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An Experience Like No Other: A Case Study on Summer Camp Culture

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The University of Southern Mississippi

An Experience Like No Other: A Case Study on Summer Camp Culture

by

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Abstract

In “An Experience Like No Other: A Case Study on Summer Camp Culture,” I consider the stories of individuals as they remember experiences and encounters they had while at summer camp. As a camper, counselor, and staff member, I have experienced many sides of camp. Recognizing my own tendency to describe the camp experience with claims about how “camp relationships are the best” and how “camp is great,” I decided that I, and others, would benefit from a study that considers and critiques these commonly recited stories about camp as a master narrative. Indeed, as the number of summer camps continues to increase and more children, teenagers, and adults become involved in camp activities, researchers are beginning to take interest in further exploration of camp culture (e.g., see Abigail Van Slyck, Dennis Waskul, and C. L. Lopez). Very little, however, has been written about relationships within the summer camp setting and the stories camp counselors tell about their experiences; thus, there is a direct need for scholars to fill in the gaps and explore new avenues of camp culture.

In order to explore these camp narratives, I distributed electronic surveys to and conducted interviews with camp counselors at a summer camp in the Deep South. My data suggests that the stories camp counselors tell often adhere to what Jean-Francois Lyotard describes as a master narrative, “an overarching story people tell themselves about their experiences in relation to the culture, literature, or history of society” (qtd. in Alexander, 610). However, like the writers of literacy narratives in Kara Poe Alexander’s “Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: ‘Master’ and ‘Little’ Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre,” camp counselors also tell more nuanced stories that contradict

this master narrative. Thus, this study delves further into individuals' stories and how each contributes to, and sometimes contrasts with, our master narrative. Through reading, analyzing, and coding the provided stories from each counselor, we can begin to perceive what the counselor communicates as valuable experiences and memories and learn more about the culture of summer camp and the stories it produces. Ultimately, my research suggests that there are six little narratives associated with the stories camp counselors tell: collaborative, problematic, religious, heroic, external, and other. By providing these little narratives in contrast with the grand narrative, we are able to gain a better understanding of and greater appreciation for camp culture.

Key Terms: narrative, summer camp, master narrative, Lyotard

Dedication

To all of those who love summer camp, community, and sunshine.

Blest be the tie that binds.

Acknowledgements

I must admit that this study would not have been possible without my advisor and friend, Dr. Joyce Inman. Thank you for tirelessly working with me on this project and for always pushing me to write to the best of my ability. With your help, I have been able to study what I love and contribute to the realm of summer camp culture. You have truly shown me the power and beauty of story telling.

I would also like to give special thanks to those who have been a part of my own journey at summer camp. Thank you for loving, laughing, crying, and doing life with me. Y'all have certainly made camp an experience like no other. To God be the glory for the precious times we have spent together in fellowship!

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My Story of Camp

I roll over in my bunk bed as the radio chatter begins. The girls are pulling out their staff shirts and khakis and trying to decide which shoes to wear (Chacos® or tennis shoes?). As I try to wake my sleepy self, I immediately feel the eagerness in the room. This can only mean one thing—it is the first day of camp! I stumble down the ladder of the bunk bed, rush to get ready with the girls, and then we hop on the golf cart to race over to the dining hall for breakfast. After breakfast, we join together for a staff photo. We sing hymns and pray for the campers we will welcome for the first week. By the time the gates are opened, we are dancing, singing, shouting, and carrying on—this is the moment we have been waiting for since the end of last summer.

Throughout my time as a camper, camp counselor, and camp leadership staff member, I have had “the experience like no other.” Over the past few summers, I have realized that summer camp puts me in my element. From spending my days outdoors to serving children and counselors alike, camp is the exact combination of all of my passions. As I reflect on my time in the camp culture, I begin to realize how much I have changed and grown as a result of my work as a counselor and staff member. While working at camp, I have become more confident and outgoing, more aware of others’ needs, and more joyful and energetic than ever before. I have learned many helpful skills such as caring for children, leading a group, mentoring others, building a fire, and driving a golf cart. Through my everyday work at camp, I have experienced the love and encouragement of others and developed a deeper understanding of God’s grace and mercy.

Because of my experiences at camp, I frequently share my memories with others. In fact, any of my friends will say that I constantly relate moments from camp to encounters at school, church, and work. As I consider my diverse experiences at camp and how much they have shaped me into who I am today, I see a need to share these experiences beyond my immediate acquaintances. Beginning with my first-hand knowledge, my research provides a theoretical look at the experiences of camp counselors as they participate in camp culture. More importantly, analyzing the narratives of camp counselors allows us to think about the stories people tell about seemingly common experiences like summer camp and to hone in on how these stories create a common culture and camaraderie among staff members. Though many former and current staff members of summer camps comment on their positive relationships with others at camp, there is an overall lack of even general literature about camp culture. As summer camps grow and affect more lives, it is critical that we look beyond the overarching ideas of camp and look deeper into the actual stories of individuals as they remember experiences and encounters they had while at camp. These different types of occurrences allow us to see a more varied, accurate perspective of camp relationships and their effects.

