



## Slaying Dragons with Chickens and Eggs:

Exploring the effectiveness of development training in the outdoors for aiding young women in making significant personal transitions within society.

by Geoff Price

### Introduction

Development training is said to be intervention that aids individuals or groups in making transitions or changes in perception, behaviour or attitude <sup>(15, 11)</sup> This article is about women in society and specifically how successful they may be at making transitions in life. In this case the transition that involves gaining independence from the family home.

A style of development training has been successfully developed for working with men although the specific needs of women in a development training context have not been wholly facilitated <sup>(11)</sup>. However, there have been attempts within the field of development training to provide more appropriate opportunities for young women <sup>(5, 13)</sup>. This article looks to examine 'transition' in the context of development training in the outdoors. Then we explore how the field might be able to better consider the needs of young women and implement programmes that might draw out greater successes for the individuals involved. The concept of 'the chicken and the egg' is then introduced as a means of discussing the roles of *practice* and wider *society* within which an individual is a part.

There are complexities of discussing gender in any field <sup>(10)</sup>. Using gender terms such as *man, woman, boy, girl* imparts a social expectation, using terms such as *sex, male, female* offers a writer some detachment by using a more scientific language. However, much of the writing in social science will use *gender* based terminology so that is what is used in this article.

### Some truths of women in UK society

According to the Office for National Statistics (2008), men and women in the UK are becoming more alike in terms of employment, earning and education. However, there are key differences in some areas. For example, in education: girls/women continue to outperform boys/men at every stage from key stage one through to higher education.

However, also according to the Office for National Statistics, a greater percentage of men are in employment, and where women are employed, 50% are part-time employees (in part due to the roles in family life women play). Added to this is the pay gap difference of 12.6% in favour of men.

More statistics reveal that fewer women own their own homes. Plus, men travel further each year, though women make significantly more 'escort trips'; such as taking a child to school.

Less statistically based thoughts on women in western society state that the social construct of society dictates that women must be beautiful, compliant, cooperative

and subservient. Furthermore, it is suggested that this stereotype is hard to challenge as the ideals of society are invariably lead and constructed by white, middle-class, heterosexual men (9).

It could be said that women generally have less money and fewer opportunities for employment despite displaying advanced abilities in education. Of key significance here is the evidence that suggests that the UK is dominated by men and masculinity.

## Transition as personal development

The "Hero's Journey" is often referred to as means for outlining transitional processes for an individual. The journey's processes can be abbreviated and condensed into these parts (2, 14, 18, 19):

- 'Normal Life' – The life of an individual as they are familiar with. Typically, (despite what might be considered negative circumstances) an individual is comfortable here.
- 'The Call to Adventure' – Either through a third party or their own impetus, an individual "hears a call" and so is given the inspiration to embark upon a journey.
- 'Crosses the threshold' – This is the departure of 'normal life' with which our individual is so accustomed. This stage often leads to feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and sadness.
- 'A Guardian or a Challenge' – With the help of a supernatural aid or companions, our individual is compelled into challenge and as Warren (1996) writes; *must slay the dragon*.
- 'The Return Home' – Once this individual has reflected upon the journey, they may be able to understand themselves more clearly and therefore be able to place themselves more appropriately in society. Subsequently, their new found identity becomes their '*Normal Life*' and the journey should come full circle but end at a different place.

The outdoors has for years, provided the context within which this journey can be implemented (17). For example, by exposing individuals to perceived risk in say, a rock climb, the individual is removed from '*Normal Life*' and must overcome a challenge that gives that individual a greater insight into their own potential. Using the 'journey' as a metaphor, challenges that are overcome during developmental experiences can be related back to the 'real world'. An example would be the challenge of leaving the family home to become independent (11).

Transition within society can be measured by studying the age at which young people become

financially independent from their parents' or guardians' (7). During the previous 60 years, individuals are waiting longer and becoming older before *flying the nest*. Researchers give different reasons for this that include employment shortages, over inflated house prices or staying on in to higher education or training (16). Today:

- 40% of women aged from 20-24 years old are still living with their parents.
- 60% of men aged from 20-24 year olds are still living with their parents (16).

Based on the information outlined; does development training in the UK have the potential to offer more to women in aiding them through transitions? It is proposed here that the contribution made by the field could be more effective and that yes; development training could offer itself as a springboard for women to re-define their roles within society. Especially when one considers that women appear better educated or more intelligent (based on the information from the Office for National Statistics) and a greater percentage are prepared to leave home at a younger age.

## A deeper look at women in development training

*If we accept these two statements:*

- *The Hero's Journey is a widely accepted model upon which to base development training programmes*
- *Women in Western society are still subjected to an oppressive social system . . .*

*Has development training done enough to cater for women's specific needs?*

Some writers suggest that adventure therapy and development training does not properly cater for feminine specific needs in a masculine dominated domain (5, 19). The '*Hero's Journey*' does little to engage women and thus, it could be argued, the potential for aiding significant life transitions is lost.

But why?

The '*Hero's Journey*' engages men as it asks for the conquering of an obstacle (19). This promotes the manifestation of aggressive and competitive behaviour. This is the complete opposite of typical behaviours displayed by women. It is argued that women may be more inclined to seek out an opportunity for open emotional discourse





among a group of peers who create an atmosphere of emotional safety and support (4, 10, 20).

These behaviours can be seen in the very early years of an individual's life. Boys and girls (or girls and boys) construct different ways of communicating with each other. Boys will rejoice and bond with each other through competitive and physical expression, whereas girls will relate to an individual more closely if they share their "biggest secrets" (10).

