

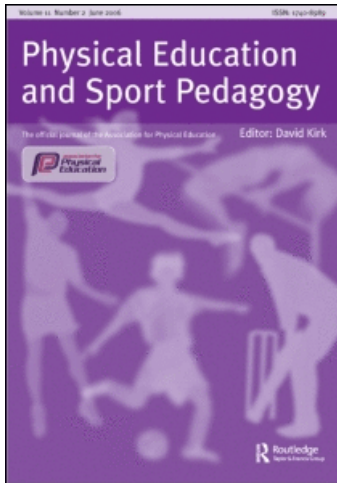
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Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713674664>

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To cite this Article Saunders, Nina and Sharp, Bob(2002) 'Outdoor Leadership - The Last Male Domain?', Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy, 7: 2, 85 — 94

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/1740898020070202

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1740898020070202>

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Outdoor Leadership – The Last Male Domain?

Nina Saunders and Bob Sharp¹

A previous paper (Sharp, 2001) presented evidence to suggest that men and women working in outdoor education tend to adopt different styles of leadership. It was reasoned that if this is true, then courses designed to train leaders in outdoor activities should reflect these differences if they are to be properly effective. The present study examined this hypothesis through a postal survey to over 800 people involving course providers, leaders and aspirant leaders in mountain, paddle and snow sports. There was clear support for the perceived existence of variations in leadership style, but whilst many thought this was gender-based, others considered that variations were accounted for better by variables such as age and experience. There was a clear view that these differences should not be reflected in single-sex leadership courses, but there was support for changes in the way that courses are marketed and publicised; National Governing Bodies should examine especially the general image portrayed to the public through literature, advertising resources and role models.

INTRODUCTION

The leadership 'style' adopted by an instructor in outdoor education is a function of many variables such as age, experience, ethnicity, religion, sex, personality, family, client group and level of qualification. Exactly what makes a good leader (in an outdoor context) has been discussed and debated by many people. For example, Graham (1997, p.8) suggested that good leadership embodies '...traditional, hard edged stuff such as technical skills, making tough decisions and dealing with conflicts'. In addition, it includes competence in '...so called soft skills, such as developing trust, communicating with sensitivity, balancing intellect with intuition and inspiring those you lead' (p.8). Graham's description is relevant in the present context because it draws attention to characteristics that have traditionally been associated with men and women. Knapp (1985) suggested that women are viewed broadly by society as caring, nurturing, expressive, co-operative, emotional and passive, whereas men are seen as competitive, dominating, risk takers, judgmental and assertive. According to Nolan and Priest (1993) role generalisations/stereotypes such as these are rooted in early life through influences of home, education and society as a whole, and are perpetuated throughout adult life.

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Nolan and Priest highlighted the need to extinguish stereotypes like these since they serve only to patronise, deepen inequality and limit opportunities – especially for women.

Unfortunately, there is a history of male dominance in outdoor education. It is suggested that many developments within outdoor education and outdoor leadership have been furthered by men (Humberstone, 2000; Kerbey, 2000). Similar patterns relating to participation and leadership are duplicated in different areas of sport and other professions such as politics (Douglas, 2001) and management (Mercer, 2000). There is some evidence that the number of women in outdoor leadership is slowly increasing (Association of Mountain Instructors, 2001; British Canoe Union, 2000a) however, there are still very few women involved in higher levels of coaching and leadership in outdoor sports (Kerbey, 2000; Sharp, 2001). The reasons for these trends have been well documented (Edwards, 1994; Tunstall, 1996). It would appear there are many barriers (social, practical and biological) that women face before a position of equity is established (Lyle, Allison and Taylor, 1997; Nolan and Priest, 1993).

The accepted route to leadership in outdoor activities is via qualifying courses developed and overseen by the National Governing Bodies (NGB's) for the relevant outdoor activities, such as mountaineering and skiing. As Humberstone (2000) has noted however, outdoor leadership programmes have been written mainly by men. In addition, they have tended to concentrate essentially on the acquisition of technical skills (British Canoe Union, 2000b; United Kingdom Mountain Training Board, 2000). It is not surprising therefore to note this mirrors the stereotypical view that males tend to be more adept at technical skills, whilst women tend to be better at communication/interpersonal skills (Graham, 1997).