In order to call attention to this need for more scholarship on camp culture, I will first provide a brief overview of scholarly and popular literature associated with summer camps. Next, I will explain my own research study on the interactions and experiences of individual camp counselors at a Christian summer camp in the Deep South. Considering the narratives of these counselors, I then code and analyze the stories counselors provide via interviews and surveys and distinguish between metanarratives and the overarching

and more common “master narrative” of the camp counselor. These personal narratives are valuable in that they offer a more realistic and reliable picture of camp than those seen in available literature. Through the presentation of each counselor’s story, we will add to our understanding of camp as experienced by the individual. Overall, this study is a call to action to continue academic research in this area of camp culture and the narratives that sustain it.

Scholarship and Stories about Camp

Additional research about camp is important because of the continued growth of summer camp facilities. According to the American Camp Association, “Since 2002, the number of ACA day camps has increased by 69% and resident camps have increased by 21%” (“ACA Facts and Trends”). As the number of summer camps continues to increase and more children, teenagers, and adults become involved in camp activities, researchers are beginning to take interest in further exploration of camp culture. Current literature written about the summer camp experience tends to focus on the history of summer camps, recruitment of camp counselors or campers, or the maintenance of summer camps.

One of the most prominent historians of summer camp culture is Abigail Van Slyck. Her article, “Housing the Happy Camper,” provides a historical perspective on summer camps. Van Slyck explores the beginnings of summer camps and suggests they were created as a way to bring up children properly and to further educate them. During these early times of camp culture, summer camps were advertised to parents as a place to send their children to learn good manners and mature their minds. Focusing primarily on

gender, Van Slyck addresses how summer camps were promoted as a tool to grow boys into men. These early summer camps focused on physical fitness and personal growth. By providing histories of both public and private camps in Minnesota, Van Slyck gives us the primary view of earlier summer camps as places for intellectual growth. She continues by describing the changes that take place over time, such as the landscape of camps as they evolve with changed perspectives (i.e. tents to cabins).

By considering the histories of earlier summer camps, we can come to a better understanding of the development and changes in camp culture over the years. While there are a number of authors¹ who address early summer camps as they influence children, Van Slyck once again proves to be most helpful in visualizing early camp culture. In her book *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960*, Van Slyck explores the creation and histories of summer camp. Van Slyck's writing is especially helpful in that she reveals how early summer camps served as a way to address the political issues of America during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As physical destinations, these summer camps work as an escape from school, inequality, and trouble at home. This "manufactured wilderness" was created to encourage the imagination and allow children to play as children, not worrying about the hardship and dangers of the times. In addition to its service as an escape, these early summer camps also function as places where children learn outside of the classroom, fully emerged in nature. Within the camp setting, children's curiosities soar as they experience their surroundings hands-on. Overall, Van Slyck conveys these summer camps as a vital part of the child's development as a person.

Another common theme in camp literature involves the recruitment and retention of summer staff. Dennis Waskul's study, "Camp Staffing: The Construction, Maintenance, and Dissolution of Roles and Identities at a Summer Camp," for example, concentrates on the interactions among camp staff and relationships formed as a result of the summer experience. A sociologist, Waskul gathers data through open-ended surveys, interviews, and observation of staff members. He discusses counselors' interactions from day one to the very end of camp and even afterwards. Waskul investigates how staff members interact and come together as a team within a wilderness setting. In addition, he notes the counselors' difficulty leaving camp at the end of the summer and adjusting to the outside world and its routine. Dan McCole et al.'s "The Relationship Between Seasonal Employee Retention and Sense of Community: The Case of Summer Camp Employment" and William August Becker's "A Study of Job Satisfaction among Returning Camp Counselors" also consider the recruitment and retention aspect of summer camp. Both of these articles focus on how counselors react to the culture of camp, especially the fellowship of counselors and relationships that influence whether or not a staff member will return the following summer.

Beyond recruitment and retention of staff, there is also a thread of scholarship that specifically focuses on the continuation of Christian summer camps. While writers such as Zlati Meyer² and John W. Kennedy³ focus on Christian summer camps for minorities and underprivileged populations, C. L. Lopez addresses the need for Christian camps to rethink their systems and operations in order to stay current among their competitors. In his article, "Setting Up Camp Afresh," Lopez concentrates on the difficulty of maintaining the relevance of Christian summer camps. He reveals that part of the struggle

comes from an increase in costs, while another difficulty involves larger churches forming their own Christian camps. In this call-to-action article, Lopez suggests that camp directors need to make program changes for the better, including the use of social media as a way to reach potential campers and families. Lopez quotes Dwight Gibson's affirming statement about Christian summer camp: "Camping is not old-school. It is a significant strategy for ministry today because it reaffirms community and discipleship, it shows the fullness of God in creation, and it allows people to have a break from their normal routine to discover God afresh" (qtd in Lopez 19). While Lopez's article and other texts are helpful in perceiving the background and functions of summer camps, they allow very little understanding of the culture and experiences of community and relationships of the counselors while at summer camp.

