

Gender and the Outdoors: An International Conversation

Katherine J. Pinch
California State University, Sacramento
6000 J Street
Sacramento, CA 95819-6110 USA
1-916-278-6880
pinch@csus.edu

Mary Breunig
Brock University
South Academic 329
500 Glenridge Avenue
St. Catharines, Ontario L2S 3A1 CANADA
1-905-688-5550 x. 5387
mbreunig@brocku.ca

Marg Cosgriff
The University of Waikato at Tauranga
142-144 Durham Street
Tauranga, New Zealand
64-7-577-5332
cosgriff@waikato.ac.nz

Annie Dignan
University of Otago
P.O. Box 56
Dunedin, New Zealand
64-03-479-7368
annie.dignan@mountainsafety.org.nz

Abstract

Over the past two to three decades in outdoor education circles, there has been a gradual swell of interest in bringing a gender lens to the examination of issues, theory and practice within the field. Although feminist theory has been subjected to lively debate and undergone sophisticated shifts in the ways of conceptualizing and analyzing gender, much of the literature coming out of the outdoor field and much of our practice is still centered on women and difference.

As Bell (1997) so clearly asked, “Has the dialogue on the nature of gender and associated social issues not changed in the past decade?” A group of international researchers, educators and practitioners discussed gender theory and practice in their “neck of the woods” and challenged attendees to ask that question again today

Key Words: gender; outdoor education; outdoor recreation; feminist theory

Gender and the Outdoors: An International Conversation

This panel allowed four practitioners and scholars with ties to four different countries – two New Zealanders, one American who teaches at a university in Canada, and an Australian who teaches at a university in the United States – to come together for an international conversation about gender in the outdoors in relation to theory and practice.

We hoped that through sharing our experiences we could provoke some renewed interest in gender issues and generate discussion among those people who attended our session.

So how did we get here? Due to our submission of proposals for the Confluence we were recognized as having a common interest in gender. It was suggested that we should meet, albeit electronically, to discuss a panel on gender. The result of this was the drawing together of some common threads and personal perspectives, some of it through the ether, but much of it in a more enjoyable way over coffee at this conference!

We drew our inspiration for the panel on a question asked by Martha Bell in 1997 when she voiced her frustration at how gender was theorized and practiced in such an unsophisticated manner in the outdoors. Ten years late we are asking her question again: “Has the dialog on the nature of gender and associated issues not changed in the past decade?”

Stories From the Field – Part 1: Annie and Marg

This commentary is a record of the presentation Annie gave on behalf of Marg and herself about “gender in our neck of the woods” to open the panel.

About 5 years ago I was instructing a mixed group of 18-20 year olds on a tramping trip. Not long after having met the group, as we were about to sit down and discuss objectives, one of the young men in the group said, “How come we got a girl instructor because I wanted to have an adventure”. I am not sure what my response was! I have thought of some good ones since of course, but I think my point is fairly obvious.

A couple of years later I was giving a guest lecture on gender issues in the outdoors at the School of Physical Education at Otago University and I recounted this experience and outlined a number of historical influences in the outdoors. As I was quite new to lecturing, when I was leaving the lecture theatre I asked one of the woman students whom I knew and who was an aspiring outdoor leader, how she thought the lecture had gone. Her immediate response was not overwhelming and she said, “I can see how it was like that in your day but it is not like that now.” I was a bit stunned for two reasons; firstly it still was my day and secondly the belief that everything was all good now didn’t ring true. I want to use the ubiquitous Tui advertising slogan to respond to that: “Yeah... right!” As an aside that student did go on to be an excellent outdoor instructor and is at this conference.

When Marg and I originally discussed our thoughts for a framework for today’s presentation, we began to reminisce back to the time when we first met which was in the mid 1980’s at Outward Bound in Anakiwa. I had just turned 20, and the word feminist was just entering my vocabulary. I was working at the school as a kitchen hand – the last time I cooked anything – and there were a number of strong women instructors who encouraged me to think beyond the negative view of myself as a “tom boy” and to begin to value my physical strength and love for all that the outdoors embodied.

Not long after leaving Outward Bound I went to a Women's Studies Association conference and was blown away by the presentations there and then hitched a ride back across the country with Martha Bell who had just begun her post graduate research into women in the outdoors. These were heady days! Gender and issues related to women seemed to be at the forefront of people's thinking. I joined Women Outdoors New Zealand (WONZ) and I became vigilant about the use of sexist language. I then went to Australia to do a degree in outdoor education and my interest was always about issues for women in the outdoors.

