

Mirrored Tensions: A Mother–Daughter Introspection on Gendered Experiences in Outdoor Recreation

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Abstract

This autoethnographic essay explores the narratives of a mother (Teresa) and daughter (Stephanie) as active participants in the field of outdoor recreation. The discussion in this chapter seeks to unpack our understandings of hegemonic masculinity, gender performativity and the *superwoman* complex, and the impact of supportive males in outdoor recreation environments. Through a deconstruction of shared experiences consistent through two generations, our essay politicizes some of the recurring themes that have shaped our gendered identities and experiences as women in the field.

Keywords: outdoor recreation, gender performativity, mother and daughter, hegemonic masculinity, superwoman, supportive males, privilege

Introduction

Active participation in outdoor recreation has prompted us to question why and how our experiences in the field have been shaped by the dominant discourse of hegemonic masculinity, and our modes of resistance to it. Together, we examined mother (Teresa)/daughter (Stephanie) narratives and subsequently deconstructed the recurring themes in our experiences. Frustrated by the extent to which our experiences mirrored each other, despite 30 years of progress, this chapter focuses on our lived experiences with the masculinity that characterizes outdoor recreation (Humberstone, 2000; Warren, 1996), the internalized pressure to *beat the boys* and become *superwoman* whilst participating in the

field (Allin, 2000; Hoffert, 2015; Newbery, 2003), and the recognized importance of supportive males who resist dominant ideologies of gender to move the field towards social justice.

This autoethnographic essay presents a critical reflection of Teresa and Stephanie's experiences in outdoor recreation, and seeks to politicize dominant themes that shaped their gendered identities. Working in concert with a third author (Janice), we adopted a feminist lens to shine light on the social construction of gender in relation to the field and our experiences within it (Butler, 1993). Although our experiences often *mirror* each other, we do not assume that similar narratives are consistent across all realms of participation in outdoor environments—we recognize that our social locations deeply shape our perceptions and lived experiences. We thus acknowledge the complexity of the field of outdoor recreation for women and *others*, and we approach it as a realm that requires transformation from a masculinist construction to an inclusive terrain that acknowledges and celebrates diversity in experiences, abilities, bodies, identities, and desires.

Setting the scene

Teresa

I was born in Montreal, Quebec, a second-generation Canadian of Polish descent from a white, working-class family. Exposed to car camping from a very young age, being involved in tennis, and playing outdoors with friends in our urban

Stephanie

I was born in Thunder Bay, Ontario, into a white, middle-class family with a passion for the outdoors. From nearly the day that I was carried through the hospital doors, my parents fostered opportunities for me to explore the outdoors. From pushing the limits of my rubber

neighbourhood for hours at a time defined my childhood outdoor recreation experiences.

As a privileged, thin, athletic teenager and young adult, I vehemently resisted the dominant culture's inscriptions of femininity, namely *weakness*, by seeking a strong, athletic body to prove that I was as good as, or even better than, the boys. This gender identity was established during my young adolescent years as a competitive tennis player. I had strong female role models, Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova, to emulate, both of whom were aggressive on the court and fiercely competitive. These displays of "expected sporting masculinity" (Wellard, 2016, p. 3) were, however, juxtaposed with tennis dresses and frilly panties of the times, to keep us looking feminine—another site of resistance for me. Yet, beneath this athletic self-confidence lay my body insecurities, and as a result, I also embraced "technologies of the self," primarily self-

boots whilst fishing in backyard puddles, to raft guiding in Jasper, Alberta, learning through challenge in outdoor environments played an integral role in shaping my childhood and early-adult experiences.

Throughout middle and early high school years especially, I encountered significant pressure to conform to stereotypical social expectations of femininity that are shaped by the dominant discourse (Butler, 1993, 1999; Spade & Valentine, 2014): tight clothing, makeup, long straight hair, passivity, weekends spent at the mall, and so on. Driven by the desire to fit in, I performed many of these normative practices despite my associated discomfort. Through sport, I began to challenge the gender policing/regulation (Preston, 2016) to which I was subjected. Although women's volleyball is inherently sexualized through dress, I connected with the sport as an opportunity to assert strength and confidence.

surveillance (Foucault, 1988, p. 18), to maintain thinness.

