Telling My Story: Being Female in Outdoor Education in Higher Education

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Introduction

When I was asked to contribute to this book, I pounced. As a female working in outdoor education, I was keen to add my story to this important collection to explain the road that I have travelled, the place I am in now, and comment on how I see the future unfolding. The invitation was fortuitous, as, at that time, I was delving into areas around practitioner enquiry (Drew, Priestly, & Michael, 2016), biographical narrative research (Horsdal, 2012), research as lived experience (van Manen, 1990), and the complexity of identity (Griffiths, 1995). The opportunity to combine these interests through the story of my experience gave grist to my mill. Also, the narrative style of the book spoke to me; I believe there is great potential in personal storytelling as a way of (re) imagining our relationships with one another, both human and nonhuman forms, and I celebrate the act of storytelling as a way of nourishing inter- and intragenerational conversations that work to challenge, rather than simply affirm, the hegemonic discourse of the time. This process of telling, retelling, and shaping as we go reinforces our existence as political beings and reminds us that our stories form part of a bigger narrative, one that persists beyond our individual contribution (Gersie, Nanson, & Schieffelin, 2014). This is

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important, as if we are to engage in any kind of cultural examination or shift within the broad field of outdoor education, if that is in fact what we aspire to do, then we must understand our situatedness within this deeply political and complex ecology.

> The self I am—the identity I have—is affected by the politics of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability and world justice … the feelings I have, the reasons I recognise, the wants I act upon—they are all deeply political. (Griffiths, 1995, p. 1)

With this chapter, I would like to tell my story as a female, who is a wife, mother, sister, friend amongst other things, carving out her career. By sharing my experience, I hope to shed some light on the competing identities we must hold if we are to flourish in the largely male-dominated field of outdoor education (Wright & Gray, 2013) and higher education (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). This chapter is not given with the aim of *solving* the issue but with the hope that by sharing experiences we may come to see ourselves within others' narratives and, in doing so, recognize that the lone voice is not so quiet when it is heard as a collective.

The Process

So far, I've mentioned personal storytelling, autobiography, practitioner enquiry, all terms related to the examination of the self, but the approach I've focused on is "life-narrative" (Griffiths, 1995, p. 56). I turned to life-narrative to make sense of the iterative process or the to-ing and fro-ing between self-reflection and theoretical examination that I became engaged in, which, eventually, gave rise to this chapter. The guiding epistemological position throughout being constructivist in the Gadamerian sense that the individual is always in relation with and for other people (Lawn & Keane, 2011). We are situated beings and so exist in relation to the sociocultural context we inhabit. We cannot remove ourselves from this; therefore, we must acknowledge the influence it exerts and that we can exert upon it.

My understanding of the dialectic between personal experience and theoretical reflection has been influenced by Susan Noffke (1997) and her position that the "public sphere of professionalism and the domain of the personal are also particular manifestations of the political" (p. 306). Her introduction of the "personal, professional and the political" as organizing principles helped me to get underneath the "multiple layers of assumption, purposes and practices that exist" and the messiness I've uncovered within my life-narrative

(Noffke, 2009, p. 8). In other words, they allowed me to (re)imagine how my story could be considered from these linked perspectives. I also found McNiff (2014) helpful, especially her reference to a process of writing for you, for others, and the world. This allowed me to consider to whom I might tell my story and where my voice could lend itself to a bigger conversation. At this point, I consciously likened this process of self-examination as being similar to looking through a kaleidoscope, and I became aware that much of my sub-conscious, evidenced through my thinking, being, and doing, related to that metaphorical conceptualization. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim that "metaphor is not just a matter of language," rather "human thought processes are metaphorical." They also suggest that we seek out "personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes and goals too" and that self-understanding is "the search for appropriate personal metaphors" (p. 233). Whilst I am still exploring much of Lakoff and Johnson's writing, their work has encouraged me to examine the way in which I spoke/wrote/thought about myself and how that *thinking* is evidenced within my life-narrative. This process revealed that I view identity as fluid and kaleidoscopic, the point being that the image may alter with each turn but all pieces remain in the frame, so that nothing leaves; we simply bring a change of focus by looking through a specific lens. For example, I may frame my narrative with a particular heading—professional, personal, and political—but my experience isn't altered as such; rather, it is how I've gazed upon it that alters the perspective. My experience remained but the assemblage, or my understanding of that experience, transformed. Much of my writing perpetuates this metaphorical concept.

I've structured my story using Noffke's conceptual framework, albeit a re-ordered version. These headings are offered as signposts for the chapter rather than strict disciplines and as such, the edges are fuzzy and loose; aspects of the professional, personal, and political permeate each experience, as they should.