In addition, few community members read these types of studies; rather, their understandings of camp culture are based on what they see in popular culture representations of camp. Indeed, Van Slyck recognizes that "summer camps for children are familiar strangers on the American landscape" and "we feel we know them well"; in actuality, we heavily rely on stereotypes portrayed through movies and literature ("Housing" Van Slyck 68). Typically, in narratives about summer camp that are forwarded in media, camp materials, and children's literature, campers and counselors refer to the summer as a time of joy and positive interactions and bemoan the long school year and its difficulties. Popular culture presents images of the counselors as crazy, athletic teens who wear matching shirts and are always pictured in the outdoors building bonfires, carrying children on their backs, or singing and dancing on stage. The camper is often portrayed holding a melting popsicle, participating in activities, or grinning ear to

ear while playing with other campers and counselors. Van Slyck addresses camp as it appears in the media: “Films like *The Parent Trap* and songs like “Camp Granada” would fail to entertain if we were not already acquainted with the joys and miseries of the camp experience they evoke” (“Housing” Van Slyck 68). These portrayals of summer camp contribute to our understanding of the culture and lifestyle surrounding camp.

Consider the narrative in *The Parent Trap*, the popular 1960s era Haley Mills film that was later recreated starring Lindsay Lohan, a movie also referenced by Van Slyck. The twins unexpectedly meet each other at Camp Walden, a place that reinforces the stereotype of overnight camp. Though sometimes they participate in mischievous acts such as pranks, skinny-dipping, and piercing their own ears, Sharon and Susan have the summer camp experience we often imagine: community meals in a dining hall, competitions between cabins, and a time of singing camp songs. *The Parent Trap* movie is yet another example of how the public receives the concept of summer camp as the media portrays it without questioning whether or not it is a realistic view.

Another example of children’s literature that portrays summer camp is the *Berenstain Bears Go to Camp*, from the popular children’s book series developed by Stan and Jan Berenstain. This story addresses young readers’ anxieties about first time camping by chronicling Sister’s adventures as she learns how to craft, canoe, and play sports at camp. On the last night of the camp, there is an opportunity to spend the night outside under the stars. Sister is nervous about that night because she has never spent the night outdoors. Her friend Lizzy comes up with the idea to do a practice run and camp out in their backyard the night before going to camp. Sister is able to sleep through the night, and she is proud after staying overnight at camp. Children’s literature like the

Berenstain Bears Go to Camp serves as a way for children to overcome their own fears about spending the night away at camp. Though literature like the *Berenstain Bears* and movies like *The Parent Trap* help produce some ideas about summer camp, Van Slyck admits that, “on the other hand, our grasp of camp history is limited” (“Housing” Van Slyck 68). As these general camp narratives are quite common in popular culture’s camp fantasies (as well as valid), we must look more closely at the individual’s stories for a more realistic view of summer camp and its contributions to our culture.

A Case Study of Camp Culture

In an attempt to begin such a conversation, I conducted a research study at a small, Christian summer camp in the Deep South, and I ultimately rely on Jean-Francois Lyotard’s discussions of master and little cultural narratives to begin to explain and consider the value of stories about summer camp culture. Lyotard describes the master narrative as “an overarching story people tell themselves about their experiences in relation to the culture, literature, or history of society” (qtd in Alexander, 610). In this case, the “overarching story” of summer camp is that working as a counselor will secure new friendships as well as positive outcomes. The media’s refrain about people working at camp is this instant friendship. However, there is much more to the counselor’s story of working at a summer camp. Lyotard’s theory of the master narrative reveals that we often latch on to an all-encompassing notion, or “narrative of legitimation,” in order to attempt to understand something in its entirety (Lyotard 31). However, such a general idea does not do any justice to the subject. Summer camp, for example, is much more than just relationships and positive experiences. Each individual has his or her own

memories and stories from camp, and, as Lyotard argues, no one person's view can be understood as the only view. As a result, it is critical that we explore the individual stories provided through research and interactions.

Lyotard continues by explaining that the grand narrative is a convenient way for people to pack large, ambiguous thoughts together. Though often not realistic, the grand narrative is something that people repeat over and over again (therefore continuing its existence). As a solution to this problem, Lyotard explores the concept of little narratives as a way to challenge and even correct the grand narrative. Lyotard notes that while the grand narratives are very broad, the little narratives contain individual stories that help contextualize our understanding of the grand narrative. Such narratives serve as “the quintessential form of imaginative invention” and allow others to view various sides of the grand narrative (Lyotard 60).

I am certainly not the first one to use this idea of the grand and little narratives. Kara Poe Alexander relies on Lyotard's theory of the grand and little narratives in her article “Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: ‘Master’ and ‘Little’ Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre.” In this article, Alexander discusses the grand narrative present in the literacy narrative genre—a genre often assigned in college composition classes—that assumes the more literate a person is, the more successful he or she will be. Hesitant to see the successful outcome as everyone's story, she examines the overlooked little cultural narratives in students' essays to contrast and further analyze literacy narratives as they oppose the grand narrative. Alexander concludes that the majority of students communicate successful stories when they are asked to consider literacy. Alexander's study is the basis for my own methodology in considering master and little

narratives as they relate to summer camp culture. By reviewing counselor stories, we can see how they contrast with, alter, and expand our grand narrative of positive camp relationships.

