

The Gendered Hidden Curriculum of Adventure Education

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Abstract

Background: Critical examination by adventure educators in North American colleges and universities reveals that students receive messages about the nature of adventure education through both the intentional and hidden curriculum. **Purpose:** The study was designed to discover adventure education's hidden curriculum and its potential effect on women in adventure education. **Methodology/Approach:** The phenomenon of the hidden curriculum was examined using a modified Delphi method. Three rounds of questionnaires solicited knowledge from a panel of experts (21 females and 18 males), who had tenure of at least 15 years in the adventure education field, to obtain a reliable semi-consensus of opinion. **Findings/Conclusions:** Gender-based hidden curriculum messages were found, including the prioritizing of values and traits perceived to be predominantly male, linguistic sexism, assumptions about outdoor identity, outdoor career messages, gender insensitive facilitation and teaching, and the centering of White men in the field's history. **Implications:** The proposed strategies to consciously address sexism and gender role conditioning in the adventure education's hidden curriculum may benefit women and gender-nonconforming participants and leaders.

Keywords

adventure education, hidden curriculum, gender, women

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Adventure education programs continue to be important in higher education institutions as part of both liberal arts and vocational curricula. For example, almost 200 colleges and universities engage students in outdoor orientation programs that use adventure education as the delivery model (Bell, Gass, Nafziger, & Starbuck, 2014). Critical examination by veteran adventure educators reveals a hidden curriculum (HC) that imparts messages to students about the nature of the adventure education field. In this article, we detail evidence from a Delphi study which shows that dominant western cultural values pervade the curriculum of adventure education programs in higher education. The purpose of the study was to discover adventure education's HC and its impacts on populations underrepresented in adventure education, particularly women. While this article focuses on women, the authors acknowledge that the HC can disadvantage all participants, although particularly those from marginalized groups. Although it can be argued that aspects of the HC may provide motivating opportunities for women to overcome adversity, the panel of experts agreed that women's agency in response to these challenges does not dismiss the adverse impacts of the HC. Thus, strategies for how adventure educators in higher education can mitigate the gender-biased effects of the HC on their students are explored.

Literature Review

A HC can be defined as the unspoken or implicit messages, beliefs, values, and assumptions in the educational setting, including the unstated promotion and enforcement of certain behavioral patterns and professional standards (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004). It is beyond the teachers' or students' awareness and contrasts with the intentional curriculum. The HC is implied through teacher and student actions and inactions, unwritten rules, and what is and is not talked about. As a HC limits the capacity of faculty and students to reflect upon or engage in social justice (Giroux & Penna, 1979), examining the HC can help professionals to design a curriculum to ensure more inclusivity. The negative and the positive results of HC can be minimized or magnified through changes in the intentional curriculum.

The HC in adventure education has been minimally discussed in previous literature. Brookes (2006) identified a potential HC in safety guidelines for outdoor activities, which he implicated in potentially mis-educating participants about how to respond in risky situations in the outdoors. Analyzing student experience in a higher education expedition field school, Harper and Webster (2017) found "the informal 'hidden curriculum' of personal growth and development to be strongly present and at times far more relevant than the formal curriculum upon which the field school was justified and approved" (p. 79).

Studying female outdoor education students in Australia, Lugg (2003) concluded that a HC in adventure education was prominent, based on "some of the 'unspoken rules' that allow men in the outdoors to maximize their learning opportunities at the expense of their female counterparts" (p. 42). Other literature has examined gender-sensitive leading and teaching (Mitten, 1985; Warren, 2016) and women's constraints in outdoor adventure (Humberstone, 2000; Little & Wilson, 2005), but little research

has explicated the HC in higher education adventure education as a site of disadvantage for women.

Although overall findings from this Delphi study have been presented elsewhere (Mitten, Warren, Lotz, & d'Amore, 2012), this article highlights how the HC disadvantages female participants and leaders in higher education adventure education programs, which was a prominent theme emerging from this research.

