

## Feminist Theory and Outdoor Leadership

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### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on feminist theory and its application to outdoor leadership. In it, we challenge popular conceptions and misconceptions about feminism (or more correctly, *feminisms*) and aim to develop a basic understanding of feminist theory. We begin by providing some historical background to feminism before outlining some broad feminist perspectives, namely: liberal, radical, socialist, and post-structural feminism. As we work through these different feminist perspectives we show how each can be used to inform an analysis of gender in relation to outdoor instructor qualification schemes and outdoor leadership.

### **First, Second and Third Wave Feminism**

Popular conceptions of feminism and feminists invoke an image of groups of strident women with little sense of humour (they just don't get sexist jokes), agitating for power, and ill-disposed to men. At best, feminists pose a threat to the status quo and at worst they seek to overthrow traditional gender roles, which can lead to the breakdown of society. Indeed, this was exactly how David Lloyd George's coalition government viewed the *first wave feminists* -- the Suffragettes who demanded the vote in the early twentieth century. Having secured the vote and accrued some rights to property and divorce, *second wave feminism* emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the general Civil Rights movement demanding, among other things, equal pay for work of equal value. Second wave feminism challenged men's privileged position in the public sphere of life (civil society and the work place) and women's under-valued position in the private sphere of life (the home and family).

The apparent strength of second wave feminism was its coalescence around womanhood. However, this had become a source of weakness by the 1990s. Powerful critiques by black feminists challenged the assumption that women's experiences were sufficiently similar to warrant a single approach to tackle gender inequality. They pointed out that for some women, racism acts as a more powerful source of oppression than sexism. In response to a growing realization that women's experiences are multiple rather than singular, *third wave feminism* emerged and recognized the diversity of women's experiences.

Although there have been different waves of feminism and contrasting theoretical approaches, a commonality in feminist research is an attempt to enhance understanding of women's lives and challenge gender inequality. In this chapter, we explore questions about gender in relation to outdoor leadership, and consider the solutions different feminist perspectives offer to enhance women's experiences of outdoor leadership schemes.

### ***Liberal Feminism***

A key concern for liberal feminists is the belief that women should have equal rights with men. Liberal feminists believe that gender differences are not rooted in biology, and that men and women are more similar than different. All individuals, therefore, should have equal status under the law and the same opportunities in education and work. A key concept for liberal feminists is *equality of opportunity* and the recognition of individual talent. The liberal principle behind equal opportunities is therefore to remove collective and discriminatory barriers that prevent, in work, the 'best person' being appointed to jobs. Key liberal feminists advocating women's rights have been Mary Wollstonecraft (18<sup>th</sup> Century), Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem (20<sup>th</sup> Century).

Liberal feminists frequently cite evidence of inequalities by referring to the number of men and women in different occupational roles. For example, male employees are most likely to be working as managers and senior officials, and least likely to be working in administrative and secretarial, sales and customer services and personal services occupations. The opposite is true for women (ONS, 2009). In sport, women make up only 22% of board members of governing body associations and are highly under-represented in the senior administrator positions (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, 2012). Although very little data is available about the number of women in outdoor leadership roles, what data does exist suggests that women are under-represented compared to men as outdoor instructors, particularly at the highest levels (Sharp, 2001). Examination of the 2012 members list of the British Mountain Guides also shows that out of approximately 190 mountain guides, only seven (<4%) are women.

For liberal feminists, inequalities between men and women arise through processes such as gendered socialization and the gendered division of labour, which favour men. Gendered socialization refers to the way in which boys and girls learn social norms and expectations according to their sex and hence learn their gender identities. This occurs through both formal and informal processes, via key socializing agents such as the family,

peers and teachers, and institutions such as the home, school and work. Gender socialization begins very early on in life and is typically based on and reinforces stereotypical thinking. For example, girls are more often directed by parents towards playing passively with dolls, whereas boys are taught to play with cars or guns, while being active and in charge. Learning that there are differential interests by sex can be reinforced through gender stereotypical images in books or differentiating tasks at school. Later on, peer pressure and the activities of different friendship groups often move girls away from any engagement in physical activity and sport. At home, girls may be more encouraged to play indoors or near the house, while boys may be more likely to be encouraged to play outdoors in rough and tumble activities. What is evident is that from early to middle childhood, boys spend more time in active play outdoors in their leisure time, and girls spend more time indoors (Cherney & London, 2006). The implication for outdoor leadership is that girls and young women experience fewer opportunities to develop skills and confidence in outdoor environments prior to becoming an outdoor leader. Unintentionally, this also means women are less likely to pursue careers as outdoor leaders.

