Article

Journal of Experiential Education
1–20

DOI: 10.1177/10538259211012714
journals.sagepub.com/home/jee
SAGE

Outward Bound Instructors' Experience of Stress: Storms, Students, and Role Strain

Gina McGovern[1,2]

Abstract

Background: Outward Bound (OB) provides experiential outdoor learning programs where students grow through overcoming challenges. Instructors leading these wilderness courses face numerous demands and situational conditions which may create stress. **Purpose:** This study sought to describe instructors' experience of stress on OB courses with adolescents. **Methodology/Approach:** In semi-structured interviews, 31 OB instructors from two sites provided in-depth guided narratives of highly stressful course situations, which were analyzed using grounded theory methods. **Findings/Conclusions:** Findings indicated that instructors were stressed by unsafe and unpredictable situations (e.g., adverse weather, dangerous terrain, medical concerns) and student behavior, thoughts, and feelings (e.g., conflict, oppositional behavior, distress). Analysis also suggested that the internalization of role demands—for student safety, student learning, and control—intensified experiences of stress. Self-perceptions of failure to meet these role demands led to role strain. In addition, stress affected instructors' functioning and their interactions with students. **Implications:** This study suggested several recommendations for OB and other youth-serving organizations. These include assessing the amount and types of stress instructors are experiencing on a regular basis and examining how these stressors might be reduced or mitigated by actors at multiple levels in the organization.

Keywords

role strain, risk management, stress, wilderness settings, job performance

[1]University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
[2]University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

Corresponding Author:
Gina McGovern, School of Education, University of Michigan, Room 1416, 610 E. University Ave., Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.
Email: ginamcgo@umich.edu

Ariel[1] was an experienced Outward Bound (OB) instructor who, with her coinstructor, led a backpacking course with seven male students for 20 days. The three younger boys, who struggled with physical and interpersonal challenges of being on course, had "some kind of temper outburst pretty much once a day," which built resentment among the rest of the group and slowed their progress. Ariel described the stress she experienced as a result: "We just didn't have enough time to get enough sleep and travel those miles and deal with these emotional outbursts every day. It was this cycle of just being physically and emotionally exhausted."

The human stress response can be traced through evolution to our mammalian roots, and today has aspects of psychological, behavioral, and physiological processes that affect emotional regulation and social behavior (Porges, 2001). Stress can be situational and short term or accumulate over time. It is a natural response to change and low levels of stress can be motivating or help a person to adapt to a changing environment (Kupriyanov & Zhdanov, 2014). Too much or prolonged stress can have harmful effects on productivity and wellness (McEwen & Robinson, 2012).

Stress similar to Ariel's experience is not uncommon. All jobs have some degree of stress (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013), and research has shown that the emotional work of human-serving professions can be particularly stressful (Pugliesi, 1999). However, the role of a field instructor in experiential wilderness education courses differs from most other youth-serving roles. Instructors are "on" for 24 hours a day for the duration of the course, are subject to the unpredictability of the wilderness, and have only their coinstructor(s) for immediate assistance. On these courses, physical, emotional, and social challenges present opportunities to support students' growth and learning (Walsh & Golins, 1976). Research suggests that youth can learn powerful social and emotional skills from grappling with challenges in real-world settings, but that this learning can be messy, visceral, and complex (Smith et al., 2016). It is important to understand how facilitating these transformational learning experiences takes its toll on field instructors like Ariel. There is a lack of research that examines the ways instructors experience the unique stressors of their jobs and how they deal with it, especially the ways stress affects instructors' professional role to support youth's learning and development.

This study uses OB as a context to explore the causes and effects of field instructors' experiences of stress on course. Narrative descriptions of instructors' most stressful situations on courses with youth—situations where the stress was enough that it became difficult to function—provided rich context and nuanced details for exploring the sources of stress and their effects. The questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What situations do instructors find highly stressful?
2. Why are these situations stressful? What are the underlying contributors to stress?
3. How do intense feelings of stress affect instructors' functioning on course, especially how they interact with students?

This study of the lived experiences of OB instructors can inform practices and strategies that can help OB and other similar outdoor programs to prepare instructors for their role.

Literature Review

The Context of OB

OB instructors enact the organization's mission "to change lives through challenge and discovery" (OB, 2018) by leading groups on wilderness expeditions. Worldwide, OB offers a variety of courses for adults and youth, but this study focused on courses for youth at two United States–based OB schools. At these schools, courses last from five to 60 or more days and present numerous physically demanding conditions and emotionally taxing situations for students and instructors. Pairs of instructors are engaged in all aspects of the course, including being exposed to extreme weather, wildlife, and/or challenging terrain. They instruct students in how to safely engage in arduous activities like hiking, rowing, skiing, and rock climbing. Throughout all these activities, instructors have around-the-clock responsibility for the physical and emotional safety of students (many of whom are inexperienced with the outdoors).

After managing risk, the top priority of an instructor's professional role is to support youth's development and learning. Throughout the course, instructors monitor students' experience of challenge. They change the situations or supports to attempt to provide the right level of challenge for each student to learn. The OB staff manual describes instructors as "the interpreter(s) of a physical and emotional journey" and names multiple roles in which they serve: "skills trainers, program designers, interpreters (translators), facilitators, teachers, coaches, rapport builders, assessors, site-managers, followers, and mentors and trainers of other staff" (Crane et al., 2008, p. 51). Ultimately, the job requirements ask OB instructors to shoulder the responsibility for both students' learning and risk management. These expectations may create pressure that leads to feelings of stress for instructors.

