

A Democracy of Experience: Significant Life Experiences of Appalachian Trail Thru-hikers

Vanessa Ann Klein

Montclair State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This study examined the Significant Life Experiences (SLE) behind Appalachian Trail (AT) thru-hikers' choices to engage in an intense nature/outdoor experience. To more deeply understand the contexts of hikers' SLE a naturalist inquiry research method was used. Data sources consisted of in-depth interviews, observations, and researcher journaling. A constant comparative analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used in data analysis. In this study, it was found that childhood experience in nature was an important factor in participants' decisions to undertake an intense nature experience. This is in line with what the current SLE literature reveals. However, the study also found that childhood interaction with the outdoors was not strictly necessary, nor did it always result in an environmentally minded adult. Looking at a democracy of experience reveals that SLE do not always result in an environmental individual, nor are they necessary to becoming an environmental individual

KEYWORDS

significant life experiences, Appalachian Trail, hikers, :
Environmental education (EE)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 January 2017
Revised 11 April 2017
Accepted 19 April 2017

Introduction

Environmental education attempts to mold students into informed citizens who will work actively toward the maintenance of a diverse, beautiful, and resource-rich planet (Tanner, 1980). To further this ultimate goal, we must examine why people form a connection to the environment and how they do so. It is also necessary that environmental education researchers attend to multiple conceptions and constructions of nature. Environmental education (EE) seeks to instill students with knowledge while simultaneously creating action-oriented citizens. EE is a broad field, one which is interdisciplinary and can involve students of any age.

CORRESPONDENCE V. A. Klein ✉ kleinv@mail.montclair.edu

© 2017 V. A. Klein.

Open Access terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License apply. The license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, on the condition that users give exact credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if they made any changes. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

The body of Significant Life Experiences (SLE) research explores experiences and influences that environmental individuals report as being significant to their environmentalism. According to the literature, nature experience is known to be important in producing citizens who are environmentally active (Tanner, 1980). Within the SLE literature, childhood experience in nature was found to be important in adult environmentalism (Arnold, Cohen, & Warner, 2009; Chawla, 1999; Corcoran, 1999; Furihata, Ishizaka, Hatakeyama, Hitsumoto, & Ito, 2007; Hsu, 2009; Palmer et al, 1998; Palmer & Suggate, 1996; Palmer, Suggate, Bajd, & Tsaliki, 1998; Palmer, Suggate, Robottom, & Hart, 1999; Sward, 1999; Tanner, 1980). This study explored the SLE of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers.

Overview of Significant Life Experiences Literature

SLE research contributes to our understanding of how past experiences, mainly childhood experiences, influence our future attitudes and behaviors towards the environment. In order to determine what kinds of learning experiences contributed to environmental activists' environmental identities, it makes sense to study the early experiences of such persons so that we might replicate these experiences within environmental education (Tanner, 1980). This body of research stems from original work on SLE by Thomas Tanner (Tanner, 1980; Palmer, 1993; Palmer & Suggate, 1996). It is important to note that this review of literature only looks at SLE defined as actual experiences and not formative influences. In order to be able to delve deeply into both experiences and formative influences it was necessary to discuss these two closely intertwined concepts in separate publications.

Environmental Educators and SLE

Many SLE studies examine environmental educators as subjects (Corcoran, 1999; Furihata, Ishizaka, Hatakeyama, Hitsumoto, & Ito, 2007; Palmer et al, 1998; Palmer & Suggate, 1996; Palmer, Suggate, Bajd, & Tsaliki, 1998; Palmer, Suggate, Robottom, & Hart, 1999). Palmer (1993) and Palmer and Suggate (1996) attempt to determine the relative significance of foundational life experiences on the development of environmental educators' level of concern with and knowledge of the environment. Expanding on these two studies, Palmer, Suggate, Bajd, and Tsaliki (1998) look at the categories of SLE on environmental educators from the UK, Greece, and Slovenia. The authors, again, examine the categories of SLE and their importance in the development of knowledge of and concern for the environment. In developing an individual's concern for the environment, the most influential factor within the UK sample was childhood experiences of nature and the countryside (Palmer, Suggate, Bajd, & Tsaliki, 1998). In the original two studies (based in the UK), differences in age groups were included and the authors found that the older age groups found childhood experiences of the outdoors to be most important (Palmer & Suggate 1996).

Palmer et al (1998) describe the preliminary analysis of a larger project in which the authors ask the same questions to environmental educators from nine different countries (Australia, Canada, Greece, Hong Kong, Slovenia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and the UK). Although the authors specify the preliminary nature of the analysis, an overview of the findings is discussed. The authors found that direct experiences of the natural world affected over half of

the respondents when looking at the nine countries as a whole. However, in comparing the countries, the greatest importance of childhood *and* adult experiences of nature was found in Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the UK; whereas in Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, enjoying the natural world as an adult ranked most important (Palmer et al, 1998). The results of these four studies suggest that childhood experience in nature is incredibly influential. However, adult experiences in nature can also be equally significant. Environmental education program designers, whether formal or informal, must take this into consideration when designing programs for various age groups. This supports the idea that knowledge and formal learning should not be the main form of environmental education (Hungerford & Volk, 1990). It would seem that in order to care for and connect to the environment, experiencing it is more important than formally learning about it.

