

3-10-2022

Employment with the Northwest Territories Aquatics Program: A Significant Life Event?

Sebastien Denize

University of Ottawa, sdeni087@uottawa.ca

Audrey R. Giles

University of Ottawa, agiles@uottawa.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ijare>



Part of the [Exercise Science Commons](#), [Health and Physical Education Commons](#), [Leisure Studies Commons](#), [Other Rehabilitation and Therapy Commons](#), [Outdoor Education Commons](#), [Public Health Commons](#), [Sports Sciences Commons](#), [Sports Studies Commons](#), and the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)
How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation

Denize, Sebastien and Giles, Audrey R. (2022) "Employment with the Northwest Territories Aquatics Program: A Significant Life Event?," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*: Vol. 13: No. 4, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/ijare.13.04.09>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ijare/vol13/iss4/9>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Abstract

For over 60 years, the Northwest Territories Aquatics Program (NWTAP) has employed university students from southern Canada with little to no exposure to northern Canada to run seasonal swimming pools and waterfronts in isolated northern communities. In this article, we examine the impact that working for this program had on nine former employees' lives and whether or not working for the NWTAP could be categorized as a significant life experience. We used thematic analysis of the data from retrospective semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires and identified four themes: (1) employment by the NWTAP enhanced the employees' self-confidence, independence, and self-efficacy; (2) employees gained knowledge about Indigenous cultures in the Northwest Territories; (3) employees developed enhanced sensitivity to social issues in northern communities; and (4) the experience of working for the NWTAP strongly influenced participants' career paths. Our analysis indicated that working for the NWTAP was a significant life experience.

Keywords: Canada; indigenous peoples; swimming; significant life experience.

For many young people, work as lifeguards and swimming instructors provides important early employment opportunities. The impacts of this work on their lives has not received much scholarly attention. This is the case for one unique program in northern Canada. The Northwest Territories (NWT) is one of three Canadian Territories, all of which are located north of the 60th parallel. A mixture of primarily Indigenous small communities and more ethnically diverse regional centres dot the NWT's Arctic and Sub-Arctic landscape. Despite the often-frigid temperatures, the NWT has been home to a long-running physical activity and safety intervention program: The NWT Aquatic Program (NWTAP). According to Giles et al. (2007) the NWTAP was established in 1967 as the NWT Above Ground Pool Program. It was initially created with the colonial premise of "developing" leaders within Indigenous communities. After an increase in awareness of the high rates of drowning within the region, water safety and drowning prevention became the Program's primary goals. At its height, the program operated 21 seasonal pools and 15 waterfront programs across the NWT (Giles et al., 2007). Following the division of the NWT to establish Nunavut, Canada's newest territory and Inuit homeland, in 1999, as well as budget cutbacks, there was a change in the funding structure for the NWTAP, which led to fewer operating pools and waterfronts (Baker & Giles, 2008; Giles et al., 2007). As a result, the size of the program has decreased dramatically over recent decades.

Since its inception, the NWTAP has employed hundreds of primarily southern, non-Indigenous Canadian university and college students to work in communities in northern Canada. This is in large part due to public health

requirements that require swimming pools to have certified lifeguards and swimming instructors. The fact that these certifications require access to deep-water pools, which are in short supply in the NWT due to cost and permafrost, has made it difficult for northerners to obtain the qualifications necessary to be hired (Giles et al., 2007; Rich, 2013). As a result, the Program has relied heavily on employees from southern Canada.

Although there has been research conducted on the history of the NWTAP, to date, researchers have not examined the impact that working for this program has had on its staff. For hundreds of southerners, working for the NWTAP was their first exposure to the Canadian North and, for many, their first experience in Indigenous communities. Studies on cross-cultural employment experiences have identified a number of benefits including increases in personal growth and cultural awareness (Cai & Rodriguez, 1996; Carlson & Widaman, 1998; Zapf, 1993; Zorn, 1996). In this study, we sought to understand the impacts of employment with the NWTAP on its southern-based employees and whether it met the criteria as being a significant life experience (SLE) in these individuals' lives.