I believe that we must look beyond the filtered pictures of camp presented by current scholarship and popular media and point to the experiences and encounters of the camp counselor to tell us more about camp culture. I acknowledge that I often find myself repeating the grand narrative. Recognizing my own tendency to recite the same phrases about how “camp relationships are the best” and “camp is great,” I have decided that I, and others, would benefit from a study that considers this master narrative in a more sophisticated way. I conducted my research at Camp Happy Hills,⁴ a camp in the south that welcomes thousands of campers and nearly one hundred staff members each summer. The mission of Happy Hills is to provide children with the means to grow in character, to explore the outdoors, and to learn about Jesus. By conducting interviews and distributing electronic surveys, I gathered data with the intent to examine the stories told by camp counselors.

My survey focuses on demographic information as well as gathering individual stories.⁵ It includes fifty-eight participants in all—thirty-four female participants and twenty-four male participants. The ages of the participants range from sixteen to twenty one and older. These participants represent eight states: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. While some of these people worked for one summer at Camp Happy Hills, others worked up to nine summers on staff.

Focusing mainly on two of the open-ended questions asked in my survey (“Can you give examples of when your relationships with other counselors benefitted or problematized camp experiences? How would you describe the working relationships between counselors at Happy Hills?” and “If you could share one story about camp experiences, what would it be? Please be as specific as possible.”), this study delves further into each individual’s story and how it contributes to, and sometimes contrasts with, the master narrative. By focusing on each participant’s answers to these two qualitative questions, we can learn more about the everyday encounters between counselors and counselors, counselors and administrators, and counselors and campers. In addition, through reading and analyzing the provided stories from each counselor, we can begin to understand what the counselor communicates as valuable experiences and memories framed via storytelling. By doing so, we can better appreciate camp culture and its effect on individuals.

Just as I found Lyotard’s grand narrative as a helpful tool in conceptualizing my argument about summer camp, I also found his definition of the “little” narrative helpful to demonstrate how incredibly important it is to include the individual counselor’s stories. In Alexander’s article, she refers to little narratives as “more specific, narratives of literacy that contrast with and challenge the master narratives” (Alexander 611). She utilizes these little narratives as a way to divide the literary stories into categories for further study and reflection. I found it valuable to replicate Alexander’s methodology and to examine my data for patterns of little narratives that might help us better understand the camp experience and allow us to look through the eyes of the individual as he or she experiences various occurrences at camp. These smaller narratives take us right into the

action at camp and show us how they have an impact on counselors and campers alike. Such a theoretical lens proves helpful in that it allows the viewer to analyze and code the stories in smaller categories in order to draw conclusions. In addition, these little narratives often contrast with and sometimes even prove the grand narrative as false.

Little Narratives about Summer Camp Culture

After analyzing the surveys and interviews conducted at Camp Happy Hills, I identified six prominent little narratives in which counselors elaborate on their camp experiences in ways that expand or contradict the master narrative. I have chosen to label these narratives as follows: external, collaborative, problematic, heroic, religious, and other. For each of the stories I examined, I coded the story as one of the six little narratives. Some stories contain more than one of these little narratives. Of the six little narratives, the collaborative stories were mentioned the most and then the problematic stories. The religious, heroic, other, and external categories followed. By defining these little narratives and showing examples of each, we can gather a greater amount of information on and appreciation of camp culture. The chart below includes my description of each little narrative as well as the characteristics required for any episode to be labeled using the descriptor.

Coding for Little Narratives

Collaborative	Allows others to view camp relationships through the teamwork of the staff; focuses on interactions between staff members, benefits of working together, accomplishments, shared expectations/goals, support, and encouragement.
Problematic	Allows others to view camp relationships during difficulties; focuses on issues (whether or not resolved), distractions, conflicts, and divisions.
Religious	Allows others to view camp relationships through Christian ideals/salvation stories; focuses on moments of prayer, teaching, learning, sharing of the Gospel; gives insight into the Bible program at Christian camps.
Heroic	Allows others to view camp relationships through success stories; focuses on counselors (and campers) who overcome obstacles, make sacrifices, solve problems, create peace, and/or use creativity in the summer camp setting.
External	Allows others to view camp relationships outside of the camp setting; focuses on individual experiences, interactions, and bonds with other staff members during times when camp is not in session.
Other	Does not fit in any of the other little narratives.

Percentages of Responses for Little Narratives

Little Narrative	Percent of Responses
Collaborative	37%
Problematic	36%
Religious	24%
Heroic	20%
Other	15%
External	13%

If we begin with the collaborative narrative, we can see how critical it is that counselors are willing to work together in many areas of camp. These collaborative narratives include moments when counselors share goals,

encourage one another, and/or accomplish objectives together. In addition, the collaborative little narrative provides an example of how such an outlook can prove

beneficial to counselors. Devin's story gives us a picture of this: "I had a child who was from a foster home. She made a mailbox but told me that she wouldn't get any mail." From the beginning of the story, we must understand letter writing as a larger part of camp. Counselors always encourage campers to write to their parents at home, their friends at other summer camps, or even write their counselors when they return home. A child who does not expect to receive any mail during the week could potentially have negative memories of camp if all of his or her cabin mates receive mail and the camper does not. Devin continues her story by explaining an idea she and another staff member came up with for her camper—"Another counselor and I arranged for her and her foster sister who was also a camper to write each other letters so they could get mail. It was a really sweet moment as both girls were able to join in the joy of the whole cabin getting mail."

