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## **Transformational Learning through a Women's Outdoor Leadership Course**

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## **Abstract**

This study considers the impact of Outward Bound UK's Women's Outdoor Leadership Course, as a strategy for addressing the gender imbalance in leadership within the organisation and wider outdoor sector. A qualitative approach was taken in order to examine changes experienced by the women on the course, what contributed to such changes and the significance of the female environment. Analysis taking an initial grounded theory approach led to the use of Transformational Learning Theory as a framework for understanding the data. Results suggest that transformations occurred primarily around confidence and an inner authentic sense of self. Key contributing factors to this were the supportive environment, the focus on learning, challenge and reflection, and relationships with female peers. Findings can be used to inform an explicit theory of change for further women's outdoor leadership development. More research is needed to understand the sustainability and impact of change.

Keywords: Outdoor Education, Gender, Transformational Learning, Women's Leadership

## **Transformational learning through a women's outdoor leadership course**

### ***Introduction***

There has been visible progress in the number of women involved in outdoor adventure and those qualifying as outdoor leaders. However, there remains considerable evidence from across the world to suggest that women developing careers in the outdoor industry continue to face challenges in their progression and a gender inequality that stifles their ability to flourish (see Gray & Mitten, 2018). In particular, the numbers of women progressing to the higher levels

of outdoor leadership has historically been, and remains, low and disproportionate to those of men (Allin & West, 2013; Hall, 2018; Sharp, 2001). Fewer than 25% of outdoor instructors in the UK are female and the gender gap continues to increase as one progresses further up the qualification levels (Hall, 2018). Within The Outward Bound Trust UK, prior to a focussed effort on increasing representation, only 20% of instructional staff were female in 2018 (Outward Bound, 2018) and the proportion still stands at less than 30%.

One attempt to address inequality has been the development of women only outdoor courses. A number of studies have shown that women or girls who take part in such courses gain a sense of empowerment and physicality through participating in all female outdoor environments and find them a supportive environment for learning (Boocock, Avner and Allin, 2019; Hornibrook *et al.*, 1997, Mitten, 1992, Whittington, Mack, Budwell, & McKenney, 2011; Whittington, 2018). However, women only courses have been controversial as some suggest they are divisive (Hall & Doran, 2020) or reinforce gender stereotypes and divisions (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2008). Alternatively named ‘women specific’ courses such as those run by some UK national organisations aim to be more inclusive, but have typically focused on outdoor skills development, rather than leadership or qualification (Boocock et al, 2019; Hall and Doran, 2020). Little is known about the impact of a women’s outdoor leadership course as a way of addressing the gender imbalance of leadership within the sector.

Since 2018 Outward Bound have committed to diversify their workforce in order to better represent the young people who participate. Gender has been one significant focus, which has included raising organisational awareness of gender equality and investing in facilitated diversity conversations at multiple levels. The Women’s Outdoor Leadership Course (WOLC) is a practical initiative created to compliment this wider project. It is a 10 week, residential, course initiated by Outward Bound, with a vision ‘to create a nurturing environment with

opportunities for personal progression towards the technical, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills required to work within Outward Bound and progress within the outdoor sector' (Outward Bound UK, 2019). The programme is aimed at women already working in the outdoors and comprises female peers and a female leader for a full programme, plus mentoring opportunities by either a male or a female. The programme was designed to be a purposefully progressive blend of building relationships, goal setting, psychology of potential, technical skills weeks, experience working with groups of young people, mentoring and celebrating learning. This was based on research identifying key constraints in these areas influencing women's progression (Allin, 2003, Allin & West, 2013; Gray and Mitten, 2018; Hardy, Roberts & Hardy, 2019; Jordan, 2018; Loeffler, 1995; Warren and Loeffler, 2018) and the course designer's previous background in psychology and outdoor education.

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of this course. Specifically, the study aimed to see if the WOLC facilitated personal changes that could lead to overcoming leadership and career development challenges, and to examine what contributed to such change, including the significance of the female environment. With a programme emphasis on intrapersonal development, we sought a theoretical understanding that might be useful in order to inform future course design. This was not identified at the outset, but through the analysis process, where transformational learning theory emerged as a potential explanatory framework that could inform a theory of change.