In a recent study which looked, in part, at the way men and women view NGB's awards in mountaineering (Sharp, 1998; Sharp, 2001) some evidence was presented which supported these differences. Sharp (2001) showed that items within leadership programmes which men valued highly were considered less useful by women, and vice versa. For example, women seemed to place greater importance on those items connected with the 'knowledge base' central to leadership (e.g., weather information, access and conservation, planning and preparation). In contrast, items viewed as more useful by men tended to be those concerned with the acquisition of skills and physical activity (e.g., emergency techniques, rope handling skills, winter expeditioning). Sharp (2001) reasoned that if there are differences in the way men and women perceive leadership courses and if they place different values on different components of the leadership process, then programmes which fail to differentiate men and women in terms of their content/structure/delivery may be limited in their capacity to properly facilitate leadership training. He also drew attention to the serious problem of female dropout from leadership schemes, showing that one barrier to progress by women was dislike for certain parts of a scheme. He reasoned that courses which address this matter by adjusting the balance of time given to different course parts (or excluding particular items) may, effectively,

remove a key hurdle to female progress/involvement. On two accounts therefore, Sharp (2001) questioned the effectiveness of 'undifferentiated' leadership schemes which attempt to serve all.

The present study was designed to examine whether men and women see a need for leadership courses to be differentiated in some way to account for gender differences. Specifically, it sought to examine whether people believe there is a need to alter course content and delivery styles to suit men and women, and whether there is a need to separate courses for men and women.

METHOD

The study by Sharp (2001) and that of several others (e.g., Edwards, 1994) explored leadership issues within the mountaineering fraternity. To gain a broader perspective, a decision was taken to seek views from those involved in mountain sports (e.g., walking, climbing), paddle sports (e.g., kayaking, canoeing) and snow sports (e.g., snowboarding, alpine skiing). Furthermore, it was decided to widen breadth of opinion by contacting not only course providers who organise and oversee the delivery of courses, but also qualified leaders involved in course delivery and those who aspire to lead (registered but not actually involved in training). The study therefore encompassed three different categories of outdoor activity and three groups of people. A postal questionnaire was developed, piloted and distributed to male and female course providers, leaders and aspirant leaders registered with three Scottish-based NGBs viz, the Scottish Mountain Leader Training Board (SMLTB)², the Scottish Canoe Association (SCA) and the British Association of Snowsport Instructors (BASI). The schemes operated by these NGB's are popular, well known and undertaken by a large number of those involved in outdoor education. They serve as qualifying benchmarks by the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (Health and Safety Executive, 1996) which oversees safety management within the outdoor industry. The main purpose of the questionnaire, which included both closed and open ended questions, was to elicit perceptions of leadership styles, sex differentiated courses and changes to course content/structure. Copies were sent to course providers, leaders and aspirant leaders in each activity. In the case of course providers, it was possible to identify the entire population in each of the three activity areas (N = 101). All were included in the survey. Owing to the large numbers involved (many 1000s), random samples of 200 current leaders (approximately 10% overall) from each activity were selected. In the case of aspirant leaders, samples of 50 (approximately 90%) from each activity were selected. In the case of mountain sports, the researchers made the random selection whereas in the other two activities, the selection was made by the relevant NGB. This decision was made because the two NGB's were not happy to release details of members for fear of breaching individual confidentiality. Table 1 summarises the sample sizes for each activity/group. The overall number of questionnaires distributed was 851.

Table 1: Sample size (N) for each activity/group

Activity	Course Providers	Leaders	Aspirant Leaders
Mountain sports	35	200	50
Paddle sports	26	200	50
Snow sports	40	200	50
TOTAL	101	600	150

The questionnaires were constructed so as to provide both quantitative and qualitative information. Both forms of information were valuable in providing information on the key issues of interest to the study. In the case of open-ended questions, an 'issues analysis' for each question was carried out (Robson, 1993). To check accuracy, a selection of three questionnaires from each group was analysed by a second investigator. There were no differences of note. In the event, the large majority of replies were clear and well defined leaving little room for subjective judgement. Indeed, it was encouraging to receive so many responses expressed with conviction and clarity.

RESULTS

Data Returns

Questionnaires were received from 258 people. This represented an overall return rate of 30% (males = 67%; females = 36%). Table 2 shows the return rates for each activity/group, which varied from 15% to 64%. Returns from paddle sports were lowest, but it is not clear why this was the case. There was also a relatively poor response rate from leaders.