Our approach

We approached our introspective work from a feminist perspective, using a collaborative autoethnographic approach (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012; Geist-Martin, et al., 2010). We acknowledge that introspection and reflection without guidance can, as Béatrice Boufoy-Bastick (2004) cogently articulates, “result in nothing more than pointless self-absorbing introspective ‘navel gazing,’ excessive subjectivity and self-delusion” (para. 3). We endeavoured to be critically self-reflexive of our “sociopolitical interactivity” (Spry, 2001, p. 713) and thus subjected our ideas to questioning from ourselves, co-authors, and significant others. We embraced the messiness of this iterative process and honoured the time it took.

Independent of each other, we (Stephanie and Teresa) began writing our personal narratives. Then, through sharing our stories with co-authors and significant others, we were able to highlight recurring themes and question our understandings and attachment of personal meaning to our experiences. In essence, we “held up mirrors to each other in communal self-interrogation,” willing to be “vulnerable and open” with each other, and “explored our subjectivity in the company of one another” (Chang et al., 2012, p. 26, 28). Doing so encouraged us to explore our ideas in more depth, which helped flesh out central themes across our stories and locate the political within our personal experiences. Overwhelmed by the complexity and multitude of intersecting identities and social forces (Thornton Dill & Kohlman, 2012), it was only after extensive discussion and questioning that we were able to begin to understand the depth and implications of our experiences in outdoor recreation.

A discussion of central themes

Hegemonic masculinity in the field

Teresa

In my later teen years, I was introduced to hiking and rock climbing, and subsequently took up canoeing, kayaking, and backcountry skiing. I was quickly drawn to outdoor recreation as it afforded more opportunities to be outdoors, connected with nature; yet, hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) continued to rear its head. As a young assistant on a college co-ed hiking trip, and not much older than the students, I was asked by the male instructor to accompany a girl who was experiencing great difficulty on the trip back to the outdoor centre, and to then navigate to a rendezvous point with a map and compass. Two boys were sent with me. I remember questioning to myself: “Why boys, and why these two?” as I found them particularly annoying with their exaggerated displays of physical prowess. I felt compelled to show them

Stephanie

With family and close friends, outdoor recreation represented an environment in which I felt a sense of emotional safety and freedom to step outside of traditional gender stereotypes and associated expectations (Hoffert, 2015). Outside of these close-knit groups, however, gendered social expectations were strong, and I accepted and took on the notion that being a *true* competent outdoor recreationist was synonymous with being perceived and accepted as *one of the boys*: fulfilling the ideals defined by hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Junior to my white-water paddling peers, for example, I was determined not to show how I struggled to carry my 23-kilogram solo canoe down the portage, slung on one aching shoulder, as I hurried after the men who carried much lighter kayaks. Like the image they emulated,

otherwise, and proceeded to walk at a pace that taxed their fitness level, to demonstrate that women are highly capable.

On personal outdoor trips, I was often the only female participant—just *me and the boys* out *conquering nature*. In the 1980s there were fewer women participating in outdoor recreation and even fewer female role models to emulate. I generally felt accepted by the dominant male group until, on one occasion, when co-planning a canoe trip with them, one of the participants suggested it be *a boys' trip*. It was then that I began to long for an all-women's outdoor trip. I had come to understand that my desire to be with women in the outdoors was, in part, a result of my resentment to have to defend my rightful place in outdoor recreation (Hoffert, 2015).

I strived to be just as strong and able (Newbery, 2003; Warren, 1996). I was unaware of the social forces to which I was set against, and did not see these experiences as problematic until I began analysing them through a feminist lens in university.

