

Assessment of Readjusting to Life after Completing a Thru-Hike of the Appalachian Trail

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Hundreds of individuals participate in the outdoor recreation activity of hiking the entire length of the Appalachian Trail each year. Research had been conducted on various aspects of hiking, but limited research is available on the post thru-hike experience. Research on place attachment and culture shock served as a basis for this study to uncover how individuals readjust to life after hiking on the AT. Ten telephone interviews were conducted during the winter of 2011 with hikers from 2009 or 2010. Themes emerged from the data to show similar outcomes. Results indicated that thru-hikers have difficulty with the readjustment process, experience personal life changes, miss aspects of the AT and have motivation towards other long term goals. This study shows that hikers feel a strong connection to the trail, thus more efforts should be taken to protect such an important place to many individuals.

KEYWORDS: Appalachian Trail, qualitative research, readjustment, hiking

"Hiking is one of the most popular of all land-based outdoor pursuits" (Ford & Blanchard, 1993, p. 247). The Appalachian Trail (AT) is a 2,176.2 mile footpath from Georgia to Maine (Mass, 2008). Since the trail was completed in 1937, hikers from a vast array of backgrounds have used its wandering pathways for recreational pursuits (Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), 2010). Every year about 4 million people walk along the trail (Jory & Dappen, 2000). Approximately 2,000 of these individuals start hiking at one end with hopes of walking to the other; these hikers are referred to as thru-hikers (ATC, 2010). According to the ATC website (2010), 11,590 hikers have self-reported a thru-hike since Earl Shaffer completed the first thru-hike in 1948 (Martin, 2002).

Completing a thru-hike is quite a feat for an individual to accomplish, considering there is only a 25% chance that individuals who attempt the trail will make it all the way (ATC, 2010). Many factors play into why some complete the hike and others do not. Constant rain, muscle fatigue, harsh trail conditions, and personal life circumstances all contribute to why hikers choose to abandon their thru-hike attempt. But, 25% manage to push through and complete the entire journey.

Research has illustrated why people hike in general (Svarstad, 2010), why individuals attempt to hike the AT (Goldenberg, Hill, & Freidt, 2008), and on the connection hikers feel to the mountains (Rollero & Piccoli, 2010). However, limited research is available regarding the readjustment that thru-hikers experience after finishing the AT. The purpose of this study was to assess the post thru-hike experience of AT thru-hikers. Specifically this study examined challenges of readjustment after the trail, lifestyle changes, aspects missed of the trail, if depression was experienced post trail, and how the hike influenced motivation of other long term goals.

Literature Review

As thru-hikers journey down the AT, place identity, place dependence, relationships, and self-expression all influence their physical and emotional bonds to the trail. These bonds are better known as place attachment. Research on place attachment to the AT reveals that hikers do experience place attachment to the AT (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003). With this attachment comes the learning of new behaviors and ways of doing things. Thru-hikers learn how to act within the new environment and what their identity is in the culture of the trail. Some hikers may experience culture shock. The scope of culture shock has been widened to include feeling out of place or unfamiliar with a situation (Fabrizio & Neill, 2005). With the expansion in scope of culture shock, hikers feeling unfamiliar with life on the trail are now considered to be in culture shock. Research has shown how an individual progresses through culture shock and how to best deal with it (Mak, Westwood, Ishlyama, & Barker, 1999; Pedersen, 1995).

Place Attachment

Place attachment can be defined as the link people develop to specific environments, where they have a tendency to feel safe and at ease (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). This attachment takes time to develop and it is hard to explicitly explain how these bonds are formed. Place attachment can be broken down into two distinct aspects, place identity and place dependence. Proshansky (1978) defined place identity as, "those dimensions of the self that define the individual's personal identity in the relation to the physical environment..." (p. 155). Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) added identification with a group, defined by a location, as another aspect of place identity. Joining these two ideas together, it is clear that place identity comes from the non-

tangible experiences a person has with a location. Place dependence, however, refers to the physical aspects a person interacts with in their environment (Kyle et al., 2003). An example of place dependence is washing the dishes at a kitchen sink due to the availability of water.