The gendered division of labour describes the extent to which women and men do different types of work and the way in which 'women's work' is devalued. For example, in developed countries, men are more likely to be engaged in physical, technical or senior professional work, while women are more likely to be engaged in domestic or caring work. In relation to outdoor leadership, the gendered division of labour would refer to women outdoor leaders being more likely to facilitate social skills than be engaged in technically-focused work, or women leaders being more likely to work with younger and less experienced clients. While there is little data as to whether this happens in outdoor leadership, research about women's experiences as sports coaches indicates that they perceive themselves as less likely to coach male performers or performers at the highest levels and more likely than male coaches to coach children or novice performers (West, Green, Brackenridge, & Woodward, 2001). Liberal feminists also note that women are also more likely to experience the 'glass ceiling effect' in their careers, whereby they are restricted from reaching the top occupational positions by hidden discriminatory practices. Again, little research exists in respect to outdoor leadership, but West et al. (2001) found that women sports coaches reported difficulty accessing high level sports coaching roles, citing closed social networks as one reason.

Such practices may include gender stereotypical beliefs by managers or hiring practices that inadvertently disadvantage women. Discriminatory

practices may occur in the outdoors when higher level outdoor managers perceive women leaders as more suitable for particular roles than others, or where jobs arise through 'old boys' networks -- informal male social networks to which women have less access. Indeed, Loeffler (1995), writing from North America, cited the exclusion of women from these networks as a key barrier to women's progression in outdoor leadership. The lack of role models for women in higher outdoor leadership positions may also lead women to believe that these roles are not achievable for them.

For liberal feminists, equality is sought through recourse to the law and through lobbying. Specific liberal feminist actions include the promotion of non-sexist education and non-sexist media representation. Two important pieces of legislation in the UK addressing discriminatory practices have been the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Both of these have now been subsumed by the Equality Act (2010) and have made a considerable difference to women's achievements in society and in the outdoors. Triumphant women's successes and raising awareness of women's contributions in society and the outdoors has also accelerated the drive toward gender equality. Typical strategies to encourage the number of women outdoor leaders from this perspective have included raising women's visibility through successful role models, challenging stereotypes about women's lack of physical or technical competence, and enhancing women's opportunities to acquire the necessary skills (Saunders & Sharp, 2002; Warren & Loeffler, 2006).

Liberal feminists would advocate visible female instructors or co-instructors on training and assessment courses, with women taking an equal part with men in such activities as leadership decision-making, unloading the minibus, and mentoring participants. Women may also benefit from additional opportunities to support their technical skill development and confidence in areas such as map-reading. This might include active strategies to encourage women to participate in skill development courses. This latter point reflects liberal feminist calls for women to be offered increased or different opportunities where necessary, in order to support their involvement and progression. Such strategies can play a role in enhancing women's involvement in outdoor instruction and leadership, and can be seen in many outdoor organizations' or governing body equal opportunities literature, policies and strategies. For example, the UK Royal Yachting Association (RYA) Equality Action Plan 2009-13 includes investigating barriers to women undertaking RYA coaching courses and targeting women with positive interventions.

However, liberal feminist approaches have been criticized for the way they position women as the problem who need help, rather than challenge the structures which can disadvantage women in the first instance. That is, this perspective does not involve any critique of the content or structure of outdoor qualification or progression systems themselves, the ways in which 'good leadership' is defined, or that most outdoor assessors and designers of outdoor qualification systems at the higher levels are male. The weakness of liberal feminism is therefore that it assumes legislation and formal frameworks will guarantee opportunities for women, and that equal access to opportunities will lead to equal outcomes in terms of progression in jobs or qualifications. It ignores the capacity of those with a vested interest in retaining the status quo to resist change.

