

OUT OF THE CABIN, OUT OF THE CLOSET:
THE TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF CAMP AND IDENTITY EXPLORATION

by

Emily Cluen

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

The Honors College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science in Recreation Management

May 2018

Approved by:

J. Joy James, PhD, Thesis Director

Mary Ballard, PhD, Second Reader

Jefford Vahlbusch, Ph.D., Dean, The Honors College

Abstract

Summer camp is a tradition for American youth; each year over 7.2 million children attend summer camp (American Camp Association, para 1). Camp provides transformative experiences for campers and staff that should be available to all, however, some youth are denied this opportunity. This study focuses on the experiences of seven LGBT+ camp staff members. The results were broken down into four themes: Transformation, Camp Atmosphere, Friendship, and Change-Maker. In focusing on the experiences shared in these interviews, the study aims to aid camp directors in adopting more inclusive practices for LGBT+ people.

Literature Review

Frederick Gunn is credited with being the “father of recreational camping” in the United States (Krimsky). In 1850, he and his wife, Abigail, opened the doors of their home to act as a school. Within their school, the students’ education revolved as much around outdoor skills and games as it did learning Latin word roots (Krimsky). Together, the Gunns helped found a movement that spread through the 1870s and 1880s and helped children escape the modern, indoor life of the day (Gershon, 2016). By 1918 there existed more than one thousand established camps (Gershon, 2016). Today, more than fourteen million children experience nature through summer camp each year (American Camp Association, para. 1). These camps often provide children their “first experience of community beyond their immediate family and neighborhoods” (Paris, 2008). Summer camps are such a large part of American culture that even those who have never attended camp can easily imagine children singing and roasting marshmallows around a campfire, or perhaps sneaking out of their bunks after bedtime (Paris, 2008). This study focuses on residential camps, where campers and staff engage in a continuous stay of five or more days at a time. During their time at camp, these residential campers are

supervised by college-age counselors who work under the guidance of one or more full-time directors.

Summer camps provide children a necessary outlet for recreation and growth, yet are not available to all. Some barriers to camp include geography or financial availability. These can be overcome by fundraising, scholarships, and making travel accommodations. Other barriers that are more difficult to overcome are related to the identity of participants and the culture of individual camps. This study focuses specifically on people who hold LGBT identities and their experiences navigating camp as a person who identifies with a gender, sexual, or romantic minority.

Of the limitations mentioned above, gender is the most ingrained in Western society. Here, gender is defined as activities and behaviors shaped by the social practices ingrained in society (Bussey, 2014). Gender is so much a part of our everyday lives that most people find it hard to believe that gender is, in fact, consistently created out of social interactions (Lorber, 1991). These social interactions begin before a person is out of the womb, as it is not unusual for parents to identify the sex of their baby before it is born. People celebrate the new child's sex with gender markers. This occurrence starts even before birth with parties that reveal pink for girls or blue for boys, depending on an ultrasound reading. When the child is born, they are labeled by the color of their clothing and the toys they play with. As the child grows and is perceived by society as being on either end of the constructed gender binary, they are treated based on their assumed gender. Boys are called strong, smart, brave, and funny, while girls are taught to be sweet, delicate, cute, and kind (Wells, 2018). The way human bodies are constructed and the organs within can influence the way those humans are perceived and treated by society. Because these rules are human-made and passed down, the way humans think about gender has

changed over time and will continue to evolve. Even so, the gender norms ingrained in today's society are so rigid that those who do not follow the prescribed rules often struggle to find their way.