Despite my growing awareness and understanding of the norms shaped by hegemonic masculine relations, resisting them continued to be a struggle for me in many social settings. For example, whilst beginning a day of climbing with a group of males I had never climbed with before, I found that I was very shy to participate in ways that I thought would reveal my *lesser* abilities in comparison to theirs. Although I wanted to push my abilities on the rock, I remained passive, waiting instead to be invited to become more involved. Despite my awareness of and desire to resist traditional gendered scripts, my experiences in the field continued to be heavily shaped by seemingly unfulfillable social expectations defined by hegemonic masculinity.

The field of outdoor recreation is a stereotypically masculine terrain, fuelled in the popular imagination by images of men engaging in risky, adrenaline-fuelled pursuits in which they test their bodies to the limits whilst *conquering* nature. Strength, ability, and skill are connected to this image, contributing to the construction of the outdoors as a space for men to perform an idealized, hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1990; Humberstone, 2000; McNeil, Harris, & Fondren, 2012; Messner, 2002). Through this portrayal, wilderness becomes a site for men to assert a rugged form of individualism, testing themselves against the elements. As William Cronon (1996) writes, “In the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity” (p. 78).

Where, then, does this leave women? Whilst boys and men are encouraged to display their bodies in forceful and skilled ways through sport and physical recreation, girls and women get the message that they should limit their strengths and enthusiasm, retaining a feminine, heterosexual presentation whilst participating in sports deemed *acceptable* for their bodies (Ezzel, 2009). Following this construction, outdoor recreation becomes a complex space for women to negotiate, as Teresa and Stephanie’s narratives attest. Women may experience pressure to maintain a heterosexualized feminine presentation, or if they reject this cultural script, a pressure to *step back in line* to their expected gender role. Ultimately, through the hetero-masculine construction of the field, women who participate in it are seen as transgressing against the dominant order.

McNeil et al. (2012) explain that one of the ways the hegemonic masculinity of the field is evidenced is through a distorted presentation of women in advertising that portrays outdoor pursuits. Their analysis of outdoor magazine advertisements found that women are rarely depicted in such advertisements, but when they are, their physical accomplishments are

either downplayed or heralded as *rare* or *unique* accomplishments that may stand in threat to a woman's *feminine* identity. In this way, women are literally erased from the popular imagination of outdoor recreation, or they are presented as rare exceptions to the rule. An internalized need to be an *exception to the rule* is clear in the narratives above.

The *boys' club* of outdoor recreation is also evidenced through the persistent lack of gender parity in the field. In some contexts, women have been outright excluded from the field—Outward Bound, for example, was almost an exclusively male institution when it began in 1941, and deliberations were still taking place in the 1970s regarding the *crisis* of young women joining their ranks (Warren, 1996). Sarah Hoffert (2015) writes that today, women are still represented in “appallingly small numbers . . . as technical trip leaders, directors of outdoor programs in university settings, and directors of national organizations with outdoor emphasis” (p. 29), and women are also frequently left out of leadership literature (Henderson, 1996). Despite the fact women are active participants across all outdoor activities, the idea that men are *natural leaders* and superior to women in terms of their physical abilities remains a hegemonic patriarchal ideology (Cousineau & Roth, 2012).

Women—including the authors of this paper—are drawn to outdoor recreation for various reasons. The benefits to their participation are numerous, including maintaining a connection to nature, experiencing spirituality, gaining a feeling of empowerment, and improved mental, physical, and emotional health (Henderson, 1996; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004; Whittington, 2006). Despite limited role models and the gender-role stereotyping that positions outdoor recreation as a site for men to enact a hegemonic masculinity, women continue to participate in every recreational form of outdoor programming. Doing so, however, means they must negotiate competing ideas about outdoor adventure and/or their very identities, or push their bodies beyond levels of physical comfort to *prove* themselves worthy of participating in the

first place. As Michelle Wright and Tonia Gray (2013) note, “[Women] have experienced firsthand the ways that women in outdoor fields face stigmas . . . [and] must unflinchingly face any challenge, with fearless determination and a cup of ‘toughen-up’” (p. 12).