Another relevant study on SLE of environmental educators was the first research of this kind in Japan (Furihata, Ishizaka, Hatakeyama, Hitsumoto, & Ito, 2007). This study analyzed questionnaires completed by 188 environmental educators and 12 follow-up interviews, along with questionnaires from 25 community center members used as a control group, to determine which nature experiences during formative life experiences influence environmental educators' responsible environmental behavior (REB). Results from the questionnaires showed that environmental educators chose different REB categories corresponding to their choices of each SLE category. The REB of "consumption" (actions related to the purchase, use, and disposal of items) was strongly connected to the SLE of "nature experience" (experiencing nature through games, activities, walks, etc.); the REB of "promotion" (recycling, establishing nature clubs, etc.) was strongly connected to the SLE of "nature experience;" and "nature experience" as REB was also strongly connected to the SLE of "nature experience." The authors defined a nature experience not only as a SLE but also as a REB that one could undertake in the present. This shows how important nature experiences are during childhood. However, after the interviews, the authors were unable to find many answers that *directly* connected childhood nature experiences to current nature-related activities. It seems that a more in depth study is needed to answer lingering questions of *how* SLE influences REB.

An SLE study by Catling, Greenwood, Martin, and Owens (2010) did not look specifically at environmental educators, but at the formative life experiences of teacher educators and teachers in the UK and Ireland who are involved in supporting geography education in primary school. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the autobiographical memories written by participants as responses to a questionnaire. Both informal or personal experiences and formal education experiences were found to be important factors. Within informal experiences, outdoor experiences or "freedom to roam" and outings or trips were particularly important. Within formal education experience, fieldwork was important in primary school, secondary school, and university. Just as other SLE studies have shown, the results of this study suggest that enjoyment of the outdoors formally and informally can influence "a love of landscape, the natural environment and 'exploration'" (Catling, Greenwood, Martin, and Owens, 2010, p. 349).

Environmental Professionals and SLE

Environmental professionals are also often the subject of SLE research. Sward (1999) investigated the SLE of El Salvadoran environmental professionals to identify patterns in life experiences involved in the development of environmental sensitivity. The study used the Environmental Sensitivity Profile Instrument (ESPI), which includes a structured interview section. The ESPI was translated into Spanish and administered to 17 El Salvadoran environmental professionals, 14 men and 3 women. Outdoor experiences were cited by 88% of the sample as being highly influential to the development of their environmental sensitivity.

In a related study, 30 environmentalists from Kentucky and Norway working in a range of capacities—such as recycling, waste management, pollution and radiation, transportation, land use planning, habitat and wildlife preservation, and environmental education—were the participants for a phenomenological study that investigated different life paths into effective environmental action (Chawla, 1999). Structured, open-ended interviews were conducted that analyzed the sources of environmental commitment and when these experiences occurred. Participants seemed to characterize their stories with a combination of chance, such as being born into a certain family in a certain place, and continuity, such as environmental experiences building towards attitudes and behavior. The experience that participants considered most important to their commitment to environmental protection was experience of natural areas. The interviews also revealed two distinct paths into environmentalism: a concern for the environment and a concern for social justice. One difference between participants from Norway and those from Kentucky were that a number of Norwegians' outdoor experiences were “just being Norwegian,” while some from Kentucky presented outdoor experiences as something that made them special. Both of these studies relate the importance of experiences in nature for inspiring an environmental career. It is again clear that outdoor experiences are important in the formation of an environmental identity and/or responsible environmental behavior.

Environmental Activists and SLE

SLE research often looks into environmental activists (Tanner, 1980; Arnold, Cohen, & Warner, 2009; and Hsu, 2009). In fact, the original work in SLE used environmental activists as participants (Tanner 1980), and much of the SLE research since has stemmed from this foundational piece. Tanner (1980) studied autobiographical statements of active, informed citizen conservationists. The autobiographical statements included information on the experiences that participants believed led them to an environmental path. Childhood experiences of the outdoors and nature were found to be a dominant theme. Negative environmental experiences were also found to be important in adult environmentalism.

Arnold, Cohen, and Warner (2009) looked at the SLE of youth environmental leaders involved in environmental action. In-depth interviews revealed that experiences outdoors in childhood, and conferences or gatherings, influenced youth leaders' environmental action. Hsu (2009) investigated the SLE of environmental activists in Taiwan through autobiographical accounts as well as questionnaires. The autobiographical accounts revealed 17 categories of SLE with the largest category being natural experiences.

Participant Groups and SLE

SLE studies have, for the most part, looked at the formative experiences of environmental educators, environmental professionals, and environmental activists. There is however debate among scholars about which participants make the best subjects for these types of projects. Tanner (1998) argues that it is a fundamental error to study environmental educators or other populations, instead prioritizing environmental activists. He uses the goals of environmental education – put forth in the Belgrade Charter and Tbilisi Declaration of promoting an educated citizenry who would work actively toward a final goal of sustaining a diverse, beautiful, and resource-rich planet for future generations—to support his argument. Because his original work in SLE was done with environmental activists, he was “disappointed that more researchers have not kept fully in mind the rationale for the original study” (Tanner, 1998, p. 400). Tanner (1998) asserts that only politically active citizens can preserve ecological integrity and that SLE research should therefore investigate the kinds of learning experiences which produce such persons to inform the practice of environmental education (Tanner, 1980 & 1998).

Not all researchers agree with this reasoning. As can be seen from this literature review, numerous SLE studies have included environmentalists that are not considered by Tanner’s (1998) definition to be activists. Payne (1999) takes a different approach by arguing that the democratic aims of education give a broader picture of environmentalism, which includes activism, but also includes environmental awareness, sensitivity, and commitment. He believes that SLE research should broaden, not narrow, its scope of understanding in order to encompass the range of paths toward different environmental outcomes in terms of different individual’s identities and construction of experiences. “There is a place in research for both ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ subjects if we wish to know more about the ‘democracy of experience’ and less about curriculum models that prioritize some experiences because they might cause some to be active” (p. 370).