As we know it today, gender is broken up into three components (Trans Student Educational Resources). First is a person's sex assigned at birth. This is the conclusion that doctors make after reading an ultrasound or looking at a baby's genitals. For this, there are three options: male, female, and intersex. (Formerly known as "hermaphrodite," an intersex person's genitals do not fall within the determined male or female parameters.) As the child grows in society and they experiment with different toys, clothes, and hobbies, they develop a gender identity, the second component of gender. Gender identity is defined as a person's innermost understanding as who they are as it relates to gender (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). A majority of people identify as male or female, aligning with the sex they were assigned at birth. These people are considered cisgender (the Latin root "cis" meaning same (Gilboa, 2018)). Others do not identify with the sex assigned at birth and are considered transgender or genderqueer (Knox and Schacht, 2016). The term transgender also encompasses those who do not identify with either male or female labels (Knox and Schacht, 2016). Lastly, as a person develops, they will express their gender through adornment such as clothing or hairstyles. The physical manifestation of a person's gender is called their gender expression (Trans Student Educational Resources). Gender expression is the third and final component of gender. As people express their gender and are perceived by others, the concept of "passing" is introduced. When a person is considered passing, they are seen and recognized as belonging to one gender as perceived by societal standards of gender. If a transgender woman is seen and recognized as a woman, she is considered to be passing. If a transgender woman is seen as a male wearing

makeup and a dress, she is not considered to be passing. The concept of passing can be applied to other identities, including race and religion. (Sanchez, 2001). For some, passing is an accomplishment that unlocks many societal privileges. However, passing can also rob people of the trying experiences that are common bonding points for people in marginalized communities. In the aforementioned example, transgender women being mislabeled as men or drag queens, while frustrating, can be a point of camaraderie between transgender woman. A transgender woman who is considered passing will not be able to relate or contribute to those conversations.

While sex and gender dictate what norms a person is expected to follow and how they are treated by the world, a person's sexual identity determines the people to which they are attracted. Gonzaga et al. explored romantic love and sexual desire as separate processes. Romantic love satisfies the need for commitment, "sustaining long-term bonds by promoting, intimacy, connection, and the formation of mutual long-term plans" (2006). Meanwhile, sexual desire fulfills "an initiation role, motivating sexual interest, proximity seeking, and initial contact" (Gonzaga et al., 2006). These do not always align. For example, a person could be romantically attracted to people of the same gender and physically attracted to people of two sexes. People use prefixes to disclose the number or type of genders to which one is attracted physically or romantically. People who are homosexual or homoromantic are attracted to others of the same gender (Knox and Schacht, 2016). People who are heterosexual or heteroromantic are attracted to others of the opposite sex (Knox and Schacht, 2016). Bisexual/biromantic people are attracted to two people of sexes, pansexual/panromantic people are attracted to people of all sexes (Knox and Schacht, 2016). Not all people feel sexual or romantic attraction. About 1% of the population identifies as asexual or aromantic (Miller, 2015). The person from the example above would identify as homoromantic bisexual.

Camps have their own way of interpreting and reinforcing gender. Some camps operate to serve campers of a single gender. Others serve both, separating males and females in bathrooms, sleeping arrangements, and sometimes even meals. Camps also have rules about what counselors can disclose to campers about their sexuality and relationships. In one study, camps were found to have either homophobic, tolerant, or supportive environments (Oakleaf, 2013). Oakleaf found that staff members utilized strategies to manage their identity, regardless if they were at a camp that was homophobic, tolerant, or supportive (2013). Oakleaf attributes this finding to the fact that all camps exist within the larger context of a homophobic and heteronormative society (2013). Most staff utilized identity management strategies, like carefully choosing how they dress or describe their partners, in an effort to minimize the consequences of others' homophobia. Staff working at homophobic camps took the largest emotional toll, but all still reported that camp was an experience they grew from – one to which they would gladly return the next year (Oakleaf, 2013).

A qualitative study focused on queer people's experiences in Girl Scout camping (Argus, 2016). Study participants reported that camp gave them a sense of safety, acceptance, and confidence. Some described coming out for the first time, finding a life partner, and being supported or providing support to others in the LGBT community. The themes that emanated from Argus's research included non-judgmental atmosphere, a new sense of self, and a community of other LBGT people (2016).

The purpose of this study is to examine how the LGBT+ identity of staff affected their camp experiences.