It was around this time that I was exposed to the writing of people such as Karen Warren, Deb Jordan, Denise Mitten and Barbara Humberstone to name just a few. When I was discussing this with a colleague recently he used the expression "cut my teeth on". And I think he is right; this is the stuff that I cut my teeth on. I have slides of some of the covers of these influential books here today because I am interested to know whether these images evoke the same feelings for others.

At our 1992 national outdoor education conference there were discussions, forums and papers on women outdoor leaders, women and girls as participants on outdoor programmes, and strategies for including women and girls in programme planning. Gender related issues were definitely on the agenda! Charmaine Poutney's keynote address issued challenges to the field about the traditional views on nature underpinning some programmes and the need for bi-cultural approaches, and she acknowledged WONZ's unique endeavours to deal with these issues. In short, I am drawing your attention to what was a proliferation of discussions, ideas and thinking about gender and outdoor education. Marg described it as being like a bubbling stew.

This story describes some of our interest in this topic and begins to outline where we have come from. Before we discuss where we see things to be at currently we wanted to briefly acknowledge that there has been a huge amount of theorising around gender identity, subjectivity, how gender is performed, queer theory and the intersection of gender with other cultural markers including class and race that has greatly influenced our work. The writings of Judith Butler, Lisette Burrows, Jan Wright and Jenny Gore on performativity, subjectivity, identity, gender prescribed norms and feminist pedagogy and the practice of 'doing' feminism in the classroom are but a few that have had their particular impact on the ways that *we* think about and practice outdoor education.

A decade ago Martha Bell posed the question "Has the dialogue on the nature of gender and associated social issues not changed in the past decade"? We remain unconvinced that it has changed much at all! To the contrary, on the basis of personal experience, shared reflection and collegial dialogue, we would argue that gender has ceased to be a focus warranting attention on many of the agendas in our field.

But this doesn't mean that things in our "neck of the woods" aren't of concern. We continue to grapple with questions such as:

- How does gender get practiced or played out in the outdoor education programmes we do?
- How are we complicit in reinforcing some really pervasive, limiting gendered understandings about identity in outdoor education programmes?
- How does my/your practice reinforce those social inequities?

And even in the simplistic terms of things like representation, how come in Otago I struggle to find well qualified woman instructors? I am in the situation where 54% of my students are female but I can seldom find 50% of my staff to be female despite my concerted efforts to do so.

These gender issues are still challenges for our field and we are interested in this forum for input into this.

A Theoretical Interlude: Kath

There always has to be the boring one in the group who wants to get all intellectual. So the theoretical piece fell to me.

Over the past two to three decades in outdoor education and recreation circles, a gradual swell of interest emerged in bringing a gender lens to the examination of issues, theory and practice within the field. Mirroring the progress of feminist studies, early efforts in this area (for example, Hardin, 1980; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1987; Mitten, 1985; Yerkes & Miranda, 1985) tended to concentrate on: women's and girls' perceptions; and gender differences in behaviors, development, and needs. Such writings would be viewed as "essentialist" today, but these authors and researchers were responsible for articulating the uneasiness felt by many feminist outdoor educators about gender equity issues within our field.

Although feminist theory has been subjected to lively debate and undergone sophisticated shifts in the ways of conceptualizing and analyzing gender, much of the literature coming out of the outdoor field is still centered on women and difference. As Bell (1997) so clearly asked: "Has the dialogue on the nature of gender and associated social issues not changed in the past decade?" (p. 143). This question and these concerns are still very relevant today, ten years later. There is still a tendency in this field to view gender simply as a categorical variable. That is; to conduct outcomes based research and compare these outcomes for women and men or girls and boys. What we need to do is focus on gender processes and the constructed meanings that create and reinforce difference, not merely view difference as "given" based on a biological dualism that finds little support when held to the test of credible research.

Basing distinctions between individuals on taken-for-granted, binary sex categories creates a tendency to simply replace the sex categories with similarly defined gender categories and roles. This leads to a simplistic view of "sex" as the biological and physiological characteristics that allow one to classify individuals as female or male, and "gender" as the culturally constructed behavioral and psychological characteristics associated with being either female or male. When cultural characteristics are applied to dichotomous and biologically determined views of sex, there is a tendency to simply equate the cultural to the sexual, and hence, sex (male/female) simply becomes gender (men/women) in common thinking.