Through teamwork and care for this camper, this story reveals a tender approach to a potentially scarring experience. Such a story also shows us some of the behind-the-scenes work that counselors do everyday of the summer to show concern for each camper's experience. As a collaborative narrative, Devin's story reveals the benefits of working with another staff member in order to accomplish a goal. Through their teamwork, they were able to make a difference in two campers' lives. Devin shares a memory that gives her joy in knowing that she and another counselor were able to give a camper the opportunity to participate in mail-time. While this may be something that from the outside we would never imagine as a responsibility of the counselor, this example reveals Devin's close observation of and commitment to her campers.

Bruce also shared a story classified as collaborative in that it exemplifies staff working with staff in order to reach an end.

One example where my relationship with another counselor benefitted my experience at camp was the second summer I worked at [Camp Happy Hills]. Going into the summer, we were paired together to be [Youth] Directors. We knew very little about each other from the summer before . . . Our personalities balanced each other so well. Where one was weak, the other was strong. An example of this would be while one of us really enjoyed taking care of the logistical side of camp, the other enjoyed dealing with the relational side of camp.

Although unsure at first, Bruce recognizes that he and his partner were successful as a result of putting their gifts together and allowing each other to handle different parts of the job. Bruce is encouraged because he and the other staff member were able to aid each other in their efforts to serve campers. He reflects on their success and relates how thankful he is for this particular experience. Bruce's story points to the fact that he was able to accomplish and fulfill his duties because he had a partner to work with and to support him. As a little narrative, this collaborative story recognizes teamwork within the camp culture as well as a deeper understanding of the counselor's dedication to his or her campers. It highlights beneficial interactions between the summer staff as they support, encourage, and recognize one another in their work.

The second most popular little narrative is the problematic story. As a little narrative, the problematic story questions the grand narrative as it describes negative interactions and moments at camp. These stories illustrate conflict, division, and

difficulties as experienced by staff members while working within a summer camp setting. Carley mentions romantic relationships at camp and how they can cause issues amongst the staff. “My first summer I fell for my camp crush and it really hindered my experience. He cut me off from the other friendships I had started to create because he was a loner and didn’t like them.” Carley expresses the problematic story in that her “camp crush” led her away from the community that serves as a support throughout the whole summer. With such a distraction, she was taken away from all other friendships and sources of encouragement. Carley continues, “It made me not like them and I walked away from that summer with few friends and eventually lost him. It’s definitely so easy to develop camp crushes because of the environment but it’s how you act on them that matters.” Carley mentions an issue that is prevalent in many summer-long camp experiences. Staff members get to know each other by spending countless hours together during the many weeks at camp. Some become distracted and pursue romantic relationships that hinder their ability to fulfill their duties. Carley also adds that it hurt her friendships with other staff members, and eventually, after leaving camp, she felt lonely as if she had lost all the camp friendships she had at the beginning of the summer. Crushes and flirting can prove problematic and hurtful in a setting like summer camp. Romantic interests can result in exclusivity as well as division. Besides ruining staff relationships, romantic distractions can also hinder one’s connection to the campers.

Cliques among counselors can also be added to this category of problematic narratives. Robert mentions his experience at camp with cliques—“Cliques form and some people get offended that they weren’t invited to something and that got in some people’s way of being able to take advantage of any situation and enjoy yourself.” Robert

comments on a very common problem in camp culture. Cliques cause division between a group of people and often leads to conflict. While it is natural for people to be drawn to one another, it is critical within a camp setting that the staff strive to be as inclusive as possible. Robert notices, “They felt like the only place they could have fun is wherever the biggest group of people is so if they are not there then they are in a sour mood and are bitter towards that group of people which can ruin camp sometimes.”

From Robert’s perspective, cliques are inevitable; however, while people are drawn to each other and groups will form at camp, it is important that administrators and leaders encourage including others and getting along well with other staff members. While weekend plans and outings can be problematic because not everyone in a large staff can go everywhere together, camps must recognize this and encourage staffers to participate in activities on-site as well as other events planned by leadership. As a little narrative, the problematic stories reveal issues and distractions that take place during the summer. These stories contradict the grand narrative in that they show that counselors do not always get along and that negative relationships can be a result of a summer at camp. By challenging the grand narrative that includes only happy, ideal relationships and interactions, the problematic little narrative adds a truer perception of camp culture. After combining these narratives with the grand narrative, our view of camp will be nuanced and more believable because it will include both positive and negative parts of camp culture.