Methods

Study Design and Sample

A set of interview questions was developed to elicit the participants' thoughts, experiences, and identities related to gender and sexual orientation. An interview protocol was developed specific to participant identities, meaning participants were asked questions related to their gender and sexual orientation. Questions were designed and modified to fit each participant. Questions included: What kind of camp experience do you have? How has camp played a role in your life? What does camp mean to you? And how would you compare the relationships built at camp to those you have hold with friends from the outside world? A full list of questions can be found in the appendix.

Through the snowball method, participants were recruited. The first author attended various ACA conferences and advertised the project. The researcher also interviewed a few people with whom she holds personal relationships. Seven interviews lasting between 15 and 40 minutes were conducted in 2017 and 2018. The interviews were conducted face to face and via telephone by the researcher. Each interview was audio recorded. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. See chart below for sample description. Each interview was transcribed by the main researcher and uploaded into Nvivo 11.

Participant Pseudonym	Camper Experience	Staff Experience	Organizational Affiliation	Gender	Sexuality
Isaac	7 years (1-2 weeks per year)	5 years	Boy Scouts, Christian	Male He/him/his pronouns	Homosexual
Jayne	6 years (1-2 weeks per year)	6 years	Christian, Girl Scouts	Female She/her/hers pronouns	Queer Lesbian
Taylor	One week	5 years	Girl Scouts, 4H, Christian, Special Needs	Transgender, prefers he/him/his pronouns	Questioning Gay

Drew	One week	none	Girl Scouts	Male Transgender	Questioning
Bobbie	10+ years (1-2 weeks per year)	3 years	Christian, YMCA	Male	Gay
Carson	One week	10+ years	Girl Scouts	Female	Lesbian
Alex	none	6 years	Girl Scouts, Special Needs	Female	Lesbian

A codebook was created using A Priori concepts from the literature, personal experience, and modified grounded theory approach. Initially, the first two authors coded one interview separately using identified a priori concepts. Then, to ensure trustworthiness of the codebook, the first two authors came together to compare coding. There was no continuity between the findings of the researchers for the first codebook. The researchers modified and refined a 2nd codebook to include more appropriate codes. Using another interview, the researchers coded using codebook 2. When comparing notes on the 2nd codebook, there were still some gaps the researchers' separate coding. A 3rd codebook was developed through discussion and revision of the 2nd codebook. The 3rd and final codebook was used to code the remaining interviews by the first author. Once the interviews were coded, the researchers met to conduct a thematic analysis of the code to interpret meanings and themes. The themes that resulted include transformation, camp atmosphere, friendships, and change-maker.

Researcher Background and Biases

Emily Cluen, Appalachian State University Recreation Management Honors student, went to camp for the first time at 16 years old and has worked for camps every year thereafter. Emily's experience includes working for a Christian, co-ed day and residential camp, an all-girls camp with extended sessions, a nonprofit that works to send military kids to camp, and a camp for children facing illnesses, disabilities, and other life challenge. Emily identifies as a queer

woman. Emily currently a fourth-year Recreation Management major at Appalachian State.

When searching for an undergraduate institution, Emily chose a program that would prepare her for a career as a camp director.

Joy James (Honor's Thesis advisor) has been a camper, staff member and camp director as well as conducted research on resident camp experiences. Her camp settings have been primarily with non-profit camps (Camp Fire Boys and Girls, Girl Scouting and 4-H). Joy identifies as cisgender. Her experiences with the LGBT Community began in the camp setting which opened her perspective to differing identities. Currently, Joy is an Associate Professor of Recreation Management and conducts research on how people become comfortable in outdoor settings and encouraging healthy physical activity in outdoor settings.