### *Transformational Learning*

Transformational learning (TL) has its roots in theories of adult learning. The main approach to TL usually cited is based on cognitive and developmental psychology, attributed to the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Jack Mezirow (1978). Mezirow (2000) focuses on the process of making meaning through experiences and proposes that ‘the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings’ (p.3). He takes a constructivist approach and suggests that the beliefs, values and assumptions we hold as adults are appropriated and assimilated, often unconsciously, through the contexts and cultures we have lived through. That is, through negotiating the course of our lives and experiences, we acquire particular ‘frames of reference’ - that define how we view our life world. The frames of reference we hold are then used to interpret and understand future experiences as well as shaping and delimiting our expectations, views, thoughts and feelings. One problem is that whilst these frames of reference can help us make sense of the world, they can limit what we perceive and constrain our potential (Dirkx, 1998).

Transformational learning changes the way people see themselves and their world in what Mezirow calls ‘perspective transformation’. This occurs through assessing or re-assessing our justifications for the assumptions and views we hold, using insight gained through critical discourse and the experience of others. Central to Mezirow’s theory is the presence of a ‘disorienting dilemma’ (Mezirow, 1991), which serves as a catalyst for change. Research proposes such dilemmas can arise through a specific abrupt event, or ‘crisis’, or can happen gradually and involve a longer process, as new knowledge is created from interpretations and reinterpretations in light of new experiences (Laros, 2017).

Mezirow’s perspective has been well used, but his early work has been criticised for taking an overly individual and rational approach to transformational learning (Dirkx, 1998, Irving &

English, 2011). Although his initial study was with women, Irving and English (2011) and Belenky and Stanton (2000) also suggest that Mezirow's work fails to engage with gender or recognise that women's ability to engage in the critical discourse needed for change may be influenced by their marginalised status. In order to develop the framework for this study, therefore, we add insights from the work of Freire (1970) whose work shares similarities with that of Mezirow, but who takes more of an explicit social justice approach (Dirkx, 1998).

Both Mezirow and Freire associate transformational learning with liberation and highlight the importance of reflection in the process, but for Freire (1970) transformational learning is not just liberation through a psychological process of values or knowledge awareness. According to Freire, there is no such thing as neutral education, all education is political (Freire, 1970). Transformational learning therefore involves developing a critical consciousness and gaining a deeper understanding of how wider social structures and power relations have shaped and influenced the way people think about themselves and the world around them. Liberation occurs with consciousness raising - or what he terms conscientization. This raised awareness and ability to intellectually understand and identify the social conditions which have led to their situation provides the 'oppressed' with a voice to analyse, raise questions and take action. Whilst Freire was particularly concerned with class relations, and despite accusations of sexism in his language, his perspective can resonate with feminist approaches (hooks, 1993) and how women's self-perceptions are influenced by the dominant masculine cultures through which they live and work.

Although the focus of Mezirow and Freire differed and they represent only two of a number of perspectives on transformational learning, there have been increasing calls for a more integrated and unified approach to TL research and theory development (Cranton & Taylor, 2017; Dirkx, 1998, Irving & English, 2011). For example, Cranton and Taylor, 2017 (p.10)



propose that ‘transformational learning need not be about individual *or* social change, it is about both’. Specifically critiquing the lack of theory development in the literature of women’s transformational learning, Irving and English (2011) suggest that there is a need to bridge the gap between individual and social justice approaches; ‘healing divisions between individually oriented and social justice orientation - *to establish a firm role for feminism in this dialogue*’ (p.309). We hope that this study can contribute not only to the understanding of women’s transformational learning on the WOLC, but also to the wider dialogue around gender and inequality in women’s outdoor leadership development.

### ***Applications of transformational learning***

Studies of women’s transformational learning have primarily focused on women in oppressed conditions, such as in developing countries, threatened by violence or crisis (Hamp, 2007). However, a number have included women managers, women literacy educators (Cranton & Wright, 2008) and more recently literature has specifically addressed women in leadership development (Debebe et al, 2016; Megheirkouni & Roomi, 2017; Suby-Long, 2012). From this literature a number of themes emerge that seem important in the transformational learning of women; these included the role of supportive and mentoring relationships (Irving & English, 2011); trust, respect, possibility and the need to consider the whole person (Belenky & Stanton, 2000, Cranton & Wright, 2008). Suby-Long also highlights the importance of opportunities for orally discussing concerns, experiences, and leadership issues.

