Psychological Resilience as a Relational Process in Scout Camps: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Leader Perspectives

Psikolojik Sağlamlığın İzci Kamplarında İlişkisel Bir Süreç Olarak İncelenmesi: Lider Perspektiflerine Dayalı Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Çalışma

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Abstract
Research on psychological resilience in youth activity settings often prioritizes individual coping capacities and overlooks the relational and contextual processes fundamental to psychosocial functioning. This study reconceptualizes scout camps as structured socio-ecological leisure environments where children's resilience emerges through everyday interactions, peer relations, and leadership practices rather than as an isolated individual trait. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with six experienced Turkish scout leaders. The interview data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings reveal three interrelated themes: (i) transition into camp life emotional and social adjustment; (ii) constructing socio-ecological resources: patrol, peers, and leaders; and (iii) from adjustment to empowerment: developmental change. Leaders' narratives indicate that resilience manifests as a dynamic relational process shaped by emotional strain, sense of belonging, and ethically grounded leadership support. This study contributes to understanding resilience as a developmental and socio-relational phenomenon in real-world youth contexts, highlighting how structured peer and adult interactions in leisure environments influence psychosocial adaptation. Findings have implications for clinical and community approaches to promoting resilience in childhood and adolescence, suggesting that supportive camp-based experiences can serve as meaningful contexts for developmental resilience

Keywords: Psychological resilience, Relational processes, Scout camps, Leadership, Phenomenology

Öz
Gençlik etkinlik ortamlarında psikolojik sağlamlık üzerine yapılan araştırmalar sıklıkla bireysel baş etme kapasitelerine odaklanmakta ve psikososyal işlevselliğin temelini oluşturan ilişkisel ve bağlamsal süreçleri göz ardı etmektedir. Bu çalışma, izci kamplarını, çocukların psikolojik sağlamlığının izole bir bireysel özellik olarak değil, günlük etkileşimler, akran ilişkileri ve liderlik uygulamaları aracılığıyla ortaya çıktığı yapılandırılmış sosyo ekolojik boş zaman ortamları olarak yeniden kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Yorumlayıcı fenomenolojik bir yaklaşım kullanılarak, altı deneyimli Türk izci lideri ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş ve veriler Yansıtıcı Tematik Analiz yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, birbiriyle ilişkili üç temayı ortaya koymaktadır: (i) kamp hayatına geçiş: duygusal ve sosyal uyum; (ii) sosyo ekolojik kaynakların inşası: oymak sistemi, akranlar ve liderler; (iii) uyumdan güçlenmeye: gelişimsel dönüşüm. Liderlerin anlatıları, psikolojik sağlamlığın duygusal zorlanma, aidiyet duygusu ve etik temelli liderlik desteği ile şekillenen dinamik ve ilişkisel bir süreç olarak ortaya çıktığını göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, psikolojik sağlamlığın gerçek yaşam bağlamlarında gelişimsel ve sosyo ilişkisel bir olgu olarak anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmakta; boş zaman ortamlarındaki yapılandırılmış akran ve yetişkin etkileşimlerinin psikososyal uyumu nasıl etkilediğini vurgulamaktadır. Bulgular, çocukluk ve ergenlik döneminde psikolojik sağlamlığın desteklenmesine yönelik klinik ve toplum temelli yaklaşımlar için, destekleyici kamp deneyimlerinin gelişimsel sağlamlık açısından anlamlı bağlamlar oluşturabileceğini önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Psikolojik sağlamlık, İlişkisel süreçler, İzci kampları, Liderlik, Fenomenoloji

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the psychosocial processes experienced by children in organised scouting camps requires a multilevel and context-sensitive analytic perspective that situates these experiences within the social, relational, and environmental conditions in which children are embedded. From this perspective, psychological resilience is conceptualised not as an individual form of "mental toughness" or a fixed set of personal traits, but as a relational and dynamic process emerging through ongoing interactions between individuals and their social and environmental contexts. Whereas traditional approaches have tended to conceptualise resilience primarily in terms of individual endurance or coping capacity, contemporary scholarship increasingly positions resilience as a process emerging through the interaction of interconnected ecological systems (Antony, 2022; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sinde & Alves, 2024; Topcu & Demircioğlu, 2020).

According to Bronfenbrenner, children develop within nested systems ranging from proximal microsystems, such as family and peers, to broader macrosystems shaped by cultural norms and institutional structures. From this perspective, scouting camps can be understood as distinctive and intensive social environments in which children's everyday routines, relationships, responsibilities, and opportunities for interaction are temporarily reorganised. Within scouting camps, children encounter physical and social conditions that differ from those in their everyday environments, enter new social groups, assume shared responsibilities, participate in structured activities, and experience varying degrees of uncertainty and psychological strain. These characteristics make scouting camps a particularly valuable context for examining how children respond to psychological challenges and how resilience may emerge through interactions with peers, leaders, and the camp environment. Although scouting activities largely take place within recreational and organised leisure settings, the present study does not conceptualise leisure as its primary theoretical framework; rather, leisure constitutes a contextual feature within which the scouting experience unfolds.

Masten's (2001) concept of "ordinary magic" further reframes resilience as the adaptive functioning of normative developmental systems rather than as an exceptional individual attribute. From this perspective, resilience emerges through ordinary developmental processes operating under supportive environmental conditions. Scouting camps may provide such conditions by combining structured activities, shared responsibilities, social interaction, and manageable challenges that require children to adapt to circumstances beyond their familiar everyday environments. Through these experiences, children may encounter psychological strain while simultaneously accessing social and relational resources that support coping and adaptation (Masten, 2001; Stoica et al., 2025; Zmudy et al., 2009).