Review of Literature

The key in determining whether a life experience can be deemed to be SLE in an individual's life is the degree to which it has resulted in a lasting change in the individual that persists after the event has passed (Chawla, 2006). More specifically, SLEs are those experiences that "lead to a substantial change in people's lives and have formative impacts with various implications for the life course and well-being" (Michael et al., 2018, p. 441). These experiences can occur in virtually any setting and have been shown to be most significant in non-traditional settings. Moreover, SLEs are widely regarded as having the greatest impact on a person's life during adolescence and young adulthood (McCullough et al., 2000)

Merriam and Clark (1993) aimed to identify the characteristics that made events significant in the lives of 405 adults. They found experiences to be significant when they affected participants personally by expanding an aspect of their lives or by having sentimental value. Expansion of a person's life can occur over three dimensions, each of which results in enhancing the person's capability of handling a given situation (Merriam & Clark, 1993). The first of these dimensions involves an expansion of skills and abilities which can be translated to other aspects of the person's life. The second, expansion of an individual's sense of self, is slightly more nuanced. Expansion within this dimension often comes from the individual's appraisal of the impact that an experience has had on their self-identity. Ultimately, the result of the expansion of the sense of self is characterized by either a greater sense of independence and autonomy following

the experience or an enhanced sense of connection to others. The final dimension involves the expansion of an individual's life perspectives following an experience.

While the expansion of any dimension can be viewed as isolated and specific, when the expansion of these dimensions is broad and results in significant changes to multiple aspects of the individual's life, it results in the transformation of the whole person (Merriam & Clark, 1993). Following a transformative experience, the participant has a novel view of themselves and how they are perceived by others. Of note in Merriam and Clark's (1993) study, transformation was found to be more likely in situations that resulted in a significant change in an individual's ideologies, views of life, and self-understanding.

Takano (2010) investigated the long-term effects of participation in a three month long overseas youth expedition and their significance to Japanese participants later in life. All but one of the 67 (39 men, 28 women) participants who were a part of the program between the ages of 18 and 24 considered the expedition to be an SLE. When asked directly, participants attributed opportunities for reflection and the timing of the event as key factors that made it significant. Retrospective interview data identified several factors that enhanced the impact of the program on the participants' lives: living and working with people of different backgrounds who were their age during the program; enduring new and challenging experiences; and finally, the application of these experiences to situations later in life. Importantly, participants considered the exposure to new cultures to be the single most influential feature of the program (Takano, 2010).

Several researchers have examined the impact of primarily non-Indigenous people's relocation to Indigenous communities for employment. For example, Zapf (1993) investigated the progressive adjustment of 85 social workers during their first year after relocation for work to remote northern Canadian communities. The participants in the study who came from southern Canada experienced culture shock. Zapf (1993) identified a common pattern of cross-cultural adjustment characterized by a significant initial decrease in the social workers' subjective well-being ($p < 0.001$) in the first few months of their relocation to northern regions, which was followed by an increase towards the end of their first year. Zapf found that the challenges the social workers faced when working in an isolated community were impactful and increased their confidence and self-efficacy. Those employed by the NWTAP are usually hired for between two and four months; as a result, their experiences may be quite different than those who spent an entire year in an Indigenous community.

Gartner-Manzon and Giles (2015) investigated the lasting impacts of employment in a sport for development program in northern Alberta, Canada:

Alberta's Future Leaders Program (AFL). Similar to the NWTAP, AFL employs mostly non-Indigenous postsecondary students to work as summer youth workers or arts mentors in Indigenous communities in Alberta. Retrospective interviews of previous employees revealed that they had an increased awareness of the impacts of racism and colonialism on Indigenous communities, which forced them to challenge existing stereotypes and had a direct influence on their career paths. Employment in this program facilitated participants' improved cultural understanding and instilled in them an increased sense of responsibility to improve relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Ultimately, the authors found that the former employees identified working for AFL as having a significant long-term impact on their lives.

In summary, researchers have shown that for an experience to be a SLE, it must have a lasting influence on their sense of self as well as their perception of the world well after the event has ended. Moreover, experiences are more likely to be significant if they occur during young adulthood and challenge the learners' existing beliefs. Given the demographics of employees working for the NWTAP and the literature on SLEs, we were interested in learning whether employment with the NWTAP served as a SLE for past employees.

