‘Build Up Strength Without Looking Masculine’:

Heterosexual and Lesbian Women Experiences in Wilderness Recreation

J. Nichole McNiel

Research Proposal

**Introduction**

Research has shown dramatic differences between women and men's participation in wilderness recreation. Findings suggest that due to gender role socialization, women are often unable to participate in wilderness recreation because of a fear of crime and violence (Bialeschki 2005; Coble, Selin, and Erickson 2003; Day 2001; Henderson and Bialeschki 1993; Koskela 1999; Manning, Bacon, Graefe, Kyle, Lee, and Burns 2001; Pain 1991; Pain 1997; Wesely and Gaarder 2004), perception of outdoors as dangerous places (Filemyr 1997), caretaker ethic (Johnson et. al 2001; Wearing and Wearing 1988), perceived lack of skill, self-confidence, feminine body-image (Frederick and Shaw 1995), and a perceived lack of entitlement due to views of outdoor recreation as being primarily male-dominated territory (Henderson and Bialeschki 1991; Johnson et. al 2001; Virden and Walker 1999; Wearing and Wearing 1988).

While studies tend to focus on these aspects of gender role socialization and women's wilderness recreation participation, I would like to extend current knowledge of women’s wilderness recreation participation, by exploring a less-examined demographic disparity within the wilderness recreation women’s community: sexual orientation. Few studies have undertaken qualitative inquiry into heterosexual and lesbian women’s experiences in wilderness recreation. Through in-depth interviews, this paper delves into the role of gendered ideologies that may reinforce the marginalized status of lesbian women within the wilderness recreation community. Once highlighting the experiences of lesbian and heterosexual women in wilderness recreation participation, this paper discusses implications of these findings for sociology and future studies.

**Literature Review**

The founding of the national parks service was guided by an idealized view of wilderness as the realm of purity, which had to be preserved (Cox 1985; Cronon 1995; Miller 1992; Ross-Bryant 2005). In 1916, inception of the National Park Service was guided by both utilitarian and economic rationales (Ross-Bryant 2005). Later, the environmental movement encouraged more people to turn to the wilderness for recreational use (Turner 2002). Following the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, wilderness recreational activities grew in popularity and travel to the parks became a common way to enjoy an individualistic exploration of wilderness while maintaining membership within the American community (Miller 1992; Ross-Bryant 2005).

Those that remain left out, with little ability to engage in wilderness recreation, are often empirically found to be distinct demographic segments of society. That is to say, this inequality is consistently experienced among minority populations. Racial minorities, the poor, and women have a disadvantaged position within society, which underpins and often places constraints or limitations on their leisure participation (Arnold and Shinew 1998).

While the disparity experienced by these demographic groups is evident, women are impacted most by this inequality. For example, one study found that women were most likely to feel constrained in outdoor recreation when compared to racial and rural groups (Johnson et al. 2001). Lee et al. (2001) found that elderly minority females without a college degree and an income of less than $20,000 occupy the lowest rank in the hierarchy of outdoor recreation participation probability.

Research indicates a myriad of gender-based meanings and experiences within leisure activities, especially outdoor recreation (Henderson et al. 2002). These meanings are often tied to the outcomes of gender role socialization and research often explores the various motivations for why women do not participate in wilderness recreation or other leisure activities in the same manner as their male counterparts.

Therefore, while some women are involved in wilderness recreation, their participation is circumvented by a vast difference in gender norms. For instance, the back-cover of one women’s backpacking guide advertised, “Know who will make the best companions on the trail. Build up strength without looking “masculine.” Clothing alterations that make life easier. Deal with hygiene and medical problems in the wilderness: menses, pregnancy, contraception, and ‘the pill’” (Glotfelty 1996: 440).