Considering place identity and place dependency as two parts of place attachment, it would seem logical to assume that place attachment would become stronger as an individual increases their activity within a particular environment. Lewicka (2005) opposed this idea while Rollero and Piccoli (2010) found a trend suggesting a positive correlation between place attachment and activity level. Recognizing this ambiguity, Kyle et al. (2003) suggested that disagreement arises in how an individual attaches meaning to a place. The connection of activity level to place attachment turns out to be a very complex issue and cannot be determined by a simple, single variable analysis; more research is needed for a strong conclusion (Kyle et al.; Rollero & Piccoli).

There is a positive connection between place attachment and the number of significant relationships a person has in the area (Rollero & Piccoli, 2010). It also has been found that place identity and self-expressions have a positive correlation (Kyle et al., 2003). Combining these two ideas, it makes sense that groups would start to form and express their own identity. Rollero and Piccoli found that as place attachment increased so did the positive perception people have of their environment.

Considering the influence that place identity, place dependence, relationships, and self-expression all have on place attachment, AT thru-hikers have a high predisposition to develop a strong attachment to the trail. Kyle et al. (2003) described this positive connection of hikers to the AT, “as the importance and pleasure derived from hiking increased and the perceived self-expressive value of hiking increased, so too did respondents’ emotional bond (self-identification) with the AT” (p. 266).

Culture Shock

Going to a new environment puts stress on a person’s cognitive being, forcing them to take in new sites, norms, values, and language. Sudden immersion into a new culture can startle an individual and change ordinary behaviors; putting them in a state of culture shock. Winkelmann (1994) defined *culture shock* as the responses manifested through behavioral, mental, emotional, or physical functions to a new environment. Researchers have identified several stages of culture shock and have developed multiple models ranging from three to eight stages (Pedersen, 1995). The five stage model that Pedersen outlined uses the following stages: honeymoon, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and interdependence.

Considerable research has been focused towards the experience of culture shock while traveling from country to country, but Fabrizio and Neill (2005) argued that feeling out of place in new and unfamiliar situations is culture shock as well. This widens the scope of culture shock. Sperling (2001) included both the physical interactions and the socially accepted aspects of the environment as vital parts of culture. Combining the ideas of Sperling, and Fabrizio and Neill, culture shock should be treated as a stress reaction to underlying, unmet mental and physical expectations, which makes predicting and controlling the outcomes difficult (Furnham, 2003).

Going through culture shock requires a person to adapt to a new environment. Inability to adapt may lead to an experience of culture shock that could amplify personal dysfunctions and even prevent potential personal development (Winkelmann, 1994). The desire to adapt comes from the person-to-person conflicts that arise when encountering an unfamiliar culture (Mak et al., 1999). This adaptation may require a person to learn new behaviors, expectations, skills, make new relationships, and even recreate their self-identity within the new circumstances

(Fabrizio & Neill, 2005). An approach that combines both the mental and behavioral aspects is recommended when adapting to a culture (Mak et al.).

Considering what must be accomplished on a daily basis when one attempts to thru-hike the AT, it is easy to see the new behaviors and practices that must be learned. As hikers spend time on the AT, they slowly start to adapt to the different lifestyle and environment of the trail, and may even experience some of Pedersen's (1995) stages of culture shock. Those who fail to adapt to life on the AT may become frustrated or even quit their thru-hike attempt. Successful integration into the thru-hiker culture allows the hikers to be at ease and thrive in their surroundings. However, full integration into thru-hiker culture forces hikers to experience culture shock again when they finish their journey and head back home.

