

Being in nature and the development of personal values

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Being in nature and being active in nature (which roughly means an area or a period of time where nature perception is dominant) offers other experiences than being or being active in a place where man-made things are the dominant focus of perception. The experiences offered in the natural environment seem to be an expression of the connection between nature and human being (as a part of nature) and can also refer to the aspect of a conscious experience of values (Liedtke 2005; Liedtke 2007). This, in turn, raises the question if experiences in nature reflect or even change the personal motivational values of young people?

Project: 24 hours outdoors

We designed a project where school children between the ages of 11 and 13 years took part in an activity called “24 hours outdoors”. In this project the children had the chance to be concerned (active) with aspects of living in the outdoors (cooking, preparing shelter, sleeping outdoors), challenges, calming down, playing, cooperating and being creative. The project took place in two settings: (1) the city of Hamburg using parks, small green areas and the schoolyard, or (2) in a rural area approximately 60 kilometers south of the city center of Hamburg in a park-like area with a small lake. The children spent the night in simple shelters using their own sleeping bags or blankets. The project “24 hours outdoors” was arranged in cooperation with two schools. Study participants (i.e., school children) could choose to participate or not.

Methods

Two school groups with a total number of 40 children took part in the project. The influence of the project on personal values was reported mainly by the 21-Item Portraits Value Questionnaire (Schmidt et al. 2007; Schwartz 2002) in a pre-post-design and through additional interviews and observation (Flick 1995).

Results

The results of PVQ-survey showed significant changes in 7 of 21 items of the Portraits Value Questionnaire (see table 1).

The value orientations *power* and *self-direction* (in their specific item) became more important during the course of the project while achievement, security, tradition, benevolence and universalism became less important. Although some of the changes seem to be quite marginal the level of significance is very high.

Discussion

Two aspects seem to be interesting to discuss: on the one hand significant changes in personal values were observed. On the other hand, what explains the increase in some value orientations and the decrease in others?

The observed changes in values, which were (probably) triggered by only two days in the outdoors seems rather improbable because value orientations are something persistent. However, nature appears to be a phenomenon that affects human beings in special ways. The philosopher Martin Seel (1996) showed that nature is a sphere that gives not only special opportunities to calm down because nature (as a phenomenon) is not allocated with utility and diction – in contrast to man-made things that are nearly all allocated with utility and diction – but also corresponds in a special manner with an individual’s ideas of life. When nature is perceived as beautiful there is a correspondence with an idea of a successful and “right” life. When nature is perceived as ugly there is *no* correspondence with these ideas of a successful and right life (Seel 1996). But nature is also a special sphere because it corresponds not only with ideas of life but also with liveliness itself. Therefore, nature is a sphere where people can feel connected to the liveliness of the world (Liedtke 2005; Liedtke 2007). From these theories, nature seems to offer special qualities that may explain the changes observed in our study. The way the change in personal values took place is only understandable in connection with the qualitative data from interviews and observation (Hack 2011). Because a differentiated discussion of all changes is not possible here due to space limitations, it suffice to say that it appears that the changes in value orientations lead to a status that better fits an individual’s personal abilities and everyday life.

Table 1. Results of PVQ-survey (figures form 1-6, the lower the figure the more the described person is like oneself)

Item in 21 PVQ	Mean Pre-test	Mean Post-test	statistical significance
Achievement: Being very successful is important to him. He likes to impress other people (Item 13)	3,00	3,07	.00
Benevolence It's very important to him to help the people around him. He wants to care for other people (Item 12)	2,48	2,93	.02
Power It is important to him to be in charge and tell others what to do. He wants people to do what he says (Item 17)	4,23	3,72	.01
Self-Direction: Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him. He likes to do things in his own original way (Item 1)	3,03	2,35	.02
Security: It is important to him to live in secure surroundings. He avoids anything that might endanger his safety (Item 5)	3,21	3,30	.04
Tradition: He thinks it's important not to ask for more than what you have. He believes that people should be satisfied with what they have (Item 9)	3,05	3,47	.03
Universalism: It is important to him to listen to people who are different from him. Even when he disagrees with them, he still wants to understand them (Item 8)	2,18	2,47	.00

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