

A group of South African adolescents’ subjective experience of participation in an eco- adventure programme: A strengths perspective

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Adventure

(noun)

1. an unusual and exciting or daring experience

synonyms: escapade, deed, trail, experience, occurrence, event, happening, stunt, romp, campaign, venture, quest

What an adventure this has been, which I would not have been able to complete on my own if it was not for the remarkable people in my life.

I would first of all like to thank my future husband for all of his love and support throughout this process. Thank you for being understanding regardless of the situation and for being my greatest source of motivation and encouragement.

Secondly I would like to thank my parents for their lifelong support and motivation. Thank you for believing in me and never having any doubt that I could do this.

I also need to thank my master's class of 2014 – you guys are amazing. Thank you for becoming not only my friends, but also family.

Finally I want to thank my two supervisors. The amount of patience and encouragement that you had for me cannot be described. I am so grateful for having the opportunity to learn from you. You both are an inspiration to me.

OPSOMMING

Die konsep van eko-avontuur programme bestaan reeds vir dekades en het 'n toename in gewildheid gesien in die afgelope paar jaar. Die uiteindelijke doel van eko-avontuur programme word beskou as die totstandkoming van positiewe en blywende veranderinge in deelnemers se lewens deur natuur-gebaseerde avontuur aktiwiteite. Dit toon 'n sterk konseptuele verband met die sterktes perspektief wat beskou word as 'n teoretiese raamwerk wat daarop fokus om optimale funksionering binne die mens te fasiliteer deur die proaktiewe ontwikkeling van sielkundige sterktes. In 'n poging om karaktersterktes te verstaan en te identifiseer op 'n individuele vlak, asook te monitor in terme van groei en ontwikkeling, het Martin Seligman en Christopher Peterson die *Values in Action (VIA)* klassifikasie stelsel ontwikkel.

Hierdie kwalitatiewe fenomenologiese studie het daarop gefokus om die subjektiewe ervarings van 'n groep manlike adolessente tydens hul deelname aan 'n eko-avontuur program vanuit 'n sterktes perspektief te beskryf. Data vir hierdie studie is ingesamel deur middel van reflektiewe dagboeke en fokusgroepgesprekke. Al 31 deelnemers het die daaglikse reflektiewe dagboeke vir 5 dae van die 7-dag program voltooi, en 16 deelnemers is deur sistematiese steekproefneming geïdentifiseer om deel te neem in twee fokusgroepgesprekke. Temas is geïdentifiseer deur induktiewe analise, wat gevolg is deur 'n deduktiewe vergelyking van temas met die *VIA* klassifikasie stelsel vir karakter sterktes.

Volgens die resultate het deelnemers die eko-avontuur program ervaar as 'n geleentheid vir beide *intra-* en *interpersoonlike* ontwikkeling. 'n Ryk beskrywing van ontwikkeling op beide hierdie vlakke het gehelp om ons begrip van die ervaring van die adolessente te verdiep. Verskeie subtemas het na vore gekom, waaronder die ervaring van dankbaarheid; 'n groter mate van self-bewustheid; volharding en fisiese uithouvermoë; geestelike verbinding; 'n waardering vir skoonheid; interpersoonlike begrip; ontwikkeling van nuwe, of versterking van bestaande verhoudings; en spanwerk. By die vergelyking van resultate met die *VIA* klassifikasie stelsel, is gevind dat die deugdes *transendensie* (*dankbaarheid, spiritualiteit en waardering vir skoonheid*); *wysheid en kennis* (*perspektief*); *waagmoed* (*dapperheid en volharding*); *menslikheid* (*liefde, vriendelikheid en sosiale intelligensie*); *geregtigheid* (*leierskap en spanwerk*); en *gematigdheid* (*self-regulering*) almal verteenwoordig was binne die resultate. Persoonlike groei op beide 'n *intra-* en *interpersoonlike* vlak is grotendeels meegebring deur die aard en spesifieke eise van die eko-avontuur program. Terwyl die resultate van die studie vorige studies se bevindinge bevestig

rakende *intra-* en *interpersoonlike* ontwikkeling, bied dit 'n unieke beskrywing van hierdie ontwikkelingsproses vanuit 'n sterktes perspektief deur gebruik te maak van die bekende VIA klassifikasie stelsel.

'n Beter begrip van die ervaringe van manlike adolessente tydens deelname aan eko-avontuur programme kan beskou word as uiters waardevol, en kan gebruik word om blywende veranderinge met betrekking tot die bou van sterktes in die jeug mee te bring. Dit help ons ook om die rol van die adolessente ontwikkelingstadium te verstaan in die tipe karaktersterktes waarop hulle steun in uitdagende omstandighede. Die identifisering van karaktersterktes wat nie as sulks deur die eko-avontuur program gefasiliteer is nie, kan gebruik word om program ontwikkelaars in te lig van aspekte wat in ag geneem kan word tydens die beplanning van programme. Die ontwikkeling van karaktersterktes blyk veral in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks relevant te wees, waar die adolessente populasie se geestesgesondheid en welstand beduidende uitdagings in die gesig staar.

Sleutelwoorde: Adolessente, eko-avontuur program, ervaring, sterktes perspektief, VIA klassifikasie stelsel.

SUMMARY

The concept of eco-adventure programmes (EAP's) have been in existence for decades and have seen an increase in popularity in recent years. The ultimate goal of EAP's is considered to be bringing about positive and lasting changes in the lives of participants through several nature based adventure activities. This shows a strong conceptual overlap with the psychological strengths perspective, which can be described as a theoretical framework that focuses on the facilitation of optimal human functioning through the proactive development of psychological strengths. In an attempt to understand or identify character strengths on an individual level and monitor its growth and development, the Values in Action (VIA) classification system was developed by Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson.

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on describing the subjective experiences of a group of male adolescents during their participation in an EAP from a strengths perspective. Data for this study was collected through reflective diaries and focus group discussions. All 31 of these male participants completed daily reflective diaries for 5 days of the 7-day programme, and 16 participants were identified through systematic sampling to participate in two focus group discussions. Themes were identified through inductive analysis, which was followed by a deductive comparison of themes with the VIA classification system for character strengths.

According to the data, participants experienced the EAP as an opportunity for both *intra-* and *interpersonal* development. A rich description of development on both these levels helped to deepen our understanding of their experience. Several subthemes emerged, including participants' developing a sense of gratitude; greater self-awareness; perseverance and physical endurance; spiritual connection; an appreciation for beauty; interpersonal understanding; the development of new or strengthening of existing relationships; and team work. When compared to the VIA classification system of character strengths it was found that the virtues of *transcendence (gratitude, spirituality and appreciation of beauty)*, *wisdom and knowledge (perspective)*, *courage (bravery and perseverance)*, *humanity (love, kindness and social intelligence)*; *justice (leadership and teamwork)*; and *temperance (self-regulation)* were all represented within the results. Personal growth on both an *intra-* and *interpersonal* level were to a large extent brought about by the nature and specific demands of the EAP. While the results of the study confirm many former literature findings relating to participants' *intra-* and *interpersonal development*, it offers a unique description of this developmental

process from a psychological strengths perspective, utilizing the well-known VIA classification system.

An improved understanding of the experiences of male adolescents' participation in EAP's can be considered extremely valuable as it can be used to bring about lasting changes with regards to building strengths in youth. It also helps us to understand the role of the adolescent developmental stage and the type of character strengths they draw upon in challenging situations. The identification of character strengths that have not been facilitated by the EAP per se, can be used to inform EAP developers of aspects to consider in programme planning. Developing character strengths seem to be especially relevant in the South African context, where the adolescent population has been identified as experiencing significant threats to their continued mental health and well-being.

Keywords: Adolescents, eco-adventure programme, experience, strengths perspective, VIA classification system.