OB trains instructors extensively for their role in the field, including direct instruction in risk management, wilderness first aid, youth development, and leadership facilitation (Crane et al., 2008). The OB schools in this study also encourage instructor self-care and provided training in mindfulness strategies, communication tools, and breathing techniques that instructors used to reduce their stress. Prior to each course, instructor pairs discuss their leadership styles and preferences in a pairing meeting. Instructors discuss a range of topics, including coming to agreement on how they will handle safety, daily routines, camp set up, behavior management, and so on (Crane et al., 2008). They also specifically share their reflections on how they approach stress, answering questions like, "How do you handle stress? What do you need in times of stress? What causes your sense of urgency to rise? What type of communicator are you?" (Crane et al., 2008, p. 79). These processes for precourse discussions demonstrate OB's attentiveness to supporting their field instructors to be successful in their roles.

Instructor Stress in Outdoor Education Programs

While this study focused on OB, much can be learned from research on similar programs that employ field instructors such as wilderness therapy and outdoor education. Research suggests that field instructors experience stress from maintaining their relationships outside of work and creating a balance between their work and personal lives. A study that conducted interviews with five Canadian and American outdoor education leaders reported these leaders felt misunderstood by those who do not have experience in the field and were overwhelmed by the transition of returning home from being in the field (Field et al., 2016). Another study, which surveyed 129 field instructors from North American wilderness therapy programs, reported that instructors felt disconnected from home, and as if they were missing out on time with friends and family (Marchand et al., 2009). Two studies of Australian outdoor educators by Thomas (2001, 2002) reported long work hours, time away from home, and relationship difficulties as commonly experienced challenges. It is suggested that these persistent challenges (Edwards & Gray, 1998), along with dissatisfactory compensation (Hall, 2019; Marchand & Russell, 2013), can contribute to turnover in the field. This research shows some of the challenges associated with being a field instructor but does not examine the stress instructors experience while on course.

There are limited empirical studies on the firsthand experiences of field instructors. In one early study, Bunce (1997) conducted focus groups with wilderness therapists and generated a list of difficulties associated with this work, including the changing environment, feeling a lack of control, pressure to succeed, and dealing with intense experiences. Bunyan and Boniface (2000) conducted an exploratory case study of one adventure education leader (39-year-old, white male) over an 8-day course. They attributed fluctuations in anxiety and self-confidence to the leader's perceived control over event outcomes. A study of five instructors by Field (2014) found that instructors demonstrated leadership skills despite feeling fear and a "keen awareness of safety supervision" (p. 77). Marchand and colleagues (2009) concluded that field instructors in outdoor behavioral health care programs experienced emotional anxiety and stress-related issues as well as physical and mental challenges as a result of their work. Additional research is needed to understand the types of situations and interpersonal dynamics that create these feelings of stress for instructors on course and how that stress affects instructors' ability to support students' learning and growth.

Individuals' Roles in Organizations

Role theory can be helpful to understanding why instructors may experience stress. The job description and an organization's mission help to establish what Biddle (1979) called an *expected role*, or "the set of expectations for the behaviors, in context, of an object person (or position) that are held consensually by one or more subject persons (or are attributed by them to others)" (p. 210). Roles are socially constructed—people associate beliefs, values, norms, interaction styles, and so on with a particular role. The role of OB instructor has partly been shaped by its long history, the organizational

mission, and countless anecdotes from past participants of transformational "Outward Bound moments." These inputs influence the expectations OB instructors develop for themselves in their role.

Role demands and expectations may be a source of both motivation and stress for instructors. Meeting the expectations of a role can lead an individual to more strongly identify with the role (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), serving to motivate continuation in the work. However, a mismatch between role expectations and the individual's perception of their ability to fulfill those obligations may result in feelings of stress. This incompatibility has been termed *role strain* and arises from an individual's difficulty in fulfilling role obligations (Goode, 1960; Pearlin, 1983). A recent study of behavioral health care field instructors indicated that "individuals who underestimated their job demand stressors or reported current job demand stressors generally had lower job satisfaction," despite an overall high satisfaction with the nature of the work (Marchand & Russell, 2013, p. 66). This connection between job demands and job satisfaction may be a sign of role strain. It is important to understand the situations instructors find stressful, how the instructor role may contribute to that stress, and how extreme stress affects their functioning on courses.

Method

This study was part of a larger project examining instructor expertise in supporting students to learn from challenges on OB courses. The project research team consisted of a faculty member and two graduate students, including myself, and we worked collaboratively to collect data on multiple topics, one of which was instructor stress. While I was assisted by an undergraduate research assistant during coding, the findings presented here are my own. They have been reviewed by the principal investigator of the study.

Participants

We recruited participants from two OB schools in the United States. The first site employed approximately 150 instructors who led courses that ranged from 5 to 60 days. The second site employed approximately 25 to 30 instructors who typically led 5- to 20-day courses. Course activities for groups of five to 15 students included backpacking, hiking, rock climbing, canoeing, high- and low-ropes courses, and at the first site, skiing and dogsledding.

We worked with OB managerial staff at each site to identify instructors who had led a course with adolescents in the last 4 months. Administrators shared fliers about the study with instructors at spring training events and individually approached instructors that met the inclusion criteria. Table 1 contains demographic characteristics for the final sample of 31 instructors. Participant demographics are broadly consistent with the demographics of the instructor base at the sites and were mostly white (94%) and mostly in their 20s (74%). Of note, the demographics were also consistent with past studies of field instructors, reflecting a lack of racial and ethnic diversity (Kirk & O'Connell, 2012; Marchand et al., 2009).

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Female	17	55
Median years of experience (range)	8 (1–50)	
Median age (range)	27 (23–74)	
Race		
Asian/Indian	1	3
Black/African American	1	3
White—Non-Hispanic	29	94
Total	31	

Note. There was one outlier, a 74-year-old instructor with 50 years of experience.