Let's examine this more closely:

Sex "is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males. The criteria for classification can be genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before [or after] birth, and they do not necessarily agree with one another" (West & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 132).

Chromosomal research by Money and Ehrhardt in 1972 classified six different chromosomal make-ups of individuals (XX, XY, XXX, XXY, XYY, and XO). And within Western societies, Lorber in 1994 identified five sexes, five gender displays, three sexual orientations, six relationship types, and ten self-identifications. With all of these chromosomal types and gender identities floating around and the ambiguity of genitalia structure for many individuals, the idea of merely two sexes or genders is somewhat challenging, even to my non-menza mind.

Within feminist literature, there has been a move away from conceptualizing gender as an individual attribute and toward an understanding of gender as process: that is, a conception of gender relations as an interplay between social practice and social structure (Connell, 1987).

The major focus of research within the field of outdoor education has been on benefits to programme participants. In many of these studies gender was used as a categorical variable to highlight differences or similarities in outcomes for women and men or girls and boys. Within this research, there is no consistency in the findings regarding gender differences (although the researchers were really using *sex* categories to signify gender). This does not seem surprising to me given the previous analysis of the true complexity of sex or gender.

Neill (1997) divided gender related research into four categories – the influence of gender on: (i) participation rates; (ii) outdoor leadership: gender ratio of outdoor leaders and general perception of outdoor leaders; (iii) mixed-sex and single-sex programmes; and (iv) programme outcomes. He went on to talk about the rapidly increasing number of women who are accessing outdoor programmes, the small number of women in leadership roles in the outdoors, the relatively small differences in the ways that female and male leaders are evaluated by participants, the lack of research attempting to quantify differences in outcomes for females in single sex versus mixed sex groups, and the mixed findings of differences in outcomes for men and women.

There are a number of problems with both the outcomes based research that looks at gender differences and Neill's analysis of gender research. Categorical research assumes that the experience of all females can be normalized and the experience of all males can be normalized, and that these experiences may be different simply because they are female or male. It does not address the gender processes occurring within the groups that may account for different outcomes for individuals.

The problem with Neill's analysis of gender and how it affects the outdoor education experience is that he doesn't question the assumptions behind the research and he makes no attempt to address the research in anything but positivistic terms. If it isn't *counted* then it doesn't count. There is a large body of research conducted from an interpretive paradigm that has attempted to address the perceptions of women and girls in outdoor education programmes (for example, Henderson, Winn, & Roberts, 1996; Loeffler, 1995; Roberts & Henderson, 1997; Stringer, 1997; Yerkes and Miranda, 1985).

Allowing the voices of women and girls to be heard (and not just counted) was a valuable first step toward a critical analysis of gender practices in outdoor education. This is not to say that all of this research was conducted well. There was an assumption in much of the early work that all women spoke with one voice, and many women's perceptions were therefore excluded from the

discussion. Some writers have suggested that race and class have been subsumed into false generalizations about *all* women, and that these generalizations were based on a white middle class view that did not recognize the privilege of some women over others (hooks, 1984; Huggins, 1994; Lake, 1994; Lord, 1984; Moraga, 1983; Spivak, 1993).

The recognition of the differences between women has led to feminist and cultural studies writing that focuses on multiple axes of identity, such as gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation (e.g. Denis, 2001; Saunders & Evans, 1996; Solorzano, 1992). This trend has been combined with the questioning by postmodernist feminist philosophers of the universalist tendencies of modernist theorizing.

In our field categorical analysis is still seen in much of the present research, with very little research conducted that is based on a discussion of gender at a theoretical level. We need to move beyond viewing gender as an individual attribute in our studies and in the way we practice. We also need to stop thinking that gender studies is all about women and girls and that men and boys simply play a tangential role in discussions.

Gerson and Peiss (2000) considered gender relations in terms of “boundaries, processes of negotiation as well as domination, and gender consciousness as an interactive and multidimensional process” (p. 119). This conceptualization recognizes that behavior is regulated through structural constraints within the social sphere (i.e. physical, social, psychological, and cultural constraints), and these boundaries establish and reinforce commonalities and differences among and between women and men.

This conceptualization also highlights the importance of agency, as women and men act to support and challenge the system of gender relations through the reciprocal processes of domination and negotiation. It is also suggested that all individuals have some assets and resources that enable them to cooperate with or resist existing social conditions. These resources, however, are not always equal, and individuals have differential power bases. Control and coercion within gender relations is often through systems of control based on hegemonic masculinity. However, there will also be multiple realities, and negotiated boundaries and power differentials among women and men and between women and men.

