

# Social Justice in Outdoor Experiential Education: A State of Knowledge Review

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## Abstract

Outdoor experiential education has often been critiqued for its White, male, middle/upper-class, able-bodied history, thereby causing professionals and programs to consider issues of social justice. This state of knowledge paper will review the literature on social and environmental justice, identify gaps in current social justice literature and practice, and offer recommendations for creating a new history.

## Keywords

outdoor experiential education, social justice, environmental justice

Many experiential education professionals seek ways to fully understand the intersections of experiential education with issues of social and environmental justice (Breunig, 2005). Demographic, economic, and social changes in society create an imperative for outdoor experiential education (OEE) professionals to meaningfully engage with these issues as vital components of their practice (Warren, 2012).

This state of knowledge review will analyze the intersections of OEE and social justice, identify gaps in the current social justice literature and practice, and offer recommendations for future research. The article draws from sociocultural, critical and feminist theories and draws on literature from peer-reviewed materials, as well as books, articles, and opinion pieces that are relevant to the field. As social justice

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concepts often vary greatly in different global societies, the focus will be on the state of knowledge of social justice as it has developed in North American outdoor programs.

## **Outdoor Experiential Education and Social Justice**

The fields of experiential education are as varied and numerous as are the settings for experiential education practice. This article will focus on social justice topics specific to OEE, acknowledging that the outdoors refers to a broad spectrum from urban areas to wilderness spaces and that the outdoors represents one of the many diverse environments and contexts for the enactment of experiential education.

Similar to experiential education definitions, there exist numerous, overlapping, and contradictory definitions of social justice. Many critical pedagogues continue to assert that social justice theory must remain true to its Marxist roots, with its focus on economic inequities (McLaren, 2003). Others assert that social justice educators must adopt a more expansive lens, and that issues of social privilege and oppression involve examination of race/ethnicity, culture, gender and gender identity, age, ability, and religion as well as socioeconomic status (hooks, 2003).

## **Outdoors and Adventure as Contested Constructs**

Nature and the meanings ascribed to the natural environment are rooted in history, gender, race, and culture (Ewert, Chavez, & Magill, 1993). Similarly, constructs of the concept of adventure are based on positions of privilege and oppression. For example, Little (2002) found that for women in the outdoors, the traditionally constructed adventure narrative was problematic, and they needed to negotiate and restructure their ideas about outdoor adventure to participate. For people with disabilities or poor people, outdoor adventure remains a contested area due to attitudinal, structural, and economic inequities of outdoor programs (Dillenschneider, 2007).

Early questions about why there is a lack of participation among people of color in OEE (Ashley, 1990) led to an examination about the contested nature of outdoor places for oppressed groups. Johnson (1998) explored the social and collective memory of Blacks in relation to the outdoors (e.g., slavery, share-cropping, lynching), thereby contesting the natural environment as a sanctuary or a place of refuge as has been reflected in predominantly White beliefs (Martin, 2004). Collective memory of past experiences of legally mandated segregation, the flight from rural to urban areas due to forced labor outdoors, and racially motivated violence that most typically occurred in remote areas continues to play a role in deciding how people of color spend time in nature (Taylor, 1989).

Latinos, likewise, have reported feeling unwelcome or discriminated against despite many outdoor areas in the United States “reminding them of their homelands” (Chavez, 2005, p. 32). Native American authors (Hall, 1992; Oles, 1992) have pointed to the misappropriation of cultural and spiritual practices into OEE programs as a contested area in the field. For people of color, broadly, the everyday practices aligned

with environmental interactions are directly related to issues of identity and cultural history (Finney, in press). Moreover, the dominant narrative of preservation—that wilderness should remain untrammelled versus used for sustenance—has also been a factor in thinking about race and class (Agyeman, 1989).

Too often well-intentioned people and organizations position themselves as knowing more about what communities want and need more than the communities themselves (Agyeman, 2003). By talking about communities as “others” who need to be saved by programmatic, structured experiences in the outdoors, professionals are missing the existing empowered connections to nature informed by the communities themselves.

As noted by Roberts (2008), “social trends show an often deep and profound connection to the land yet, culturally, there are numerous subcultural as well as self-imposed personal constraints limiting outdoor experiences” (p. 93). This is substantiated by Finney (in press), who reports there is a persistent feeling by people of color that being involved with the environment is something White people do; yet on another level, there is a passionate acknowledgment about the importance of nature and the land and a need to claim a place within it.