PREFACE

Article Format

This dissertation is part of the requirements for the completion of the Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology and was prepared in article format according to North-West University regulations (rule: A 4.4.2.3).

Journal for Publication

This dissertation was prepared to adhere to the publication requirements of *The African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance (AJPHERD)*. For examination purposes the article is longer than prescribed by the journal, and will be shortened before submission for publication. APA 6th edition style guidelines were followed in preparing the document for examination purposes, however will be adjusted according to the journal's requirements thereafter.

Page Numbers

For examination purposes the pages will be numbered from the title page and numbering will follow accordingly.

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We, the supervisors of this study, hereby declare that the article *A group of South African adolescents' subjective experience of participation in an eco-adventure programme: A strengths perspective*, written by Christel Labuschagne, reflects the research done by her on this topic. We hereby grant permission that she may submit this article for examination in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium in Clinical Psychology. It may also be submitted to *The African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance (AJPHERD)* for publication purposes. The roles of the supervisors were as follow:

Prof. Potgieter: Supervision of the dissertation as a whole and liaising with service providers and the school of the involved participants.

Dr De Klerk: Supervision on the qualitative methods of the study and assistance with technical aspects of the document.

Prof. J. C. Potgieter

Dr W. de Klerk

DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER

I hereby declare that this research, *A group of South African adolescents' subjective experience of participation in an eco-adventure programme: A strengths perspective*, is entirely my own work and that all sources have been fully referenced and acknowledged.

C. Labuschagne

DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITOR

I hereby declare that I language edited a Master's dissertation authored by Ms Christel Labuschagne with the title:

“A group of South African adolescents’ subjective experience of participation in an eco-adventure programme: A strengths perspective”.

Jennifer Lake

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lake', written in a cursive style.

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SECTION A: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aims to describe the subjective experiences of a group of adolescents during their participation in an eco-adventure programme (EAP), from a psychological strengths perspective. More specifically, it sets out to deepen our understanding of the extent to which participants' experience during these activities calls upon their character strengths, and how, if at all, individual character strengths may be enhanced or developed during participation in such programmes. This section will provide an overview of the most recent literature regarding constructs that are central to the stated aims of this study.

Introduction

EAP's have seen an increase in popularity in recent years (Daniel, Bobilya, Kalisch, & McAvoy, 2014; Passarelli, Hall, & Anderson, 2010; Ritchie, Wabano, Russell, Enosse, & Young, 2014). Having existed for decades, these programmes typically incorporate outdoor activities and experiential learning as a means toward helping participants deal with a variety of psychological challenges or difficulties (Caplan, 1967; Ulrich, 1984). More recently, its scope has broadened toward the strengthening of positive psychological characteristics such as resilience, self-regulation and self-esteem – just to name a few (Bowen, 2013).

The terminology used to describe such programmes varies considerably, including for example: 'adventure based counselling' (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002); 'outdoor and adventure education' (Daniel et al., 2014; Passarelli et al., 2010; Sibthorp & Jostad, 2014); 'adventure therapy' (Norton et al., 2014; Tucker & Rheingold, 2010); 'outdoor intervention' (Ritchie et al., 2014); 'outdoor programs' (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005); 'wilderness therapy' (Bettmann, Olson-Morrison, & Jaspersen, 2011; Greffrath, Meyer, Strydom, & Ellis, 2012); 'adventure experiential learning' (Greffrath et al., 2012); 'adventure-based recreation programming' (Bloemhoff, 2006); and even 'therapeutic camping' (Bowen, 2013). For the purpose of the proposed study the umbrella term *eco-adventure programmes* will be used. This term can be defined as the careful consideration and calculated combination of nature-based adventure activities with emotional and/or behavioural experiences, with the ultimate goal of bringing about positive and lasting changes in the lives of participants – thus having a personal benefit and creating an opportunity for growth (Gillis & Ringer, 1999). Beringer and Martin (2003) argue for the use of the term eco-adventure therapy in acknowledgement of the important role that a person's relationship with the environment, both socio-cultural and biophysical, play in these interventions and indeed in all forms of adventure therapy.

Psychofortology and the Psychological Strengths Perspective

The psychological strengths perspective stems from psychofortology, which can be described as a theoretical framework that focuses on optimal human functioning and the proactive development of psychological strengths (Compton, 2005; Keyes, Fredrickson, & Park, 2012). In the psychofortological framework there is a focus on what creates a life characterised by an utmost sense of well-being, fulfilment or contentment, often referred to as the *good life* (a term commonly used for the factors that contribute to a well-lived and fulfilling life) (Compton, 2005). The *good life* is described by Seligman (2002) as a combination of three main elements – positive connections to others, positive individual traits, and life regulation qualities such as healthy self-control, autonomy and individuality which all contribute to a person's level of well-being.

Within the burgeoning field of positive psychology two main schools of thought about what constitutes well-being have been identified. In the first of these, referred to as the hedonic perspective, the assumption is that pleasure is the most basic motivation behind human behaviour (Wong, 2011). Here the focus is on high positive affect, low negative affect, gaining pleasure and avoiding pain (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). The second approach is commonly referred to as the eudaimonic perspective, where psychological well-being is considered in terms of meaningfulness, and the realisation of one's true potential. Within this perspective, aspects like self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, meaningfulness, authenticity and personal growth are all considered important components of individual well-being (Ryff, 1989; Wong, 2011). Exploring the development of these aspects in different individuals thus forms an essential part of the eudaimonic approach to well-being.

The strengths perspective can be viewed as an approach to interventions where "...treatment is not just fixing what is wrong, it is also building what is right" (Seligman, 2002, p. 4). Research suggests that, within the strengths perspective, an integration of the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to well-being should be considered optimal for facilitating positive changes within an individual – thus bringing about lasting personal change, while at the same time enjoying the experience through engaging in activities one finds pleasurable (Henderson & Knight, 2012). The challenge, however, is to identify the

specific characteristics that have developed or grown in the individual whilst engaging in these activities.

The Values in Action (VIA) classification system, developed by Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, can be used to understand or identify character strengths on an individual level, and thus provides a tool to monitor growth and development (Gillham et al., 2011; VIA Institute on Character, 2014). The development of the VIA started in 2000, involving several scientific meetings run by Martin E. P. Seligman, and various complex historical investigations led by Christopher Peterson, both having collaborated with 53 other leading scientists over a period of three years (Niemi, 2013). The result was the development of a comprehensive typology within which 6 virtues, representing a total of 24 character strengths, form the main components. The identified virtues and character strengths have been determined to be universal across various cultures, countries, religious and spiritual belief systems (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). According to the VIA Institute on Character (2014), the VIA Survey-240 has been found to have adequate internal consistency with all scales having satisfactory alphas ($>.70$) as well as test-retest reliability. It was also found to have satisfactory levels of concurrent validity and thus correlates reasonably well with the constructs it is expected to. However, it is important to understand the concepts of virtues and character strengths in order to understand the VIA's value.

Virtues are described as core characteristics with universal value and are made up of various character strengths (Park & Peterson, 2006; Walker & Pitts, 1998). Character strengths are more specifically described by Park and Peterson (2006) as the psychological mechanisms or “ingredients” that define virtues – thus representing the different ways in which individuals can display the same virtue. Within this classification system six *core virtues* (namely wisdom and knowledge; courage; humanity; justice; temperance; and transcendence) are described to be omnipresent across time and culture (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; VIA Institute on Character, 2014). These six virtues has been extensively employed by researchers and experts in the field of psychology around the world, some of the latest including the work of Linkins, Niemi, Gillham and Mayerson (2014), Quinlan, Swain and Vella-Brodrick (2012), as well as White and Waters (2014).

