A REASON TO STAY: THE JEWISH CAMP COUNSELOR EXPERIENCE AS IT RELATES TO JOB RETENTION AMONG COUNSELORS AT JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS

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Abstract

The American Summer Camp industry is a large, growing, and significant aspect of America’s recreation and education systems with more than 14,000 day and overnight camps in the United States. Camp counselor retention is important to the business of camping because veteran staff play a key role in a camp’s success by helping to preserve camp culture and maintain camp traditions. Veteran staff serve an important role in the naturally occurring peer-training and peer-support environment that camps depend on. Using Achievement Motivation Theory as a theoretical framework, this Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) sought to answer the following research question: what are the experiences of veteran camp counselors at Jewish Summer Camps and how do counselors make sense of their experiences as they relate to their motivations for returning to work at the camp beyond three summers? Five veteran camp counselors were interviewed in this study, representing four different camps. The camps ranged from Conservative and Reform affiliated camps to a Jewish Community Center camp. Findings from this research showed that counselors stayed at camp for different reasons. They stayed because they were invested in their campers and want to continue to contribute to their campers’ childhoods. They stayed for their own friends, for the Jewish connection, and especially, because overnight camp offered them an opportunity to gain useful skills that they knew would help them as they moved into specific careers or continued with their education.
Dedication

For my husband, who probably always knew I would finish eventually.

For my kids, who probably thought I would work on this forever.

For my parents, who never seemed to stop being proud of me.

For my teachers, who never gave up on me.

Thank you.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Camp counselor retention is important to the business of camping because veteran staff play a key role in a camp’s success. Veteran staff help to preserve camp culture, help to maintain camp traditions year after year, and serve an important role in the naturally occurring peer-training and peer-support environment that camps depend on (Byrnes, 2004; Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2011; Powell, 2002). Staff who come back to camp for multiple summers tend to be driven to keep improving their own individual performance and also improving the camp experience in general (Byrnes, 2004; Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2011; Powell, 2002). Returning staff do not experience the long adjustment period that so many first-time staffers experience and are able, instead, to plunge deeper into more complicated training topics that will ultimately serve their campers better. When camps don’t (or can't) retain staff, there is a necessary increase in staff-training hours while new staff spend valuable time acclimating to a new place.

There is, in addition, a purely economic factor to a camp administration's desire for high staff retention—the cost of hiring and training new staff is higher than the cost of maintaining current staff (Byrnes, 2004; Powell, 2002). If camps knew how to appeal to staff so that returning to camp for multiple years was more attractive, they would increase overall productivity as well as program quality.

This Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) looked at five veteran camp counselors at Jewish overnight summer camps in the United States and explored the common
phenomena of the young adults’ experiences as counselors, their motivations for returning to their roles as counselors for more than three consecutive summers, and how they make sense of their common experience. While some literature exists on the topic of summer camp counselor retention, many of the studies are quantitative and have not looked in depth at the phenomenology behind counselors’ choices to retain their roles.

**Research Problem**

For those who grew up going to summer camp as kids and loved the experience, coming to work at camp for one year (usually immediately post-high school) is an easy decision. For many recent high school graduates camp provides an easing into a first job experience and may even feel like a continuation of the camper experience. Coming back for a second year may also be an easy decision because counselors often want to spend another summer with friends after their first year away at college (Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2011). Those who come back for a third summer are likely to be choosing camp over internships, spending the summer with new friends, or making more money at a "real job". This is where the biggest drop-off in counselor retention is (Finkelstein, 2013). If camping professionals knew more about what motivates counselors to return for a third, fourth, or even fifth summer they would be better equipped to target their retention efforts, and would succeed at building a more stable and better trained staff for their camps.

The purpose of this research was to discover what motivates camp counselors to keep coming back to work at camp beyond the first two years and in particular, for more than three years. While the biggest drop-off is after the first two summers, as stated above, this project
focused on those who made it through that first ‘cut-off’ point and were heading towards a significantly longer stay at camp. I interviewed five veteran counselors using the in-depth, open question, multi-interview style associated with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is a research method designed to allow a researcher to explore a particular aspect of human experience in an in-depth manner. Phenomenology “provides us with a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 11). The data retrieved will offer camp directors a new understanding of camp counselors’ perspectives and considerations around their commitment to return to their camp jobs. This should lead camp directors to a better sense of how to cultivate a commitment to camp in their staff and to use that information specifically in targeting staff recruitment and increasing their inability to appeal directly to potentially returning staff.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

The American Summer Camp industry is a large, growing, and significant aspect of America’s extra-curricular recreation and education systems with more than 14,000 day and overnight camps in the United States (ACA Facts and Trends, n.d.). Many stakeholders in the industry have an interest in the topic of camp counselor retention. Campers themselves benefit from the continuity that returning staff offer and parents want to be certain that their kids have strong, well trained role models during the one to eight weeks that they are away from home. Camp Directors want to be sure that they are hiring reliable employees and the Boards of
Directors of both for profit and non-profit camps are protecting the reputation of large organizations and, often, large financial investments, as well.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

A gap in the literature exists around the study of camp counselor retention. Few qualitative studies can be found on the subject and there are no qualitative studies of staff retention that focus exclusively on Jewish summer camps. Specifically, in the field of summer camp, there are recent quantitative studies surveying camp staff about their motivation for working at camp that touch on job satisfaction. However, few studies have touched explicitly on the question of motivation and/or longevity in order to explore questions about the number of years staff continue to return to camp. "While a large body of literature supports the developmental benefits of camp for youth, fewer studies have investigated the impacts of camp on camp staff" (Duerden, Witt, Garst, Bialoshcki, Schwarzlose, & Norton, 2014, p. 26). The IPA approach will allow for an in depth exploration into this topic and a deeper understanding of the shared lens through which camp counselors view their experience, especially around the question of whether to return to work at camp.

**Relating the Discussion to Specific Audiences**

This study, which highlights young adult voices as they explore their experiences of being on staff for multiple summers at Jewish summer camps in the Southeast United States, has the potential to interest several audiences. Camp Directors seeking to learn the reasons that some camp counselors choose to keep coming back to their jobs will be able to tailor their staff
recruitment efforts to the specific interests of returning staff members. Other young adults who are considering a long-term commitment to camp will learn why some of their peers keep coming back to camp. Funders and philanthropists who are interested in investing in the Jewish Camping Industry might want to invest in initiatives directly related to camp counselor retention.

**Positionality Statement**

The topic of counselor retention was chosen in part due to the researcher’s personal interest in the subject matter. I have worked professionally with emerging adults for the past 10 years and have been a Jewish Camping Professional for the past three. I am interested in counselor retention as it relates to camper success; as a measurement of the camp’s own administrative success in retaining workers; as a reflection of the priorities and motivations of camp counselors, and as an indication of counselors’ career-related decision-making habits. I strongly believe in the power of summer camp to transform the lives of both campers and counselors.

The interview subjects for this IPA were solicited via email through correspondence with a small group of Camp Director colleagues. I did not know the interviewees personally or professionally prior to the initiation of this research. I am passionate about the subject matter in general and hope the understandings revealed in this paper will influence and improve both the industry as a whole as well as my specific role as a camping professional who is engaged in the hiring of counselors. However, I do not believe that there was any bias expressed in the performing of this research.
Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to understand the motivation of veteran camp counselors at Jewish Summer Camps who choose to return as counselors for more than three years. Rooted in the methods of IPA and with Achievement Motivation Theory as a scaffold, this study asked, what are the experiences of veteran camp counselors at Jewish Summer Camps and how do counselors make sense of their experiences as they relate to their motivations for returning to work at the camp beyond three summers?

Theoretical Framework

Achievement Motivation Theory was used as a framework for this research. Achievement Motivation Theory classifies the potential motives behind the drive to achieve into three categories: a need for achievement, power, or affiliation (Lussier & Achua, 2010; Milner, 2005; Moore, Grabsch, & Rotter, 2010). This theory was developed by David McClelland in the 1950’s when he proposed that there are three specific needs (or categories of needs) which drive behavior: achievement, affiliation, and power. In his book, The Achieving Society (1961) McClelland proposed that these needs are not inherent but instead learned by individuals during their lifetime, and that there is generally some combination of these three needs that motivate people to achieve success. While everyone possesses each of these needs “one of the three needs tends to be dominant in each one of us and motivates our behavior” (Lussier & Achua, 2010, p. 42).

The theoretical framework of Achievement Motivation has been used in recent years when considering the origins of motivation for college students who choose to participate in
optional leadership training (Moore, et al., 2010); as a predictor for career choice and career success, (Janman, 1987; Collins, Hanges, & Locke, 2004); and as a tool for predicting academic goals and academic success among college students (Corker & Donnellan, 2012)

In his 2005 textbook, Organizational Behavior, John Milner explains that based on achievement motivation theory’s structure of needs there are five situations in which people will likely be motivated to achieve. The first situation he describes is one in which a person can personally take ownership over both responsibilities and outcomes; approval from others is not as important as the achievements that come out of a person’s own efforts. Second, Milner describes situations that are characterized by an “intermediate level of difficulty and risk” (Milner, 2005, p. 48). In the third the situation there is explicit feedback on one’s accomplishments. Fourth, Milner describes situations that include circumstances conducive to innovation and creativity. In the fifth situation, there is the ability to foresee future involvement or other opportunities arising from the present.

Achievement Motivation Theory is highly applicable to counselors in the summer camp setting, although a search of the literature did not find that this theory has been used previously in research on this topic. Each of the aforementioned achievement situations is directly applicable to the summer camp setting. When engaging campers in activities, counselors can see almost immediately the success (or failure) of their approach by noticing how campers respond. In this manner counselors are personally taking ownership over both responsibilities and outcomes. The counselor role is defined by intermediate levels of difficulty; being a counselor does not require specific advanced knowledge, however the hours are long and the demand for
attention is high. Counselors are motivated by the explicit feedback that they hope to receive from division and department heads. Counselors count on their opportunities for innovation and creativity and counselors often say that they don't want to come back ‘to do the same job again’; rather they expect an increased ability to foresee future involvement.

Knowing the motivation profile of a group of people is useful because it can “explain and predict behavior and performance” (Lussier & Achua, 2010, p. 44). Using the Achievement Motivation Theory as a theoretical framework for this research offered a platform to consider interviewees’ needs-based motivations while specifically helping to categorize interviewees’ particular motivation for their own job retention. Combining this with the IPA approach resulted in the construction of a motivation profile for returning camp counselors.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of counselors at summer Jewish camps, how they make sense of their experiences, and why they return summer after summer (or do not). This literature review starts by offering a brief overview of the North American summer camp industry as well as an overview of the Jewish camping industry. Next, the experience of summer camp will be explored from multiple stakeholder perspectives. These stakeholders include the families who are seeking enrichment opportunities and quality supervision for their children, the campers themselves, and the staff or camp counselors. The staff experience will be explored in depth by considering counselor demographics; the motivating factors for counselors coming to work at camp; and what counselors are looking to get from their summer camp experience. This literature review will also explore current thinking related to counselor recruitment and retention. The topic of employee retention will be explored in general, as it relates to other seasonal businesses, and specifically as it relates to the business of Jewish summer camp.

Due to a general lack of published literature on the general subject of summer camps, the counselor experience, and the specific topic of counselor retention at summer camps, the reader will notice that many of the statistics quoted are derived from personal communications with experts in the field as well as prominent websites of the industry such as that of the American Camp Association and the Foundation for Jewish Camp.
The North American Summer Camp Industry

History of the American Camping Movement

Summer camps in North America have been an integral feature in the lives of children, their parents, and their counselors for well over a century (Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011). Educational camping in America is thought to have originated in the mid 1800’s when Frederick William Gunn, a schoolmaster from Connecticut, founded “Gunnery Camp” and began to take some of his students to learn about nature and to experience a replicated ‘life of a soldier’ (Zola, 2006). Camping as a movement in America began in the 1880s as a general antidote to industrialization (Paris, 2008; Van Slyck, 2006; Zola, 2006). Starting in the Northeastern United States as a means to allow urban children some respite from the heat, disease, and sometimes boredom of the city in the summertime, the first summer camps combined a natural setting with opportunities to live a temporarily rustic life far away from the bustle of city life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These camps were the result of a convergence of the ‘Fresh Air’ movement, designed to combat undesirable aspects of rampant urban industrialization, and the Social Gospel movement which was trying to promote a more ‘down to earth’ and socially responsible Christianity (Zola, 2006). Camp offered children a chance to learn “nostalgic skills” (Paris, 2008, p. 8), skills rarely needed in their modern urban lives. like canoeing and cooking on an open fire. Furthermore, camps offered a summer vacation from school that was not for the explicit purpose of pitching in to help with family agricultural work. This was still a very new concept in American culture. Parents needed a safe and stimulating alternative for their kids (Van Slyck, 2006).
History of Jewish Camping

The roots of specifically Jewish camping run parallel to those of the general camping movement in America. The establishment of Camp Lehman in Connecticut by the Jewish Working Girls’ Vacation Society in 1893 and, a few years later in 1901, the founding of the Educational Alliance Camp in New York state, marked the beginning of Jewish Camping in America. The missions of these two camps were very similar to those of their secular counterparts with one added goal: the Americanization of Jewish youth (Sarna, 2006). Judaism and Jewish education did not play a large role in these early Jewish camps both because the staff was often not Jewish and because the goals of the camps were not explicitly Jewish. These camps sought to build character by exposing campers to outdoor living and nature and to offer an alternative to the urban lives they were living at home (Sarna, 2006).

Just a few years later however, in 1919, this trend shifted and the first Jewish Educational summer camp was born. Cejwin was started by the Central Jewish Institute’s Albert Schoolman and Leah Konovitz as a method of helping students maintain the Jewish learning they had accomplished during the school year. Cejwin offered opportunities to continue Jewish learning throughout the summer when traditional school was not in session. By the late 1920’s two more camps had been established with the express purpose of providing informal, pluralist, Jewish educational opportunities for boys and girls—Camp Modin which was started in 1922 and Camp Achvah founded in 1927. All three camps were founded on principles of informal education and the kind of immersion that was possible only in a summer residential setting away, from the day-to-day urban lives of the campers (Krasner, 2011; Sarna, 2006).
The Jewish camping movement accelerated in the late 1930’s through the 1940’s just as traditional Jewish schools were also becoming more popular in the United States and against the global backdrop of World War II. Between 1941 and 1943 six different pluralist Jewish overnight camps were established across the United States from Los Angeles to Chicago to Massachusetts (Sarna, 2006). These were followed a few years later by the first two movement-specific camps when in 1947 the first Conservative Movement Camp Ramah was founded in Wisconsin (Reimer, 2010), and in 1951 the first Reform Movement camp started in Chicago (Sarna, 2006).