We might look to the social roles that women take in the indigenous cultures of South America or Canada. In these societies, women are seen as a link to nature and these cultures learn *from* nature rather than *in* nature (4). Where the 'Hero's Journey' is often set within nature (2); women may be more inclined to take learning *from* nature. Taking an example from myth and legend, we might speculatively contrast the masculine dragon slaying hero with a more feminine view (9). This view might prefer to open an interrelating discourse with the dragon and seek empathetically and mutually based relationships. More an understanding friend than a slayer.

I believe that the Hero's Journey goes some way to reinforcing gender assumed roles and expectations. Women in society are still subjected to masculine lead ideals. To this end, it is argued that the Hero's Journey model of transition not only negatively contributes to women's transition in society, it may in fact be detrimental.

## The Chicken and the Egg

Development training in the UK faces an obstacle of its own making. Thus, a change in values and subsequently practice is necessary.

### Society as the Chicken

One role of development training is to promote a positive contribution to society and to align individuals with social norms (11). As already discussed, concerns have been expressed with this notion as social norms and society are often lead and influenced by masculine ideals (5, 6, 11). The repercussion of this for young women may be the potential for further oppression once returned to society. This oppression might lead a young woman to rebel against social norms:

*"... a creature of the deepest forest within, the undomesticated, unhousebound, unhusbanded woman, hungry for something beyond human society, restless, prowling, in thrall to a savage earth lust." (4)*

It is perhaps so far as unfair to encourage women to embark upon a journey of transition and personal development. As the 'return home' process may only further highlight the social barriers that prevent women

from being independent; or further, a leader. Gender inequality is felt even more prevalently by those women who have become leaders. Especially in a field that has been dominated by men; an example being development training in the outdoors (1).

However, it may be through development training that the values of society could change. Thus making the process of transitions in life potentially easier for young women more generally.

### Practice as the Egg

Although contested (8), some believe that "women only programmes" provide opportunities for women to personally develop in a context and environment that suits them (5). One such example is the "Connecting with Courage" programme initiated by the Outward Bound Trust in Canada. This programme began in 1992, born out of the perceived need to provide adolescent young women with an empowering developmental experience (13). The initiators reasoned that at the age of 12/13 years old, teenage girls become responsive and susceptible to the gender imposed expectations society places upon them. Having open communication with others you can relate to, has allowed young women to discuss the highs and lows of femininity in society.

By identifying and discussing such things, adolescent women may begin to better understand the place they wish to have within society. Coupled with the empowering (yet alternative) experience of an outdoor programme to instil the confidence to make change and challenge society, the programme initiators believe these adolescent young women will become the societal leaders of the future (13).

The societal leaders that the above practice (*Egg*) might reveal are the individuals that could go on to hatch a new society (*Chicken*). Yet only if the current *Chicken* wishes to lay such an *Egg*.

### Or the Cockerel?

Development training practice needs now to consider how it might serve the needs of the individuals whom embark upon a transitional process. How does the outdoors (a historically masculine lead field) seek to empower individuals while at the same time ensuring the society from which that individual derives is ready to change its ways and regard feminine values with equal importance to that of the masculine?

Perhaps one direction the field could explore with further discussion and research would be an outdoor programme that encourages feminine values yet is designed solely for young men. So, rather than seeking to mould young women in to acceptable individuals within a masculine society, men are asked to seek femininely grounded relationships with the outdoors and with each other in the hope of discouraging aggressive

or “*macho*” behaviour. Added to this, the positive fall out might be that of sharing the responsibility for promoting gender equality. Indicative to this may be the idea that it is not women or the feminine that are/is to blame for its demise within society.

## Conclusion

I posed the question as to whether development training is effective at aiding women in the UK with making significant life transitions, such as becoming established as independent from the family home. From the evidence of statistical indicators and the thoughts of different writers it would appear that the power of “gender roles” is the dominant social construct in our society.

The often referred transitional model widely used in development training; that of the Hero’s Journey was described and questioned in its effectiveness for women. The model is constructed out of masculine ideals of ‘*conquering and battle*’. This does little to engage women in personal development. Thus, a different style or approach to outdoor development training programmes may need to be instigated to aid women in making transitions. For this we looked to Canada and its “women only” programmes that have had great success. It is suggested here that UK practice may do well to adopt or learn from such practices.



Therefore while development training does have the potential to contribute to transition in women more positively and effectively, all is lost if society (lead by masculine ideals) refuses to accept empowered young women to take a lead and so carve out gender equality. Therefore society must change, yet society might only change through the work of empowered and inspired individuals. So, there is a link to make that requires a significant change in values and practices in development training that may be less influenced by the dominant masculine paradigm both in society and outdoor practice. Thus, I ask; which comes first? The *chicken or the egg*? ■

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## Author’s Notes



Geoff Price has recently graduated from the University of Cumbria (Ambleside Campus) with a degree in Outdoor Studies. Currently, he is working as a freelance outdoor instructor with various organisations in England and Wales. He is most keenly interested in the way the field of outdoor education portrays the outdoors to clients and participants and he looks to develop ways in which people might come to a mutually beneficial and intrinsically grounded relationship with the outdoor environment. His future aspirations include sustainable travel and further study. You can contact Geoff by e-mail: [geoffprice88@yahoo.com](mailto:geoffprice88@yahoo.com)  
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