### ***Radical Feminism***

While liberal feminism focuses on addressing the causes of women's equality in public life, radical feminism begins by tackling women's position in the home, or the private sphere of life. Radical feminists argue that the cause of a woman's unequal position in society is male control over her body, particularly with respect to her sexuality as the bearer of children, but also in terms of her physical appearance.

For radical feminists, a key concept in understanding gender inequality is that of *patriarchy*. Patriarchy, or literally, 'rule of the father' initially referred to the power of the male head of the household over females and younger males, but is now used more broadly within feminist work to describe a societal-wide system of gender social power relations, where men dominate women. Radical feminists accept biological differences between men and women, and indeed, some celebrate such differences by emphasizing women's closeness to nature and relationships, due to their involvement in reproduction. Feminists such as Adrienne Rich (1977), for example, advocated the position that the process of motherhood allowed women to see the world in a different, more connected way than men.

Explanations for women's subordination from a radical feminist view are based either on male biology – their natural aggression which they use to dominate women – or the meaning attached to biological differences, such as the ways in which women's experiences or strengths or roles have been de-valued. For example, radical feminism would highlight differences between men and women outdoor leaders in the possession and valuation of technical 'hard' skills versus inter-personal 'soft' skills. One research study with outdoor instructors has shown that men express greater

confidence about their technical ability and value it more highly than women (Sharp, 2001). Conversely, women tend to value knowledge-based activities such as planning and preparation. Such reported differences reflect and reinforce radical feminist essentialist arguments about supposed natural differences between men and women. In terms of outdoor leadership, radical feminist approaches would critique 'male' models of outdoor leadership that encourage physicality, authoritarianism, competitiveness or aggression, and replace them with more 'female' approaches or styles that emphasize co-operation, consensus and communication.

Radical feminists would also highlight the use of sexist and sexualized language by outdoor leaders, which serves to reinforce male superiority. For example, the use of the term 'shuttle bunny' is taken from the corseted waitresses the 'Playboy Bunnies', and used to refer to the person in the group (traditionally female) who is not kayaking the river, but there to drive those who are (traditionally male) to the top of the river and then collect them at the bottom. Moreover, the imperative for women to look good (for men) exists even in the outdoors (Haluzá-Delay & Dymont, 2003; McDermott, 2004). This involves maintaining a heterosexual personal appearance, perhaps by paying particular attention to hair, dress or accessories, or else risking being labeled 'lesbian' (Loeffler, 1995).

Women's competence can also be undermined by male chauvinism on outdoor courses. For example, Allin (2000) drew from the experiences of some women in her study who explained how on a predominantly male instructor course, a man's cry of 'do you really think you can handle a force five' or 'phew it's hairy out there, are you sure you want to be going out?' can undermine women's confidence despite their ability (p. 59). The existence of both sexualized and chauvinistic behavior acts as a potential distraction from women's roles as outdoor practitioners, while undermining their perceived status among male outdoor leaders who may judge their sexuality before their competence.

The radicalism in radical feminism lies in the solution offered to address the male-dominated and 'masculine' approach to outdoor leadership and instruction, which is for women to claim a women-only space and free themselves from patriarchal power (male oppression). Such views found expression in the 1970s in particular through women-only communes. In the outdoors, Henderson (1996) identifies how this approach is evident in the North American group *Woodswomen, Inc.*, which applies a 'feminist transformational leadership' model to their work. She draws from Mitten

(1992, p. 58) to show how this group emphasizes the provision of empowering outdoor experiences through principles such as being supportive, creating an emotionally and physically safe space for women, traveling in the wilderness for its own sake, and viewing leadership as a relationship and not a personality type.