Complementing this perspective, Ungar (2011) emphasises the social–ecological dimensions of resilience, arguing that resilience depends not solely on individuals' internal capacities but also on their ability to access and negotiate supportive resources within their environments. Within scouting camps, such resources may include peer support, group belonging, shared responsibility, emotional safety, leader guidance, and participation in collective activities. Psychological resilience can therefore be understood not simply as an individual coping capacity, but as a process

shaped by children's ability to access, utilise, and negotiate these social and relational resources within the camp environment (Sinde & Alves, 2024; Williams et al., 2018).

The phenomenological approach adopted in this study is theoretically consistent with this ecological and relational understanding of resilience. Children's lived experiences in scouting camps cannot be adequately understood solely through measurable outcomes; rather, they involve embodied, emotional, social, and relational processes that unfold over time (Løvoll & Sæther, 2022; Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004). Examining these processes through scout leaders' accounts provides an opportunity to understand how children's experiences of psychological strain, coping, social adaptation, and emerging resilience are perceived and interpreted within the everyday realities of camp life. This perspective is particularly important because children in scouting camps engage in intensive and sustained interactions with peers, leaders, and their physical and social environments.

Within this specific context, scout leaders occupy a central position as adult actors who witness children's psychological strain, adjustment, and development throughout the camp experience. Leaders are not merely organisers of activities; they also function as relational actors who observe emotional and behavioural changes, interpret children's needs, provide support, manage interpersonal difficulties, and shape the social conditions within which children respond to challenges (Jeuck et al., 2023; Masten, 2001). Their continuous and close interaction with children throughout the camp enables them to observe psychosocial processes across different dimensions of everyday camp life, including structured activities, accommodation, meals, leisure periods, peer interactions, and group responsibilities. Focusing on leaders' lived experiences therefore provides an important analytic vantage point for understanding how psychological resilience is relationally shaped within the social world of scouting camps.

Despite the growing body of research on scouting and psychological resilience, an important knowledge gap remains regarding how psychological resilience is shaped through everyday social and relational processes within scouting camps. Existing research has demonstrated that scouting is associated with a range of developmental and psychosocial outcomes, including academic performance, social skills, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and coping with stress (Asensio-Ramon et al., 2020; Szałachowski et al., 2024). Similarly, camp research has shown that camp experiences can support positive youth development, life skills, and broader psychosocial outcomes (Garst et al., 2011; Garst et al., 2016; Warner et al., 2021). However, this literature has predominantly focused on developmental outcomes, providing comparatively limited insight into how children's psychological strain, coping processes, peer relationships, and leadership practices interact to shape resilience during camp experiences.

In particular, recent research on scouting camps has demonstrated that leader support is associated with young people's psychosocial development (Kirchhoff et al., 2024). Yet, less is known about how scout leaders perceive and interpret children's psychological strain and how they respond to these processes through relational interventions. Similarly, although camp experiences have been shown to support positive changes associated with resilience (Merryman et al., 2012), qualitative and context-sensitive explanations of how resilience develops

through the everyday relationships of camp life remain limited. The present study addresses this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of experienced scout leaders and examining psychological resilience not as an individual trait, but as a relational and context-dependent process shaped through interactions among children, peers, the patrol (oba) system, leaders, and the camp environment. To address this gap, the study examines children's psychological strain, coping, social adaptation, and psychological resilience through the lived experiences and interpretations of long-serving scout leaders. In doing so, the study moves beyond viewing resilience solely in terms of individual outcomes and seeks to illuminate how resilience is perceived, supported, and shaped through everyday relationships and leadership practices within scouting camps.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do scout leaders perceive and interpret children's experiences of psychological strain and coping during scouting camps?
- Through what relational processes involving peer relationships, the patrol (oba) system, and leadership practices is psychological resilience shaped within scouting camps?
- How do scout leaders' interpretations and interventions contribute to children's social adaptation and psychological resilience during scouting camps?

METHOD

In this study, an Interpretative Phenomenological design was adopted to examine in depth scout leaders' experiences and meaning-making regarding scouts' psychological strains, coping practices, and processes of social adjustment during camp participation. Interpretative Phenomenological places individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to these experiences at the centre of analysis, while recognising interpretation as a double hermeneutic process in which participants make sense of their worlds and researchers, in turn, interpret these sense-making processes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021).

Within this context, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was considered particularly appropriate as scout leaders act as primary observers and interpreters of scouts' psychological and social processes in camp settings. Through sustained engagement across multiple camps, leaders are able to perceive psychological strain not as isolated reactions but as experiences that unfold over time and are shaped by pedagogical roles and professional positioning.

This interpretative phenomenological design attends to a lifeworld in which meaning is co-constructed through leader–scout interactions. As a context that departs from everyday life in terms of time, space, embodiment, and social relations, the camp environment enables Interpretative Phenomenological to explore how scouts' lived experiences are interpreted and translated into pedagogical responses. Accordingly, scout camps are conceptualised

not merely as activity settings, but as meaningful developmental contexts in which psychological strain, coping, and social adaptation are negotiated.

Participants

To ensure confidentiality in the study, all participants were assigned unidentified pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2… P6) and written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were purposively selected scout leaders due to their continuous involvement in all stages of camp life and their sustained, close interaction with scouts. Criterion-based purposive sampling was employed to explore leaders' experiences of children's psychological strain, coping, and social adaptation processes within scouting camps (Patton, 1990; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The sample comprised six licensed male scout leaders affiliated with the Turkish Scouting Federation (n = 6; age range: 37–51). Participants were required to have served in at least 10 different national scouting camps and to hold a minimum rank of Oymak Başı (a scout leader holding the Green Neckerchief rank). These criteria ensured that participants had extensive and sustained leadership experience across multiple camp contexts and diverse scout populations. Their prolonged and repeated involvement in scouting camps provided accumulated experiential knowledge of scouts' psychological strain, coping, social adaptation, and interpersonal processes. Thus, despite the small sample size, the participants offered substantial and directly relevant information closely aligned with the study aim. The adequacy of the six-person sample was therefore assessed in terms of information power rather than numerical size, with the specificity of the research aim, the highly relevant sampling criteria, and participants' extensive experiential knowledge collectively supporting the depth and sufficiency of the dataset.