Study Rationale

I agree that we must broaden our conceptions of what it means to be environmental. This study examined the SLE behind Appalachian Trail (AT) thru-hikers’ choices to engage in an intense nature/outdoor experience. This takes SLE research beyond activists, beyond environmental educators, and beyond environmental workers to study participants who want to connect with the environment or have a nature/outdoor experience for reasons other than, or in addition to, activism. This research reveals how different individuals construct and reconstruct environmental/outdoor experiences by looking at SLE in tandem with current environmental/outdoor experiences. Furihata, Ishizaka, Hatakeyama, Hitsumoto, & Ito (2007) considered nature experience as a significant life experience when experienced in the past and as a responsible environmental behavior when sought out in the present. This study considered environmental experience in much the same way by claiming that seeking a nature experience *is* an environmental behavior. The behavior of seeking an environmental/outdoor experience through engaging in an intense nature experience, such as hiking the AT, could be an expression of environmental sensitivity or connection to nature. Environmental sensitivity and connection to

nature are supported in the literature as being more important than knowledge of environmental issues in terms of pro-environmental behavior (Hungerford & Volk, 1990). This study furthers SLE research by specifically exploring current nature experiences as a responsible environmental behavior.

Current SLE literature has only investigated formative influences that are environmental in nature, such as nature experiences, negative environmental experiences, people, education, and others, which all revolve around a context of environmentalism. This leads into a gap in the SLE research that the current study attempts to fill. The current study investigated SLE and current nature/outdoor experiences with a broader scope. Participants chose to have an outdoor experience for reasons such as connection with nature, athleticism or active-lifestyle, spirituality, religion, as well as other reasons that are not directly environmental. If SLE research is indeed used to inform environmental education, then the diversity of experiences investigated in this study could broaden the types of experiences offered through EE. Chawla (2001) supports this reasoning with the assertion that it is important for EE researchers to deepen their understanding of the different motivations for different groups of people, such as activists, teachers, citizens, students, and politicians, and to realize that people belong to different groups at different times in their lives. Activism is not the only “correct” outcome of environmental education. Outcomes such as science teachers, environmental educators, poets, authors, artists, and even people who “merely” have a spiritual or personal connection with nature or the aesthetics of the outdoors are equally valid. The actual environmental impact of individuals and groups over time would be impossible to measure, therefore who can say if Rachel Carson has impacted the environment more than Henry David Thoreau? This research attempted to look beyond the typical environmental individual to expand and develop how we construct what it means to be environmental.

Research Purpose & Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the SLE that inspired adults to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. The act of long-distance hiking is not necessarily equivalent to being an environmental activist; however, given that environmental sensitivity and connection to nature are thought to be precursors to action (Hungerford & Volk, 1990), it is vital that we include this population in SLE research. Stemming from this purpose, the following research questions were investigated:

1. What significant life experiences led participants to undertake an intense nature experience?
2. How do participants express the contexts of their significant life experiences?

Carspecken (1996) argues that an operational definition takes a subjective term and turns it into an objective measurement. In order to support subjective-referenced research claims, face-to-face interviewing using sound interviewing techniques, in conjunction with observation in the field, was used. However, some explanation of terms is appropriate for clarity and intellectual transparency. *Significant life experiences* (SLE) refer to any experience – experience being defined as a generic term that encompasses a diverse range of personal meanings, connotations, and significances, such as dispositions,

emotions, sensations, feelings, activities, actions, and events – that occurred previous to the present time and which the participant considers noteworthy, important, or momentous (Chawla, 1999).

Methods

In order to more deeply understand the contexts of hikers' SLE a qualitative research method was used. Guided by the above research questions, I utilized a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) research design. Data sources consisted of in-depth interviews, observations, and researcher journaling. A constant comparative analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used in data analysis.

Participants

Participants consisted of AT North-bound thru-hikers. Long distance hikes, or thru-hikes, can be days, weeks, or months, but are defined by necessitating complex logistics (Ray, 2009). A hiker or backpacker who has completed or is attempting to walk the entire AT in one uninterrupted journey is considered a thru-hiker (ATC, 2012). The participants for the study were recruited on site and a diverse population was sought out. For this study, no one was excluded based on race, age, or gender, however, I wanted to recruit a diversity of participants in terms of both motivations for hiking the trail and demographics. The rationale for this type of recruitment was a desire to garner a variable assortment of participants who encompassed a diverse set of hiker personalities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Long distance hikers on the AT come from many different backgrounds and choose to hike for myriad reasons. Extreme athletes, recent high school or college graduates, people with career burn-out, those with midlife crises, evacuees of failed relationships, and retirees are among some of the groups that choose to hike the AT. What these hikers share is the choice to undertake a brutal, intense outdoor experience that involves rough terrain and inclement weather (Ray, 2009). As I wanted to understand the diversity of SLE, a diversity of participants was desirable, in so far as it was possible under the circumstances of reality. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, this increased the range and possibility of data uncovered, and exposed multiple realities. It is for this reason that participants were not pre-selected from hiking groups, such as the Sierra Club, as participants in these groups most likely share commonalities such as being pro-environmental. Potential participants were approached at three intervals during the study. Each recruitment event resulted in a new set of participants. Due to the "off the grid" nature of hiking, it was not possible to meet up with the same hikers at different points along the trail. Recruiting new participants at each point allowed me to recruit enough participants to have a depth of data, as well as recruit participants who might have left the trail before finishing along with participants who were more likely to finish their thru-hike. This insured that I would be able to investigate a wealth of different types of participants and therefore a democracy of experiences. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the areas in which each data collection period took place. During the data collection periods, I hiked approximately 60 total miles of the AT.

