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Speaking out: perspectives of gay and lesbian practitioners in outdoor education in the UK

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Outdoor education has been shaped historically and culturally by many influences. Physically challenging activities out of doors have been appropriated by a number of traditions. These include militaristic, educational and developmental ideologies. Arguably, central to these ideologies are heterosexual, white middle class values. While women have sought to challenge this and feminist and pro-feminist research is evident, very little research has been undertaken into sexuality in relation to teacher or practitioner perspective and experience. Consequently, gay and lesbian voices within outdoor education are all but silenced. This paper explores the perspectives of three lesbian and four gay men who work in the UK outdoor education 'industry'.

In-depth interviews were held with the participants exploring a variety of issues relating to their life histories and their experiences of working in a predominantly heterosexist outdoor education culture. This paper focuses upon the ways in which the participants perceived the need to conceal their lesbian and gay identities and the consequential effects of managing their identities.

Introduction

Contemporary adventure recreation and outdoor education have been shaped over the years by various influences, and physically challenging activities out of doors have been appropriated by a number of traditions embedded in militaristic, educational and developmental ideologies. Since the early 1980s, much feminist and pro-feminist work has explored and highlighted the significant male dominance in the area of physical activity and outdoor learning (see, for example, Warren, 1996; Cook, 2001; Humberstone & Pedersen, 2001; Allin & Humberstone, 2006). Nevertheless, Rickinson et al.'s (2004) review of research concerned with outdoor learning suggests a gap, a 'blank' spot, in research on groups such as girls and women.¹ They failed to identify the rich genre of gender studies related research around outdoor education.² While

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gender and gender relations have been explored in many outdoor contexts, perhaps more specifically focusing upon women's outdoor experiences, the heterosexist and homophobic nature of outdoor education has largely been ignored. Consequently, the experiences of gay and lesbian people in the outdoors continue to be rendered invisible and unspoken. As Dignan (2002, p. 34) points out for the outdoors the 'maintenance of silence is highlighted in lack of research into issues relevant for lesbians and gays'. There remain significant 'blind' spots in research to do with sexuality and gay and lesbian experiences of and in outdoor education. In wider terms but relevant to this paper, Zink and Burrows (2006) and Barrett (2005) pertinently draw attention to the importance of interrogating the taken for granted, everyday understandings of outdoor experiences and discourses. They highlight the 'hidden' that may be uncovered for the outdoor research community when it engages with post-structuralist thinking and consider what this might mean for outdoor practice. In this paper, topical life history interviews with three lesbian and four gay outdoor practitioners draw attention to the ways in which they experience their working life on numerous occasions as homophobic and heterosexist. The paper highlights the ways in which these practitioners variously choose strategies for accommodating to the prevailing heteronormalizing culture and the implications this has for both lesbian and gay outdoor educators, teaching and for the outdoor 'industry'.

Homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormalization

While there has been little research reported concerned with heterosexism in outdoor education, there is some research focusing upon and exploring sexuality in relation to sport and education. For example, Griffin (1992), Griffin and Genasci (1992), Burton Nelson (1996), Wellard (2002, 2006), Clayton (2005), Clayton and Humberstone (2006, 2007), Humberstone and Clayton (2007) draw attention to the way in which sport contributes to the continuation of sexism and heterosexism. Wright and Clarke (1999) show through careful analysis of media texts the ways by which women rugby players are constituted in hegemonic versions of heterosexual femininity.³ Taken for granted, everyday understanding about appropriate expected behaviour and the visual look of women are played out through these media discourses⁴ which pervasively construct heterosexuality as the only way of being:

These discourses by their very exclusion and silences continue to reinforce and legitimate a heterosexual way of being. Other forms of sexuality are denied legitimacy and normalcy through a range of strategies. These include being unacknowledged, being legitimated against, derogatory naming and the very absence of a language that is inclusive of lesbian and gay experiences. 'Compulsory heterosexuality' thereby acts as a form of social and sexual control through the naturalising and normalising of (hetero)-sexual relations (Wright & Clarke, 1999, p. 228).

In physical education, despite the research which has explored issues around sexuality (Griffin & Genasci, 1990; Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Clarke, 1998; Oliver & Lalik, 2000), Evans and Davies (2002) point out that the UK government, in debating the repeal of 'section 28' has uncovered the hidden homophobia in society, offering,

‘a stark reminder of the work to be done in education and physical education to contest the prejudices and intolerance that persists in society’ (p. 24).