Data Collection

The interview guide was designed to explore how scout leaders perceive and make sense of scouts' psychological strains during scouting camps, the ways these strains are managed, and how psychological resilience is experienced within the camp context. The guide consisted of six open-ended core questions, supported by context-specific probing prompts.

Questions invited participants to reflect on: (1) situations in which scouts experienced psychological difficulties and how these were recognised by leaders; (2) coping processes and the role of leader interventions; (3) experiences of social support within the patrol (oba) system, peer interactions, and leader-scout relationships; (4) the relationship between belonging, a sense of "we-ness," social adaptation, and psychological resilience; (5) developmental changes observed by the end of the camp; and (6) leaders' own interpretations of the contribution of scouting camps to psychological resilience.

All interviews were conducted individually. Interviews began with broad, experience-oriented questions and were deepened through reflective, clarifying, and interpretive follow-up questions. Consistent with the assumptions of

Interpretative Phenomenological, this approach aimed to elicit not only descriptive accounts but also the meanings participants attributed to their experiences.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, anonymised, and transcribed verbatim. The data were uploaded into MAXQDA 24 and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021a). RTA is a non-linear and iterative analytic approach comprising six interrelated phases: data familiarisation, initial coding, theme construction, theme review and refinement, theme definition, and reporting.

The coding process was primarily inductive, with initial codes generated from participants' accounts rather than from a predetermined coding framework. This approach allowed meanings emerging from the data to guide the initial analytic process. As the analysis progressed, however, theme development and interpretation became increasingly informed by the study's conceptual focus on children's psychological strain, coping processes, and psychological resilience within the camp context. Thus, theoretical concepts were not used as predetermined categories for coding; rather, they provided a sensitising framework during the later stages of interpretation. This positioning is consistent with the flexibility of RTA, in which inductive and deductive orientations are understood as points on a continuum rather than mutually exclusive procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Campbell et al., 2021).

Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2016) epistemological position, themes were treated not as entities passively embedded in the data, but as meaning patterns actively constructed through the interaction between the data, the researchers' theoretical orientations, and their interpretive engagement. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the dataset, followed by inductive coding and progressive theme development. RTA enabled the exploration of both semantic and latent layers of meaning: initial coding attended primarily to participants' explicit accounts, while subsequent analytic phases examined underlying relational and contextual processes shaping psychological resilience.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive memos were used to document emerging interpretations and critically examine how the researchers' assumptions and prior experiences might influence meaning construction. The first author led the analytic process and used MAXQDA 24 to organise codes, themes, and analytic memos. Theme development and refinement were supported through iterative discussions with the second author, who acted as a critical friend (Smith et al., 2017). These discussions were not intended to achieve consensus or coding reliability, but to challenge interpretations, surface assumptions, and strengthen analytic clarity and rigour.

The phases of theme construction, review, and definition were treated as iterative rather than linear, involving continuous movement between data extracts, codes, and developing themes. Although narrative analytic approaches were considered, RTA was selected because the study aimed to identify shared patterns of meaning across the dataset rather than examine the structure of individual narratives. Overall, the analytic process

maintained an inductive coding orientation while allowing theoretically informed interpretation during theme development, thereby aligning the analytic strategy with the study's Interpretative Phenomenological orientation.

The final analysis resulted in three interconnected themes:

(a) Transition into Camp Life – Emotional and Social Adjustment,

(b) Constructing Socio Ecological Resources: Patrol, Peers, and Leaders and

(c) From Adjustment to Empowerment: Developmental Change

Procedures

After receiving ethical approval from Kırıkkale University Social and Humanities Research Ethics Committee, the data collection process started (September 29, 2025, No.367768). Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study. They were explicitly informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Participants were also assured that all data would be treated confidentially and anonymously, used solely for scientific purposes, and not shared with third parties. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researchers in a quiet, private setting to facilitate participants' comfort and open expression. Each interview lasted between 25 and 38 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Following the interviews, all recordings were transcribed verbatim and used for analysis. Audio files and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected digital folders and were accessible only to the research team, in accordance with ethical and confidentiality principles.

The researchers' familiarity with the context of scouting, camps, and group-based recreational activities contributed to a more nuanced engagement with participants' accounts and supported contextual understanding during the interviews. At the same time, to minimise the influence of researcher assumptions on data generation and interpretation, leading questions were deliberately avoided. Open-ended, experience-focused questions were used to allow participants to articulate their own meanings freely. Throughout the analytic process, the researchers engaged in ongoing reflexive scrutiny of their preconceptions to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives.

In line with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological, sample size was determined by analytic depth rather than breadth of representation. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021a) position that data saturation is not a universal quality criterion or requirement, this study did not prioritise reaching a predefined saturation point. Instead, the focus was placed on the quality of the data (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016) and the concept of information power (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016), rather than the number of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). In

line with Legard et al. (2003), sufficient understanding of each participant's experiences and perspectives was considered a key indicator in evaluating the adequacy of the dataset.

Research Quality

The quality of this qualitative study was evaluated in alignment with the epistemological and methodological assumptions of the Interpretative Phenomenological approach, drawing on Tracy's (2010) criteria for qualitative research quality. In this framework, particular emphasis was placed on rich rigor, sincerity and reflexivity, credibility, and meaningful coherence.

Rich rigor was achieved through the development of a theoretically informed semi-structured interview guide, the clear justification of purposive criterion sampling, a context-sensitive data collection process, and the detailed reporting of Interpretative Phenomenological iterative and phased analytic procedures. Sincerity and reflexivity were supported by the explicit articulation of the researchers' prior assumptions, positionalities, and relationships with the scouting and camp context, as well as by a transparent reflection on how these positions may have shaped data generation and interpretation.