Method

The Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa approved this study. We also received a research licence from the Aurora Research Institute which is a requirement for conducting research in the NWT. We used snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) to recruit research participants, all of whom were former employees of the NWTAP (N=9: male=3, female=6). All participants were university students when they were first employed by the Program and worked as pool or waterfront supervisors during the summer months in various communities across the NWT. For the purposes of anonymity, all names have been changed, and participants' dates of work have been listed by the decade in which they worked rather than by the specific year(s). Angela worked as a supervisor in Whati for 3 months in the 2000s. Alexis worked in Fort Simpson as a pool supervisor for four consecutive summers in the 2000s. Chris spent three summers as a pool supervisor in Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk in the 2000s. Stephanie spent just over six weeks as a waterfront supervisor in Colville Lake in a summer in the 1990s. Karen worked as a swimming pool supervisor in Fort Simpson for two years in the 2000s during which she also supervised 7- to 10-day waterfront programs in the nearby communities of Jean Marie River, Wrigley, and Trout Lake. Grant worked for three consecutive summers in Tuktoyaktuk in the 2000s. Christine was a lifeguard and swimming instructor in multiple communities for the NWTAP during the summers in the later 1990s and early 2000s – she asked for the communities in which she worked to remain confidential. Ethan worked for the NWTAP in Fort McPherson

from May to the beginning of August in the 2010s. Finally, Andrea was the swimming pool supervisor in Taloyoak, Nunavut (formerly NWT), for three summers in the 2000s prior to running the swimming pool in Tuktoyaktuk, also in 2000s. The communities in which the participants worked ranged in size from 54 to 3,500 individuals at the time when she worked there.

We used semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires to gain an understanding of how working for the NWTAP affected participants' lives. Initially, we had hoped to collect all data through semi-structured interviews, but several early participants stated that they did not have the time and would prefer to provide their insights in questionnaire form. As such, we gave all subsequent participants a choice in the method they wanted to use to share their information. We completed the semi-structured interviews one-on-one either in person (n=1) or over the phone (n=3). Five participants answered the same questions in writing. The questions explored participants' experiences during their work terms, the most impactful parts of their experiences, and how/if employment in the Program influenced the course of their lives. Near the end of both the interviews and the questionnaires, we asked participants directly whether they considered their employment by the NWTAP to be a SLE which we defined for them as an experience that had a lasting impact on their lives.

Retrospective Data Collection

The data in this study were collected by recording the retrospective experiences of participants' work terms that occurred over a decade earlier. Studies investigating recall and selective bias have brought into question the reliability of autobiographical information over time. Beckett and colleagues (2001) examined the quality of retrospective reports of Malaysian family life services after 12 years. The authors of this study found that the quality of retrospective data is quite high, especially when describing unique experiences. Wilson et al. (2003) investigated the impact of retrospective bias and reaffirmed that happy experiences were recalled as happier than they were, while people reported unpleasant experiences as more negative than initially reported. In short, these results indicate that overtime, both positive and negative emotional experiences are exaggerated. Wilson and colleagues also highlighted the robustness of this bias as it stayed true in participants' responses to test performance and political results after 2 and 12 weeks, respectively. Importantly, although our study relied on participants' recall of much older memories, Chawla (2006) found that "when it comes to the broad outline of life events and their significance, memory's reputation fares much better [than memories of specific details]" (p. 63). As such, despite its limitations, data collection concerning past experiences can still yield important findings.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview is a method of qualitative data collection whereby the researcher asks the participant a pre-determined set of predominantly open-ended questions (Baumbusch, 2010; Harris, 2010). As with all interviews, consent must be obtained prior to the conduction of the semi-structured interview. Once this condition has been satisfied, the interview guide must be created in order for participants to elaborate on topics encompassing the goals of the study. Answers to these pre-set questions are further probed in order to extract the meanings behind them (Baumbusch, 2010). The existence of an open dialogue between the researcher and participant allows for contextualization and a better understanding of the questions being asked, which is a considerable benefit of this method. Furthermore, interviews have the added benefit of allowing respondents to describe their perspectives in their own words, eliminating the ambiguity associated with other methods of data collection. Semi-structured interviews are especially useful because they contain a fixed set of questions that are posed to participants, increasing their reliability as well as an organic probing of the answers to these questions, which enhances depth.