Table 2: Returns (N) for each activity/group

Activity	Course Providers	Leaders	Aspirant Leaders	Total
Mountain sports	17	76	20	113 (40%)
Paddle sports	9	30	9	48 (17%)
Snow sports	17	48	32	97 (33%)
TOTAL	43 (43%)	154 (26%)	61 (41%)	

Leadership Styles

All groups perceived the existence of differences in leadership styles between men and women of the kind noted by Sharp (2001). Table 3 shows this was evident in both the quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data. Between 36% and 44% perceived differences between men and women. A lesser proportion (between 21% and 31%) perceived no obvious differences in

leadership styles and around 35% perceived clear variations in leadership styles, but these were not gender-based. The over-riding conclusion from these data was that men and women perceive differences in leadership style. In many cases, these differences accorded with the stereotypical description given above. Interestingly, when this topic was examined separately for men and women, significant differences emerged ($p < .05$). Whilst 51% of men considered there to be differences in leadership style, over 78% of women considered there to be differences in leadership styles between men and women.

Table 3: Views on leadership styles (all figures are percentages)

	Quantitative - %	Qualitative - %
There are differences between men and women	36	44
There are no differences between men and women	31	21
There are differences, but not gender-based	33	35

Single Sex Courses

A number of questions centred on the key issue of differentiated courses. Based on the previous study (Sharp, 2001) it was expected there would be an opinion in favour of separate courses tailored for men and women. In contrast, the majority of respondents indicated opposition to this position (see Table 4). Table 4 shows that over 90% of respondents do not believe that NGB award courses should be segregated into male or female-only courses. Also, there was no significant difference in opinion between men and women or the different groups ($p \geq .05$). Furthermore, an analysis to gauge whether those supporting differentiation also perceived differences in leadership style showed there to be no relationship. There was a small exception however. The qualitative data indicated that opportunities could be made available for women to take part in single sex courses specifically during the early levels of leadership training and assessment. Twenty five percent of those responding ($p \leq .01$) agreed with this idea. There were no differences between men and women. In both cases, views were expressed that single sex courses might encourage more women to participate and also promote positive attitudes to women in sport. Interestingly, no course providers suggested that courses should be split; those in favour of single sex courses were only current or aspirant leaders. It is not clear why there is this difference but it reveals a mismatch in perceptions between those who deliver courses and those who take them.

Table 4: Views on differentiated courses (all figures are percentages)

	%
Gender-differentiated courses are not necessary	91
Gender-differentiated courses are necessary	8
Undecided	1

The whole area of single sex courses has been debated by a variety of people (e.g., Edwards, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Humberstone, 1986; Nolan and Priest, 1993) and whilst there may have been a perceived need in the past (Warren, 1990), the present data would suggest there may be little future for single sex course provision.

Changes in course content/structure

Other questions asked respondents if they thought courses should be changed to make them compatible with perceived differences in leadership styles. The analysis showed that around one-third of all respondents supported some kind of change in course structure or content whilst almost two-thirds indicated changes are unnecessary (see Table 5). Women felt more strongly there should be change but this was not significant ($p \geq .05$). The qualitative data was less supportive with only 5% of respondents suggesting specific changes to course structure. An analysis was also undertaken to gauge whether those supporting change were also those who perceived there to be differences between men and women in leadership style. This proved to be negative; those who perceived there to be differences in leadership styles between men and women were no more supportive of change to NGB courses than those who did not perceive there to be differences. The key changes suggested are listed in Table 6. Over 25% of all comments suggested that negative attitudes of men towards women (and vice versa) need to change. Strong feelings were also expressed about the need for NGB's to revise their marketing strategies to ensure female role models are more visible (e.g. more female assessors and other leaders). The opportunity for women-only courses at lower levels was again suggested. The need for NGB's to inject within their courses more detail about education and awareness of leadership issues was also highlighted. These ideas were expressed by all three activities, although numbers were slightly higher from paddle sports compared to the others.

Table 5: Views on changes to course content/structure (all figures are percentages)

	%
Changes are necessary	34
Changes are not necessary	61
Undecided	5

Table 6: Suggested major changes (all figures are percentages)

	%
Negative attitudes and perceptions of users and providers (both men and women) need to change	26
More visible and positive female role models (trainers and leaders) are considered necessary	17
Positive action advertising	14
The opportunity for women only courses (specifically at lower levels)	11
Education and awareness of leadership issues need to be enhanced	10