Method

This study used a modified Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff, 1975) with a purposive sample of experts (Crossman, 2017) to examine the phenomena of the HC in adventure education. The Delphi technique solicited knowledge from a panel of experts selected by the researchers based on at least 15 years experience in the adventure field in higher education, with an average reported tenure of 25 years. These experts were sent three rounds of questionnaires to systematically explore components of curricula and obtain a reliable semi-consensus of opinion by asking them to reflect on and reassess the subject to offer considered responses. The Delphi technique allowed many experts to be involved, increasing chances for saturation, while the anonymous nature of the method precipitated authentic reactions. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Prescott College.

The Round 1 questionnaire, comprised of seven questions and meant to be exploratory and open-ended, asked the experts if a HC in adventure education existed and how they might describe components. Responses from 39 individuals (21 females and 18 males) were used to develop a comprehensive list of HC assumptions determined by the experts to use in the Round 2 questionnaire. Analysis by constant comparative method allowed these assumptions to emerge from the data (Eggers & Jones, 1998).

The primary focus of Round 2 was to share the data gathered in Round 1 so the experts could see the breadth of opinions about HC offered by their colleagues, including aspects they might not have thought of. To obtain a quantitative ranking of Round 1 results, respondents were asked to rate (using an 8-point Likert-type scaled survey) the concepts and assumptions as to their agreement about their importance and impact on the HC. Consistent with the Delphi protocol, this allowed the experts and researchers to delve deeper into the subject. The Round 2 questionnaire had 31 respondents, for a 79% retention rate.

In Round 3, experts were asked for their agreement or disagreement of the concepts and ranking found in the researchers' interpretation of the data in previous rounds, as well as to make qualitative comments about the picture of a HC that was emerging. The 21 respondents (54% retention rate) provided a check to the researchers' analysis of the data.

Gender Messages of the HC

The panel of experts in this study identified continuing social inequalities in outdoor adventure regarding race and White privilege, class, and gender, which aligns with

Table 1. Experts' Highest Ranked Hidden Curriculum Messages (Scale = 1-8).

Item	Score
Socioeconomic class privileged values	7.2
Euro- or Anglo-American-centric cultural values	7.1
Value of physical and technical skills over intellectual, social, emotional and moral development	6.7
Gendered images in the media	6.6
Promotion of a certain way to be in adventure settings (outdoor identity)	6.6
Emphasis on strength and endurance	6.6
Language usage	6.5
The language of "hard skills" and "soft skills"	6.4
Gendered role messages (e.g., women cook, nurture, do group dynamics; men do technical skills)	6.3
An orientation that favors males over females in hiring, promotion, assigning leadership roles	6.2
Emphasis on values such as independence, individual autonomy, and free choice	6.1
Facilitation and instructional styles that fail to account for gender of instructor/ participants	6.1
Portrayal of history of the field and historical figures	6.0

recent literature (Gray & Mitten, 2018; Rose & Paisley, 2012; Warren, Roberts, Breunig, & Alvarez, 2014). If the curriculum is unintentionally a site for the perpetuation of dominant culture values of privilege and oppression, the adventure education field will continue to have problems with promoting racial, economic, and gender equity. Although intersectionality of oppressions and gender fluidity informs any discussion of the HC, this article focuses on the specific concerns about gender identified by the panel. Table 1 details assumptions and messages rated highest by Delphi study experts when asked in the second survey to rank components previously identified by their peers in the first survey.

The study results revealed many highly ranked pervasive gender-based issues in the HC of adventure education including prioritizing values and traits perceived to be predominantly male, assumptions about outdoor identity, linguistic sexism, messages about outdoor careers, gender insensitive facilitation and teaching, and the centering of White men in the field's history.

Gendered Values and Traits

The militaristic roots of adventure education and the present allure of extreme sports were cited as masculine elements in a HC. This study found that the emphasis in these cultural messages on strength and endurance in outdoor activities created an advantage for male participants and leaders. Western cultures have promoted the idea of individualism, self-reliance, and autonomy, especially for men. Outdoor learning leaders

often use these notions as a guide for program development and outcomes. As one study participant noted,

I believe that adventure has at its core middle class values of goal attainment and self improvement through risk. Pip Lynch has argued that these traits derive from its origins in western capitalism, and arguably they also represent deep affiliation with Victorian Protestantism. I think these historical origins are not sufficiently outlined and yet shape the consciousness of adventure educators to a profound degree . . . Until the narrative of adventure is also understood as historically evolved, and especially how the historical narratives of adventure and individualism intertwine in actual experience, adventure education will be a severely limited enterprise. (Respondent 3)

Privileging these values is problematic to any systematically marginalized group who depends on community for safety and support. In particular, such gendered values do not take into account the relational orientation of many female participants (Sammet, 2010) despite the realization that group work and interdependence are beneficial to many program outcomes (Cooley, Burns, & Cumming, 2016).