Most of the semi-structured interviews we conducted were administered via telephone (3 of 4), which is often critiqued as being an inferior means of gathering rich, qualitative data compared to face-to-face interviews. Although it is true that when interviews are collected over the phone the interviewer is unable to respond to visual cues and contextual data, in a recent study researchers demonstrated that phone interviews are nevertheless capable of obtaining rich data (Drabble et al., 2016). Moreover, phone interviews are particularly useful when conducting interviews with subjects in geographically dispersed areas (Novick, 2008) as was the case with our participants.

Open-ended Questionnaire

Open-ended questionnaires are questionnaires that request more subjective responses from participants than close-ended questionnaires. These questionnaires do not contain any scales or true or false responses but rather are used to have participants to write out their responses in an unstructured manner. Open-ended questionnaires promote creativity in the responses given and allow respondents to offer as much detail as is needed to illustrate their points of view. In so doing, this method of data collection offers the benefit of allowing participants to answer according to their own unique perspectives. Although open-ended questionnaires are widely used in research, certain shortcomings do exist. First, open-ended questionnaires demand a great deal of time and cooperation on the part of the participant (Lee, 2006). Furthermore, variability in the depth of answers to the questions within such a questionnaire is inevitable, but the same challenges exist in semi-structured interviews. Five of our participants chose to answer the questions in questionnaire format rather than semi-structured interview format; we found that

they provided shorter responses than those with whom we conducted semi-structured interviews; nevertheless, we found that their responses directly addressed the questions, so they still provided valuable information.

Analysis

We followed Attride-Stirling's (2001) four-step approach to thematic analysis. First, researchers must familiarize themselves with the data to be coded. This involves developing a coding framework that highlights the common and interesting topics that arise in the data set. The goal of this step is to split the data into meaningful segments that reduce the data set. Although the data set is reduced, these segments should still be representative of the set in its entirety. Second, pertinent themes within the coded data are identified. Themes are defined as the abstract meanings behind the text. Although certain themes may come up often within the data, prevalence is not the only reason for their identification. Themes can be identified by going through the coded data and attempting to group segments of text using underlying patterns that certain data share. These basic themes are considered the lowest ordered themes in the thematic network. The third step concerns the construction of the thematic network. This process involves grouping themes into categories that serve to support arguments for the development of one or more global themes. These categories are hierarchical in order. Organizing themes involve clustering basic themes together and labeling them based on underlying issues that they share. Global themes are the main claims the researcher is making about the meanings behind the data set. Finally, for the last step, the resulting thematic network needs to be explained and analyzed in a conclusive report. This report summarizes the thematic network and provides exemplar excerpts from the data set to support the authors' arguments (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The first author transcribed all the interviews verbatim. Transcripts were returned to participants for verification; none of the participants provided edits. Each participant's transcript or questionnaire response was thoroughly read through multiple times before being coded. All quotes pertaining to northern cultures, the differences between northern life to southern life, responsibilities of working for the program, challenges participants faced, expansion of any skills, and influences on future life were separated into their respective codes. With assistance from the second author, these codes were grouped into four overarching global themes: enhanced self-confidence, independence, and self-efficacy; cultural learning; sensitivity to social issues; and influence on career path.

Results

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires from nine former employees of the NWTAP led to the identification

of four main themes, which we present below.

Increased Self-Confidence, Independence, and Self-Efficacy

Overall, working for the NWTAP was a challenging experience that resulted in increases in the participants' self-confidence, independence, and self-efficacy. All former employees in this study dealt with what they experienced as a great deal of responsibility during their work term. Grant plainly stated, "this is a big job for one person." Karen explained that she, "was the only trained lifeguard in the communities" in which she offered waterfront programming. Karen found it, "was always a bit nerve wracking in case anything happened." Christine added that neither of the employees – other than her - who worked with her at one of the pools she ran in the NWT could swim, which left her feeling that she had more responsibility than she had when working in southern Canada.