Teaching unions do produce awareness-raising policies. For example the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers [NASUWT] (2004, p. 6) in its policy document, ‘Tackling homophobic bullying’, refers to homophobia as:

an irrational dislike, hatred or fear of individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. It results in negative consequences ranging from damage of self-esteem to premature death.

This identifies bullying to occur in either direction between pupils and teachers, pupils and pupils, and teachers and pupils and being manifested in a variety of forms including: ‘name calling, physical assault, hostility, isolation, rumours, ridicule, theft of property and sexual assault’. It also suggests that those who suffer from homophobic bullying do not necessarily have to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Nevertheless, a comprehensive study in the UK found that over 75% of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals had been verbally abused, with more than half reporting being physically attacked during their time at school. In the same study, more than half of those who had been bullied had contemplated self-harm or suicide as a result of the violence experienced (Rivers, 2001).

However, with acknowledgement of these issues, the very use of the terms homophobia or homophobic is problematic, implying a deep-seated aversion which is outside of a person’s control and so that person cannot be expected to think differently and therefore change their actions (Dignan, 2002). Through this form of language homosexuality is pathologized, that is it becomes discursively constructed as abnormal, contributing to the (hetero) normalizing project.

The research – ‘life histories’

The views and strategies referred to in this paper emerged from in-depth interviews which focused on the outdoor practitioners’ experiences of being gay or lesbian while working in the outdoor industry. Denzin (1978, 1989) and Plummer’s (1983) classic work set the basis for the different forms of research that takes as its starting point the reconstruction of a respondents’ life by the telling of their personal stories. During generally informal interviews, the participant was encouraged to talk about their past in their own words. Dowling-Naess (2001) argues that the life history interview can provide insights into a person’s identity and sense of self; and how these may change over time. The approach taken here was ‘topical’, the interviewees were asked to talk about their work in the outdoor industry and their views and opinions of ‘managing’ their sexuality. Interviews of between 45 minutes and 2 hours were conducted and were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were undertaken with three women – Charlie, Lucy and Victoria whose ages ranged between 22 and 24 years and who had worked in the outdoors from 4 to 8 years, and four men – Jack, James, Stuart and Richard, three of whose ages ranged from 23–26 years, and one aged over 40 years.⁵ All names mentioned here are pseudonyms.

Hetero-normative practice and outdoor education

It is reasonable to suppose that outdoor learning provision is no more or less immune from hetero-normalizing discourses and practices than any other educational or social contexts. Consequently, taking seriously the views and experiences of gay and lesbian outdoor practitioners provides insights into these normalizing processes and gay and lesbian perceptions of such processes. Sensitivity to heterosexist language and 'put downs' is something which straight people are less likely to gain without an understanding and knowledge of the effects of such discourse.

Richard not only acknowledges this but highlights the current usage of the term gay, which in common parlance amongst young people is often taken to mean 'rubbish' or 'lame', having acquired particularly negative connotations.

I notice more than say my straight counterparts that a lot of kids these days use derogatory terms towards gay people and I think that's . . . umm . . . partly due to the increased media attention that it gets . . . but its not put into perspective within schools. Like the new word for stupid is gay and you get it . . .

Yeah . . . and you get it all the time like . . . 'that's so gay' . . . 'you're so gay' . . . 'you batty boy' . . . and things like that and its there all the time and you know . . . the last week I was there I had just had enough of it and I just said to these kids 'why do you call each other gay?' (Richard).

Furthermore, Richard highlights the ways in which the heterosexism deeply embedded in society is carried with young people and affects the ways in which they react and respond to simple 'ice-breaker' activities, which may involve physical contact such as hand holding.

You know . . . kids won't even hold each other's hands, doing ice-breakers and things, and you get a bit of that with twelve and thirteen year olds, and between girls and boys. But almost all of the boys won't hold each other's hands and just say 'that's so gay'. The image is so strong, that if you just hold another boy's hand, whether it's just for an ice breaker or just for a bit of fun then there is sexual meaning behind it when it's totally innocent (Richard).