As Byrne and Wolch (2009) have documented, the exclusion of the poor and people of color in parks and other outdoor spaces was a hallmark of the U.S. system as these spaces were “founded upon middle- and upper-class sensibilities and eugenicist ideologies about pristine wilderness” (p. 5). In sum, any meanings ascribed to nature or perceptions of place, as well as how adventure is defined, have not always fit the traditional Eurocentric, able-bodied, male paradigm.

## **Social Identities in Outdoor Experiential Education**

Social justice theory embraces the idea that social identities such as race, class, and gender exist in intersectionality, that is, in the belief that social identities do not act independently, instead interact in an intersection of systematic oppression (Shinew, Floyd, McGuire, & Noe, 1995). The OEE field has been slower to chronicle intersectionality, with the early literature often addressing independent social identities (Warren, 2005). The sections that follow will explore the state of knowledge concerning select social identities while acknowledging these issues are interwoven and mutually reinforcing.

### **Gender**

Discussion about gender in OEE has focused on the experiences of women and, more recently, girls in the outdoors. As Bell (1997) has posited, this literature, although more expansive than any of the other broad topics dealing with social justice in the OEE field, is under-theorized and lacking in feminist theory as it deals with women’s issues rather than the complexity of gender relations (Freysinger, Shaw, Henderson, & Bialeschki, 2013).

Gender role socialization and conditioning, a factor in unequal power relationships in OEE programs and leadership positions for adult women (Warren, 1998), has

continued over time. More recently, a movement toward studying girls' experiences has arisen (e.g., Whittington & Mack, 2010), with this literature currently examining what works best for girls in adventure programming.

The value of single gender experiences for women/girls has been firmly established in the outdoor field as a way to provide supportive environments for females to learn (Hornibrook et al., 1997; Warren, 1996). Pertinent questions arise about the continued emphasis on women-only experiences, whether single gender experiences can be replicated within mixed gender outdoor environments (Mitten, 1985), and if new research can find ways to mitigate factors that continue to disadvantage women and girls in OEE (Mitten, Warren, Lotz, & d'Amore, 2012).

Furthermore, language is a fundamental part of social justice. The persistent use of the terms "hard" and "soft" skills in the outdoor field and gender-biased language are examples of linguistic sexism that continue to support gender role conditioning (Jordan, 1990; Shooter, Sibthorp, & Paisley, 2009). In addition, feminist critiques of teaching and learning in the outdoors point out its gender-privileged nature (Warren & Loeffler, 2006). A recent study on the hidden curriculum in adventure education found

messages that value physical and technical skills over intellectual, social, emotional and moral development; gendered images in media; language of "hard skills" and "soft skills"; an orientation that favors males over females in hiring, promotion, assigning leadership role; and facilitation and instructional styles that fail to account for gender of instructor/participants

were a constraint for women in OEE leadership and participation (Mitten et al., 2012, p. 39). Furthermore, a glass ceiling for women's career development in outdoor fields has also been noted (Loeffler, 1996).

Gaps in the OEE literature concerning gender include the invisibility of the experience of women/girls of color (Roberts & Drogin, 1993), its hetero-normative nature (Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2003), rare examinations of men's role in the dialogue (Rasberry, 1991), and nascent attention to transgendered issues (Mitten, 2012; Wilson & Lewis, 2012).

### *Race and Ethnicity*

What is known about the participation in OEE programs seems to vary by race/ethnicity. The state of knowledge of race and ethnicity in OEE moved from exploring race primarily as "black versus white" (Roberts & Drogin, 1993; Washburne, 1978) to investigating Latinos (Chavez, 1992; Noe & Snow, 1990), with fewer studies including Native American (Hall, 1992; McDonald & McAvoy, 1997) and Asian experiences in the outdoors (Winter, Jeong, & Godbey, 2004). Biracial and multiracial populations are still missing from the equation (Roberts, 2013).

Research has investigated different types of barriers (e.g., socioeconomic, lack of knowledge, discomfort) along with attitudes, prejudice, perceived discrimination, marginality, and injustice and inequality as experienced in OEE programs (see Allison,

1996; Ashley, 1990; Martin, 2004; Roberts, 1996; Warren, 2005). Furthermore, challenging the field to explore new methods of facilitation in the OEE, Warren (1998) scrutinized how some leaders can alienate ethnic minorities, among other groups, based on their assumptions and lack of cultural competency.