Method

Individuals who attempt to thru-hike the AT represent a cross section of society. All ages and occupations can be found in the background of AT thru-hikers (ATC, 2010). Participants of this study completed a thru-hike of the AT between January, 2009 and December, 2010. A thru-hiker was defined as someone who hiked the trail from terminus to terminus in one continual push. Four hundred and twenty-three hikers reported completion of the trail in 2009, and 309 hikers in 2010 (ATC, 2010). Hikers interviewed were selected by convenience for the primary researcher. A snowball sampling method was then used to interview a total of ten thru-hikers. Potential participants were identified through a list of personal contacts identified by the primary researcher, who thru-hiked the AT in 2009. "Samples used for qualitative evaluations are usually small and purposive. About ten to twenty people is the usual number" (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002, p. 155). Henderson and Bialeschki also discuss saturation and typically saturation "occurs when the evaluator realizes that the data collected are repetitive and no additional information is being uncovered" (p. 155) Participants were initially contacted via email to inform them of the research and request an interview. Participants who responded affirmatively were sent an informed consent form to print, sign, and mail to the primary researcher. Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted from 15 to 45 minutes. Interviews began with a period of orientation where the primary researcher reacquainted with the hiker. Before the interview started, the researcher again reminded the interviewee of the information on the informed consent related to potential risk and asked if they were ready to proceed with the interview. Questions were asked sequentially from the interview script with follow up questions. All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim after the interview was completed.

After the qualitative data were collected, the primary researcher reviewed the interviews for trends and themes, which provided frequency and response percentages. All trends or themes were developed in response to the research questions and corresponded to the readjustment of thru-hikers. According to Henderson and Bialeschki (2002), "coding is used as a way to organize qualitative data info brief word descriptions" (p. 303). The research questions examined challenges of readjustment after the trail, life changes, missed aspects of the trail, if depression was experienced post trail, and how the hike influenced motivation of other long term goals. The trends and themes, along with the transcribed interviews, were then given to an independent reviewer for inter-rater reliability. With the primary researcher and an outdoor recreation specialist reviewing the data, personal biases of the primary researcher were controlled. Before any further data analysis was conducted, an inter-rater reliability of 84.2% was achieved.

Results

A total of ten phone interviews were conducted during the winter of 2010-2011. Eight males and two females were interviewed. All trends and themes fell under one of the research questions topic areas: readjustment challenges, life changes, missed aspects of the AT, depression, and motivation towards other goals.

Readjustment Challenges

Participants were first questioned about the primary challenges of readjusting to life off the trail. Of the ten participants, 20% ($n = 2$) mentioned that they had gone through similar experiences before and did not have many challenges readjusting. The responses of the eight ($n = 8$, 80%) who expressed challenges readjusting after the AT were varied. Responses were coded and developed into themes. The four themes that emerged were: *communicating the experience, new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and loss of community*.

Communicating the experience. Thirty percent ($n = 3$) of participants gave responses that fell under the theme of communicating the experience. This theme was developed around the feeling that others were unable to relate to the thru-hikers experience. Hiker #3 stated, “*I think that [the] hardest part was that I wanted to talk about it so much to everybody, but...they wouldn’t get it.*” Hiker #1 showed a feeling of disconnect from family and friends; “*It was hard sometimes to be around people at first, because you [were] gone for so long then having everyone [ask] ‘how was it?’ You just feel that culture shock.*” Frustration surrounding this theme was expressed by Hiker #4 who responded, “*So many people just couldn’t relate to your experience. You feel like you [have] done this great thing, and nobody appreciates it.*”

Routines/structure. The theme of routines/structure was developed from thru-hikers ($n = 4$, 40%) who expressed difficulty functioning within a structured setting. Hiker #1 best expressed this with the following,

I would say the hardest part about transitioning back was going to the classroom right away. You go from having your own schedule. You do what you want to do. You hike when you want to hike. Relax when you want to relax. You eat...then you all of a sudden have this really structured life. You have to listen. Like actually remember and write stuff down. I can’t even explain...