Procedures and Measures

The University of Illinois Institutional Review Board (IRB 17401) approved all procedures. All participants gave written informed consent and completed a demographic questionnaire before being interviewed by a member of the research team. All interviews were conducted either in-person during site visits or over the phone/video conference and were audio-recorded and transcribed. We checked transcripts for accuracy, selected pseudonyms for each instructor, and deidentified data for analysis.

Semi-structured interviews. Literature and anecdotal reports suggest that field instructors are subject to unique conditions (e.g., 24-hr, multiday expeditions) that are not likely to be captured in validated measures of workplace stress. Thus, we designed an interview protocol to obtain personal narratives from instructors about stressful situations they have encountered on course. The protocol was based on pilot interviews with instructors and was informed by an instructor focus group (for full description of measure, see McGovern, 2019). Interviews began with building a basis for trust and rapport before asking about stress directly (e.g., What do you most enjoy in your experience as an instructor?). We then asked instructors to brainstorm types of stressful situations that they experienced on course and the reasons why these situations were stressful. The main portion of the interview asked instructors to share in-depth guided narratives of a single stressful situation where (a) the stress was enough that it became difficult to function and (b) their coinstructor helped in some way to manage their feelings of stress. We sought to gain insight into the most stressful situations instructors experienced. The findings on the role of coinstructors are shared elsewhere (McGovern, 2021). Using semi-structured and open-ended follow-up questions, we probed instructors to provide a detailed account of the situation, including why it was stressful, what additional factors contributed to their stress, and what emotions the instructor was feeling. We further asked instructors how feeling stressed affected their functioning in the situation, and especially how that affected their ability to relate to youth and support their learning. Responses

provided nuanced contextual details that were essential to understanding instructors' most stressful experiences.

Data Analysis

The goal of the analyses was to understand instructors' experience of stress on OB courses. I used constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2014) in multiple, iterative stages to conduct an interpretive analysis focused on describing the lived stressful experiences of instructors. I collaborated with an undergraduate research assistant for portions of data analysis.

My research assistant and I first became familiar with each instructor's account by reading the full transcripts. Next, we analyzed data regarding instructors' experiences of stress, both their short descriptions of sources of stress in early interview questions and their detailed narratives of very stressful situations in later interview questions. This entailed both of us going through the relevant data and using gerunds to capture the actions and behaviors present in the data, one line at a time. We came together to discuss the ideas that arose from the initial coding, and then reexamined those ideas as we conducted line-by-line coding on another set of interviews. For example, an early code "being vigilant" assigned to several lines in interviews started to reflect several different dimensions, including "weighing decisions" and "anticipating risks" as we examined and discussed additional interviews.

Through several iterative rounds of initial coding, I decided upon the most salient codes to develop into a codebook. The codebook contained a label, working definition, and several examples from the data for each code. For instance, at this stage, the code "sense of responsibility and care" was defined as "the instructor conveys an obligation to keep students safe and assumes the liability for students' health and safety" and included the sample quote, "IN23: I'm taking care of someone else's kids, and I need to make sure they're safe." My research assistant and I used the codebook to code all 31 instructors' holistic narratives of highly stressful situations. Coding was recorded using NVivo11, a qualitative data management program. We independently applied the codes to the transcripts, then met to discuss discrepancies. We reviewed NVivo11 data sorts of each code to ensure that the data supported the code's conceptual definition. The principal investigator of the project also reviewed drafts of the findings for each research question. I iteratively revised the codebook as new data and nuances were encountered through coding. As a part of these analyses, I also drew on sensitizing concepts to guide the inquiry of the data (Charmaz, 2014). For example, instructors' repeated reference to the expectations of their role led me to examine the concept of role strain (e.g., balancing safety with opportunities for learning). In this way, I engaged in an iterative process of constant comparison which included coding, discussion, creating and revising operational definitions, and recoding the data.

Findings

The findings are presented in three parts, in alignment with the research questions. The first set of findings are descriptions of the diverse and impactful course situations

instructors named as highly stressful. The second findings are the role demands that contributed to instructors' experience of these situations as stressful. The third findings are how experiences of intense stress affected instructors' job performance.

These findings were relevant across participants, and numerical counts of instructors are included for each category and shown in Table 2. Naturally, qualitative interviews include some participants who are more vocal or offer more rich descriptions of a phenomenon. Therefore, some portions of this section are dominated by comments from certain participants. However, the included quotes were selected because they best represented the findings.

Instructors Reported Many Sources of Stress

All 31 instructors named at least one situation they find stressful. The stressors fell into two main categories: (a) unsafe and unpredictable situations and (b) student behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. A third category—pileup—captured situations where multiple stressors co-occurred or accumulated over time.

Unpredictable and unsafe situations. A total of 20 instructors named stressful situations that presented immediate physical danger or that were unpredictable and therefore risky. Weather, terrain, and health concerns fell into this category. OB provides instructors extensive training in risk management and safety protocols (Crane et al., 2008). Still, potentially dangerous situations created a stress response.

Fourteen instructors named adverse weather, especially lightning or windstorms, as a primary stressor. Tim called wind "super unpredictable" and admitted it "terrifies" him. Robin shared a time when a middle-of-the-night lightning drill meant "we just had to sit in the rain fifty feet apart from each other for five hours just getting wet and it was terrible . . . having to keep everybody safe throughout that and okay and not hypothermic."

Eleven instructors reported that a major stressor was situations where the terrain or physical environment presented a risk. For example, on canoe trips, students had to portage—a physically demanding task where students carry canoes and equipment overhead and traverse "wet, slippery terrain, rocks, and roots" to access lakes and rivers interrupted by land. Several instructors described having to bivouac, which meant camping in areas not designated as campsites.

