SEER 2005 Abstract

Girls in the Woods: Exploring the Impact of a Wilderness Program on Adolescent Girls’ Constructions of Femininity

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Background and Significance

Historically, the wilderness and outdoor recreational activities have been portrayed as a masculine domain (Humberstone, 1990; Loeffler, 1997; Warren, 1985). Countless studies reveal that women reap positive mental, physical, and spiritual outcomes from participating in outdoor experiences; yet little research investigates the outcomes of girls’ participation in outdoor programs. More specifically, the literature neglects the study of how participation in outdoor wilderness programs challenges conventional notions of femininity.

Simply defined, femininity refers to characteristics that are associated with being female. In contemporary Western society, femininity emphasizes beauty; girls are valued for being compliant, sweet, nice, cooperative, upbeat, and sincere (Brown, 1997, 1998). Notably, the dominant conception of femininity is shaped by a white, middle-class, heterosexual model. Researchers in girls’ development argue that adherence to traditional femininity silences girls and, consequently, adolescent girls “lose their vitality, their resilience, their immunity to depression, their sense of themselves and their character” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 2). “Normal” feminine behavior exists in contrast to masculine traits—autonomy, power, competitiveness, strength, and authoritarianism—that are socially valued qualities, and perceived as essential for success in outdoor activities. Girls’ participation in outdoor activities, then, can offer confusion for girls as they navigate their individuality within these competing paradigms.
Wilderness programs that focus on girls’ development can offer avenues for girls to resist social stereotypes, to challenge conventional notions of femininity, and promote positive gender identity development. Understanding how outdoor programs challenge conventional notions of femininity for adolescent girls and how they negotiate these understandings upon returning home offers new insights to the growing body of research on the benefits of same-sex programming. Research on the outcomes of girls’ participation and its effects on girls’ development and gender socialization offer a dynamic addition to the growing body of research on girls’ development and new insights on defining social constructs of femininity.

**Research Goal**

The goal of this qualitative study was to, 1) add girls’ voices to the research on the outcomes of participating in an all-female program, 2) expand the research on girls’ development, 3) examine how participation in a wilderness program challenged conventional notions of femininity for adolescent girls, and 4) expand the research on poor and working-class girls’ constructions of femininity through the lens of their participation in outdoor recreational programs. This study was guided by a feminist perspective and feminist methodology. Feminist methods allow the researcher to start with a topic with which she has a personal connection and then use all the data sources available to study it (Reinharz, 1992). Consistent with feminist commitment to promote social change, a goal of this study was to influence program design for girls in wilderness settings.

**Research Questions**

In order to examine how participation in an all-female wilderness program challenged girls’ constructions of femininity, the following questions served as a guide:

1. In what ways did participation in an all-girls’ wilderness program challenge conventional notions of femininity?
   a. How did the girls describe the ways in which this program challenged femininity, both collectively and individually?

2. What impacts did participation have on the girls’ everyday lives?
   a. In what ways are their understandings transferred or used in everyday life?
   b. In what ways do they negotiate these understandings after the program concludes?

3. How might these understandings or changes influence their long-term decision-making, life choices, ambitions, and goals?
Methods

Subjects in this study consisted of nine girls, ages 13 to 18, who participated in a 23-day canoe expedition in the North Woods of Maine. These nine girls come from poor and working-class families and live in a variety of locations throughout the state of Maine. The family structure of the girls is diverse; some live in two-parent homes, others share time between divorced parents, and some live with other family members.

Two sets of interviews, the primary method used to gather data, were conducted, 4 to 5 and 15 to 18 months after the expedition. Secondary data sources consisted of a focus group, public presentation, parent surveys, journal entries, reflexive journaling, applications, newspaper articles, trip reports, and the graduate thesis that served as a model for this program. During data analysis I used a three-step process for constructing case studies. I first read each transcript and made summary notes about the interview (Phillips, 2000). I then created a case record, which allowed me to condense the raw data into an organized and manageable file (Patton, 2002). During this step, I drew upon established methods of coding and categorizing (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify themes and patterns. This consisted of reading each transcript line by line to deduce codes. I then reread each transcript to code according to the research questions. These codes were clustered into themes and allowed me to generate similarities between each girl. The last step consisted of writing a final case study narrative—a holistic portrayal of each girl (Patton, 2002) in order to illustrate the uniqueness of the experience for each individual.

Findings

The findings from this study reveal that girls who participated in an extensive wilderness program challenged conventional notions of femininity in diverse ways. These included: 1) perseverance, strength, and determination; 2) challenging assumptions of girls’ abilities; 3) elevated self-esteem and feelings of accomplishment; 4) questioning ideal images of beauty; 5) increased ability to speak out (voice) and leadership skills; and 6) building significant relationships with other girls.

The girls also spoke extensively about how they drew upon the experience during challenging times in their lives. For instance, several of the girls articulated how the experience helped them improve academically. They rely on the feelings they gained when they need reassurance that they can accomplish a goal. The ability to draw on the strength, determination, and perseverance that they gained has implications for their future as women. Additionally, the girls learned at a crucial age in their development how to develop significant relationships with other girls and to build allies with other women. This relationship building can offer
valuable skills for maintaining positive relationships with other women as they move from adolescence to adulthood. The experience also helped them look beyond traditional roles and see themselves as capable in a variety of nontraditional occupations. Other aspirations include seeking positions of leadership, learning more about themselves as individuals and challenging conventional notions of beauty.

Implications

This study reveals the importance of including girls’ voices in the examination of wilderness programs and offers a clearer understanding of how participation in outdoor programs challenge conventional notions of femininity for adolescent girls. This study illuminates the value of recognizing the complex relationships that shapes one’s identity. Although the wilderness and outdoor programs designed for girls and women may challenge social stereotypes, participants return to the social constructs that have significant influence on their development. As these systems are slow to change it is imperative that practitioners recognize girls’ struggles and help them negotiate their re-entry into everyday life.

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References


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