The total number of participants was 18. Eight participants were recruited during the first recruitment event, six during the second, and four during the third recruitment event. The decrease in participant number in each

subsequent round was due to natural attrition of thru-hikers as the hiking season progressed. Most participants filled out the optional demographic piece of the consent form, or mentioned their age during the interview. Reporting of ethnicity was also completely voluntary and participants identified themselves however they wanted to. Participants were mostly Caucasian; only 3 participants identified as non-white. This is not surprising as there are not many minorities that thru-hike the AT (Hill et al, 2014). Two of my participants were from Switzerland and had travelled to the U.S. for the sole purpose of hiking the AT. I created pseudonyms that were either similar to participants' trail names or that indicated aspects of their identities that were revealed during interviews and interactions with participants.

Context

The interviews and observations for this study took place on portions of the Appalachian Natural Scenic Trail, more commonly called the Appalachian Trail, or the AT (Ray, 2009). The AT is a public footpath that traverses 2,184 miles (NPS, 2012) and has 250,000 acres of public land associated with it (ATC, 2012). The trail goes from Springer Mountain in Georgia through North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire to Katahdin in Maine. Figure 4 shows the trail in its entirety. The trail encompasses many ecosystems and towns, goes through six national parks, and has elevations ranging from 124 to 6,625 feet above sea level (Ray, 2009).

Data Collection

In accordance with the recommendations of Lincoln & Guba (1985), the methods of data collection employed in the study were semi-structured, open-ended interviews, field observation and field notes, memos, and a researcher journal. Field notes and memos were used as formal data collection during observations, although some observation periods were audiotaped as spontaneous follow-up interviews.

The interviews were designed as purposeful conversation. "A major advantage of the interview is that it permits the respondent to move back and forth in time – to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 273). This was especially valuable for conversing about SLE. Three rounds of semi-structured interviews corresponding to the three different groups of participants were completed. The interview questions covered the topic of SLE. The semi-structured nature of the interview conversations allowed participants to talk about ideas germane to the research questions from different angles. This provided data that supported emergent themes and created rich, thick descriptions. The interviews ranged in length from one to three hours.

Analysis

This study utilized the constant comparative analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to support the naturalistic inquiry design. Initial coding began with comparing data to data, while being open to discovering any theoretical possibilities that were revealed in the data (Charmaz, 2006). The focused coding was more directed, selective, and conceptual than the initial coding and was used to synthesize and explain larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). Axial

coding clarified my emerging ideas about the data and helped me to develop a more in-depth grasp of hikers' experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical codes identified potential associations and connections among categories that were established during focused coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings

Thru-hiking the AT is a four- to six-month commitment, and involves at least some pre-planning. Thru-hikers on the AT live their daily lives mostly in the outdoors and are exposed to the elements and weather. Some people might find that kind of experience daunting or unpleasant. This is not an experience that everyone would choose to do. Making the choice to thru-hike the AT is therefore a decision that reveals elements of a person's identity, comfort in the outdoors, and connection to nature or the outdoors. From my participants, I found that there were many reasons for choosing to undertake this intense nature experience, as well as different life paths that led people to the AT. However, there were also many commonalities among participants. In my conversations with participants about the paths that brought them to the AT and the thru-hiking experience, they highlighted a number of SLE as part of their reasons for hiking the AT.

There were many SLE that came up in conversation with participants. It is important to note that participants considered these experiences significant enough to bring them up of their own accord. Even though I personally would not have thought of some of the experiences as nature/outdoor experiences, the participants themselves connected these experiences to the outdoors, nature, or reasons for wanting to hike the AT.

Participants talked about many SLE that are prevalent in existing literature however, these are not significant in and of themselves. What is of import is the context in which the participants talk about the SLE. The SLE were events that participants brought up when I inquired about nature/outdoor experiences that they had had before beginning their hike. Some participants related certain experiences as being more significant than others, while other participants felt that those same experiences were not personally meaningful to them. For example, the SLE of camping meant different things to different people. TV Idol mentioned camping when I asked him about prior outdoor experiences, but he talked about it in a way that indicated that this was not a meaningful nature experience for him. He mentioned camping in the context of Cub Scouts:

The Cub Scout trips were, they were laughable like, it was basically just like set up like all the Cub Scout troops and dens or whatever would set up like a huge tent, like, huge campsites and, and we would just like feast basically...it was just camping. It was just really luxury camping, and I don't really merit that to like any kind of learning experience. (TV Idol)

When I asked if there was anything about this nature experience that stayed with him, he said, "No, not really." The experience of camping was significant enough to recall the memory and mention it, however, TV Idol did not see it as a personally meaningful nature experience. The way in which he talked about it indicated that it *was* in fact a meaningful experience, but a negative experience. Desert Fox saw his camping experience in a more positive

light: "I did a lot of camping as a younger kid too, well not a lot but enough to spark my interest. Outdoors has always been my thing, just didn't get enough of it in the city by far." Desert Fox's experience of camping influenced his interest in nature/outdoor activities. It is something he saw as positive and perhaps something that inspired him to do more nature-oriented activities. He thought back on the experience with good feelings. His experience of camping was quite different from TV Idol's experience of camping, yet they both mention camping as an outdoor experience they had as children. I counted both mentions as a significant life experience for two reasons. First, SLE's can be positive or negative experiences. Second, I interpreted any activity that a participant mentioned as noteworthy, since the participants were free to talk about anything and the choice of stories and examples they shared indicated that the stories were significant in some way as memories. More important than just tallying the SLE of thru-hikers, was to examine how the participants talked about them. This analysis revealed that different participants felt differently about various SLE and that participants who shared similar experiences did not necessarily have similar environmental sensitivity.