Credibility was strengthened through the use of verbatim participant quotations to represent lived experiences, the transparent articulation of analytic links between data and themes, and the theoretically grounded justification of the study's approach to data saturation. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytic process, documenting coding decisions, analytic memos, theme development and refinement, and the rationale underlying changes to the emerging thematic structure. Reflexive memos were also used to record the researchers' interpretative decisions and potential influence on meaning construction. For example, one memo noted that a particular participant quotation was especially illustrative of the relational dimension of resilience and should therefore be retained as a representative extract. In another memo, the researchers noted that participants repeatedly provided detailed accounts of longing and separation, prompting further analytic attention to this experience as a potentially meaningful pattern within the dataset. These records provided a transparent account of how interpretations developed throughout the analysis rather than treating themes as fixed or objectively discovered entities. Meaningful coherence was ensured by maintaining alignment between the study's aims, theoretical framework, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and interpretative analytic approach, all of which were consistently grounded in the phenomenological and hermeneutic foundations of the study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021; Tracy, 2010).

All stages of the research were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical approval. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and interview data were anonymised and securely stored in encrypted digital environments. Data confidentiality, restricted access, and ethical reporting practices were rigorously upheld as integral components of ethical integrity in qualitative research.

Researcher Positioning

The corresponding author (RK) has over a decade of sustained engagement in the scouting field, serving regularly as a scout leader in long term camps and holding an academic position in nature based and outdoor sports at a public university. This insider positioning provided contextual familiarity that supported rapport and depth during data collection. At the same time, the study was grounded in a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology, recognising knowledge as co constructed through lived experience. To critically examine the influence of this proximity, the second author (NG), who has no prior experience in scouting, contributed as a critical friend during analysis. This insider outsider configuration enabled ongoing reflexive dialogue, supporting analytic rigour and mitigating the risk of unexamined assumptions shaping interpretation.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are organised round three overarching themes reflecting scout leaders' lived experiences and observations of children's psychological resilience in scout camps: (i) Transition into Camp Life – Emotional and Social Adjustment, (ii) Constructing Socio Ecological Resources: Patrol, Peers, and Leaders, and (iii) From Adjustment to Empowerment: Developmental Change. Leaders consistently emphasised that psychological resilience is not an individual trait, but a dynamic process shaped through social relationships, relational practices, and the developmental conditions of the structured camp environment.

These themes were developed from recurring patterns of meaning across participants' narratives and are presented using descriptive yet interpretative language that remains faithful to the leaders' experiences. The findings aim not only to describe children's experiences, but also to illuminate how social interactions, leadership practices, and peer relationships collectively foster psychosocial resilience within the camp context.

Transition into Camp Life – Emotional and Social Adjustment

Scout leaders' accounts indicate that the initial days of camp are characterised by pronounced difficulties in emotional and social adjustment for many children. As children begin to familiarise themselves with the camp environment, habits and expectations carried over from everyday life become particularly salient. These challenges manifest through intertwined physical, emotional, and behavioural responses.

Several leaders noted that adjustment difficulties often emerge first at the bodily level. Participant P2 described how discomfort with the environment translates into withdrawal and resistance:

"The body starts to react. What happens? They stop eating, they don't drink water. They become irritable… they start making plans in their heads about leaving this place." (P2)

Similarly, P3 highlighted that first time or long term campers may experience short lived disruptions in daily routines:

"Some show it in their toilet routines… some in eating… But of course, it doesn't last long." (P3)

Other leaders associated early adjustment difficulties with behavioural patterns shaped by children's prior life experiences. P6 framed this in terms of heightened needs for attention and recognition:

"At the beginning, some scouts reflect negative experiences from their past into the camp… constantly seeking attention." (P6)

Emotional responses were also prominent during the adjustment phase. P4 referred to feelings of confusion and disappointment resulting from unmet expectations:

"Some scouts experience shock and disappointment because they don't find what they expected when they arrive at camp." (P4)

Homesickness emerged as a particularly salient emotional experience. P1 noted that children frequently evaluated the camp through their separation from family members and digital devices:

"In the first days, we often hear scouts saying, 'I miss my mother,' 'I miss my tablet,' 'I miss my phone.'" (P1)

Digital deprivation itself was identified as intensifying adjustment difficulties:

"Generally, scouts get bored… it's very clear that it's about not having phones and tablets." (P1)

Some leaders further linked these challenges to highly protected home environments. As P1 explained:

"Children who have been raised very comfortably at home… The environment here may not always match what they want." (P1)

Finally, P4 emphasised that the most salient difficulty was emotional separation rather than physical demands:

"They don't struggle with the activities, but they struggle with the emotional emptiness." (P4)

Drawing upon the leaders' narratives, it becomes evident that the adjustment difficulties experienced during the initial days of camp are not merely individual coping failures, but rather an inevitable reflection of children's transition from their familiar worlds comprising family ties, digital habits, and daily routines into an entirely new social environment. This transitional process presents itself as both an experience of loss and reconstruction for the children. Bodily reactions, emotional fluctuations, and behavioural withdrawals are, in fact, expressions of children's efforts to attribute meaning to the new environment and to establish a new equilibrium in which they can feel safe. In this context, expressions of homesickness and digital deprivation reveal that children are not only physically but also emotionally detached from their familiar worlds, and that this detachment constitutes a necessary yet painful threshold for the development of psychological resilience. The leaders' approach to these

challenges suggests that early adjustment problems are not pathological but rather a natural and constructive part of children's process of adaptation to a new socio-ecological context.

Constructing Socio Ecological Resources: Patrol, Peers, and Leaders

Leaders' accounts indicate that early camp relationships are often marked by tension and resistance, which gradually transform into collective identity and group belonging. This transformation is closely linked to the patrol system, peer interactions, and sustained shared experience.

