

“I firmly believe that everyone of us who has experienced camp as either a staff member or a camper will not argue when I say that each one of us would have been a very different person if it were not for our experiences at camp” (anonymous, CCA Writing Awards, 2006).

I will briefly overview my study on the nature of camp counsellor experiences. What I'd like to focus on are some of the dilemmas for those in service provision working in work-leisure ambiguous space.

### **What is Camp?**

Similar to outdoor recreation camps in Australia, summer camp in North America is defined as “a sustained experience which provides creative, recreational and educational opportunity in group living in the outdoors” (American Camping Association, 1993, p. 14). In Canada, this is provided through a variety of traditional and contemporary recreational activities in the outdoors (Meier & Mitchell (1993, pp. 4-5).

### **The people who work and play there are...**

A national study (Ipsos-Reid 2001) reported that an estimated 6.5 million children attend camp every year in Canada. In summer residential camps, children from about age 6 to 16 attend a rural or natural geography for a number of overnights in cabins or tents. They are cared for and provided recreational activities for the most part by camp counsellors, although there is a range of camp employment roles involved in the provision of summer camp experiences (i.e. director, kitchen, maintenance).

Camp counsellors are usually senior high school, university and/or college students who are employed on a two to three month seasonal contract. Camp counsellors are often studying or moving toward careers in unrelated fields to outdoor education or outdoor recreation (Magnuson, 1992) hence summer camp employment is seen as a “fun” work opportunity rather than career development. Most camp managers, however, require their staff to have special qualifications or training such as First-Aid and Life Saving (Ipsos-Reid, 2001).

### **My involvement in Camp**

I have been involved with camps (on and off) for over 20 years. I am what camp people might call a ‘lifer’ and just like the author mentioned above, I am a different person because of my camp experiences. Camp provided opportunities during my adolescence to explore questions of self, identity and vocational calling. It was a

positive and growing place but not all my recollections of camp experiences are congruent with the grinning and glossy images portrayed in camp brochures. I had both positive and negative experiences.

As a young camp staff member I struggled with the contradictions that I perceived between what was commonly stated as the positive and character building benefits of camp and my own embodied experiences of camp. As an older camp employee, however, my focus was drawn to the emotional demands of ground-level facilitation roles. Particularly I began questioning the sustainability of an industry that relied so heavily on the emotional expertise of young people (16-25years). How could employees meet the complex emotional demands of direct contact roles and not burnout? And how do camp leaders become equipped and able to meet children's emotional needs responsibly?

As a researcher, I hope to build understanding about these issues in an empirical way in order that the camp community (that I hold so dearly) can continue to improve potential and 'magic' of such formative youth leisure experiences.

### **Research Aims**

By taking a post-structuralist approach, My research aims to better understand how camp discourses and practices shape the nature of the emotion work performed by young camp counsellors. I wish to examine how camp counsellors' wellbeing is affected as they negotiate the emotional expectations of camp managers, parents, peers and campers in the provision of positive camper experiences. My research intends to offer a critical management perspective to improve reflexive camp practices regarding the employment of young people.

### **Camp counsellor employment experiences...**

Young camp counsellors are responsible for the everyday care and safety of campers in their charge (American Camping Association, 1993; Meier & Mitchell, 1993). They are also responsible for the delivery of learning opportunities, as well as the development of moral character of campers. In addition, camp managers call on staff to act as a camper's friend, parent, therapist and teacher. Camp counsellors are expected to facilitate personalised opportunities for campers to gain skills and improve self-concepts through a positive and meaningful camp experience around the clock.

In contrast, camp counsellors are considered to be youth in a significant developmental period themselves (Magnuson, 1992). Thus the developmental benefits gained from camp employment compensate for the work they do and their low pay (Bialeschki et al., 1998; Bolden, 2005; K. A. Henderson & Bialeschki, 1982). Discourses about the fun and life skills gained from camp experiences are pervasive, and with little mention of potential negative effects, these 'jobs' are widely appealing. This illustrates the tensions within camp experience practices that create a number of dilemmas from both camp employees and managers.

### **Work-leisure boundaries of camp counsellors**

Bialeschki et al. conducted a study to explore the "perceived benefits associated with summer camp staff experiences" (Bialeschki, Henderson, & Dahowski, 1998, p. 27). What they found was that camp staff benefited by making friends, learning about diversity, teamwork skills, and personal growth (Bialeschki et al., 1998). However participants raised concerns about the lack of pay and personal time (Bialeschki et al., 1998). They felt that they deserved higher wages and more privacy in light of the level of responsibility and intensity of effort that was demanded of their roles (Bialeschki et al., 1998). Bialeschki et al.'s study also revealed that the expectations for young staff are not well articulated and may be unrealistic for young people (Bialeschki et al., 1998). As a consequence there is confusion about what the camp counsellor role entails. Bialeschki et al. brings attention to the disenchantment of camp counsellors when they feel they have not met the expectation of contributing 'tangible' developmental benefits to each and every camper in their care (1998). Little commentary, however, is made about the conditions of camp employment being untenable (Bialeschki et al., 1998). This example highlights a number of issues.