Currently, there are more than 14,000 summer camps in North America including approximately 8,400 overnight camps and 5,600 day camps (American Camp Association, 2014). Roughly 9,500 of these camps are managed by nonprofit boards and 2,500 are privately owned (American Camp Association, 2014). Summer Camp is a growing industry, with the total number of camps in North America having increased over 70% since 2002, (ACA Facts and Trends, n.d.). More than 14 million children and adults attend summer camp each summer, (ACA Facts and Trends, n.d.). "Summer camps rank second only to schools in the number of children who attend," (Van Slyck, 2006, as cited in Ventura & Garst, 2013, p. 65).

Day Camps
Approximately 28% of the camps accredited by the American Camping Association are day camps (ACA Facts and Trends, n.d.). Day camps range in session length from a few days to summer-long programs that run five days a week for several months. Day camps often specialize in a particular sport or activity, however, there are also many traditional day camps that mirror
the diverse curriculum of their classic overnight counterparts—a little swimming, some hiking in
the woods, arts and crafts, a taste of sports, singing, etc.…The age range for both campers and
counselors is generally a bit younger at day camps than at overnight camps (ACA Find a Camp,
n.d.).

Day camps offer enormous benefits to children who attend them. The opportunity to
spend their days with their peers in a semi-structured environment, to learn new skills, to be
cared for by their teenage counselors, to spend time outdoors getting exercise...all these
opportunities are of great value to kids (Kimmelman, 2011). However, due to the non-
immersive nature of day camps, the impact is very different from that of their overnight camp
equivalents. The role of a camp counselor at a day camp is also quite different, since day camp
counselor duties end when both they and the children travel home at the end of each day. This
study will focus on overnight camps in which the counselors are responsible for campers 24
hours a day, 7 days a week. For that reason, the remainder of this literature review will focus on
overnight camps.

Traditional Overnight Camps

Traditional, non-religious, camps make up the vast majority of summer camps in the
United States. They vary by geographic location, size, types of activities offered, whether they
accept campers of more than one gender, etc., but in many ways, they are more similar than they
are different. For the most part, traditional summer camps share the mission of offering a fun,
safe environment in which kids can try new things, make friends, spend time outdoors, and grow.
The peer-rich environment of summer camp and the leadership of counselors who are often only
a few years older than their campers are particularly significant fixtures at summer camp, and represent a large part of what campers remember about the summer years later (Thompson, 2012). In particular, the presence and influence of counselors is a significant fixture at all overnight camps. While campers will remember certain activities that they participate in, especially any *firsts* that they encounter at camp, campers place the relationships that form with their counselors in a special category of summer experiences (Wallace, 2008). Many former campers rate their camp counselors as some of the “most influential people in their lives” (Wallace, 2008, p. 1) both in and out of camp itself. In other words, the role modeling that counselors offer during the course of a few weeks each summer often carries over into campers’ thoughts and actions throughout the school year.

**Religiously Affiliated Camps**

Religiously affiliated camps represent just over 20% of all summer camps (including both overnight and day camps) accredited by the American Camping Association (Ferguson & Burch, 2011). These camps provide many aspects of the traditional summer camp atmosphere, like their secular counterparts, by offering children the opportunity to play soccer, softball and other sports, to learn photography, art, and wood crafts, and to participate in activities such as horseback riding, swimming, and canoeing. However, Religiously Affiliated Camps also include faith-based programing in the camp schedule, designed to “nurture spiritual growth through the camp and retreat experience” (Religiously Affiliated Camps website, n. d.). Clergy from various faiths agree that religiously affiliated camps are an important immersive opportunity for children
and counselors to explore their faith in a peer-rich, experiential framework (Ferguson, 2008). More than 39 different religions or denominations are represented by religious camps in the United States (Personal communication with Deb Bialeschki, 11/6/15).

**Jewish Camps Today**

The Jewish experience at Jewish summer camp is hard to define (Frisch, 2012). In some camps it is the maintaining of Jewish dietary laws; the Jewish weekly ritual of Shabbat with its prayers and songs and generally altered daily schedule; the blessing of meals and other daily rituals in Hebrew with traditional Jewish prayers, (Baer, 2012; Frisch, 2012). Jewish camps combine this foundation of Jewish ritual practice with the teaching of Jewish values such as friendship and teamwork; service and responsibility; a love of Israel; an appreciation for nature; and a respect for leadership (Frisch, 2012). However, the key ingredient to Jewish summer camp is the specific combination of Jewish ritual practice, Jewish values education, and the strong foundation of experiential learning applications (Chazan, 1991).

Jewish camps serve over 70,000 children each summer (Cohen, Miller, Sheskin, & Torr, 2011). Jewish camps range in movement and denominational affiliation (or lack thereof as is the case with the pluralist and the Jewish Community Center-affiliated camps) as well as in many other ways: session length; diversity of offerings; whether they serve campers of more than one gender, etc. However, no matter how different the activity selection, gender representation, or geographic location might be at each of the camps, there are common threads among the mission statements of these Jewish camps. Phrases such as build Jewish identity; create Jewish community; complemented by a Jewish environment; foster an understanding of Jewish heritage:
designed to strengthen the Jewish future speckle the sentences about nurturing fun; building teamwork and sportsmanship; cultivating responsibility; and encouraging the development of strong friendships (Grinspoon Foundation, n.d.) and are repeated across many Jewish camps’ mission statements. Literature about Jewish camping, specifically, indicates the benefits of some particularly Jewish aspects of the inherent peer-led experience (Cohen, et al., 2011; Sales, Samuel, & Boxer, 2011; Sales & Saxe, 2002). At Jewish camp, campers have the opportunity not only to participate in Jewish rituals, but also to explore the meaning of those rituals with counselors who are just a few years older than they are. These young adult counselors are often still searching for the religious and spiritual meanings of these customs and are in a unique position to pass on their enthusiasm and knowledge to their campers (Friedman & Zisenwine, 1998; Mykoff, 2009; Sales & Saxe, 2002). This offers young Jewish campers a unique opportunity not only to learn basic physical and social skills from their counselors but also to have a specifically Jewish connection with spiritual and religious role models who are only a few years older than they are.

The Value of Summer Camp

The Value of Summer Camp for Parents

Parents send their kids to camp for many reasons. Some parents simply need a safe place that cares for their children when school is not in session. Some parents want their kids to develop a particular skill, to make new friends, to be outdoors, and/or to try new things. Many parents who were campers themselves know the role summer camp plays in developing
independence, encouraging empathy, increasing selflessness, and improving tolerance (Kimmelman, 2011). Parents value the relationships that their kids form at camp—both with their camper-peers and with their young adult counselors. Parents also value the opportunities that their kids have when they are away from home—the chances to try new things far from parental supervision (Thompson, 2012). Parents know that counselors will encourage their children to face physical challenges and to engage in healthy risk taking in a way that they, as adults and parents, will not be able to (Thompson, 2012). Parents also see camp as an opportunity for their children to experience unique opportunities to develop their own identity that will allow them to gain the valuable skill of independence (Himmelfarb, 1989; Thompson, 2012).

**The Value of Summer Camp for Campers**

Summer camps provide important educational and social experiences for children (Marcus, 2010; Sales, et al., 2011; Sales & Saxe, 2002). Overnight summer camp experiences are important for children because they foster physical, social, and spiritual growth (Henderson, Bialeschki, & James, 2007; Sales, et al, 2011). The immersive experience of being away from home for 24 hours a day, for an extended period of time, allows for a sustained resetting of behaviors resulting in the acquisition of positive social skills (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler & Henderson, 2006). Participation in overnight summer camps, even for as short as one week, has been shown to increase children’s self-esteem as well as their problem-solving capabilities.
Summer camp has also been described as a place that encourages positive risk taking in both the physical and the social realm (Thurber, et al., 2006).

**Physical growth.** Opportunities for physical activity are frequently one of the primary attractions that bring campers to summer camp (Dworken cited in Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007; Thompson, 2012). Children often initially go to camp to acquire physical, tangible skills such as horseback riding, swimming, theatre, sports, rock climbing, gymnastics, or any of the many other specialty programs that summer camps offer. In addition, the summer camp campus itself generally provides increased potential for physical activity because of the manner in which campers move from place to place around the property (Hickerson & Henderson, 2010). By offering both team sports such as soccer, volleyball, and kickball as well as individual physical activities such as dance and fitness, the physical activity available at summer camps doubles as an opportunity to teach both team building and self-sufficiency (Hinton & Buchanan, 2015).

**Social growth.** The skills that kids come home with often extend far beyond the borders of those organized camp activities. Research shows that children come home from camp with increased confidence, an ability to make more independent decisions, a capacity to be more comfortable in new social situations, and more self-assurance when trying new things (Connors, Falk, & Epps, 2010; Sales, et al., 2011; Wallace, 2013). In a study conducted by the American Camping Association (ACA), “Campers, parents, and camp staff all reported significant increases in campers' self-esteem, peer relationships, independence…friendship skills, values and decisions [after overnight camp attendance]" (ACA, 2005, as cited in Ventura & Garst,
Studies have shown that camp helps kids with the development of social skills and in gaining “a greater appreciation for those others who are different from themselves” (Henderson, et al., 2007, p. 762). In addition, the overnight camp climate is especially conducive to fostering strong friendships. As Michael Thompson put it in his book, Homesick and Happy (2012), the amount of time available for socializing during the school year is literally nothing compared with the 24/7 social opportunities presented to kids at camp even if kids are at camp for only a few days. The intensity of the immersive social experience is unique to overnight camp.

**Spiritual growth.** In this context, spirituality is understood as the “intrinsinc capacity of the human for self-transcendence” and the understanding that each human is “rooted in something larger than just the self” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 1). Spirituality is not the same as religion; rather it is that ability to see oneself as an integral piece within a larger puzzle. Summer camps, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof, provide “a kind of spirituality that helps develop social capital and morality” (Thurber, et al., 2006, p. 243). A longitudinal study of youth outcomes and growth at summer camp conducted by Thurber and colleagues (2006) found that spiritual growth was more strongly reported by those campers attending a religiously affiliated summer camp. However, a significant number of the 3,395 families surveyed noted some form of spiritual growth during their camp experience regardless of the camps’ spiritual or religious affiliation (Thurber et al., 2006). Opportunities for expressing creativity, for connecting with nature, for participating in traditions, and for just slowing down all provide opportunities for spiritual growth at summer camp (Ferguson, 2007).
The Value of Summer Camp for Staff

Camp is not just for campers and their parents. Overnight camps employ a combined total of more than 1,500,000 counselors each summer to serve in roles ranging from general educator to lifeguard to sport coach to dance instructor and more (ACA Facts and Trends, n.d.). The designation of “counselor” for the purpose of this project, refers to those seasonal employees at overnight camps, generally aged 17-22 who are employed for 6-10 weeks over the summer and who play a direct role in camper care and education. In this light, the term will not be used to discuss kitchen or facilities staff who, while perhaps coming from a relatively similar demographic, have very dissimilar job responsibilities regarding their direct contact with campers.

The traditional age for camp counselors is the result of a combination of factors. The peer-led atmosphere of camp is strengthened when the difference in age between the counselors and the oldest campers at camp is kept at a relative minimum (Thompson, 2012). On the other hand, that age difference must be great enough for even those oldest campers to see their counselors as authority figures and role models. These staff are therefore uniquely positioned in camp to be the primary, though temporary, guardians of children who are not many years younger than they are themselves. This relative age proximity creates an environment rich with peer leadership. Camps depend on the counselor cohort to create the magic of camp; it is in many ways the opportunity itself of forming a connection between camper and young adult counselors that makes summer camp so special for campers (Thompson, 2012).
Although it is true that the camp staff experience is an integral part of the camper experience (Henderson et al. 2007), staff are not merely at camp to fulfill their role as educators and to be role models for their campers. Staff are, in many ways, experiencing their own version of camp, a parallel camp exclusively for staff (Garst, Franz, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, 2009; Sales, et al., 2011). However, not much has been written about camp from the perspective of these young professionals. In fact, the field of camping is substantially lacking in research focused on the camp staff experience (Garst, et al., 2009; Henderson, et al., 2007).

It is important to note that the sheer availability of these young adults is itself a relatively new development. Jeffrey Arnett, in his seminal 2000 paper, coined the term emerging adulthood to describe that period of late teens through the age of 25. This period is at once a continuation of adolescence as well as a period of investigation into adulthood. Arnett proposes various examples of how societal changes and the affect they have had on this age group has led to a very different life-stage for these emerging adults, including a general trend towards a postponement of marriage and parenthood in recent decades. In addition to societal timeline shifts, or perhaps as a result of them, there remains little consistency in terms of societal expectation for this demographic--upon completion of high school there are many possible and (perhaps equally important) socially acceptable pathways that can be pursued. While many social scientists agree that identity formation begins in the teenage years (Adams, 1999, as cited in Arnett, 2000), there continues to be a strong focus on identity development during emerging adulthood as well, often taking the ideas that began in adolescence one step further. Regarding the role of work in these years, Arnett comments that, “in emerging adulthood work experiences
become more focused on preparation for adult work roles” (Arnett, 2000, p. 474). This possible source of motivation for these emerging adults in their work will be explored in greater detail at a later point in this paper.