Beating the boys and negotiating the superwoman complex

Teresa

Stephanie

As a result of my experiences in sport, I continued to enact a “particular masculinized performance of gender” (Newbery, 2003, p. 211) in the outdoors. I felt a strong need to demonstrate my competence and strength to male participants. “If a guy can portage a canoe, so could I, [and] run the portage at the same time. If a guy can carry a heavy pack, I too could carry more than half my bodyweight” (Russell, Cameron, Socha, & McNinch, 2013, p. 29). I had to be stoic; to show signs of fatigue and pain would only highlight a lack of strength and reinforce assumptions of women’s weakness. I remember one time crying in silence from fatigue, out of male view, and questioning my ability (rather than the load I was carrying on my back:

Whilst pursuing more technical activities such as white-water canoeing and climbing, where groups are primarily dominated by men, I continue to feel as though I have to demonstrate that my competence, strength, and tenacity earn me the right (Hoffert, 2015) to, for example, stern a canoe with a male bow paddler. Before attending university, I was a raft guide in Jasper, Alberta, in a culture dominated by *macho* males. Driven by expectations of being able to overcome daily physical feats, one of which was as *simple* as guiding heavy rafts of six or more adults, work responsibilities pushed my body past its limits, which contributed to a long-term shoulder injury. Due to the macho culture that shaped the rafting industry, *going easy* and seeking help

alpine skis and boots, camping gear, for my injured body was frowned upon; to be clothing, and food, which exceeded 30 kg). a *real* raft guide, my body had to regularly This common behaviour came at a cost to sustain being pushed past its limits. my body.

In a discussion of women's involvement in outdoor programming, Sarah Hoffert (2015) writes that "one of the many challenges for women in outdoor leadership is the pressure of having to consistently prove their competency to male participants, partners, co-leaders, and employers in an attempt to defend their right to a presence in outdoor adventure" (p. 35). For many women, this pressure is internalized as a need to possess outstanding technical skills and reject traditional notions of femininity: to become, in effect, a *superwoman* (Allin, 2000; Hoffert, 2015; Warren, 1996). Karen Warren (1996) describes the superwoman thusly: "She can carry the heaviest pack with a smile on her face. She demonstrates complete command of her campstove, compass, and canoe. She is comfortable in the mountains and woods, confident in her unequalled proficiency" (p. 15). She is, effectively, the exception to the rule of gender norm socialization, defying expectations of a woman in the wilderness.

One of these expectations is exceptional physical strength and endurance, qualities that are heralded as some of the most valuable characteristics in the outdoor field, particularly amongst outdoor leaders (Newbery, 2003). Hypermasculinist individualism is encouraged through a field that reflects ideas about the normative participant as not only male, but also strong and able bodied. Whilst men are unduly privileged in the field, women and all *others*—those who are not able bodied, lean/athletic, cis-gendered, and heterosexual—are relegated to the domain of unfit bodies: bodies (and identities) that do not *fit in*.

Not surprising, the ongoing pressure for women to defy gender-role stereotypes and *beat the boys* is difficult physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. Karen Warren

(1996) notes that women who perform the superwoman role can temporarily relieve themselves of the conflicts inherent in being a woman in a masculine space, yet ultimately, being *exceptional* in this regard equates to holding themselves up to a highly taxing, and often unsustainable, standard (Warren, 2016; Wright & Gray, 2013). Women who do so maintain the masculine status quo of the field by enacting a masculine performance of gender, and may also be intimidating other female participants in the process. This positioning does not result in a transformation of gender inequities in the field, nor does it acknowledge the problems in the first place (Hoffert, 2015). Rather, it leaves the women who are pushing themselves beyond their limits in a compromised place, at a cost to their mental and physical health.

Michel Foucault (2006) argues that disciplinary power is imposed on individuals by institutions (e.g., government, state, school, and sport), and individuals comply and accept responsibility for their control by conforming to its directives, rules, norms, and values. Bodies become subjectified, and thus sites for conformity and hegemonic control. Teresa's and Stephanie's experiences of internalizing the need to push beyond their limits to conform to the understood *rules* of the field, demonstrate the way this power can operate on, and within, individuals' bodies and identities.

