

Sisters of the Earth: Identity and the Subject in Adult Learning

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Abstract

Research on theories of experience and on leadership for experiential learning in the outdoors presumes an independent individual, as participant or leader, who acquires and masters a body of knowledge outside of themselves. Adult women contest the discursive practice of decontextualizing their already taken for granted autonomy by centring themselves as subjects of their own experience on a week long canoe trip in Northern Ontario. They find new places in which to locate themselves through "discovering" their bodies and the land as sources of their knowledge. I explore my own location as leader, constructed as super-bodied expert, possessing all knowledge.

Introduction

For me, the core of the research process is almost a meditation, a living with the complexity of a situation that is the focus of my interest, much like the "living with the data" phase which substantiates qualitative research methodology. The work that I am presenting in this paper is the prelude to such research, and the result of months of "sitting with" data which are a prelude to a study. I choose to report on this process as I think it is an important constituent of what is learned through research. What I formulate as my initial research interest, and then what emerges as "the question" to be answered, directs "the study" and "the knowledge" it produces (Lather, 1988:576). I am trying to work through a constant critical checking so as to find more clearly what motivates my conceptualizations (Game, 1991:43). I resist fixing my thinking at a single place or set of conclusions, and welcome comments and dialogue from others about what I am setting out here.

This paper begins to document my current thinking about--my breathing through in this meditation--the complex situation of how the learning on a canoe trip can be thought about in a different way than experiential learning in the outdoors is thought about now. My aim is to release more of the semiotics of it, the meaning-making processes embedded in such outdoor experiences. My starting point, or at least one of them, is taking the canoe

trip as a culturally inscribed form of social relations. I depart here from those who see wilderness expeditions as metaphors for the development of human identity: a vehicle for learning by experience, a symbol of the eternal human quest for self, a journey of personal growth and discovery (Beale, 1988; James, 1981; Leenders & Henderson, 1991). My focus is on the actual material practices which constitute participants in outdoor experiences as subjects of our own meaning-making, resisting an approach which sees us as agents independent of a pre-existent knowledge and meaning.

In this case, "us" is nine adult women on a six-day river expedition by canoe in Northern Ontario, Canada. The trip was planned and conducted collaboratively, and deliberately, as a learning project, over a five month period. The agreed upon goal was to introduce the women involved to a physically challenging and empowering experience, rather than to provide a leisure-time holiday. They wanted to be able to plan and conduct their own wilderness trips in future. Consistent with principles of adult education, we began at their level of readiness and with their goals; they decided on the information we needed to plan the trip and they each reported back to the group when they had found resources (Edgington et al., 1987; Ewert, 1983). Seven of the eight women were over sixty years of age, and were not familiar with wilderness canoeing, and the eighth, three years younger than her peers, had participated in a recreational trip on an Arctic river a few years previously. At thirty-two years old, I brought extensive outdoor skills and

expedition experience, and was paid to "lead" the trip. I knew many of the women through their children. It was not explicitly a feminist project (I will return to this point later), although I talked with the women initially about my feminist approach as an outdoor leader and feminist research interests. The data for my observations were gathered in my trip log, and in field notes taken on and after the trip. This was suggested by one of the women.

Adult Learning in the Outdoors

One context for my writing about this expedition, called "the French River trip," is current writing about women's outdoor adventures. A feminist critique of American adventure programmes providing expedition experiences

identifies widely accepted myths about the outdoors in that country which are shown to hinder women's participation as a gender group in adventure experiences (Warren, 1985). The myths pivot on a reification of rugged individualism and notions of equality of accessibility, opportunity, achievement and fulfillment thought to be particularly unfettered in the wilderness. However, Warren points out the dilemma that women face in dealing with this individual who is not them (the universal/male individual for whom these programmes are run) in what becomes very close to a model highlighting deficit as difference. She calls on wilderness programmes to address the distortion of women's reality hidden in commitments to liberal democratic notions of equality, and to be responsive to the need for social change in and through outdoor learning. However, according to mainstream theories of outdoor leadership, the characteristics of liberal individualism are precisely what are endorsed in outdoor leadership practices.