Meeting social expectations. The theme of meeting social expectations was developed from hikers ($n = 3$, 30%) who expressed feeling pressure to act a particular way. Both female participants’ responses ($n = 2$, 20%) supported this theme. Hiker #5 addressed the theme by saying, “*It was kind of hard not to be crude, or more crude. That doesn’t fly so well with the people in my area.*” Hiker #8 expressed difficulty with this theme as well,

Being a girl [again] and getting some lady like mannerisms back [was hard]. Totally happened on trail crews before. But this being out in the woods for six months consecutively, [then] realizing like, you know like, you can’t pee outside anymore! There are definitely some habits that are like acceptable out in the woods that aren’t really acceptable back in public society.

Loss of community. The last theme developed was loss of community ($n = 3, 30\%$). The following two participants made it clear that they experienced a loss of community. Hiker #1 stated, “*I would say that I had lost the sense of community.*” Hiker #5 best supported this theme:

One thing I really appreciated about the trail was that there were people there and you were with people all the time. So you have that initial community, but coming home, I have good friends but you don't see them regularly every day. So feeling that separation in your life, of like wow there is no involvement from other people in my life. That was really sad in my life.

Life Changes

When the questions concerning changes to the participant’s lives were asked the responses were varied. After searching for emergent themes, three themes were developed: *character development, increased sense of confidence, and change in personal care.*

Character development. Responses that fell under the theme of character development ($n = 3, 30\%$) were focused around participants’ further development of traits they already possessed. Hiker #1 supported this theme by stating, “*The trail solidified in me and gave me experience to, to define my identity and kind of my core values. I think the trail helped to strengthen them. For that I am quite thankful.*” Hiker #5 echoed Hiker #1: “*I think more confidence, in who I was as a person. More confidence in the ideas that, in holding on to my ideas that I had and not being scared to share them.*” Hiker #9 choose to put it bluntly, “[For] a lack of a poetic term, it turned me into a man.”

Increased sense of confidence. Sixty percent ($n = 6$) of the participants cited that their thru-hike experience instilled in them an increased sense of confidence. Responses revolved around the AT as a goal the participants had to struggle with to achieve. Hiker #4 displayed this stating, “*I kind of set out on the AT to test myself and you know, do something different and harder than the norm. And having proven that, I feel that I could do anything.*” Hiker #9 agreed with Hiker #4: “*I am more confident, much more confident. Of the 12 big things [in my life], probably there are six or seven large failures in my life. But I finished the AT.*”

Change in personal care. No one reported having an increased level of hygiene due to hiking the trail. The theme of personal care ($n = 3, 30\%$) was linked to diet and overall hygiene. Hiker #7, who had been a “*very strict vegetarian*” stated,

On the thru-hike, I mean you know how it goes, I ate anything and everything that I could. I stayed vegetarian... but I hadn't had a soda in nine years...so yeah those sort of things, kind of stuck around. Even to present day, I'm still struggling with things of that nature.

Hiker #4 put a different spin on diet change by saying, “*I started eating healthier...to keep down the weight I had lost.*” Hiker #3 responded best to hygiene change by saying,

I just think my personal hygiene isn't necessarily grosser but I have a lower standard now. If I haven't showered in a few days it doesn't really matter cause I [have] been a whole lot grosser. People in the US think that's really gross, I think they are crazy.

Aspects that the Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers Missed

The primary researcher asked the participants what they missed about hiking the AT. There were a range of responses, but after coding, four themes were developed: *being outside, physical exertion, the community on the AT, and the simplicity of life on the AT.*

Being outside. Hikers who gave responses that fell under the theme of being outside ($n = 5, 50\%$) missed the contact with nature. Hiker #4 supported this theme saying, “*I miss sleeping in tents. I miss waking up in the sun and breeze. I miss walking in the rain strangely enough.*” Hiker #9 showed a strong desire to be in closer contact with nature: “*We were driving by a particularly woody part of Long Island. And I had to an overwhelming urge to stop the car, run into the woods and sit under a tree.*” Hiker #8 used a more poetic phrase to support this theme: “*I think just being totally surrounded by nature all the time, like waking up every day in the woods, there is definitely a peace that [it] brings. That's pretty special.*”