Resisting dominant ideologies of gender: Supportive males

Teresa

Stephanie

Whilst many men in outdoor recreation are focused on demonstrating their strength, physical prowess, toughness, and virility, I have also participated in outdoor

Although my outdoor recreation experiences have varied significantly between women-only and co-ed groups, they have, similarly, been drastically different with men

pursuits with “other” men, the “bearers of alternative masculinities” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846), who appear to resist normative, hegemonic forms of masculinity. With these men, I don’t feel compelled to prove my competence and be *one of the boys*. They are accepting of me, regardless of my skill level; they also openly acknowledge my ability even when greater than their own. They have been willing to follow and have encouraged me to lead; with them, I have experienced little in the way of competition and no pressure to perform physically. I was more able to let my guard down in their company. Such experiences have helped me to question my gender performance and, as a result, adopt a more *balanced* gender performance, one that also allows for expressions of femininity.

who take on alternative forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Whilst recreating exclusively with these particular men, I do not feel the need to prove my right to participate or strive to become *one of the boys* (Hoffert, 2015). These experiences have provided me with a stronger sense of emotional safety which has allowed me to further resist gendered norms, specifically the passivity that is too often expected from female bodies. For example, whilst joining a new group of climbers who were much more advanced than I was, I began the day as a timid follower. As I got to know the group, I discovered that they all took on alternative forms of masculinity; they were supportive and noncompetitive. As a result, I felt confident and comfortable, rather than in need of proving my worth as a climber.

Feminist contributions have made clear the distinction between sex (a biological category) and gender (a social construction) (Butler, 1993). Whilst the two are highly conflated in Western culture, inscribing masculinity on male bodies and femininity on female bodies, the understanding of gender as a fluid construct is liberatory, opening pathways for all sexes to enact individualized performances of gender in accordance with identity, rather than biology.

Despite strong pressures exerted on women and men to comply with gender norms, it is also possible for individuals to resist dominant, gendered ideologies. Teresa's and Stephanie's narratives reflect the ways that supportive males who are "bearers of alternative masculinities" can contribute to a transformation of the outdoor recreation field—and women's experiences within it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846).

The outdoor recreation field can provide a counterculture, a site where men may challenge hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity rather than reproducing it. Barbara Humberstone (1990, 2000), for example, suggests that some forms of outdoor education may offer males and females alike a place to practice transgressive gender behaviours, and that these programmes could provide for "a shift in the construction of gender identities and relations" (1990, p. 199). She further encourages male outdoor educators to "become agents in resisting or challenging dominant ideologies" (2000, p. 27). These possibilities extend beyond challenging the hyper-masculinity and male dominance that governs the field to equally challenging its heterosexism, ableism, racism, classism, size-based discrimination, and intersecting sociocultural forces and corresponding oppressions (see, for example, Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Russell et al., 2013; Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2003; Warren, 2016; Warren, Roberts, Breunig, & Antonio, 2014).

We derive renewed hope for change from the photo below of an outdoor educator and friend, Scott Read, playing dress-up with his young daughter, Jala, and crossing gender boundaries in dress. As an example of a supportive male who is resisting dominant ideologies of gender, Scott demonstrates the responsibility, as an educator, to foster an environment that challenges culturally imposed gender binaries and their associated meanings (Breunig & Rylander, 2016). Karen Warren (2016) writes that despite the fact that "men in the outdoors who resist dominant stereotypes are marginalized, expressions of alternative masculinities

that contradict the prevailing ethos . . . may help reconstruct the male-dominated nature of the outdoor experience” (p. 364). Through role models such as Scott, women and girls like Jala can experience and celebrate more fluid representations of masculinity and femininity in environments that are relevant to their lives. By validating diverse gender identities and expressions, socially just relations may result.



Figure 1: Scott Read with daughter Jala playing dress-up. Reprinted with permission.