The six virtues identified were then used to classify 24 specific character strengths, which can be fostered or strengthened at any time (Compton, 2005; Gillham et al., 2011; VIA

Institute on Character, 2014). Specific criteria were used to derive these strengths from an extensive list of possible candidates. Character strengths needed to: be fulfilling; be morally valued; not diminish others; have no suitable opposites; be trait like; be distinguishable from other strengths; have paragons and prodigies that represent it, be selectively absent in some individuals; and have establishments/rituals to celebrate or express them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The virtue *wisdom and knowledge* is considered to include cognitive character strengths that require the procurement and use of knowledge. It is represented by five character strengths including: *creativity* (thinking of innovative and dynamic ways to conceptualise things – not limited to artistic abilities); *curiosity* (captivation with topics and others, continuous exploration and discovery, and interest in ongoing experience for its own sake); *judgement* (critically considering various aspects of situations/constructs, openness to change your mind or opinion in the light of new evidence, and not jumping to conclusions); *love of learning* (tendency to add systematically to what one knows and constantly wanting to develop new ways of thinking and doing); and *perspective* (having a good understanding of the world and others and providing wise counsel to others) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

The virtue *courage* is considered to represent emotional strength, where an individual exercises the will to achieve goals despite the presence of internal or external opposition. The strengths include *bravery* (standing up for oneself and what you believe in, not being intimidated by threat, challenge, difficulty or pain – emotional or physical), *perseverance* (persistence despite obstacles and finding fulfilment in the completion of tasks), *honesty* (authenticity, sincerity, taking responsibility for one's own emotions, behaviours and beliefs), and *zest* (enthusiasm, approaching life with excitement, doing things wholeheartedly, feeling alive) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

The virtue *humanity* can be described as an interpersonal strength focused on nurturing and supporting others. Character strengths that were identified to be related to this virtue include *love* (valuing close relations with others and being close to others), *kindness* (generosity, nurturance, compassion and helping others where possible) and *social intelligence* (awareness of the motives and emotions of others, social awareness and emotional intelligence) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

The virtue *justice* is considered to consist of community strengths that underlie healthy communal life. Character strengths that were identified as being related to this virtue include *teamwork* (working well as a member of a group, loyalty to the group, sharing social responsibility), *fairness* (treating all individuals equally according to notions of fairness and objectivity), and *leadership* (encouraging others to perform tasks, while at the same time maintaining good relations with them, organising group activities and seeing that the task gets completed) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

The virtue *temperance* is described as a combination of strengths that shelter one against excess. Character strengths that were identified to be related to *temperance* include *forgiveness* (forgiving others for wrongdoings, accepting others' shortcomings, believing in second chances), *humility* (modesty, not regarding yourself as more special than another regardless of accomplishments), *prudence* (carefully making informed decisions, not taking risks, considering options), and *self-regulation* (regulating your own feelings and actions) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

The final virtue, *transcendence*, can be defined as a combination of strengths that allows for connections to the larger universe and provides meaning in our lives. Character strengths associated with this virtue include *appreciation of beauty and excellence* (appreciating beauty, brilliance or a skilled performance in various spheres of humanity such as the arts, nature, mathematics, science, to hearing a child laugh), *gratitude* (taking time to be thankful for positive things in your life), *hope* (hopefulness and future-mindedness), *humour* (liking to laugh and to make others laugh, playfulness), and *spirituality* (having coherent beliefs about the greater purpose and meaning in life, having faith, knowing where you fit in the greater scheme of life) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

These character strengths exist within individuals to varying degrees and may be developed or strengthened at any time during life. Many of these are strengthened in our daily lives with activities we deem ordinary. The work of Linley (2008) and Niemiec (2013) suggests that there are specific pathways for developing character strengths from a psychological perspective. Linley (2008) explains that character strengths develop when individuals become more aware of the existence of these strengths. Individuals then reflect on these strengths once they are aware of them by exploring when they have previously used the identified strengths and how these may be used in the future. Exploration then needs to be

followed by application of an action to further develop the identified strength (Niemic, 2013). When considering the power of observational learning (Bandura, 1986), Niemic and Wedding (2008) argue that character strengths can also be developed by observing others utilising it (for example bravery or overcoming a fear) – whether it be in movies or in real life situations. Mundy and Judkins (2010) explain that eco-adventure programmes have received increasing emphasis as a context wherein adolescents can explore and develop these individual traits.

Eco-adventure Programmes

Eco-adventure programmes are defined as the calculated combination of nature-based adventure activities with emotional and/or behavioural experiences, with the ultimate goal of bringing about positive and lasting changes in the lives of participants (Beringer & Martin, 2003; Gillis & Ringer, 1999).

Recent literature studies have revealed that these programmes hold a number of potential benefits. Passarelli et al. (2010) argue that the unfamiliar nature of eco-adventure programmes may foster the creation of new perspectives, increase participants' sense of mastery, and facilitate spiritual growth and transformation. The element of surprise, being challenged and having a sense of success after overcoming each challenge may produce a sense of personal growth and adds to one's feeling of self-efficacy and confidence (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass, Gills, & Russell, 2012; Schell, Cotton, & Luxmoore, 2012). Intrinsic motivation has also been found to be fostered in eco-adventure programmes as individuals strive to complete tasks which introduce stress in a manageable but challenging manner (Eckstein & R uth, 2015). In addition, Leberman and Marlin (2002) state that situations can be developed in eco-adventure programmes where the individual is required to think creatively – further stimulating individual growth of personal strengths such as perseverance and creativity. In addition to these intra-psychic effects, eco-adventure programmes have also been shown to provide an opportunity to form high-quality connections with others, positively affecting interpersonal relationships as new friendships may be fostered or pre-existing ones are strengthened (Passarelli et al., 2010; Schell et al., 2012). Interpersonal skills are therefore also frequently developed as conflict management, communication and compromise are often central to these activities (Passarelli et al., 2010; Leberman & Marlin, 2002).

Despite its apparent contribution to the fostering of the many strengths that form part of Seligman's VIA classification system, the impact of eco-adventure programmes has rarely been regarded from a strengths perspective in particular. The absence of such research in the South African context, especially within the challenging developmental period of adolescence, renders this a relevant and worthwhile topic to explore.

Relevance of This Study

Schell et al. (2012) are of the opinion that although EAP's have been implemented in a variety of settings across different ages, it has been found to be most effective with the adolescent population. A recent evaluation of an internationally known organisation's EAP projects supports this statement as Mundy and Judkins (2010) suggest that participation in an eco-adventure programme may foster individual development in areas such as personal growth and identity. These aspects are in line with Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion, the psychosocial stage, and associated challenges that adolescents (aged 13 to 18 years) typically face (McLeod, 2008). During this stage the adolescent wants to become more independent (i.e. have a sense of autonomy and environmental mastery), create meaningful interpersonal relationships, and learn roles that he/she will fulfil as an adult (e.g. leadership roles) (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2009).

In line with the strengths perspective, Anderson (2004) argues that EAP's provide an opportunity for development that lies in leveraging natural talents rather than merely remediating one's weaknesses. The emphasis is often placed on individual reflection when participating in EAP's, providing participants with opportunities to identify newly developed or pre-existing strengths, which has been found to not only confirm, but also facilitate the further development of these strengths (Leberman & Marlin, 2002; Passarelli et al., 2010). Exploring strengths that might possibly be developed in EAP's might serve as motivation for the ongoing development of programmes within the South African context specifically. The development of EAP's could serve as a preventative measure in promoting adolescents' resilience as they face various challenges.