Physical exertion. Hikers gave several responses that fell under the theme of physical exertion ($n = 3, 30\%$). Hiker #8 supported this theme saying, “*My body really wanted to exercise all the time. Like my legs would get really sore because I wasn't hiking all the time.*” Hiker #4 agreed with Hiker #8: “*I really missed walking. I would go out to the bars with my friends and walk back home afterwards even though it was like four miles.*” Hiker #6 expressed missing physical exertion by sharing, “*At least once a week I go out on a hike somewhere. Just keep the ball rolling. Coming back with everyone back at home, it kind of seems that life is so sedentary after doing a big trip like that.*”

Community on the AT. Participant’s responses that fell under the theme of community on the AT ($n = 8, 80\%$) were directed both toward the people on the trail and the surrounding communities. Participant #6 commented on missing both these aspects:

It was just so much fun. Just like hiking and meeting people every day that have things in common with you from all over the world and then start hiking with you. So I would say I miss the people the most. Just from the whole, everyone is so friendly. And people pick you up on the side on the road and feed you meals and it's just like, what is going on?

Participants also missed the variety of people on the trail. Hiker #3 said, “*There were just all those excited people that were out there...I like the people out there. I like the spirit.*” Hiker #1 depicted the uniqueness of AT community:

I mean you look back and you realize how unique of an experience of community it is. And you are not going to find it any other place. And you're aware of it after you have done something like the AT. Most people aren't aware of that. They don't assume that the community out there is so amazing.

Simplicity of life on the AT. The theme of *simplicity* ($n = 4$, 40%) emerged in several different ways. Hiker #7 showed a longing for simplicity: “*I miss the simplicity of just being able to wake up and not necessarily know what you are doing. But you go through things automatically. You know? You break down the tent and then you are walking.*” Hiker #9 furthered this thought by saying,

For 140 days it was get up, eat, break down camp, hike, eat, hike, eat, set up camp, eat, sleep. Wash, rinse, repeat...and that was all I did for four and a half months. As hard as it was, physically and mentally, there was an ease to it. I knew what to expect any given day. By the time the end came, I knew exactly what to expect out of a rainy day, out of a sunny day...

Hiker #6 put this theme in a simple phrase: “*When I was out there I thought things were so complicated. Where I was going to get food or water. But looking back I wish I could worry about [just] those things again.*”

Depression

Of the ten thru-hikers interviewed, five reported ($n = 5$, 50%) some level of sadness or depression during their process of readjusting. Participants who expressed these types of feelings expressed it such as Hiker #1: “*I [felt] those times of boredom or loneliness, just times of being lost, feeling lost sometimes. It's like, I don't know how to have a productive day.*” Hiker #5 described feeling “*...a deep sadness. Related to the fact that having my ideal lifestyle and not sure how to incorporate it into the society that I live in.*” Hiker #4, however used the word “*depression*” and described it saying, “*It really was this kind of dark feeling that was hanging over my head...I actually lost it for a good while.*”

Of the five (50%) thru-hikers who reported not experiencing sadness or depression, two (20%) expressed they were ready to be done hiking the AT. Hiker #8 simply said, “[The] AT was a lot more of a mental challenge than I thought it was going to be in the process of hiking...I was happy, so happy when I accomplished it. I was really ready to be done.” The other three (30%) thru-hikers who reported not experiencing depression linked it to having strong support when they came back. Hiker #10 described this saying, “*I feel that I was lucky that I had a very supportive family and a cushion [of support] to fall on. I lived in my old room in my parent's house. And that was very helpful.*”

Motivation towards Other Goals

When questioned about their motivation toward other long term goals, the participants responded in a variety of ways. Themes that emerged were *travel and adventure, career goals, and physical challenges*.