**Staff Retention**

The retention rate among staff at summer camps varies widely, with an average of 56% of staff returning year to year (ACA, 2008, as cited in McCole, Jacobs, Lindley, & McAvoy, 2012). While this level of staff retention seems to be holding steady (Wilson, 2015), Camp Directors and other researchers have stated that increasing staff retention is an important goal for camp success (Byrnes, 2010). “Getting competent and caring staff is one of the biggest challenges that camp directors face,” (Henderson, et al., 2007, p. 758). A 2011 survey conducted by the American Camp Association showed that while the mean return rate for staff is around half, the variation is high with some camps reporting as low as 25% of staff returning and some camps reporting as high as 75% retention (ACA, 2011, as cited in McCole et al., 2012). These data suggest that high staff turnover is not inevitable; some camps have managed to buck the trend and have achieved a high percentage of staff retention. In other words, someone is doing something right regarding staff retention and there is a chance that other camps could enjoy the same benefits of staff consistency too, if they could learn the reasons behind certain camp’s success rates.
The Benefits of High Staff Retention

Camp directors spend both time and money to recruit and train new staff each year. Hours are spent reaching out to potential staff through social media and at employment fairs. The interview process itself takes time and energy; and once hired, new staff require additional hours of training that previously trained staff do not (McCole, et al., 2012). All of these resources could be spent on other pursuits were it not necessary to recruit so many new staff members each year.

The average number of summers that most counselors work at camp is two or three (Sales & Saxe, 2011); at some point during their career as college students these young adults are choosing to dedicate their summers to other pursuits. "An important part of a counselor's decision to return to camp is to what degree his needs have been met by his camp experience" (Becker, 1984, p. 32). If this is the case, it follows that understanding these needs is important for Camp Directors looking to increase staff retention.

As has been stated previously, there is a dearth of literature focusing on the camp staff experience. However, looking beyond the field of summer camp, literature about workforce planning and employee engagement does offer some conventional wisdom on the topic of employee satisfaction in general and the desires of employees in their workplaces that might be applicable in the case of summer camp counselors as well. “The extent to which employees are satisfied … may directly influence the level of customer satisfaction with their services" (Tutuncu & Kozak, 2007, p. 2). For camp counselors, those customers are the campers and their parents. In many ways, the counselor is the most influential person at camp, and therefore a pivotal factor to running a successful camp (Wallace, 2008). In other words, if the counselors are
content and getting what they need out of the summer they will probably continue to contribute to high quality programing, work hard, and perhaps even maintain their jobs for several years. The question of increasing camp counselor retention is at the heart of this project and the remainder of this literature review will focus on determining counselor needs as well as other methods by which camp directors and other professionals might go about bringing successful counselors back to camp for multiple summers.

**Job Satisfaction**

There is no consensus on the exact needs and motivations with which camp counselors come to work. In general, job satisfaction is the term used by the studies of occupation trends to refer to “the level of contentment employees feel towards their jobs” (Abu-Shamaa, Al-Rabayah, & Khasawneh 2015, p. 1). Any particular employee’s level of job satisfaction is generally understood to be the result of a combination of factors including but not limited to relationships with coworkers and supervisors, availability and accessibility of resources needed for tasks, perceived equity of compensation and, of course, individual attitudes of the specific employees (Abu-Shamaa, et al., 2015; Ali, Anis, & Yadav, 2015). Job satisfaction is used as a catch-all term to allow for a discussion of a wide variety of major factors considered by employees in relation to their desire to continue with or return to a position (Al-Zoubi, 2012; Banker, Konstans, & Mashruwala, 2000; Becker, 1984; Birmingham, 1989; Milner, 2005; Nadeem, 2010). But job satisfaction only describes the outcome (satisfaction) and not the means by which to achieve that
outcome. In order to understand how to keep counselors satisfied it is important to explore what might make them happy in the first place.

Camp counselors are unique in that they have their job for only six to ten weeks of the year and then spend many months away. The pull back to the job must be particularly strong just to overcome basic inertia and the very human experience of *out of sight, out of mind*. The summer camp industry is not the only field facing this challenge of a seasonal workforce. Much of the tourism industry is maintained by seasonal workers (Krakover, 2000; Lee & Moreo, 2007; Lundberg, Gudmundson, & Anderson, 2009). One of the unique factors associated with seasonal employee satisfaction is expectation. Results of a recent study indicate that job satisfaction during a period of employment for seasonal workers has a lot to do with expectations set prior to beginning the job. This may be because the seasonally employed population often looks at their jobs more as an opportunity for an experience and less of an economic necessity. In fact, one particular study found that seasonal employees who came to their jobs out of a general desire to enjoy the geographical area in which they are working were by and large more satisfied compared to those who were at the job for financial reasons (Lee & Moreo, 2007; Lundberg, Gudmundson, & Anderson, 2009). Another study that looked at the motivation of seasonal workers at a ski resort in northern Sweden noted that wage level had an insignificant influence on work motivation, whereas meeting new people had the strongest influence across the sample (Lundberg, et al., 2009). If wage level is equally unimportant to camp counselors, it may be due, at least in part, to a naturally self-selective process that camp counselors go through when looking for a job. The average salary for overnight camp counselors is $235/week (ACA, 2010;
Jacobs, 2010). Comparatively, the average salary for a full-time summer job paying an hourly minimum wage would be approximately $290/week. In other words, it may be that the average camp counselor is not in it for the money because there is no money to be in it for.

These sentiments about counselor incentive to work at camp were supported in an earlier study (Roark, 2000) conducted to assess the motivation of young adults who chose to work at residential overnight summer camps. In that study, the top five motivating factors for staff were listed as “personal satisfaction and enjoyment, opportunity to be a role model for youth, opportunity to work with youth, opportunity to meet people and make new friends, and opportunity for personal growth” (Roark, 2000, as cited in Cressi, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, a 2009 paper written by Garst and colleagues took on the topic of the staff experience at camp. In a series of in depth interviews they explored experiences that staff were exposed to as a direct result of their work at camp and the positive outcomes of those experiences. Staff cited increased confidence, a sense of belonging, and the strengthening of problem-solving skills (Garst, et al., 2009).

**Social connections among staff at camp are highly valued.** As previously mentioned, one reason that camp counselors cite for working at camp is to make new friends (Roark, 2000, as cited in Cressi, 2010, p. 7). Several studies have recognized that seeking and finding a sense of community is a major factor for many camp counselors (Magnuson, 1992; McCole, Jacobs, Lindley, & McAvoy, 2012). Just as the friendships that campers make at camp may stick with them into adulthood, the friendships that solidify between counselors can have just as profound (if not more profound) an effect (Thompson, 2012). Counselors often know that there is more
money to be made in other forms of summer employment, but as one reported, “I could make so much more money [at a different summer job] but I come here for my friends” (Sales & Saxe, 2004, p. 104). But, is there an inherent expiration date to this particular motivating factor? What happens when young adults decide that spending time with friends is not a sufficient justification for their employment decisions? It could be that as young adults grow out of the determination (or practical ability) to prioritize friendship over career advancement or finances they begin to move on to other types of summer employment.

**Camp employment is seen as a gateway to job preparedness and future leadership roles.** Several studies have focused on counselor perceptions of job-related leadership skills (Garst & Johnson, 2005; Forsyth, Matysik, & Nelson, 2004). "It is possible that employment as a staff member at a summer camp might serve as an opportunity to develop skills and resiliency that will better prepare individuals for future employment opportunities" (Duerden, et al., 2014, p. 28). In a 2005 paper presented to the American Camp Association Research Symposium, McNeely and Ferrari explored past counselors’ perceptions of skills learned on the job and the applicability of those skills in other realms such as school and other work places (McNeely & Ferrari, 2005). In this study, counselor alumni found, overall, that many job-related skills were learned as a direct result of being a camp counselor. Some specific skills mentioned were: time management, adaptability, responsibility, communication, and teamwork. Several years later, Ferrari and Arnett (2011) discussed the similarities between the type of skills that young adults need to succeed in the work force and the kind of skills that camp counselors are likely to develop while working at camp. Ferrari and Arnett suggest a list of overlapping skills: "thinking
skills, communication skills, teamwork and leadership, lifelong learning and self-direction, technology adoption and application, and professionalism” (Ferrari & Arnett, 2011, p. 2). Ferrari and Arnett further observed that "a common feature of many… workforce skills is that they involve demonstrating mastery, which is not likely to develop without practice" (Ferrari & Arnett, 2011, p. 3). It may follow that since camp offers a relatively supportive and non-threatening environment in which to practice, counselors might be drawn to a place where they are getting a chance to build and strengthen this future-oriented skill-set.

**The spiritual connection factor.** There is a body of literature focusing on spirituality in the workplace which claims, among other points, that there is a direct connection between the presence of spirituality in the workplace and the enhancement of both job satisfaction and employee motivation. This theory recognizes that since workplaces offer an opportunity for self-expression, and often represent the "greatest part of [adults'] interaction with other human beings" (Fourie, 2014, p. 2) the opportunities available for individuals at their workplace go deeper than the mere accumulation of salary dollars and vacation days. Other studies have considered employee satisfaction at a workplace in relation to how much of an intrinsic connection there is between the values of the organization and those of the individuals. Factors such as alignment with organizational values will often increase the likelihood of job satisfaction (Chatterjee & Naqvi, 2010). Since this study focuses on the Jewish staff at Jewish camps, a strong overlap in personal and organizational values for the camp counselors being interviewed was assumed. Indeed, in their 2004 book on the topic of Jewish Summer Camp, researchers and authors Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe claim that counselors at Jewish camps “commonly
described camp as their ‘Jewish home away from home’” (Sales & Saxe, 2004, p. 107). This values alignment will be explored in the current study as an additional possible motivating factor for continuing to work at camp.

Conclusion

Having investigated the motivations that camp counselors might have for working at camp, and the needs that these young adults are trying to satisfy while being summer camp employees, the working assumption for this study is that when not enough of these needs are met, camp counselors decide that they will no longer return to camp. Specifically, this project aims to explore why 56% of returning staff members return, in an attempt to also understand the 44% who chose to move on to other opportunities. This research should assist in the staff retention efforts of Camp Directors by offering a window into the true needs and interests of their staff members. By looking at a few specific success stories of camp staff who have chosen to return for a fourth summer at camp, I hoped to be able to offer a foundation upon which to build an effective staff retention campaign for any camp. Cataloging skills that counselors gain on the job can assist with both counselor recruitment and retention. Counselors are effectively recruited through the explicit advertisement of specific leadership skills that they have the opportunity to develop while at camp (Garst & Johnson, 2005). This project focused on staff retention, and on the conditions, both at camp and within the individuals working at camp, that contribute to those staff wanting to return for an additional summer. These conditions include the importance of a good experience with opportunities to learn and practice new and useful skills,
prospects for establishing meaningful connections with peers, and the chance to explore self-identity in a spiritually resonant environment.

**Chapter III: Methodology and Research Design**

This chapter describes the research methodology and design for the current study. In addition, this chapter discusses the general profile of the study participants, recruitment strategies for participants including recruitment materials, and data collection, storage, and analysis.

The purpose of this qualitative Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to understand the motivations of veteran camp counselors at a Jewish Summer Camp who choose to return as counselors for more than three years. Rooted in the methods of IPA and with Achievement Motivation Theory as a scaffold, this study asked, What are the experiences of veteran camp counselors at Jewish Summer Camps and how do they make sense of those experiences as they relate to their motivations for returning to work at the camp beyond three summers?

**Paradigm**

A paradigm “represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world,’ the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). Within the context of a research study, a paradigm provides the perspective from which the study is conducted. The current research is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which implies that individuals experience a subjective reality based on their own experiences and their individual, internal systems for processing those experiences.
“Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Dezin & Lincoln, 2005, as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 36). The constructivist paradigm offers a solid foundation for a qualitative research study since constructivism makes room for individuals’ interpretations of their own experiences without assuming that there will be one single true interpretation. The qualitative researcher is “watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms” (Kirk & Miller, 1986, as cited in Kreftig, 1991, p. 214). The IPA design is particularly suited to a constructivist paradigm since IPA truly allows the researcher to uncover participants’ personal and unique accounts of their own experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). “IPA… wants to know what the experience for this person is like, what sense this particular person is making of what is happening to them” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 3). In other words, IPA not only allows for the subjective approach inherent to the constructivist paradigm, it is an approach to research that is sculpted specifically around a subjective approach to the research question.

**Methodology**

The inherently exploratory nature of qualitative inquiry made qualitative research the most fitting method for this analysis. “Qualitative research is a form of inquiry that analyzes information conveyed through language and behavior in natural settings” (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Berkwits & Iniui, 1998). Qualitative research was chosen for this inquiry because of the desire to explore, understand, and capture the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and motivations of the participants in their own words. This purpose of these interviews was largely the generation of
data to be used in an inductive analysis. In other words, an analysis aimed first and foremost at making sense of the data at hand rather than testing an existing theory through the collection of data.

**Research Tradition: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on “an examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 1). This makes IPA an appropriate research method for a study in which the research questions center on asking participants to explore their own experiences and how they themselves make sense of the choices they have made. Furthermore, research questions in which the researcher is hoping to understand “several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 60) are a perfect fit for the IPA approach. IPA fits particularly well as a form of exploration into a topic that has not yet been well documented in literature. The primary focus in an IPA study is on conducting a deep investigation into the individuals being studied and the meaning they make from their own experiences; it does not necessarily depend on previous interpretations of the subject matter (Lin, 2013). While a quantitative study such as a survey or questionnaire might have produced some similar data, the interviews that are the basis for the IPA study allow for a more detailed understanding of the context of the answers given, rather than the information alone.

The broader framework of phenomenology, in which IPA is rooted, “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). Phenomenology is a tool for uncovering the implicit structures of the
human experience and bringing them explicitly into focus (Sanders, 1982). A phenomenological approach to inquiry allows the researcher to uncover beliefs held in common by study participants and to make sense of the commonalities revealed by the participants (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological inquiry offers the researcher tools with which to make generalizations about how a particular phenomenon is experienced across the sample, occasionally offering further insight into the implications that can be drawn from this sample to the greater population. Phenomenology will create a base of knowledge about the field regardless of any current lack of understanding of the field that may exist.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a distinct research method first used in the field of psychology in the mid-1990’s (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA allows researchers to probe into the question of how a group of people who are engaged in a common activity make collective sense of their experiences. Edmund Husserl introduced phenomenology in 1931 calling it a “new science” and explaining this method of inquiry as it related to current physiological methods of research (Husserl, 1931/2012). In his influential work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/1962) traces the Greek etymology of the term *phenomenon* to explain the basic task inherent to the method of *bringing into the light*. IPA is used most commonly in the fields of sociology, psychology, education (Creswell, 2007; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2008; Smith, et al., 2009)

IPA focuses specifically on semi-structured, in-depth interviews that allow the researcher to explore and uncover the participants’ own understanding of their experiences as they offer their own rich descriptions of their engagement with the particular phenomenon. In a semi-
structured interview, one of the tools the interviewer uses to gather data is to establish a rapport with the interviewee. For this reason, the interviewer might be less concerned with the specific interview questions or the order in which they are asked. Instead an emphasis is placed on helping the interviewee to feel comfortable and allowing the interviewee to pursue questions that are of particular interest, especially when the information being shared seems to be pertinent to the general interests of the interviewer. The interviewer is free to pursue tangents that arise in the interview process and the interviewee is able to shape the direction of the interview according to their particular interests and concerns. In this manner an interviewee might actually take the interview in a direction that the interviewer had not expected, thereby allowing for truly new insights to be uncovered (Smith, 2008).