An examination of theories of experience shows that learning from experience is conceptualized as occurring through detached, rational processes of reflection, representation and transference on the part of individuals, outside the lived reality of the experience, but within "the learning cycle" (Dewey, 1938; Joplin, 1981; Kolb, 1984). The literature on theories of leadership for experiential learning in the outdoors emphasises the behaviour of the leader in these processes of experience and of reflection. Such theories presume a self-directed individual who acquires and masters a body of knowledge outside of themselves (Cockrell, 1991; Jordan, 1989; Priest, 1988). American research emphasizes generic, natural abilities (task, function, and conceptual skills) and traits (maturity, for instance) which can be developed in order to ensure predictable behaviour (Cain, 1991; Ewert, 1988; Phipps, 1991; Priest & Baillie, 1987; Swiderski, 1987). Kohn (1991), in the United States, and Kiewa (1991), in Australia, both articulate a specifically humanistic belief in the leader as facilitator, whose responsibility is in "carefully managing" the "evolutionary" process of learner-centred learning and growth for a group. With emphasis on the rational and the inevitable, humanism is directed at discovering "personal power." Power, in this sense, is neutral and irreducible. Its use depends on "one's effectiveness" as a leader, as an individual outside the process. Although "empowerment," writes Kiewa, "is a process that implies personal growth and self-responsibility"

(1991:9) on the part of the learner. Similarly, Jordan writes about leadership specifically for women endorsing a holistic approach called transformational leadership, which "allows humanism to be an integral aspect of the definition of leadership" instead of "a more feminist orientation" (Jordan, 1992:62). This work is based on psychological role theory and gender socialization theory, approaches presuming the existence of an individual with intrinsic "worth" and "potential," upon whom gender expectations are inconveniently imposed.

A closer look at the language of another example reveals how the key terms are presented. A recent Canadian proposal for androgynous behaviour as a theoretical breakthrough in outdoor leadership begins: Outdoor adventure experiences are intended to develop the whole person in terms of physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth. In order for individuals to reach their fullest potential, however, they must experience a wide range of human

behaviour, emotion, skill and choice. (Friedrich and Priest, 1992:10)

Evident in the use of the terms "the whole person," "growth," "fullest potential," "experience" is the assumption that these are self-evident and autonomous terms. The sweeping generality of the statements constructs a tone of external authority, while the passive voice relieves the two authors of such responsibility. There is no specificity as to whom, evidently deficient, is to be developed into "the whole person" nor by whom. The intention, development and reaching are considered natural and inevitable progress towards coherence. The prescription in the statement and encoded in cause-effect logic in the language leaves me, as the reader, with the impression that this is natural, good and beyond question. This is 'the way things are' in outdoor adventure learning.

Women-only wilderness trips have also been treated generally, written about in attempts to identify common aspects of what women experience and need in the outdoors (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1987; Miranda, 1985; Miranda & Yerkes, 1982; Mitten, 1986, 1985). One account of an all-women's tripping programme in the United States focuses on the empowerment women feel when a "feminine reality" is endorsed: Women agree that friendships with other women are important and that having time in an all-women's space is nurturing and essential for many in maintaining a solid sense of self....This vulnerability brings with it both the joy and pain of intimacy,

and is central to women's bonding process...Women commonly bond with nature...their attitudes towards women and towards themselves change...Women often go past self- and society-imposed ideas of what is possible, both as individuals and as women. This results in higher self-esteem and more self-reliance enabling women to return home more actively involved as responsible community members, family members or relationship partners. (Mitten, 1986:2-5)

To many women, and perhaps even the women on the French River trip, Mitten's account above might seem to be an accurate description of what we seek and experience with other women in the outdoors. I have felt this, too.

However, I have also begun to see this perspective as substituting one set of

conditions for certain predicted and regulated outcomes for another, while still framed in the language of the dominant assumptions of individuality and

inevitability on which the perspective rests. It reifies wilderness expeditions as the means to a discovery of the essence of woman's real identity, while attempting to counter the universalist accounts of wilderness

trips that hide their relevance to explanations of masculinity, but in fact reproduces without contesting patriarchal structures of gender and phallogocentric discourse (Grosz, 1988).