Nine instructors listed a medical or health concern as a source of stress. Jacob described some of the physiological sources of stress, "The fact that you're not getting very much sleep, you can even maybe get dehydrated in certain situations, or you're just physically exhausted, or you're carrying a lot of weight."

Students' behavior, thoughts, and feelings. A total of 24 instructors reported that students' behavior, especially that which was oppositional to the instructors, the other group members, or the goal at hand, created stress for the instructor.

Sixteen instructors experienced stress when students were uncooperative or when they did not meet the goals of the course due to their behavior. Freda, who was leading

Table 2. Distribution of Findings Across Instructors.

Site		Site 1																				Site 2									
Instructor gender		Female											Male									Female					Male				
Instructor pseudonym	Total	Chloe	Freda	Brynn	Ariel	Beth	Rebecca	Margaret	Tim	Erika	Genevieve	Robin	Eden	Tyler	Hank	Jordan	James	Jacob	Michael	Justin	Paul	Rupert	Jessica	Mai	Emily	Sage	Evelyn	Andrew	Lucas	Cameron	Jari	Will
Stressful situations																															
Unsafe and unpredictable situations	18		■		■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■									■	■
Adverse weather	14		■		■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■		■	■	■									■	
Physical environment	11				■	■		■	■		■	■	■		■	■	■		■	■	■									■	■
Medical, health concerns	9		■										■	■	■	■		■	■	■						■				■	■
Student thoughts and behavior	24	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■		■	■	■		■	■	■		
Student oppositional behavior	16	■	■		■	■	■	■			■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■		■		■	■	■		■	■	■		
Student distress	17	■	■		■	■	■					■	■	■		■	■	■	■		■		■	■	■		■	■	■		
Student conflict	9	■				■	■					■	■	■				■	■		■										
Pileup	15				■			■	■	■		■	■		■	■			■		■		■				■	■		■	■
Instructor role demands																															
Keeping students safe	18		■		■		■		■	■		■	■	■		■			■	■		■			■	■	■			■	
Responsibility for student safety	12		■		■		■		■	■		■	■	■					■	■		■			■		■				
Vigilance	12				■			■	■	■		■	■		■	■			■	■							■			■	
Self-doubt	12		■				■		■	■	■	■							■	■	■				■		■		■	■	
Maximizing opportunities for student learning	25	■	■	■			■	■		■	■	■			■			■	■	■	■				■		■		■	■	■
Balancing challenge and learning	18	■		■			■	■		■	■	■			■			■	■	■	■				■		■		■	■	■
Lack of power to affect student learning	11		■				■		■		■									■	■				■		■		■		
Maintaining control	21		■	■	■			■	■	■	■	■		■		■		■	■		■		■	■	■	■		■		■	■
Route stress	16			■	■			■	■	■	■	■		■				■	■		■			■		■				■	■
Appear as confident leader	11		■	■					■							■		■	■				■	■	■			■			■
Effects on job performance																															
Strong emotions	22		■				■	■		■	■	■	■		■		■	■	■	■	■	■			■	■	■		■	■	■	■
Difficulty problem-solving and decision-making	14					■	■			■		■			■			■	■					■	■		■				
Less positive engagement with students	20	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■						■	■		■		■	

a course in weather that was "prime for hypothermia," had an experience with "seven pretty angsty, angry, teenage boys" who refused instructors' efforts at warming them. "You try to get them to do stuff, like, 'Okay, we're going to try to get warm right now,' and they'd be like, 'I don't want to.'" Others were stressed when they were "getting more pushback, getting more questions" from students, or "having to repeatedly ask students about a certain behavior issue that has a negative impact on the group." Students who outright refused to listen to instructors or who seemed unreachable were especially stressful.

Seventeen instructors named student distress as a source of stress. Sometimes students faced emotional and motivational challenges, or their success was impeded by mental health issues. Robin felt unprepared to deal with "students with mental health flare ups" and said, "I don't feel like a professional in handling those kinds of situations so that's stressful." Eden felt that "constant panic attacks and emotional outbursts" required "constantly working with those students," which was "extremely draining."

Nine instructors named student conflict as a source of stress. For Eden, "really tense group conflict" put her in an "elevated level of stress"; on one course, she "had just nonstop verbal threats and [she had to get] physically in between students to prevent them from hitting each other." Not all conflicts were physical; when students were scapegoated or bullied by the other group members or were mean to each other, this affected instructors personally. Jacob was stressed by trying to relate to students who were "really cruel and manipulative." He said, "If you have students that just can't empathize or don't empathize, or choose not to empathize, . . . it makes it really challenging for you to move forward to the interpersonal side of things."

Pileup: Multiple stressors at once. Half of the instructors described situations where multiple stressors happened concurrently. This pileup intensified their feelings of stress. Margaret called it a "domino of anxiety and stress." Robin recalled "all of these little things come together, and I just froze and was like I don't know what to address first, there's so much going on." Ariel shared one instance where multiple scenarios piled up and created intense stress:

> You kind of look forward to solo[2] as, "Oh thank God we have a few moments without students." And then we were late getting into it, we had a storm roll in, just all these things, so that basically solo was not restful at all, and our stove didn't work so we weren't able to cook food and it was just an every-possible-thing-that-could've-gone-wrong kind of day.

Instructors' Internalized Role Demands and Mission Investment Contributed to Stress

Analyses of instructors' explanations of *why* these situations were stressful indicated that instructors' internalization of the demands of their professional role and the OB

mission often increased their stress. The instructors conveyed that they were dedicated to their jobs. Their passion and commitment likely contributed to their success as instructors. At the same time, they reported that role demands contributed to their level of stress. Instructors said their stress was due to felt obligations of their role, namely, to keep students safe, to provide them with opportunities to learn, and to maintain control of the course.

