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LEARNING OUTDOOR RECREATION SKILLS IN A SAFE PLACE: LESSONS FROM A SINGLE-SEX PROGRAM

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Introduction and Background

While women have always recreated and participated in outdoor recreation (Bialeschki, 1992), the out of doors and the activities done in it traditionally have been considered a male domain. Women have not participated in outdoor recreation activities as frequently as men for a variety of reasons including social stereotypes, family responsibilities, lack of skill, and a perception of a lack of entitlement to leisure (Bialeschki, 1992; Henderson, 1990; Jordan, 1989). The dominant stereotype is that "masculine activities" are enjoyed in the out of doors, and because of this, outdoor recreation activities such as camping, hunting, trapping, and fishing have long been considered taboo for women (Bammel & Bammel, 1996; Bialeschki, 1992; Henderson, 1990; Jordan, 1989).

The perception that outdoor recreation activities are taboo for women, however, is beginning to change. Henderson, Bialeschki, Freysinger, and Shaw (1996) reported that more women than ever before are participating in outdoor recreation, and that this will continue to rise. Women's experiences in the out of doors are little understood, yet we know that involvement in outdoor recreation is desired by many women. As they prepare to become more involved in outdoor recreation women are searching for and participating in outdoor recreation skill workshops across the country. Many of these

workshops are designed for, instructed by, and restricted to female participants.

While there is an increase in outdoor recreation participation by women, research about women and outdoor recreation is lacking. Studies in this area have been sporadic and limited over the past fifteen years (Bialeschki, 1992; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1986; Henderson, 1992; Jordan, 1989; Yerkes & Miranda, 1985). The research about people's involvement in outdoor recreation that does exist has focused primarily on males because they are the majority of outdoor recreation participants. Thus, a gap exists in our understanding of the experiences of females in the outdoors, particularly in outdoor recreation. It is important to understand women's experiences in the outdoors from their perspective. Leisure providers can better serve this growing population by learning more about what women want in outdoor recreation, how they feel about doing outdoor recreation activities, and the constraints they face in their outdoor recreation efforts.

The primary intent of this study was to ascertain the reasons women participate in single-sex outdoor recreation workshops to learn outdoor recreation skills. A secondary issue was to identify reasons for participation in outdoor recreation activities.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two perspectives were utilized as underlying frameworks for this research: feminist theory and gender theory. An advantage of utilizing a feminist framework for this research study is highlighted by Sky (1994). She suggests that through such a framework women are not viewed merely as subjects, but as sources of knowledge. In addition, theories emerge from women's perspectives. Furthering the conceptualization of feminist theory in the study of leisure, Henderson and Bialeschki (1991) noted that there are three goals of feminist philosophy: 1) to make women's and girls' lives more visible; 2) to redefine existing social systems; and, 3) to enable all women to have equity, dignity, and choice through the power to control their lives both in and out of the home. They also indicated that feminist methodologies rely on listening to women speak in their own voices, and on being sensitive to differences among and between women. These elements are important in understanding and utilizing the research reported here.

Feminist theory helps to establish a basis from which to conduct research and gender theory provides a cogent explanation for understanding one aspect of the socialization process on peoples' lives. Henderson (1996) indicated that research where gender is not viewed as a variable, but a central theoretical construct is necessary to fully examine the influences of gender on leisure (and vice versa). Therefore, the second underlying construct for this research study is that of gender theory.

It is clear that our understanding of experiences in leisure is influenced by gender role expectations; in essence, leisure is gendered (Fox, 1994; Davidson, 1996; Freysinger, 1990; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1990; Jackson & Henderson, 1995; Kane,

1990; Shaw, 1994). Our understanding and perception of leisure is impacted by the lifelong socialization process whereby we learn the gender expectations that apply to us. We know from previous research that the differences in leisure experiences between women and men "are more contextual than biological" (Henderson, 1996, p. 163). The differences are due to social dictates and mores, the roles one fulfills, and the type of lifestyle one promotes rather than one's sex. Leisure and recreation opportunities and experiences deemed "appropriate" (feminine) for girls and women include such activities as aerobics and gymnastics; males are to engage in "masculine" activities such as football and hunting (Jordan, 1989; Kane, 1990; Shaw, 1994). This gender-role conformity constrains leisure choices for both women and men (Kane, 1990).