P5 described this relational shift vividly:

"At first, they hate each other… But later, they become like a family." (P5)

This suggests that the patrol functions not merely as shared space but as a social context in which relationships are renegotiated. P2 emphasised patrol belonging as central to collective awareness:

"Being an individual within a patrol… They don't do things alone… there's no empty time." (P2)

Peer relationships shaped not only social adjustment but also learning processes. While acknowledging leader influence, P5 highlighted peer based learning:

"I think peer learning was stronger. They all learned something from one another." (P5)

Some leaders noted that camp participation altered children's social positioning beyond the camp context. As P1 explained:

"A scout who attends camp is always one step ahead… in social life." (P1)

At the same time, adaptation to collective life was uneven. P6 reflected on the disruptive effects of antisocial behaviour:

"If there are many… the group balance breaks down." (P6)

Similarly, P2 noted that some children who struggled to find their place displayed coercive behaviours:

"They insist that everything should go their way." (P2)

Leaders' accounts reveal that the social tensions and resistance observed in the early stages of camp gradually transform into a collective sense of belonging over time. For scout leaders, this transformation is not merely a maturation of group dynamics but a profound relational process through which children's self-perceptions are reconstructed. The patrol system, in this context, functions as a micro-universe where children can develop a collective identity while preserving their individuality. Leaders' narratives suggest that peer learning processes are

more decisive than direct adult interventions, and that peer interactions shape not only social adjustment but also cognitive and emotional development. However, it is evident that this process does not follow a linear progression; rather, it advances through cycles of conflict, resistance, and renegotiation. Antisocial behaviours or coercive attitudes, in this context, can be interpreted not as failures to adapt but as visible expressions of children's efforts to find their place within the new social order. From this perspective, the camp environment offers children the opportunity to experiment with social roles, redefine themselves through peer relationships, and establish a meaningful position within the group—a process that serves as a fundamental socio-ecological resource in the development of psychological resilience.

Leadership as a Relational Regulator of Psychosocial Processes

This theme illustrates how scout leaders shape children's psychosocial processes through fairness, guidance, emotional support, and individual recognition. Leadership was experienced not merely as organisational authority but as a relational practice regulating emotional states and facilitating adjustment.

Perceived fairness emerged as fundamental to trust and order. P1 noted:

"If a scout believes the leader is fair, I don't think there will be any problems within the patrol." (P1)

Leaders' individualised and sincere interactions enabled children to feel safe and develop coping capacities. P4 described leadership as supportive and empowering:

"We emphasize that they can stand on their own feet." (P4)

Some leaders reported working one on one with scouts experiencing social or emotional difficulties. P1 framed this explicitly as psychosocial support:

"I conduct one on one meetings… If they have fears, I talk to them about those fears." (P1)

Participants emphasised that effective leadership relies less on formal knowledge than on embodied field experience and psychological sensitivity. As P4 explained:

"Leaders definitely need to develop themselves in terms of psychological guidance." (P4)

A central dimension of leadership involved recognising scouts' fluctuating emotional needs. P6 highlighted the importance of relational attunement:

"You can only sustain it if you know the child." (P6)

This understanding extended leadership beyond activity organisation to continuous observation and responsive engagement:

"We also observe their emotional states… and act accordingly." (P3)

Leaders' accounts reveal that leadership within the camp environment is not merely an organisational function or a position of authority, but rather a fundamental relational regulatory mechanism that shapes children's psychosocial experiences. In this context, leadership is redefined as the capacity to respond sensitively to children's emotional needs, provide a fair structure, and recognise individual differences. As understood from the leaders' narratives, the perception of fairness is not only a disciplinary tool but also a relational foundation that enables children to feel safe and develop trust in the group. The sincerity and individualised approach in leader-child interactions not only guide children but also support their capacity to develop autonomy. This suggests that leadership functions less as an external control mechanism and more as an internal source of empowerment. In particular, leaders' continuous observation of children's emotional needs and responsive engagement with those needs facilitate not only children's adjustment to camp but also the development of their own coping strategies. From this perspective, leadership gains meaning as a critical socio-ecological mechanism through which psychological resilience is actively constructed within the camp environment. Leaders' experiences indicate that effective leadership relies less on technical knowledge and more on psychological sensitivity, field-acquired experience, and relational attunement—all of which directly contribute to children's development of trust, belonging, and autonomy.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an in-depth examination of the psychosocial impacts of scouting camps on young people through the experiential perspectives of scout leaders, who are the primary actors and facilitators of these structured camp experiences. It addresses a qualitative gap in a literature dominated by quantitative approaches (Bowers et al., 2019; Dare et al., 2020; Uhls et al., 2014) by focusing on how leaders' pedagogical and relational practices, within everyday camp activities, contribute to building psychological resilience. The findings, structured into three distinct themes, conceptualise resilience not as an individual trait but as a dynamic "ecosystem outcome" emerging from the interaction of nature, group dynamics, and leader guidance (Ungar, 2011; Williams et al., 2018) within a bounded camp experience. This discussion section will first analyse, based on the leaders' narratives, how this process operates around this core finding, and then evaluate the implications of the findings within developmental and psychosocial theoretical frameworks (Jeuck et al., 2023; Sinde & Alves, 2024) and practical applications.

Transition into Camp Life Emotional and Social Adjustment

According to the observations of the leaders, the findings indicate that peer relationships among children in the scout camp were initially shaped by marked tension and social distance; however, over time, these relationships were reconfigured around a shared collective identity and sense of group belonging. In addressing the first research question, an interpretative phenomenological perspective indicates that the early challenges observed by scout

leaders should not be viewed as pathological. Instead, they can be understood as meaningful responses that emerge when familiar coping strategies are temporarily unavailable in the novel camp environment. In this sense, early psychological strain represents a process of reorientation rather than dysfunction.