The emphasis on physical and technical skills over social, emotional, and communication skills represents gendered values identified in the HC of adventure education (Warren & Loeffler, 2006). Women participating and/or working in adventure education programs are taught that the field was created by and still better suited to men and that if they are to participate in adventure education they are to do so in a way “appropriate” for women—for example, being a nurturing follower instead of taking a leadership position (Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro, 2016). Thus, when women are expected to use their interpersonal skills, and men are expected to rely on physical skills, a double bind is created because physical skills are more highly valued in adventure education programs.

Outdoor Identity

Early gender socialization from institutions, family, and media contributes to the belief that women and men should behave differently in the outdoors and participate in activities approved within their expected gender roles (McNiel, Harris, & Fondren, 2012). In a content analysis of outdoor leadership texts, Warren (2002) made the case that this literature reinforces Western gender roles. Commonly used adventure education texts in the United States contain an underrepresentation of women adventurers, use stereotypical gender roles in examples (e.g., men in technical skill positions and women in communicative leadership positions), and underrepresent women in photos (Martin, Maney, & Mitten, 2018). In addition, Martin et al. (2018) reported that women were underrepresented in citations or omitted in authorship in five adventure education texts and two leading adventure education journals.

Panel members agreed that gender role messages affect the experience of most participants outdoors. Due to this gender role conditioning, participants in many adventure education programs are exposed to a HC that encourages them to “act out”

their gender stereotypes causing the promotion of certain, highly gendered ways to be in adventure settings (Newbery, 2004). In contrast, McDermott's (2004) study noted that on women-only canoeing adventures, participants experienced a more "level playing field" where they felt free to embody roles outside their gendered expectations.

Linguistic Sexism

Linguistic sexism is the use of language to invalidate or marginalize women's voices and experiences and its presence adds to the already pervasive centering of men's experiences in adventure education. Usage of the words *hard* and *soft* skills, terminology that is regularly passed down in adventure education settings, was noted by the panel of experts to be part of the HC disadvantaging women. These words have been previously interrogated as sexist (Jordan, 1996) but they persist in outdoor terminology. A study respondent explained,

Hard and soft skill has been a personal bugaboo for me for years. This is a language issue also. It infers that technical skills are "hard" and process skills are "soft." How much more can we get sucked into social norms for males and females? Besides, process skills are often more difficult, "harder" to master by any leader. (Respondent 14)

Other examples of linguistic sexism (Warren & Loeffler, 2006) include the inequitable sharing of speaking time, derogatory language that demeans the outdoor experience of women and gender nonconforming participants, masculine normative language such as "two-man tents," and using conquest and militaristic language such as "conquering fears" and "attacking the peak."

Outdoor Career Implications for Women

The study data highlighted challenges faced by women seeking or maintaining careers in adventure education. Favoring males over females in hiring, promotion, and assigning leadership roles in adventure education was noted by study participants. Respondent 9 reported, "I believe it makes women less likely to pursue this field. It takes someone who is willing to take risks of being alienated from her peer group to choose this career." Another expert spoke about the valuing of skills as a factor that contributed to inequitable hiring practices:

I see the pairing of interpersonally skilled with technically skilled quite often, and yet the technical skills still seem to take priority in hiring and training. The interpersonal skills will come with time . . . or you're a woman, so you already have them . . . physical skills are required for hire and for advancement, interpersonal skills are not—they are valued, and yet are not worth as much. (Respondent 31)

Although many women feel suited for and pursue professions in adventure education, there are gender-based social power structures for women that compound

inherent stressors to measure up to men (Allin & West, 2013). Study participants stated that women must “jump right in” with their male counterparts to be accepted as valued colleagues as opposed to displaying any hesitancy. Study respondents also noted that women, overwhelmingly, must work harder to be considered by employers and supervisors as equal to their male counterparts. A study by Wright and Gray (2013) listed burnout and unsustainable careers as a repercussion of women who felt that they had to be a “superwoman.” Whether or not they burned out, these researchers determined that feelings of fatigue confirmed to employers that women may not be suitable for work in adventure education.