Studies by Debebe *et al.* (2011, 2016) examine and apply TL theory in relation to women’s leadership development courses. Debebe *et al.* (2016) drew primarily from Mesirow and discussed three stages of leadership transformation: encountering and articulating a ‘leadership dilemma’, meaning making and achieving transformative insight. They then offer a fourth stage - connecting insight to leadership practice - which relates to the woman leader being able to

connect their changed perspective to their leadership practice and sustain it once back into their working environment. Similar to Mesirov's 'integration', this fourth element is most critical in relation to achieving long lasting impact; it is through the ability to harness one's self awareness and perspective change, and use it to do things differently, that wider change can occur. Debebe (2011) cited the importance of the all-female environment in providing a safe space to talk about gendered experiences and an 'environment that affirms women's experience' (p.680).

TL has also been used previously to understand change by participants in outdoor adventure education (D'Amato & Krasny 2011; Meerts-Brandsma, Sibthorp & Rochelle, 2020) due to the emphasis on personal growth and development. Meert-Brandsma, *et al.* (2020) aimed to identify if TL occurred and what contributed to change for students at the National Outdoor Leadership School in the United States. They suggest that challenging students, a supportive environment and times for reflection were elements more likely to lead to TL. They also suggested that readiness to change and prior perspective transformation may be influential. However, neither study focused specifically on women. A TL framework has not, as far as we understand, been used to understand change in the context of a women's outdoor leadership development course.

## **Method**

This research took a qualitative approach and was influenced by our desire to centre women's subjective lived experiences of the WOLC (Harding, 1991). Researchers were two white, degree+ educated women who work, or have worked in the outdoors. One researcher was external to the organisation, whilst the other was employed by Outward Bound. Participants were eight women aged between 23 and 33 years of age, from different parts of the UK, who had been recruited to the WOLC following an application process and selection day. They were

already working in the outdoor industry in a variety of professional roles, including care work, watersports centres, activity centres, and freelance work. All felt they were keen to progress more quickly, were dissatisfied with their current situation or wanted to move on. The women were predominantly degree educated and of white ethnicity. As such it is recognised that they do not fully represent the diversity of women, although they do reflect the majority of women currently working in the outdoors in the UK. No information on sexuality was obtained. Consent was obtained by Outward Bound prior to the course for use of all participant application information and data obtained through the course. Ethical approval was gained through a University Faculty ethics approval process. Participant names provided are pseudonyms.

### ***Research tools and data collection***

The main data for the study derived from semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants and the researcher to talk with flexibility to follow up responses (Bryman, 2012). The interview schedule focused on the key areas that were the focus of the WOLC programme; intrapersonal, interpersonal and technical skills development, plus the importance, if any, of the female environment. Interviews with each of the eight women took place on the final day of the WOLC programme on Outward Bound premises and due to time constraints were restricted to half an hour. Interviews were undertaken by the external researcher who was introduced to the participants as a group prior to the interviews and it was felt this helped participants share experiences freely and openly. However, the researcher was conscious that the short time available made it more difficult to be as open and sharing in each interview as would have been desired (see Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981; Thwaite 2017).

## *Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised by the external researcher and stored on a password protected computer. The external researcher read through several times before beginning an inductive process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify initial emerging descriptive labels for pieces of text. Codes were then grouped together and discussed between researchers whilst both engaged with literature that seemed to offer explanatory concepts. As analysis continued, we were drawn to the literature on transformational learning and subsequently returned to the data to review and develop codes with sensitising concepts in mind, going to and from literature to data and developing broader themes in an analysis process similar to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), but with a mix of inductive and deductive reasoning (Patton, 2002). This process, along with critical discussions and self-reflections helped us feel we gained maximum benefit from the in-depth programme knowledge of the insider researcher whilst minimising potential bias and ethical issues (Hanson & Allin, 2020).

## **Key Findings**

Before examining changes identified by the women on the WOLC, we highlight what participants articulated as leadership development challenges at the beginning of the course. This is followed by considering the TL that occurred and what contributed to that change. We finish the discussion with a focus on the significance of female peers.