An IPA approach is designed for a small group of up to 10 participants (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999 as cited in Fade, 2004). In-depth interviews are used to capture a precise description of the interviewee’s experience. Questions are kept open-ended as much as possible in an effort to allow the interviewee to describe their perceptions without any hindrance (Fade, 2004; Creswell, 2007). Interviews are recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, the interviews are coded individually and then compared with each other to find shared themes across participants. While limited in scope due to the small sample size, an IPA study allows for considerable depth among a few individuals and offers the possibility of the exploration of a larger picture of the participants’ experiences. In the case of this study the larger picture might include participants’ involvement in Jewish leadership activities outside of camp; their commitment to camp and why they feel committed; the impact camp has had on their lives
during the year (when they are not at camp); and whether the kind of work they do at camp is something they would consider pursuing in the future.

**Participants**

The method by which participants are selected for any type of qualitative research study “has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of the research” (Coyne, 1997, p. 623). For this study a purposeful sampling strategy was implemented to ensure that all participants have, in fact, met the needs of the study and had experienced the phenomenon being studied (Coyne, 1997; Patton, 1990). “The key to purposeful sampling is to select cases for systematic study that are information rich” (Patton, 1990, as cited in Bailey, 2007, p. 64). With purposeful sampling, there is also a striving for maximum variation so that the small sample is as diverse as possible while still meeting the needs of the study (Coyne, 1997; Suri, 2011). As is common with phenomenology, the data set was small (Creswell, 2007; Smith, 2008; Smith, et al., 2009). Given that the general population of counselors at Jewish Overnight Summer Camps in the United States is relatively heterogeneous, maximum variation was achieved through gender balance and selection of particular type of Jewish overnight camp. Specifically, the participant set consisted of three females and two males who came from four different Jewish overnight camps affiliated with the Reform Movement, Conservative Movement, and Jewish Community Center Camps.

The participants in this study were selected based on recommendations of six Camp Directors. Camp Directors were asked via email whether they had any veteran staff who might be interested in participating in a research study about camp counselor retention. The six initial emails resulted in a short list of eight potential participants, five of whom responded positively to
a subsequent email invitation to participate in the study. These five counselors were interviewed using the in-depth, open question, multi-interview style associated with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, et al., 2009). Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2016, just before all of the interviewees returned to work as counselors for their fourth summers. Trustworthiness of data was determined using member checking and thick description. Data were analyzed using an “iterative and inductive cycle” (Smith, 2007, as cited in Smith, et al., 2009, p. 79) of coding, resulting in layers of evolving patterns found first in each single interview and subsequently compared across interviews.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The protection of the human subjects interviewed in this research was taken into account at every stage. Approval for the research was obtained from the Northeastern Internal Review Board (IRB) which is part of Northeastern’s Department of Human Subject Research Protection (HSRP). An explanation of informed consent was given in writing (Appendix D) to the interviewees prior to the start of the research via email. The informed consent process was discussed in the first few moments of the first interview, immediately after asking the participants if they agreed to having the interview recorded. The identities of all participants were protected throughout the research process. Transcribed interview data was kept in a password-protected cloud storage system and participant initials were used in the files. Later, pseudonyms were attributed to the participants.
Data Collection

Interview data were collected from each participant via Skype over the course of three informal, interactive, open ended, semi-structured, hour-long interviews. Semi-structured interviews are often used in qualitative studies. Qualitative interviewing has an inherently flexible nature, which allows the researcher to respond to the unique direction that each interviewee chooses to take the interview. As a result, the emphasis of the research itself is often a direct result of the specific issues that arise out of the interviews (Bryman, 2015). In this case, the semi-structured interview allowed for an organic unraveling of ideas that the interviewee felt were important and relevant, and offered a framework for the researcher to adjust questioning based on responses received. The semi-structured interview gave an opportunity for the interviewee to be “more a participant in meaning-making than a conduit from which information is retrieved” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314).

The interviews for this research study were individual, and were modeled after a typical standardized open-ended interview (Turner, 2010). Standardized open-ended interviews begin with the same basic questions for each participant. However, the interviews are considered open-ended because the questions are kept relatively broad and flexible so as to encourage the participants to “fully express their viewpoints and experiences” (Turner, 2010, p. 756). Leading questions are avoided since the goal is to hear the interviewees own thoughts and feelings about the topic being covered. One drawback to this interview style is that “it can be a more cumbersome process for the researcher to sift through the narrative responses” (Turner, 2010, p. 756). However, the outcome is an accumulation of thick, rich, descriptive data and a general
interviews were rooted in the interpretive style of inquiry as the goal of the research was to
understand the experiences of the participants, not to learn facts. This study was looking to gain
insight into experiences and the meanings those experiences had for returning camp counselors;
it did not focus on looking at generalized patterns and causes of behavior.

In preparation for the interviews, a list was compiled with the main topics to cover as
well as central and sub questions. Additional follow-up questions were constructed to be used at
the researcher’s discretion, depending on the answer given to the previous question. The
questions were tested during a preliminary interview with a colleague in order to check and fine-
tune the phrasing and order of questions. Questions were crafted to gather basic background and
demographic information. Then, questions invited participants to reflect on their experiences at
camp, as counselors, and what it is about camp and the counselor experience that keeps them
coming back (See Appendix A). Questions were written out in full sentences but were altered as
necessary to maintain the flow of conversation during the interview. Reflective listening during
the interview process was important; interviewees were given the opportunity to validate that
they were heard correctly, and follow up questions were asked as necessary.

Interviews were conducted using Skype and were recorded directly onto the laptop used
for the Skype session. Using Skype as the data collection strategy had advantages and
disadvantages. Skype interviews allowed for connections to be made outside of the immediate
home-region without extensive travel by the researcher or the participants. Skype was preferable
to phone interviews because with access to video feed was easier to determine that a participant
was fully engaged in the interview process. However, since Skype requires access to an internet connection and a computer with a camera and microphone there was a natural limitation to participation to those who had access to this technology. On the other hand, since the main form of participant solicitation was through emails, there was already a pre-determined bias towards participants with internet access in place. Interviews were recorded using Audio Recorder software created by Softonic. Permission to record the interviewees was requested twice—first via email in the information packet sent out pre-interview and again once contact had been made. Audio recordings were subsequently saved on a password-protected cloud-based server (Microsoft OneDrive) as well as on an external hard drive used solely for this research.

Basic ethical considerations were made. Participants were asked for their informed consent to participate in the study. Participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw from the study when they were sent the transcript after the first interview. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the entire study. Emails were sent from the researcher’s NEU email address. All data (both audio and text files) were stored on an external hard drive as well as in a Microsoft OneDrive cloud-based storage system. Only the researcher had access to the hard drive and the Microsoft OneDrive account. Participant initials were used to mark all files and were used in all notations so as to keep the participants’ identities confidential. The researcher transcribed all the interviews and data files were accessible to the researcher only.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the over-arching name for a method by which qualitative studies are seen to be rigorous and valid, and their methods transparent and applicable to a wider field
(Morrow, 2005; Rolfe, 2006; Sandelowski, 1993). Qualitative research is, by its nature, a subjective enterprise. Therefore, in lieu of a single set of standards by which to judge the soundness and legitimacy of qualitative research, many scholars have proposed multiple basic approaches to trustworthiness, and have offered suggestions as to how to choose the most appropriate system for a given research style (Guba, 1981; Kreftig, 1991).

This research study employed member checking, a method of trustworthiness in which participants are given an opportunity to read the transcripts of their interviews to clarify that the data were indeed understood in a way that was compatible with the participants' own experience (Kreftig, 1991). Thick description was also employed. Thick description involves the “detailed, rich descriptions not only of the participants’ experiences of phenomena but also of the contexts in which those experiences occur” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252).

**Data Analysis**

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was the chosen method for this study because of that method’s emphasis on subjective and personal understandings of the study participants’ own experiences. However, the interpretations of the data gathered through IPA interviews are subject to the biases and limitations of the researcher’s own perspectives of the subject matter as well as of the subjects themselves. In other words, while “the participants are trying to make sense of their world, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith, 2009, p. 53). Data analysis requires “flexible thinking, processes of reduction, expansion, revision, creativity, and innovation (Smith, 2009, p. 81) and therefore
cannot be fully planned in advance. With that in mind, data analysis was planned to use the following basic steps, suggested by Smith (2009) as a guide.

**Step one: reading and re-reading the original transcripts.** At this stage the researcher’s primary goal was to become familiar with the interviewee’s words and perspectives on his or her experiences. Smith and colleagues (2008) describe this phase as “slowing down [the researcher’s] habitual propensity for ‘quick and dirty’ reduction and synopsis” (p. 82). The repetitive listening to and reading of the participants’ original words helps to “begin the process of entering the participant’s world” (Smith, et al., 2008, p. 82).

**Step two: the first stage of coding.** During this initial coding process the researcher makes notes about emerging themes, ideas for further exploration, and insights into the meanings behind the interviewee’s responses. Smith (2009) suggests a specific system for commenting during this stage of analysis using three categories of comments. Descriptive comments focus on pointing out specific things that matter to the interviewee by centering on keywords and phrases that the interviewee used. Linguistic comments are dedicated to the particular language use of the interviewee. This includes the use of metaphors and similes, as well as pauses in responses and laughter. Conceptual comments are the more interpretative comments that the researcher makes including additional questions sparked by interviewee responses and any other notes that may guide the direction of the inquiry further.

**Step three: the analytic process.** Now, the researcher is working to further expand on themes that are evolving from the previous two stages. During this step the researcher turns from working primarily with the transcripts themselves to working with notes made during the
initial coding process (Smith, et al., 2009). The trick here is to remain true to the original voice of the interviewee while allowing the analysis to become more complex by concentrating on the “interrelationships, connections, and patterns” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 91) uncovered in the researcher’s own interpretation of the data.

**Step four: moving more deeply into the data.** Next the researcher focuses specifically on the relationships between the various themes being uncovered. Not all of the themes will necessarily fit together at this stage. In fact, this may be the point at which certain themes that seemed important previously are discarded in favor of a larger and more cohesive picture.

These four steps are repeated for each individual interview. It is critical to the integrity of the research that the researcher be careful to treat each interviewee as its own individual case so that each interview is approached with a fresh perspective. “This means, as far as possible, bracketing the ideas emerging from the analysis of the first case while working on the second” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 100).

**Step five: re-approach the individual interviews as a group.** Next the researcher examines the data for similarities, connections, and patterns across the interviews. Some themes will begin to stand out at this stage whereas some other themes might need to be re-labeled or adjusted, as the data are re-examined with a bigger picture in mind.

**Limitations**

This qualitative study was grounded in the responses of five counselors entering their fourth summer working at a Jewish overnight camp. It is important to remember that while the findings may not be transferable to other populations, IPA studies are generally concerned with
small populations and “the aim of the study is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims” (Smith, 2008, p. 55). It should therefore be noted that claims made from this study might indeed be limited to the small population of study participants.
Chapter IV: Findings

As was previously stated, for those who grew up going to summer camp as kids, coming to work at camp for one summer (usually immediately post-high school) is often an easy decision. For many recent high school graduates this is a first job, and often feels like a continuation of the camper experience. Coming back for a second summer can also be an easy decision because counselors want to spend another summer with their friends after their first year away at college (Foundation for Jewish Camp, 2011). Those who come back for a third summer are more likely to be choosing camp over internships, spending the summer with new friends, making more money at a "real job", etc…. This third summer is the biggest drop-off in counselor retention (Finkelstein, 2013). If camping professionals knew more about what motivates counselors to return for a third, fourth, or even fifth summer at camp they would be better equipped to target their retention efforts, and would succeed at building a more stable and better trained staff for their camps. The purpose of this research was to discover what motivates camp counselors at Jewish overnight camps to keep coming back to work at camp beyond the first two years and in particular, for more than three years. The specific research question asked was, What are the experiences of veteran camp counselors at Jewish summer camps and how do they make sense of those experiences as they relate to their motivations for returning to work at the camp beyond three years?

Interviewees at a Glance
Five counselors were interviewed for this research, all of whom had worked at a Jewish overnight camp for three summers and were about to return for a fourth summer. The interviews were conducted using the in-depth, open question, multi-interview style associated with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, et al., 2009).

**Ariella.** Ariella (pseudonyms are used for the five interviewees), a 21-year-old female, had been working as a counselor at the same Union for Reform Judaism (URJ, the Jewish Reform Movement) camp for three summers and was about to go back to camp for a fourth summer at the time of our interview. In her three previous summers Ariella had worked the full summer as a cabin counselor for campers aged 10-15. Ariella had attended this camp for two years beginning at the age of 14, before becoming a counselor-in-training (CIT) there, and subsequently a counselor. Ariella had already graduated from college at the time of the interview, and was working full time in a URJ synagogue as the Youth Engagement Specialist.

Ariella responded quickly and enthusiastically to the initial email that I sent out about the study. When I spoke with Ariella via Skype a few weeks later she was sitting comfortably in her small office at the synagogue where she worked. Ariella answered all of my questions in a very relaxed manner; she spoke easily and professionally. Ariella told me about choosing to start attending sleep-away as a camper only in her teenage years. She felt that coming to the decision to go to camp on her own, rather than having grown up with that decision being made for her at a younger age, might have contributed to how much she loved camp as an adult. Immediately after her CIT summer she knew that she wanted to come back to be on staff.
I wanted to be a counselor because I knew that the lessons learned would be more valuable than sitting at a desk or at some other internship where you're just filing papers or you go home at the end of the day. I had a great summer my first summer on staff and I think it really prepared me for being away from home, being at college. I learned a lot about responsibility, time management, stress management, emphasis on the stress.