Subsequently, understanding cultural traditions and norms as a more holistic vantage point has begun to infiltrate the literature (Roberts & Chitewere, 2011). For instance, professionals in the OEE field have addressed racism by unpacking the invisible knapsack of White privilege: the unearned and often unseen advantages White people experience in outdoor adventure (Rose & Paisley, 2012). Cultural studies and critical research perspectives, with the goal of interrogating racial assumptions and White privilege in OEE, are making their way into outdoor learning and instruction as well (Lynch, 2012).

### *Ability*

Any discussion of “able bodied” is predicated on the assumption that there exists disabled “others.” Rather than adopting this binary categorization, this section will present the concepts of universal design, inclusion, and integration for all people engaged in OEE.

Early therapeutic outdoor programs for people with disabilities used a practice of segregation (Dillenschneider, 2007). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), among other legislation, gave support to the evolution in thinking about outdoor programming for people with disabilities toward inclusion and integration for all. Inclusion is an attitude and approach that seeks to ensure that every person, regardless of ability or background, can meaningfully participate in all aspects of life. Integration is the act of combining individuals to make a unified whole, for example, wilderness experiences including persons with and without disabilities (Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Rynders, 1993). Holman and McAvoy (2005) found that participants in integrated wilderness programs were able to transfer positive outcomes back to their daily lives.

In addition, “person first” language (Zeller, Doyle, & Snodgrass, 2006), adaptations in outdoor equipment (Havens, 1992), and universal design have been adopted in OEE programs (Schleien et al., 1993). Universal design is a process that includes consideration of environments, facilities, equipment, programs, processes, lessons, and other resources, with the goal of inclusion for all people to the greatest extent possible (Center for Universal Design, 2013). Universal design thus aims to enable all people to have equal opportunities to participate in every aspect of OEE.

### *Other Social Identities*

Attention to the poverty of at-risk youth in outdoor programs has been the predominant way to examine socioeconomic class in OEE (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1999). As explorations of class issues in the OEE literature have been scarce, this area deserves more focus in the future (Sikorcin, 2003). Similarly, what is known about sexual orientation and age in OEE has been only minimally developed. Although

McClintock (1996) has written about lesbian baiting as one form of homophobia in outdoor programs, there is also a need for greater examination of this topic. Finally, Sugerman (1999) contends that older adults are a population that has been “seriously neglected and that there is a need to develop programs for them that revive former skills and interests and teach new ones” (p. 388).

## **Environmental Justice**

Any discussion of social justice in OEE must include environmental justice because, as some authors assert, the most pressing and basic environmental issue is social inequality (Mohai, Pellow, & Roberts, 2009). Outdoor and environmental education exists at the very junction of social problems, and thus environmental justice issues are inextricably linked to social ones and vice versa (Gruenwald, 2003).

The early history of environmental (in)justice is represented in the oppression of indigenous peoples, including their displacement from the outdoor environment and the hunting and gathering practices that sustained them, rooting any discussion of environmental justice in the Western, White colonization of the outdoors itself (Gruenwald, 2003). The term “environmental racism” first appeared in the literature in the 1980s, with research concluding that environmental hazards were disproportionately located in marginalized communities, primarily Black, Hispanic, or First Nations (Haluza-Delay, 2012).

In the 1990s, the term “environmental justice” surfaced, referring to the efforts of confronting environmental racism. Bullard (1993) led an equity movement to combat the oppression that people of color experienced—those factors that regularly relegated them to marginalized positions with little political power, with health issues affecting their quality of life, and with minimal access to leisure opportunities. Further research concluded that this form of environmental racism extended beyond home spaces to include access to outdoor recreational opportunities, other quality of life pursuits, and mere survival (Johnson, 1998).