### *Initial 'Frames of Reference' as Women Outdoor Leaders*

Key leadership challenges women expressed included feelings of not belonging as a leader in the outdoors, not feeling 'good enough', lacking confidence in technical ability, decision making or ability to be a leader, and feelings of inadequacy to work within an organisation such as Outward Bound. Six participants expressed personal challenges relating to confidence, self-doubt and comparison to others to a greater or lesser degree. One participant spoke about

the challenge of finding the time and networks to progress, rather than explicitly highlighting any internal struggle. A further participant did not express doubt but identified the need to feel 'totally ready' before taking next steps to assessment. As such their findings resonate with previous research in relation to women's outdoor careers (Gray and Mitten, 2018). A challenge several women expressed was the emphasis placed on technical qualifications within the outdoor learning sector and the way in which they felt 'the level' for reaching qualifications such as Mountain Leader was far away and out of reach.

For some participants there was an awareness at the beginning of the course of the way in which their frames of reference may be linked to gender and they identified specific scenarios which contributed. These included negative comments from key people, stereotyping or being taken less seriously than male colleagues in the workplace or on courses. Others reflected on how multiple factors contributed to a generalised feeling of inadequacy built up over time, or explained their situation as a personal problem.

Viewing this through the lens of TL offers the interpretation that these women had developed and internalised such self-perceptions as a result of their life or previous work experiences. Rather than being an inherent flaw of female-ness, or a fixed, lacking aspect of personal identity, self-doubt, low confidence and negative comparison can arise through constant experiences of being devalued or oppressed at even micro levels (Mesirow, 2000). For many women, such frames of reference may be assimilated through gendered socialisation, living in a patriarchal society and/or developing their careers within the predominantly masculine culture of the outdoors. For example, research has highlighted how women's competence can be constantly questioned, how they can experience a need to prove themselves or live up to male expectations, or alternatively, be 'one of the boys' (Gray & Mitten, 2018, Warren, Risinger and Loeffler, 2018). In this study, self-perceptions seemed to be a powerful driver of

behaviour that served to constrain women's agentic progression to assessments and/or new roles, which thereby hindered their outdoor careers.

***Transformational Learning: a change in confidence and sense of self***

On the face of it the increased confidence described by all women was a confidence in their own abilities and where they were at in relation to the technical qualifications required to progress in the outdoor sector. Assessments which seemed very far away now appeared in reach for many of the participants. Em says,

*The course definitely made me feel I can complete the quals, that would allow me to work here, so... it definitely feels doable now, which before it didn't, it definitely didn't feel doable before.*

It could be argued that this was simply due to more experience of technical skills on the WOLC. However, when we examined this more closely, what we also found for some women was a deeper confidence in self, a raised awareness of 'who I am', personal strengths and values leading to speaking up for personal views more. Liv shares that,

*Yeah I feel I can stand up for myself now and like that my voice does matter and that If I don't agree with something or there is a different way of doing something I can contribute something.*

Liv was expressing a 'subjective reframing' (Mesirow, 2000) of her assumption that in the outdoor space she had nothing to contribute. The significance of this self-confidence at a collective level for women lies in the recognition of how women's voices have traditionally been marginalised or silenced (Belenky & Stanton, 2000). As Freire (1970) explains, 'The criteria of knowledge imposed upon them are the conventional ones....Almost never do they realize that they, too, "know things" '(p.63)

Others, such as Issy and Sophia, described a change in their perceptions about asking for help or acknowledging not knowing something rather than ‘blagging’ it or avoiding the situation.

*And I think I've changed within myself that I'm really trying to be just, really, open and honest. You know... rather than be, like, "Oh, yeah, I understand" and Googling it later. I just said to them... I said, "I don't know what you're talking about." ... And putting that out there and, like, feeling that that's okay. And not expecting people to... I don't know, judge me for that. (Issy)*

*I feel confident to be able to go, yeah, I don't really know what I'm doing here - can you help me out? And not feel that that's a... That, that's a representation of... Of me in the outdoors, and also all women in the outdoors. And I think, like, that kind of burden has been somewhat lifted. Because... Yeah, I just feel that it's an acceptable thing to do. (Sophia)*