My interest in examining a particular women's canoe trip, in which I

participated, is to understand how the experiences of identity formation that

we have as women in the outdoors are deeply discursive, constituted by and through the "naturalized" and sexualized relations between self and other, subject and object, male and female. In my own experience, these are relations of pain.

Identity and the Material Conditions of Subjectivity

The inscription of experiences with privileged meanings through cultural

systems is the writing of them in a text, the reading and representation of which are the practices of discourse. My assumption here, following Game, is

that "culture or the social is written, that there is no extra-discursive real

outside cultural systems" (Game, 1991:4). I don't view canoe trips or outdoor

pursuits, then, as abstract 'objects' of my analysis, but as culturally and historically constituted responses of people to their social situations

(Hall, 1983:24).

The texts in outdoor learning experiences are taken to be the activity

and the concepts required for the doing of it. Paddling a canoe and

knowing

the appropriate rescue skills on a river would be texts functioning on a canoe

trip. The canoe trip itself is a text, and the "reading" of it is "facilitated" by the group leader as part of reflection on the experience. The discourse of psychology organizes this textual reading and others around a principle of what is essentially human, functional and "natural." As such, the text is framed within liberal humanism as a fixed and coherent representation of meaning, able to be known when expressed through language.

Texts are active in linking local contexts to culture, or the process of the collective interpretation of meaning (Cheyne, 1991:34).

Texts are cultural forms that do not exist until produced. They exist at the intersection between the individual and the social, as the meaning that is inscribed from social activity, the ordinary and discursive relations between individuals. They are then "active constituents of social relations and social courses of action," given that they must be read in order to be interpreted (Smith, 1984:70). Texts are situated in social relations, just as social relations constitute texts. Thus a canoe trip has its existence in the inscription of its meaning from within an actual situation. Its existence cannot be separated from the historical context and social formation of its origins.

In the dominant practices of humanistic psychology, texts are viewed as abstracted units of objectification. A text is detached from an historical moment and "from the lived processes of its transitory construction made and remade at each moment of its course" (Smith, 1984:72). This transcends the limitation of that time of origin so as to allow "repeated uses on a number of occasions on which it is treated as the same" (Smith, 1984:72). 'Reality' can be proven and known with certainty and without bias once it can be replicated in sameness. This end is the goal of theorizing in experiential learning in the outdoors: to find the sameness, the common 'truths' about the ways in which outdoor experiences happen, groups function, individuals grow, independent of the systematic interrelationships that constitute each of these in cultural forms. If sameness can be replicated, control can be exerted

to
privilege the status quo and prevent real change.

People go on canoe trips and other adventure expeditions to experience themselves and the world more fully. In nature, the coherence that we project onto the natural elements becomes an explanation for reality. Life in the wilderness is supposed to be simpler, essential, more real. The humanistic paradigm of adventure-based learning, with its facilitation of self-discovery through personal feedback, periods of reflection and group discussions led by a detached facilitator, sees the process of self-definition as 'finding oneself.' This is built on the 'discovery' in scientific discourse which underlies modernism; certain behaviours will lead to discoveries of facts. We will discover who we really are away from what we have created.

Norwood finds in her work on "women in landscapes of adventure" that each woman "is deeply involved in self-definition throughout her adventure," and that "motivating each adventure is a need to invent oneself in new ways" (Norwood, 1988:158). Lewis and Simon suggest that the reading of a text constitutes a way of inventing one's identity. This "reading" is "a form of social practice that can be examined for the work it does in organizing subjectivity" (Lewis and Simon, 1986:463).

How subjectivity is organized as a social process is the focus of an ongoing critique of experiential education. Subjectivity is a submission to structures of power which create subjects as whole persons (complete and perfected) and whole peoples (homogenous in unity and equal as individuals) (Game, 1991:44). The same principle underlying liberal democracy governs "the group" in outdoor learning experiences. All members are meant to participate as individuals, contributing equally in the development of group identity. Identity and subjectivity are systematically mediated by conceptual and material practices that divide subjects from each other and from themselves, despite that rhetoric of wholeness and community. However, as sites of subjugation, they are open to contestation. They are also sites for negotiation and new possibilities.