Nudging the field forward: Concluding remarks

The process of reflecting on our experiences and writing narratives about them has been illuminating. The commonalities in Teresa and Stephanie’s narratives suggest to us that tensions in outdoor recreation have remained relatively consistent across a generation—that for us, and likely many others, the field has not changed considerably in the last 30 years. The masculine nature of the field and women’s constrained experiences within it is corroborated by other authors (e.g., Newbery, 2003; Warren, 2016), and the literature referenced in this chapter outlines ways that women are written out of the field or held up to unrealistic

expectations within it. Despite the recognition that there have been increases in girls' and women's participation in outdoor activities over the past decades (Warren, 2016), there is clearly much more work to be done.

Teresa

It is easy to call for change, but more difficult to engage oneself with it. Whilst the quote, "Change begins with the individual" is somewhat of a cliché, its importance cannot be overemphasized. I remember when I first became aware that I, as a health and physical educator, was a "functionary of the hegemony" (Fernandez-Balboa & Muros, 2006, p. 208), fostering notions of scientism and healthism. The resulting distress was the impetus for additional discoveries and more importantly change. For example, reading *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology* (Gard & Wright, 2005) and unpacking my thin privilege were defining moments that helped me explore, alongside my students, the dominant discourses of health, body, and obesity, amongst other forms of oppression towards developing a critical consciousness. It also transformed my

Stephanie

Enrolled in a postsecondary programme that focuses heavily on leadership, I have experienced a culture of awareness surrounding hegemony in outdoor recreation. However, there remains great potential for critical examinations of gendered messages and constructs within student experiences in the programme (Warren, 2016). By moving through an awareness of hegemonic relations to an understanding of one's personal biases and position (Wittmer, 2001), students can learn to bring a gender-sensitive approach to their leadership (Warren, 2016).

For example, whilst on extended wilderness trips through school, I see great potential to apply previous class discussions about hegemonic relations to our leadership field experiences. Building on this

teaching. Change requires a never-ending awareness, as a group, we can critically cycle of unlearning and relearning and it's examine the gendered experiences that are very hard work as it speaks out against our relevant to the group's lives (Breunig & biases. It's work we all need to engage with, Rylander, 2016). Learning to understand my if we, as a society, are to relearn gender. privilege, personal bias, and position as a young leader and educator has changed my leadership and professional aspirations. From my experiences, I believe that offering similar opportunities to students like myself has the potential to enable the growth of a body of socially just leaders and educators.

In contemplating where to begin our work, we draw inspiration from Peggy McIntosh's influential writing on privilege, and the need to consider our own positionality and unpack our "invisible knapsack" of privileges (McIntosh, 1989). We recognize that we (all three authors of this paper) come to the field with significant privilege in terms of our social locations as white, able bodied, and *fit* individuals—and also as women in higher education and leadership positions. For example, Janice teaches postsecondary social justice courses in university, many of which focus on challenging traditional gender relations. Stephanie is currently a university student in the field of outdoor recreation, with leadership experience as a raft guide. Teresa is a postsecondary health and physical education teacher educator and a department chair in Education. Clearly, these privileged positions bring a responsibility to *spend our privilege* wisely, through our commitments to academic and outdoor pursuits. We recognize the need to continue developing self-awareness by examining our positionality

(Breunig & Rylander, 2016) and, in doing so, recognizing the ways in which we might be unconsciously contributing to the dominant discourse that excludes individuals from outdoor participation.

The past 30 years have seen an enormous growth of scholarship documenting the experiences of women in outdoor education—books such as this one attest to this. Bringing forward marginalized voices, of women and *others* who do not fit the dominant participant mould, is essential to bringing awareness to social injustices and dismantling the hegemonic masculinity that governs the field. Of course, this work is not easy. Humberstone (2000), for example, puts to question the difficulty in enacting practices that realise alternative ideological commitments. However, in the process of educating ourselves, and exploring the ways things have changed (and not changed) over the past generation, we remain committed to contributing to outdoor recreation's transformation. We hope that by sharing our *mirrored tensions*, we can add our voices to the many who are working collectively to nudge the field forward, creating a terrain that celebrates diversity in relation to sex, gender, class, race, and body size and ability in outdoor recreation.

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