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SECTION B: MANUSCRIPT FOR EXAMINATION

A group of South African adolescents' subjective experience of participation in an eco-adventure programme: A strengths perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore a group of male South African adolescents' subjective experiences of participating in an eco-adventure programme (EAP), from a strengths perspective. A total of 31 grade 10 adolescent males, from diverse cultural backgrounds, participated in this study. Qualitative data for this phenomenological study was collected through the daily completion of reflective diaries for the duration of the course, and two separate focus group discussions involving 16 of the participants identified through systematic sampling. Through inductive analysis of data, results showed that participants experienced the EAP as facilitating both *intra-* and *interpersonal development* on various levels. *Intrapersonal* aspects included participants' experiencing an enhanced sense of gratitude; greater self-awareness; perseverance and physical endurance; spirituality; and an appreciation for beauty. On an *interpersonal level*, development was reported regarding participants' interpersonal understanding; strengthening or development of existing / new relationships; and teamwork. With subsequent deductive analysis it transpired that participants developed or drew on various character strengths included in the VIA classification system including *gratitude, perspective, self-regulation, leadership, bravery, perseverance, love, kindness, spirituality, appreciation of beauty, social intelligence and teamwork*. It can therefore be concluded that the EAP under scrutiny, due to its specific nature and demands, facilitated the development of individual character strengths, leading to personal growth and development on *intra-* and *interpersonal* levels. Should recommendations that flowed from the results to further improve such programmes be considered, EAP's could prove to be a successful and cost effective intervention for the facilitation of adolescent well-being in the challenging South African context.

Keywords: Adolescence, eco-adventure programme, experience, strengths perspective, VIA classification system.

Introduction

Eco-adventure programmes (EAP's) have recently received increasing emphasis as an ideal context within which adolescents can explore and develop individual character strengths (Mundy & Judkins, 2010). In spite of the diverse range of terminology used to describe such programmes, it can collectively be defined as the calculated combination of nature-based adventure activities with emotional and/or behavioural experiences, with the ultimate goal of bringing about positive and lasting changes in the lives of participants (Gillis & Ringer, 1999). A variety of possible benefits of participation in EAP's have been found and include fostering new perspectives; an increased sense of mastery; spiritual growth; higher levels of confidence; feelings of pride and achievement; establishing friendships; conflict management; and communication (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gass, Gills, & Russell, 2012; Leberman & Martin, 2002; Passarelli, Hall, & Anderson, 2010; Schell, Cotton, & Luxmoore, 2012).

A growing body of literature supports the protective effect of character strengths against the development of psychopathology, especially for individuals and groups finding themselves in high-risk environments (Gillham et al., 2011). Adolescents in South Africa presents as such a high-risk group (Petersen, Bhana, & Swartz, 2012; Strydom, Pretorius, & Joubert, 2012). When considering the potentially protective function of strengths development (Aarti, 2006; Barton & Butts, 2008; Gillham et al., 2011; Park & Peterson, 2006), an exploration of ways to empower adolescents through the identification and promotion of their character strengths emerges as a worthwhile endeavour.

The Values in Action (VIA) classification system was developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) to assist individuals in understanding and recognising character strengths on an individual level (Gillham et al., 2011; VIA Institute on Character, 2014). A total of six virtues, considered to be omnipresent across various cultures, countries and religious groups, (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006), was identified. These virtues, which include wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence, were used to classify or group 24 specific character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, VIA Institute on Character, 2014). A specific set of criteria was used to derive these strengths from an extensive list of possible candidates. Character strengths needed to: be fulfilling; be morally valued; not diminish others; have no suitable opposites; be trait-like; be distinguishable from other strengths; have paragons and prodigies that

represent it; be selectively absent in some situations; and have establishments/rituals to celebrate or express them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

From the above there is a clear and apparent relation between the positive effects of EAP's and the virtues and character strengths forming part of the VIA classification system. To the researcher's knowledge, the potential effects of eco-adventure programmes have not been explored from a strengths perspective in the South African context. While international studies may provide strong guidelines and rich information regarding eco-adventure programmes and their outcomes, the multi-cultural South African context poses unique challenges as different cultural groups cannot be assumed to share the same experiences. This notion is supported by Allik and McCrae (2004) as well as McCrae and Costa (1997), when they explain that individual traits such as that of personality (comparable with character strengths) are both biologically based and culturally influenced.

A better understanding of how eco-adventure interventions may possibly contribute to the development of virtues and character strengths in adolescents in the challenging South African context may provide helpful information for further development of such intervention programmes (Petersen et al., 2012; Strydom et al., 2012). It may further help programme developers to identify shortcomings of current programmes and motivate institutions such as schools to incorporate interventions such as these for their learners. The study will thus aim to answer the following research question: "What are the subjective experiences of a group of South African adolescents participating in an eco-adventure programme, from a strengths perspective?", and thus aims to describe, from a psychological strengths perspective, the subjective experiences of a group of adolescents during their participation in an eco-adventure programme.

Material and Methods

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was employed in this research study. With this design the researcher aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's unique perceptions and experiences regarding a specific phenomenon and describe it as objectively as possible (Creswell, 2009; Fouché & Schurink, 2011; Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). It is therefore deemed essential that the researcher puts aside his/her own views and personal biases regarding the phenomenon, a process referred to as bracketing, in order to deepen

his/her understanding of participants' unique experience (Petty et al., 2012). This was done to ensure that the researcher considered participants' experiences holistically, and would therefore not be biased towards 'finding' character strengths and virtues representative of any particular strengths-based theory.

Participants and Sampling

The researcher obtained consent from an internationally known organisation (henceforth referred to as 'the service provider') specialising in outdoor education programmes, to evaluate the outcomes of a number of their courses. The service provider has a longstanding relationship with the identified school who send their learners to participate in EAP's on an annual basis. In this specific programme a total of 141 male, grade 10 learners, from one school, aged between 15 and 16 years, was registered to attend a 7-day programme. The majority of the participant group consisted of white participants (making up about 60%), with the other racial groupings (Indian, African and Coloured) making up the remainder of the participant group. Within the racial diversity there was also found to be participants from several cultural affiliations. The programme entailed that participants were divided into groups of about 10-15 individuals upon arrival at the campsite, and had to ration their meals for the duration of the course as a first order of business. Participants were also expected to divide responsibilities amongst members of the group. Groups rotated on a daily basis between various camp sites. Each group had a professionally trained instructor who accompanied them and provided supervision while participants engaged in various activities including the completion of several hikes, river rafting, rock climbing and abseiling. For the duration of the course participants were not allowed to have any electronics such as cell phones, cameras or music players in their possession. They were expected to carry all their clothes, food and tents in backpacks provided to them.

A total of 31 of the learners attending the course agreed to partake in the research, involving the completion of daily reflective diaries and two focus group discussions. All 31 participants completed the daily diaries and systematic sampling was used to identify 16 individuals (2 groups of 8 members each) to partake in the focus group discussions. Both focus groups were therefore representative of the larger group in terms of racial and cultural composition. This systematic sampling method ensured that each individual had an equal opportunity to form part of one of the two focus groups, and that no personal biases or

observations influenced the composition of these groups, as it may have with purposive sampling or other non-probability methods (Ahmed, 2009).

Data Collection

Prior to participants embarking on the course, a memorandum of understanding was negotiated with the service provider involved. The prospective participants and their parents/legal guardians were then invited by the researcher to participate in the study. Two information sessions were conducted at the school involved, and an information letter regarding the research and its goal was distributed to the learners as well as their parents/legal guardians.