Another way that participants differed was in what they personally considered SLE. Although TV Idol participated in outdoor play as a child, had an outdoor job (bike messenger), and was a trail runner and cyclist before beginning his hike on the AT, he did not connect any of these outdoor activities to nature and also did not consider his current AT thru-hiking experience as a "nature" experience. Even after telling me about these outdoor experiences, when I asked him what prior nature experiences he had before beginning his hike he said, "Like, basically none...I was in Cub Scouts...So, that's really it." Therefore, even though his active lifestyle took place outdoors, he did not consider these experiences as leading him towards this thru-hike or even as contributing to his environmental habits.

In contrast to TV Idol, Two Dog considered his career as a small business owner and foreman of a concrete company to be outdoor oriented jobs. When I asked Two Dog about previous outdoor or nature experiences he had he replied, "I've worked outside for years. The small business I own and the concrete company were both outdoors." Unlike TV Idol, whose outdoor experience of being a bike messenger might be considered more environmentally oriented by some, Two Dog considered his outdoor oriented career as a nature experience.

Two Dog was also the only person to talk about hunting as an SLE. "Hunting and being in the woods made me want to come and you know immerse more into nature" (Two Dog). He considered his hike to be, at least in some part, a nature experience and considered himself to be environmental. Hunting is an activity that many environmentalists might consider antithetical to environmental sensitivity, but Two Dog considered his hunting experience as contributing to his connection to nature as well as his desire to undertake the intense nature experience of thru-hiking the AT.

Visiting or vacationing to outdoor/nature places was mentioned by a few participants as a SLE. Some participants mentioned going out west or visiting the western states when I inquired about their SLE and previous nature experiences. Even though there are several "nature" or "outdoor" areas to visit in the East and Midwest, "out west" seemed to be a representation of nature in

the minds of some participants. As the researcher, I found this interesting because I tend to share that same bias, although I do work to realize my own bias and examine what this means for my scholarship. Sparrow revealed that “out west” is sometimes considered more wilderness-oriented than the eastern U.S.:

...the AT is very, to me it's very social because I just have been, um, out in the wilderness and the—out west so much recently, um, that it's like, it's basically, it feels like I'm walking through people's back yards because we're so close to towns and stuff and we do and we cross roads and it's like, whoa we're not in the wilderness to me. (Sparrow)

Sparrow felt that the AT was not as much of a wilderness as the nature areas that could be found out west, since it was not as remote. The AT's proximity to humans made it less of a nature space than an area that is more removed from the influence of people. She goes on to say: “...a lot of my friends say, oh, I'm too hard on the East Coast because I'm always complaining about it, and I'm like oh I love the West Coast so much better...” Sparrow felt that the West Coast was better than the East Coast in terms of nature areas. Part of her reasoning for this was that she felt, for her, the quality of nature spaces in the western part of the country is higher than the quality of the nature spaces in the eastern part of the country. There were different degrees of nature spaces. Those participants that mentioned visiting or vacationing in nature spaces often talked about how “out west” was their idea of *authentic* wilderness.

Sparrow's hiking partner, Silent Spring, replied to this conversation about wilderness with a discussion of the definition of wilderness and how she struggled with how to conceptualize wilderness.

I kind of struggle with the definition of wilderness, um, because I read Bill Cronin's essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness' and that was like oh my god so mind blowing. But... I always think like oh yeah, the AT it's not real wilderness it's like super close to development and like farms—they're like cultivated so they're obviously like very impacted by humans and not like just, you know, letting nature run its course. So, it's like a green space in my mind but it's not like, um, it's not like wilderness or anything to me... But I, like I said, I really struggle with the definition of wilderness because I've been thinking about that for several years and just like, hashing out my feelings about what I think of as wilderness. (Silent Spring)

Silent Spring also considered the AT as less of a wilderness space, but she was beginning to grapple with her conceptualization of wilderness and nature and how these relate to humans and human cultivated spaces. Silent Spring and Sparrow show how SLE that take place in various types of nature spaces might have different meanings depending on how the person defines and borders nature as a space.

Another theme which emerged was the various ages at which the hikers reported having a SLE. Participants mostly talked about SLE's in terms of childhood years, young adult years, and recent years (if they were older). Again, I tried to allow the participants to determine what counted as an SLE as well as the time in their life when from which they recalled having SLE. These age categories made it possible to look specifically at childhood nature experiences,

which, according to the literature, are thought to be of importance in adult environmentalism. A number of participants were either not over the age of 21 or were very close to that age, so the data on SLE that occur later in life (22 years of age and over) was limited in this particular study.

Childhood experiences in the outdoors and in nature was a unifying theme for participants. Every participant mentioned that they had spent time in the outdoors as a child, with one exception. The specific activities and experiences that participants took part in ranged from simply playing outdoors to more intense interaction with the outdoors such as camping, hiking, and backpacking. Goodwill described some of his childhood outdoor activities during the interview:

...my grandmother and grandfather had a farm in Chestnut Hills, Tennessee, that I would go to during the summer. So, when my parents were working and I was a young man or young boy, they would take me there...You know, if it was a nice day like when I didn't have school, my parents would lock me out of the house, you know, and like make, make me play outside. And you know, that was, that was always cool. Me and like my cousins, we're all real close and we would always just play outside. (Goodwill)

Goodwill talked about playing on his grandparent's farm, and playing outside with his cousins. This was a positive childhood SLE. Hündchen described hiking in the Alps as a child, "So we have the Alps in Switzerland, I have to say that. So, I often went with my parents hiking when I was a child and I often went into the forest and we played games with other kids." Fraulein Fertzig mentioned the Swiss equivalent of Girl Scouts, and activities with her family: "We did with my family, every time hike holidays and skiing holidays, and also in the, we call it something else, the girl, girl scouts." When I asked about childhood outdoor activities, Growing Pains said, "you know, climbing trees and whenever I could and had the chance. Uh, I liked playing sports, I was very into sports. So yeah, I was, I was outdoors whenever I had the chance." These examples show the variety in the ways that participants spent time outdoors as children. All participants except one described a significant amount of time spent outdoors as a child in some way.