With twenty-four percent of the responses, the religious narrative is the third most prominent little narrative of this study. These narratives are characterized by the

individual describing his or her experience in prayer and the teaching and sharing of the Bible. We can see an example of this type of story from Jessie:

I was a counselor for 6-8 year old girls. I remember one night we were finishing up the Bible skits. I had a camper that had some family issues back home. On the way back to the cabin, I noticed she was crying. So of course I asked her why. Her response gives me chills. She said “I’m just happy about Jesus!” It filled my heart with joy knowing that my job is to show these children that God loves them. It made me realize how big of a role I played in camp and in these children’s week at camp. This was something I will never forget.

Jessie talks about religion, a major part of southern Christian camping programs. Through her experience, we can see the emphasis of Bible programs as well as devotionals. The counselors play a big part in the religious aspect of Camp Happy Hills (and other Christian summer camps), as they act in the Bible skits, lead cabin devotionals, and spend time in one-on-ones with each camper. Thus, we should not be surprised when a number of their narratives incorporate stories that deal with the religious aspects of the camp’s mission.

Some of these counselors even tell salvation stories. Micah relates another one of these narratives through an unlikely encounter: “One opening day I was standing at my cabin waiting on my campers. A Hindu family walked up and introduced themselves. It completely threw me off and shocked me, but I was excited to have their child in my cabin.” Here, Micah admits his surprise at having a Hindu boy as one of his campers at a Christian summer camp; however, he is thrilled to have the opportunity to have him in his

cabin. Micah says, “That child later came to know Christ as his Lord and Savior, despite my previous judgments on him and his family.” While some might be offended by Micah’s use of the phrase “previous judgments,” I think it is more important to consider his words in light of what we learn about camp from these narrative episodes that are clearly religious in nature. Though Micah was unsure of how a Hindu boy would be affected by a Christian camp, such a story serves as a reminder that not all campers who go to Christian camps are Christian. While Micah and the rest of the staff profess their faith in Jesus, they are prepared to share the Gospel with children who have never heard the Bible read. Here Micah takes his duty as a counselor seriously and shares the Gospel to the Hindu boy. This occurrence reveals a type of religious narrative that includes sharing and learning of new beliefs. As a result, the child became a believer of Jesus Christ, and Micah expresses his appreciation for the opportunity to meet the Hindu family and have the child in his cabin. While this little narrative is specific to Christian summer camps, these stories offer us a glimpse into the biblically structured programs of Camp Happy Hills. As a camp, the entire focus is on helping further the Kingdom of God through proclaiming the Gospel. These counselors prioritize encouraging the children spiritually and sharing with them the love of Christ. Through the recognition of prayer and salvation stories, we have more evidence to prove there is more to camp than just the grand narrative of positive relationships. The religious narrative incorporates the spiritual element of Christian summer camps and the role it plays in the stories told by camp counselors.

After religious narrative, twenty percent of the participants in my survey wrote what I have classified as heroic narratives. Qualified as success stories, heroic narratives

include solving problems, making sacrifices, and/or overcoming obstacles. In her story, Susan recalls a time when she and the other counselors had to adapt to schedule changes: “We got caught in quite a storm. We were out in the open so we were soaked. I herded all my little girls and we made for the pavilion where we changed up the routine and had a time of singing and funny skits by the counselors instead of the regular activities.” Here Susan and the rest of the counselors quickly transition into alternate activities due to rain. They overcome the obstacle of a potentially miserable rainy day and turn it into a time of laughter and singing. Susan admits, “I was freezing and soaked but the campers had a blast. They loved the afternoon and really bonded with each other and me. I didn’t get a shower until nine-thirty that night after my kids were tucked in their warm beds but that remains one of my favorite memories.” Susan sacrificed her own comforts so that her campers would be comfortable and would enjoy the day to the fullest. She says, “That’s how camp is—you just have to be flexible and improvise sometimes. And sometimes those crazy moments might be what your kid will remember the rest of her life as the best day at camp.”

In this situation, the counselors jumped into rainy day activities and kept the campers involved even when their regular schedule had to be delayed. In this story, we can see the counselors’ willingness to adjust to weather conditions and continue to create a fun environment for everyone. Susan cares for her cabin and also neglects herself in order to ensure the campers have a positive experience. In this situation, the counselors used their creativity to entertain the children and help them continue to find enjoyment even when regular activities had to be canceled. Through this example, we can see the sacrifices that counselors willingly make for their campers. This heroic little narrative

shows that when faced with a problem, the counselors always have a back up plan and try their best to quickly shift into the next activity. In addition, this little narrative adds flexibility as a characteristic of camp counselors, reaching beyond the relationship-centered grand narrative.

Brooke tells of her experience working with horses and the opportunity it gives her to foster new experiences for campers. She relates her experience with campers as she helps them overcome their fears of riding horses:

I worked with horses this summer, and at least once every day I would watch a kid (who was usually terrified before the activity) fall in love with horses right in front of me. They were really quiet while riding, and when I taught them how to feed the horse they had ridden, the pure joy and excitement was easily read from the uninhibited smile on their face. Some kids would verbalize intentions to one day have a horse of their own, and some would simply say, "I love horses" (to which I would respond, "I know right!" because I totally do to) (sic). This happened a lot this summer, but these were always significant experiences for me. As a future teacher, I was reminded of the wonder I hope to one day foster in the minds of my future students. As a counselor, I was reminded of the prayer I have for the campers to fall in love with Christ the same way.