Results

Transformation

Many of the study participants indicated personal growth from their experience with camp. Jayne reported, “[camp] taught me how to braid my own hair but...it also taught me how to create friendships and how to live in community and how to be a leader. I can attribute almost all of my leadership skills to this day as a young adult back to my early days at summer camp.” Isaac referenced camp as a place where “as I found my community in the staff and as I found more of who I was in my leadership potentials, camp really became a place that I could flourish and that I could thrive and that I could really develop myself.” These lessons and skills were important to the participants who experienced camp.

For the study participants who were exploring their sexual and gender identities at camp, the development of confidence and self-expression is especially important. Often, there is much fear associated with revealing one's sexuality – fear of losing social status and relationships with

others. Bobby recounted his experiences, saying “for many years I did my best to conform to heteronormative constructs out of fear of people finding out the truth about my sexuality.” Camp has helped people overcome fear by instilling confidence in them through immersion into an accepting atmosphere. Alex moved across the country to work at a new camp and remembered being nervous about revealing her sexuality: “Are people going to accept me? I didn’t know how people in Florida react to LGBT people. So I was pretty nervous and I just told people as it came up and people who I felt more comfortable with and everyone was really accepting.” The confidence gained at camp is something the interviewees took with them when they left camp. Carson reported “[camp had a] huge impact on my self-confidence and my ability to express myself and my ability to feel comfortable with my sexuality and just with myself.” She went on to say, “[camp] helped me meet other people and opened my eyes up to this whole community that, outside of camp, I would’ve never met because it got me involved in our LGBT community at school, which I never would’ve done had I not had friends around me like ‘you need to meet other people.’” Through the camp experience, study interviewees gained personal and professional skills that are necessities for life and help them be sure in who they are, including in their sexual identity. These skills include leadership, confidence, independence, and self-expression.

Camp Atmosphere

The atmosphere (traditions, policies, social interactions) at camp has a strong influence on the experiences of study participants. Some camps have traditions and policies that can come off as unwelcoming, especially to LGBT campers and staff. As Jayne explained, “I am openly out and the Girl Scout council that I [worked for] did not allow us to be...out to our campers, which is something that I really struggled with, because at that point in my life I was ready to be

out. I was very frustrated that there was a policy against it.” Another example Jayne gave involved the tradition of separating boys and girls into separate sleeping quarters and activities. A common way of referring to this is the idea that boys’ cabins are blue, girls’ cabins are red, and there is no “purpling” (mixing of boys and girls and the corresponding colors) allowed. Jayne gave her opinion on this, saying “[It’s] such an age-old thing that I would like to like toss on fire and throw out a window.” Camps who focused on prohibiting “purpling” are missing opportunities “to have real conversations about what appropriate boundaries are with our campers.”

Participants mentioned feeling particularly unsure about the welcoming atmosphere (or lack thereof) when it came to camps with a religious affiliation. Carson noted that, “If it’s faith-based...I assume that it’s not going to be as welcoming.” Isaac struggled with his involvement as a closeted Boy Scout attending camp for a number of years. He described, “rumors that were based around anyone...who wasn’t avidly bringing in girls with them or talking about [girls] or anything like that.”

Even so, camps do a wonderful job inviting everyone to be received into the culture. These camps aid participants in developing a lifelong social network and encourage participants to be who they really are. Bobby recognized this in the way he described camp as, “a slice of heaven on earth for people who felt completely disregarded and stepped over in the means of social hierarchy.” These incredibly accepting experiences are what motivates people to return to camp. Carson noted “That’s why I always went back – because I’m like “they understand me, they get me.” She went on to say, “I realized that I really love camp, you know, I can be me.” Alex recounted an experience she had camp: “I had a...t-shirt that said ‘be true’ ...and I talked to one of the year-round members [to] ask before I [wore] it. And she was like ‘no, you can wear

it.” In a previous experience, Alex was told she could not wear the shirt for fear of the reactions of others. She reflected on the experience, saying, “and so that was really cool knowing that you can truly be yourself.”

