

# Challenging Homogeneity in Post-Secondary Outdoor Recreation Programs

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There appears to be very little diversity with respect to student race, age, ability and class in many outdoor recreation programs across North America. This is an important issue affecting multiple aspects of outdoor recreation programs including student and faculty recruitment as well as course content and delivery (Aguilar & Washington, 1990; Floyd, 1998; Frater, Howe & Murray, 1997).

In the absence of a diverse student population education is often catered to meet the needs of the existing majority (Gnosh, 1996; Phillip, 1999; Warren, 1998). For example, consider the dominant conceptualizations of 'leisure' and 'recreation' taught to recreation students. A universal definition of leisure and recreation seems to exist in many recreation programs which is grounded in a Western, American-Euro-centric, Anglophone worldview. Little attention is paid to the different ways in which a variety of cultures perceive leisure and recreation.

How do faculty and staff in outdoor recreation programs, who are often themselves from the same privileged position as the students, address issues of diversity and the achievement of more socially just and inclusive outdoor recreation? The following learning activities are designed to help students identify and understand the homogeneity of outdoor recreation programs. Most students rarely understand this phenomenon, their role within it, and the actual and potential implications of the current situation. The following activities adapted from critical pedagogy, popular education, and anti-racist education are also designed to help students broaden their perspective and challenge existing paradigms that position outdoor recreation as elitists and exclusionary.

### *Activity #1: Mirrored Collage*

Students are asked to bring outdoor and adventures magazines to the class (e.g., *Outside, Explore, Paddler*, etc.). Working in groups of three or four, they are asked to create a collage that represents the typical outdoor recreationist, as portrayed in the magazines. The students are usually delighted to be involved in a cut-and-paste activity focused on popular culture and have always greeted the task with tremendous enthusiasm.

When the students are finished, the collages from the class are hung up around the room and the groups present their work to the class. Together, students note patterns and not surprisingly, similar images tend to emerge. The 'typical' recreationists, almost unequivocally, participating in adventurous and risky activities are a strikingly homogenous lot: primarily Caucasian, affluent, able-bodied, fit and young. As one student said, "They are just beautiful white people doing crazy things!"

In the debrief, students are asked to deconstruct these images with a view to understanding the implications of the media representing the recreation field in this way. We invite them to discuss whether the media is accurately representing the population who recreates and we encourage the students to explore if and how they see themselves or the class represented in the images. Usually, the class is able to identify that what is being portrayed in the magazines is also representative of the class demographics; in other words, they are able to make the connection between the lack of diversity in the media representations and the lack of diversity in the class.

This activity becomes a critical catalyst for discussing the implications of a homogenous student body. Students are able to explore questions such as "Whose voices are missing in this class?" "Why are these voices missing?" "Does recreation/leisure mean the same things to everyone?" "What are the implications of these missing voices?"

One of the reasons this activity has been useful for discussing homogeneity in the field and the class is because the collages become, in essence, a mirror. In the absence of the mirrored collage, some students have been resistant to discussing diversity, seeing it as abstract and irrelevant to their lives. The mirrored collage makes the issue personal in an entertaining yet forceful way.

### *Activity #2: Hegemony Treasure Hunt*

Once the lack of diversity in our classes and the field have been identified, we believe that it is important for students to understand that this lack of diversity reflects wider social forces which privilege certain groups over others. A useful concept in addressing this issue is hegemony, which describes how inequitable power relations are maintained. Generally, hegemony describes a process whereby social relations which benefit powerful elites become so entrenched that few people stop to question these relations and, in a sense, consent to them (Fawcett, Bell & Russell, 2001; Marino, 1997). A common refrain in response to inequities is 'that's just the way it is' which serves to normalize these relations and marginalize those most affected.

To help students understand this concept in a concrete way, we ask them to participate in a "Hegemony Treasure Hunt" to search for evidence of cultural assumptions which exist within the recreation field to which they consent daily, usually unconsciously. They are asked to examine a recreational facility, hunting for hegemonic assumptions embedded in the facility. They can bring back their "treasures," take photos, or orally describe their findings to the class.

The results of this activity are always enlightening. For example, students will notice that facilities are often set up for able-bodied individuals and that structures for persons who live with disabilities appear to be add-ons. They notice how wall photographs of Boards of Directors or Presidents are almost always of what appear to be white middle- or upper-class men. Some students collect and analyze program brochures or advertisements, which favour English-speaking, middle- to upper-class participants.

The sharing of these findings helps make embedded cultural assumptions visible and help demonstrate that the very structures of recreational facilities and programs reinforce the notion that recreation is the purview of a homogeneous community and may not appear welcoming to those who do not feel they fit the norm.

### *Activity #3: Power Flower*

After the Hegemony Treasure Hunt, we find it helpful to encourage students to bring these issues back to a personal level again. To do so, we have used the Power Flower, an activity borrowed from Enid Lee (1985) and Graham Pike and David Selby (2000). Working in groups of approximately 8 students, students are given a large piece of paper with a 'flower' on it. Each petal of the 'Power Flower' has a word written on the end of it. Examples include words such as 'age,' 'ability,' 'sexuality,' 'gender,' 'socio-economic status' and 'race.' Students are asked to explore if and how each of these identities affects their ability to have 'power' in the recreation field. If they feel they have power based on their identity, they write their name on the outside of the petal. Conversely, if they feel they have less power because of this identity, they write their name on the inside of the petal. For example, if a student was able-bodied and this gave them power in the recreation field, then they would write their name on the outside of the petal. If a student was not heterosexual and they felt that their sexuality cost them power in the recreation field, they would write their name in the inside of the petal. (Of course, we do not demand that students fill in every petal and declare their sexuality, for example. It is important to not force students to "come out" in regards to any of their identities).

Supporting the contention that many voices are not represented in the class, it is not uncommon for many students to have their names written on the outside of every petal, indicating that they have a significant amount of power and privilege in the recreation field. Again, students can be encouraged to consider whose voices are missing from the class and the possible reasons for this.

Importantly, this exercise also allows the students to see the diversity that *does* exist in the class. Often, the students are able to realize that the class may be more diverse than they originally realized, as they learn about their peers' ethnic backgrounds, sexualities, social classes, etc. By looking at the location of the names in the power flower, students can learn a great deal about each other that cannot be learned by simply looking at a person.

This activity also engages students in rich debates about the sources of power in the recreation field and helps them recognize the complexities of power relations. First, they can witness their peers' different interpretations of power. For example, while discussing gender in the recreation field, some students perceive that men have significantly more power than women, while some students believe the opposite. Second, it becomes evident that while some students have power in one area (e.g., race), they may have less power in other areas (e.g., sexuality). The exploration of privilege can be difficult for some students and lead to feelings of paralysis or guilt (Davis, 1992; McIntosh, 1995). Addressing these feelings is essential and we devote significant discussion time to ways in which privilege can be spent in positive ways. For example, discussion around socioeconomic privilege has led some students to suggest they create a stockpile of donated gear for less well-off students. Other students note that wearing hand-me-downs may cause poorer students embarrassment. Others then begin to challenge the idea that one must have all the latest outfits and technology to enjoy various pursuits and argue that we should resist the rampant consumerism in the field. Challenging unnecessary consumerism and learning to live with less not only creates a more level playing field but also is more environmentally friendly.

### Conclusion

These three activities are part of our efforts to help students broaden their perspectives of outdoor recreation. Students and staff, as professionals in the field, must work to challenge the dominant paradigm of outdoor recreation as an elite field and strive to make outdoor recreation a comforting, inviting and accepting environment regardless of one's background or current situation.

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