After obtaining parental permission and individual consent from the learners involved, data collection started when the participants arrived on site for the 7-day course. On arrival the researcher met with the participants, provided them with the reflective diaries and explained the process forward. Thereafter the researcher was not involved in the programme and only returned on the final day of the programme to conduct the focus group discussions. Reflective diaries, as a form of document analysis, were used to gather data regarding participants' daily experience of the EAP. The diaries provided some guidance on the reflection process in order to make the process as easy as possible for the participants, whilst staying within the framework of phenomenology. The diary entry for each day started with a heading "*My experience of today*" and was followed by "*My experience of the different activities today*" and "*I have learnt something about myself today*". The latter statement was followed by two options "*If yes, please explain*" or "*If no, please explain*". Diaries are considered to help provide access to individuals' understanding of their worlds, develop a realistic picture and provide sensitive accounts of an individual's experience, thus being coherent with the main goal of phenomenology to gain a comprehensive understanding of individual's experiences (Alaszewski, 2006; Burns & Grove, 2005; Moule & Goodman, 2009; Nicholl, 2010).

The second method of data collection involved focus group discussions. These discussions involve a carefully planned discussion which is designed to gain perceptions on a demarcated area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment (Petty et al., 2012; Rabiee, 2004; Strydom, 2011a). On day 5 of the 7-day course, two focus groups each consisting of 8 individuals discussed their experiences of the course for a duration of approximately 60 minutes. The opening question of the focus group was "*What were your*

experiences of participating in this eco-adventure programme?”, after which non-directive probing questions within the phenomenological paradigm were asked, such as: “*What did you observe or learn about yourself?*” and “*What helped you to complete all of these activities?*”

The diary entries and focus group discussions were thus regarded to be complementary to each other as they both provided opportunities for participants to share their experiences of the programme, while probing where participants might not have been as spontaneous in sharing.

Data Analysis

A combination of inductive and deductive methods of data analysis was used in the analysis of qualitative data in order to make sure that the process was in keeping with the phenomenological design. Schadewitz and Jachna (2007) explain that when a combination of both is used the researcher may start with inductive coding by simply studying the data collected through coding, identifying patterns and establishing themes. Then, during further analysis, some theoretical constructs are referred to in order to explain and evaluate the identified themes.

The researcher therefore thoroughly familiarised herself with the data collected after it had been transcribed. Transcriptions were studied intensely to identify patterns, which were then coded to identify recurring themes (inductive analysis). After completion of this phase, the VIA classification system of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) was used to reflect on the themes identified, to assist in identifying character strengths that might have developed or improved through participation in the programme (deductive analysis). Whilst analysing and interpreting the data it was essential to be systematic, and for the process to be verifiable, chronological and continuous, as this offers a trail of evidence as well as increases the level of trustworthiness (Morgan, 1997; Rabiee, 2004; Schurink, Fouché, & De Vos, 2011). Themes and subthemes were continuously monitored and audited by a co-researcher

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is an indication of “methodological soundness and adequacy” (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002, p. 254). The model proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research was followed in this phenomenological study. Attention was given to four aspects, namely: credibility, applicability, consistency and neutrality. *Credibility* was ensured by providing comprehensive descriptions, concrete detail and explanations of knowledge that demonstrated

the origin of the results. *Applicability* was ensured by having distinct inclusion criteria for participants (Wadembere, 2012), as well as the accurate description of the research process followed. The inclusion criteria included being a male adolescent between the ages of 12 and 18 years, who are actively participating in the programme. *Consistency* was ensured by following a structured procedure throughout the research process, ensuring that data were collected consistently using the same approach. *Neutrality* was maintained by the researcher focusing on understanding how adolescents experienced participating in the programme, regardless of whether it was positive or negative, through bracketing. The researcher did not form part of the eco-adventure team delivering the intervention, and had no vested interest in the intervention delivering positive results. She was therefore able to maintain a neutral stance in terms of the outcomes of this intervention.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to the ethical guidelines set out by the North-West University's Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) as well as the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA: Health Professions Act 56 of 1974) throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University (ethics approval number NWU-00109-13-A1) before prospective participants were invited to participate, or their parents contacted to provide permission. After careful consideration of various guidelines (Creswell, 2009; Fritz, 2008; Krishnan, 2006; Morgan, 1997; Strydom, 2011b; Strydom, 2011c; Rodriguez, Valdebenito, & Mondragón, 2008), the ethical aspects that were considered throughout the research process included obtaining both parental permission and individual consent; respect for persons; the relevance and value of the study; scientific integrity of the researcher; the level of risk of harm to participants and the likelihood of benefit; distributive justice through fair and consistent sampling methods; professional competence of the researcher; as well as respect for participants' privacy and confidentiality. Obtaining parental permission was a prerequisite for participation as all the learners were under the age of 18 years. Another vital ethical aspect related to the phenomenological design, and specifically the use of focus groups discussions, involved the concept of partial confidentiality. Participants were made aware of the limited extent to which the researcher could ensure confidentiality of the focus group discussions, as other members of the focus groups also had a responsibility in this regard.

Results

The main themes that emerged when participants were reflecting on their experience of participation in the programme could be categorised into two distinct areas, which will be referred to as *intrapersonal*- and *interpersonal development*.

Intrapersonal Development

Participants reported their experiences of the programme as facilitating growth on a personal level. This process was brought about by a number of experiences during the course, which led to an increased sense of gratitude, the development of greater self-awareness, perseverance and physical endurance, opportunities to connect spiritually, and developing an appreciation of beauty. These themes that emerged from participants' reflections on the course will be explored in more detail below.

A strong theme that emerged from participants' reflections on their experiences of the course was that the EAP facilitated a greater awareness of the value of relationships, materialistic things such as luxuries at home, and opportunities they had been given. This led to intense experiences of *gratitude* which appears to have stemmed from the limited resources the participants had access to during the programme, and the fact that they had to be self-reliant, something many of them reported as being a new experience. One participant remarked that:

I learnt to be very grateful for the resources that you have because coming here you have everything on your back that you could use. There's no unlimited anything, no unlimited food or water so you got to ration it, save it, cherish what you have.

The experiencing of a sense of gratitude showed a strong association with greater *self-awareness*, according to participant reports. Greater self-awareness was explained by participants in terms of becoming aware of personal characteristics they were previously unaware of, and left participants with a sense of gratitude. Specific reference was made by some participants to the realisation of their leadership skills:

When no people attempt to lead, I automatically take the leadership role. Cooking, continuously leading the hike, helping navigate. I tend to take responsibility when no one else does and I saw my group looking to me for solutions when problems arose.

This awareness in general terms was reported to lead to personal growth and to helping participants in facing or overcoming fears. Participants reported that especially solo

time, where they had to spend several hours on their own and not interact with anyone at all, gave them an opportunity to reflect on themselves, their interactions with others and their experiences of and behaviour during challenging activities. This led to the discovery and awareness of personal characteristics – both negative and positive, that had previously gone unnoticed. One participant remarked: “Today was amazing, I got to learn so much about myself... I realised that I have so much to offer to the world and that I just need to overcome self-doubt in order to achieve”. Related to this greater awareness of personal characteristics, participants regularly reported that they were often surprised by their own emotional experiences to events on the course. An example of this is seen in this participant’s response:

Today was actually seriously fun, I got to go out (of) my comfort zone and experience actual life... The activities were really great and I had so much fun. We did the rock climbing and abseiling. I don’t think I have ever been so free before in my life. I can say it is definitely the best part of this whole camp.

These increases in self-awareness in terms of personal characteristics and emotional experiences seemed to facilitate actual change and personal growth. Beilock (2011), as well as Akbari and Akbari (2013) are of the opinion that greater self-awareness often leads to changes in cognitions, emotions, coping strategies and changed interactions with others. Participants associated these personal changes specifically with being challenged in terms of personal boundaries and being pushed out of their comfort zones:

The person I was before coming to this camp has changed a lot because of the things I did that was out of my comfort zone, and I enjoyed changing as a person because without change there is no growth.