Canoe trips and the learning on them, though talked about in the liberal humanistic paradigm of empowerment and discovery, do offer women ways to

surface new knowledges of themselves as constrained and regulated, Other to the totalising Same, to see new possibilities of autonomy and contradiction outside the coherent wholeness of individualisation. "The double moment of totalisation and individualisation" governs the status of the subject, writes

Game (1991:44). "The subject is an effect of systems working through the body

unconsciously" (Game, 1991:39). Foucault asserts that instead of discovering

who we are, 'finding ourselves,' we need to refuse ourselves as made by these

systems (Game, 1991:44). 'Empowering' experiences for women are those that allow them to know what the practices of power feel like in their bodies, the

site through which power operates, rather than disavow material experience as

the cost of rational remembering of 'what really happened.' In this way women

are not taken as the object of the analysis, but the practices of power are analysed from the experiences of women. As a feminist "in(ter)vention of knowledge," women refuse the patriarchal structures which place them as objects, excluded from the distanced subject of phallogocentric discourse, and

place themselves as subjects of knowledges, those through whom knowledge is constituted (Grosz, 1988:97).

"My Canada Includes the French River!"

The exclusionary practices of phallogocentric discourse are constituted

through language and the semiotics of it. The thought that the French River

trip might be "a woman's trip," or, more remote still, a consciousness-raising

project, was a dangerous one. As the trip was dreamed up and inspired by this

group of eight women, I took it on their terms. During one of our initial meetings over potluck vegetarian dinner, they were curious about my university

studies. "Don't you want to interview us?" they asked. But they laughed at

the idea of feminist intentions: "I wouldn't even know what feminism was!" one

woman offered. She inhaled on her cigar. This was definitely a women's canoe

trip, the original suggestion to do a trip of married couples quickly discarded, but it would not be explicitly named as such. As the trip was to

take place over a long weekend in July known as Canada Day, this year celebrating Canada's one hundred and twenty-five years of (imperialist) confederacy, the group took up the national slogan for unity: "My Canada

includes QuebÇc!" and adapted it. Our canoe trip was put on the long list of anniversary projects and the women were proud of their nationalist spirit.

This is just one example of how exclusion can produce a strong desire to be included (McMahon, 1991:26). This was not a struggle around equal inclusion in the social for these women, as women. In refusing gender as the explicit token of membership to the group, these women were highlighting its power, but in a way that revealed more of their subject formation, their subject positioning, than at first I thought. An important space opened for me in learning about the choices these women had made for themselves. I came to see the structural regulation of other equally powerful systems in their lives.

Each woman was a strong, dynamic, capable, and independent mother and wife in/from heterosexual relationships. These were women whom, it appeared, could have whatever they desired. They had the self-motivation to meet other women whom they did not know (though of the same race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation), plan and organize their own holiday, take time off paid and 'volunteer' work for it, and pay for it with their own income. They made choices, decisions, plans and negotiations in a rational and autonomous way and never questioned their ability to do so. They did not know what they would encounter; they did know that they would learn new things; they were confident that they were physically capable; and they wanted to experience a unique challenge--indeed uniqueness was a hallmark in their lives. They were leaders in their own lives (conducting cultural tours around the world for the art gallery, chairing Boards of Trustees, and piloting non-profit community projects), and took the skills of leadership, definition and control for granted as easily as they planned ski trips to Norway. Such autonomy was decontextualized, not related to their own feelings and experiences; the personal was political in that in public it was repressed. These women were happy with each other and I enjoyed being able to be part of their process.

They were also structured by social relations of class and race in a way that silenced gender. They had money, which gave them confidence, autonomy and freedom, the products of entitlement. Again, there was no public

acknowledgement of this privilege. At least at first.