Research in OEE has begun to show how environmental justice issues include constraints to participation in outdoor programs (Gomez, 2008). For example, ethnic minorities and poor people with an increased exposure to environmental hazards experience a decreased connection to more positive environmental amenities and outdoor recreation areas (Bullard, 2001). The environmental movement has always been a powerful social force affecting the work of OEE in some capacity; research shows that an urgent challenge is to “use the injustice frame to identify and analyze racial, class, and gender disparities and to emphasize improved quality of life, autonomy, and self-determination, human rights, and fairness” (Taylor, 2002, p. 41)

## **Approaches to Social Justice in OEE**

### *Theory and Practice Approaches*

While there has been a sustained call for inclusion, diversity and social justice in the OEE community, there has been no clear consensus on how to achieve that goal

(Garvey, Mitten, Pace, & Roberts, 2008). Some authors support contact theory (Allport, 1954/1979), which suggests that interactions between people of color and White participants lead to a greater understanding and a reduction in prejudice in both groups (Seaman, Beightol, Shirilla, & Crawford, 2010). The study by Seaman and colleagues concluded that diversity-related outcomes can be achieved by use of nonformal experiential activities such as challenge courses and community service, while maintaining the optimal conditions of intergroup contact theory. A belief in the value of racially mixed programming has impelled outdoor organizations to invite people of color to their outdoor adventure programs through the use of written materials showing visible racial and ethnic minorities, recruitment of staff of color, and the emphasis on role models from diverse groups (Benepe, 1992). However, few programs have “moved beyond a basic recognition of the need to be culturally inclusive” (Roberts & Rodriguez, 1999, p. 2) to a critical examination of social justice (Frazer, 2009).

Other literature points out that the entire structure of outdoor programs need systemic analysis, with change emanating from attempts to break entrenched paradigms that support an uncritical culture of outdoor adventure (Warren, 2012). Examples of this taken-for-granted culture of outdoor programming include valuing individualism and autonomy in outdoor experiential education, whereas oppressed cultures traditionally have gathered in community or family for support and even survival (Bailey, 1999).

The OEE field has also embraced the use of experiential activities to teach about social justice issues. Drawing from social justice education work (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007), a toolbox approach using experiential social justice activities has been used to change personal beliefs and values to create a better world (Chappelle, Bigman, & Hillyer, 1998). Such toolbox approach depends more on raising awareness of social justice issues on an individual level, rather than making structural changes in organizational cultures or society, to address the lived experiences of oppressed people.

### *Outdoor Leadership Approaches*

Early definitions of outdoor leadership were based on dominant meanings and interests—those inherited from past tradition applied to explain the present condition (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006). Historically, leadership characteristics and qualities that have been touted as admirable and preferred are those possessed by White, able-bodied, upper-class, heterosexual males (Bell, 1996), reifying specific sociopolitical and sociocultural ideologies. Warren (2002) concluded that outdoor leadership is constrained by an elitist attitude that favors those instructors who have graduated from expensive instructor training courses and, overall, privileges White, male outdoor leadership perspectives. Explicit evidence of this can be found in the “traditional” outdoor leadership curriculum and textbooks that have largely ignored social justice education (Warren, 2002). Implicitly, there exists a hidden curriculum in outdoor leadership that communicates meanings of physical strength (Newberry, 2003), consists of a wide array of outdoor literature representing White male outdoor leaders, and uses “standard” facilitative practices that value certain individuals and voices over others (Warren, 1998).

Research on outdoor leadership has explored how effective leadership strategies to promote positive group experiences on outdoor trips can occur through recognition of diversity (Mitten, 1989). For example, women and other historically oppressed individuals could be encouraged to express their perspectives, in an effort to bring about greater acceptance and to lessen fear and marginalization (Mitten, 1989).

Warren (1998) emphasized the importance of race, gender, and class-sensitive facilitation in OEE as an essential component of outdoor leadership training. Other authors have described culturally competent leadership training as including diversity knowledge, social justice awareness, and cross-cultural skills (Washington & Roberts, 1999). Presently, some outdoor organizations hire diversity trainers to conduct workshops for students and instructors. The focus of these trainings has shifted from the idea of diversity toward knowledge of cultural competency, hence emphasizing the concepts of privilege and oppression.

Cultural competency as both a pragmatic need and area of research interest is increasingly being explored in OEE (Frazer, 2009). The core leadership competencies exhibited by a culturally competent leader, with a view toward inclusion, include a servant leadership approach, ability to apply integration strategies regardless of participant abilities, and ability to adapt an activity and alter the environment (Lais, 2001). How to develop culturally competent outdoors leaders who can address social and environmental justice in programs will need to be a continuing focus of research (Rodriguez & Roberts, 2005).

