arnett, 2006). The counselors' experiences also show, to some extent, self-focused aspects of identity exploration during this period. The counselors had many opportunities to be self-focused at camp, especially because they were able to try out new activities and develop their own skills and abilities. One participant, for example, had set a goal to try as many new activities as possible over the course of the summer. However, the camp counselor position is inherently full of job-related constraints and obligations. While working at the camp, the counselors consistently had responsibility for people other than themselves and for planning activities. In this way, the counselor position may help emerging adults transition out of the self-focused age, for it places them in a situation that demands being responsible for others as well as for themselves.

Implications for the Summer Camp Industry

The counselors' accounts of exploration and the importance of relationships echo the most common benefits reported in previous studies of camp counselors (e.g., Bialeschki et al., 1998; DeGraff & Glover, 2003; Dworken, 2004; Jacobs, 2004; Sweet, 2005). This study expands these findings by framing them within the developmental task of identity development. Camping professionals are well aware of the developmental needs of children who come to camp and the role that camp can play in child development; however, it is important for them to understand that counselors face developmental tasks as well. Based on a deeper understanding of emerging adult staff as developing individuals, camp administrators could address the developmental needs of emerging adult counselors by providing opportunities for deliberate identity exploration and increasing opportunities to explore adult-like roles and responsibilities. This in turn could improve the counselors' effectiveness as well as the personal growth they experience while working at camp.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The results presented here have provided a rich description of how a sample of emerging adults experienced their employment as camp counselors and how the camp context influenced their identity exploration. As with much qualitative research, our purpose, therefore, was not to generalize to all emerging adults or those who have worked as camp counselors, but instead to capture the voices and perceptions of a sample of emerging adults in order to inform existing research on identity development and the contexts in which it takes place. However, the results presented here must be interpreted in light of the study's limitations.

First, the sample was limited to camps within the New England area. The pragmatic participation requirement of school-year residence in New England further limited the sample of available counselors. Thus, this sample was composed of emerging adults who both worked at camps in New England and resided in New England during the noncamp season; this excludes from the sample individuals from other areas of the country, who may have different perspectives because they were not working at camps close to their homes. Future research should include larger, more diverse, samples of counselors, perhaps from camps located in different regions of the country.

Second, it is likely that counselors who enjoyed their camp experiences were more likely to volunteer to participate in the study, which could have contributed to the overwhelmingly positive nature of the counselors' accounts.

More than half of the counselors in this sample had attended camp as a camper, and those who have chosen that pathway may be more likely to have had positive experiences. Otherwise, the sample of counselors in this study is similar to the overall population of counselors. Future research should include those who did not attend camp as children and also those counselors who were unsatisfied with their camp experiences or did not feel that they benefited from them.

Third, the retrospective nature of the counselors' accounts of their camp experiences is a potential limitation that should be addressed in future investigations. Prospective studies that measure aspects of identity exploration and development before, during, and after camp experiences are needed to complement the counselors' own opinions about their growth processes. However, the participants' accounts provide an important perspective on how they experienced their employment as camp counselors and, as such, should not be discounted solely on the basis of their retrospective status.

Given the distinguishing features of the camp environments where counselors in this study worked, another important area for further investigation is a comparison between the summer camp context and other environments in which emerging adults spend their time. Future research could include comparisons between, for example, emerging adults who are working at camp and those who have other jobs for the summer, such as internships in corporations. In addition, given that camp positions often attract college students, an important next step is to investigate other types of immersion/separation experiences that may attract non-college-bound emerging adults (e.g., military service), as these environments also may provide a context for identity development. This would allow a comparison of the benefits of various employment and volunteer opportunities for emerging adults.

Conclusion

Participants in this study described ways in which working in overnight summer camps can provide an effective venue for emerging adults' identity explorations and expressions. The "camp bubble," as they described it, offered opportunities for the counselors to experience a variety of roles and responsibilities. Because these experiences ranged from child-like expressions of silliness to more adult-like responsibility for children's welfare, camp environments seem to provide a type of moratorium environment that may be particularly appropriate for and supportive of emerging adults' identity explorations and expressions. Indeed, several of the counselors recognized and discussed the role that being at camp had played in their identity

development. Investigation of varied venues in which emerging adults live and work can help researchers understand the variety of pathways that exist from adolescence, through emerging adulthood, and into adulthood as young people explore their identities and make enduring commitments.

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