Participants becoming aware of their own emotional experiences in some instances led to the development of increased *self-regulation* of their behavioural and emotional responses. One participant explained:

I’m like one of those people who like keep anger bottled up and eventually it will pop, like everything like when I’m walking, like when we got frustrated with people I’d be annoyed like for 10 minutes and then it would go away and I would focus on walking... you know it builds up, it builds up and then eventually you’re just like I can’t, I’ve had enough and I’ll leave or confront.

Individual growth associated with increased self-awareness was specifically noted by participants when reflecting on overcoming or facing their fears during activities. This was described by participants to lead to a realisation that the conquering of fears is mainly dependent on self-motivation and determination. One participant describes how overcoming one fear helped him realise that he can overcome fear in general: “Today was fun as we rock climbed and abseiled. It was great as I conquered my fear of falling off a mountain and learned I can overcome fear. I learned fear can be overcome with motivation”.

Realising their capacity for *perseverance and physical endurance* was described by participants as a crucial contributing factor to the intrapersonal development they experienced. Through completing challenging activities such as long-distance hikes, braving extreme temperatures and other physical demands that they were not used to, participants realised that they had the capacity for perseverance and physical endurance. Self-motivation and having a positive mind-set when being challenged was reported to directly influence participants’ perseverance and motivation to endure. This left participants with a strong sense of achievement: “I felt achievement for the hike for not giving up and keeping a positive mind-set”.

Being in a natural environment and exposed to the elements was also described by several participants to have led to a greater *spiritual connection*. One participant experienced this connection specifically through his struggle to complete a challenging task and describes how it helped him persevere when he says: “I felt like Jesus carrying the cross and every time I felt like falling down I know God was watching and I had to finish my goal”. Another participant described a sense of peace and harmony that accompanied his experience of integration of the self, the environment and God during the course: “My thoughts are alone with me and I was at peace with myself, nature and God. I felt that I was in a state of harmony and being able to open up to myself about anything”.

Along with the awareness of their environment, some participants described an *appreciation for beauty* and a sense of awe related to seeing the sun rise and the stars in the night sky – which was distinct from their experience in the city:

Yeah like I know at night the sky is like very beautiful and full of stars, and you can’t see that like in Joburg you know with like pollution or whatever, so that was very nice to see and like it’s so quiet, like there’s no cars in the distance ... and also like, cause

the first time we went to see the sunrise on the mountain... and that was also very nice to watch like a proper sunrise...

Another participant remarked:

I found that it was uhm, quite awesome seeing the sun rise...because normally like we watch Natio- Geographic's and we see it and we're like oh ok that's how it looks. But every day we wake up and we see, but there is so much pollution that it is half green and like all dodgy colours (laughs). So I found that uh waking up, even though it was early and we were all dying because it was so cold... the hike up was hectic, but on top it was worth it like the sunrise was really amazing and it was nice to see.

When considering these results, a number of individual character strengths inherent to the VIA classification system clearly stand out as forming part of participants' experience. This will receive more attention in the discussion.

Participants did not, however, report their experience of the EAP only being intrapersonal, but rather that this intrapersonal development was strongly associated with their interactions with and experiences of other individuals in the programme, leading to a strong sense of interpersonal development.

Interpersonal Development

Participation in the EPA was reported by participants to also have facilitated development on an *interpersonal level*. This level of development was explained by participants in terms of developing interpersonal understanding; developing or strengthening new and existing relationships; and the course providing unique opportunities for teamwork.

The development of a deeper *interpersonal understanding* with regard to others' behaviour and emotions, as well as their ways of interacting during the programme was reported by participants. One participant explains how he observed others: "I have learnt that we all have different breaking points and that we are all comfortable at different stages." Another participant explains how he learnt to change his interactions with others: "I can now work with people who are difficult. I can accept other people's ideas and plans". On several occasions participants described how they perceived an increase in kindness toward and concern for others, accompanied by a willingness to compromise: "What I have learnt most about myself is that I actually do enjoy being in a role where I contribute to other people's well-being". On another occasion the same participant mentions:

I just learnt that there are many differences between different people like we all react in situations differently like we had, when we came on the camp, I sort of had made up my mind that you know you have to be willing to make compromises for people, you have to be willing to help out.

It thus shows that participation in the EAP not only facilitated the development of new character strengths, but also facilitated the development of pre-existing ones.

From participants' responses it was also apparent that they experienced the programme as an opportunity to *strengthen existing relationships* by spending more time with friends in a different setting than they were used to. However, the programme was reported to most commonly provide participants with an *opportunity to form new friendships* with peers who they would not usually interact with, especially when they were grouped with individuals who were not their friends. Many participants reported being surprised with this new development:

The one guy I've never spoken to in life and now I've, I've really grown close to through this camp..yeah it was like I've never spoken to him and now all of a sudden he is in my group and got to know how he is and he's actually kind of cool.

Teamwork was reported by many of the participants as forming a central part of the programme, as many of the tasks and activities that had to be done required cooperation in a group setting. Teamwork is often reported as a central part of eco-adventure programmes (Rogers & Smith, 2012). It was interesting to find that participants moved from a sense of being individual members of a group to viewing the group as a team or unit on its own. This was apparent through participants' experience that teamwork started off with mere collaboration: "I learned on how to collaborate well with team mates to make supper which was not the best but special in its own way", but quickly moved to a deeper level where participants experienced the team as a source of motivation and support:

My team really helped me through a lot of the things like, uhm when we were doing the abseiling, my fear of heights...I had some really close friends and my team was just helping me on, so..."you can do it", "its fine", so that really helped me through the things.

Within this group motivation and support, participants reported another aspect of the interaction to be the development of trust in team members. One participant explains:

I learnt to trust in myself, my abilities, my emotions and my team mates and guide. I learnt this because I prefer doing things on my own but then tried it with team work and it was more effective.

As was the case with the intrapersonal aspects of participants' development, a number of VIA character strengths were apparent in participants' self-reported experiences, including love, kindness, social intelligence and teamwork. This will receive more attention in the section below.

Discussion

As mentioned, professionals have recently shown an increasing interest in the concept of eco-adventure programmes (Daniel, Bobilya, Kalisch, & McAvoy, 2014; Passarelli et al., 2010; Ritchie, Wabano, Russell, Enosse, & Young, 2014). Even though it is often offered as a mode of intervention specifically aimed at the development of skills and well-being in adolescent populations, participants' experience of EAP's have not been explored from a strengths perspective within the South African context. The current study aimed to address this lacuna in current knowledge through addressing the research question: *What are the subjective experiences of a group of South African adolescents participating in an eco-adventure programme, from a strengths perspective?* The results, as communicated in the previous section, suggested that this group of male adolescents experienced the EAP they participated in as an opportunity for development on both *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* levels. As a number of these experiences mirror what is currently found in the rapidly expanding literature on psychological strengths, it seems worthwhile to consider participants' experiences from the perspective offered by an established classification system of psychological strengths such as the Values in Action classification system.

On the *intrapersonal* level, participants experienced development in terms of experiencing gratitude; greater self-awareness; perseverance; connecting spiritually; and an appreciation of beauty.

Participants' experiences of an increased sense of gratitude has a direct equivalent in the VIA classification system within the virtue of *transcendence* – referring to an awareness of and being thankful for the good things that happens in one's life and taking time to express thanks for these (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). Froh, Sefick and Emmons (2008) explain that developmental theorists such as Melanie Klein consider gratitude as a capacity that is present from birth, but continuously develops over one's lifespan as the child matures both on

a cognitive and emotional level (Klein, 1957). Thus gratitude might shift from being thankful for a sweet as a child, to thankfulness for kindness in oneself and others as an adolescent (Klein, 1957). In this study, it was found that participants experienced a sense of gratitude due to the nature of the programme. This well-known character strength found expression as an increased sense of thankfulness for the value of relationships, luxuries they have at home as well as opportunities they have been given in their lives. These findings mirror that of Stott, Allison, Felter and Beames (2015) who recently reported that individuals participating in youth expeditions, which are very similar to EAP's, developed an appreciation of natural environments and they became aware of their privileged position in relation to others. The development of gratitude through participation in EAP's can be considered valuable as it has been found in other studies with adolescents that gratitude is often associated with enhanced life satisfaction, enhanced positive affect and optimism (Froh et al., 2008; Sun & Kong, 2013).