Not only is heterosexism imbued within these young people's identity, but also it appears to be deeply embedded in the structures of some organizational cultures as Charlie indicates from her experiences on being 'outed'.

I got called into the office one day and the manager threatened me that he could make sure I never worked with children again because he found out that I was gay . . . he said that if I was male he would have sacked me immediately (Charlie).

Identity management and coping strategies

Clearly then being gay or lesbian is not something that is taken for granted as normal or expected within a heterosexist society within which outdoor education is embedded. Consequently, gay and lesbian outdoor practitioners, like gay and lesbians in other work contexts make decisions about how they present themselves to their colleagues

and the young people they teach. Pioneering research concerned with gay and lesbian educators by Griffin (1991, 1992) in the USA described a continuum of identity management strategies used by gay and lesbian educators. These range from 'totally closeted', 'passing', 'covering' to 'coming out' (explicitly and implicitly) strategies, the last strategy being the most risky. In the UK, Clarke's (1997) life history research of lesbian PE teachers shows the ways in which these women created barriers around themselves in order to conceal from their colleagues and pupils their lesbian identity.

While Griffin's (1991) continuum may appear as a simple progression of identity management, the human emotion required in such endeavours can be considerable. Arguably, it may be possible for a school teacher in formal education to keep their 'secret' for the daily lunch hour in the staff room (Clarke, 1997). For the outdoor educator who may spend a week on expedition with several other colleagues and students, often in a physically and emotionally challenging environment this closeting becomes even more demanding.

As McClintock (1995, p. 52) points out:

Hiding something as basic as the identity of my life partner took a tremendous emotional toll. Being emotionally shut down meant that I was less available to my students and my co-workers. I had similar experiences as a student in experiential education programmes.

Situatedness of choices

For McClintock, her choice to remain totally closeted required much emotional work which appeared to detract from her teaching. The participants of this research tended to assess the outdoor education context in which they found themselves and thus made decisions about how they would present themselves. For example Lucy maintains, 'I chose who I was going to tell so I knew they would accept me'. Likewise Richard says, 'I think because it's something that can be quite harmful, you learn to manage it and learn to choose who to tell and you learn to be very wary of people'.

The interviewees of this study told of the different strategies that they adopted in different situations in order to manage their sexual identities/subjectivities. These have much in common with those chosen by the participants of Griffin's (1991) research.

Totally closeted strategies

Jack and Stuart tended to prefer not to disclose their sexual identities, despite, in Jack's case, having thoughtfully reflected upon the issues over a number of years. A major issue for these men is their acceptability within the outdoor industry if they were to 'come out', particularly of how this might adversely affect their future career prospects.

I would go out of my way and avoid talking about relationships. When I left (formal) teaching I spent a long time working on myself, but I still don't talk about it (Jack).

be it for career advancement or acceptance into an organisation following the crowd can be a good first move . . . I think there are circumstances in which every gay man will grin and bear it . . . be it for career advancement or acceptance into an organization . . . following the crowd can be a good first move (Stuart).

Passing as heterosexual

Griffin (1991) identifies strategies by which gay or lesbian people lead others to believe that they are heterosexual through such actions as speaking of past or fictitious partners of the other sex or wearing clothing or creating images which signify heterosexuality. Both Charlie and Victoria found it necessary to 'pass' as heterosexual; Charlie, by ensuring that she presented the image of herself as appropriately female, while Victoria pretended to have a boyfriend.

I have long hair now because I don't want to look like a boy or a stereotypical gay person. I don't want people to know who I am by looking at me (Charlie).

Once I had told everybody that he had made it up and that it wasn't true and that I had been going out with my boyfriend for five years for Christ sake and what I had gone through with him, etc., etc., people went 'Yeah, OK' and took my word for it and that was it (Victoria).

Many of the women in Clarke's (1997) study of women physical education teachers went to considerable lengths to impress their colleagues into believing that their partner was male in order that they should not be identified as lesbian.

Covering strategies

Griffin (1991) suggests that covering strategies are used when a person does not try to appear heterosexual, but hides his or her sexuality through avoiding situations where personal issues may be discussed or at social events where partners may also be invited.

Jack and James highlight their approaches of not identifying as heterosexual, yet not putting themselves into situations where they might need to.

I would go out of my way to avoid talking about relationships (Jack).

