

2006

## Power Plays: Nerdy Boys and Influential Girls "Playing" in the Outdoors

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### Recommended Citation

Pinch, Katherine J. (2006) "Power Plays: Nerdy Boys and Influential Girls "Playing" in the Outdoors," *Research in Outdoor Education*: Vol. 8, Article 21.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/reseoutded/vol8/iss1/21>

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**POWER PLAYS: NERDY BOYS AND INFLUENTIAL GIRLS  
"PLAYING" IN THE OUTDOORS**

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A major premise of this study is that gender is a system as well as a part of individual actions. Giddens (1999) described systems as "reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organized as regular social practices" (p. 127). If one does not see gender as a category, but as a process that structures identity, behavior, and social norms, Giddens' definition of a system may easily be applied to gender. The study was begun with this understanding and a desire to look inside the gender system, as it operated within and through an outdoor adventure program for adolescents, and to explore the relationship between gender and power within this setting.

This case study applied a gender lens to the interactions and behaviors of a group of seventeen adolescent girls and boys as they participated in a five day adventure camp as part of their regular school curriculum. The methods used were: (i) direct observation; (ii) open-ended interviewing; and (iii) document review. Open-ended interviews were conducted through informal conversations, through a general interview guide approach, and through group interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant near the end of the camp, and a group discussion was facilitated five weeks after participating in the outdoor adventure program. Documents that were collected and reviewed included the school applications to attend camp, program plans, program evaluations, and student journals. Information in these documents was used as a crosscheck to the information provided through the observations and interviews.

In this study, power was seen as multidimensional. It was fluid rather than static, with individuals adjusting their behaviors according to group norms and to changing perceptions about the abilities and needs of themselves and others. Individuals within the system exhibited varying degrees of agency and used different strategies to maintain and assert some degree of personal and group control. At different stages in the program there were competing discourses, giving different types of power to different girls and boys. The system that was constructed, however, was one where some girls (the influential girls) sacrificed a degree of power in order to bolster that of the boys (the self-proclaimed nerdy boys). Power was seen to be integral to social interaction (as suggested by Davis, 1991). The course of social interaction was directed or influenced by the resources that individuals brought to the setting, and how they mobilized these resources in the production and reproduction of gendered interaction. Power was used by individuals to ensure compliance to certain claims of social "reality" based on gendered ideologies. Power was exercised through enforcement, but some individuals were also willingly complicit in producing unequal relationships of power that restricted their freedom but afforded them some control within their accepted gendered realms. Individuals also resisted sanctions or subtly negotiated gendered boundaries. This reading of power allows for change and resistance but accounts for the maintenance of normative orders and explains how social positions are defined.

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Outdoor adventure programs are often claimed as sites of empowerment for individuals and as arenas for questioning gender stereotypes and gendered roles. Closer inspection of programs, such as in this case study, may point to a need for a more nuanced view of the gendered power relationships that are developed through outdoor adventure activities.

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