A few interviewees mentioned introducing the use of pronouns into camp policy. Pronouns help people one has just met identify and talk about them correctly. Jayne explained the use of pronouns, saying, “A practice that I’ve learned...is that every time we start a group conversation, when we do...introductions, that we should also be including pronouns. So “Hey, my name is Jayne, I use she and her pronouns, I’m in cabin four, and I love pink.”...Gender identity is a really easy one to include there and I think it’s important because...we need to be using the right [pronouns] more.” Alex shared that, “This year...on the camper application and the staff application we started asking for their gender identity and what pronouns they prefer. And we’re talking about putting that on the name tags.” Alex continued, saying, “So even if every single camper and every single staff member this summer identifies as cis and uses he/him or she/her, that’s fine, but just to get that out there. And then so if we do have [transgender or nonbinary] campers and staff who come in the next few years, it’s not like we’re changing it just for them.” The discussion of pronouns in camp settings was important to the study participants.

During their interviews, participants were asked about the policies they would create if they were in charge of a camp. Isaac stressed that he would, “definitely include a full session on inclusion, [not] specific for the LGBT community.” He wants his training to be well-rounded and include many different identities. Bobby would train his staff to, “keep a relatively open mind, and to keep in mind respect towards [different groups of people].” Bobby explained that, “kids [have] very impressionable minds [and] oftentimes you plant seeds in them and then those ideas can manifest into something entirely different in their subconscious without even realizing and

then it's like five years later they have all these opinions and it's because of exposure at a young age." In dreaming about creating his own camp one day, Taylor noted, "I'm gonna be open about who I am and I'm going to invite those type of people into the environment because I find that people who are open to [other genders and sexualities] are probably more healthy and open-minded and [that is] the environment I wanna provide for those kids." There was a dichotomy in the participants experience at camp between feeling welcome and unwelcome based on the camp atmosphere. Six out of seven participants worked at at least one camp where they felt welcome. Five out of seven participants worked at a camp where they did not feel welcome. Two out of seven participants reported experiencing fear of some components of organizational culture as they were job searching.

Friendships

Camp is a breeding ground for friendships. Many interview participants noted that their camp experiences taught them how to create friendships, gave them a "new flourishing community of friends" and "incredibly pure friendships." These relationships help make camp a haven for those who are socially awkward and excluded from mainstream society, for they feel celebrated at camp.

Camp friendships develop so quickly in part because of the "camp bubble," the fact that camp people spend a lot of time together without much influence from the world outside. So many things are packed into a single summer, camp leaves its inhabitants in a very vulnerable place. The varied camp experiences and emotions of camp makes relationships grow rapidly. Dwellers at camp live very closely alongside one another for the summer. Additionally, the high-energy nature of camp leaves little room for breaks in between activities. This leaves people with little energy to put up a front or try to be someone they are not. Thus, camp people truly have no

choice but to be themselves, to let their true selves show. Bobby described his experiences as a camper, saying, “just incredibly pure friendships that [I would] only see for [the] eight days [I was at camp].” This experience cannot be created outside of camp. However, the relationships fostered in this experience travel well beyond the boundaries of camp. Alex described this, saying, “When I’m away from my camp friends, it seems like we’re talking every day and flying across the country or road-tripping just to see them.” Jayne remarked, “They were my work friends but they’re my sisters...they’re my brothers. They’re still to this day my family even though I haven’t seen some of them in four years now. I know I can call up and go visit them in a second and we’d pick up right where we were.” The friendships built at camp are lasting. They give those who experience camp friendship a model for what friendship can be and what to look for in friendships elsewhere.

A special camaraderie forms between people who hold a common identity. Shared experiences sparked by a given identity help people bond together. Alex recounted a memory from one of her camps, saying “At our camp we have prides [that are represented by color]. And [my friend and I] always joked that we were the rainbow pride and we had a handshake because we were the only two [outwardly gay] people so we just liked doing that.” The camaraderie Carson found at camp took a slightly different form. “My friend always wore a GAP shirt and [one of the staff members would ask] “does that mean you’re gay and proud?” I was very naïve, you know, because she was eighteen and [my friend and I] were like fifteen or sixteen and I’m like “what does that mean?” [The same staff member] would make side comments to me, not necessarily calling me out but saying things...and not that she was trying to be rude about it, she was just trying to be like “hey, I just wanted to see if you were gay.”” This helped Carson figure out that there were more people at her camp who shared an LGBT identity.