Broader support for separatism amongst outdoor leaders is less equivocal. Survey responses from a sample of 258 male and female instructors indicated a strong preference for maintaining the existing content of courses. However, there was some support for the provision of women-only courses in the early stages of skill development and leadership training, to develop confidence (Saunders & Sharp, 2002). Other studies have also demonstrated the potential value of women-only training courses to develop technical skills and build confidence in a supportive atmosphere (Hornibrook, Brinkert, Parry, Seimens, Mitten, & Priest, 1997; McDermott, 2004; Warren, 1996). UK outdoor governing bodies such as the British Canoe Union have introduced with some success women-only courses as one of their strategies to increase women's participation and entry to outdoor qualifications. Saunders and Sharp (2002), however, warn that women-only courses may be viewed by some as being of a lower standard and thus attract less qualified applicants. That such a thought would occur to both men and women in itself reflects gendered assumptions about the inferiority of women's abilities in relation to those of men. It also supports liberal feminist views of the neutrality of the 'standard' by which male and female leaders are judged. Radical feminists would challenge this neutrality. For example, they would question the need for some of the physical endurance elements within some higher level outdoor qualification schemes. They would highlight an overemphasis on physicality as an exclusionary strategy aimed at reinforcing male physical dominance and their 'natural' position as leaders.

Critics of radical feminism assert that the concept of patriarchy is too ill-defined to provide a satisfactory explanation for gender inequality. That is, the notion of patriarchy, or 'male rule', is a universal one that implies that all men dominate all women. This does not account for the different experiences of women or indeed of men. Moreover, radical feminism views men and women as essentially different (innately and inherently) and consequently overlooks the shared experiences of men and women, and their capacity to behave in similar ways. This essentialism ignores the very many differences that exist between women, such as social class, race, sexual orientation, and disability.

### ***Socialist Feminism***

Socialist feminists argue that women's oppression is a consequence of both patriarchy and capitalism. That is, they acknowledge the existence of patriarchal relations, but suggest that patriarchy alone is insufficient to explain women's unequal position in society and that an analysis of capitalism to understand women's unequal position is needed. The most well-known theorist associated with the concept of capitalism is Karl Marx. As we saw in Chapter 3, for Marx, capitalism is an economic and social system where the means of producing and distributing goods is owned by a minority (employers) and the majority (workers) labour for a wage paid by employers. By failing to pass on the full value of workers' labour, employers profit from (and exploit, Marx would argue) the majority for personal gain.

When applying a Marxist analysis to the home setting, socialist feminists propose that women are engaged in reproductive labour, which means that their work has no exchange value. Women therefore labour for free in the home and for the family. This arrangement benefits men and enables them to participate in productive labour, as well as leisure activities (Thompson, 1999). In terms of understanding outdoor leadership schemes and progression, it can be argued that women's work in the home makes it more difficult for them to afford either the money or the time to engage in instructor courses or develop outdoor expertise, particularly as most schemes require recorded evidence of leadership and personal experience as a pre-requisite for entry.

While the pattern of women's and men's employment is changing, even when women are at work, evidence suggests that women are still responsible for the majority of childcare and domestic chores. Moreover, women tend to fit leisure around child-care responsibilities and often feel guilty about taking time 'for themselves' (Deem, 1986; Allin, 2003). Allin's study also showed that many women following careers in the outdoors found themselves becoming de-skilled, as it was difficult to continue to develop outdoor qualifications and skills due to family responsibilities, particularly when their children were young. Long and unsociable hours for work or qualification courses further exacerbate the issue. For example, working at an outdoor centre can require evening and weekend work, plus extended periods of time away on expeditions. For women with children, there are considerable practical and financial issues associated with arranging childcare for such erratic hours. Without a very strong social network or financial background, finding additional time and resources to



take part in qualification courses or consolidate personal outdoor skills can be very difficult. This situation supports both patriarchy and capitalism at the expense of gender equality in both the home and the workplace. Solutions to these circumstances involve addressing and changing women's financial and material conditions, most notably in relation to childcare.