The Road I Have Travelled: My Background

At secondary school, about age 14, I remember trying to describe the type of work I hoped to go into when I *grew up*. Whilst I don't remember the exact words, I know I mentioned *the outdoors*, *being active (both physically and politically)*, *working with people and the environment* and *teaching, but not in a classroom*. I'm writing this now, some decades later, employed as a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, part of a team that focuses on outdoor and environmental education, whose previous and current work has enabled me to work with groups outdoors in a mix of urban and more rural, wilder spaces,

from short sessions to day trips and longer residential experiences. Such work has allowed me to engage in conversations with a range of people, from young children to older adults, whose thinking, practice, and passion has challenged and continues to challenge and develop my own. On reflection, I can say that I think I've managed to weave most of my 14-year-old self's imaginings into my life so far. However, as part of this life-narrative process, I wanted to take time to look at this *weaving* in more detail. I wanted to know where my early motivations and desires came from, how have they shaped my work with others within higher education, and how has my embodied experience, in my case as a female, influenced that process. Whilst these three questions are irrefutably linked, I have filtered my attention through the latter, my experience holding a space in outdoor education in higher education as a female.

I have been involved in outdoor education, or outdoor learning as it is more commonly referred to in Scotland (I'll use the terms interchangeably here as I hold no definitional preference), for most of my adult life. In fact, my childhood and early recollections are interspersed with outdoor connections. I can immediately cast my mind back to gardening with my mother, spending time on my auntie's farm, camping trips, hill walking, and kayaking; the *outdoors* has been a constant backdrop in some form or another. I have also been linked to outdoor education within higher education institutions since I began my undergraduate studies in 1994 and then my PhD in 1998. My experiences so far have allowed me to work with children and adults in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, residential centres, national parks, on rivers and lochs, mountains and hills, in public parks and city streets too; my academic research has been informed by my practice and, so too, my practice has been informed by my research. All aspects are important to me and all have shaped my professional development, in various ways.

One constant throughout this process has been my gender. I cannot separate my female-ness from those experiences and this is often brought to my attention by others—people and contexts—during my work. These moments remind me that my embodied identity, that is, as a gendered and relational self, has shaped my career.

Let me share some of my stories.

The Place I Am in Now: Professional

I teach across a number of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Two years ago, I walked into a class to work with a group of final-year primary education students who had opted into an elective in outdoor learning that I

lead. I began the session by introducing myself and providing a little background to my work. Drew, a student, caught my eye. He looked puzzled. I turned to him. The conversation went like this:

Me: *Everything OK, Drew?*
Drew: *I'm confused, so you are 'Christie, B'?!*
Me: *Yes. B for Beth … Beth Christie.*
Drew: *But you're female!*
Me: *Yes.*
Drew: *I'm confused … I always thought when I saw Christie, B as an author that you were male, because you are all blokes in outdoor learning are you not?*
Me: *No, this female is a female.*

We continued with the class. But, his surprise to find a woman writing and teaching in the field of outdoor learning is a stark reminder of the gender imbalance in my own workplace and in the field of outdoor education more generally (Allin, 2004; Humberstone, 2000; Wright & Gray, 2013). Recently, I supervised an MSc Outdoor Education student, Brianne, who was examining the history of the postgraduate programmes that we offer through the Outdoor and Environmental Education section at the University of Edinburgh (Milano, 2015). Her examination took her through the 45-year history of teaching in the institution, collating student demographics, course reports, and interviewing current and past students. She gave me access to her data and I looked at trends relating to female student intake. I considered how gender is raised as an issue in our course reports, the place where we record student feedback and staff reviews. I reflected upon these findings in terms of my own experience. I have been part of this section, as student and staff, formally and informally, for over 20 years, and have gained a good insight into the changing demographics and the workplace culture during that time.

