

Freedom is the capacity to PAUSE



I was driving home in a hire car from a recent outdoor learning event. Arriving at the garage I went to remove the fuel cap. “Hmmm, this isn’t like my one!” After faffing around for a bit, trying a few different things, looking inside the car for some kind of button, I became frustrated. I looked across the forecourt and spotted a tall bearded man, aha – he’ll know! As I walked towards him I began to question my thinking, and in pausing clocked his old F Reg vehicle. Why on earth would this person know any better than me how to open the fuel cap on my hire car!? For one, he didn’t have a car remotely like the one I was driving, nor was there anything to suggest that he might possess some worldly knowledge about all things relating to the modern complexities (you just had to push it in!) of fuel cap opening. But, he was a man – his competence at all things “technical” coming guaranteed in my subconscious.

In the last issue we explored the idea that people have a degree of unconscious stereotype bias; the automatic, unintentional assumptions we form about certain groups of people (which can also be directed at ourselves). These are often incompatible with our conscious values. This is the often invisible, yet subtle reality of everyday existence which can drive our decisions, actions and outcomes.

Gender bias

Gender bias stems from our deep-seated beliefs about gender roles and how men and women should behave (by fitting neatly into binary categories)¹. While this affects people of all genders, the focus here will be on the impact for women working in a sector where the majority (around 80%) of the workforce is male.

It is notable that in 2016 research, carried out by Cress Allwood on behalf of the IOL, identified that 40% of respondents of all genders highlighted that there are or may be barriers (hidden or otherwise) for women pursuing leadership roles within the sector. Interestingly, the research also showed a bias towards men viewing women as being responsible for gender equality². This is important to recognise, as most leadership positions with power to effect change and ability to influence culture are held by men. To make progress gender equality needs to be a shared responsibility. This is challenging, as it is asking people who don’t necessarily have the lived experience of some of the influencing factors for women, to not only see and believe in the sometimes seemingly invisible... But then to have the knowledge, skill and motivation to take appropriate action at an individual, organisational and sector level (amid the multitude of other competing priorities). Not an easy task, but then most worthwhile things in life are not.

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Photos: from the author



This article will focus on the potential impacts of gender bias on women pursuing a leadership role within the outdoors, with a view to shedding some light on a few specific examples, impacts and opportunities for change.

Roles and goals

Gender bias starts young, and despite some progress being made with gender equality, stereotypes are still very much alive and well in 2018. A recent YoungScot study highlights that,

“...the young women recalled specific expectations of girls (to study, to keep clean and tidy, to stay indoors) and of boys (playing outside, getting muddy/dirty, needing to run around and let off steam”.

To read the full Girlguiding Survey go to Attitudes: www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2018.pdf

Similarly, Girlguiding's 2018 Attitudes Survey⁴ found that judging girls on their appearance rather than their competence, the assumption that girls can't be strong and the accepted norm that

some jobs are 'just for boys', are a few of many examples of the way gender inequality continues to impact young women. Society's construction and perpetuation of gender roles (ideals of femininity), can create and sustain unhelpful limiting beliefs in women. This can preserve disempowering stereotypes, when it comes to the outdoors, adventure, risk and leadership.

The outdoor sector is not immune to such messages. This can be blatant (like my not too distant memory of being tasked with cleaning the centre every morning, while the equally inexperienced and unqualified junior male staff brought the powerboats in). It can also be the subtler messages which are embedded in everyday thinking and interactions.

Masculine is 'hard'(?) Feminine is 'soft' (?)

Women are traditionally framed as caring, nurturing and good at interpersonal skills. This is what we collectively and it could be viewed, disparagingly, refer to as soft skills. Men on the other hand are thought to be assertive, powerful and good at technical skills. Or what we collectively value and refer to as hard skills. Unfortunately, research shows that women can often find themselves in double binds, being

expected to use their interpersonal and relationship skills more, whereas physicality and technical skills are often more highly valued in the outdoors (and western culture generally)⁵.

Research also suggests that while male and female outdoor leaders may have many similar motivations for working within an outdoor organisation (reputation, employment conditions, progression opportunities) there are also key differences. Female instructors within The Outward Bound Trust were three times more likely than male instructors to cite personal development through adventure, as an intrinsic motivator for working at The Trust, while male staff were more likely to cite the high level of adventure or leading expeditions⁶.

When physicality and technical competence are valued more highly than intra and inter-personal skills, within the subculture of an organisation (e.g. what is talked about most and celebrated in the staff room), this can have a disproportionately negative effect both on women's experiences of the workplace and how female staff are viewed within the workplace. Allwood's (2016) survey also uncovered that giving more weight to advanced technical skills (despite not being required for the actual job role), in promotions, pay rises or selection for leadership roles, can be a barrier to progression for some women who have an equally valuable skill set to offer.