### *Adventure Therapy Approaches*

In the 1980s and 1990s, as the adventure therapy field started to use licensed, clinically trained staff, more of these professionals sought training to supplement their therapeutic understandings with outdoor adventure techniques. Social workers, through their National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, are asked to

challenge social injustice . . . through social change efforts . . . focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination and other forms of oppression . . . Hence as the numbers of social workers involved in OEE has grown in numbers, so has the clamor for making social justice not only a critical core value of the work but also an important outcome as we advocate for the formulation of practice principles that link social justice goals with daily realities.” (Reisch, 2010, p. 11)

Ethical guidelines and professional competencies currently call for enhanced knowledge in social justice, advocacy, and action (Gass, Gillis, & Russell, 2012), yet in these programs, many directed by social workers, little has been written about their social justice perspective. An apparent gap in the literature is the intentionality for social justice outcomes in the field. It is critical for social workers and other mental health professionals to assist clients/participants in reframing internalized oppression so they can develop a greater understanding of the injustice they experience (Reisch, 2010).



## *Educational Approaches*

The birth of new perspectives adding to this body of knowledge was the advent of multicultural environmental education (Running Grass, 1996). A Native American practitioner and scholar, Running Grass was in the forefront of developing a “vehicle for voices, a link in a chain, a counter-narrative” (p. 1) through what became four streams of multicultural environmental education: environmental education, multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and environmental justice.

Matthews (1994) promoted multiculturalism in outdoor education by recommending that leaders incorporate a multicultural approach and promote the exploration of traditions as a means of finding common ground among cultures. Roberts and Rodriguez (1999) indicated that opportunities for diverse participants to cooperate, solve problems, exercise critical thinking skills, and develop communication within the group are augmented when conscious multicultural approaches are used and discussed.

Another educational approach in OEE has been the establishment of urban adventure programs. These programs, predicated on the accessibility of bringing the program to the participants rather than the participants to the woods, use the urban environment as a dynamic adventure classroom for inner city youth (Proudman, 1999). Outward Bound (OB) established several new urban centers across the United States to work with schools and community organizations through customized programs. In addition, two new OB Canada urban centers bring OEE principles and practices into the K-12 schools (see <http://ouwardbound.ca>).

Educational approaches in OEE should extend beyond increasing students’ knowledge about themselves and the environment to focus on promoting pro-social and pro-environmental behavior change, thereby encouraging students to serve as social and environmental change agents (Breunig, 2013). Integration of multicultural outdoor education is reflected in a transformation of program agendas, management policies, organizational strategies, and leadership actions (Rodriguez & Roberts, 2005) so that all outdoor education is pro-social with multicultural education at its core.

## *Future Directions*

It is essential for outdoor experiential scholars and practitioners to recognize what has been done and identify the gaps for future research and implications for practice. In light of this review and the conclusions drawn, the following topics merit further consideration and exploration:

- Reconceptualizing meanings of outdoor places and the concept of adventure
- Intersectionality of race, class, gender, and other identities
- Poststructural feminist frameworks to examine gender
- Experiences of biracial and multiracial populations
- Attitudes and perceptions of ethnic minorities regarding what manner they are influenced by racialized constructions including how different cultural groups experience the outdoors

- Immigrants/undocumented participants' potential exclusion from programs
- Understanding the role of socioeconomic and class oppression
- Universal design and accessibility as the norm
- Cultural competency training, education and leadership development
- Critiques of the visual and media images of outdoor leaders and participants
- Attention to social justice theory and practice in outdoor adventure therapy
- Critically reflexive experiential education research agenda supported by principled strategic interventions in power relations among practitioners
- Understanding how to make all OEE programs multicultural

## Conclusion

To review what is known about social and environmental justice in outdoor experiential education may be seen as exercise in both hope and despair. On one hand, despair is reflected in these persistent questions: Why do some organizations promote social justice yet, as Allison (1996) has stated, still foster inequity in access and program offerings? Why is the conversation about social justice not a robust part of every outdoor program? What will it take before OEE programs become genuinely accessible to all who want to participate?

Conversely, there is hope as reflected in this state of knowledge review. Professionals, researchers, and practitioners continue to advance theory and practice to create a more just OEE field. While more robust research on many of the ideas presented is needed, the OEE field continues to grapple with social justice. Critical research, in addition to the current focus on outcomes-based research, promises to provide a fuller understanding of social justice in OEE (Lynch, 2012). The future will require an even stronger commitment and greater willingness to deal with issues of power and social injustice on the part of experiential educators and OEE programs. Change is not possible any other way.

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