

Social Dynamics in Outdoor Adventure Groups: Factors Determining Peer Status

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Background

The social system within a group on an outdoor adventure (OA) course involves a dynamic interplay of relationships among individuals. For expedition-based courses during which participants spend extended time together in the field, the social structure is central to group functioning (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000; Martin & Leberman, 2005). As groups progress through stages of development, relationships change, leaders emerge, and peers assess their own standing and the standing of peers (Tuckman, 1965). Piazza and Castellucci (2014) observed, “Power and status differences exist in all organizations and are the inevitable differences along such dimensions as reputation, control over resources, formal authority, knowledge and skill” (p. 296). Student groups within OA are no exception. Groups create their own hierarchies based on formal and informal assessments of ability, competence, and compatibility, resulting in different levels of status related to the situational context. Status can be defined as one’s place within a hierarchical social structure based on the amount of prestige or importance one has in relation to others (Jacob & Carron, 1998). How groups manage status differentials can affect individual and group level outcomes. Researchers in a variety of fields have identified many ways that status relationships can lead to greater group cohesiveness (Eys, Ritchie, Little, Slade, & Oddson, 2008) or create group conflict (Bendersky & Hays, 2012). To be sure, status plays an important role in OA as the nature of relationships among students influences the overall social environment and the ability of a group to achieve difficult tasks.

Understanding status and status relationships within groups will be increasingly important as OA programs manage changing student populations. Presently, many OA programs are looking at ways to promote diversity in a field in which students are traditionally White and male. Unfortunately, there is little research on how these initiatives affect the social and educational environment on courses (Garvey, Mitten, Pace, & Roberts, 2008). Research from other disciplines provides insight on how demographic factors relate to status within a group. Cohen and

Zhou (1991) studied corporate work teams and found that when past performance is controlled for, gender has a significant effect on status within a group, with females having less status than males. In a similar study, Thomas-Hunt and Phillips (2011) found that race also affects an individual's influence within a group. Within OA, status differentials could be a significant source of group conflict, especially if demographic factors are excessively influential in determining peer status. Wide status variability within groups may lead to the development of exclusive cliques, perceptions of noninclusion, and low group cohesiveness.

In this study, we examined how certain demographic factors relate to status within the task (goal-related) and social (interpersonal) domains of group functioning proposed by Forsyth (2010). Specifically, we sought to (a) determine if gender and socioeconomic status (SES) influence individual status within a group for task-based and social scenarios; (b) identify key factors for peer selection, or sources of status, within each scenario; and (c) establish if status and peer selection factors changed over time.

Method

Data were collected from 237 students enrolled in 30-day wilderness backpacking courses offered by the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). Courses varied in gender and scholarship composition, and students receiving full scholarships served as an indicator of low SES. Students completed questionnaires three times during the course: approximately Day 10, Day 20, and Day 30. On the questionnaire, students selected three students as companions in two hypothetical scenarios that represented the task and social dimensions of group functioning. The task scenario involved difficult off-trail travel and adverse weather conditions, whereas the social scenario involved easy travel, favorable weather, and time for socializing. Respondents also provided qualitative reasons for their selections. In addition, students completed an end-of-course survey that included a question regarding previous multinight expedition experience. Data went through three types of analysis. First, selection data were analyzed using C-INKNOW social network analysis (SNA) software (Science of Networks in Communities Laboratory, 2011). SNA data describe the nature of relationships within a group, including a measure of prestige that was used to represent status. Second, RMANOVA was used to analyze the quantitative data with status as the dependent variable. Gender (male, female), scholarship standing (scholarship, no scholarship), and time (Day 10, 20, 30) were the predictor variables of interest. Analysis of status also controlled for experience. Next, responses to open-ended questions were qualitatively coded to identify distinct themes related to peer selection in each scenario (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative findings were then matched with status data.

Results

We analyzed 711 questionnaires from respondents on 22 NOLS courses ($M_{\text{age}} = 17.3$ years). Females made up 34.4% of the sample ($n = 83$), and 19.8% were scholarship students ($n = 48$). Analysis of the status data revealed no main effect for time, but significant main effects for gender and scholarship standing. Females had lower mean status than males in the task ($p < .001$) and social ($p = .011$) scenarios on courses with males and females, even when controlling for previous multinight expedition experience. Status scores for students receiving scholarship were lower than scores of students not on full scholarships on mixed courses only in the task scenario ($p = .035$); however, this difference became nonsignificant when controlling for experience. Previous experience was significantly correlated to scholarship status ($r = -.353$, $p < .01$), indicating that scholarship students are less likely to have multinight expedition experience prior to the course. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed that competence, general leadership traits, and physical ability were the main sources of status within the task scenario and that sense of humor, compatibility, and friendliness were the most important factors contributing to status in the social scenario.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of gender and SES on status. The results indicate that there is a significant relationship between gender and status for the social and task scenarios, with females having lower average status regardless of previous multnight expedition experience. This is consistent with findings in other group contexts (Cohen & Zhou, 1991). The specific cause for the low status of females is unclear and likely complex, though in a recent NOLS study of a similar population of students, it was found that males and females tend to group into same-sex cliques, limiting the influence of already outnumbered female students who are typically segregated in gender-based tent groups (Jostad, Sibthorp, & Paisley, 2013). Clearly, the effect of gender on status should be of note for program managers and merits further inquiry. For students on scholarship, mean status was significantly lower in the task scenario, but this was largely due to a lack of previous multnight expedition experience. There was no significant difference in status between scholarship and nonscholarship students in the social scenario, perhaps indicating that scholarship students are included in the overall social structure of the group. Status for all subgroups did not change over time, signifying that status within an OA course may stabilize by Day 10. These findings could be of use to instructors and program managers of OA programs despite the unique nature of NOLS courses. Instructors help create group culture, and program managers may find it necessary to offer custom training to provide staff with additional tools to manage status differentials among students.

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