I did notice a tension. And as we began to meet and see into each other's lives more and more, we became aware of the different ways that women had organized their lives in response to the incongruities of their class and gender training. One member of the trip, one of the first women architects to graduate and practise from the local university, had bought a house of her own to live separately from her husband, but joined him in one of their country homes on the weekends. Two women lived alone, had been divorced solo moms for over ten years and both worked full-time. Both were considering going back to their maiden names, and so we took delight in honouring their new/old/own names. One didn't live with her lover so that she could stay away from his overuse of alcohol. Different women had problems with ill or neurotic children and some with ill or neurotic parents, most with overbearing, self-preoccupied or abusive husbands. One woman was going through a nasty divorce battle. One woman was in recovery from treatment for a terminal illness. These aspects of their lives were never discussed openly. Canoes are tandem boats, though, and so as different women paired for the day in their canoes they learned more about the ways each other was living and coping. The enormous pain that each carried was acknowledged toward the end of the trip. (I don't see this as the same "joy and pain of intimacy" of which Mitten writes above.) The tension and the awareness were as much a part of the social training as the pain.

The trip name reflected an engagement with Canadian party politics and the flag-waving, bumper-sticker support campaign for the incumbent conservative government. It echoed the "rah rah" of the Blue Jays baseball fans at the Skydome, for whom some of the women were passionate supporters. To me it sounded possessive and territorial when applied to a river that had been the major route for opening up the "penetration" of the Canadian west by the fur trade; a river named for the "courageous" French men, les voyageurs, who had crashed and rolled down, and up, its rapids and steep granite gorges; a river along which there is today "Indian Reserve" land, tiny parcels left for the Dokis and the Pickerel bands after the rest of the land on the river's banks, left to them by the trading companies, was ceded to the Crown in a treaty in 1850. The trip name included our adventure with the other

national

projects. Our six days of fun had significance beyond the personal, in a way

that couldn't be condemned as trivial or just something for "the gals."

Now I see that the name was also a way of taking space and status as

democratic citizens. Part of the women's class training would have been like

my mother's: to take an active and "selfless" role in civic activities. As voters, even those women not heads of households could act independently and

in solidarity with their husbands if they chose. Appropriation of ownership

is part of the democratic process of governance and homogeneity. The name for

our trip was a refusal of what women are, as gendered objects subject to the

authority of the State and men, and an inscription of race and class privilege. It was perhaps more effective in inventing us as legitimate travellers of that river than one which might have reclaimed women's feminine

connections to the earth, although later our feelings about being women together on the river changed, and the women themselves gave me the title for

this paper See Anderson, L. (Ed.). (1991). *Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and*

Poetry about Nature. New York: Vintage Books.. The inevitable joke at first was that we were "voyagettes," a devalorised female parody of those early explorers.

I speak of legitimacy as historically the French and British canoe trips

were part of a pattern of appropriation from the indigenous peoples, the Cree

and the Algonquin, and as a cultural form, a wilderness trip is still inscribed with relations of domination. The men who braved the wilds were evading responsibility for what they were really constructing in the New

World, practices of violation and colonisation of the different, the Other. The spiritual quest for self-discovery (James, 1981) is an evasion of the possibility that the self is tied, subjugated to the social, the hero's journey into the wilderness a material practice that privileges the individual, the individual who is male (Beale, 1988; James, 1988). The French

River is socially and historically constituted as a place for men, men who were not with women specifically because they were on the river. "In exploration...women were at best passengers" or food gatherers close to settlements (James, 1988:15). What happens when women enter the place in which they are constituted as not existing? They can become male, or they can

become the opposition to male, "pilgrim and suppliant, not...hunter and conqueror" as one writer suggests (James, 1988:20). This follows the linguistic pattern of subject/object, canoeist/passenger, hunter/pilgrim, active/passive. I argue that it is precisely this binary opposition which structures our language as a practice of phallogocentric discourse which is contested when women paddle canoes down a river with bodies living their tension and desire. Where is the reflection of the "brave" woman in society?

Yet these women live their realities bravely every day. What about the active

woman who is tired, too tired to care or to bond or to be suppliant? But first it is important to go back to language.

Language can be seen as one of the discursive practices which privileges

the notion of individual autonomy and constitutes identity as objective, self-

evident and universal. Concepts and terms are given validity by being what they are not, or by being defined in terms of their direct opposites (Game, 1991:99). The linear dichotomy establishes rigid systems which privilege presence by virtue of absence. One cannot stand without the other, and yet the Other is repressed. The One which stands represents the universal, the generic in society, is the dominant term, the present, absencing any alternative. It evades the conditions of its own production (Grosz, 1991:97).