Compounding the issue of measuring up are the challenges to building relevant skill sets through personal experience. Previous studies reveal that women, as well as other marginalized groups, encounter constraints to participation in outdoor recreation (Ghimire, Green, Poudyal, & Cordell, 2014; Little & Wilson, 2005) including lack of time, lack of money, and lack of recreation companions. The Delphi participants echoed these concerns:

I have seen a disheartening number of really promising women pursue a career and/or coursework in adventure education, only to switch to something more stable after only a few years. I think women often come into the field optimistic about their ability to negotiate the constraints of being a woman in this field (if they are consciously aware of them) but learn quickly that it is more difficult than they expected, or it conflicts with other desires. (Respondent 18)

Facilitation and Instructional Styles

The study findings that facilitation and instructional styles in higher education adventure experiences failed to account for the gender of the instructor and participants align with other literature on gender-mediated pedagogy (Dingle & Kiewa, 2006; Warren, 2016). The historical reason for this disparity is that when many organizations became co-ed, they did not critically examine their philosophies and pedagogies; they just opened enrollment for women into unchanged programs. Without considering the attributes that women bring to adventure trips in designing the trip and the philosophy, damage to women can be done. Karla Henderson (1996) called this the “add women and stir” phenomenon, where as more women participated in outdoor activities, they were merely added to the current programs without an analysis of the suitability of those practices for women. A problem with the “add women and stir” dilemma is that it does not account for how gender role conditioning can affect learning and teaching approaches.

Many gender insensitive teaching and leading practices persist due to challenges in training the current and next generation of adventure educators (Warren, 2002). Study Respondent 3 posited as follows:

I'd say all of these components are perpetuated by limited training and education (on facilitation, instruction, and gender roles), limited to non-existent supervision and

feedback, role modeling/mentoring from senior faculty/instructors, and institutional instructor training that focuses on technical skills and safety over interpersonal skills.

History of Adventure Education

Participants and practitioners in adventure education receive some level of information about the history of the field through formal class time as well as informally at conferences and employing organizations. The panel of experts in this study indicated that the portrayal of the history and historical figures in adventure education is a problematic part of the HC in which White males are given a privileged, often exclusive, level of attention and significance. For example, Kurt Hahn, John Dewey, and Paul Petzoldt are heavily emphasized as “forefathers” while the accomplishments of influential women such as Marina Ewald, Maria Montessori, and Laura Mattoon, to name only a few, are largely unacknowledged. Few people participating in adventure education learn that Laura Mattoon, to highlight one woman’s work, was a pioneer in the field of camping (a critical antecedent of adventure education) who served as the first salaried executive of what is now the American Camping Association (Miranda, 1987). Labeling White men as “forefathers” sets up the history in a patriarchal manner, which then permeates programming. As history is a perspective, it is essential to reclaim a history that celebrates many diverse stories including those of accomplished women.

Strategies That Enhance Women’s Adventure Education Experience

The implications of the HC for women and girls suggest that adventure educators employ strategies detailed in the following sections to consciously address sexism and gender role conditioning in the adventure education curriculum.

Change the Culture of Mixed-Gender Outdoor Experiences

Participants in this Delphi study concurred that social meanings and constructions of gender continue to follow participants and instructors into outdoor educational environments (Warren, 2016). This static outdoor identity disallows people to move outside gender role expectations (Humberstone, 2000). Changing the culture of outdoor adventure education is dependent on the premise that women’s ways of knowing and strengths have equitable value in mixed-gender courses. Women and gender nonconforming people do not need to be changed to fit into adventure programs; instead, the programs need to change to be accountable to values important to all genders rather than a codified male-centered outdoor identity.