Travel and adventure. The theme of travel and adventure ($n = 4$, 40%) had responses similar to Hiker #4: “*It has made me want to travel more.*” Hiker #6 furthered this thought stating, “*That was kind of the entry level to the trekker type lifestyle. Once you do that it's kind of like, I can't go back...because I have already done it and that is what I want to do.*” Hiker #1 expressed this theme simply by saying, “*I kind of have the bug in me now.*”

Career goals. Three of the participants gave responses that created the theme of career goals ($n = 3$, 30%). Hiker #2 alluded to this saying, “*The AT put perspective on life and what I want for the long term.*” Hiker #7 showed how the AT motivated them in their art business: “*Since I got back I have really turned energy towards that even more so.*” Though Hiker #8 was unsure of the exact details, they echoed this theme stating, “[I am] definitely a lot more career oriented than I was before the AT.”

Physical challenges. The final theme that emerged was physical challenges ($n = 3$, 30%). Hiker #6 confirmed this theme stating, “*But after the trail it’s like doing something and know you can finish something like that, you think alright what else can I do... what other tests can I put myself to. From a physical endeavor thing.*” Hiker #9 took it further saying, “*On the way down from Katadhin we were already planning what was next. How far could I push it until I couldn’t do it.*”

Discussion

During the initial few months back from the AT, 80% of thru-hikers interviewed showed varying stages of culture shock. Several hikers’ responses indicated they were experiencing the honeymoon stage of Pedersen’s (1995) culture shock model. But these phrases were immediately followed by responses, which showed they had progressed further into culture shock and were now encountering challenges readjusting. Difficulty communicating the experience, following new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and perceiving a loss of community all link to the disintegration and reintegration stages of culture shock. Some hikers expressed negative reactions towards the communities they were living in, while others did not. However, some thru-hikers do not experience such progressed stages of culture shock. As noted in the results, some thru-hikers were ready to be done hiking the AT. This could have led to already mentally transitioning to life off the trail, while still hiking on the trail. As connections are broken with the AT and individuals experience different post thru-hike situations, they will go through culture shock with varying degrees of positive or negative reactions.

The average thru-hike takes five to six months, during which many challenges emerge. These challenges range from constant inclement weather, to physically demanding trails, and to the mental strains of attempting to accomplish the journey. As stated earlier, only about 25% of those who start a thru-hike attempt actually finish. Through facing and overcoming these challenges, 60% of the participants reported increased self-confidence. This increase of self-confidence may occur due to the hikers taking every step under their own will. The length of the trail and interaction with fellow thru-hikers along the way seemed to contribute to participants’ further character development. Their journey served as an affirmation that the values and beliefs they held were indeed important to them as their values and beliefs were tested through the challenges of their thru-hike and interaction with the trail community.

The obstacles of the trail also incurred personal care changes. Constantly being out in the woods, thru-hikers must learn to live with a different level of hygiene. Several hikers reported they noticed a change in their normal hygiene routines. Showers, specifically, were reported to be less important. Diet was another area of personal care reported to change as a result of hiking the AT. Thru-hikers tend to lose weight as a result of the physical exertion required. Some participants reported that when they got back from the AT, they modified their diets and continued to exercise to keep the weight off. Others reported their diets changed from being extremely health conscious to eating whatever they could get their hands on in order to consume enough calories. These habits developed while on the trail were hard to shake, and some are still dealing with them two years after starting the AT.

As previously described, thru-hikers create a strong place attachment to the AT. The literature also shows that as place attachment increases, so does the individual's positive personal perception of the environment (Rollero & Piccoli, 2010). For those participants holding a positive perception of the AT, it is only natural for them to express a longing to again experience parts of their thru-hike journey. The participants reported missing the following aspects: being outside, physical exertion, community on the AT, and simplicity of life on the AT.

As participants completed their journey and headed back to the lives they left, they started to break bonds of place attachment to the AT. Breaking these bonds, along with experiencing culture shock, participants had to begin formulating how to incorporate their experience of the AT into their everyday lives. Some looked for opportunities to be outside as often as they could. Others questioned why the community immediately around them was always busy. Still others longed for the sense of community they felt and experienced on the AT. Even those participants who reported feeling ready to get off the AT voiced missing the intangible aspects of the AT. With this in mind, it is difficult for this study to draw a correlation between a thru-hiker's experience of culture shock and their experience of the breaking the bonds of place attachment to the AT. Regardless of their current situation or occupation, all participants expressed missing aspects of their experience thru-hiking the AT.