This type of gender framework highlights three important aspects of gender relations: the actions involved in the gender process, the structural elements of social situations, and the power relations within social situations. Gender can be seen as both a process, as in “gendering” or “doing gender”, as well as a structure, as in institutionalized social relationships that organize and signify power (Lorber, 1994).

Some researchers in the outdoor field (Humberstone, 1990, 2000; Henderson, Winn et al., 1996; Monsour, 1998; Pohl, Borrie, & Patterson, 2000) have attempted to deconstruct gender and gender stereotyping by providing contextual analyses of gender and how it impacts the experiences of individuals and groups within our programmes. If we hope to understand the processes within our programmes, and not simply to quantify the same old outcomes over and over, we need to think about different ways of conducting research and using different paradigms.

With respect to gender, we need to think more critically about its construction. How is gender being constructed within and through our programmes and who benefits and who loses from these constructions? Gender is not an individual attribute or a categorical variable. It is a process that needs a more thoughtful and theoretically grounded analysis, not just within the realm of research but also within the way we practice.

Stories From the Field – Part 2: Mary

When I was first asked to participate on the panel, “Gender and the Outdoors: An International Conversation” at the International Outdoor Recreation and Education Conference, I thought to myself, what a great idea! – a panel of women who will come together to discuss the issue of gender.

When Kath Pinch, Marg Cosgriff, and Annie Dignan and I first met, there was an immediate connection – the kind of connection that grows out of many years of experience working within the field of outdoor and experiential education and as women, working from a marginalized position within that field. Each of us told our stories, in brief, during that first meeting and much of what we each said and discussed resonated amongst the group. The central themes that arose included:

- feeling marginalized for being a feminist and for speaking out both within the classroom and “in the field”;
- being marginalized for talking about power and not only gender but the other “isms”;
- the hegemonic understanding that good technical skills was a male thing while interpersonal skills was a female (or “girl” thing);
- the issue of motherhood and outdoor education;
- the idea that gender is not necessarily a “women thing;”
- the idea that women need a space because of the hegemonic inequality that has created and perpetuated those spaces for men;
- everyone is implicated, including those of us presenting on the panel – we have all grown up gendered and fall into certain habits/roles based on that;
- “thinking archaeologically” – what has really changed when the topic of gender and the outdoors is being discussed?
- language = PC (politically correct)...change in language with no change in actions, values, beliefs is not okay; and
- currently our students (particularly the women) believe and feel and attest that gender is no longer an issue – women have had that conversation and gender differences no longer exist/are not relevant for the “women of the new millennium” in the way that they were for “us” according to our student reports.

When I was asked to think about what is happening in my “Neck of the Woods” related to the topic of “gender and the outdoors,” I told a story of a recent experience with a graduate student. I am currently working at a new job as an Assistant Professor of Outdoor Recreation at Brock University. I was out on a trip with students and this graduate student, Ryan, a former student of mine was the co-leader. A Brock student made a comment about something being “gay” and although I heard the comment, I did not respond to this student in any way and simply proceeded with the rock-climbing lesson that was being taught.

When we returned to campus, Ryan confronted me asking me why I had not confronted the student and my rather weak response to him was that I was worried about being marginalized by the students. I told him that I wanted to ensure that I would fit in and once comfortable would begin to challenge some of the hegemony and marginalization that was happening – not just related to issues of sexuality but issues related to gender and the others so-called “isms.” Ryan strongly advised me to “weigh in” as soon as those occurrences came up, reminding me of the teaching and learning that had happened for him and for his peers when I did that for them. I thanked him for a lesson learned.

As I was planning for this session, I thought about that story and told that story as my opening narrative regarding what was happening in “My Neck of the Woods.” For me, it is a telling example of many of the topics that are listed above.

Hearing the stories of the other women on this panel and recognizing the relevance for all of us related to the above central themes, our panel discussion became centred around one central critical query: “What has changed?”

Questions to Ponder

The sub queries that we posited to the people who attended the panel, included:

- What is happening in your “Neck of the Woods” related to the topic of “Gender and the Outdoors?”
- What resonates with you and for you in relation to the stories just told?
- How can we shape/reshape our theory and practice in relation to what we just heard/have been discussing?

We leave you with these questions and hope the practitioners and researchers in our field may soon answer Bell’s long ago challenge to change the dialog on the nature of gender and associated issues within outdoor education and recreation. It seems way beyond time!

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