From Brooke's interaction with campers and horses, we learn that many of them have never ridden a horse before camp. Brooke uses her knowledge and gentleness to help the campers become more comfortable around horses and try something new. Like Susan's story, Brooke's heroic little narrative supports the idea of counselors as people who are

willing to sacrifice their own convenience for their campers and overcome obstacles so that campers and other staff members can experience the benefits of attending summer camp. Brooke's story demonstrates a moment in which counselors help campers conquer fears and the counselor is successful in aiding the campers. These heroic stories provide a more detailed, realistic view of camp than the grand narrative by expressing the creativity and patience of counselors in everyday situations at camp.

Another little narrative to consider is the external little narrative. In this smaller category of narratives, we are able to view relationships between counselors through their experiences beyond the summer camp experience. These stories reveal bonds between camp friends as well as the importance of these relationships to the individual even after summer camp ends. Many staff members, like Hannah, reflect on various road trips and get-togethers. "The relationships go beyond the close-knit friendships, for example everyone from Happy Hills that goes to [my college] get (sic) together about once or twice a semester to catch up. That was very valuable for me during my freshman year in college and being able to have others to look up to." Hannah recognizes how her interactions with and encouragement from her camp friends continue to be valuable within a college setting. She finds a sense of security in knowing friends who have already tread the same path and can continue to advise her throughout her college career. Hannah is able to look back and confidently point to a part of her life when relationships outside of the camp setting bettered her experience.

For some, camp friendships last much longer than college. A veteran of camp, Jonah also mentions a story about his relationships away from camp, "Years later I still have many friends from those five summers at [Happy Hills]. Often it seems that we can

just pick up where we left off and enjoy the sweet memories from [Happy Hills].” Many staff members have communicated the special bonds of camp friendships in that even being apart for years, they can come back together for a reunion and have the greatest time catching up with one another. Jonah tells the rest of his story: “There are two relationships today that stand out. I met my wife and my best friend. Without my experiences at Happy Hills I wouldn't have these two great relationships.”

In Jonah's case, camp brought him much more than friendships—it resulted in him finding a spouse. By crediting camp with two of his greatest relationships, Jonah illustrates the immense impact camp has on him years after working there. He shows appreciation and thankfulness for the influence of these relationships. These external little narratives of Hannah and Jonah reveal companionships that last long after leaving summer camp. Although not everyone who works at a summer camp experiences the same types of friendships, these two personal narratives serve as a representation of positive outcomes. These stories differ from the grand narrative as they relate friendships outside of camp. The external little narrative gives us a glimpse of camp's influence on staff as it continues even outside of the summer.

Finally, we must consider the “other” little narrative, which includes stories that do not fit into any of the other categories. For example, Jessica's story identifies Happy Hills as a new home:

One Sunday night, we were having porch talk in front of the [Waterview] cabins. The idea arose that we should do trust falls off the porch railing. When my turn came, my necklace broke off and fell onto the ground. It was my compass necklace, and I couldn't help but laugh at the

metaphorical nature of this. A compass is supposed to lead you in the right direction, or, at least, help you find your way home. And my compass landed at Happy Hills, my new home.

Hundreds of miles away from her parents' home, Jessica reflects on how summer camp became a place of safety to her. Rather than simply a workplace, Happy Hills is a place where she feels accepted and loved. With this "metaphorical nature" of the compass necklace, Jessica pinpoints a feeling that many staff members experience. While the grand narrative conveys positive relationships within the camp setting, Jessica's story digs deeper and uncovers the idea that the relationships are what contribute to camp feeling like home. If we combine this other little narrative with all the previous little narratives, we readily see that camp involves more than just buildings and a group of people and more than just the typical master narrative. The relationships, experiences, and encounters of the summer staff are the pieces that make camp what it is, and through these narratives, camp can be viewed from many different perspectives.

Another episode I coded as an "other" narrative involves Kayla's story describing one of the most popular activities at summer camp—camping out overnight: "I would probably talk about the time that we took 3 cabins out to the [camping grounds]. There were a lot of [homesick campers] at first but I think that all of the girls will remember camping out and be glad that they had the experience, even though the spiders and other bugs scared them to begin with." Some of the most vivid memories of campers and counselors alike are those of camping outdoors. In this little narrative, Kayla relates one of the nights she took ten of her campers along with two other cabins to sleep outside under the stars. One of the most common occurrences during camping is homesickness;

however, counselors often report that in the morning many campers are proud that they made it through the night and will always remember the experience. She continues, “The staff also had really good bonding time that night as we sat around the fire and then hung in our hammocks and talked after the campers went to bed.” Kayla mentions staff bonding as a result of camping outdoors with campers. Because cabins often go camping together, counselors are able to assist each other in easing homesick campers and then spend quality time together once the campers are sound asleep. Overall, this little narrative represents another piece of summer camp that further demonstrates camp as much more than just babysitting kids for a week or making new best friends as the grand narrative suggests. As a catch-all category, the other little narrative offers useful details for understanding life at camp.