When asked how their camp friendships contrasted to their friendships from outside camp, participants described a much stronger sense of love and belonging, as well as a deeper understanding of sexual identity. Carson said, “I felt like I could be open at camp, whereas at school...I didn’t necessarily tell everybody.” Bobby explained, “I have like a lot of friends from high school that are genuine, like they definitely are, but it’s to a different, completely different degree...I’ll never be able to act the way I can around [my camp friends] in regards to everything including my sexuality.” The revealing of sexuality was welcomed by camp friends and was not necessarily a surprise to them. This was the case in Alex’s experience: “When I first came out to [my best friend from camp], she was like “oh yeah, for sure...we all knew that. So there’s people who know you better than you know yourself in a lot of ways.” In spending summers and other times together, interviewees were reaffirmed in these relationships and in their identities.

Change-maker

Change-makers want to affect change at camp through mentoring or policy. Interviewees expressed a desire to be change-makers: to affect change at camp through improving policies and mentoring others. Jayne wanted to serve as a role model for those in an earlier stage of coming out and accepting themselves. In speaking about Girl Scout camp, she remembers, “I kinda wish that I had been out there because...I know there were some campers there that would have benefitted from having an openly queer counselor.” In his interview, Isaac revealed that “three fellow staff members came out to me in private.” He remembers, “It was actually really cool to spend a couple different nights throughout the summer in long deep talks about what my journey was and how my journey was able to help other people.” Bobby recounted a time when he was working as a counselor and was able to educate some of his campers. When they were changing in the locker room, middle school boys were prone to making comments along the lines of, “quit

looking at me. Why are you being gay? Shut up homo.” In correcting them, Bobby remembers, “It was a non-negotiable as far as slurs went and just giving reason, tangible reason as to why something isn’t okay and trying to show how that affects other people is kind of what I went by when explaining that kind of stuff.” Bobby remembers, “the kids respected me because [of the strategy I took] towards handling a counselor-camper relationship [and a tough situation].”

Interviewees used their knowledge and experience to educate and help improve the experiences of others.

Additionally, interview participants articulated a need to improve the inclusivity of policies at camp and the experiences of those who are still exploring their identities. Jayne stated her opinion on including trans campers in cabins, saying “I will always yield to the preference of the camper – where do they feel comfortable – because we could have Mary Smith who identifies as a trans girl but the girls’ cabin is still a very foreign place to her. She is not ready to live in that cabin. She’s been in the boys’ cabin for the past five years as a camper. She wants to be with her old cabin mates... I think that we put Mary where Mary feels comfortable.” Jayne also commented on how bullying policies could be improved to include gender issues. “[We can address this in] the same way we talk to campers all the time about bullying. Like don’t be a jerk, don’t be a bully... we don’t bully people based on their weight, we don’t bully people based on like what shoes they brought to camp, and we don’t bully people based on their gender... We already teach our kids not to be bullies so that just goes one step further.” Isaac recounted a time when, “my camp director [came] to me asking my opinion on what I would do [in the case of] a camper who, during the introduction just felt the need to explain her identity...as lesbian, without prompt or without question, she still openly identified. The question was brought up to me was like, why would someone feel the need to do that. So my answers were given and my

kind of thought process behind why that was so was given, and then that was relayed to the staff, starting from the leadership staff and then thereunto the rest of their team.” Isaac served as a human resource for his camp directors and helped them better speculate and understand the thoughts of LGBT+ individuals. Alex spoke about a friend of hers saying, “he doesn’t have a lot of knowledge in the LGBT community so anytime he has questions he’ll ask, which is really cool. And so he’s in med school and anytime they learn about treating patients who are LGBT he’ll tell me and he asked me if I felt comfortable if he brought me up ever in the conversation and I’m like yeah, go for it.” Alex wanted her friend to better understand herself and others who identify as LGBT, so she gave him the knowledge to do so.