I don't go around shouting about it. Just like people don't go around shouting that 'I'm Fred and I'm straight' (James).

Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) suggest that the level at which young people are open about their sexuality is influenced by the fear of physical violence or abuse directed at them. Adults are also clearly affected by how they perceive the community will react to knowledge that they are gay or lesbian as the outdoor practitioners of this study show.

Being implicitly/explicitly out

Implicitly coming out, Griffin (1992) suggests, involves a person making decisions to stop using passing and covering strategies and to openly share information regarding

their personal life but without using the words gay or lesbian in referring to themselves, leaving others to assume that they are gay or lesbian; while being explicitly out involves the disclosure of identity using the words gay or lesbian.

Most of the interviewees in this study on occasions would feel sufficiently safe to be implicitly out but appeared rarely to specifically identify as gay or lesbian by using those words.

I was vaguely open about my sexuality in an 'if you ask I will tell' kind of way, so if someone asked 'do you have a girlfriend?', I would respond 'no but I do have a boyfriend' (Stuart).

As for what environment would I be open in . . . any! . . . I chose who I was going to tell so I knew they would accept me (Lucy).

Bryson and de Castell (1993, p. 285) talk about the complex issues around 'identifying' as lesbian, highlighting through their analysis, 'the tensions between post-structuralist theories of subjectivity and the political/pragmatic necessity of essentialist constructions of identity' prompted by their being described in a hostile fashion as a 'dyke' in a public place. On the one hand, 'politically' an oppressed 'other' may gain strength and power as part of what may be seen as an 'essentialist' group identifying as say woman, black, disabled or gay and so forth and so find solidarity to challenge their subordinated position, but on the other hand, they may know and want to move in and out of different subjectivities in different contexts (see for example Squires, 1993; Salleh, 1997). Metaphorically speaking, Bryson and de Castell (1993, p. 299) present this tension as 'ontological straight-jacket or revolutionary battle-cry?'. Their analyses show that although it may be possible to resolve these tensions theoretically, referring to Fuss (1989), it appears that, 'in the context of pedagogical practice' this can not be easily resolved. We see this conundrum in the voices of the interviewees, in the comments of Stuart and Lucy above and the previous speakers.

Teaching, identity and heteronormativity

This complex ambiguity is practised within the teaching context of these interviewees since, for the most part, they tended not to raise the issue of sexual identity, preferring to practise different subjectivities while teaching from other situations in which they found themselves. When asked if being gay or lesbian affected their teaching Victoria and Stuart's replies tended to be consistent with those of the other interviewees.

It didn't affect me at all. At the end of the day, I am a different person during the day to when I am not teaching. Whether I have a girlfriend or a boyfriend doesn't make a difference (Victoria).

I don't think it affects it in either way, it just makes me more careful in not making a flippant joke at the expense of a client, because I would be hurt if someone did that to me. I think it also helps to make me more understanding and hopefully accepting of different people (Stuart).

Furthermore, participants suggested that they rarely challenged heterosexism within teaching situations, although they themselves might avoid using heterosexist 'putdowns'.

I think there is a risk of when you do bring an issue like being gay in the outdoors, you might be creating, more of . . . an appearance that being gay is wrong and drawing attention to yourself . . . not dealing with the issue itself . . . how these people actually feel, having to hide something so basic as their identity, having to present themselves as something they are not. I think that has repercussions as well for the quality of teaching they give (Richard).

Richard intimates that reasons for not raising issues around heterosexism are not only to do with fear of negative reactions by drawing attention to oneself, but also fear of presenting gay and lesbian as not normal. Consequently, it appears that for the most part heteronormalizing practices are for these interviewees the safest to 'buy' into. The perceived negative effects of acting otherwise thus further maintains the hegemony, and prevents the 'disruption' of heteronormality in the outdoor education context.

As Gough and Gough (2003) suggest for environmental education research, so too it can be argued for outdoor education research – 'heteronormativity configures ignorance' (p. 48), that is to say taken-for-granted assumptions are far from neutral but can perpetuate the silencing of other ways of being and understanding.⁶

Research, theory and praxis

This research suggests that less blinkered perceptions and more critical reflections on current practice may enable an added sensitivity to teaching approaches and provide for a more inclusive environment, disrupting heteronormativity in the outdoors. Clearly the interviewees in this study are averse to an overly direct approach to raising the issue, which they perceive could be counter-productive. The failure to establish safe working and learning environments, to tackle heterosexist bullying and the inappropriate use of language associated with sexuality and even to remain silent may only give a message of consent to heterosexist bullying. As the interviewees highlight, for them the normalizing processes silence many from disrupting/deconstructing the current prevailing heterosexist norm.