For both Issy and Sophia, the course appeared to foster a change in their frames of reference (Mesirow, 2000), whereby they no longer saw lack of knowledge as an indication of weakness, inferiority or incompetence but rather as a sign of authenticity and opportunity to learn. In the outdoors, many women feel the need to engage in proving behaviours (perfectionism, avoidance of failure or questions, or hiding true ability) which may arise from subconsciously fighting against out of date ideas around females being less capable, less valuable, less worthy and competent of leadership roles, as well as emotionality being associated with weakness (Humberstone, 2000). In contrast, ‘openness to not knowing runs countercurrent to dominant norms of masculinity, and understandings of expertise which continue to hinder learning, change and innovation’ (Avner, Boocock, Hall & Allin, 2020, p 14)

What also stood out as transformational was the increased confidence to participate in learning enhancing behaviours. For example, several women described how they would now pro-

actively put themselves in situations that were likely to enhance learning, but may feel uncomfortable due to being at the edges of current perceived or actual capability. Hence there was some evidence of passing through transformational learning stages from building confidence in new ways, to planning courses of action and experimenting with new leadership or learning roles (Mesirow, 2000)

Ava says,

*I think I feel more confident in going out and putting myself in situations that will be of benefit to me. And going out and, like, taking it. Whereas before I think, maybe, I was more likely to hold back or... Like, sit at the back or feel like I was an impostor.*

A significant finding was that for some of the women, shifts in understanding of the self and reviewing of belief systems had translated into taking or booking assessments. Issy shares that,

*I think it's allowed me to see what's within reach. It's... Like, I thought things were quite... Like, quite far above me. Like, I put some of these qualifications on a pedestal, and it's changed my perspective of, like, where I'm at. I need to do my rock-climbing instructor training. Which, before this course, seemed like a long... A long way away. And I've got it booked for March now.*

The booking of leadership assessments is indicative of the fourth stage of leadership transformation (Debebe *et al.*, 2016) and is critical for changing the wider picture of the industry. It is also indicative of transformational learning, in that 'a mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner make an informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight...' (Mesirow, 2000, p.24).

However, though some had become more aware of their limiting internal narratives and frames of reference, not all had yet taken the next steps to action. In addition, although women seemed



stronger in their new values and understanding of themselves, not all were clear how they would react when back in their workplace. One criticism of the programme is that although it facilitated discussions around gender, no formal attempt was made to provide participants with strategies to address the structure or culture of the masculine outdoor environment. As transformational learning is proposed as a permanent change in perspective (Mesrirow, 2000), follow-up research is needed to examine this in more detail.

### **What contributed to Transformative Learning?**

The three core themes which stood out as contributing to transformation were the supportive environment, the course structure including the underpinning ethos around learning, and the significance of female peers. These are unpacked in more detail below.

#### ***A Supportive Environment***

The strongest theme that led to change was that of the supportive environment created. Indeed, the word ‘supportive’ permeated all post-course interviews by all women and reinforces literature that highlights the importance of such a context for facilitating TL (Meerts-Brandmas *et al.*, 2020) and for women’s TL in particular (Taylor, 2000).

For these women supportive meant *‘a very obvious lack of ego’, feeling ‘accepted’, genuinely understanding, valuing and helping each other towards goals, collaborating rather than competing, being able to ‘ask questions about anything’, and an ‘openness to being vulnerable and sharing how you’re feeling.’*

Some participants describe how the supportive environment was not synonymous with making things easier as they or others may have anticipated, rather it created an environment where they were able to nudge at the edges of their current capabilities. Pushing outside of their comfort zone and stepping up to lead despite doubts or setting more stretching and aspirational goals were described positively, in contrast to avoidance or holding back as may have

previously been the case in other environments. Sophia describes how the environment enabled '*advocating for yourself*,' saying challenging goals out loud, and then trying them, in a way that they perhaps wouldn't have previously. This supports findings of Meert-Brandsma, *et al.* (2020) who found challenging students in a supportive environment along with time for reflection was most likely to lead to transformational learning.

### *Course structure and underpinning ethos: learning, reflection and challenge*

In addition to a supportive environment, the emphasis on the course structure and underpinning ethos on reflection and learning were frequently mentioned in participant interviews in relation to elements contributing to change.