Many participants indicated that most or all of their childhood free-time was spent outdoors, whereas others said that their time as children was a mix of indoors and outdoors. The only participant who spent reported spending a majority of her time indoors as a child was Nails. Interestingly, Nails related to me that she would never have chosen to hike the AT on her own, but was hiking with and because of her husband, Fortis (another participant). I asked Nails why she was hiking the AT, and she replied:

Because my husband asked me to come and, and I wanted to come actually. But I was on the fence for about six months...so you know, but I, I wanted the adventure. I mean, he's so adventurous and is always doing you know, those kind of things and I thought yeah, we'll try it so he asked and I finally said yes. (Nails)

When I asked Nails if she had ever had any personal aspirations of doing something like hiking the AT, she replied, "No ma'am. Which is kind of crazy!" However later in the interview, Nails reported seeing herself more as a part of nature because of her hike: "I definitely feel like more a part of nature now."

Setting this negative case against the other participants helped to show that outdoor experiences as a child are an important and potentially imperative element of peoples' journeys toward undertaking an intense outdoor experience. Everyone who was hiking the AT as a personal choice had spent time outside as a child; whereas Nails spent the majority of her childhood indoors and was not hiking the AT because she personally wanted to. This reveals that time spent outdoors or in nature as a child might be an important factor in a person's comfort with outdoor and nature spaces. However, Nails' case also shows that individuals who did not have outdoor or nature experience as a young person can come to feel comfortable in nature and become environmentally sensitive.

It is interesting to compare Nails, who did not spend very much time outdoors as a child and did not have a lot of initial interest in hiking the AT, with T.V. Idol, who spent a lot of time outdoors as a child and a young adult and made an individual choice to undertake a thru-hike. Nails saw her thru-hike as a nature experience and enjoyed being in/with nature on her hike. When I asked Nails if she noticed nature around her on her hike she said:

And some of the places we've been have the most amazing landscapes like, there's this specific place in Massachusetts, Williamstown, that we stayed at that the landscaping was just phenomenal and it was really something that I noticed and I appreciated immensely, like the flowers. (Nails)

She also came to see herself as more connected to nature through her hiking experience. T.V. Idol, on the other hand, did not see his thru-hike as a nature experience. He even reported that "if there's something I look at the least, it's trees." When I asked him if he had any contact with nature on the trail, he said

Yeah, I was with, yeah, I was with two other people here, and we, yeah, I came up on a what he says is a black racer snake, and they just darted the hell like, it scared the shit out of me. I've seen a lot of snakes, which sucks. And...yeah. That was terrible. (T.V. Idol)

When I asked him how he interacted with these aspects of nature later in the interview, he replied:

I mean, if I see a spider, I'll flick it off. I won't crush it because then I'll probably get all its nasty shit all over me. Yeah, snakes, if it's a garter snake, maybe we'll poke it a little bit, get it a little pissed off. (T.V. Idol)

These statements reveal that T.V. Idol did not possess a high level of environmental sensitivity or connection to nature. Even though Nails did not spend time outside as a child, she was much more environmentally sensitive than T.V. Idol. T.V. Idol reported having many of the SLE that are often reported in the literature, whereas Nails did not report having any of these common SLE. Yet, Nails saw her hiking experience as more nature oriented and had a higher level of environmental sensitivity. Comparing these participants reveals that childhood time spent outdoors does not guarantee environmental sensitivity and lack of childhood time outdoors does not guarantee that a person will *not* become environmentally sensitive later in life.

In relation to SLE and childhood time spent outdoors, I also looked at the types of environments that participants had grown up in. These environments

were broken down into three categories: urban, suburban, and rural, with some participants having lived in multiple environments as children. Interestingly, childhood environment did not seem to influence how much time participants spent outside as children. One might think that children growing up in an urban environment might tend to spend less time outdoors than children growing up in rural environments, but this was not the case. TV Idol, Growing Pains, Sparrow, Fortis, Desert Fox, and Freebird all grew up in urban environments for a portion of their childhood and all said that they spent the majority of their time outdoors, whereas Liege, Goodwill, and Nails grew up in rural environments and did not report spending as much time outdoors as children.

As participants moved beyond childhood, many kept in contact with nature and the outdoors through outdoor activities. For example, Sparrow mentioned many outdoor activities that she participated in after childhood. Other participants did not keep in contact with the outdoors and nature in later years of their lives. Desert Fox and Freebird did not mention any SLE that took place in their early adult lives. There did not seem to be any connection between type of childhood environment and type of SLE activity, however, many of the participants who kept doing nature/outdoor activities in adulthood seemed to grow up in rural environments as children. This could be because children growing up in rural environments find nature spaces to be a nostalgic reminder of their childhood. They may also be more comfortable in nature spaces, or have more everyday experiences with nature spaces, which made nature a special place to them. However, it is hard to draw any conclusions from this, since a number of participants were not represented in the 22 years and over SLE category because they were younger than 22 or barely over 22 years of age.

Spending time outside as children seemed to be an important factor in choosing to undertake an intense nature experience. All the participants who had played outside as children chose to hike the AT, whereas the one participant who spent little time outside in her youth did not have a personal interest in hiking the trail. Most participants also mentioned a number of other outdoor and nature activities that they had experienced before undertaking their hike. Having nature experiences in the past might have influenced participants' decisions to hike the AT by making them more comfortable with nature and the outdoors.