Angela noted, "I had the sole responsibility of running the waterfront with very little direction. I had to be my own boss. It helped me mature, too. It felt like a lot of responsibility at the time." These duties allowed Angela to realize that she could handle the responsibility, which improved her self-confidence. Similarly, through his position, Ethan was forced to "be more independent, it helped me to be more organized and... not to limit myself." Grant found that sole leadership of the pool, "[provided] a situation where you can run with ideas and go way further than like [Canadian city] [where] you would be bogged down with all the different levels of leadership." Christine reported that she treated the freedom that came with this increased responsibility as an opportunity to become a lot more creative because

I was like, 'we need this,' and they were like, 'well in [this community] the next barge comes in three months.' Okay so you know, I needed straps for the spinal boards so we're gonna get seatbelts, and I need non-slip paint, so we're going to mix in sand. In doing things like that, I think I became much more creative.

The other participants experienced similar degrees of independence following their work experiences: "I think if you're open-minded, [then] this is an exceptional opportunity. The potential for personal growth is astounding" (Alexis).

Loneliness was a prevalent theme among participants' experiences working for the NWTAP. Stephanie, Karen, and Angela all identified loneliness as one of the worst aspects about working at the waterfronts and pools in their respective NWT communities. Christine noted that, "there was no internet there, so you were really isolated. It was just mail basically and maybe a phone call once a week, and mail took about two weeks, so it was pretty lonely and isolated at the time." Interestingly, this seclusion was also an opportunity for independence. For example, although Angela felt extremely lonely during her summer in the NWT, she noticed a benefit in having all this time to herself: "I was far from friends

(although I did make new ones) and family... This was pre-internet, [pre-]cell phone days... I had no choice but to be independent and make my own decisions.”

Knowledge about Indigenous Cultures in the NWT

The NWTAP employees who participated in this research reported knowing very little about Indigenous cultures and life in the NWT before their work terms. Stephanie revealed that prior to her experience, “I had absolutely no knowledge of the North.” Ethan went into his experience underestimating the cultural differences between southern and northern communities in Canada: “I thought it was gonna be like Calgary [a major Canadian city] believe it or not. I honestly thought it was going to be a little small town...but it wasn’t like that at all.” Other employees of the program were surprised to find out how different Indigenous communities were from anything they were used to. Chris commented, “I found the community...totally different from anything that I have ever seen before. I am a city boy from Ottawa.” Andrea noted,

Working in the North was my first exposure to any Indigenous peoples, so everything I learned about Indigenous people was built on that foundation...I was exposed to a great deal while living in the North, from the incredible...culture and skills of the Inuit and Inuvialuit people (drum dancing, throat singing, storytelling, hunting, fishing, camping, arts such as felting and carving), to the deep relationships people in the North have (close family ties, the roles of Elders in the community, traditional adoption).

Following their experiences, the NWTAP employees felt much more knowledgeable about Indigenous cultures and Canada as a whole. Through her work, Karen noted that she, “developed an understanding of the North and the culture specific to that community.” Exposure to and knowledge about the North led to a lasting appreciation of northern cultures. She stated, “I have continued to have an interest in other cultures and northern Canadian cultures in particular.” The participants in this study reported benefitting from the experience of being immersed in other northern cultures and environments: “I definitely had a better understanding of the North and Aboriginal issues after that summer...I feel that I’m a better, more informed Canadian for the experience” (Stephanie).

Enhanced Sensitivity to Social Issues

A recurring theme in participants’ accounts of their experiences working for the NWTAP was the prevalence of social issues in these northern communities. Grant found a host of issues affecting youth within the community in which he worked: “The suicides and issues, the [young] people I worked with, the [youth] who was arrested [who] broke into my house... This all stuck with me.” According to Stephanie, substance abuse was a significant issue within the community in which

she worked. She went on to explain that there were drastic differences between the societal problems in northern communities and those in southern Canada:

I learned that if it hadn't been for the currency that I would not have recognized the town as a part of Canada. I had not had exposure to grinding poverty within Canada prior to this...I grew-up in a middle-class, suburban setting, and I witnessed a lot of violence that summer – it took years for me to reconcile what I had experienced with my flawed vision of Canada.

