

Back to Civilization

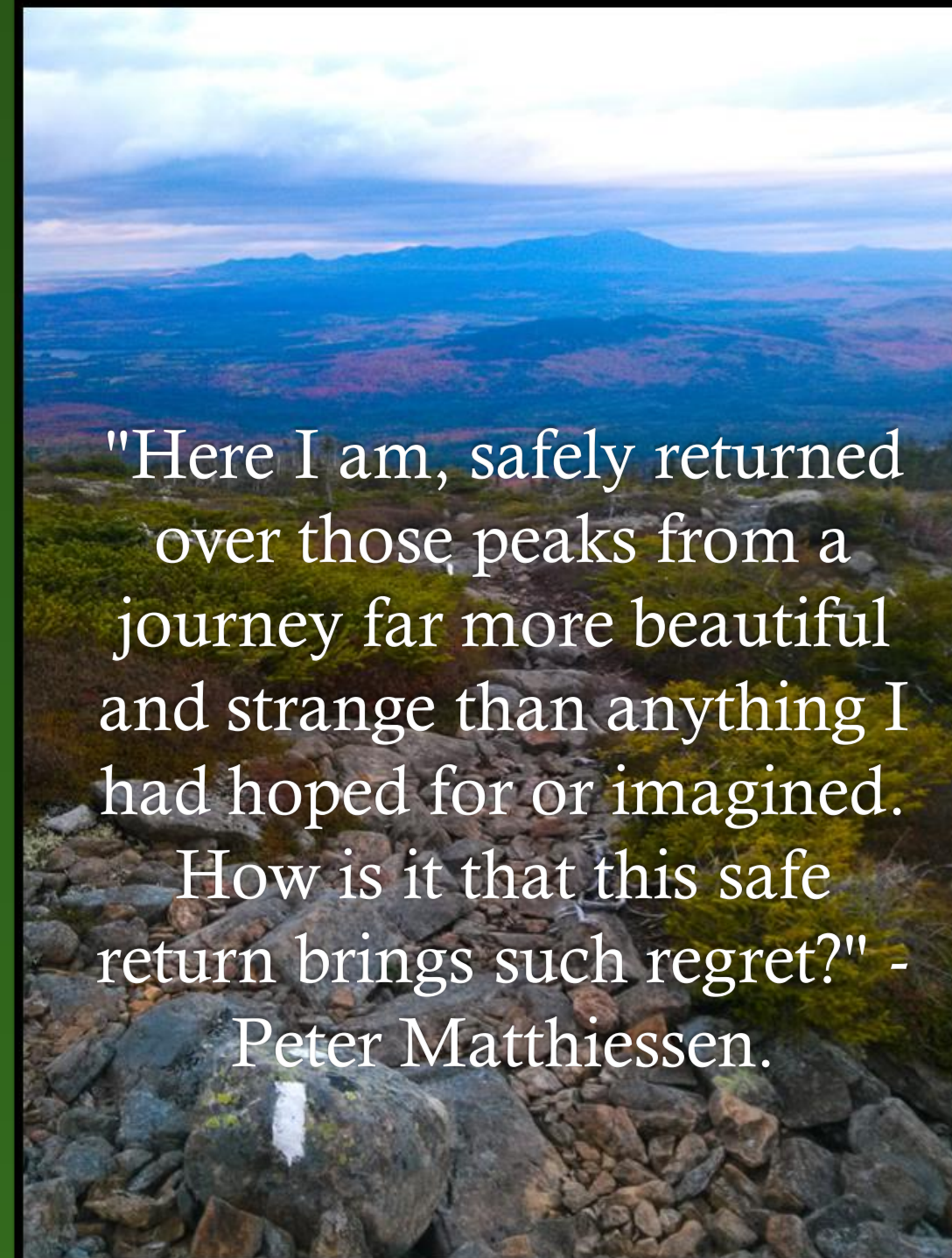
Strategies for Coping with Reintegration After a Long-Distance Hike On the Appalachian Trail

A project presented to the faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Experiential and Outdoor Education in the College of Education and Allied Professions.

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Purpose



"Here I am, safely returned over those peaks from a journey far more beautiful and strange than anything I had hoped for or imagined. How is it that this safe return brings such regret?" - Peter Matthiessen.

To explore hiker's experiences of reintegration after thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Overview:
The Appalachian Trail (AT) is one of the most renowned long-distance hiking paths in the United States. Over 21,000 individuals have hiked the entirety of the AT from end-to-end as a "thru-hike." There are many great physical challenges associated with thru-hiking, but research shows that the mental challenges can be the most difficult (Turley & Goldenberg, 2013).

Of all the mental challenges associated with long-distance hiking, the period of time following the end of the journey, called the *reintegration* phase is known by many to be the most difficult, and least studied aspect of the experience. Through this research, I sought to build an understanding of this phenomenon and identify strategies hikers have used to cope with the loss of their community, sense of place, and lifestyle.

Literature Review

- Benefits, outcomes, motivations and challenges of a long-distance hike.
- Place Attachment
 - Re-shaping personal identity
 - Adopting trail-names
 - Activity involvement & self-expression
- Culture Shock
 - Four stages: Honeymoon, Negotiation, Adjustment, Adaptation
- Reintegration phase
 - Inability to communicate/relate to other people
 - Lack of control over daily routine and responsibilities
 - Having to live up to society's expectations
- Comparisons of long-distance hiking and normal outdoor activity

(Cole & Thompsen, 2021; Crust et al., 2011; Gerard et al., 2003; Gomez et al., 2008; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Mau et al., 2021; Mayer & Lukacs, 2021; Turley & Goldenberg, 2013; Yun & Peden, 2018)



Method: Narrative Inquiry

Blanco et al., (2022) describe narrative inquiry as:

"An interdisciplinary method that views lives holistically and draws from traditions in literary theory, oral history, drama, psychology, folklore, and film philosophy... Narrative inquiry requires openness and trust, a mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship that is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. It demands intense and active listening and gives the narrator full voice." (p. 173)

Narrative is an important aspect of developing a sense of self, differentiating one's relationship to the other, and understanding one's connection to a larger community. (Glover, 2004; Glover, 2016; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002)

Guiding research question: what are hikers' experiences of reintegration after hiking the Appalachian Trail?

