

# Self Determination Theory, Residential Summer Camp, and Creativity:

Staff perceptions of autonomy, relatedness, competence, and creativity in a residential camp setting

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## Background

Self Determination Theory (SDT) posits that the innate human needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence have the potential to promote psychological well-being for individuals in society (Ryan & Deci, 2000). One definition of creativity states that when creating something novel or useful, the social context of a situation must be taken into consideration (Plucker, Beghetto, Dow, 2004). Camp promotes a sense of freedom, independence, and community for both youth and staff (Thurber et. al & McCole et. al). Summer camp is a setting that has a variety of activities. Seasonal staff need the ability to not only think in creative ways, but also have varying levels of autonomy, relatedness, and competence over the course of their 9 week employment.

## Research Questions

- 1 Perceptions of creativity and sense of freedom are related to increased motivation for staff in the camp setting.
- 2 Staff motivation and creativity will vary according to the type of activity taught.
- 3 Perceptions of autonomy, relatedness, competence, and creativity will fluctuate over the course of the 9 week employment.

## Implications

- 1) Staff motivation is a key ingredient for how practitioners organize their camp in terms of training and activity offerings
- 2) Understanding fluctuation of motivation over the course of the summer will help aid practitioners in determining when to implement support systems
- 3) If staff are motivated under creative conditions, this may help with staff retention, promotion of job related skills, marketing, and overall health of the community.
- 4) Differences in activity type, motivation, and creativity are key components in understanding various methodologies for teaching in summer camp settings.

## Theoretical Foundation

### Self Determination Theory:

SDT may help explain the relationship between staff motivation, creativity, and activity types in the camp setting. Staff, just like any work setting, experience varying levels of autonomy, relatedness, and competence due to their perceptions of their job role. Perceptions may change due to levels of experience time at the camp, how many certifications they hold, level of education and relatedness of degree, whether or not they had a family member attend the camp, and how much freedom they sense within their job. Due to the dynamic components of summer camp, SDT will help to explain how these innate psychological needs are enacted.

### Residential Summer Camp:

Summer camp provides 14 million youth and 1.5 million seasonal staff recreational opportunities every year (American Camp Association Business Report, 2015). Past studies investigate youth outcomes, but much fewer have addressed the 1.5 million staff who work at camps (Bialeschki et. al). Staff at summer camp are typically between the ages of 17-25 years old, and are developing key life skills. These skills relate to how staff are trained in terms of their perception of autonomy, relatedness, competence, and creativity. Investigating what motivates staff will help practitioners understand how best to organize and facilitate their programs.

### Creativity and Sense of Freedom:

Staff teach a variety of activities at a residential summer camp. Some activities may allow for a higher degree of flexibility and choice in teaching such as: arts & crafts, photography, drama, music, while other activities may be more rule bound and competitive such as: swimming, archery, and sports. Studies have shown that work environments that promote creativity and motivation are ones that have a sense of freedom and choice (Amabile, 1997). This study will investigate the differences in activities taught by staff and their varying levels of motivation based on the features of that activity. Additionally, whether or not a staff chose (or was assigned) to teach an activity will be investigated as an influence of motivation.

## Concepts

### Features that help explain staff motivation:

- High Sense of Freedom Activity (HSFA) may yield an increase in perceptions of creativity and motivation (autonomy, relatedness, competence). HSFA examples: arts & crafts, drama, photography, woodworking, nature exploration, survival skills, sailing, etc.
- Low Sense of Freedom Activity (LSFA) may yield a decrease in perceptions of creativity and motivation (autonomy, relatedness, competence). LSFA examples: basketball, baseball, archery, shooting, swimming, etc.
- Employment atmosphere: high or low perception of sense of freedom for employees.
- Frequency of change in employee responsibilities and degree of choice of responsibilities.
- Outcome – change in perception of motivation and creativity over the course of a 9 week program
- Predictor – controlling for: age, gender, years spent working, major

## References

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