The remoteness of the communities in which the participants worked illuminated other social issues. Like Andrea, Alexis found the one of the hardest parts about living in the community in which she worked was “how [expensive and] difficult it was to get fresh fruit and vegetables.” Both Stephanie and Karen were surprised by the lack of access to health care in these communities. These social issues deeply affected participants and led them to a newfound desire to get involved: “I learned that Aboriginal people in northern Canada had terrible access to health care and that I wanted to be part of improving that situation” (Stephanie).

Although it was not a theme in all the participants' transcripts, racial tensions posed significant challenges for several of the participants in this study. Suddenly experiencing what it felt like to be a minority resulted in a shift in Christine's perspective: “I learned how people see whiteness...and really the privilege that that gives you...I think it really challenged me in a way that nothing else did.” Andrea described her experience similarly: “I learned so much about my role as a colonizer. It was a four-year process of learning to put aside my assumptions and preconceptions and to listen to what the community members were telling me.”

After working in two northern communities, Chris developed a newfound appreciation for the historic and present issues facing Indigenous peoples: “It's one thing to hear about it or to learn it in classrooms, [but] it is much more shocking [in real life].” With better understanding came a change in employees' perspectives of Indigenous peoples. Alexis noted, “I gained a tremendous amount of respect for First Nations people. The people I met, especially in the more remote communities, were open about their experiences in residential schools. I can't even put into words their strength.” Similarly, Andrea explained that she learned a great deal about “the painful legacy of colonization (mental health problems, suicides, alcohol abuse, family violence).”

The understanding, appreciation, and respect for Indigenous peoples that the participants gained had a profound impact on them. According to Alexis, “this sort of life experience has made me more passionate about...the inequality that still

exists in Canadian society.” Chris revealed that his time in the North, “definitely played a role in how I view Aboriginal issues... most of my Twitter feeds are Aboriginal-issue related.”

Strong Influence on Career Path

Employment by the NWTAP had a notable impact on the future careers of the participants in this study. Many of the participants in this study went on to work in fields closely related to the social issues they learned about within the northern communities in which they worked. Chris now works as a teacher with youth-at-risk because of his experiences in the North, and Stephanie has spent most of her career working as a physician in northern Canada. Ethan is still working as a lifeguard in the North. Alexis’ career path was also strongly influenced by her experience working for the NWTAP:

Working in aquatics gave me a great deal of experience working with children/youth, which essential[ly] shaped the direction of my career. I chose to work in the field of youth addictions and mental health...After some of the experiences I had up north, I’m always able to approach situations with clients/students with calm confidence. This attribute has made me effective in my current position as a school counsellor, working specifically in a mental health program.

Even though Grant was always interested in working in the NWT, “Actually going to the NWT actually motivated me to want to go back...not everyone has positive experiences up there, but for me I did, and for me that’s what motivates me to either work in that area or work supporting initiatives up there.” In fact, Grant chose to attend graduate school to focus on issues pertaining to Indigenous peoples.

Upon reflecting on his time with the NWTAP, Grant noted, “it’s definitely one of the things that I’ll never regret doing.” This quote was echoed by all participants in this study. Karen, for example, was so deeply affected by her experience that it changed her “way of approaching life.” She stated, “[the] skills I developed and honed working in Fort Simpson are part of my personality and way of approaching life.” Following her work in Fort Simpson, she worked in a healthcare setting in an Indigenous community in British Columbia. Angela also considered the experience to be foundational. She reported that that was “the summer I went from being a teenager to an adult.” Similarly, Stephanie found her employment by the NWTAP influenced the direction of her life. Her experiences in the NWT led her to pursue a career in rural and remote medicine. In fact, she returned to Colville Lake several years ago to work as the local doctor. Alexis met the man she would later marry while working for the NWTAP and considered the conversations she had with members of the community in which she worked to be a significant turning point in her life. Finally, Andrea explained the profound

influence that working for the NWTAP had on her:

[It] was one of the absolute formative events of my life. It completely changed me. I used to want to work overseas exclusively, but now I am aware of the injustice and postcolonial effects in my own country I want to be part of working to make things better here in Canada. The job I have, the location I live in, the politics I support, the neighbour I want to be are all a direct result of working in the North.

