

THE EFFECT OF PARTICIPATION IN THE GIRL GUIDES OF CANADA ON YOUNG WOMEN

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Introduction

Youth organizations have been responding to the needs of society since the late 1800s. and early 1900s. Many have claimed they help offset some of the problems experienced during adolescence by offering support and leisure experiences that can help in the development of positive attributes, skills and relationships (Elder, 1975; Nichols & King, 1998). Many of these youth organizations that emerged in the 1900s continue to exist today and are seen as significant in attending to society's need as government social and recreation service delivery declines. Caldwell and Andereck (1998) recognized the necessity of understanding motives for involvement in these associations as recreation and leisure services organizations become more prominent. Many adolescents have a difficult time with their transition from childhood to adulthood. Research has shown that social contacts and leisure experiences can be beneficial during this stage of life, helping adolescents to develop self-competence, independence and autonomy (Cordes & Ibrahim, 1996; Kimmel & Weiner, 1985; Newman & Newman, 1999)

The Girls Guides of Canada-Guides du Canada (GGC) have been providing programs for girls and young women since 1909 and is the largest all-female organization for girls and women in the world, with worldwide membership of over 10 million members. (Crocker & Batchelor, 1990; GGC 1997). The vision of the GGC is to be a movement for girls, led by women, and their mission is to aid adolescent girls in their development through the achievement of positive attributes and skills. A review of literature revealed little published research that assessed the GGC's effectiveness. Therefore the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of participation in the GGC on young women. In order to understand and examine this effect the following concerns were explored: The motivations for joining the GGC, the determinants of extended active participation, and the over all effects of participation.

Methods

A qualitative methodology was carried out using phenomenology as the framework to guide this study dealing with the social and leisure behaviour of young women through their participation in the Girl Guides program. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with five young women (ages 16 to 19) who were in the Rangers level of the Girl Guide program, and their mothers. Each interview with the daughter / mother participant sets were taped recorded and transcribed. Questions examined how each young woman first became involved in the Girl Guide program, (e.g. age they first enrolled, the motivating factor for getting involved, what appealed to them about the Girl Guide program, etc.) Additional questions probed in more depth for the determinants as to why each girl continued her involvement beyond the age when many drop out of the program. Lastly each of the daughters and mothers were questioned as to what they felt the major benefits were or the long term effects had been to the young woman due to her participation in the GGC, etc.). Once the first interviews were transcribed, coded, and themes identified. A second meeting took place to allow the

daughter and mother to read over the transcripts, make any changes or additions they felt necessary. A additional questions were asked and recorded if clarity was required. These too were transcribed, coded and added to the analysis. Narrative analysis was used to examine the core narratives and reflect the experiences of these five young women based on their own personal experiences, and the reflection of their mother's of their involvement in the GGC.

Results

Ten unique stories presented the researcher with an in-depth view of the progression of each girl from her initial involvement in the GGC to her current participation as a Girl Guide Ranger which puts the young woman in a leadership role over younger girl guides, plus continues to allow the girl guide to experience personal growth and development.

The young women's stories began with their first involvement in GGC which was often at a very young age. It was felt that the inclusion of the mothers as participants in the study would provide greater insight into their daughters' involvement, and that they would have greater recall of certain events when their daughters were of a younger age.

In addition, it was anticipated that mothers would be able to render a perspective to their daughter's participation that the young women were unaware of or may have overlooked.

The primary motivation for first engagement or enrolment in the GGC program was due to the influence of either a good friend, or that of their own mother, who had also previously been a girl guide or a girl guide leader. One girl's father also played a prominent influence in his daughter's decision to get involved and to remain active as he drove her to and from the guide meetings, and actively engaged in helping her to prepare for camping trips, complete requirements for earning badges, and other getting involved in skill development and learning activities.

There were many varying reasons identified for why the girls and chosen to remain actively involved with the Girl Guide program beyond the length of time most young girls stay active. Some of the common themes that were identified as the reasons for their extended participation were: fun, friendships and socialization, personal rewards, personal growth opportunities, leadership challenges, etc. In the early years of involvement, just being with friends and having a chance to socialize and have fun were the most common determinants to remaining active, followed by a strong emphasis on the opportunities to go camping or other excursion trips, being involved with service projects, or participation in community based learning experiences. In the later years the determinants for extended participation were again because of friendships and socialization, but motivations began to be more associated with the intrinsic personal development and leadership opportunities afforded the girls, along with other extrinsic rewards such as earning badges, or the satisfaction of completing the branch or program, and even the potential awarding of a University bursary.

As a result of their participation, young women believed that they had accrued many benefits, skills and attributes that have helped them to this point in their life, and that would continue to provide positive values and guidance to them in their adult life. The girls mentioned the following benefits; increased general life skills (e.g., personal organization, time management, personal health, etc.), broadened interests (e.g. in various

leisure activities - travel, service and camping, the arts, music, cultural understanding, etc.), and increased personal confidence. The mothers added such benefits as increased respect and acceptance of others, awareness of environmental conservation, development of lifelong friendships, and better preparation for life situations, such as being able to better handle themselves with others, etc.

Discussion and Recommendation

As shown by these findings, young women and their mothers expressed many internal benefits derived from participation in the Girls Guide of Canada. This supports Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's study (1984) where in they found that highly structured activities provide adolescents with the most intrinsically rewarding leisure experiences. When discussing the benefits of the GGC participation, the same elements emerged from most of the participants' stories, supporting other leisure-benefits research. The findings of this study also further support the concept supported by Larson (1994) and Ngai-Pun and Cheung (1997) that participation in youth organizations can contribute to an adolescent's personal development, allowing her or him to develop and master beneficial life skills.

Although this study was based on a small homogeneous samples in terms of class, geographic location, and race; and relied on a convenience sample that limits generalizability, the findings of this study are consistent with previous literature on leisure, socialization, motivation for leisure and the benefits of leisure. It is also consistent with other studies, that found that socialization of recreation and leisure activities in childhood have a significant impact on adolescent behaviour (Hultsman & Kaufman, 1990, Kelly, 1983, Scoot & Willits, 1998). Thus it seems reasonable to recommend that parents and youth organization seriously consider the quality and type of leisure opportunities that are provided to children as determinants of extended participation.

A prominent model in determining motivations for extended commitment and the effects of extensive participation on personal development has not yet been developed. This study, however, contributes to the literature by presenting findings that address the experiences of participants in their decision to maintain participation in a structured leisure program, rather than dropping out when they reach adolescent age. This study looked at the benefits from the participants' perspectives in order to help determine the needs of the participants. It found that motivation to extend participation went beyond family and peer support to that of personal development and personal rewards. This information might assist youth organizations to consider shifting or adapting their marketing strategies directed at adolescent / youth participants.

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