Ariella mentioned several times during the interview that she was certain that her years on staff had prepared her well for her current position, as Youth Director of her synagogue.

**Beth.** Beth, a 21-year-old female, had been working as a counselor at the same URJ camp that she grew up attending as a camper. Beth took a somewhat non-traditional path as a staffer coming to camp for a full summer her first summer on staff, then coming back for only a single session her second summer, and subsequently staffing the camp’s five-week Israel trip for its oldest campers her third summer. In the summer immediately after the interview Beth was planning to spend the first part of the summer at camp working with the counselors-in-training (CIT) program, and subsequently staffing a camp-sponsored CIT trip to Costa Rica. Beth had graduated from college the December prior to the interview and had been working full time for several months before camp. After camp Beth planned to enter law school.

It took some time to set up the initial interview with Beth. Although she did not respond to my emails promptly she was always very enthusiastic in her responses when she got around to them. Beth’s short emails were peppered with exclamation marks. Each time we spoke Beth was in her apartment. She often mentioned being very busy and it seemed to me each time that she would try to cut the conversation short. However, once she began to speak with me she seemed
to enjoy the conversation and she spoke very freely not only about her time as a camp counselor but about her personal journey over the course of the previous three summers at camp. Beth spoke easily about her struggles to choose a job at camp each summer, her drive to pursue her professional passions, and her annual negotiations with the Camp Directors about what her role would be the following summer. Beth knew that the coming summer would be her final summer at camp because she felt that once she started law school she would begin filling her summers with law-related internships and jobs. However, even though she felt pressure to invest her time more specifically in her future profession, she felt confident that her summers at camp had left her with vital skills that she would continue to use in the future. “Character building and problem solving are two major outcomes from being on staff [at camp] that I think will translate into my career.”

**Dan.** Dan, a 21-year-old male, had worked at the same JCC-affiliated Jewish camp for three previous summers. Dan grew up attending a different, independent, community-based, and Jewish Federation-affiliated camp as a camper for nine summers. Dan was a counselor at his childhood camp for one summer and then decided to try a different camp and loved it. Dan was the only interviewee in this study who was currently working at a camp that he did not attend as a camper. In his first three summers at his current camp Dan was a general counselor staying for the full summer. In the summer following the interview Dan would be serving as a programmer, which is a specialist counselor position.

Dan answered my initial generic email about the study within 90 minutes of my sending it. This was by far the fastest response I received. His response was not only speedy it was also
passionate, “I am very interested in participating in your study. I’m going to be a fourth-year staff member at camp [this summer]. I look forward to hearing from you soon.” It took us a few days before we could find a day and time that worked for both of us for the initial interview. Dan’s enthusiasm and positivity were infectious in that first conversation and throughout all of our communications. He had a very constructive way of looking at life. Dan was exceptionally self-reflective as he told his story about growing up at a camp in his home-state for nine summers only to realize, his first summer on staff there, that he did not want to remain there as a staff member. His love of camping drove him to find an alternative camp where he could spend his summers on staff and he found his current camp simply by searching for camps in a particular state where he thought it might be fun to spend his summers. Dan was certain that you get out of camp what you put into it. He dispelled the notion that counselors don’t get paid enough or that they don’t receive enough appreciation for their hard work. “You have to show up, you have to do your job, and you can choose to do it and love it, and it works out.”

Gabe. Gabe, a 21-year-old male had been a counselor at the same URJ camp where he grew up as a camper. Gabe had finished his third summer as a cabin counselor prior to our interview and was planning to go back for a fourth summer to be a song-leading counselor in the summer following our interview. At the time of the interview Gabe was in the midst of a joint undergraduate and graduate program in political science and public administration.

For each interview, Gabe spoke to me from his apartment. He often would pick up his laptop and walk around the apartment while we were speaking. Not wanting to interrupt the flow of the interview I never asked him why we were moving to a new room. Gabe was a bit cool and
non-committal from the start. He responded quickly, within about 12 hours, to my initial email but his answer was “I'm happy to participate need be” [sic]. Gabe gave his answers freely but remained a little aloof over the course of the interviews. When I asked him if his friends had continued to come back on staff, he answered that they had never started. “Most of my friends stopped coming back before staff. Sometimes it’s hard because I spent my life at camp but I don’t have a lot of old friends there now”. However, Gabe was very clear about his desire to keep going back. His parents had initially told him that he could only work two summers at camp and then he had to “find a real job” but he managed to find internships during the academic year and his parents backed off. Making a difference in the world is very important to Gabe, and he is certain that he is able to be a positive influence for his campers in a way that is more meaningful than what he might accomplish at an alternative summer job. “There are a hundred million things you could do with your summer. But if you are a great counselor you’re thinking, am I making an impact? I don’t want to think that my impact is minimal.”

Ilana. Ilana, a 20-year-old female, had been a counselor for three summers at the same Ramah camp that she attended as a camper for six summers. Ilana was on staff for two full summers although during her third summer, the one that preceded our interview, she became ill in the middle of the summer and had to go home after just one session. She was planning to go back in the same role, a cabin counselor, for her fourth summer, following our interview. It took Ilana only a few days to respond to my initial email and her response was highly enthusiastic. “I am more than willing to participate in your study. Being an avid supporter of camp, this seems like a no brainer! Can't wait to be a part of this!” Ilana’s enthusiasm continued throughout our
conversations. Ilana told me of her family’s history with the Ramah Camping Movement and how her sisters had also attended the camp with her, both as campers and as staff. Ilana’s answers were consistently woven around long and rambling stories of camp. Each answer rested on examples of things that happened at camp or snippets of conversations with her previous co-counselors, supervisors, and the camp directors. Ilana used layers of imagery in her colorful responses to really make her camp and the role of camp counselor come alive when she spoke. “You know how people talk about switching hats when they talk about switching roles? Well, as a counselor you do not have time to switch hats, you have to wear one hat that is every single thing at once.”

The five interviewees represent different non-profit Jewish camps, ranging from camps affiliated with the Reform and Conservative movements to Jewish Community Center affiliated camps. There were several major themes apparent in the analysis of the interviews. This chapter will report in depth a few of those themes starting with why these interviewees chose to become counselors in the first place, continuing on to look at what keeps them coming back on staff for multiple summers, and finally considering why some counselors stop coming back to their camp jobs.

Findings

A number of themes emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts of the five participants. They are organized below by discussing different reasons camp counselors return followed by the different reasons camp counselors leave.
Counselors return to camp for different reasons. It should be noted that the five interviewees included in this study were planning to come back to five different jobs during the summer following their interviews. Only one of them, Ilana, was coming back to the same job she had in her previous three summers: a cabin counselor. Ariella was about to become a unit head in charge of more than a dozen counselors and dozens of campers; Beth was going back to camp to run the Counselor-in-Training (CIT) program during her camp’s first session and to travel abroad with the group of CITs during second session; Dan was returning to be a “programmer” for various specialty areas of camp; and Gabe was headed back to his camp in a song-leader role. These job titles are important to mention because they shed light on the possibility that, in fact, four out of five of these individuals might have been returning to camp simply to be in a new role.

They believe the kids need them. “[Counselors] facilitate those kids having a great summer” (Gabe). For all five of these veteran counselors, becoming a counselor for the first time was simply a logical conclusion to the camper experience. All of them also expressed a specific common inspiration for having become counselors in the first place—to have a positive influence on the campers’ summer experiences. In some cases, these counselors judged their success based on whether they were influencing those campers to return summer after summer, just as the counselors themselves did when they were of camper age.

[I come to camp] to make sure the kids have a great time, that they come back the next year that they can build deeper relationships at camp. One of my biggest goals every summer has been to make sure that those kids have the best time possible and that when I
come back the next summer all those kids are back at camp and are able to have deeper and deeper experiences each summer. (Gabe)

Another interviewee reminisced about the exceptional counselors that she had growing up at the same camp where she now works as a counselor. One of her goals in her first summer was to offer her campers that same quality experience that she remembers having as a camper.

I just had such phenomenal counselors and I believe that they just so heavily influenced me for the better in terms of finding out who I was as an American Jew, as an Israel supporter, just as a human being in the world, and I just wanted to be able to give that back to other campers and give them the love and appreciation for Judaism that I so appreciatively received growing up. So that was a real no brainer going into my first summer as a counselor. (Ilana)

Beth also wanted to emulate for her campers the same connection that she had an opportunity to have with her counselors growing up.

I initially wanted to be a camp counselor because I had a camp counselor follow my cabin when I was a camper and she had a profound impact on my summer camp experience. I wanted to create that experience for my campers. (Beth)

Dan spoke similarly about his motivation to be a leader in the camp community and to be a role model for his campers.

It [is] about picking up the pace and trying to be more of a leader… my goals have been trying to be…the best person I could be, being a role model for the kids, being a positive male role model, role modeling in general and having a consistent work ethic. (Dan)
*Wanting to experience another summer with friends.* “I…wanted to be back with my camp friends for the summer” (Beth). All of the interviewees also mentioned the additional pull to be back at camp with their own friends, “my best friend, my very first camp friend, was returning on staff as well. We have been long distance best friends for years so it was a plus that we could work together” (Beth). On the other hand, sometimes that initial opportunity to be back with camp friends the first summer is not a motivating factor in subsequent summers. As Gabe said,

One big difference [after the first summer] is that the second year many of your friends are not going to be coming back. Your first year on staff so many of your peers are there and it is so easy. But then the next year even though all of the staff members have been at camp forever, you don’t know them…because they are younger or older then you and it is difficult to build those relationships on staff, as an adult… It is a different experience knowing that you are not coming back for your friends so much that second year. (Gabe) Ariella agreed, “You might come back the first summer for your own friends, and after that you are coming back for some other reason. Because your friends are likely not coming back after that” (Ariella).

Conversely, while four of the five interviewees mentioned that their friends stopped coming back after one or two summers, one interviewee spoke about making new friends on staff and specifically mentioned having a socially positive peer experience every summer that he was on staff. “Socially, these have been the best four summers of my life really… It is just an incredible feeling. I have made some of my best friends at [this camp]” (Dan). However, in
general, there was consensus that just getting to be with your camp friends for the summer was not a practical reason to come back summer after summer, “It was never just about [my] friends. As a camper, yes, as a CIT (Counselor in Training) maybe also, but after that it was about camp, not just the friends” (Ariella).

*Understanding that camp is a place to gain useful skills.*

I’ve developed a lot of personal skills like communication, and interpersonal skills. I’ve solved problems every day. You have to think on your feet, you learn what to say and what not to say. You don’t just wake up one morning and have those skills, you learn them. (Beth)

One of the ways that camp professionals use to describe the benefits of being a camp counselor is the acquisition of ‘21st century skills’ (Ditter, 2016). Camp Directors, for instance, use this term to describe the culmination of the experiences that camp gives you; they use it to “sell” returning counselors on the usefulness of a summer spent at camp, which will increase their job-market readiness in the future (Kimmelman & Heiser, 2013; Goldstein-Smith, n.d.; Sebell, 2016). All of the interviewees seemed to agree with this general sentiment; all of the interviewees were able to list a long set of skills gained and honed while working at camp. Many of the skills learned were the direct result of the built in ‘on the job training’ that is inherent in the job of a counselor. In describing the skills acquired there was rarely mention of formal training. Instead there was a sense of skills gained from intuition or trial and error.
You have to figure out how to be a leader and a role model. And I think one of the things I’ve learned is that being a leader and a role model doesn’t always mean standing in the front of the room. (Ilana).

All of the interviewees were able to list a broad set of useful skills that they learned while working as a camp counselor. Not all mentioned the same skills, but all of the skills mentioned had practical applications outside of camp. Ariella listed,

…time and stress management, organization, communication with people of all ages from dealing with parents to dealing with small children … being able to be enthusiastic at all times of day…Positivity…creativity, [keeping a high] level of energy, communication skills…[being] comfortable enough to lead a group discussion, to talk in front of a large group, empathy, caring, sympathy, devotion to what you are doing…understanding that everyone is stressed at camp and it is not just you going through that stress. (Ariella)

Dan added,

You really learn how to give and receive constructive feedback, more so than in other jobs like food service jobs, just being able to communicate with people in an open and constructive way. Being able to take on leadership positions when required and when needed, really being able to step out of your comfort zone and be able to lead in a group of people, being open minded and being ready to adapt in any given circumstance whether or not prepared. (Dan)
However, the specific skill-set was not always perceived as being “enough”. Despite the clear advantages of increased competence that a job at camp can offer, the interviewees still struggled with the designation “camp counselor” that would appear on their resume in the fall.

To an extent, I agree that I am working towards my professional goals, as far as developing those skills. But realistically, in the legal field, if I’m not getting real legal experience, I don’t think that my future employer is going to look at it the same. Unless they went to a summer camp I don’t think that they’ll look at my resume and say, ‘wow, she worked in leadership in a summer camp, I think that she would make a great attorney in my office’. (Beth)

The specific opportunity to develop certain skills through opportunities for personal reflection was discussed by all of the interviewees. They agreed that being at camp often means being surrounded by a beautiful, natural environment, which can be particularly conducive to self-reflection and personal growth. “There is a real opportunity for personal growth especially when you are in the middle of [nature], you don’t really have day to day distractions” (Dan). Ilana explained that camp is actually designed to be a growth opportunity for counselors, perhaps even more so than for the campers.

Once I began to be a counselor I understood that campers are going to have fun no matter what, they are with their friends, there’s a swimming pool, there’s a water slide. The counselors are really the ones who learn and grow. (Ilana)
Understanding that they have a special attachment to the physical location of camp.

Often, though not always, the connection to the physical campus comes from having been a camper, “I can’t imagine coming back for four summers on staff without having been a camper [here]” (Ariella). Yet, one of the interviewees who was about to launch into his fourth summer on staff at a camp where he did not grow up as a camper confirmed that you can develop that connection even without having been a camper, “Most of the staff have been campers since they were six [years old] so yes, I am an exception” (Dan). The common denominator is the connection to the physical place itself. The majority of camp staff seem to develop that connection over time, as campers, but others are able to develop the same level of commitment and connection in their relatively short time as a staff member, without ever having been a camper.