Despite efforts to construct a more nuanced analysis of patriarchy that considers social class differences (Walby, 1990), socialist feminism's reliance on the ill-defined concept of patriarchy is one of its key weaknesses. Its failure to acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences beyond those of social class is a second. Finally, a third criticism of socialist feminism is that in countries which embrace(d) socialism, there is little to suggest that women enjoyed a more equal position than men.

### ***Post-structural Feminism***

The post-structuralist project led to a radical re-interpretation of social life, and challenges, for example, the binary divides of male and female, black and white, gay and straight. In contrast to feminist approaches that viewed women as a largely homogenous group, differentiated only by social class, post-structuralist feminism contests notions of what it means to be female by arguing that there is no such person as a 'typical woman'. Instead, post-structural approaches recognize both the diversity of women's experiences and the multiple factors contributing to gender inequality in society.

Central to post-structuralist analysis is its focus on language and the deconstruction of the subject. That is, the multiplicity of individual identities or subject positions. For feminist post-structuralists, this involves revealing how the ways in which we use language reflect historical and cultural narratives or meanings, and how these are gendered. A key concept in post-structural analysis is that of *discourse*.

Much feminist post-structural work draws on the work of Michael Foucault and his theories of discourse and the self (1979; 1981) (See Chapter 9). Foucault argued in *A History of Sexuality* (1981) that 'sex' is not an unequivocal or fixed essence, but is produced, or made intelligible, by complex and historical figurative representations of appropriate and deviant sexuality. That is, what makes for acceptable or 'deviant' sex, and thus regulates individual thought and behaviour, is constructed through the 19<sup>th</sup> century texts, images, and ways of talking about sex. These become normalized discourses, or sets of beliefs and understandings

reinforced daily in our language practices, and frame the way we understand the world (Weedon, 2004). It is the dominant discourses of femininity (aligned with nature and passivity), which arose in what is known as the Enlightenment Project beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued through medico-scientific discourses and practices during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, that frame and regulate what it means to be a woman. It is these dominant discourses which continue to position women as passive and men as active. Hence the dominant discourses of femininity and leadership undermine women's credence as 'good leaders'.

Once discourses are taken-for-granted, it is difficult to think, or indeed act, outside this network of meaning. Moreover, for Foucault (1979), discourse is related to power, in that who controls the dominant discourse can determine who has authority and who does not, who is heard and who is not. For Foucault, power is not resident in any individual, male or female, but rather is all-pervasive and evident in what he terms 'regimes of truth' -- the dominant types of discourses that are accepted and reinforced through education, media and politics. In the outdoors, it is typically outdoor leaders, managers, directors of outdoor centres, and those running outdoor courses -- predominantly men -- who are those 'speaking' about outdoor leadership. They are effectively creating and reinforcing the discourses surrounding qualifications and outdoor leadership, thus determining what is accepted and valued.

Post-structural feminists often draw on the work of Foucault (1981) to explain how dominant forms of masculinity and femininity are constituted historically and culturally, and consequently serve to organize our thought and action. They also draw attention to discourses that intersect with gender, such as those associated with race or class. In doing so, they seek to expose and deconstruct binary constructions of gender and highlight the ways in which some (usually male and white) discourses are privileged over others. For example, the history of outdoor education highlights the dominance of military training and physicality in leadership development practices that emerged from the public schools in the UK. Closer analysis reveals the existence of alternative discourses in outdoor education, associated with, for example, personal and social development, environmental awareness, and egalitarianism in such movements as the Woodcraft Folk. These discourses would perhaps lead to more women outdoor leaders, as they do not contradict notions of femininity. It is arguable that since these alternative discourses have historically been marginalized and less visible, they have been less popular. Such discourses need to be promoted and made more desirable for students if the

hegemonic (dominant) discourses and cultures are to be challenged (Humberstone, 2000).