Effective strategies of modeling nontraditional gender roles in teaching/leading include providing same-sex adventures or single-gender space within mixed-gender courses (Libby & Carruthers, 2013) and creating opportunities to dialogue about gender issues between men and women. Attention to emotional and spiritual as well as

physical safety can allow healthy bonding to occur in mixed-gender experiences (Mitten, 2008). Instructors can also use an ethic of care to set a tone of inclusivity, acceptance, and reflection (Burke, Nolan, & Rheingold, 2012). These ethical values are fundamental as they provide a culture of openness and awareness to both the individual and the collective whole in outdoor learning environments (McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006).

Enhance Adventure Educator Awareness and Training

The use of facilitation and instructional styles that fail to consider the gender of participants and instructors was a problem noted by the Delphi experts. Physical and technical skills are privileged over communication and caring skills in adventure education (Mitten & Clement, 2007). As one study participant suggested, “Prioritizing physical/technical skills sends a message about what is valued in the outdoor education culture, and perpetuates a gendered, conquering mentality” (Respondent 10).

Gender-sensitive training can help educators understand unexamined leading and teaching practices and how to work with gender differences as it relates to technical skill development. For example, as research shows that females who are focused on the process of technical skill acquisition have a higher tolerance for repetition in skill training sessions than males (DeBoer, 2004), instructors can offer participants more opportunities for repetitive practice of technical skills thus taking into account gendered learning preferences (Mitten, 1985; Warren & Loeffler, 2006).

Use Gender-Sensitive Teaching/Facilitating Strategies

Reducing anxiety in the learning environment is a key strategy for facilitators advocating for gender-sensitive teaching. Many current program techniques are based on withholding information, providing partial itineraries, and emphasizing stress as a method to “build character” (Gray & Mitten, 2018). These strategies favor participants who are already comfortable and experienced in outdoor settings, for whom failure does not contain social risks, and who are willing to try despite the risk of failure.

Cooperative learning environments have been shown to promote gender-sensitive teaching styles (Loeffler, 1997). In an adventure education activity involving an instructor demonstrating a complex technical skill to an audience of students, often the more confident students will place themselves in locations in proximity to the demonstration, thus blocking others from an effective learning perspective. Warren and Loeffler (2006) termed this dilemma “territorial sexism.” Cooperative learning environments begin with the elimination of territorial sexism by developing an awareness of the position women and men occupy in learning environments and attempting to equalize it. Positioning female students where they can see a process, feel the equipment, and observe and manipulate cause and effect relationships may help develop their spatial reasoning. Gender-sensitive educators, who understand that childhood technical conditioning may be absent in their female participants, will provide pre-teaching or additional support for skills involving spatial ability (Warren, 2016).

Make Choice Prominent in Programming

A desired outcome in adventure education is for participants to learn to make conscious, positive choices. However, the HC in adventure education creates conditions that decrease the likelihood of authentic, self-affirming choices on the part of participants. Influenced by the HC, many adventure education instructors operate under the assumption that doing the hard thing and pushing oneself creates growth and promotes confidence and self-esteem. Neill (n.d.) recognized the intentional and unintentional strategies that “serve to design and facilitate programs in ways that coerce, entice, lure, etc. participants into joining in” (p. 1).

When a person consciously chooses their participation, they can internalize the results of the choice as their own, often increasing self-efficacy. However, participants’ choices may be influenced by social expectations (including the instructors), media, and personal history, which may be in conflict with their desires or best interests. Participants need to feel safe to try different choices and to understand the factors that influence their choice-making. Study Participant 5 noted, “Creating an environment in which true choice is available also addresses power imbalances, and therefore also encourages the full expression of self.”

Higher education faculty might consider teaching skills of conscious and authentic choice-making, which help participants consider the different factors that influence their choices. Supporting choice as a key component of an educational philosophy includes ensuring dialogue about risk and choice, giving information to make informed choices, supporting participants in creating their own goals and making choices for themselves, providing options, encouraging rather than pushing participants, having a flexible schedule, and allowing people their own timing as much as possible (Mitten, 1985; Tyson & Asmus, 2008).

Provide Positive Images and Messages About Women in Adventure

Instructors in higher education can normalize women being and working in the outdoors in numerous ways. This may include learning about and including more women in the history of adventure education and referencing them in discussions. It is essential to give voice to more perspectives by normalizing that there are many ways to be in the outdoors, rather than a single story (Martin et al., 2018).