Thus, both a feminist framework and gender theory support this research. By better understanding why women choose single-sex environments in which to learn outdoor recreation skills, women's lives will be made more visible and existing social structures called into question and perhaps, reexamined. In addition, the influence of socially proscribed gender roles on women will be better understood aiding in the elimination of restrictions on leisure opportunities and choices for women.

Procedures

Data were collected through self-report written questionnaires developed for use in this investigation. Both closed-ended and open-ended items were selected to reflect the research questions for the study, and were developed out of the literature review, previous research conducted with this program, and the stated desires of representatives of the state Department of Natural Resources.

The surveys were inserted into participant registration packets at a weekend-long outdoor recreation program designed and held for women in the fall of 1996. The closed ended items elicited quantitative data which were analyzed with descriptive statistics using SPSS for the Macintosh, while the open-ended, qualitative items were analyzed using an open coding system. Only the qualitative data are presented in this paper. Through the qualitative analysis common themes emerged and categories were determined. This was accomplished after reading the data many times and comparing, coding,

and enumerating the responses. A second rater was employed during the coding process; there was a 90% inter-rater agreement on categorization and assignment within category. Data were collected from 100 of 126 individuals for a 79% response rate.

Results

Participants were primarily white, middle class, highly educated, and between the ages of 18 and "over 55." Specific demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics

<u>Previous attendance at workshop</u>		<u>Ethnicity</u>	
first time attendee	65%	white	98%
second time attendee	26%	other	2%
third time attendee	5%		
no response	4%	have disability	6%
<u>Age</u>		<u>Education level</u>	
18 to 36 years	26%	completed high school	12%
36 to 55 years	58%	some college/college degree	69%
over 55 years	12%	graduate college	15%
no response	4%	no response	4%
<u>Income level</u>		<u>Occupation</u>	
less than \$25,000/year	11%	business woman	32%
\$25,001 to \$50,000/year	40%	healthcare worker	22%
more than \$50,000/year	39%	teacher	8%
no response	10%	homemaker	8%
		clerical worker	6%
		retired	4%
		self employed	4%
		other (e.g., farmer, student)	12%
		no response	4%
<u>Marital status</u>			
married/partnered	73%		
single	23%		
no response	4%		

Number of children		Ages of children	
no children	22%	under 5 years old	5%
1 – 2 children	50%	5 to 12 years old	19%
3 or more children	24%	13 to 17 years old	12%
no response	4%	over 18 years old	38%
		no response	26%

Table 2

Top Ten Reasons for Attending the All-Women Workshop

	Frequency	Percent
To learn new skills	94	18.2
For the love of the outdoors	82	15.9
To try something new	57	11.0
To practice skills	54	10.5
To build my confidence	46	8.9
To make new friends	34	6.6
To network with others	31	6.0
For vacation	30	5.8
To equalize my knowledge w/partner	29	5.6
To be with friends	17	3.3
Total responses	474	91.8

Prior to asking why they chose a single sex environment in which to learn outdoor recreation skills, workshop attendees were asked why they decided to learn about outdoor recreation. The two most important reasons for participating in the workshop were "to learn new skills" and "for the love of the outdoors." The top ten reasons for participation are presented in Table 2.

Women were very willing to share information about why they chose a single-sex environment in which to learn and enhance their outdoor recreation skills. From the data, four categories of reasons emerged explaining this desire for a single sex environment: 1) the environment was perceived as non-threatening (two sub-categories emerged: no men were present, and participants shared a baseline of novice-level

skills); 2) the reputed quality and safety of the program; 3) to be with other women and the anticipated friendships; and 4) to learn outdoor skills and knowledge. Quotes supporting each of these categories are presented below.

Non-Threatening Environment: No Men Present

Eighty-nine percent of the women who attended the workshop expressed a sense of appreciation at learning in an environment that was non-threatening because there were no men present. It was evident that the women shared a perception that men were judgmental, intimidating, and condescending. Women stated, "There are no men here. I don't have to worry about being judged by them. I enjoy the mostly female instructors."