Discussion

At camp, people are transformed both through experimenting with new activities and in connecting with other people. By doing archery for the first time or improving their swimming skills, people gain confidence. By engaging in a new community and forming relationships, people gain independence and self-efficacy. Camp participants take the lessons learned at camp with them wherever they go. The transformation of people that happens at camp makes camp an even more special place for the individuals who are transformed.

The interactions people have at camp serve as a model for what vulnerability and authenticity look like, what friendships have the potential to be. Camp allows people to belong, as opposed to having to feel like they fit in. Brené Brown writes in “Braving the Wilderness,” fitting in requires people to change themselves to fit their surroundings, while belonging allows them to be who they truly are and to find acceptance (2017). When people enter a place where they know they belong, they build stronger relationships with the people around them. A shared

identity has the potential to strengthen these relationships and create a special camaraderie between individuals. However, friendships form regardless of identity or past experiences.

The atmosphere of camp plays into the experiences people have at camp. When camps foster an open, inclusive environment, people's experiences foster hope and happiness within themselves. This is especially important for LGBT people, who, all too often, do not receive affirmation because of the fear of other's perceptions of them and their identities. However, because the current atmosphere at some camps is less than welcoming, people choose to be selective about the camps with which they involve themselves. Some also choose to act carefully so as to abide by policies set by the camp – even ones with which they do not agree. This reflects the same principles found in a study concerning camp counselors closeting themselves to abide by the rules of the camp (Oakleaf, 2013). Some counselors embody professionalism in the ways they manage their identity and act around campers because they want to set a good example – it is their choice. Some do it because they know it is essential to keeping their job.

As participants shared their vision for what camp can be, it became clear that some possess great knowledge about certain topics and have suggestions for how things can be better at their camps. They want to share that knowledge with camps. When given the opportunity to share and have their ideas incorporated, they are able to be better understood. Those who want camp to be a better place and share suggestions with their specific organization will feel empowered when their suggestions are put into play. Particularly when it comes to identity, those who are marginalized want to be understood and understand the need to make change through education. It is important to note, though, that at a point, some individuals become tired of educating. One should only ask identity education questions if the information is pertinent or if the person answering offers to educate.

The camp experience is important to any person because of its potential for transformative experiences. Camp gives its participants a chance to discover more about themselves and the world around them. The impact camp has on an individual depends on the individual and what they bring to their own experience. In her study, Argus found that people were able to be transformed based on where they were in their development – camp met them where they were (2016). Those who come to camp lacking a creative outlet or acceptance from peers credit camp for the transformative experiences. Isaac described how his life changed, saying, “I was able to really find solace in [my camp community] and knowing that [my friends] were there. Knowing that, that eventually led to, enough motivation that, I did not end up taking my life, because that was something that I did struggle with in my early teenage years, but as I found that camp community, it became more and more apparent that there were people that I could find that solace in.” The life-altering power of camp turns into life-saving power for some who struggle with wanting to take their own life.

This kind of camp experience still is not available to some who need it. Danny spoke about his experience being rejected from working at camp, “When I was just out of high school I went to apply as a counselor at a camp and I was denied because of my biological sex.... I was honestly fuming because [as part of the application for] the job...we had to do an on-site training...It was basically a ropes course [and we] were tying knots and doing teamwork to pick who was going to be part of this job. I was applying at a Boy Scout camp and [I had to know how to tie certain knots]. I had come in and learned them really quick and was catching on really well and my best friend actually got the job instead of me. I was so upset.” As Danny tells it, though he possessed the greater skills, he was not hired to work. He experienced gender-based bias that is incredibly common among transgender people (Harrison, Grant, Hermon, 2012).