As mentors and role models, outdoor leaders could offer literature and popular images that portray women and girls in active outdoor situations requiring mechanical manipulation and advanced technical skills. Furthermore, as professionals normalize women being in the outdoors and include them in storytelling, course reading lists, and instructional media, women’s contributions to adventure become evident. As an example, when talking about mountaineering, adventure educators could reference women, such as Lhakpa Sherpa, who has summited Mt. Everest 9 times (Callaghan, 2018), or Junko Tabei, who was the first woman to summit Everest (Franz, 2016). These female expeditioners prove to future climbers that there is not only a place for women in the mountains, but that their accomplishments matter to the larger sport of mountaineering.

Adventure education career development strategies for women are also key factors in providing positive messages. To mitigate career challenges, Delphi respondents claimed that seeking supportive female role models was important.

I think [women's success] depends a lot on whether they have had positive experiences in programs they were a participant in, have had positive role models (male and female), been given the opportunity to grow in a single gender and co-ed environment and use the learning from each experience to help them in the other. (Respondent 27)

Other strategies include recognition and acceptance that women's careers in the outdoors may not be a linear trajectory and may differ from men's (Gray, 2016), institutionally supported equal opportunity hiring policies and advancement tracks, and enforced sexual harassment policies (Loeffler, 1996).

Transform the Language of Outdoor Adventure

Gender-biased language was noted in the research as an opportunity for needed change:

Language is so powerful and I think the slang associated with adventure education is a male oriented slang. There are historical reasons for this but as we all evolve I think language should be precise and not gender oriented. I do not believe this is a difficult component to be addressed but takes a lot of awareness for the leaders and participants. (Respondent 14)

Strategies for ridding the HC of biased language include interrupting derogatory use of gender-based comments that put down women's outdoor experience. For example, leaders can stop comments such as calling someone a "sissy," "gay," or a "girl" if they choose an activity with lesser difficulty. Many words commonly used in adventure education, such as craftsmanship, fireman's belay, and two-man tents, while not used maliciously, still create a linguistic lexicon in adventure education that values men over women. Words that connote domination such as "summit assault" or "attack the trail" can be replaced by terms such as "climb the mountain," or "let's start hiking" (Giammatteo, 1993).

Committed and conscious interrogation of language by adventure educators is the pathway for changing this mis-educative part of the HC. Modeling use of the terminology "technical skills" and "interpersonal, communication, or leadership skills" instead of "hard" and "soft" skills and expecting students to follow suit is important. Other linguistic strategies include avoiding nonparallel language (e.g., use women and men instead of girls and men or ladies and men), changing militaristic language (e.g., use processing instead of debrief), and removing language that implies there are right and wrong ways in the outdoors (e.g., acknowledging the variety of ways possible to set up camp).

Conclusion

As evidenced by the primary concerns found in this Delphi study, adventure education, as practiced in North American colleges and universities, has a HC that leads to values, attitudes, and embedded practices that disadvantage women. Work needs to be done to reframe history to portray women and other people from nondominant groups in active and fully participating ways, to enhance inclusion in publishing practices and media portrayals, and to continually scrutinize teaching practices and learning environments for gender sensitivity.

The authors encourage adventure education instructors in higher education to learn about the HC to understand the informal and insidious messages that are conveyed to students and help students negotiate the challenges. Instructors can help shape the intended curriculum to counter the problems of the HC, including using the intentional curriculum to offset the damaging messages of the HC for marginalized groups. Adventure educators can use gender equitable teaching, educate students about HCs, and graduate more practitioners who are aware of the potentials and pitfalls of the HC.

This study describing the HC that exists now in adventure education can serve as a baseline for future HC studies. Future studies might assess other aspects of the adventure education HC and examine changes in the HC in relation to its impact on women. Considering Gress and Hall's (2017) question, "Is the goal of a diversity initiative to add more individuals of diverse backgrounds into the same equation, or to diversify that equation with the inclusion of different perspectives?" (p. 130), this study and the recommended strategies aim to change the equation for the better of all participants.

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