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[25 – 35 year old married marketing representative w/two children]; and “It sounded very interesting and [I] would not be intimidated by males.” [under 25 years old single insurance broker]. Two others reported, “No one is “teaching” in a condescending manner. It gives me confidence in myself. It’s opened up a whole new world to me.” [46 – 55 year old married chiropractor’s assistant w/two grown children]; and “You are learning with other women. Sometimes you feel like men talk down to you or don’t want you doing “their” sports.” [25 – 35 year old single public relations specialist]

Non-Threatening Environment: Shared Skill Levels

The other aspect of the non-threatening environment was that the women felt comfortable being in the company of others who shared common skill levels. By far, the comments indicated that it was important to be free from the embarrassment of being unskilled. The women said, “It was the most “comfortable” way for me to learn (i.e., not feeling like an old dummy because I’ve had 59 birthdays and still don’t know how to fish!).” [59 year old married nurse with two grown children]; “Didn’t feel embarrassed [sic] [because] men are around and you’re not very good at a skill. [Having] the same skill level of people helped.” [25 – 35 year old single research analyst]; and “I felt it would not be an intimidating experience; a way to learn with women of equal ineptitude!” [46 – 55 year old married part-time worker with one grown child]

Reputed Program Quality

The third category of responses was related to the quality of the program. It is clear that women want to learn the correct methods and techniques of various outdoor rec-

reation skills. Comments included, “It had professionals teaching the classes.” [36 – 45 year old single businesswoman]; “I came here last year and had a wonderful experience. This is a top notch program that is well organized and has excellent programs and speakers.” [36 – 45 year old married healthcare worker with 3 children]; “People’s past experiences with the workshop the expertise and level of knowledge and skills of the instructors.” [46 – 55 year old divorced clerical worker]; and “To learn the knowledge and expertise from the instructors and to learn the ‘proper’ and ‘legal’ procedures of the different activities offered.” [25 – 35 year old married executive assistant].

In addition to quality of instruction, women also felt physically safe being a group of all women. As one workshop attendee noted, “It’s very comforting to feel and be safe walking in the woods at night or even by the parking lot.” [36 – 45 year old married teacher with two children].

To Be With Other Women

In reviewing the data the fourth category of responses as to why women chose a single-sex environment in which to learn outdoor recreation was related to being with other women. The special connections and relationships that develop between women were important to the respondents. They said, “I get to speak to and laugh with and enjoy these strangers—who have suddenly become non-strangers—because of this wonderful interest we are sharing.” [36 – 45 year old married machine operator with 4 children]; “[for the] companionship of other women” [25 – 35 year old married RN with no children]; “I thought the company of women would make it special.” [46 – 55 year old married teacher with 3 children];

and "[it is] good to be with other women interested in outdoors." [36 – 45 year old married writer with four children].

Discussion

It is clear that women desire single sex outdoor recreation learning opportunities, and that they can benefit from them. As the women mentioned, this is in part because all-women programs offer a safe learning environment. Safety was viewed as psychological (free from intimidation, power-over, and role constraints of co-ed workshops), educational (it is okay to be inept—judgment based on skills is minimized, as is the concomitant embarrassment), physical (there is no fear for one's physical safety or of violence), and emotional (participants can express emotions without fear of sanctions).

In addition to the many elements of safety, women desired a single sex workshop to learn outdoor recreation skills because they felt that being with other women was special, and because they simply wanted to learn proper outdoor recreation skills and techniques. Most of the women in this study had at least one child and worked outside the home. The resulting "double shift" leaves little time for gathering with friends and groups of people who share common interests. A single sex outdoor skills workshop creates a gathering place where women can connect with others who share similar concerns, problems, interests, and life situations. It is a place where female sharing and bonding can occur.

The other issue, the desire to learn proper outdoor recreation skills and techniques, obviously is also important to women. This was identified as the most important reason to participate in the workshop, and also as one of the four reasons for

selecting a single sex learning environment. Learning the proper skills and techniques to fully participate in outdoor recreation enables women to feel increasingly competent and confident in their own outdoor recreation abilities.

The women in this study gained much from their participation in the outdoor recreation workshop and had common reasons for selecting the single sex learning environment. At the same time, it was clear (from anecdotal comments and verbal asides during the workshop) that the participants understood the possible repercussions and social sanctions they would receive because of their attendance. One respondent noted this negative element surrounding participation in a weekend workshop meant for a women only audience. She also indicated how her early perception was changed through her participation. The individual said, "We feared this workshop might be alot [sic] of women wanting to be men or male bashing—we were wrong. Great teaching, great bunch of people attending & teaching & running the show."

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