Dignan (2002) emphasizes the importance of inclusion in this project of disruption, the inclusion of heterosexuality and people who do not identify as gay or lesbian, citing Quinlivan and Tower (1999) whose research focused upon formal educational contexts.

A deconstructive approach to sexuality must be inclusive of heterosexuality. Such an approach will destabilise heterosexuality through the recognition of diversity and difference, which exists within those communities. This will effectively render the category, along with its power to include or exclude, null and void, thereby creating change through actively pursuing concepts of heterogeneity and difference (Quinlivan & Tower, 1999, p. 522).

For those who do try to create a safe environment through raising issues around heterosexism, there is a risk that they may be stigmatized as gay or lesbian. For organizations, failing to recognize heterosexism and heterosexist bullying/violence' is not only negligent but also misses opportunities for professional development and creativity in the pedagogic process.

Concluding remarks

This paper has highlighted the continuing issue of heteronormativity as part of the learning process in much sport, education and outdoor education and emphasized its effects on gay and lesbian outdoor practitioners. The research has shown how the participants in this study managed their lesbian and gay identities within different outdoor contexts and the additional emotional expenses required of them. Despite a taken-for-granted understanding amongst 'liberal' commentators that being gay or lesbian may no longer be an issue of much concern, it is clearly significant for the participants in this study. Not only is it necessary for them to continually manage their identities in different situations but also some point to the broader effects on learners and learning of not challenging heteronormalizing processes.

This paper calls for further research that examines outdoor education through 'lenses' that frame and bring into focus this 'blind' spot, which asks what and where are the normalizing processes and what might it mean to outdoor experience if they are disrupted?

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Notes

1. Wagner (1993) refers to the collective ignorance in educational research making reference to 'blank' and 'blind' spots. Blank spots are known areas (theories, perspectives) which are seen to require further questioning, while blind spots are those which are not known or cared about and so are ignored. See also Gough (2002), who explores these in environmental education, and Zink and Burrows (2006) who explore a useful theoretical framework.
2. Clearly, as outdoor learning was their remit, the focused searches for the most part did not uncover the work published in non-outdoor-specific academic journals.
3. Examples of hegemonic and compulsory versions of heterosexual femininity include reference to newspapers emphasizing the 'feminine' attributes of the athletes and their heterosexual relationships rather than their skills as athletes (Wright & Clarke, 1999, pp. 236–238).
4. Discourse is taken to mean a set of understandings and beliefs which are reproduced by everyday practices and prevailing practices which construct a particular understanding of the world and reinforce particular ideologies, privileging the dominant world view (Weedon, 1997).
5. Richard was interviewed by Barbara. The other interviews were undertaken by Daniel for his final degree project which focused upon his interest in, and awareness of, sexuality issues in outdoor education (Barnfield, 2004).

6. Gough and Gough (2003) argue that environmental education research has largely been undertaken from the perspectives of white middle-class males and has been blind to other ways of seeing and knowing. They call for research that takes account of a diversity of perspectives, i.e. post-modern research (cf. Denzin, 1997; Humberstone, 2004).

Author biographies

Daniel Barnfield is a qualified outdoor teacher and is the director of a learning and development consultancy, Developing Potential (UK) Ltd (www.developing-potential.co.uk). An experienced trainer and consultant, Dan has a passion for the development of young people and those professionals who work with them. In addition to his consultancy, he continues to work closely with the Brathay Hall Trust in the design and delivery of inspirational personal development programmes.

Barbara Humberstone is Professor of Sociology of Sport and Outdoor Education at Buckinghamshire New University, UK. Her work is underpinned by principles of social and environmental equity and justice, and a concern for diversity. She has supervised and examined a number of Ph.D. theses and is involved in the new part-time MA Professional Development (Outdoor Learning) at BNU. She is currently chair of the European Institute for Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning (www.eoe-network.org).

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