Interviewees had mixed experiences and opinions as to the difference between growing up at the same camp where you become a staff member, or coming into camp for the first time as a staff member. In fact, there were predictions in both directions in terms of how being a camper first would change the outcome for that staff member. Three out of five were very clear that being a camper first was important for staff retention.

Those who grew up at camp are more likely to return. Often those who didn’t grow up at camp just want the experience but often there is no reason for them to return. They get the experience they want, and one summer is enough for that… [This camp] is such a special place for me, it’s because it is [this camp] that I am coming back. The connection to the place is one more reason to come back. (Beth)
On the other hand, some interviewees felt that being a camper first might actually be a negative factor for retention, due to the adjustment inherent in shifting from camper to counselor in the same environment.

Growing up at camp you develop an image of camp that probably, when you become a staff member, is completely shattered and you are going to have to cope with that change. And those who never grew up at camp won’t have that—they’ll come in and be on board with whatever is going on. I mean hopefully, obviously...The staff who come for only one summer, there are a couple reasons—mainly their experiences as campers and as staff members are so divergent from one another, they feel disheartened about how they are experiencing camp as an adult, being on the “other side” of things. (Gabe)

Another interviewee took the opportunity to describe the positive impact of counselors who were not campers but come back for multiple summers. “When the campers see someone who has never been to camp before who wants to come to camp [they think], it must be something special about camp. Not just having gone all the summers is what keeps you coming back” (Ilana). That same interviewee quickly added, however, that in her opinion it is less likely for those who have not been campers to return on staff for multiple summers, “I don’t think that the retention is as strong just because they don’t have that connection that I’ve had for nine summers” (Ilana).
Experiencing feelings of success at camp. For some counselors, when they return to camp, it is because they truly flourish in the camp environment. Surrounded by nature and a relatively intimate circle of like-minded people, some counselors feel that they are their best selves and can be uniquely productive. Ilana described her growth over her multiple summers on staff. “You really learn what works and what doesn’t work and it’s hard not to grow. [The camp directors] really put you in a space where your only option is to move forward” (Ilana).

For Dan, the draw was the specific type of work itself in which he had learned to excel. He believed that he thrived on his ability to do well at his job and wanted to find himself in a position to continue succeeding. This, in itself, provided a reason to return to the scene of his success.

As time goes on, it seems like more and more of a job, which I think is a good thing… [You start] feeling confident in your role as a counselor and as a staff member… in how you are interacting with kids. You just become more comfortable, you become more fluid. (Dan)

Gabe felt the same way. Camp was uniquely suited to offer a platform for his success. As opposed to a large company where he might have had an internship, camp is a place where his impact was maximized. He talked about a topic covered earlier in this chapter, having a positive influence on campers. He did so in the specific context of his ability to be impactful in general as a counselor as opposed to the lack of impact he feels he would have had at an alternative summer job.
If you are a great counselor you’re thinking, am I making an impact? I don’t want to think that my impact is minimal. As an intern, not many people are listening to my ideas. But as a camp counselor I am solely responsible for my own actions and to work together with my co-counselors to make a difference to these kids. (Gabe)

**Feeling connected “Jewishly”**. For Ilana and Dan, Jewish summer camp is important because it is a place where they truly feel part of a Jewish community. “If I hadn’t been exposed to that side of the Jewish world [at camp] I don’t know if I’d be that passionate about [staying connected to Judaism]” (Ilana). Similarly, Dan spoke of the formative Jewish impression that being at camp made on him. “[Being at camp] really shaped how I saw myself as a Jew and how I related spiritually to Judaism… I think that I relate to Judaism now from a more spiritual and more ‘natural’ sense” (Dan).

For Beth, camp became the one place where she could express herself “Jewishly” and spend time in a Jewish community with Jewish peers. This was not necessarily enough in itself to keep her coming back to camp, but not having a large Jewish presence at her university she found a unique Jewish connection only at camp.

It was sad to me when I said that it was my last summer after my second summer on staff … camp was my Jewish connection and I was realizing and recognizing that I would no longer be able to reconnect with my Jewish identity and my Jewish friends in the summer. It was the end of a part of my Jewish journey. (Beth)
Understanding that this is the time in their lives to be at camp.
There is not really anything else that I would be doing with my summer other than finding an internship. Would it be cool to spend time travelling around or doing an internship in a city? Yes. But I feel like I still have those opportunities so I don’t really stop to think about that. (Gabe).

For Gabe, coming back to camp summer after summer simply became part of his life’s rhythm. Content with that summer rhythm, he saw no reason to change direction. He felt certain that there would be plenty of time in the future for other pursuits, and being at camp was simply where he wanted to be. Because he was not in a hurry to experience other summer opportunities, there was no particular reason to stop coming back to camp. Dan echoed Gabe’s thoughts that camp was simply the place to be. “It was a natural progression within the organization, I felt that … it would be cool to be a part of the staff. And that’s what I ended up being” (Dan).

Ilana recognizes that in some ways she has been waiting her entire camper career for her chance to experience camp as a counselor.

Growing up as a camper you always heard that ‘camp is for the counselors’ and that always really stuck with me because it is such a funny notion to think that a camp that is for campers is actually really for the counselors. And I didn’t understand that and I wanted to understand that. (Ilana)

Counselors leave camp for different reasons. Three out of five interviewees had the opinion that some people were just ‘meant to be’ counselors and others weren’t. Reflecting on this, the interviewees pondered whether the attrition that so often occurred after the first and
second summers at camp might be due to the fact that being a counselor is just not a ‘good fit’ for everyone. “There are certain people who have camp counselor qualities and some who don’t and you can tell whether they do or not based on how they thrive in the environment” (Ariella).

The interviewees also speculated on other possible reasons that counselors choose not to continue coming back to camp after their first or second summer. The underlying theme seemed to be that the reasons that certain counselors might give for leaving are personal and would not affect all counselors equally. In other words, those who want to stay will find reasons to stay, and those who are ready to leave can find reasons for leaving.

**Experiencing appreciation, or not.** For some counselors, motivation to succeed likely comes from within. For others, appreciation seemed to be an important topic among summer camp staff. But despite its prominence as a topic of staff conversations at camp, none of the interviewees felt that it was ever the primary deciding factor in a counselor’s decision to return or not. Rather, the general culture of appreciation at camp becomes one of many aspects of a counselor’s summer experience.

I hear all the time that people don’t feel appreciated. I hear it all the time. I don’t think that it is the thing that makes people not want to come back but it is a contributing factor to people not wanting to come back a second or third summer. I have plenty of friends who say, “It took until the last day before they showed any appreciation for the work we are doing.” It definitely gets people frustrated and it contributes to their willingness or not wanting to come back, but I don’t know if it is necessarily the most enormous of factors (Gabe).
Dan was of the opinion that while appreciation is important, it shouldn’t necessarily be given out for free; it needs to be earned. He stated that appreciation is readily available for those who earn it. For him, if counselors don’t feel apprenticed they might actually need to work differently or even harder in order to be appreciated.

If you are not appreciated it does affect your interest in being in a place. You won’t want to return to a place that you don’t feel appreciated. People want to feel respected. But an individual’s personal attitude has a lot to do with how you feel…If you are a ‘woe is me’ kind of person you are going to get more constructive feedback and less ‘good job’ kind of feedback and appreciation…. If you are doing your work, then you’ll be appreciated. I really think that the feeling of not being appreciated comes directly from not pulling your own weight. My first year I was getting more constructive feedback than positive, but I was caught in that cycle of ‘well, I’m doing all the right things, why am I not feeling as appreciated as I should?’ But then I realized that once I did start going above and beyond compliments started pouring in. Like any job. (Dan)

Ariella acknowledged that the culture of appreciation at camp is complicated. Everyone is working all the time so there are no obvious pauses to say, ‘hey that was great’. Many jobs, even 'jobs well done' go unnoticed at camp because everyone is busy and the work never stops.

At [other workplaces] when you finish a project, that is a ‘socially acceptable’ time to appreciate you. But at camp you wouldn’t thank a staff member for taking the campers to the pool; it goes unnoticed. As a staff member, my favorite times were those times I was alone, when other staff members were napping, when you can get good one-on-one
bonding time with the cabin, it wouldn’t be the same if someone was there, but if someone was there it would be a good time to appreciate them. There are just not enough eyes at camp (Ariella).

The nature of summer camp is the 24/7, immersive culture - for both campers and staff and this complete immersion in the non-stop world of camp perpetuates a lack of pauses to reflect, including those pauses that might elevate the culture of appreciation at camp. At the same time, camp is also a place where campers are raised with a culture of ‘consolation prizes’ and the feeling that ‘everyone’s a winner at camp.’ Camper appreciation is something that many camps value—and many camps go out of their way to make sure that campers feel successful at camp. As the following excerpt shows, when those campers grow up to the become staff and the rules of the game suddenly change, it can be a difficult adjustment.

I think it wouldn’t hurt if there was more [staff appreciation at camp], but at the same time we’re trying to get away from ‘everybody’s a winner’… it’s part of the culture, it’s the leftovers from that, we were raised that way... Some of the staff members were raised as winners for just showing up, and when they show up now and are not appreciated they feel that they are missing out. (Ariella)
One thing is for certain; no one works at camp for the money. Money was often mentioned by interviewees as a limiting factor, although there was also a general sense that just paying counselors more was unlikely to change the attrition rate. The fact that camp jobs pay so little is part of the package; it’s understood as a limitation of the profession by the young adults in the field. While several interviewees felt that offering more money to prospective counselors might help, there was general agreement that it is necessary to look at the bigger picture rather than single out the monetary factor. Overall these interviewees felt that decisions about job retention are made by counselors on the basis of the overall counselor lifestyle and job responsibilities rather than only the salary.

People who return don’t return for the money. And so if there was some sort of financial incentive that was supposed to be mildly enticing I think that it might help a little bit but overall if you’re going to stay you’re going to stay and if you’re not, you’re not…I think that it depends on what type of responsibilities that you want to take on, and if you’re not willing to [take on more responsibility] you can keep the same job, and if you’re not willing to make the same amount of money then you’ll go get an internship. I’d say that it’s more of a cult following. (Dan)

Beth described her thought process in terms of limiting factors. She explained that there are a set of reasons that you might come back to camp, which is in constant competition with a parallel set of reasons that you need pursue other directions. Each summer you weigh all your reasons, and eventually the camp side is going to come up short.
If you compare [being a camp counselor] to other job opportunities, the only way that camp wins out over another job is if you have some other connection other than the money. It might be that your best friend is going or all of your friends are going, maybe you don’t want to be home for the summer, maybe the Jewish connection… So what people are doing is that people are weighing their options out, and whatever the ‘other’ is which is usually linked to their professional interests, they are going to continue to pick camp unless the ‘other’ has too much of a pull. Costs and benefits…. (Beth)

In other words, Beth believed that the counselors who do manage to come back each summer are likely in a financially secure situation that allows them the luxury of not needing summer employment that pays better than a job at camp. If this is the case then a natural time for counselors to age out of the camp system is, at the very latest, once they graduate from college and are no longer supported financially by their parents.

So many young people [return] to camp because … the finances aren’t that important to them yet. But when they graduate from college and their parents want them to get ‘a real job’ they don’t view a summer camp job as that. (Beth)

Eventually these concerns about finances become part of the choice for these counselors to move on. Despite all of the successes, the motivation, and commitment, most counselors find an end to their camp careers and move on to their own next step.

I need to do adult things. Not that camp isn’t an adult thing, but I need to just get my life rolling a little bit … Financially I’d really need to make more money than I can make over
the summer in order to support myself… It’s really a combination of a lot of different factors. Specifically, it is not related to [camp]. (Dan)

**Fitting camp into a professional trajectory.** All of the interviewees admitted that the opportunities described above were not actually enough on their own. To bring them back year after year counselors wanted specific skills, or skills packaged in a specific way, in order to gain ground within a particular professional pathway. The interviewees tell a collective story pointing to personal professional goals as a reason to return (or not return) to their jobs as a camp counselor. In the opinion of all of the interviewees, it is much easier to justify returning to camp for an additional summer if specific professional goals are aligned with both the skills gained on the job and the impact the counseling job title will have when it appears on a resume.

[I’m a] Jewish studies major … I’d love to work in the Jewish world, I’d love to be the director of a Jewish summer camp, I’d love to work with a JCC or be a head of a teen program, work for the Jewish Federation, work on funding for synagogues…. I definitely think that if I wasn’t a Jewish studies major I don’t know if it would be such an easy decision, if I wasn’t benefitting from these connections for my professional life I might have had to remove myself from the camp world to ensure that my professional life could go where I want it to go. (Ilana)

Ilana also speculated that for her peers who did not have a Professional Jewish and Communal profession on their horizon, coming back to camp would likely be much harder to justify.
I think that academic and professional life is the biggest obstacle people face in coming back to camp. Not everyone who stays in camp is going on to the Jewish professional world but a large part of the decision-making correlates to what you are studying in school. (Ilana)

However, even if their exact career path is still unclear, the practical, hands-on, immersive nature of a job at camp may be exactly what they are looking for.

I wanted to be a counselor because I knew that the lessons learned would be more valuable than sitting at a desk or at some other internship where you're just filing papers and you go home at the end of the day. (Ariella)

For Ariella, who had graduated from college and was already in the work-force at the time of the interview, her professional goals were already fully aligned with her time at camp, to the extent that her job actually required that she spend summers at camp in some capacity. She also noticed that most of her peers who were coming back to camp summer after summer were able to do so because of career alignment.

[Working at camp] is actually part of my job now. I work in a synagogue and part of the agreement was that I spend the summers at camp ... I found a way to stay with camp professionally so I don’t see myself growing out of camp any time soon since I have this job that creates a year-round experience out of camp… The only staff members I know who are my age who are coming back to camp are using the camp experience in some professional way, are going into professions like either education or the Jewish professional world which really values camp. (Ariella)
When the alignment between career and camp was not as seamless, all of the interviewees found alternative motivation to compensate for the lack of career/goal alignment. All five interviewees saw value in the skills they had learned as counselors, even if the specific type of work was not what they saw themselves doing as part of their main career in the future. In the quote that follows, Gabe mentions that he hopes to “always have involvement in synagogues” in the future. In other words, he is expressing his hope to be an active member of whatever Jewish community that he will choose for himself as an adult, and he knows that the skills he learned at summer camp will help him to be a more effective and active member. In this way, the exposure to and experience with Jewish communal life at camp can be useful to veteran counselors outside of their specific career paths.