Keeping students safe. Twenty-one instructors attributed their stress to their role in keeping students safe. Twelve instructors directly stated that their role demanded a strong sense of responsibility for student safety and care. Their role was to keep students from harm, and they felt liable for students' health and safety. Michael was conscious that "people's safety, bottom line, depends on your judgment." In some situations, however, this could become problematic. Twelve instructors said their stress was heightened due to their vigilance in monitoring the environment and the group's interactions to identify and mitigate potential risks to students. Eden described being on course as being "in a mode where you don't shut off."

In addition to being hyper-aware, 12 instructors experienced stress from self-doubt in knowing how to respond to a challenging situation, especially when they were novice instructors. For example, Rebecca found that when faced with an incident where she did not know what to do, that she was stressed by "processing all the different options. What is the right one and is there a right one? What is best for the emotional and physical safety of the student or the group as a whole?" Her role in keeping students safe made decision-making stressful.

Finally, one instructor, Lucas, felt guilt from exercising poor judgment. Lucas felt he had put the students in danger by deciding to start a canoe expedition, despite high water levels. He said, "Everybody was okay at the end of the day, but I still carried around a lot of guilt about how I put my group in an unsafe situation and felt really bad about it."

Maximizing opportunities for students' growth and learning. The most frequently mentioned contributor to stress, expressed by 25 instructors, was the expectation that they would maximize students' learning opportunities. Eighteen instructors reported that their stress was increased by the pressure they felt to balance the challenges students faced. Instructors felt they were expected to make the course "meaningful for everybody," a reflection of the demands they felt to enact the OB mission. Eleven instructors said that stress arose from the lack of power they sometimes felt to affect student learning. For example, Rupert was stressed by not being able to change one student's slow pace and low energy on a hike—a situation that he predicted would detract from the other students' experience. He said, "That instills stress in me because it makes me worry that we're just elongating our day and that student's energy is going to eventually effect the whole group's energy." Sometimes, instructors felt forced to move the course forward even if it meant foregoing an opportunity for youth learning. Jacob lamented how he sometimes wanted to do more than was possible, given course con-

straints, "You want to be able to extract the meaning out of every situation that happens on course, but all of that stuff takes time. You're just battling time."

Instructors also acknowledged that the demands they felt to create learning opportunities for students was somewhat contradictory to their recognition that change and growth happened from *within* students themselves. As an experienced instructor, Cameron had witnessed OB courses being "super impactful" and he wanted students to be "able to say you did something that you didn't think you could do." He knew, though, that ultimately it was up to the student to persevere through course challenges and learn from that experience. He was stressed when he was unable to create impact for students: "It's heartbreaking in a way that you want to show them, but you can't show them. They have to do it for themselves." Instructors wanted to create meaningful opportunities for student learning which reflected their investment in the OB mission and their role, but also contributed to instructors' experiences of stress.

Maintaining control of the course. Instructors' stress in difficult situations was sometimes due to demands to maintain control of the course—both to meet course milestones and to present themselves as confident leaders to students. Twenty-one instructors ascribed their stress to the desire to maintain control. For 16 of these instructors, the cause was "route stress" from having to guide the group through daily and long-term plans for where to camp, how many miles to cover, what meals to eat, and what equipment was needed. Instructors had to coordinate the timing of critical transitions in the course when the group members needed to arrive at an exact location by a certain time to resupply materials or to participate in a planned activity (e.g., rock climbing). Instructors described route stress as a sense of responsibility to keep the "whole train moving," even when weather, student behaviors, or other factors forced alterations in the planned route. Jacob captured how multiple course elements collided in creating route stress:

> Knowing that you have a lot of miles to travel but feeling like it's impossible to make those miles based on where your students are at in terms of their behavior, and their physical ability, and everything else. So, the stress of trying to balance this expedition thing that you're doing, where you're trying to get from A to B with this curriculum that you're trying to put forth.

This passage from Jacob captures the demands he felt to maintain control over the group's progress toward goals, including covering adequate distance and ensuring students learn needed skills. Balancing conflicting role expectations like these can leave an individual feeling emotionally depleted and lacking in energy (Creary & Gordon, 2016).

The pressure of maintaining control led 11 instructors to feel they had to put their own "needs on the back burner" to appear as a confident leader. Jacob described how he felt like he needed to suppress his feelings of stress, "There's always some element of not wanting to be stressed out, or not feeling like it's allowed or okay . . . there's sometimes this need to feel invincible." Several instructors did not want to show their

weaknesses or vulnerability to students or their co-instructors. Margaret described it as a "dynamic of feeling the need to prove yourself and feeling the need to be the authority, be in control." Mai reflected on having a "fear of looking like I don't know what I'm doing or not being knowledgeable enough . . . feeling embarrassed." Instructors' role demanded that they always knew the answer or were able to do anything, and this contributed to their experience of stress.

Stress Affected Instructors' Job Performance

The analyses revealed a strong relationship between instructors' experience of stress and how they performed their job. Instructors' accounts emphasized how deeply they cared about the students and their experience. When asked *What do you most enjoy in your experience as an instructor?*, most instructors ($N = 25$) named things centered in student's learning and growth, such as "seeing students changed," "tangible growth," "seeing a spark that comes alive," or the way courses "profoundly re-shape the way that [students] think about themselves and how they can relate to each other." However, when instructors experienced stress, these positive outcomes were threatened. High levels of stress on course could affect their mental and emotional functioning. From their narratives of intensely stressful situations, I identified three ways stress affected instructors' job performance: (a) strong emotions prevented them from being effective, (b) they faced difficulty in problem-solving and decision-making, and (c) they were less able or inclined to engage in positive interactions with students.