Brianne's work (Fig. 16.1) shows, amongst other things, that since the course records began 45 years ago, the number of female applicants has steadily increased and we are now experiencing a situation where female students outnumber their male counterparts (Milano, 2015, p. 38). One possible explanation for this growth is the expansion of the field, and our programme content, to include not just predominantly male-dominated adventurous activities (Wright & Gray, 2013) but other forms of outdoor learning, too, whether that be in urban locations, community spaces, and more formal educational contexts, for example, school grounds. Certainly, in Scotland, over the past decade, we have seen outdoor learning develop as an approach to
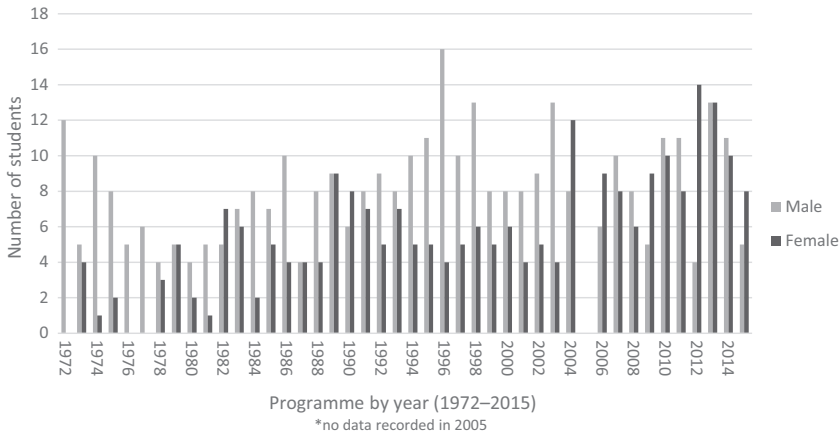
Fig. 16.1 Number of male and female students by year of programme delivery (1972–2015)

delivering our formal curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence, and this is the area where I have increasingly developed my own research and practice (Christie, Beames, & Higgins, 2016).

Milano's research (2015) also revealed that

> as ratios of women participating in the OE [outdoor education] programme have risen, there has been an increasing call [from the student body] for more female lecturers and PDP [professional development programme] instructors to match the ratios of women on the course, as well as setting an example for the profession as a whole. (Milano, 2015, p. 38)

This call has been partly addressed with my own appointment in 2013; however, in terms of full-time lecturing staff, I still remain the only female alongside four male colleagues. The last female lecturer left her position in 2007 and my appointment followed almost a decade later.

On reflection, I am encouraged to see more females entering the programmes, but I share the students' concern that this pattern of growth is not reflected within the lecturing staff. I recognize that there is a double bind at play here, where female staff are not only underrepresented within our discipline but across higher education more generally. Yet the Outdoor and Environmental Education section within the University of Edinburgh sits within a School of Education that has a high proportion of female staff. And, perhaps, it could even be considered a triple bind, that is, unique to the outdoor education profession, as there is an implicit and often explicit demand

for a range of technical skills as well as the required academic credentials; *all* applicants can suffer under this impossible wish list.

It is hopeful to witness the increasing number of females entering outdoor education within higher education and this shift can only be positive for gender representation. However, I offer a cautionary note here that we shouldn't simply look to *count more women in* as a marker of redistributive justice or the gender equality end goal. What we need to address is the more complex structural discrimination—existing within such systems—that devalues women's capital and marginalizes their career progression, often going beyond the glass ceiling analogy and reducing women to "incarceration in an identity cage" (Morley, 2013, p. 116). Whilst a more thorough investigation is beyond the scope of this chapter, a contextual awareness of gender challenges within higher education gives nuance to what it means to be an outdoor education lecturer within that particular system.

The Person I Am Becoming: Personal

Let me share another occasion.

In discussion with a male colleague on the way to an outdoor education conference, I was challenged on my authenticity as a *member* of the field. Their comments were *"Don't you feel like a fraud?"* and "*Well, you don't really do this kind of stuff, do you?*" This threw me. I believe I have a good sense of my own self but like others, I do suffer from doubt and am no stranger to questioning my role, my worth, my contribution, and so on; usually this occurs before a major conference or other such occasions. But this was not a product of my insecurity. This was different; it was a colleague making a direct, explicit challenge to my professional and personal identity. It left me hurt and then angry. An uncomfortable silence didn't fill the space. They continued the conversation as normal, as if the question they had asked was as straightforward as *"Do you take sugar in your tea?"* However, the only similarity was in my response: *"No,"* which I resolutely qualified with, *"I do not see myself as a fraud."*

I am aware of impostor phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins, 2015) where individuals experience conflicting external and internal experiences of success; externally they are accomplished, but internally they believe they are fooling everyone. One explanation for this identity conflict within high-achieving females, offered by Clance and Imes (1978), stems from early childhood experiences where another sibling, or close relative, is labelled as the *intelligent* one and, indirectly or directly, the other is told they are the

sensitive or socially adept one. In my case, I am sister to an older and a younger brother, both of whom are very academic and biddable. I, however, fell into the *spirited* category whose academic prowess was dependent on my mood and my social calendar. I enjoyed being referred to as a *tomboy*, being described as *headstrong*, and I loved exploring my competitive athletic ability through kayaking, climbing, running, and other adventurous activities. Whilst I am not entirely convinced that the impostor phenomenon manifests itself as a consequence of those experiences, what interests me is that the allegedly *problematic* monikers are the very qualities that I have drawn on throughout my outdoor career, that is, the identity that I return to when I question where I fit, when I don't see another like me in the field, the classroom, or the conference hall.