Conclusion

Through my research, I have found that these little narratives challenge the grand narrative of positive relationships at camp. Counselors offer much more content and vivid details in their individual stories. These types of narratives not only contribute to the overall idea of camp culture and the counselor’s experience during the summer but also challenge and further the grand narrative. As a result of looking through the theoretical lens of grand and little narratives, we now can have a nuanced view of counselors in relation to their work, relationships, and community at summer camp.

As a site of literature, camp allows campers, counselors, and directors to experience all kinds of ways to express stories. These stories can be told around campfires, through letter writing, in myths and legends of camp, in silly skits, and in

songs. Summer camp is a culture that encourages creativity through sharing stories and trying new things. Campers and counselors alike are encouraged to take part in learning camp songs they can carry outside of the summer and on to their homes. Camp lore spreads beyond camp, and staff and campers come back year after year with new myths and legends. Indeed, summer camp nurtures a love for literature and unique story-telling unlike any other summer experience.

While my research provides more insight into the summer camp culture, it only focuses on individual counselors. This study of counselors' narratives merely touches the surface. As a place filled with stories, summer camp is an ever-growing movement that demands our attention. By delving further into the various types of stories told by campers, counselors, and full-time staff members, we can reach an even deeper understanding of summer camp as it influences its participants. Continued studies are important for us to see even more ways that camp affects and benefits the individual.

From my own experience as a counselor, I have seen the highs and lows of camp. Sometimes counselors do not get along, sickness takes one out for a week, or other circumstances ruin plans. Regardless, part of the training as a counselor includes learning to be flexible and gracious because camp is not a perfect place, no matter what popular culture stereotypes or the grand narrative tells us. Camp has the potential, however, to be an incredible place that fosters learning, growth, and fun for children and counselors alike. For some, camp has become a lifestyle. As we consider camp through these stories provided, we must continue to be curious and delve deeper into the various portrayals of summer camp. If we do, I believe we will find that camp is much more than simply "an experience like no other."

Notes

1. Cohen, Rich. "The Summer of Our Discontent;" Paris, Leslie. *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp*. 2007.
2. Meyer, Zlati. "A Summer Camp Where Religion is at the Center; For Youths, Faith-based Camps are Making a Big Comeback. Religious Camps Drawing More." 2001.
3. Kennedy, John W. "Urban Kids Meet Wilderness and Christ" 1998.
4. Camp Happy Hills is a pseudonym used for the camp where I completed this study.
5. The survey and interview questions were approved by my institution's Institutional Review Board.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Consent Form

The purpose of this research project is to explore the individual narratives of [Happy Hills] camp counselors. By collecting individual stories and experiences of camp counselors, this research seeks to further the understanding and appreciation for the role of the camp counselor within the summer camp setting. This is a research project being conducted by Lizzy Rhett at the University of Southern Mississippi. You are invited to participate in this research project because you are either a current camp counselor at Twin Lakes or have been one in the past.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research survey, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalized.

The procedure involves completing an online survey that will take approximately 20-30 minutes. Your responses will be confidential and we do not collect identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address. The survey questions will be about your own experience and stories from being a camp counselor at Twin Lakes.

We will do our best to keep your information confidential. All data is stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with University of Southern Miss representatives.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Lizzy Rhett (601-606-9701). This research has been reviewed according to University of Southern Miss IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below. Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that:

- you have read the above information
- you voluntarily agree to participate
- you are at least 18 years old

not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "disagree" button.

Agree

Disagree

Appendix B

Survey Questions

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. In which state do you live?
4. How many years have you worked at camp?
5. Do you plan on returning to work at camp next summer/future summers?
6. How did you hear about camp?
7. Why did you choose to work at camp and has your experience fulfilled your expectations? Why or why not?
8. Can you give examples of when your relationships with other counselors benefitted or problematized camp experiences? How would you describe the working relationships between counselors at camp?
9. If you could share one story about camp experiences, what would it be? Please be as specific as possible.

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experiences as a camp counselor. If you were going to tell others about what it is like to be a camp counselor, what would you tell them about and why?
2. How important is bonding with fellow counselors; what about with campers? Why?
3. What do you wish other people particularly campers and their families) knew about camp counselors?
4. Why did you choose to be a camp counselor? Do you enjoy it or not?
5. How do you feel this kind of work does/does not prepare you for other opportunities?
6. Tell me about the camp lore. How does it function as a part of camp?
7. Tell me about the dynamics inside of the cabin. Do they remain the same or differ from week to week?
8. [Ask for a reflection on his/her specific role at camp and how he/she understands the job].

Appendix D

IRB Approval Letter



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 15032302

PROJECT TITLE: Character and Community: A Case Study of Summer Camp Culture

PROJECT TYPE: New Project

RESEARCHER(S): Sarah Elizabeth (Lizzy) Rhett

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts and Letters

DEPARTMENT: English

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Exempt Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 04/02/2015 to 04/01/2016

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board