Leaders frequently described emotional and bodily responses such as irritability, withdrawal, homesickness, and reduced appetite during the first days of camp. These reactions signal a threshold moment in which children's existing self regulatory capacities are confronted with unfamiliar environmental demands. Consistent with previous research linking structured camp experiences to emotional regulation and self efficacy under stress (Szałachowski et al., 2024), these early reactions appear to reflect a transitional phase in which feelings of competence and control have not yet been fully mobilized. Psychological strain, therefore, can be understood as an intermediate space preceding the construction of self efficacy rather than as evidence of limited resilience.

This interpretation aligns with Berry et al.'s (2026) systematic review of 21 studies, which found that structured nature experiences in summer camps consistently support growth in mental, emotional, and social health competencies through experiential learning and nature immersion. Their review identified emotional regulation and resilience as key themes, with campers showing improved coping with novelty, reduced emotional reactivity, and decreased stress sensitivity particularly in adventure-based programs. The early psychological strain observed by leaders in our study can thus be understood as integral to this intentional process, consistent with the review's conclusion that structured nature experiences serve as intentional and evidence-based mechanisms for advancing mental, emotional, and social health outcomes.

The prominence of parental longing and the absence of digital devices further illuminate the extent to which children rely on external sources of regulation in everyday life. Research on technology restricted outdoor settings suggests that the initial discomfort associated with digital deprivation is often short lived and gives way to enhanced face to face interaction and emotional attunement (Uhls et al., 2014). In line with this, leaders in the present study emphasized that adjustment difficulties tended to diminish as children became embedded within the structured rhythms and social relations of camp life.

Several leaders characterized the camp environment as a setting that disrupts overprotected forms of upbringing, thereby offering children opportunities to experience autonomy and limits within a supportive micro ecology. This finding resonates with earlier work highlighting the role of nature based programs in fostering independence and self reliance (Karakaş et al., 2018). From an Interpretative Phenomenological standpoint, such experiences may constitute a critical turning point in children's self understandings, enabling a gradual shift from perceptions of incapacity towards emerging senses of "I can cope" within the camp context.

Notably, leaders differentiated between challenges arising from physical activities and those linked to emotional separation, suggesting that the primary source of strain was relational rather than task based. As camp routines progressed, peer interaction and participatory learning practices appeared to facilitate the activation of regulatory

mechanisms associated with self esteem and self efficacy. Taken together, the findings indicate that early psychological strain in the camp context does not signal vulnerability, but rather marks a necessary and productive threshold through which resilience and adaptive capacities can be cultivated within structured camp practice.

Leaders' accounts of children's early adjustment difficulties are treated not as objective descriptions of reality but as their subjective interpretations of children's experiences. Accordingly, leaders' perspectives are employed not to claim factual certainty but to illuminate the underlying meanings embedded in their narratives. What leaders describe as "irritability," "withdrawal," or "homesickness" are, in our interpretive reading, manifestations of children's confrontation with the unfamiliarity of the camp environment. These responses, as interpreted by leaders, reflect children's efforts to navigate a world where previously relied-upon coping mechanisms parental presence, digital connection, habitual routines are temporarily suspended. Thus, our interpretive analysis suggests that leaders perceive these early struggles not as individual deficits but as relational and contextual phenomena, embedded in the interplay between children's biographical histories and the novel socio-ecological conditions of camp life.

While previous qualitative resilience studies (e.g., Karakaş et al., 2018; Szałachowski et al., 2024) have largely focused on the *outcomes* of camp experiences such as self-efficacy gains and social skill development—the present study offers a process-oriented understanding of *how* resilience is interpreted and constructed within the camp context. Unlike earlier research that often conceptualized early adjustment difficulties as mere adaptation problems, our interpretive reading repositions these challenges as a productive and necessary threshold for resilience development. The most distinctive contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of early psychological strain as a "non-pathological reorientation process" rather than a sign of vulnerability. Furthermore, whereas leadership has been predominantly framed as "role modeling" or "authority" in prior qualitative work (e.g., Kidd & Kral, 2016), the present study extends this understanding by highlighting, through leaders' own interpretive accounts, their regulatory and individually responsive functions. In doing so, it broadens socio-ecological models of resilience (Ungar, 2011) within the specific context of structured camp settings, revealing how resilience is co-constructed through the subjective meanings that leaders and children attach to their shared experiences.

The findings indicate that early psychological strain in the camp context does not signal vulnerability, but rather marks a necessary and productive threshold through which resilience and adaptive capacities can be cultivated within structured camp practice. Accordingly, this threshold is understood not as a fixed stage but as a dynamic, meaning-laden process in which children, leaders, and the camp environment collectively participate in the ongoing construction of resilience.

Constructing Socio Ecological Resources: Patrol, Peers, and Leaders

The findings indicate that peer relationships among children were initially shaped by marked tension and social distance; however, over time, these relationships were reconfigured around a shared collective identity and sense of group belonging. In relation to the second research question, which focuses on the interaction between peer

relationships, the patrol system, and leadership practices, leaders' accounts indicate that psychological resilience does not develop through a spontaneous process of adaptation. Instead, it is actively formed through ongoing social interactions, peer relationships, and shared responsibilities within the patrol system, all of which shape the camp experience. The individual psychological challenges highlighted in Theme 1 (such as homesickness, resistance, and frustration) gradually gave way in Theme 2 to a more relational and collective repositioning. Leaders' accounts referring to "early objections" and "refusal to share tents" illustrate how initial defensive and distancing strategies evolved into practices of mutual support and "becoming like a family." This shift suggests that shared experiences and common goals enabled children to transcend individual boundaries and develop a sense of "we ness."

The findings further demonstrate that the patrol system, a core pedagogical structure in scouting, functions not merely as an organizational unit but as a social micro environment in which collective identity is actively experienced. Consistent with Sinde and Alves (2024), who emphasize the patrol system as a powerful learning context fostering democratic participation, shared responsibility, and leadership development, the present study shows that the patrol provides a setting in which individual behaviors are reorganised within group norms and children learn to position themselves as part of a collective rather than as isolated individuals.