The boundaries between work and leisure are particularly blurred for leisure providers like camp counsellors (2003). The work of camp counsellors "involves the enactment of leisure" which confounds the work-leisure relationship (Guerrier & Adib, 2003, p. 1404). Camp counsellors need to perform "having fun" as they are providing leisure activities to campers. Camp counsellors are also with campers for most hours of the day making times and spaces for work and leisure ambiguous.

Given the low pay, lack of private space and regulations about recreational choices in the name of 'fun' and developmental opportunities, camp employment practices present a number of ethically contentious issues such as the healthy balance between work and leisure time (Frisby 2005; S. Wearing & Wearing, 2001).

The experience of freedom which is central to leisure experiences exists in tension with the regulation of camp employment (Foucault, 1982a; B. Wearing, 1998). For example, dominant discourses about young peoples' lack of maturity exist in tension with the responsibilities conferred on camp counsellors for the care and wellbeing of campers (Wyn, 2000). The regulation of freedom by camp managers and counsellors in the provision of leisure experiences for others highlights the need for reflexive management practices on the regulation of freedom in camps.

### **The Emotion work of camp counsellors**

Camp counsellors are embodied subjects (Rose, 1996a). They experience their camp employment with and through a body (Lupton, 1998). Emotions act as "expressions of and lenses through" which camp counsellors can understand embodied camp experiences (Sharpe, 2005, p. 29). Emotions allow camp counsellors to 'make sense' of their camp experiences and interpret these for themselves and others (Lupton, 1998). The emotional interpretations camp counsellors make of their employment experiences provides insight into aspects of camp that affect, in both positive and negative ways, their emotional wellbeing and their ability to perform their jobs (Hochschild, 1983; S. Wearing & Wearing, 2001). However, the emotion work performed by camp counsellors in the provision camper experiences remains largely invisible in industry discourses, academic literature and camp management practices.

The 'front-line' delivery of and responsibility for camper experiences require young camp counsellors to manage their own and campers' emotions (Hillman, 2006). This, Hochschild (1983) argues, is emotion work. Emotion work exists when camp counsellors must expend their emotions "to produce a certain quality of interactions" and manage the emotions of campers in order to achieve the camp product (Leidner, 1999, p. 82). Boyle (2005) extends Hochschild's concept of emotional labour to include other aspects involved in emotion work such as emotional processing or emotion switching. I will refer to emotion work as it is more comprehensive of the dimensions involved.

*Leidner argues, that emotion work is "crucial to the performance of interactive service work" such as in the work of camp counselling (Leidner, 1999, p. 81) but Hilman adds that this is "not really recognised and rewarded" (2006, p. 5).*

For example, camp counsellors are expected to 'bond' with new campers every session yet they are not given time to process the previous campers departures or

sadness they may experience from this loss. They are expected to have intense emotional connections with the children in their care but not notice or care when these children leave and new ones arrive. The provision of camper experiences, in this way, relies upon the exchange of commodified relationships (Hillman, 2006).

Due to the nature of interactive service provision camp counsellors must negotiate camper, colleague and camp managers' involvement in emotion work (Leidner, 1999). For example, camp counsellors are looked down on for displaying anger or frustration when campers misbehave because camp norms dictate that they must be 'happy' in order to deliver positive and beneficial camper experiences.

### **The need for a critical management perspective on camp employment**

The 'job' of camp counsellors is complex and challenging –this is made even more so with camp employers emphasizing the 'hard skills' of the role and lack of awareness of emotion work required of young camp counsellors. This indicates a need to critically explore how the emotion work of camp counsellors comes to be shaped. My research considers the implications of this for the critical management of ethical employment practices for camps specifically and leisure provision professionals more broadly.

### **Research Design**

A pool of potential interview candidates are currently being generated by snowball sampling from my personal contacts of past camp experiences. Candidates are invited to fill out a short survey about their demographic information and camp counsellor experience. Then using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) I will select 30 individuals with camp counsellor employment experiences and 10 individuals with direct camp counsellor management experience to interview.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be used to gather data about the derived meanings of camp counsellor employment experiences, how this shapes their emotion work and effects and affects their emotional wellbeing.

### **Contributions to body of knowledge**

My examination of diverse embodied camp counsellor experiences will display possibilities for rethinking the emotional expectations of these roles. I anticipate that the complexity of emotion work will be revealed through the research and further understanding of the effects of camp employment experiences on the wellbeing of

young people can contribute to the development more appropriate management practices.

My research will provide camp managers with an in-depth understanding of the emotional demands on camp counsellors and with it the sensitive nature of individual's interpretation of the affects of these experiences. My research will support recommendations for ground level applications in providing optimal camp employment experiences and inform reflexive practices for policy design and camp administration.

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