What roles do you assume when working in a mixed gender environment and why?

What roles do you have power or influence to dictate to others?

What do you do in your language, behaviour, policies, processes to equally value technical and intra/interpersonal competencies, where appropriate?

Assumed competence versus questioning competence

Let's return to the story at the start. Surely this is just an isolated incident, something to laugh about and forget. Inconsequential. (Maybe it's just me, I probably shouldn't admit it!). Or could this microcosm of competence bias be happening all around us?

A largescale, longitudinal study carried out by leading gender diversity experts McKinsey and Co, highlights that in the workplace women routinely have to provide more evidence of their competence than men and are more likely to have their judgement questioned in their area of expertise⁷. In the outdoors, studies highlight that people have a pre-conceived notion of what a leader will look like: it happens to be a white male. While males are generally implicitly assigned this role, leadership competence assumed, women often have to work harder to earn it⁸ ("Miss, are you taking us climbing?!").

In researching this article, one of the most interesting and illuminating pieces I read was linked to research with transgender people, making the transition to being male. It offers a unique perspective where literally the only thing that has changed is the persons gender identity presentation:

"When I was a woman, no matter how many facts I had, people were like, 'Are



you sure about that?' It's so strange not to have to defend your positions". When they suggested women for promotions, other men said, "Oh! I hadn't thought about her"—they were able to promote women because their advice was taken more seriously. Personality traits that had been viewed negatively when they were women were now seen as positives. "I used to be considered aggressive," said one individual. "Now I'm considered 'take charge.' People say, 'I love your take-charge attitude'".

Taken as isolated incidents, such things can be invisible, one offs, nothing to worry about. The accumulative impact over time however can be far greater.

What do you assume yourself and others you work with to be competent at? How does this drive your decisions and behaviour?

Who do you invite to contribute expertise in discussions or decision making?

How do you develop your own, and others competence in roles which may not be gender stereotypical?

Corrosion of confidence and self-limiting behaviour

Female babies are not born questioning their competence at life; Western society teaches the females from a very early age, some incredibly unhelpful messages which can become internalised, influencing beliefs, thought patterns, actions and outcomes. Particularly when it comes to taking on 'gender incongruent' (in societal terms) behaviours and roles.

This is important to recognise because for some women self-doubt can be an internal factor (barrier for some) influencing ability to engage meaningfully with outdoor activity. This lower representation from women persists into the qualification pathways for outdoor leadership, with self-doubt potentially impacting on whether women feel able (or not) to join a training course. Whether they feel ready (or not) to go forward for an assessment. Whether they feel like a new job, project or promotion is for them. Of course, this selecting out could just be preference, or a lack of interest, right? For some, perhaps. That is also the easy answer, the answer which lets us off the hook, negates a need to think and behave differently. Paradoxically for some women, this fear of judgement and not feeling 'good enough, plays a significant role in opting out of exactly the experiences needed to build the skills, self-belief and networks of people who could help to support and motivate growth and development in the outdoors. Women can take ownership for this internal struggle, taking opportunities despite doubt, consciously focussing on evidence to support competence and accepting that not being good is part of the process of getting good. This year's Women in Adventure conference at Glenmore Lodge explored exactly this¹⁰.

We are what we repeatedly do

While some of the above may be uncomfortable to consider, the positive take-away is that biases have been learned, and so can be unlearned (if we are willing to acknowledge them). Neuroscientists are continually making new discoveries about the brains remarkable capacity to rewire, grow and change. Awareness is the first step. As with anything, this takes conscious practice, effort to think differently and strategies to overcome disempowering ways of thinking and behaving which we may have been practicing for a very long time.

This article extends ideas shared at a workshop held at the UK Outdoor Learning Conference. Read the conference supplement for a summary of discussions, useful resources and ideas.



One way of developing awareness is to practice creating PAUSE moments¹¹. This is especially important in times where you have influence in decision making which affects others, particularly when it involves assessing competence.

P – Pay attention to what is beneath the surface

A – Acknowledge and accept your reactions, interpretations and judgements

U – Understand that a different response is possible

S – Select the response which is most empowering for all involved

E – Execute, by acting on your conscious judgement

Bias is not the (only) answer to lower representation by women in the outdoors. However, it is a significant and well researched area which can be brought largely within our control. Each new moment is an opportunity to replace unhelpful, deep-rooted thinking patterns (which can drive our actions) with more empowering ones. It is also something which can be the responsibility for people of all genders to consider at an individual, organisational and sector level. ■

If not you, then who? If not now, then when?

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