Greater self-awareness was reported by participants on various levels as explained in the results. This can be related to four character strengths found in the VIA classification system – *leadership*, *perspective*, *self-regulation* and *bravery*. Within the virtue of *justice* the character strength of *leadership* is described as the ability to encourage a group of which one is a member to get things done, while maintaining good relations (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). Leadership is often found to be an element that participants of EAP's become aware of through their participation (Daniel et al., 2014; D'Amanto & Krasny, 2011; Ritchie et al., 2014). However, Park and Peterson (2006) found in their studies of character strengths amongst adolescents that leadership is less commonly reported. Leadership can be considered a skill that not everyone needs to have, although in the adolescent developmental phase it may be thought to play an important role in identity formation through greater self-awareness of personal skills. The development and awareness of leadership skills is indeed regarded by some as a key element for future success (Weilbach, Meyer, & Monyeki, 2010).

Greater self-awareness was also related to the character strength of *perspective* in the data, which forms an important part of the virtue of *wisdom and knowledge*. Perspective can be defined as individuals' ability to consider life and their interactions with others in broader terms in order to make sense of themselves and others (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). Considered more than merely absorbing information, but also what one does with the information to improve one's well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), participants in this study explained how they developed greater self-awareness, and greater perspective as a

consequence, by firstly becoming aware of their own personal characteristics, and secondly becoming aware of emotions they experienced whilst overcoming or facing fears. This involved greater awareness of both positive and negative aspects of themselves, as was also found in the work of Greffrath, Meyer, Strydom and Ellis (2012) when participants in their study reflected on their time spent in solitude and how this facilitated self-reflection on experiences of different activities in relation to oneself and others. The development of perspective in terms of one's own position in the environment and making consequent changes in how one relates to others and oneself is frequently found in EAP literature (D'Amanto & Krasny, 2011; Draper, Lund, & Flisher, 2011; Somervell & Lambie, 2009).

According to Papalia, Olds and Feldman (2009), adolescents' stage of development psychosocially can be considered as a search for identity or self. During this stage of development it becomes essential to differentiate oneself from others, a process that directly involves greater self-awareness and which often accounts for increased self-consciousness and a need for self-agency (Erikson, 1968; Damon & Hart, 1982). Marcia (1966) also explains in her theory of identity status that identity achievement during adolescence is considered when the adolescent has high levels self-certainty, self-esteem and performance under stress. Perspective therefor seems to play an integral part in the process of identity development during adolescence - a strength that was shown to be reinforced during participation in EAP's when considering the current results.

The greater self-awareness reported by participants in some instances were associated with increased self-regulation. The self-regulation was explained in terms of participants having to regulate their emotions and behavior in the group setting. This can be compared with the character strength of *self-regulation* within the virtue of *temperance*, which can be described as regulating how one reacts to situations both emotionally and behaviourally (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). Self-regulation can be considered to be exceptionally important for adolescent development, as these skills are considered to be vital in preventing mental illness and risk-taking behavior and promoting optimal adjustment (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008; Moilanen, Shaw, & Fitzpatrick, 2010).

The greater self-awareness and perspective reported by participants also often led to them stepping out of their comfort zones and then reporting growth and actual change as a result. The courage that participants gained from this to overcome or face their fears was an important outcome of participants' experience during the EAP. This can also be directly

related to their stage of identity development as adolescents are engaged with a process of striving for independence and feelings of achievement (Mansfield & Wosnitza, 2010). The character strength *bravery*, which forms part of the virtue *courage*, is defined as a virtue which may or may not emerge in instances where individuals face challenges, difficulty or pain albeit physical or not (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). Participants of this study reported on several occasions that they had to be brave and face or overcome fears they had prior to the EAP. Overcoming or facing their fears left participants with a feeling of achievement; a critical aspect of development for positive self-esteem and confidence during adolescence.

Another character strength related to the virtue of *courage* that found expression in participants' self-reported experiences is that of *perseverance* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Perseverance is considered to be finishing what one starts, persevering in a course of action despite having encountered obstacles, and taking pleasure in carrying out tasks (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Participants reported being challenged through various activities inherent to the programme, and that they had to find ways of motivating themselves cognitively to persevere and reach their end goal. Perseverance then led to the realisation of their own potential and a feeling of achievement, which confirms the findings of other researchers (Deane & Harré, 2013; D'Amanto & Krasny, 2011; Ewert & Yoshino, 2011; Stott et al., 2015). This discovery of their own ability to persevere most often found expression in participants' surprising physical endurance when they were challenged by extreme conditions. Being forced to rely on themselves and their inner resources was also reported by participants in a study by Greffrath et al. (2012) to have played a significant role in their experience. Lekies, Yost and Rode (2015) also found that participants reported the challenging nature of the environment in EAP's to require a high level of endurance on both a physical and mental level. When considering the various challenges that adolescents face daily on both academic and personal levels, perseverance have been found to be an essential strength to help them reach their end goals (Shoshani & Slone, 2013; Steen, Kachorek, & Peterson, 2003).

Two strengths related to the virtue of *transcendence* emerged in participants' reflections on their experience of the EAP – *spirituality* and *appreciation of beauty*. *Spirituality* denotes feeling a connection on a spiritual level whilst engaging with the environment; knowing where one fits in within the larger scheme and beliefs about the meaning of life (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). This was reported by some participants,

specifically while they were exposed to the elements of nature. For example, participants reported experiencing the greatness of God, and relying on prayer for support. Several other studies also reported a spiritual experience being facilitated by participation in EAP's (Ewert & Yoshino, 2007; Greffrath et al., 2012).

Related to spirituality, the appreciation of *nature and beauty* was reported as some participants experienced seeing the sunrise, looking at the night sky, or distinctly experiencing other elements of nature for the first time. This appreciation for nature and beauty has also often been reported in EAP's (Lekies et al., 2015; Stott et al., 2015). Part of adolescent development of identity as described by Erikson (1968) involves the identification of values, an ideology, religion and world view – implying that the above-mentioned results are especially important for adolescent development.

On an *interpersonal* level, participants experienced development in terms of interpersonal understanding, developing and strengthening of new and existing relationships, and teamwork. These experiences can be related to the character strengths of *love, kindness and social intelligence*, all forming part of the virtue *humanity* within the VIA classification system (VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

Increases in participants' levels of interpersonal understanding reported in this study involved the development of a deeper understanding of others, as well as facilitating interactions with old and new friends. Participants learned to interact with different individuals, handle conflict, compromise and support others. They reported an increased awareness and understanding of the fact that others may differ from themselves on various aspects and that this is okay. Although there are several sources to support the development of interpersonal skills during EAP participation (Draper et al., 2011; Schell et al., 2012), the reported increases in participants' experiences of kindness, concern for others and compromise seem to be distinctive in this study. This development of positive interactions and appropriate social skills can be considered one of the most important aspects of adolescent development when considering that peers become the main source of measurement for self-worth and identity (Brown & Larson, 2009).