In recent decades, studies have found that fear is related to women’s participation in wilderness recreation and leisure activities. Fear often motivates a woman’s perception of and precautionary behavior within some spatial contexts. These spatial constraints are intertwined with micro and macro gender power relations. Thus, there is a fear-related production of space (Koskela 1999; Krenichyn 2006). In some ways, this *geography of fear* has resulted in women’s lives being more restricted than men’s (Day 2001; Koskela 1999; Pain 1991; Pain 1997). Therefore, gender is viewed as a crucial factor affecting fear of violence and geographical mobility in women’s lives (Coble et al. 2003; Day 2001; Koskela 1999; Krenichyn 2006; Manning et al. 2001; Pain 1991; Wesely and Gaarder 2004). In a recent study, Day (2001) tied fear to the construction of masculine and feminine gender identities. Her findings reveal that the spatial construction of masculine identities builds upon perceptions of feminine identities, especially those of women as “fearful” and “endangered” in given places (Day 2001).

Other research suggests that women’s opportunities to participate in wilderness recreation is greatly constrained by a caretaker ethic (Johnson et. al 2001; Wearing and Wearing 1988), perceived lack of skill, lack of self-confidence, feminine body-image (Frederick and Shaw 1995), and a perceived lack of entitlement due to views of outdoor recreation as being primarily male-dominated territory (Henderson and Bialeschki 1991; Johnson et. al 2001; Virden and Walker 1999; Wearing and Wearing 1988).

Recent literature cites the heteronormativity of wilderness recreation. Lesbians’ participation in leisure has gained focus in recent years as scholars began to recognize the need to examine all aspects of women’s leisure (Henderson et al. 2002). By emphasizing the ideologies that shaped the experiences of women, research shed insight into the relationship of gender roles to outdoor settings. According to Henderson et al. (2002), five percent of the studies published in journals between 1996-2000, focused on lesbians. For example, one study found that older lesbians attributed their discrimination experiences within leisure to dominant cultural ideologies (Jacobson and Samdahl 1998). Lesbian mothers were found to have more ability to participate in leisure because they did not have strict gendered social roles in their lives (Bialeschki and Pearce 1997).

Findings suggest that while the outdoor recreation market boasts its own community and social norms, it still intertwines with underlying cultural ideals and symbols, such as ideas about “appropriate” gender roles within wilderness recreation (Russell, Sarick, and Kennelly 2002). According to Russell et al. (2002), this heterosexualization of nature is dependent upon social constructions of what is ‘normal’. Not only is wilderness seen as the traditional arena in which men can enact rugged individualism and prove their masculinity, but is concurrently laden with heterosexual gender roles. Deviance from prescribed gender roles often results in women being called “Amazon types” (code word for lesbians) and the practice of “lesbian baiting”, whereby women working in wilderness recreation are labeled as lesbians, regardless of their sexual orientation (Russell et al. 2002).

While categorizing people by their sexual orientation is a relatively new phenomenon in Western culture, literature highlights the need for more studies to delve into lesbian experiences, especially within wilderness recreation. Related to these ideas, this paper seeks to extend current research on gender role socialization from a critical standpoint by exploring heterosexual and lesbian women’s experiences in their wilderness recreation participation.

**Methods**

Access to the sample of interviewees for this project will be obtained through the author’s participation in wilderness recreation. An email will be sent out to women I know who either participate in wilderness recreation, or who know women who engage in these activities. This email will solicit help for this project in referring me to women with whom this study would be applicable. Thus, through convenience sampling, I can find heterosexual and lesbian women subjects to participate in an in-depth interview for this study. Snowball sampling will be used to find additional participants. This method involves recruiting future subjects from among the women I interview. That is to say, I will ask subjects if any of their women acquaintances, who participate in wilderness recreation activities, would be willing to be a part of this study. I will then contact any women I am referred to, explain this study to them, and ask if they would like to participate.

Given this paper’s topic, this study explores the following research questions:

1) Do lesbians and heterosexual women have different experiences associated with their wilderness recreation?

2) Are there differences among women wilderness recreation users in how they define, approach, and choose which activities to participate in?

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