Discussion

SLE studies have for the most part, looked at the formative influences of environmental educators, environmental workers, and activists. In order to support the democratic intentions of education and create a more comprehensive conception of environmentalism, researchers need to include both 'right' and 'wrong' subjects (Payne, 1999). The participants of this study could be considered both "right" and "wrong" subjects. People choose to thru-hike the AT for many reasons, many of which having little to do with environmental activism. Therefore, examining AT thru-hikers' SLE provides a broader range of ideas about what constitutes an SLE, how nature is defined as a space, and how participants interact with those spaces. The findings showcase a democracy of experience which was called for by Payne (1999).

Participants brought up many SLE that are prevalent in existing literature. However, participants decided on what was a personally relevant SLE. More importantly, participants spoke about these SLE in nuanced ways. Various SLE, such as camping, were meaningful to participants for different reasons and in different ways. The same SLE might be perceived as both negative and positive depending on that persons' unique experience. Participants also varied in what they considered to be an SLE. Hunting and working outdoors at a concrete company brought one participant closer to nature, whereas other participants connected to nature through hiking or visiting a nature space. This shows that curriculum models that prioritize some experiences because they might influence someone to become environmentally active or sensitive might not be successful or comprehensive.

Participants revealed their environmental sensitivity in different ways and at different levels. For example, TV Idol did not see his hike as a nature or outdoor experience and was not seeking to connect with nature on his hike, yet he reported having many of the same SLE as other participants who were very aware of nature around them and had a strong connection to nature. In contrast, Nails did not have many of the typical SLE, including time spent outdoors as a child, yet she saw her hike as a nature experience which was transforming the way she connected to the environment. Again, this demonstrates that curriculum models that rank some experiences above others because they might inspire someone to connect with nature or display more environmentally responsible behavior might not be fruitful or inclusive.

Making the choice to thru-hike the AT is a decision that reveals elements of a person's identity, comfort in the outdoors, and connection to nature or the outdoors. Time spent outdoors as children was an exceptionally important experience in terms of leading participants to the AT. All participants hiking the trail by personal choice had spent time playing outside as children. Current SLE literature supports the idea that childhood experience outdoors would be important in seeking future outdoor experiences or being environmentally sensitive (Arnold, Cohen, & Warner, 2009; Chawla, 1999; Corcoran, 1999; Furihata, Ishizaka, Hatakeyama, Hitsumoto, & Ito, 2007; Hsu, 2009; Palmer et al, 1998; Palmer & Suggate, 1996; Palmer, Suggate, Bajd, & Tsaliki, 1998; Palmer, Suggate, Robottom, & Hart, 1999; Sward, 1999; Tanner, 1980). Interviews with participants revealed that people who chose to thru-hike the AT had spent time playing outdoors as children. Only one participant, Nails, was not hiking by her personal choice and she was also the only participant who reported not spending a significant amount of time outside as a child. However, the experience of thru-hiking and being in nature as an adult changed how Nails saw herself in relation to nature. This suggests that some childhood experience outdoors or in nature helps people to feel comfortable in outdoor environments later in life, however it is possible to increase an adult's environmental sensitivity by providing opportunities for them to experience and connect to nature. Environmental education has mainly focused on relaying factual knowledge to, and changing patterns of behavior of, a non-adult audience (Hougen, 2009). However, this study shows that adults can develop environmental sensitivity and would therefore benefit from environmental education efforts.

Participants revealed diverse ideas about what they considered to be a nature space and therefore, what they saw as a nature oriented SLE. A majority of participants felt that nature was synonymous with wilderness and this conception of nature excluded humans or human influenced areas. This brought many participants to the belief that hiking the AT was not truly a nature experience since the AT runs through many towns and environments were human influence on the landscape is very overt. Several participants also mentioned vacationing “out West” as a wilderness or nature oriented SLE. This is remarkable as an example of an SLE because it demonstrates that even though AT thru-hikers are participating in what many would consider an intense nature experience, they diminish it because it is not “out West.” This definition of a nature space as any space which has not been touched by humans is problematic in that it effectively severs humans from nature. The conception of nature as wilderness that has not been greatly influenced by humans is a myth which elevates certain landscapes, biomes, and habitats above others. This has a very real impact on what we choose to conserve and how we interact with various environments. Haluza-Delay (2001) found that EE built around wilderness experiences might actually diminish environmentally responsible behaviors among suburban participants because these programs tend to reinforce the separation of pristine nature and the students’ home environments (Fisman, 2005). This supports the idea that current EE practices of immersing children in nature spaces which limit their conception of what counts as nature may actually diminish environmental connection. Human civilization cannot be separated from nature and the goals of environmental education should encompass different types of nature spaces as well as different spatial contexts of human-nature overlap. If the only type of nature space that is valuable in “wilderness,” than the majority of people living in urban areas will feel disconnected from nature and the environment. The goals and purposes of EE must be shifted to encompass a broader conception of nature if we are to create environmentally active and aware citizens.

Implications

In this study, it was found that childhood experience in nature was an important factor in participants’ decisions to undertake an intense nature experience. This is in line with what the current SLE literature reveals. However, the results of this study are also novel to the SLE literature in that AT thru-hikers have not been invited to participate in this type of research until now. The act of long-distance hiking is not necessarily equivalent to being an environmental activist, however, given that environmental sensitivity and connection to nature are thought to be precursors to action (Hungerford & Volk, 1990) it is vital that we include participants who seek out outdoor or nature experiences in SLE research.