Like Andrea, most of the participants explained that working for the NWTAP changed their career path and, in turn, changed their lives. In fact, when asked directly, all participants responded that they felt that the experience was a SLE.

Discussion

For over sixty years, the NWTAP has employed primarily southern Canadian college and university students to work in isolated communities in the NWT and what is now Nunavut (Giles et al., 2007). To date, no study has investigated the personal or professional ramifications of working for the NWTAP. While it is easy to dismiss summer employment as a lifeguard and swimming instructor as “just a summer job,” our research shows that working for the NWTAP resulted in the expansion of multiple dimensions of the employees’ lives and thus met the criteria for being a SLE.

A review of 35 youth expeditions revealed that participants returned from their experience with improvements in their self-identity, self-efficacy, confidence, and cultural sensitivity (Stott et al., 2015). Through our research, we found similar results. Working for the NWTAP was a difficult job and employees were often given little guidance, which resulted in them feeling as though that had a large amount of responsibility and the need to develop new skills and abilities. Consequently, employees were challenged to become more independent in their decision-making. By the end of their work terms, employees of the program clearly experienced personal growth with notable enhancements in their self-confidence, independence, and self-efficacy. Altogether, the increased self-efficacy coupled with a development of independence and self-confidence resulted in an expansion of employees’ sense of self, a key component of an SLE (Merriam & Clark, 1993).

Notably, researchers found that participants of an outdoor youth expedition considered the exposure to new cultures to be the single most important factor in the program resulting in the experience being an SLE (Takano, 2010). For former employees of the NWTAP, this was also an important factor in their work being an SLE. The interviewees knew very little about Indigenous cultures and gained new knowledge and understanding of northern Indigenous cultures following their experiences. Working for the NWTAP transformed the employees’ perspectives on northern and Indigenous ways of living. Following their newfound knowledge of

northern Indigenous cultures, study participants indicated that they became passionate about addressing issues of important to Indigenous peoples.

Prior to their time in the North, employees were unaware of many of the social issues wrought by colonialism in northern communities. Their employment experiences changed the participants' views of Canada by exposing them to a part of the country they had never seen, which gave the employees a greater sensitivity to the issues that many northerners, especially Indigenous Peoples, face. Much like the AFL study by Gartner-Manzon and Giles (2015), these realizations fostered an enhanced sensitivity towards social issues that resulted in a significant impact on the employees' perspectives – a criterion for an experience to be considered an SLE (Merriam & Clark, 1993), and had an especially important influence on interviewees' future employment.

Subjectively Valued Experience

Chawla (2006) stated that for an experience to be significant, it must have a lasting impact on the individual that persists after the event has passed. Most of the participants were deeply affected by their experiences working for the NWTAP and ended up working in fields related to the issues that they identified as being important to members of the northern communities in which they had worked. For example, since being employed by the program, Stephanie has pursued a career in rural and remote medicine, and Alexis works in the field of youth addictions and mental health, career choices that they both explained were directly influenced by their experiences working in the NWT. Additionally, when asked directly, all employees considered their experiences in the North to be a SLE with many claiming that the experience changed the course of their lives, thus satisfying Merriam and Clark's (1993) requirement that an experience must be subjectively valued as important in the individual's life to be considered an SLE.

Conclusion

Experiences can be classified as significant when they result in a lasting change within an individual's life (Michael et al., 2018). SLEs are associated with the expansion and transformation of behaviours and attitudes that are subjectively valued. The experience of working for the NWTAP resulted in an expansion of the knowledge and skills of employees. This expansion led to a transformation of the perspectives and worldviews of the participants in this study. Following their work terms, employees altered their life and career paths substantially to pursue these new passions. Finally, all the participants in this study retrospectively identified their experiences working for the NWTAP as significant despite the fact that the participants only worked for the program for six to sixteen weeks. These results suggested that even relatively short work experiences can have significant impact on one's life, which is an important addition to the SLE literature.