Additionally, Danny will never know the full impact that camp could have had on his life – he was not given the opportunity to experience the community, independence, and transformation that the camp experience reflects (Paris, 2008). Full inclusion at camp starts with being accepted into the environment. Danny hopes that camps nowadays are more accepting of all people.

Camp has an impact on all who enter. The kind of impact and the magnitude of that impact is dependent on the camp's atmosphere, the level of belonging felt by individuals, the friendships formed, the willingness of camps to open themselves to change, and the kinds of transformative experiences encountered.

Limitations

This study was completed with a relatively small sample size. The diversity within LGBT identities did not allow for in-depth consideration of and implications for individual identities. Accessing interviewees who had the identities and experiences required by the research was a challenge. Interview participants were found through friends of the first author and advertisements at recreation conferences. Another limitation was the sometimes-lacking relationship between researcher and interviewee. Some participants shared stories freely with the first author, despite having just met her. Some participants were more reserved because of the missing relationship.

Applications for Camps

The purpose of this study is to give suggestions for ways camps can be more inclusive in their policies and everyday practices. First and foremost, full-time camp staff (directors, receptionists, nurses, etc.) need to engage in awareness and personal education about LGBT+ identities. It is essential for staff to know these identities exist and that, throughout their career at camp, they will come into contact with people who hold these identities. Camp staff can utilize

resources like university programs, community-sponsored LGBT centers, or online resources like Trans Student Education Resource and the Human Rights Campaign to stay up-to-date on these issues.

Next, camps should take a look at their existing policies and procedures and eliminate the unwelcoming or biased ones, while still ensuring that all policies meet the camp's purpose. Common policies camps may need to adjust involve hiring, camp dance norms, and bathroom rules. Another practice suggested by interview participants is to declare preferred pronouns when introducing oneself, both orally and on paperwork. It is important to note that some camps may not be able to change their policies and embody inclusiveness because of the camp's mission or affiliation. These camps need to be aware of their exclusionary nature and prepared to have conversations with people who hold LGBT+ identities and do not experience the full inclusiveness of camp. Camps who do adjust their policies need be prepared to have conversations with governing bodies, staff members, and camper parents. These conversations should center around the need for the change, stemming from the camp's need to meet their mission and goals – to be inclusive and foster growth within all who enter through the camp's gates.

Lastly, full-time camp staff need to broaden their knowledge by fostering diversity within the relationships they hold with others. While many resources are available through resources online and otherwise, camp staff need recognize that they will never be able to understand the full experience of a person with an LGBT+ identity if they do not hold that identity. Asking a person about their experience is completely appropriate once an open relationship is fostered. In fact, these shared experiences can greatly benefit both the party offering the story and the one

listening. Until a relationship is built, however, camp directors need not press people to share their knowledge and experiences.

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Appendix

Questions for Interviewees

How would you identify your gender?

How would you identify your sexuality?

How are you perceived by others in those regards? What's other's first impression of you?

What kind of resident camp experience do you have?

How has camp played a role in your life? What does it mean to you?

How did your sexuality play into your experiences at camp? Why do you believe it was significant?

How would you compare the relationships you build while at camp to those you hold with friends from the "real world?"

How do you believe the sharing/non-sharing of your sexuality played into those relationships?

What did your camp friends and coworkers know about your sexuality? What did you disclose?

Were there others at your camp that identified in the same way you did? (as members as the LGBT community or with the same sexual identity as you?)

How do you believe your level of openness about your sexuality/gender identity affect your camp experience?

According to your camp's staff training, how were you expected to approach sexuality with your campers?

If you were in charge of staff training, how would you tell your staff to approach this topic with campers?

What was your experience readjusting to the world in regards to your sexuality after camp?

Did you/do you plan to return to the camp(s) you worked for?

Why or why not?

Do you believe your sexuality played into your decision?