I do manage to get jobs during the year based on my job at camp such as song-leading, which is great. But camp counselor will not be the first line of my resume in the future, maybe the third line. Because it is not directly relevant to what I want to do. But the skills that I have gained and am gaining are definitely relevant…The general skills I’m able to gain at camp about working with other people are definitely applicable to what I am doing and want to do in the future. But the Jewish communal work that is at the center of what you do at camp is not exactly what I want to do for my career but I do hope to always have involvement in synagogues. (Gabe)

But, Beth saw it another way. If a young adult is not on a trajectory to a “Jewish profession,” working at camp can become a luxury that they cannot afford. She was very clear about the cost of returning to camp rather than getting a job or internship in her chosen field,
“Unless you are seeking a profession in the Jewish world, camp is kind of an escape from the ‘real world.’ That is how I feel” (Beth). Ilana also put it very clearly,

There is a professional trajectory that young adults are on these days, and you can only stall that for so long. There are so many amazing counselors and so many people who could do amazing things at camp but they really can’t because getting an internship after your junior [year] is really a huge part of people’s life experience. (Ilana)

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore and hopefully make sense of the veteran camp counselor experience at Jewish camps, and to discover what motivates camp counselors to keep coming back to work at camp for more than three summers. Data collected in the interviews suggests that there are some universal truths that were experienced across the five interviews as well as some truths that were not universal.

This study focused on counselors who were entering their fourth summer employed as counselors at a Jewish overnight camp. They were employed for 6 to 10 weeks over the summer. They played a direct role in camper care and education over the course of the summer. The five individuals interviewed for this study represented four different camps. The camps were affiliated with The Union for Reform Judaism Movement, The Ramah Camping Movement, and The Jewish Community Centers of America Camps. There were two males and three females; four of the five participants in this study were 21 years old at the time of the interview and one was 20.
These counselors stayed at camp for a combination of reasons. They stayed because they were invested in their campers and wanted to continue to contribute to their campers’ childhoods. They stayed for their own friends—often continuing to invest in friendships that had been building since the counselors themselves were campers. They stayed because overnight camp offered them an opportunity to gain useful skills that they knew would help them as they moved into specific careers or continued with their education. And when those skills clearly fit into a specific professional trajectory such as Jewish education, clergy, or other Jewish community profession, staying at camp became even easier. Whether they grew up at camp or not, they developed an attachment to the physical place of camp and longed to be back summer after summer. Camp was also a place where they felt successful and so they returned to the scene of their success to continue to flourish.

Camp was sometimes a place that counselors felt uniquely connected “Jewishly.” Whether these specific young adults grew up in practicing Jewish homes and whether they connected with the Jewish life on their college campus, they saw Jewish camp as a place where they could continue or renew their spiritual connection to Judaism. And, while certainly not the majority, some of those counselors interviewed just realized that this was a time in their lives to be at camp; they were in no hurry to discontinue their somewhat predictable summers in favor of unknown internships or jobs.

These returning counselors also speculated on why others stopped coming back to camp. For some, camp might simply not be a ‘good fit’. Others might never fully make the transition from camper to counselor and did not enjoy being ‘behind the scenes.’ For some, the culture of
appreciation at camp might be a contributing factor. Although most of the interviewees acknowledged that while lack of appreciation might be mentioned as a reason that some counselors leave, those who stay do so in spite of that lack, because they are able to accept and understand the specific culture of appreciation at their camp. All five interviewees agreed on one thing: No one worked at camp for the money. While small salaries could be a cause for attrition, those who stayed found reasons to do so despite the absence of a monetary incentive. It could be that there is an intrinsic quality to this detail. Those who choose to prioritize camp do so with little regard for those benefits that are not included in a camp counselor’s employment package—they prioritize finances less, in order to prioritize everything else that they are gaining along the way more. Those who don’t think in this manner, and for whom money might be an explanation for not returning to camp, remain interested in financial gain and allow it to take priority over the other benefits of working at camp.

Discussion of Themes

Counselors Stay at Camp for Several Reasons

Several themes emerged as these participants made sense of the experiences that motivated them to return to camp summer after summer. These included job satisfaction, social connections, gateway to other jobs, personal growth, and spiritual connections.

Job satisfaction is largely understood to be the combined result of several factors encompassing relationships with co-workers and supervisors, the availability and accessibility of resources needed for tasks, perceived equity of compensation and, of course, the individual
attitudes of the specific employees (Abu-Shamaa, et al., 2015; Ali, et al., 2015). Job satisfaction is commonly used in studies of occupation and workplace as a general term that enables a wide-ranging discussion of factors considered by employees as contributing to their desire to continue with or return to a position (Al-Zoubi, 2012; Banker, et al., 2000; Becker, 1984; Birmingham, 1989; Milner, 2005; Nadeem, 2010). When asked, all five participants in this study shared stories associating high levels of job satisfaction with the choice to return to camp for multiple summers. Participants discussed positive relationships with co-workers and supervisors, deep connections to the physical places of their camps, as well as enjoyment and satisfaction received from the daily tasks inherent in their roles as counselors.

Achievement motivation predicts that counselors’ feelings of success will translate into feelings of achievement and lead to a desire to remain in the situation that sparked those feelings. In the case of summer camp, campers offer a highly responsive litmus test for the counselors’ achievement. When engaging campers in activities, counselors can see almost immediately the success (or failure) of their approach by noticing how their campers respond. When campers respond favorably to programs implemented by their counselors, counselors will likely be motivated to repeat those programs to solicit additional positive responses. This can create a positive chain-reaction of successful actions and favorable responses (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003). Previous studies have shown that when counselors are more engaged in program implementation and improvement, the results are an increased sense of ownership and an increased sense of job satisfaction (Browne, Jameson & Bialeschki, 2015)
The ability to make and preserve social connections was another recurring theme in the interviews. These counselors needed and were interested in investing in their own peer friendships. Although they also firmly stated that coming back for friends is never enough on its own, a positive social environment for counselors at camp was seen as a necessary factor for staff retention. When friends are no longer able (or willing) to dedicate the summer to camp, counselors need to decide whether coming back without their built-in social connections is still a priority. It may also be that with increased access to camp friends via social media, the passion for close proximity can take a back seat to a passion for a particular resume-building internship that demands being on-site at a non-camp location. It is no surprise that a wide range of factors are taken into consideration whenever career decisions are made by young adults (Ferry, 2006). These interviews uncovered a collection of shifting and sometimes limiting factors that counselors considered when choosing their summer path. When the desire to be with friends for the summer is replaced by the drive for career-specific skills, counselors choose to move on. This shifting of priorities is not uncommon for emerging adults. As 20-somethings strive to succeed they often pivot towards goals that they feel they can attain, driven by the self-fulfillment that comes with accomplishing a goal (Creed & Hughes, 2013). This echoes the sentiments of both affiliation and achievement in Achievement Motivation Theory. Counselors’ connection to camp is strengthened through feelings of belonging to a group of friends there (affiliation), but these emerging adults also keep their ‘eyes on the prize’ when it comes to achieving career goals.
Camp counseling serves as a gateway to other jobs. The opportunity to gain useful skills is highly valued by today’s college students. Those interviewees who were planning to pursue jobs in education or Jewish communal and non-profit work were likely to rationalize their connection to camp by explaining that they were gaining applicable skills and making professional connections that would help them in their next steps. However, for those interviewees who were not planning to go into fields associated with Jewish expertise, a common theme was that no matter what skills you gain at camp, and no matter how valuable those skills might be in general, if the method for communicating the achievement of those skills on a resume is under the title of "camp counselor," it may not be worth it.

It is no secret that resume writing and resume building are not only about the skills acquired and listed, but also about the specific places where those skills were gained. Employers look at the where as much as or even more than the what (CPA Bulletin, 2002; Larsen, 2005). At a certain point in a young adult’s journey towards their chosen career they want to accrue explicitly relevant job experience from an explicitly relevant employer in order to get full credit for taking the right steps or making the right choices. Whether these experiences are truly necessary for job success is irrelevant. The impression that future employers expect specific experiences is enough for young adults to feel that they are required to gain them (Dudley, 1996). In other words, if a specific type of training is what potential employers are looking for, then it is likely that many young adults will turn away from camp and begin to prioritize future employability over other factors. Achievement Motivation Theory explains this process of weighing out positives and negatives in terms of future gain and achievement. In this case
achievement is dictating both counselors’ interest in staying at camp (when it is in line with future aspirations) as well as their need, sometimes, to leave camp for alternative pursuits that will serve them better in their imagined path ahead.

**Growth and spiritual connection.** Growth happens at camp as a natural progression of working there for several summers. Counselors improve. They get better at things. They take on more responsibility. They take on additional roles such as leading activities, leading prayer services, etc. The rhythm of summer camp offers an opportunity for both hard work and reflection. This opportunity is enhanced when the hard work and reflection are accompanied by beautiful vistas and a significant amount of time spent in nature (Louv, 2005). The attachment to place that counselors develop at camp can have a positive effect on counselor’s success and their motivation to return to camp for multiple summers (Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004). The interviewees suggested that both the specific, often indescribable, qualities of ‘home’ that camp embodies as well as the specific natural surroundings of camp were highly contributing factors in their decision to return. Achievement Motivation calls this affiliation and suggests that when people feel connected to a specific place they will be more likely to want to remain (or return) there.

Spiritual growth (i.e. finding a specifically Jewish connection at camp) was referred to by several interviewees as a factor in retention. Several did not grow up in religiously observant homes and found, as campers, that camp was their primary source of Jewish education and practice. As young adults, this does not necessarily change, especially if the counselors do not have access to (or do not affiliate with) a strong Jewish presence on their college campus. For
these counselors, giving up a summer at camp means giving up the opportunity to be in an age-appropriate Jewish haven.

**Counselors Leave Camp for Different Reasons**

While this study focused on counselors who have been and are continuing to come back to camp, the interviews also uncovered some insights as to why some counselors may stop coming back to camp. Among the reasons these returning counselors gave for their peers’ leaving camp included a need to gain alternative academic and professional experience, a perceived lack of appreciation at camp, the feeling that they didn’t have the support or guidance they needed, and simply not enjoying the work itself.

Being a camp counselor is not right for everyone, and some staff will not discover this until after they have tried it for one or two summers. The central reason cited by interviewees for counselor attrition after a single summer at camp was difficulty in making the transition from camper to staff member. The hard work behind the scenes of camp is purposely hidden from campers. The nature of camp for campers is a feeling of being surrounded by a ‘bubble of fun and support.’ Being the participant inside that bubble and being a part of the crew creating it, are two very different experiences. For some that ‘crew member’ role is fun, and perhaps even more rewarding than the participant role. For others, however, being on staff can be disheartening.

And even for those counselors who enjoy the role of staff member, there are some who do not want to advance further into positions of authority such as division leader, activity area leader, program coordinator, etc. For counselors who do not desire advancement there seems to be a self-determining process dictating who comes back to camp and who does not. For them,
being a counselor for a few years is simply enough, and they prefer to pursue other options after that. This is not surprising considering that emerging adults are often motivated to pursue experiences that are specifically designed to prepare them for a future career (Arnett, 2000). This can also be explained in light of the quest for achievement and/or power that Achievement Motivation Theory predicts will be a strong motivating factor for these emerging adults. When the potential for upward mobility at camp is not associated with achievement and/or power, counselors will look elsewhere for alternate circumstances that can satisfy those needs.
Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

This chapter discusses three superordinate themes and the resultant implications for future practice and research.

Superordinate Themes

Turnover is an inevitable fixture in the industry of camp. There were interviewees who felt that staff turnover might be positive for a camp’s overall structure. From these staff members’ perspectives, their peers’ attrition does not seem problematic. They felt that having new staff come to camp each year had benefits for the campers, and that new staff bring a certain refreshing energy to camp. However, from the camp director’s perspective, it can be challenging when the number of new staff is disproportionately greater than the number of veteran staff. In these instances, a heavy burden is placed on the more experienced staff until the new staff find their rhythm.

There are a finite number of senior leadership positions at any camp. When motivation to achieve and the opportunity to advance within the organization are significant factors in counselor retention the percentage of returning staff cannot be too great because there would never be enough such positions for every first-year counselor to continue to advance within the organization indefinitely. Some percentage of attrition is not only inevitable but also necessary if the camp is going to continue to nurture and support new leadership.

It is important to remember that some percentage of counselor attrition is the direct result of counselors who leave because they are not asked back to camp, or who are not offered promotions that they desired and therefore chose to not return. However, this is not necessarily
the attrition that Camp Directors are worried about and this type of attrition was not the focus of this research. Camp Directors generally focus their retention efforts on those counselors whom they believe have the potential to continue on in the field of camping. It is when these counselors, who are sought after, choose not to return that Camp Directors wonder if something could have been done to keep them in the system.

**Appreciation is a state of mind.** While clearly expressed appreciation is not always readily available at camp, all five interviewees felt that those who complain about being underappreciated may have unfair expectations. The consensus seemed to be that counselors who feel underappreciated should be prepared to work harder to make sure that they deserve the appreciation that they expect.

As I was analyzing the rhetoric of the interviews it occurred to me that in other jobs there might not be as much entitlement when it comes to the culture of appreciation. I wondered whether, in other jobs, the reaction to not feeling appreciated isn’t to simply, as Dan suggested, work harder. Part of the confusion at camp might be the casual atmosphere that is so pervasive; it is not a traditional professional hierarchy of leadership but rather a peer-heavy work environment in which supervisors are likely to be friends. One interviewee also mentioned that there is often an ‘everyone's a winner’ mentality that is encouraged in the campers, and this might be hard to shake once campers become counselors.