Twenty-two instructors named strong emotional responses to severe stress including anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, frenzy, frustration, anger, and doubt. Six instructors described feeling overwhelmed to the point where they "had a hard time moving," were "frozen," "shell-shocked," or "paralyzed." Mai recalled, "just shutting down and being like, 'I don't know how to do anything,'" and Michael described feeling "confused and unsure of myself." Eight instructors described that in moments of high stress, they faced extreme self-doubt and posed questions to themselves such as "Why am I doing this again?" The emotional and mental anguish instructors experienced in highly stressful situations affected their ability to effectively lead the course.

Stress and these emotions made it difficult for instructors to solve problems and make decisions. Fourteen instructors conveyed how stress affected their ability to think through and settle on a plan of action. It took them longer to make decisions, or they used poor judgment that led to inefficiencies, short-sighted solutions, or setbacks. Instructors attributed this to "fatigue and tiredness" and having "less head space [due to] the number of things that I was managing." Rebecca recalled the stress causing her to "spiral down all these what-ifs," and Andrew reflected, "My job is to be creative and think on my toes and you can't do that if you're so imbalanced that you're stressed to a point that I was."

Finally, 20 instructors reported that stress made it harder for them to engage positively with students. They were less inclined to develop interpersonal connections, had less of a focus on student learning, were impatient with students, or were unable to enjoy students' company and have fun. Instructors described feeling "more easily

frustrated or annoyed," or "irritable." Genevieve said she was "less able to focus on the present and put in all my energy there and probably teach lessons or coach or check-in with students that probably needed it." Robin confessed about one course, "I wasn't as much a fun, jokey, instructor and [was] more a down-to-business kind of instructor, which is a bummer for me." When instructors experienced stress on course, it could translate to undesirable, unfriendly, or counterproductive interactions with youth.

Discussion

This study used instructors' narratives of very stressful course situations to examine what situations instructors find most stressful, how underlying factors could contribute to the intensity of stress, and how feeling stressed affected instructors' job performance. The focus on extremely stressful situations provided context to learn about experiences that may have a lasting effect on instructors and their beliefs about their work. My analysis led to two propositions about how instructors' role expectations and investment may intensify high-stress course experiences. These propositions lead to potential directions for continued research on these topics.

Proposition 1: Uncertainty, Unpredictability, and Pileup Are Stressful, Despite Preparation

Despite their preparation and training in risk management and group facilitation, findings indicated that instructors experienced occasional periods of high stress due to the unpredictability of extreme weather and precarious terrain; the volatility of student behavior, thoughts, and feelings; and pileup of multiple stressors. The types of situations that instructors named as most stressful were those that they could not fully prepare for. This aligns with prior research which suggests that uncertainty in the outcomes of a situation can result in an individual perceiving a lack of control, and increase the debilitating effects of stress (Bunyan & Boniface, 2000; Ewert, 1988; Robinson & Stevens, 1990). Being exposed during a lightning or windstorm might be stressful for anyone, as would having to deal with continued challenges from confrontational students, like Ariel faced on her course. OB currently implements practices developed over their extensive organizational history that are intended to support instructors' preparedness for stressful situations on course. My findings suggest that instructors experience stress despite this preparation.

Proposition 2: Role Investment Intensifies Instructor's Experience of Stress

Findings indicated that these situational stressors were intensified by expectations that OB instructors internalized about their role, namely, to provide for student safety, maximize opportunities for student learning, and maintain control of the course. For

many instructors, their inability (real or perceived) to meet these expectations—what Goode (1960) and Pearlin (1983) referred to as *role strain*—compounded their feelings of stress.

I found that instructors' internalized obligation to keep students safe heightened the stress they experienced facing uncertain physical environments and sometimes unpredictable student behaviors. Prior research has shown field instructors face intense experiences in a changing environment (Bunce, 1997) and are keenly aware of their responsibility for student safety (Field, 2014). In this study, I also found that instructors' internalization of this responsibility led them to feel anxiety and fear as they anticipated dangers. While instructors' vigilance protected students from harm, stress research has demonstrated that a prolonged state of heightened awareness could have detrimental effects leading to fatigue or exhaustion (Sapolsky, 2004). It is important to conduct further research that assesses the proportion of time instructors spend in this state on course. In addition, when faced with novel challenges, instructors sometimes doubted their ability to make the right choice. This role uncertainty has been shown to be especially stressful for novice instructors making and communicating decisions (Enoksen & Lynch, 2018). At its extreme, this self-doubt could lead instructors to question their choice of career. Efforts to reduce instructor turnover and burnout (Hall, 2019) must incorporate an understanding of how role strain can affect instructors' on-course experiences.

Instructors in this study also believed a major part of their role was to make the course meaningful for students. This belief put pressure on instructors to make the most of every moment on course and resulted in them blaming themselves when students failed to meet expectations. Despite believing that students were agents of their own learning, instructors were invested in the expectation that they could facilitate learning opportunities for each youth on course. These findings are similar to those found by Marchand et al. (2009), who identified "pressure to perform" as a frequently cited challenge for outdoor behavioral health care field instructors. This commitment to student learning created strong feelings of disappointment or powerlessness when instructors faced situations where a student did not or would not realize their potential.