Interestingly, when I worked as a park ranger I saw these identities called into question continuously, largely dependent on who I was with and the context in which we met. During my work, I drove a 4×4 and a minibus, often towing a full canoe trailer behind those vehicles. I worked outdoors teaching environmental education, windsurfing, kayaking, and sailing. I drove and maintained powerboats and I carried out heavy maintenance and conservation tasks. My friends (who don't work in the field) saw this as largely masculine work and I remember being described as *boyish*. I had rough hands, short hair, and was often turning up to social occasions with scrapes on my arms and bruises. However, that same summer, I remember a female colleague, who worked closely with me, judging me on my physicality and appearance, suggesting I was *too precious* as I was smaller in height and stature than her, and *too girly* as I shaved my legs and painted my toenails. I only paint my toenails to hide their real colour, which is usually different shades of black from marathon running, but my colleague never asked why. She just assumed she knew my motive. This experience left me confused and very aware that a particular quality, or perhaps more correctly my identity, could be viewed as incongruent depending on who was looking in and where they were looking from.

Such assumptions around male and female capabilities and normative stereotyping reinforce the traditional binary system around gender roles: such framing is suffocating and rarely freeing. It seems that women in outdoor education pose transgressive challenges to deeply embedded gender stereotypes both within the field of outdoor education and within society more generally. Such provocation can be posed by anyone, of any gender, who does not conform to the group norm and/or does not fit a particular gender script. In my case, the tension I have experienced highlights the liminality or incongruence between female social identity and the normative, masculinized

identity of an outdoor educator, and indeed the identity of an academic. Morley (2013) suggested that managing one's identity in this way, that is, navigating "discrimination and other people's negativity" can lead to additional and energy-sapping workloads (p. 124). I would agree.

I have come to realize that others' conflicting perceptions of my ability and some of the challenges levelled at my competence stem from where the gaze is cast, rather than being driven by the identity that I hold. Griffiths (1995, p. 93) offers a way forward here. She states that "self-identity is to be understood as a kind of web, the construction of which is partly under guidance from the self though not in its control." And Taylor and Coia (2009) offer support by suggesting that one's understanding of self is in constant flux as we grow, develop, and change. Here I return to my earlier kaleidoscope metaphor and the continual alternating, shifting, and repositioning of oneself throughout the life course where, as Griffiths (1995, p. 93) summarizes, "plurality is the norm, rather than the exception."

Shifting Identities

As a PhD student, I juggled motherhood, part-time work, and my fledgling research career, but I struggled to feel able to maintain an identity within any of those spheres. I struggled to juggle the days I needed to spend on the water and the hill to gain enough experience to turn my trainee instructor statuses into full qualifications. I struggled to spend enough time in the mother and baby groups to qualify with full motherhood status. I struggled to spend enough time in the university where I held a part-time position to feel like I truly had an employee status. I struggled to share in the experiences of my fellow PhD students, as I dipped in and out of my studies. During that time, my attention was constantly turning to each aspect of my life but never resting long enough to feel satisfied or part of any particular group.

I recognize that I made the decision to place my family above my career, so building a stable home and being present was core to my son and daughter's early upbringing. Despite studying and now working in Edinburgh, I chose to live two hours further north in a small coastal town so that my children could have a rural lifestyle and live close to both sets of grandparents.

This lifestyle choice came at a cost, the biggest being the progress of my practical outdoor career and the most constant being my four-hour round trip to work. This *cost* was felt most acutely when I was called a *"fraud"* for not *"doing the hard stuff."* That *"hard stuff"* was delivering the practical outdoor skills to our students; this was the one plate I couldn't spin fast enough. How

could I justify more time away from my family to cultivate my practical skills, whilst at the very time I was pursuing these qualifications, I was juggling the other roles I already held: wife, mother, academic, and so on? Other female outdoor educators in similar positions have shared their stories; for example, Allin (2000) considered the significance of childbirth and pregnancy in her life-history work on women outdoor educators, highlighting the complexities that exist when making such a lifestyle-changing choice. These choices are not easy, nor are they made lightly.