In order to further broaden conceptions of environmentalism and showcase a democracy of experience, diverse participant groups must be invited to participate in SLE research. This study revealed the diversity of experience that brought hikers to the AT, but it also revealed that different people perceive these experiences in different ways. If SLE research is used to inform what experiences environmental education offers, then it is important to realize that how students perceive these experiences is just as important as the experience itself. It is also imperative that we open environmental education to more age

groups, specifically to adults. Adults are an often overlooked audience in environmental education and informal science education. However, adults are often in positions of power, influence and have the ability to act of their own accord. If more nature experiences and environmental education opportunities were available to adults, the impact of environmental education would be increased.

Limitations

One of the goals of this study was to examine the construction of nature experiences during a long-term engagement in the outdoors, as well as to examine how these experiences in nature impact the relationships between space, place, and identity; the follow-up interviews would have helped to support findings related to those ideas. Due to the transient nature of much of the AT thru-hiking community, I was only able to reconnect with one participant for a follow-up email conversation. Therefore, discussion of place-making and discussion of the evolution of experience and connection to nature is limited to what participants related to me during their initial interview. The interview protocol was designed to elicit ideas about space, place, identity, and evolving experiences so I was still able to answer the research questions without the follow-up interviews.

A second potential limitation was the participant racial and gender homogeneity. My participants mostly reflected the demographics of thru-hikers as a group, which is made up of a higher percentage of Caucasian males than average. I was in fact lucky to have the diversity I did in my participant group since the demographics of thru-hikers are so male-centric and Caucasian oriented. However, this posed potential limitations in the perspectives that might be offered. The perspectives offered by my participant population were ultimately limited by the participants' backgrounds and experiences. Given my larger aims for equitable nature experiences, I felt it important to note this in the limitations.

Disclosure statement

The Authors reported that no competing financial interest.

Notes on contributors

Vanessa Ann Klein - Montclair State University, USA

References

- Appalachian Trail Conservancy. (2012). About the Trail. Retrieved from <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail>
- Appalachian Trail Conservancy. (2012). Hiking. Retrieved from <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/hiking>
- Arnold, H. E., Cohen, F. G., & Warner, A. (2009). Youth and environmental action: Perspectives of young environmental leaders on their formative influences. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 40*(3), 27-36.
- Carspecken, P. F. (1996). *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Catling, S., Greenwood, R., Martin, F., & Owens, P. (2010). Formative experiences of primary geography educators. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education, 19*(4), 341-350.

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative research*. Sage Publications Ltd, London.
- Chawla, L. (1999). Life paths into effective environmental action. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 31(1), 15-26.
- Chawla, L. (2001). Significant life experiences revisited once again: Response to vol. 5 (4) "five critical commentaries on significant life experience research in environmental education." *Environmental Education Research*, 7(4), 451-461.
- Corcoran, P. B. (1999). Formative influences in the lives of environmental educators in the United States. *Environmental Education Research*, 5(2), 207-220.
- Fisman, L. (2005). The effects of local learning on environmental awareness in children: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 36(3), 39-50.
- Furihata, S., Ishizaka, T., Hatakeyama, M., Hitsumoto, M., & Ito, S. (2007). Potentials and Challenges of Research on "Significant Life Experiences" in Japan. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 17(4), 207-226
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Mill Valley: The Sociology Press.
- Haluza-DeLay, R. (2001). Nothing here to care about: Participant constructions of nature following a 12-day wilderness program. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 32(4), 43-48.
- Hill, E. (2014). Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trail hikers: A comparison of benefits and motivations. *Journal of Unconventional Parks, Tourism & Recreation Research (JUPTRR)*, 5(1).
- Hougen, C. (2009). Adult Learners and the environment in last century: An historical analysis of environmental education. *Electronic Green Journal*, 1-11.
- Hsu, S. J. (2009). Significant life experiences affect environmental action: a confirmation study in eastern Taiwan. *Environmental Education Research*, 15(4), 497-517.
- Hungerford, H. R., & Volk, T. L. (1990). Changing learner behavior through environmental education. *Journal of environmental education*, 21(3), 8-22.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- National Park Service. (2012). Appalachian National Scenic Trail. Retrieved from <http://www.nps.gov/appa/index.htm>
- Palmer, J. A. (1993). Development of concern for the environment and formative experiences of educators. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 24(3), 26-30.
- Palmer, J. A., & Suggate, J. (1996). Influences and experiences affecting the pro-environmental behaviour of educators. *Environmental Education Research*, 2(1), 109-121.
- Palmer, J. A., Suggate, J., Bajd, B., & Tsaliki, E. (1998). Significant influences on the development of adults' environmental awareness in the UK, Slovenia and Greece. *Environmental Education Research*, 4(4), 429-444.
- Palmer, J. A., Suggate, J., Robottom, I., & Hart, P. (1999). Significant life experiences and formative influences on the development of adults' environmental awareness in the UK, Australia and Canada. *Environmental Education Research*, 5(2), 181-200.
- Palmer, J. A., Suggate, J., Bajd, B., Ho, R. K., Ofwono-Orecho, J. K. W., Peries, M., & Van Staden, C. (1998). An overview of significant influences and formative experiences on development of adults' environmental awareness in nine countries. *Environmental Education Research*, 4(4), 445-464.
- Payne, P. (1999). The significance of experience in SLE research. *Environmental Education Research*, 5(4), 365-381.
- Ray, M. (2009). *How to hike the A.T.: The nitty-gritty details of a long-distance hike*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books.
- Sward, L. L. (1999). Significant life experiences affecting the environmental sensitivity of El Salvadoran environmental professionals. *Environmental Education Research*, 5(2), 201-206.



- Tanner, T. (1980). Significant life experiences: A new research area in environmental education. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 11(4), 20-24.
- Tanner, T. (1998). Choosing the right subjects in significant life experiences research. *Environmental Education Research*, 4(4), 399-417.