DISCUSSION

The starting point for the study was the suggestion from previous research that leadership courses for those working or planning to become outdoor leaders should be structured in a way which recognises stereotypical differences in leadership between men and women. It is well documented that male and female leaders adopt contrasting styles of leadership when working in the outdoor environment (Edwards, 1994; Scott, 1993; Sharp, 2001). The present study examined whether these differences should be reflected in the way NGB's structure qualifying courses for leaders in outdoor activities. The response from people representing different activities and different stages of leadership within the outdoor industry confirmed the perception that men and women display differences in leadership styles. Almost half of those who responded (proportionately more women) perceived there were differences which can be aligned with gender, whilst over one-third perceived variations in leadership style which are more closely associated with other factors (e.g., age, experience, personality) rather than gender differences. Only one-fifth of all respondents perceived there to be no differences between men and women in leadership style. The findings therefore lend some support to the stereotypical view that men and women display different styles of leadership when working in an outdoor environment. But, in addressing the key question of the study – should these differences be reflected in how courses are structured or delivered – the answer was less clear. The strongest opinion was that no changes are necessary. The feeling that women are 'better' at communication/interpersonal skills and men 'better' at technical skills was not seen to be a valid basis for re-structuring the manner in which people are introduced to or taught leadership skills. The fact that men and women are perceived to adopt varying approaches to leadership is not seen to disadvantage either men or women when embarking on leadership training and assessment. A general feeling was that male and female outdoor leaders should be treated as equals where they learn from one another, and where their differences compliment rather than contrast – a view supported by Graham (1997). Many believe that the most effective leader is an androgynous individual who adopts a flexible leadership style to suit conditions and the group as appropriate.

One thing that was very clear was the overall lack of support for single-sex courses. Edwards (1994) suggested that a case can be made for such courses for those working at an introductory level as they may help to overcome preconceived ideas and barriers and enable participants to concentrate on the task of acquiring key leadership skills without the influence of unnecessary distractions. However, the current study revealed more disadvantages than strengths. Firstly, there are practical difficulties in delivering 'women only' courses to satisfy those who live in different parts of the country. Of greater importance was the feeling that men and women must be exposed to the same experiences because they both work to the same basic principles and within the same safety management structure (as dictated by Health and Safety legislation) when operating as outdoor leaders. Many felt that separation of

men and women lessens the potential for learning about real issues in the practical environment. In this connection, many underlined the importance of safety. The outdoor environment does not differentiate between men and women; leaders must be capable of working with anyone in all situations. If leaders cannot demonstrate the technical skills to get them out of emergency situations then they fail in their leadership role. A further view was expressed that separating courses by sex could lead to the technical elements of female-only courses being delivered at a 'lower' standard than would be the case for mixed courses. Edwards (1994) presented evidence suggesting that women-only courses may not only widen the gap between men and women (i.e., enhance the stereotypical distinction) but also lead to lower skill levels. This would happen because such courses would tend to attract people with lower standards who were looking for easier training/assessment. There is some evidence of this (Cousins and Peters, 1998). It was also indicated that the opportunity for men to see role models of women and women to see role models of men is missed if courses are constrained to men or women only. Indeed, it has been suggested that the absence of positive female role models may be one reason why there are so few women involved in leadership (Humberstone, 2000). However, a significant minority of respondents (almost one third) suggested that differences in leadership styles between men and women should be reflected in how NGB's programme their courses. Changes were suggested primarily in regard to marketing and publicity. There should be more widespread use of female images in promotional materials and an increase in publications by female authors. It was suggested that strategies such as these may help break down some of the negative attitudes which centre around female leaders in the outdoors. Many indicated it is critical to eradicate the view held by some that female leaders are weak, lack confidence and assertiveness; women themselves should be actively involved in solving these problems. Jordan (1991) explored this particular issue and suggested it may be overcome, in part, by providing trainee outdoor leaders with relevant information (e.g., information about expectations and reactions to incongruent situations) as well establishing strategies which ensure a better balance in male/female leaders. She suggested that participants, leaders and administrators all have a role to play in changing peoples' perceptions of male/female leaders.

In summary, the study failed to find clear evidence to support the hypothesis that gender-based differences in leadership styles should be reflected in differences in leadership course provision. It did, however, reveal that NGB's should consider gender issues in regard to marketing, publicity and the general image portrayed to the public through literature, advertising resources and role models. Whilst women in today's society assume a more equitable place (Mercer, 2000), the outdoor leadership industry is still playing 'catch-up'. There is a critical need for female leaders who work in the outdoors to be accepted into what is very much a male dominated community. There is clearly a need to examine further the attitudes and perceptions of leaders involved in outdoor education and how this impacts on schemes to train leaders. More generally, there is an obvious requirement

to eliminate the stereotypical attitudes and myths surrounding the place and role of women in outdoor education. As Humberstone (1986, p.29) indicated '...The issue of gender then is considerably more complex than it might appear at first sight. Gender is not merely a question of identities and images of either sex, it is also about particular and appropriate relations between women and men'. The authors are currently exploring these issues within the field of expedition leadership in mountaineering.

NOTE

² It should be noted that the governing body for mountaineering is the Mountaineering Council of Scotland. The SMLTB is a different agency which is responsible for the mountain leadership programme.

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