I chose to pull back on the time spent away from home. I was already following a PhD that required me to spend a lot of time in a residential outdoor centre working alongside instructors, researching the relationship between informal and formal educational contexts and the developmental opportunities that exist therein. Following my PhD, I chose to move towards the formal educational context and consider curricular opportunities for outdoor education. This came at a time when the Scottish curriculum was undergoing revision and the emerging framework offered a greater opportunity for such embedding. Increasingly, outdoor learning has become recognized as spanning a range of contexts, including school grounds, local and urban places, more remote and wild spaces, and residential and expedition experiences. Yet this questioning or claiming of outdoor education as one specific doctrine only defined by the *"hard stuff"* limits what it can and should be. Such monochromatic visioning stems from an outdated, anthropocentric, male-dominated view of what *counts* and what doesn't, where legitimacy is awarded through physicality, the toughness of the approach, and the severity of the conditions. This view still exists within the field and it is problematic in terms of gender inclusivity for two reasons. First, teaching and education largely comprises female professionals (Mistry & Sood, 2016) and, second, the *"hard stuff"* is not frequently called upon in those spaces. Rather, most curriculum-linked outdoor learning happens in school grounds and local spaces, negating the need for technical mastery.

The Future Unfolding: Political

How I view myself and how others view me are two questions that form a difficult relationship. Griffiths (1995) writes about wanting and not wanting to belong. She provides a helpful account of the personal examination process she undertook to adequately untangle, or at least understand, the network of political and contextual factors that contribute to the *web of identity*. I do not have time or space to do justice to a similar investigation here. However, I can

say that my identity is shaped by my view of myself as a mother, a wife, a daughter, a friend, a sister, an aunt, a lecturer, a runner, a walker, a skier, a snowboarder, a traveller … the list continues. But, what is important here is not so much how I view myself but how others view me and how they construct those views. My identity is fluid. Its construction is a collective process whereby I am in as much control as the political dimensions, both the material and the social, that structure the circumstances in which I exist.

Following my research, that is the critically reflexive life-narrative process I have been through, I contend that our identities are mutually constructed and not simply reducible to *given* or taken-for-granted gender characteristics. Morley (2013) is useful here as she writes that it is "the gendered world itself that represents the problem, not simply the exclusion of women or the existence of the male norm" (p. 126). Therefore, we need to get at the structural processes that perpetuate these gendered views as ultimately, they permeate the field and become the culture of our profession. This is not a revelation; it is a constant theme.

Almost two decades ago, Humberstone (2000) made a similar point, stating that "it cannot be assumed that the 'outdoor industry' in all its constituents has not been touched in some way by dominant ideologies" (p. 26). To progress, we (all genders) need to hold our own practice up to the mirror and interrogate ourselves as part of the cultural construction that is defining our profession. This critically reflexive process encourages us all to interrogate our practice—and the circumstances in which we practice—an act that will ultimately move the field forward beyond operating in a state of unquestioned acceptance. Such questioning, and sharing of the questioning process through our stories, is important as acceptance perpetuates the hegemonic discourse.

It was my aim to share one such reflective life-narrative process in this chapter, through my own story.

Closing Comment

I remember when my children (son and daughter) were younger, we read together, often. We still do. One of the books that I bought for them, and for me, was titled *Not One Damsel in Distress: World Folktales for Strong Women*. It brings together tales of strong women who challenge the dominant male narrative in their respective cultures by offering authentic stories where girls don't need to be rescued; rather, they rescue themselves or come to others' rescue. Jane Yolen brought the collection together for her daughter and

granddaughters, not to offer heroines or *sheroes*, a term introduced by Maya Angelou (Ventura, 1998), but to introduce "regular sword-wielding, spear-throwing, villain-stomping, rescuing-type heroes who also happen to be female" (Yolen, 2000, p. xi).

Yolen's daughter and granddaughters responded to her collection saying:

> we need this book to remind ourselves that girls heroes have always been around, hidden away … these great stories need a shaking out every so often, like some old camp blanket that's been packed away all year. And boys need to read it, too. Because while we know girls can be heroes, the boys need to know it even more. (Yolen, 2000, p. 103)

This response stirred me. Within outdoor education, we need to shake out our own camp blanket, share the past stories, and encourage new ones to be told. I've read that the "most captivating stories are the ones that help us understand better what is common, most taken-for-granted and concerns us most ordinarily and directly" (van Manen, 1990, p. 19). Often the narrative of the female outdoor educator is not the dominant discourse. We are not common in the field. We don't always fit the gender script, and so our voice, whilst strong, is not heard above, or equal to, the male storyline. Therefore, we need to strengthen our collective voice by reminding ourselves and others (all genders) of the backstory, which existed when we entered the field and persists by shaping our everyday experiences. But in doing so we must remember that we are not powerless, as much as we struggle to fit the shape that exists, for our actions, as we live them, can alter the landscape for those entering the field in the future; their starting point does not need to feel similar to ours. I hope it doesn't.

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