This longing to again experience aspects of the AT could be tapped into by organizations that maintain or protect the trail. If opportunities for previous thru-hikers to relive parts of their journey were provided, organizations could use the abilities of these individuals to further their missions.

It is inconclusive whether thru-hikers experience depression during the post thru-hike experience. Depression would fall under the disintegration stage of Pedersen's (1995) model, which multiple participants indicated they were currently in or already went through. However, even though a person may be in the disintegration stage, they are not necessarily depressed. Some participants explicitly used the word "depression" to describe their feelings, but others used words and phrases such as "loneliness" or "a deep sadness." Looking at cases in which participants reported they did not experience depression, support from their family and community was a key factor to avoid depression. The variation of experiences reported indicate a need to further define what constitutes depression and how it is identified.

These participants have clearly been motivated towards other long term goals as a result of their thru-hike experience. Not surprisingly, some responded that they hoped to travel and adventure more in the future. Because hiking the AT offers continual adventure and new experiences, it is logical that those who developed place attachment, specifically place identity, would feel compelled to seek out other outlets for similar experiences. For those who feel motivated toward more physically challenging goals, the link is the physical aspect of hiking. Participants expressed missing the physical exertion required to hike the AT. Desiring other long term physical challenges is a natural progression. It was surprising that participants responded with motivation towards long term career goals. The responses showed forward thinking about what the participant desires, and life away from the AT. Experiencing contrasting lifestyles on and off the AT could be a possible explanation. The hike then, would serve as a time for the individual to examine their lifestyle and determine their priorities. More research is needed to fully examine the motivation thru-hikers feel about career goals.

Limitations

Due to using the snowball sampling method, obtaining possible subject contact information was limited, limiting the sampling size of this study. "Determining adequate

sample size in qualitative research is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it will be put, the particular research method and purposeful sampling strategy employed, and the research product intended" (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 179). It is recommended that future studies examine a larger sample size if possible if theoretical saturation is not reached. Another limitation of this study is the possibility that participants responded to uncomfortable questions in a way they perceived as socially acceptable. This may have led to ambiguity about whether thru-hikers experience depression during their post thru-hike experience. Participants recalled past feelings and emotions which may have become partially distorted since the original occurrence. This study was also limited by the primary researcher, being a former AT thru-hiker, who brought in personal bias from his own post thru-hiker experience, and may have influenced the responses of some participants.

Summary

Communicating the experience, new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and loss of community when they were readjusting to life off the AT where some of the challenges of the thru-hikers in this study. Participants identified character development, increased sense of confidence, and change in personal care as areas of life that changed as a result of their thru-hike. Aspects of the trail that hikers expressed missing were being outside, physical exertion, the community on the AT, and the simplicity of life on the AT. Some hikers in this study experienced depression during the post thru-hike experience. Some determined they were motivated towards travel and adventure, career goals, and physical challenges after hiking the AT.

This study has shed light on what some AT thru-hikers experience once they complete their journey and leave the trail. Serving as a base for future research, this study can be used to craft other more detailed research studies looking at the readjustment process. Additionally, more quantitative and qualitative research is needed to better understand the post-hike experience of the AT thru-hiker population, as well as other thru-hiker destinations. Increasing the sample size is recommended, as well as conducting interviews immediately following the thru-hike experience, and then 6 months or a year later, in order to better understand the progression which hikers go through readjusting to life off the AT. The scope of future research can also be widened to examine other similar, intense, short-term community experiences such as NOLS/Outward Bound, study abroad programs, youth intervention programs, military assignments, and scientific research expeditions.

Organizations who maintain or protect the AT, would benefit from targeting past thru-hikers. By better understanding the long term impact from this sample of thru-hikers of the AT, organizations can use this knowledge to focus and further their missions, increase funding sources, and market the trail for users. Lastly, this study shows that some hikers feel a strong connection to the trail. More efforts should be taken to protect such an important place to so many individuals.

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