Ava comments,

*That constant process of reflection helps you to feel that if something doesn't quite go to plan, it's not a problem. It's a way to learn. Like, that growth mindset, kind of, ethos makes you feel that every challenge is... You don't fear making mistakes.*

When all outcomes are viewed as a 'successful' part of learning, there is an acceptance, rather than judgement of current skill level as a start point to progress from. Coupled with a supportive learning environment meant for participants that '*it just frees you up to try.*'

The data also revealed that the course allowed deeper learning about the self, which is Mezirow's first stage of transformational learning. Becoming critically aware of their 'own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others' is an essential focus (Mezirow, 2000) and was built into the course design. Several participants described how they felt able to experience deeper reflection as a result of being able to share feelings and concerns with other coursemates. Em shares

*...when someone is having a bad moment, we all seem to... everyone is feeling quite vulnerable but everyone groups together and goes out and smiles and laughs and has a good time still, I think that definitely has helped create such a good environment.*

This aligns with Taylor's (2000) research which identified that particular aspects of the TL process appear to have more significance than others, with the ability to work through feelings and share concerns being highlighted as a key element in beginning critical reflection. Irving and English (2011), relate this particularly to female development suggesting that 'emotion plays a particular role in transformation for women' (p.308) but also note that it is often ignored in TL research. This may also be an element that had been previously lacking from women's experiences and career development in the outdoors due to dominant hegemonic masculinity favouring technical skill development over interpersonal skills and emotional competencies (Kennedy & Russell, 2020).

For other women, progressive challenge in technical skills created a dissonance in that something that was previously viewed as impossible or very far away was achieved or experienced as within manageable reach. This led to experiencing themselves as competent in areas they had previously felt (often erroneously) they were lacking. For Mia getting positive feedback on her technical competence was a critical incident that changed her belief that she was not ready for assessments.

*The real key thing that came out of this for me was just the confidence that I'm at the right level. I've had that feedback, I can go ahead now and, you know, take the qualifications I need to.*

Several participants spoke of the powerful blend of practical skills development and self-reflection, describing how the intrapersonal learning '*keeps popping back up... these little bits*

*that have been dripped in*'. Charlotte summarised the impact of the integrated course design as below;

*They've taught us, you know, they have taught us very good map reading skills and judgement making and decision-making and the psychology of holding yourself back and what is it that's holding you back, and you delve deep into that and remove that ...blocker and you're like right ok, that's gone and that's within me and you've now gone and taught me how to read a map and put good gear in and set up climbs, and I've a load of systems to work with now.*

Several of these women appeared to be talking about the combination action and reflection which Freire (1970) describes as 'praxis' which enables people to reconstruct their own meanings leading to personal and social freedom. By transforming previously limiting frames of reference it seems participants were better equipped to freely engage in their own professional development.

### ***The significance of female peers***

The third area contributing to TL was the value of the women only nature of the course and the relationships built. Some of the women who applied for the course were motivated specifically by the female only component, others were unsure or neutral about this aspect. Indeed, some had negative preconceptions that the course might be a 'soft touch', having internalised the gendered viewpoint that women's course would be designed at a lower level due to women's lower technical competence. One participant explained that she had worried a group of women together might be 'catty' or 'bitchy' or even 'competitive' due to the way in which women *'can be pitted against each other.'*

However, for others, just reading about the course for the first time appeared to make sense of thoughts and feelings that may have been bubbling away beneath the surface unexplored and may have been the beginning of perspective transformation. Sophia comments,

*And it just was like someone had taken words I didn't even know I had from my brain. And I was like, oh, that's... You know, that's... And it actually kind of... Yeah, it put to words some thoughts that I'd had for a little while and some, kind of, musings that I'd had for a little while about, oh, you know, sometimes it... Sometimes it can feel a bit alienating.*

For women such as Sophia, suddenly their experiences were no longer purely personal. Reading about the course challenged the notion in some participants that they were to blame for not progressing as fast as they would like. Mesrirow (2000), views a disorienting dilemma as a central element of his theory, referring to a critical incident, or incremental process which creates cognitive dissonance and begins a reflective, questioning process of transformational learning.