I found instructors also internalized an image of "instructor invincibility" and sometimes projected the appearance of being in control when they were feeling a loss of it. This strategy was typically employed to preserve students' view of the instructor being in control and knowledgeable, especially when a stressful situation threatened to spread panic among students. However, instructors' denial of their feelings of stress sometimes led to deleterious effects for them or the students. When stress reached levels such that it impeded instructors with feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and frustration, it could strain instructors' decision-making and induce negative interactions with students. In this way, experiencing high levels of stress could create a vicious cycle; instructors who felt invested in their role might interpret adverse experiences with youth as revealing their failings as an instructor, which could compound their feelings of stress and role strain. This phenomenon is not unlike that experienced by a physician who, having made an unfortunate and tragic error in their work, may

experience social excommunication by colleagues and if unable to redeem themselves, may become a "second victim" of the error (Wu, 2000).

In the extreme cases examined in this study, instructor investment in their role contributed to being pulled into these demands for safety, learning, and control. Role theory suggests that the more an individual commits to the organization's mission, and integrates the role into their identity, the more salient the meanings associated with the role become to the individual (Ashforth, 2001). Pearlin (1983) argued that role strain associated with occupational roles could lead to deep concern because individuals are socialized to invest in these roles. This could lead individuals to experience greater distress when they behave in ways incongruent with the role or the mission (Burke, 1991). This study has revealed somewhat of a paradox: By investing in their role to provide safe and meaningful courses for students, instructors also may experience role strain and levels of stress that can threaten the realization of these expectations.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings from this study suggest implications for practice and further research. First, OB and other field instructor-led programs may find value in assessing the amount and types of stress instructors are experiencing on a regular basis. Instructors in this study frequently debriefed with their course directors or other supervisors about their experiences after course completion, but none mentioned their school using measures to assess instructor stress levels. Researchers could help to develop instruments that adequately measure and monitor stress levels of instructors. If assessments reveal that stress is at problematic levels, then programmatic responses may be appropriate. Second, it is also likely that instructors effectively cope with more moderate or short-term stressors on a regular basis, and that this meters their exposure to the more intense stressful situations like those examined in this study. It is important to conduct research that investigates the ways instructors counter their stress with positive coping strategies and identifies organization-level supports that can reduce the stress instructors experience.

In addition, many of the sources of extreme stress identified by instructors may stem from planning and design decisions made by administrative and managerial staff. A multilevel systemic analysis examining the laws, regulations, policies, and plans that influence the actions of different members of the organization (see Donovan et al., 2017; Rasmussen, 1997; Trotter et al., 2014) might reveal insights that can reduce the likelihood of instructors experiencing stress on course. For instance, a system-level analysis might suggest that training efforts could be enhanced to better prepare instructors for the demands of their work (Marchand & Russell, 2013) or might prompt program administrators to examine their methods for determining the suitability of participants for courses or the program's access to natural areas during peak use times.

It is important that administrators, directors, or employers who manage or offer OB and other outdoor education programs be attentive to how instructors' investments in their role expectations might intensify their experiences of stress. My findings suggest that instructors might benefit from discussion of how their investment in their role can contribute to stress in ways that may sometimes be counterproductive. Administrators

at individual OB schools or other organizations may also wish to hold internal conversations to acknowledge and address stress among instructors. Giving instructors opportunities to discuss their experiences off-course with other instructors may help them to manage their expectations and reduce role strain. In addition, program administrators, trainers, and instructors should examine how organizational policies and practices influence instructors' experiences of role strain and stress. They might direct attention to the pressures accompanying the role of instructor and how expectations are communicated to new instructors through multiple levels of the organization.

Conclusion

In sum, these OB instructors took their work personally and seriously. Instructors were aware of the potential impact OB courses could have on students' lives and recognized that they played a large part in whether that potential was actualized. This commitment and dedication may be part of what makes OB courses so powerful for youth, but they can also be an underlying source of instructor stress. In fact, high investment in the role intensified stress for instructors and in extreme cases, interfered with them carrying out their role. These findings provide a greater understanding of the nuanced causes and effects of instructor stress that can help OB and other organizations to prepare experiential and outdoor education instructors for their role.

Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the collaboration and support of Reed Larson, Carolyn Orson, and Paula Koelbl at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, and the staff and instructors at participating Outward Bound sites.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a grant from Character Lab (Grant: "How Outward Bound Staff Support Youth's Learning from Setbacks").

ORCID iD

Gina McGovern https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9533-3996

Notes

1. All names of people are pseudonyms.
2. Solo is a period where students are on their own, within sound but out of sight of instructors and other students. It typically involves quiet reflection (writing, drawing, sleeping, and meditation) or individual check-ins.

References

Ashforth, B. E. (2001). *Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Biddle, B. J. (1979). *Role theory: Expectations, identities, and behaviors*. Academic Press.

Bunce, J. (1997). Sustaining the wilderness therapist. In B. Roberts, S. Horwood, N. Aunger, & M. Wong (Eds.), *Exploring the boundaries of adventure therapy: International perspectives. Proceedings of the 1st international adventure therapy conference* [Issue July] (pp. 178-188). Therapeutic Adventure Professional Group Association for Experiential Education.

Bunyan, P. S., & Boniface, M. R. (2000). Leader anxiety during an adventure education residential experience: An exploratory case study. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, *1*(1), 37–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/14729670085200051

Burke, P. J. (1991). Identity processes and social stress. *American Sociological Review*, *56*(6), 836–849.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Crane, N., Krebs, J., Lodato, A., Owen, D., Roos, B., Frankel, J., Kushner, J., Ostherr, G., Perillo, I., Whyte, D., Kager, K., Lindsay, M., Ostreicher, A., Robertson, J., & Wyne, M. (2008). *Outward Bound staff manual*. Outward Bound.