The availability of alternative discourses enables women to position and re-position themselves at any one time within multiple discourses. For example, a female leader can draw on a particular discourse of education and position herself legitimately within it as outdoor educator or facilitator. An ongoing problem, however, is that while there are multiple discourses, they are often conflicting or contradictory for women. For example, a woman can position herself as a physically strong mountain guide and adventurer, but these discourses conflict with dominant discourses of femininity or of motherhood. As such, women are constantly negotiating their subject positions, with different ones being significant at different times (Allin, 2003). Such conflicting discourses in the outdoors were most noticeable in the case of Alison Hargreaves, who lost her life while descending the summit of K2, but was condemned as an 'unfit' mother for leaving her two children. Donnelly (2004) describes how media attention focused on the loss of a mother to two small children with suggestions that she was 'irresponsible' in her actions. By comparison, media accounts of expectant father and mountain guide Rob Hall, lauded his heroism for staying with an incapacitated client on Everest, in the knowledge that he would die if he did not leave the client and descend the mountain.

Theoretically, the focus on language and discourse can make it difficult to analyze the realities of women's lived and embodied experiences in an outdoor profession. Hence some feminist writers have retained attention on the material body, but drawn on post-structuralism to show how women's experiences of their bodies differ due to gendered discourses. Barrett (2005), for example, nicely uses the example of solo portaging a canoe to show how, for a woman, gendered discourses of physicality position her as a 'superwoman', but for a man to portage solo is only what is expected. Dominant gendered discourses, of course, also position men in different ways. For example, for a man on an instructor course, asking for help in decision-making or with carrying his physical load may position him as a weak leader and threaten his masculinity.

For post-structural feminists, then, the focus is on a celebration of differences between women rather than women as a group. In particular, they emphasize the way women are positioned, or position themselves, within multiple identity discourses which are less fixed and more fluid. This approach is consistent with Black feminist theory, which stresses the significance of racism and racist discourses (among other factors) in

constructing black women's experiences. A potential problem to this perspective, however, is that it risks losing the commonality between women, and thus reduces their power to effect actual change to women's lives.

## **Conclusion**

What we have tried to show in this chapter is that feminism is not a single entity, but rather that there are multiple feminist theories and perspectives. This chapter has dealt with some of the main ones, but it should be recognized that we have only really scratched the surface of feminist theory and research. While feminism has a common interest in understanding women's lives and addressing gender inequality, each feminist theory views the issue of gender and gender inequality in society differently. In applying each to outdoor leadership qualification systems and women's progression within them, it can be seen that each perspective has different explanations and solutions.

Liberal feminism is often seen as 'common sense' and is adopted by men and women uncritically, as it values individualism, minimizes disturbance to the status quo, and holds up the ideal of 'the best person for the job'. Radical feminism, on the other hand, is particularly salient in terms of highlighting male power in issues of physicality and in exposing how seemingly innocuous concepts and structures may serve to reinforce male superiority in outdoor qualification systems, while undermining women's 'natural' strengths. Socialist feminists add to the debate through an analysis of patriarchy and capitalism, by explaining how financial and domestic inequalities through women's free labour in the home can disadvantage women's progression through qualification systems. Finally, post-structural feminism has value in uncovering the dominant and emerging discourses of gender, outdoor education and leadership, and in recognizing diversity and providing scope for resistance and challenge.

Each perspective, of course, has its weaknesses. Liberal feminism is perhaps a little naive, radical feminism and socialist feminism over-rely on the often criticized concept of patriarchy, while post-structuralist feminism, with its main focus on language and discourse, negates actual embodied practices and experiences. The beauty of *feminisms*, however, is that they are not static; their theories are constantly being challenged and developed.

## **So what does this mean for you?**

We hope this chapter has caused you to reflect on your beliefs about feminism, feminist theory, and its contribution to understanding the

gendered dynamics of outdoor leadership. On a practical level, it may lead you to question the extent to which the discourses and practices surrounding outdoor leadership are truly gender neutral. This might involve you reflecting on your personal experiences of the outdoors, and examining the processes involved in qualifying as an outdoor leader. We also hope that knowledge of feminist perspectives will encourage you to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about masculinity and femininity in your personal professional practice, and strive to take steps towards equality and fairness.

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