Though many may dismiss summer jobs as lifeguards and swimming instructors in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic as short-term and relatively unimportant to young adults' lives, our study shows that, quite to the contrary, they can play important roles in changing peoples' lives.

References

- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 385-405.
- Baker, A. C., & Giles, A. R. (2008). Pedagogy of the front float: A reflection on dialogue, aquatics programming and research in Taloyoak, Nunavut. *Arctic*, 61(3), 233- 242.
- Baumbusch, J. (2010). Semi-structured interviewing in practice-close research. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, 15(3), 255-258.
- Beckett, M., Da Vanzo, J., Sastry, N., Panis, C., & Peterson, C. (2001). The quality of retrospective data: An examination of long-term recall in a developing country. *Journal of Human Resources*, 36(3), 593-625.
- Cai, D., & Rodriguez, J. (1996). Adjusting to cultural differences: The Intercultural Adaptation Model. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 1(2), 31-42.
- Chawla, L. (2006). Research methods to investigate significant life experiences: review and recommendations. *Environmental Education Research*, 12(3-4), 359-374.
- Carlson, J. S., & Widaman, K. F. (1988). The effects of study abroad during college on attitudes toward other cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 12(1), 1-17. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(88\)90003-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(88)90003-x)
- Drabble, L., Trocki, K. F., Salcedo, B., Walker, P. C., & Korcha, R. A. (2016). Conducting qualitative interviews by telephone: Lessons learned from a study of alcohol use among sexual minority and heterosexual women. *Qualitative social work: Research and Practice*, 15(1), 118–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015585613>
- Gartner-Manzon, S., & Giles, A. R. (2016). A case study of the lasting impacts of employment in a development through sport, recreation and the arts programme for Aboriginal youth. *Sport in Society*, 19, 159–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2015.1067770>
- Goodman, L. A. (1961). Snowball sampling. *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 148-170.
- Harris, L. R. (2010). Mixing interview and questionnaire methods: Practical problems in aligning data. *Practical Assessment and Evaluation*, 15(1), 1-19.
- McCullough, G., Huebner, E. S., & Laughlin, J. E. (2000). Life events, self-

- concept, and adolescents' positive subjective well-being. *Psychology in the Schools*, 37(3), 281-290. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1520-6807\(200005\)37:3<281::AID-PITS8>3.0.CO;2-2](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6807(200005)37:3<281::AID-PITS8>3.0.CO;2-2)
- Merriam, S. B., & Clark, M. C. (1993). Learning from life experience: What makes it significant? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 12(2), 129-138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260137930120205>
- Michael, K., Solenko, L., Yakhnich, L., & Karnieli-Miller, O. (2018). Significant life events as a journey of meaning making and change among at-risk youths. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(4), 441-460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1385748>
- Novick G. (2008). Is there a bias against telephone interviews in qualitative research? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 31(4), 391-398. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20259>
- Lee, S. H. (2006). Constructing effective questionnaires. In J.A. Perishing (Ed.), *Handbook of human performance technology* (pp. 760-779). Pfeiffer Wiley.
- Rich, K. (2013). Contextually appropriate aquatic programming in Canada's North: The Shallow Water Pool Lifeguard Certification. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 33(1), 49.
- Stott, T., Allison, P., Felter, J., & Beames, S. (2015). Personal development on youth expeditions: a literature review and thematic analysis. *Leisure Studies*, 34(2), 197-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2013.841744>
- Takano, T. (2010). A 20-year retrospective study of the impact of expeditions on Japanese participants. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 10, 77-94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2010.505707>
- Wilson, T. D., Meyers, J., & Gilbert, D. T. (2003). "How happy was I, anyway?" A retrospective impact bias. *Social Cognition*, 21(6), 421-446.
- Zapf, M. K. (1993). Remote practice and culture shock: Social workers moving to isolated northern regions. *Social Work*, 38, 694-704. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/38.6.694>
- Zorn, C. R. (1996). The long-term impact on nursing students of participating in international education. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 12, 106-110. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s87557223\(96\)80056-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s87557223(96)80056-1)