The French voyageur on the river was present by virtue of his subject positioning, his maleness, and which he would lose were women to be present.

It became apparent that some of the women on the French River trip lived in conditions of propping up the men to whom they were Other in their lives even

if they were not still living in the same house.

Women's Bodies Matter

When women act with their heads from a training in rationality, they

necessarily move out of their bodies, as these are absented in the binary opposition (Brodkey & Fine, 1991). Class and race training had constructed the women on the French River trip, including myself, as independent, rational, selfless subjects, making our own choices about our desires and entitlements. Gender training had also taught us to be selfless, albeit connected, embodied, caring, passively allowing others who know to make decisions for us. On the river, we were in the position of thinking and moving, rational and embodied, learning and doing, living the split in our subjectivities. For the model of discursive subject production that poses as

universal is

a form of discourse which totally erases the body, the emotional, the symbolic, the multiplicities, the confusions--and in all ways orders the chaos of our lived experiences so that we can no longer feel their power, their immobilizing conflicts as we live them.

(Rockhill, 1987:13)

On the French River, women paddled our canoes, carried our canoes and packs, cooked and prepared our meals, set up and struck camp, navigated the route. Our 'discovery' was of our material selves, our bodies, in uncovering them, seeing them work, feeling them work, feeling them wet, feeling them in the wind, feeling the rock beneath us. The body is a particular text through which inscriptions of power are written and read, in plural and contradictory ways. For these women, uncovering our physical bodies surfaced a delight in them, a noticing of what was beautiful, what was feminine, what was strong. Swimming "skinny" mid-day, lying out on the salmon-coloured granite like a lizard in the sun, carrying heavy loads, and paddling the rapids on their

knees, were ways in which women uncovered and sustained their embodied selves.

I know of the impact on different women only by the comments they made on the last morning: that as they had moved through the land and found their way, they had also moved through their bodies making relationships with that land and that body, not the sexualized body that was the territory of another. In our final circle, contrary to notions of women's intimacy as nurturing and harmonious, we brought up the ruptures, the pain, the dislodging we felt. We asked not for emotional support, but for each other to notice the struggle, acknowledge the complications, even betrayal of self, that we 'chose' to live with at different intersecting locations of power. I noticed that different women I had seen on the trip who were expected to be strong in their lives had taken time on the trip to balance, or to be cared for. One woman responded quietly, and with difficulty: she had a capable body and appeared strong but she "wasn't allowed to be strong" in her partnership. She was one of the most competent art gallery tour guides. Another woman told her: "I noticed you laughing on this trip."

But I am not seeking homogeneity and I am sure that I have left many important parts out. I leave my narrative re-telling here, struggling to make

sense of the stories, but knowing that the telling is the beginning. In my own experience, even on that trip, on others, my body is the most lonely place for me, the site of constant betrayal of myself, and of conflicting desires for constructions of meaning. I talked to the women on the French River trip about this, and the feelings of fullness and strength and love that I feel in the wind and the rain and the river. Over the course of the trip, they had called on me for my knowledge, "the right way to do it," decisions about the best option, and I had refused this centring as super-bodied expert, possessing all knowledge. I had pointed out that there were many alternatives that would work or I had negotiated for input into decisions. Some reactions had ranged from confusion to resentment. But in the end they realized that sometimes there are no certain explanations, only new inventions. Any knowing is from a situated or embodied place, the particular location, which in turn has its costs.

Being in the outdoors gives women a chance to try to end the mind-body split not in achieving coherence, but in noticing the tension and desire that are part of the lived reality of being women. The women on the French River trip did know that they would be able to paddle the river, because we have been trained to be strong and confident, but they also explored the learning that we are constituted by discursive practices that separate us from our bodies as agents and simultaneously embody us as receptacles. What is real, the text, is the situation in which we live the tensions as both object and subject, and the French River was only context (Game, 1991:44).

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