**It’s Never Been About the Money.** “What is clear is that there is little monetary incentive for young adults to take on the job of counselor” (Sales & Saxe, 2004, p. 122). Amy
Sales and Leonard Saxe drew this conclusion in summarizing remarks about their 2001 survey of Jewish summer camps. This survey asked questions of campers, parents, Camp Directors, and camp staff and included a broad range of questions including motivation to work at camp. What was true in 2001 seems to have also been true in 2004-5. In December 2004 and January 2005, Jeff Kress conducted a survey of Camp Ramah counselors who had worked at a Ramah camp the previous summer. The participants spanned all seven of the Ramah overnight camps and the Ramah Nyack day camp (in which the counselors sleep overnight although the campers go home each day). Counselors were asked a range of questions in the survey including a question asking them to rank motivating factors in their decision to work the previous summer. Salary ranked the lowest in a list of nine factors including to give back to [camp]; to be a part of a Jewish community, and to be with friends (Kress, 2010).

These findings continue to be relevant today; counselors keep coming back despite the meager salaries. Although, the interviewees in this study explained that when finances are not an issue the decision to continue to work at camp may be easier, they also felt that those who choose to return to camp do so knowing that they will not be making a lot of money there and are likely able to find paying jobs during the school year. This lack of financial pressure may also be the result of returning counselors’ parents’ ability to value the camp experience more than they value encouraging their college-age children to shoulder a larger financial burden. In any case, and no matter the origin of the reason, it seems that few if any counselors are motivated to work at camp because of the salary.
**Camp(er) experience not necessary.** Having been a camper may not have a significant impact on a staff’s decision to stay at camp. The interview data did not necessarily support the idea that being a camper is a strong predictor of a successful summer on staff. Counselor qualities that were strong predictors included being intuitive, having the ability to learn the culture of a place by reading context clues, having a tendency to feel a sense of belonging, and making friends easily. Some of these traits might come more easily to those who have previous experience with summer camp, but not necessarily. This suggests that there is no reason for camp directors to limit their staff recruitment efforts to veteran campers. In fact, targeting camp counselors based on the qualities listed above might produce better results in the end.

**Implications for Future Practice**

**Implications for camps in general.** According to the data gathered in this study, the best predictors of staff retention are well-aligned staff career goals. When staff (and their parents) see camp as applicable to their future selves and in line with their career goals, they will be more likely to return. In recruiting staff, solid staff programming, good support and training, decent wages, adequate appreciation, and opportunities to spend time with friends all help, but the single most important factor appeared in this study to be whether staff are convinced that a job at camp will improve their chances to gain a job somewhere else later on. If camps want to attract specific counselors back to camp, they should consider assisting those individuals in sculpting internships or externships at camp. These could take many forms and could focus on child development, sports and recreation, music, and any of the other activities offered at camp. It might even be possible to have the business and accounting oriented counselors assist with
ordering summer supplies and keeping track of the summer budget if this would satisfy their need for relevant work experiences. While the curricula would have to be structured and would require satisfactory supervision and oversight, it may be possible to implement such programs with minimal adjustments to the current staffing configurations at camp.

While high salaries were not the expectation of any of the interviewees in this study, there might still be a benefit to raising counselor salaries. Increased monetary compensation might make a difference for some counselors who are choosing between camp and certain other summer experiences.

**Implications for Jewish camps.** Jewish camps offer their counselors an opportunity to connect with religion and/or spirituality in a safe, peer-rich environment. However, for counselors determined to acquire skills directly related to their future employment goals this will likely not be enough. A better ace in the hole for Jewish camps will be the possibility of a Jewish community job network, the creation of specialized internships for camp counselors, and any other career-specific advantages that could be offered.

Camp directors might want to focus retention efforts on those counselors predetermined to most likely to remain at camp. Based on the data gathered in this study that means those emerging adults pursuing careers in fields of education, Jewish communal work, social work, and non-profit management. Focusing retention efforts specifically on those counselors will help directors focus their limited resources and manage their expectations. But, although well-aligned professional aspirations are a good predictor of counselor retention, it is important to remember that not every young Jewish adult can aspire to be a Jewish educator or Jewish
professional. If all camp counselors grew up to be Jewish professionals, who would teach math and science, who would be doctors, lawyers, clothing designers, and retailers…? It is natural that when young adults with a variety of professional ambitions begin to pursue other careers they may not be able to keep coming back to work at camp. Perhaps then, recruiters might emphasize how well one or two or even four summers at camp can prepare these emerging adults to be effective and positive forces in their future workplaces and in their future pursuits in general.

**Looking beyond retention.** Although it might seem counter-intuitive at this point, staff retention may not actually be the most important parameter to be measuring in judging the success of a camp. While this study has focused on staff retention at Jewish overnight summer camps, it has become clear to me that staff retention at camp, high or low, is likely a sign of something else, and it might be important to look beyond the retention numbers to see what else is going on within the camp community. It is important to ask the parallel question, What are the true measures of success for camp and for camp counselors? It is not clear that counselor retention should be a goal unto itself, but rather one gauge with which to measure the general climate at a camp.

**Areas for Future Research**

Given the important role that excellent staff play in a successful summer camp, further research on the topic of counselor retention should be encouraged. One area in need of study is research and statistics on the actual scope of the retention “problem” among emerging adults and whether it is unique to the camping industry. What is the average number of years that emerging
adults retain summer jobs in any field? This information would offer much-needed context for the more general question of summer job retention and attrition in that age group. In addition, since the percentage of staff retention at overnight camps varies greatly, between 25% and 75% (ACA, 2011, as cited in McCole et al., 2012), it might be worth exploring other differences among camps with very different retention rates. Are camps with a higher ratio of veteran staff better camps? Are campers and parents happier when staff retention is higher? What else are those camps doing differently?

Further research might also explore the socio-economic diversity among campers (including those campers who are able to come to camp because of scholarship funds available to them) compared with the socio-economic diversity among counselors. Surely some parents are willing to support their kids to work at camp simply because it is a good social environment, regardless of possible financial need. In addition, it is important to gain a perspective on the number of counselors who wanted to return to camp but were not invited back for some reason as well counselors who preferred to advance in their careers at camp but were offered jobs that they did not want to come back for.

Another topic of interest is the best balance between new and returning counselors on staff at camp. Given that there should always be the opportunity for new emerging adults to begin a career at camp as a first time counselor, and since there are not an infinite number of available positions at camp, some amount of veteran counselor attrition is necessary. What would Camp Directors say is the best ratio of new and returning staff in order to balance the need for peer leadership and role modeling while still making room for new counselors to be hired?
And finally, since accumulating relevant job experience is of such importance to emerging adults, it would be interesting to examine the effect that a change in the title of “counselor” to “experiential education intern” or similar more “professional” title, would have on counselor job retention.

Limitations of the Study

As with any phenomenological study, this IPA study had a small number of participants. While the depth of the interviews served to counterbalance the limited number of viewpoints, the small scale might serve as a limitation of this study. Despite this limitation, the lessons learned from this research may apply to other faith-based camps. Both Jewish and other faith-based camps will have the advantage of attracting returning counselors who are interested in a faith-based career. The implication is that the experiences these counselors gain at camp will likely be directly applicable to their future jobs.

Conclusion

There is an inherent self-selection among counselors who come back to camp for multiple summers. Those are counselors who can handle the long hours, the low salaries, the need to perform well under pressure and with little sleep, the lack of appreciation, and the lack of personal privacy. Those who do not thrive under these conditions, or for whom just a couple of summers in those circumstances are enough, are more likely to move on with their lives in other directions. However, the factor most responsible for camp counselor attrition at Jewish overnight camps seems to be the young adult’s need to acquire specific job-related experiences that they
can describe in a positive way on their growing resume. If camps continue to offer opportunities for counselors to learn relevant skills, and improve their methods of packaging jobs in relevant 21st century terms (such as *intern*), there might be an improvement in camp counselor retention.
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Appendix A: Interview schedule

Initial conversation: demographic and other information

1) How old are you?

2) Gender?

3) How many summers have you worked at camp?

4) Which camp do you work at?

5) How many days (or weeks) was each session at the camp you worked?

6) What was your role at camp each of the summers that you worked there?

7) Did you attend camp as a camper?
   a. Which camp?
   b. For how many summers?

Second conversation: semi-structured interview questions

1) Tell me about your experiences as a camp counselor. You can start with telling me why you initially wanted to become a counselor.

2) After your first summer, were you certain that you wanted to return to camp as a counselor again?
   a. Why? (or why not?)
   b. What were the specific feelings you remember about wanting to return to camp again?
c. Were there specific goals that you had in mind for yourself for that second summer?

3) After your second summer were you certain that you wanted to return to camp as a counselor again?
   a. Why? (or why not?)
   b. What were the specific feelings you remember about wanting to return to camp again?
   c. Were there specific goals that you had in mind for yourself for that second summer?
   d. Was it different being at camp for the second summer?
      i. How was it different? (or how was it the same?)

4) And at the end of last summer, your third summer at camp, were you certain that you wanted to return to camp as a counselor again?
   a. Why? (or why not?)
   b. What were the specific feelings you remember about wanting to return to camp again?
   c. Were there specific goals that you had in mind for yourself for that second summer?
   d. Was it different being at camp for the second summer?
      i. How was it different? (or how was it the same?)
5) What kinds of specific skills do you think that being a camp counselor has helped you gain?

6) Did you ever feel any pressure (academic, parental, financial, other) not to come back?

Third session: member checking

1) Did you have a chance to look over the transcript that I sent you via email?
   a. If not, do it together during the session

2) Does everything seem correct? Did I understand you correctly during the interview?

3) After reading it over is there anything that you would like to add?

4) (if applicable) I actually have a couple more questions, just to clarify a few things, is it okay if I ask you a few more questions?
   a. Clarifying questions if necessary…
Appendix B: Letter of Institutional Support

November 9, 2015

Foundation for Jewish Camp
253 W 35th St, New York, NY 10001
(646) 278-4500

RE: IRB Letter of Support

Dear Institutional Review Board Chair and Members:
I am writing this letter of support for one of our colleagues, Leah Zigmond.
It is our intention to support Leah’s research (described below) and in particular to assist Leah in recruiting for her research.

Research Overview

1) **Project Summary**: This Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will look at four veteran camp counselors at Jewish Summer Camps in the United States and will explore the common phenomena of the young adults’ experiences as counselors, their motivations for returning to their roles as counselors for more than 3 years, and how they make sense of their common experiences. What are the experiences of veteran camp counselors at a Jewish Summer Camp and how do they make sense of those experiences as they relate to their motivations for returning to work at the camp beyond three years?

2) **Objectives**: The purpose of this research is to discover what motivates camp counselors to keep coming back to work at camp beyond the first two years and in particular, for more than three years.

3) **Background and Rationale**: Camp counselor retention is important to the business of camping because veteran staff play a key role in camps’ success. Veteran staff help to preserve camp culture, help to maintain camp traditions year after year, and serve an important role in the naturally occurring peer-training and peer-support environment that camps to depend on. Another reason that staff retention is important is that staff who come back to camp for multiple summers tend to be driven to keep improving—both their own individual performance and also improving the camp experience in general. When camps don’t (or can't) retain staff they spend many valuable staff-training hours starting at zero with staff who need to get used to the place, instead of hitting the ground running with an experienced staff. Returning staff do not experience the long adjustment period that so many first-time staffers experience and are able, instead, to plunge deeper into more complicated training topics which will ultimately serve their campers better. If camps knew how to appeal to staff so that returning to camp for multiple years was more attractive, they would increase overall productivity as well as program quality.

Sincerely,
Julie Finkelstein
Foundation for Jewish Camp
Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Letter

Leah Zigmond
Northeastern University
zigmond.l@husky.neu.edu

Shalom!
Your Camp Director gave me your contact information because They thought that you might be interested in participating in a research study about counselors at Jewish camps.

It is possible that we have crossed paths in recent years. I am the new Associate Director at Camp Judaea (and the former Assistant Director at Camp Ramah Darom), and I was Ramah Darom’s Cornerstone liaison last spring at the Cornerstone conference.

I am also a doctoral student working on my dissertation in Jewish Education and am conducting a research project related to camp counselor retention. The purpose of this research is to discover what motivates camp counselors to keep coming back to work at camp in hopes of helping Camp Directors to target their staff recruitment and retention activities to maximize the years that counselors stay at camp. I’ll be exploring the stories of camp counselors who are choosing to return to camp for a fourth summer. I am looking for a small sample size—just 4 or 5 participants. The commitment is to participate in 3 Skype/Google hangout sessions.

1) In the first session I’ll just get your basic information—name, at which camp you work, did you go to camp as a camper, that sort of thing.
2) The second interview will last the longest—60-90 minutes. At this point I will ask you about your camp counselor experience—what you get out of being at camp, what keeps you coming back...
3) In the third and final session I will go over with you the transcript of that interview and make sure that everything I wrote down makes sense to you, and perhaps ask a few clarifying questions if necessary.

All interviews will be recorded.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at zigmond.l@husky.neu.edu

In the event that I have more interest than space for participants in the study I will select the first 4 or 5 qualified responses that offer a balance of both gender and place of employment to the study (in other words, the first 2 or 3 males and the first 2 or 3 females, preferably from 4 different camps).

I look forward to working with you and to helping make all our camps better!!

Leah Zigmond
Northeastern University, EdD candidate
Appendix D: Participant Informed Consent Letter

UNSIGNED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Northeastern University, Department of:
Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Kelly Conn. Student Researcher, Leah Zigmond

Title of Project: Why they Keep Coming Back: Experiences of Summer Camp Counselors

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to discover what motivates camp counselors to keep coming back to work at camp beyond the first two years and in particular, for more than three years.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place as a series of 3 Skype or Google Hangout interviews and will take a total of about 2-3 hours of your time. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in three video interviews about your experiences as a camp counselor over the last 3 summers in general and specifically about your motivation for returning to camp for a fourth summer.

The possible risks or discomforts of the study are minimal. You may feel a little self-conscious answering certain questions. Please know that if at any point there are questions asked that you do not feel comfortable answering you do not have to answer those questions. You are free to quit the study at any time, even once you have already agreed to participate and have already begun to be interviewed.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, potential benefits include helping Camp Directors to target their staff recruitment and retention activities to maximize the years that counselors stay at camp.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Leah Zigmond, zigmond.l@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Kelly Conn, k.conn@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Leah Zigmond