According to Brown and Larson (2009), adolescents spend increasing amounts of time with peers and their friendship groups are characterised by similarity – within which status and prestige plays a major role. Keeping this in mind, the development of especially new relationships, which was reported by participants to surprise them as they got along well

with individuals they would not earlier have considered friends, is significant. Although the reasons for their surprise are not clear, the researcher speculates that this could be related to perceived similarity/dissimilarity. What is clear from participants' self-reports is that the development of these relationships was facilitated by the nature of the EAP. The work of Draper et al. (2011), Passarelli et al. (2010), as well as Somervell and Lambie (2009) supports this, as they found that the increased empathy fostered during EAP participation to facilitate the development of mere connections into more meaningful relationships. Considering the above, increased interpersonal understanding can be related with the character strength of *social intelligence*, which forms part of the virtue of *humanity* (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). Peterson and Seligman (2004) explain in their work how social intelligence develops during adolescence as there generally is a greater emphasis on integration of mutual communication, moral standards, meaning and identity. Developing skills to help one distinguish and identify emotions in relationships and understand these better seems to be of great importance during this stage of development.

The character strength of *social intelligence* was also related to the development of new/existing relationships. Individuals developed social intelligence through greater self-awareness, as reported earlier, and also developed a better understanding of others and how to effectively adapt and interact with them. Developing such humanitarian skills during adolescence can be deemed extremely important as peer relationships play a major role in the identity development process, as discussed earlier. It is thus not only important how adolescents experience their peer groups, but also to reciprocate positive feedback and interactions as an individual to your peers (Brown & Larson, 2009).

The capacity to effectively engage in *teamwork* was clearly developed during the participants' experience of EAP participation. This refers to working well as a member of a group or team; loyalty towards the group; and doing one's part, representing the character strength of *teamwork* within the virtue of *justice* in the VIA classification system (VIA Institute on Character, 2014). Teamwork formed a central part of participant reports as they realised that without collaboration in the team, reaching their goals may have been more difficult, if not impossible. The collaboration in a team setting gradually spilled over to a deeper experience of having the group/team as a source of support and motivation. This was also found in other studies (D'Amanto & Krasny, 2011; Stott et al., 2015), where teamwork was regarded as an ideal opportunity to develop trust in others (Lekies et al., 2015; Passarelli et al., 2010), as was reported by participants during their experiences of the programme

involved. Developing trust in others can be difficult and forms a crucial part of EAP's and teamwork in general. Teamwork is strongly associated with relational aspects during adolescence – where adolescents learn how to interact with others, trust others and compromise to reach a goal.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to describe, from a psychological strengths perspective, the subjective experiences of a group of male adolescents during their participation in an eco-adventure programme. It was found that participants experienced the EAP as an opportunity to develop on two levels – *intrapersonally* and *interpersonally*. *Intrapersonal* development was described by participants as experiencing gratitude; greater self-awareness; developing perseverance and physical endurance; connecting spiritually; and having an appreciation for beauty. *Interpersonal* development was explained by participants to have been experienced throughout their participation in terms of developing interpersonal understanding; developing or strengthening new or existing relationships; and participating in teamwork.

The results of this study can be considered significant as it not only confirms existing literature that identifies eco-adventure programmes as an ideal intervention to facilitate *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal development* (Cason & Gillis, 1994; D'Amanto & Krasny, 2011; Lekies et al., 2015; Russell, 2006), but also offers a description thereof in terms of specific aspects of participants' functioning that may be facilitated during such programmes. Each of these aspects could be related to one or more of the virtues and its associated character strengths found within the well-known VIA classification system. In summary, it was found that the virtues of *transcendence (through the VIA character strengths of gratitude, spirituality and appreciation of beauty)*, *wisdom and knowledge (through perspective)*, *courage (through bravery and perseverance)*, *humanity (through love, kindness and social intelligence)*, *justice (through leadership and teamwork)* and *temperance (through self-regulation)* were all reported to have been developed on some level by participants (VIA Institute on Character, 2014).

As EAP's aim to bring about lasting changes in the lives of youngsters, this improved understanding of the experiences of male adolescents' participation in such programmes, and its association with character strengths specific to the VIA classification system, can be considered extremely valuable. It also aids the understanding of how the strengths facilitated during EAP participation could help adolescents deal more effectively with the numerous

challenges posed by this developmental phase. Together with this understanding, it could also help course developers identify character strengths that have not received explicit attention in course development such as creativity, curiosity, humor, judgment, zest, fairness, humility, and prudence for example. This may inform EAP developers to improve the course content and enhance the potential benefits for individuals, groups or schools by including activities that would facilitate these ‘untapped’ character strengths. There are a limited number of interventions that build character strengths in a comprehensive way. Most interventions target one or two specific strengths, for example gratitude (Froh et al. 2008), optimism (Gillham et al. 1995), and hope (Pedrotti, Edwards, & Lopez, 2008). Few systematic interventions have been developed that have explicitly attempted to systematically build a large range of positive traits in children and adolescents (Rashid et al., 2013). Although the EAP under scrutiny shows a lot of potential in this regard, our results suggest that at least part of its potential impact remains untapped. By adopting the strengths perspective, and making full use of the recent development of classification systems of character strengths, course developers could significantly increase the impact of such programs. This could prove hugely beneficial for the besieged male adolescent population within the South African context.

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SECTION C: CRITICAL REFLECTION

When reflecting on the present study there are some definite limitations and strengths to be identified. The phenomenological research design within the qualitative research method can be considered to have been relevant for the current study, and facilitated a process of data gathering to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. It allowed for the exploration of participants' experiences from various perspectives and gave participants the opportunity to self-reflect. The researcher is of the opinion that the same results would not have been gathered within a quantitative paradigm – especially not in terms of being an in-depth and explanatory investigation. Within other qualitative research designs the understanding would not have been as explanatory as the present findings and therefore the research design and method can be deemed to have been the most relevant to achieve the research goals. A mixed-method approach, however might have been beneficial to gain a greater understanding of the VIA character strengths that specifically developed during the programme. The VIA Youth Survey could have been completed a few weeks before the programme commenced and then thereafter again. Possible changes observed in character strengths could then have been compared with the qualitative data gathered. This would also have enabled the researcher to explore participants' level of awareness of changes and growth within themselves.

The data gathering methods are also deserving of critical reflection. The two data gathering methods (i.e. daily journals and focus group discussions) proved effective and relevant in gaining an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. However, there are areas that could have been improved on. The reflective diaries was employed as a tool for participants to reflect on their experience on a personal level. However, it seemed from the diary entries that some participants got so involved in their EAP process that they found it difficult to complete it on a daily basis. It is therefore important to consider that participants should be given sufficient time during the course of the programme for this purpose, and that clearer instructions need to be given to programme developers to incorporate into the

programme. This should be done in a very circumspect manner, though, as the extra responsibility that participants have to complete their diaries should not interfere with their experience of the programme. Less intrusive alternatives could also be considered in the future to ease this process. However, the reflective diaries provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on the here and now moment, and not after a prolonged period of time – providing richer information that might have got lost with time.

Focus group discussions are also considered to have been effective and most of the participants demonstrated active involvement and enthusiasm during these discussions. This method is recommended for future research on the basis of its effectiveness and its relevance in the research setting. One or two participants were however less active in the discussions and seemed more withdrawn. Incorporation of individual interviews might thus be beneficial with a smaller sample group to be able to explore participants' experiences on a more intensive level and to create a space where all individuals can participate more comfortably.

It is also recommended for future research that the researcher spend the duration of the EAP with participants and observe them as challenges and activities are completed. Although the participant group were visited on-site during the course, a more constant presence would have given the researcher a better understanding of the nature of the expectations and challenges that participants faced. However, this might also place additional stress on the participants in that they are aware of being observed, and might detract from their experience as they might feel the need to perform. The investigation of less intrusive ways for the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding participants' day-to-day experiences and challenges is therefore recommended for future research.

In general, it can be considered that the research methodology and approach to this research study was effective in answering the research question.