Narratives indicating that peer influence often outweighed leader influence suggest that learning processes within the scout camp were largely mediated through horizontal relationships. This finding aligns with previous research showing that structured activities offer a pedagogical environment that supports children's social behavior and adjustment (Moldovan & Bocoş Binţinţan, 2016). Children appeared to internalize social norms primarily through observing, imitating, and negotiating with peers rather than through direct adult instruction, thereby strengthening the durability of collective identity formation.

At the same time, the findings clearly indicate that collective identity did not emerge in a homogeneous or conflict free manner. Difficulties in adaptation and the presence of dominant or antisocial behaviors among some children point to the fragile and negotiated nature of group dynamics. Rather than signaling a failure of the collective structure, such tensions reflect a learning space in which identity is continuously contested and reconstructed, consistent with findings from adventure and camp based contexts (Zmudy et al., 2009).

Finally, leaders' observations that some children appeared to gain increased visibility and confidence among their peers following the camp experience suggest that collective identity can generate forms of social capital that extend beyond the temporal boundaries of the camp. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating that nature based experiences enhance children's autonomy, self confidence, and perceptions of social competence (Karakaş et al., 2018). Experiences of shared responsibility, coordinated action, and conflict resolution within the patrol enabled children to define themselves not solely through individual achievement but through membership in a collective.

Overall, Theme 2 indicates that the scout camp constitutes more than a setting of intensified social interaction; it represents a developmental context in which individual identities are temporarily suspended, renegotiated, and reconstituted within a collective narrative of "we." In this respect, the patrol spirit emerges not simply as an organizational model but as a central pedagogical space in which children actively construct their social identities through lived camp experiences. From an interpretive phenomenological perspective, this process of identity renegotiation is not a mechanical outcome of group participation but a deeply meaning-laden journey through which children make sense of themselves in relation to others. Leaders' accounts reveal that the shift from "I" to "we" is experienced by children as a gradual and often ambivalent transformation, marked by moments of resistance, uncertainty, and eventual belonging. Accordingly, the patrol system appears to function as a relational space where children confront and reconcile their biographical histories shaped by family, school, and prior social experiences with the novel demands of camp life. This finding extends socio-ecological models of resilience (Ungar, 2011) by demonstrating that collective identity is not merely a supportive resource but an active, co-constructed process through which children develop new self-understandings and social competencies. In this regard, we interpret leaders' observations of peer interactions and conflict resolution not as indicators of successful adaptation but as expressions of children's ongoing efforts to construct meaning and identity within the camp's social micro-ecology.

From Adjustment to Empowerment: Developmental Change

This theme underscores the regulatory and transformative role of leadership in shaping the psychosocial development of children in scout camps. The third research question explores how scout leaders interpret children's experiences of psychological strain and adaptation, and how their interpretative and ethical practices contribute to resilience as a relational process. Participants' narratives indicate that leadership is experienced not merely as a structural authority responsible for managing activities, but as a relational resource that shapes emotional safety, facilitates adjustment, and enables developmental gains within the camp environment. This finding suggests that, within organised settings, leadership operates less as a fixed formal position and more as a continuously negotiated and individualized form of guidance.

The perceived fairness of the leader emerged as a fundamental condition for trust and order within the troop. P1's account highlights how scouts closely observe leader behaviour, and that this perception of justice is decisive not only for individual leader–scout relationships but also for group dynamics as a whole. This aligns with findings by Sinde and Alves (2024), who emphasise the pedagogical importance of democratic participation and equality in scouting. The leader's fair conduct creates a predictable and secure social framework, thereby contributing to the regulation of intragroup conflicts.

Findings further demonstrate that leadership functions as a relational practice that supports children's emotional regulation skills. Leaders' connection with scouts through one on one contact, genuine communication, and a "sibling like" rapport allows children to feel secure and expand their coping repertoires. These results meaningfully

parallel the work of Szałachowski et al. (2024), who found that the scouting experience strengthens self efficacy and emotional regulation mechanisms in coping with stress. In this context, leader guidance assumes a regulatory function that helps children recognize, name, and manage their emotions, rather than suppressing them.

Personalized leader interventions, particularly for introverted children or those experiencing social adjustment difficulties, proved to be a key factor strengthening the inclusive nature of the camp environment. The one-on-one conversations and emotional support practices described by P1 illustrate how leadership is structured flexibly and sensitively to individual needs, rather than through a uniform approach. These findings are consistent with those of Wozencroft et al. (2019), who showed that therapeutic and development focused camp settings support children's self efficacy, character development, and psychosocial well being.

Participant narratives strongly emphasize that effective leadership deepens not only through formal training but through experiential learning in the field. Leaders' references to "every child having a different character" suggest leadership is an intuitive competency developed through experience, not a standardized skill set. This implies that camp and adventure-based environments also offer a continuous learning arena for leaders themselves. Similarly, findings by Karakaş et al. (2018) that nature based experiences support autonomy and self confidence in children buttress this study's observation that leader guidance provides a foundation that strengthens children's perception of "standing on their own feet."

A critical element foregrounded in this theme is the leader's capacity to recognize the scout in light of their individual characteristics. Accounts from P2 and P3 indicate that leader behavior is continuously readjusted according to the child's psychological state, and that this flexibility is decisive in maintaining group equilibrium. This finding is congruent with the work of Moldovan and Bocoş Binţinţan (2016), who stress that scouting provides a structured yet flexible pedagogical framework supporting children's social adaptation and developmental needs. This form of leadership allows children to be experienced not as rule following individuals, but as subjective beings whose emotions, needs, and boundaries are acknowledged.