Creary, S. J., & Gordon, J. R. (2016). Role conflict, role overload, and role strain. In C. Shehan (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of family studies* (pp. 1–6). John Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119085621.wbefs012

Donovan, S. L., Salmon, P. M., Lenné, M. G., & Horberry, T. (2017). Safety leadership and systems thinking: Application and evaluation of a Risk Management Framework in the mining industry. *Ergonomics*, *60*(10), 1336–1350. https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2017.1308562

Edwards, R., & Gray, T. (1998). "Burnout": What is it to you? *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, *3*(1), 36–46. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03400676

Enoksen, E., & Lynch, P. (2018). Learning leadership: Becoming an outdoor leader. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, *18*(2), 176–188. https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2017.1391105

Ewert, A. (1988). The identification and modification of situational fears associated with outdoor recreation. *Journal of Leisure Research*, *20*(2), 106–117.

Field, S. C. (2014). *An exploratory study of the job-related experiences of outdoor education leaders in relation to their personal health and wellness* [Unpublished master's thesis, University of Victoria].

Field, S. C., Lauzon, L. L., & Meldrum, J. T. (2016). A phenomenology of outdoor education leader experiences. *Journal of Experiential Education*, *39*(1), 31–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825915609950

Goode, W. J. (1960). A theory of role strain. *American Sociological Review*, *25*(4), 483–496.

Hall, J. M. (2019). *Turnover of outdoor adventure education field staff* [Unpublished master's thesis, Eastern Washington University].

Kirk, L., & O'Connell, T. S. (2012, January 13–15). *Perceptions of social support for therapeutic wilderness program instructors* [Conference session]. Coalition for Education in the Outdoors Eleventh Biennial Research Symposium. https://www2.cortland.edu/dotAsset/102016a7-e701-4100-8f43-ef7b8d6af4f8.pdf

Kupriyanov, R., & Zhdanov, R. (2014). The eustress concept: Problems and outlooks. *World Journal of Medical Sciences*, *11*(2), 179–185.

Marchand, G., & Russell, K. C. (2013). Examining the role of expectations and perceived job demand stressors for field instructors in outdoor behavioral healthcare. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, *30*(1), 55–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2013.751809

Marchand, G., Russell, K. C., & Cross, R. (2009). An empirical examination of outdoor behavioral healthcare field instructor job-related stress and retention. *Journal of Experiential Education*, *31*(3), 359–375. https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590803100304

McEwen, B. S., & Robinson, G. E. (2012). Brain on stress: How the social environment gets under the skin. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, *109*(2), 17180–17185.

McGovern, G. (2019). *"It's okay to ask for help": Outward Bound co-instructors' experience of stress on course* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign]. http://hdl.handle.net/2142/106146

McGovern, G. (2021). How Outward Bound co-instructor relationships create a context for emotional support during stressful course situations. *Journal of Community Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22570

Outward Bound. (2018). *Our mission*. https://www.outwardbound.org/about-outward-bound/outward-bound-today

Pearlin, L. I. (1983). Role strains and personal stress. In H. B. Kaplan (Ed.), *Psychosocial stress: Trends in theory and research* (pp. 3–32). Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-397560-7.50006-4

Porges, S. W. (2001). The polyvagal theory: Phylogenetic substrates of a social nervous system. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, *42*, 123–146. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8760(01)00162-3

Pugliesi, K. (1999). The consequences of emotional labor: Effects on work stress, job satisfaction, and well-being. *Motivation and Emotion*, *23*(2), 125–154. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021329112679

Rasmussen, J. (1997). Risk management in a dynamic society: A modelling problem. *Safety Science*, *27*(2–3), 183–213. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0925-7535(97)00052-0

Robinson, D., & Stevens, T. (1990). Stress in adventure recreation: Types of stressors and their influences during an extended adventure-based expedition. *Journal of Applied Recreation Research*, *15*(4), 218–238.

Sapolsky, R. M. (2004). *Why zebras don't get ulcers: The acclaimed guide to stress, stress-related diseases, and coping* (Vol. 79). Henry Holt.

Schaufeli, W. B., & Taris, T. W. (2013). A critical review of the job demands-resources model: Implications for improving work and health. In G. F. Bauer & O. Hämmig (Eds.), *Bridging occupational, organizational and public health: A transdisciplinary approach* (pp. 43–68). Springer.

Sluss, D. M., & Ashforth, B. E. (2007). Relational identity and identification: Defining ourselves through work relationships. *Academy of Management Review*, *32*(1), 9–32. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2007.23463672

Smith, C., McGovern, G., Larson, R. W., Hillaker, B., & Peck, S. C. (2016). *Preparing youth to thrive: Promising practices for social and emotional learning*. David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, Forum for Youth Investment.

Trotter, M. J., Salmon, P. M., & Lenné, M. G. (2014). Impromaps: Applying Rasmussen's Risk Management Framework to improvisation incidents. *Safety Science*, *64*, 60–70. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2013.11.021

Thomas, G. (2001). Thriving in the outdoor education profession: Learning from Australian practitioners. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, *6*(1), 13–24.

Thomas, G. (2002). Work related stress in the outdoor education profession: A management perspective. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, *7*(1), 54–63.

Walsh, V., & Golins, G. (1976). *The exploration of the Outward Bound process*. Colorado Outward Bound School.

Wu, A. W. (2000). Medical error: The second victim. *British Medical Journal*, *320*(7237), 726–727. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.320.7237.726

Author Biography

Gina McGovern is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan in the Combined Program in Education and Psychology. Her research focuses on youth programs as a context for the development of social and emotional learning skills and racial and ethnic identity in adolescents. Specifically, she examines the experiences and practices of adult leaders in youth programs, including how they develop skills and attitudes that support positive youth development, and how their own identity work influences their interactions with youth from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.