Project Overview

- Semi-structured interviews with seven AT hikers from the years 2012, 2015, and 2022
- Convenience sampling method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)
- Deliverable:
 - Narrative summary to be distributed to members of the hiking community through AT affiliated agencies

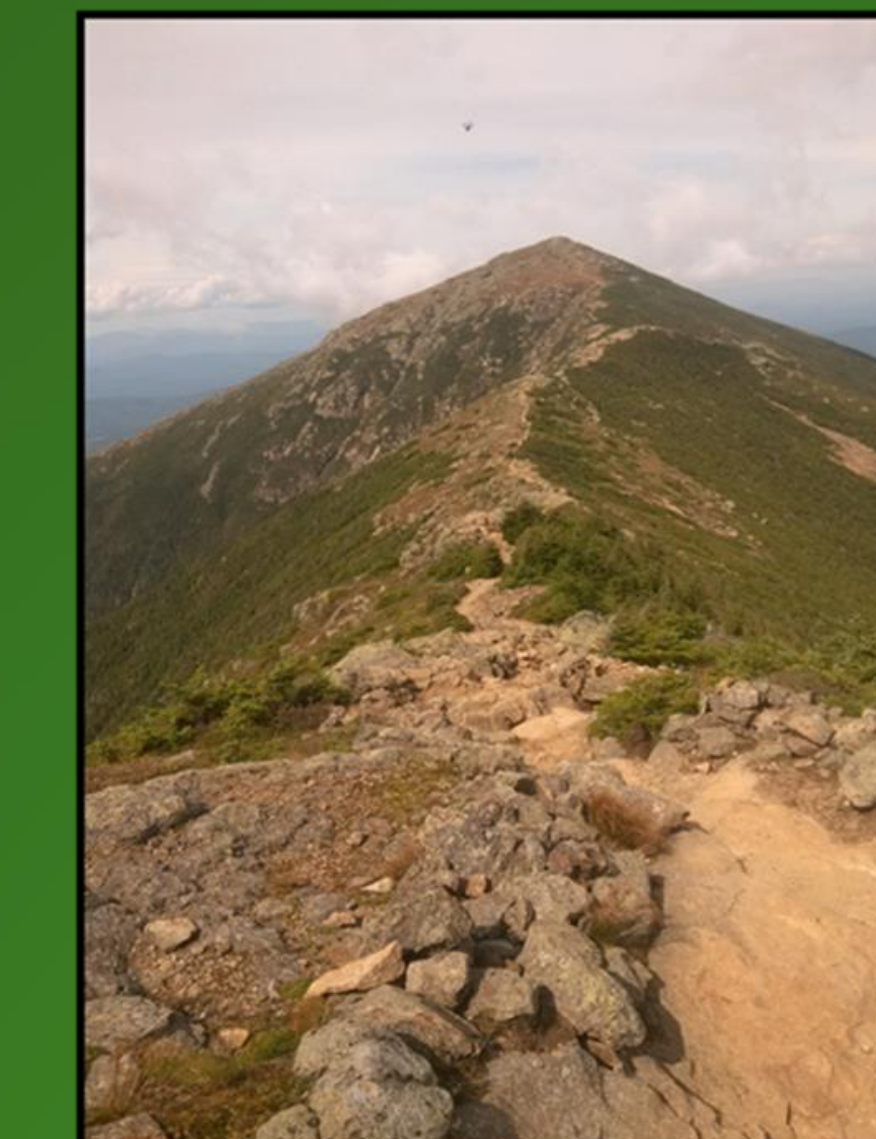


Narrative Themes

- End of hike experiences & emotions
- Personal changes (positive/negative)
 - Post trail depression
- Similarities with results of prior studies
 - Increase in sensory perceptions
 - Culture shock experiences
 - The desire for community

Advice for Other Hikers

- Being prepared before/after the hike
- Choosing to be thankful for things that others may not have e.g., partners, supportive family, a home, a career to return to
- Opening up to other people
- Avoiding self-isolation
- Embracing awareness
- Acknowledging hardworking people in the background who make the trail possible
- Staying connected with close friends
- Resisting the urge to reintegrate with society completely – keep the most important aspects of your new self/experience
- Thinking of the hike as one part of a life full of accomplishments, instead of one great accomplishment that has come to an end
- Remembering that the trail experience doesn't have to end at Katahdin



Recommendations for Future Research

- Thru-hiking as a form of therapeutic activity
- Thru-hiking and its relation to Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)
- Thru-hiking as a Rite of Passage (Van Gennep, 1960)
- The Appalachian Trail as a liminal space – Liminality and Communitas (Turner, 2011)
- Studies exploring the experiences of solo hiking vs. group hiking
- Similar studies looking at the experiences of hikers from different demographics – age, race, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status
- Thru-hiking as a much-needed form of community in a socially isolated modern culture
- Dunbar's number (1992) as it relates to the thru-hiking social community
- More longitudinal research of the hiking experience (beginning, middle and end)