Collectively, the findings of Theme 3 position camp leadership as a central environmental regulator in the development of children's psychological resilience. The leader's position as a fair, supportive, experienced, and recognizing figure enables the transformation of the individual challenges (Theme 1) and social negotiations (Theme 2) within a secure framework. Consequently, leader guidance ensures the camp functions not as a transient social setting, but as an integrated developmental space where children co construct emotional regulation, self efficacy, and a sense of belonging. From an interpretive phenomenological standpoint, this regulatory function of leadership is not merely a structural feature of camp organization but emerges through leaders' ongoing, situated interpretations of children's emotional states and relational needs. Leaders' accounts reveal that their guidance is continuously readjusted in response to children's moment-to-moment experiences, suggesting that leadership operates as a dynamic, intersubjective practice rather than a fixed set of skills. This finding extends socio-ecological models of resilience (Ungar, 2011) by demonstrating that the leader's role is not only to provide

supportive resources but to actively interpret, respond to, and co-construct meaning with children within the camp's social micro-ecology. Unlike previous qualitative studies that have often framed leadership in camps as a unidirectional influence from adult to child (e.g., Kidd & Kral, 2016), the present study reveals, through leaders' own interpretive accounts, that effective leadership is reciprocal, context-sensitive, and co-constructed through the ongoing interplay between leader and child. This interpretive reading suggests that resilience is not merely facilitated by leadership but is actively negotiated and co-produced within the leader-child relationship, a process that previous studies have largely overlooked by focusing on outcomes rather than lived experiences.

This qualitative inquiry, grounded in the lived experiences of scout leaders, elucidates the complex psychosocial ecosystem of a scouting camp. Moving beyond a deficit based view of initial adjustment difficulties, the findings collectively portray resilience as a dynamic, socially situated capacity that is actively co constructed within the unique triad of nature, peer group, and leader guidance that defines this camp experience. Through the double hermeneutic lens of IPA, we interpret leaders' narratives of their own practices not as objective reports of what "works" but as their subjective meaning-making efforts to understand and respond to children's evolving needs. This perspective reveals that the leader-child relationship in scouting is not merely a supportive mechanism but a transformative relational space where emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and belonging are co-constructed through moment-to-moment interactions. Accordingly, this study contributes to the resilience literature by illuminating the relational, interpretive, and process-oriented dimensions of leadership—dimensions that are often reduced to individual traits or program outcomes in previous research. In this regard, psychological resilience in the camp context is understood not as a fixed capacity developed through program participation, but as an ongoing, meaning-laden process of becoming, shaped through the intertwined dynamics of nature, peer relationships, and responsive leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study provides novel insights into how psychological resilience is developed in scout camps as structured youth programs. Initial psychological strain experienced by children was not interpreted as a deficit but as a necessary challenge that fosters growth within a novel social and developmental context. This individual adjustment gains significance through integration into structured peer groups, where shared belonging supports adaptive psychosocial change. Importantly, these processes are guided by relational, fair, and emotionally attuned leadership, which regulates the camp environment and facilitates transformative developmental experiences.

The findings extend socio-ecological models of resilience (Ungar, 2011) and contribute to the understanding of how organised youth programs operationalise resilience through relational and peer-mediated processes. The study demonstrates that the psychosocial benefits of outdoor and adventure-based programs are not automatic but are actively produced through structured, high engagement interactions.

From a practical perspective, scout leader training should emphasize relational pedagogy, emotional co-regulation, and recognition of individual needs alongside technical outdoor skills. Leaders act as facilitators of group

dynamics, promoting emotionally safe and developmentally supportive environments. Program design should allow sufficient time for individual adjustment, peer group formation, and leader-mediated psychosocial support.

Overall, scout camps represent a developmentally significant context in which guided interaction with peers and leaders supports children's psychological resilience and social-emotional growth. Structured youth programs are not merely recreational activities but serve as relational workshops where critical psychosocial capacities are cultivated for life beyond the camp.

Limitations

First, this study foregrounds scout leaders as primary interpretative actors rather than accessing children's accounts directly. This reflects a deliberate analytic positioning rather than a methodological shortcoming. Leaders occupy sustained relational and pedagogical roles through which children's emotional and social processes are continuously observed, interpreted, and responded to. Accordingly, rather than claiming to directly capture children's first-person experiences, the findings illuminate how psychological resilience is produced and regulated through leadership practices and relational dynamics within the context of scout camps.

Second, the study was conducted within national scout camps in Turkey, which are shaped by specific institutional structures, cultural norms, and leadership traditions. While the study prioritises depth of meaning over generalisation, these contextual characteristics may shape how resilience is enacted in this particular leisure setting and may limit the transferability of the findings to other cultural, organisational, or international youth leisure settings.

Third, in line with interpretative phenomenological and reflexive thematic approaches, the analysis is inevitably shaped by the researchers' theoretical orientations and positionalities. Despite sustained reflexive engagement and analytic dialogue, the themes presented represent one situated and theoretically informed interpretation of resilience processes within Project Based Leisure, rather than an objective or exhaustive account.

Fourth, the interviews lasted between 25 and 38 minutes, which may be considered relatively brief for an interpretative phenomenological study seeking to explore lived experiences in depth. This constitutes a limitation, as longer interviews might have provided further opportunities for participants to elaborate on their experiences. Nevertheless, the information power of the dataset was supported by the participants' extensive and sustained experience in scouting, including leadership roles with diverse scout populations across different periods and settings. This prolonged and varied experiential background enabled participants to draw on a broad range of observations and experiences, contributing to information-rich accounts despite the relatively brief interview duration. Accordingly, although longer interviews may have generated additional nuances, the adequacy of the dataset was considered in relation to the depth and relevance of participants' accounts rather than interview duration alone.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Kırıkkale University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Tarih: 10.08.2025; Oturum No: 08 / 367768). The research was conducted in accordance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Author Contributions

Study design: R.K; Supervision: R.K; N.G; Data collection: R.K; N.G, Data analysis: R.K; N.G, Literature review: R.K; N.G,; Writing: R.K; N.G,; Critical review: R.K; N.G.

All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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