What was clear was that some women's negative perceptions of 'women generally' and/or women's courses - despite being women themselves - were challenged by their experiences of the course and through their critical reflections and interactions with peers. These women were pleased but perhaps seemed also surprised and disconcerted to discover a development-enhancing level of challenge and that the other women were also competent outdoor professionals. Ava shares that,

*Following this course I think, you know, my respect for women has grown as well. Like, I think... I don't think I didn't respect women before this course, but I think it's just reinforced how... Like, how awesome women are. And that there's not... Not a difference. They can do everything that a guy can do. And go on these big*

*adventures and be emotional and vulnerable, and at the same time – it doesn't have to be one or the other.*

While Issy goes on to say,

*It's reinforced in my head that women are capable and powerful and... That there's more than just... Well, there's more of us than I've seen. Like, it's not just me, like, on my own with all these guys.*

Being part of this '*powerful group of women who want[ed] to lift each other up*' was held in contrast to what some described as the 'normal' outdoor environment where there were more '*ego driven macho behaviours*', a need to prove oneself, competitive peers and a sense of not quite being good enough to belong. According to Mesirow, disorienting dilemmas bring about change as the new reality challenges a frame of reference or habits of mind that can no longer be true. Often they reveal themselves as surprises, or are articulated in a way that the person is trying to make sense of what they are saying because it does not quite fit with what they previously held to be true. For these women, encountering other powerful outdoor women who contradicted the stereotypes they had potentially internalised, and realising there was another way to experience the outdoors, was such a moment (Mesirow, 1991). This presented them with a challenge to their own potential status as women leaders in the outdoors, enabling them 'to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation' (Freire, 1970, p.83).

Some women simply shared that having close relationships with other women at a similar stage of career was significant to them as a fresh experience after becoming used to being in male dominated environments in the workplace, on courses and frequently with peers in the outdoors. The significance of relationships reinforces the findings of several publications which show them as a particularly important aspect in women's transformational learning

(Brookfield, 2003; English & Irving, 2012). Being in a female only space also allowed new ways of seeing personal capability. Amelia shares that it also enabled,

*...taking inspiration from the women around you who also are feeling the same way... actually, you can sort of see a bit of yourself in the people around you. And it's quite a nice thing to be able to see.*

Being surrounded by other women who had similar limiting experiences in relation to gender (sexism, a feeling of representing all women, proving, being overlooked, feelings associated with being a minority) also allowed a shared dialogue of exploring and becoming more critically conscious of the wider social structure and power relations which underpinned some of their experiences (Freire, 1970).

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine if the WOLC led to personal changes that could aid women's career development and to examine what contributed to such change. Findings from this study suggests that changes, which can be understood as transformative learning, did occur for women on the WOLC, most notably in areas of perceived self-confidence. This was not just confidence in actual technical skills (many were indeed already competent), but, for many, a deeper confidence in their authentic self, values and capabilities. There are indications that such changes are leading to actions for some women, through booking assessments for qualifications, and may lead to greater engagement in learning experiences. Follow up research is required to determine whether the final stage of change of leadership or perspective transformation has taken place for all and is sustainable over time and across contexts.

Key elements contributing to change through the WOLC were the supportive, improving focussed environment, the focus on learning, challenge and reflection, and having female peers.

Building relationships and sharing with other competent women who worked in the outdoor industry may have contributed to the perceived supportive environment, and certainly led to disorienting dilemmas for some, facilitating changed frames of reference. We suggest that the integrated use of Mesirow (1991, 2000) and Freire (1970) enabled deeper insight into women's transformational learning. In particular, we suggest that incorporating this with a focus on gender allowed for an understanding of how critical reflection, dialogue and relationships with other competent women can facilitate empowering change. These should be considered key elements in future courses for women's leadership development.

It should be noted that the women who came on to the WOLC were at a stage where they were dissatisfied with their current career and wanted to move on. This was significant to the study in that Meerts-Brandsma *et al.* (2020) suggest participants who come to an experience looking for change or who are at transition are potentially more likely to undergo personal transformation. It is also the case that the women on the course were relatively advantaged as white, educated women. More research with a greater diversity of women participants would give further understanding of the value of Mesirow (2000) and in particular a nuanced application of Freire (1970), to understand the experiences of women from different subject positions (hooks, 1993) and the potential for transformational learning via a women's leadership courses to lead to both individual and social change.

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