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Embodying indigeneity in the mountains: Creating inclusive adventure spaces for Welsh women, United Kingdom

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Summary

This case study examines an intersecting legacy of exclusion in the Welsh mountains, UK, and how this is challenged by Welsh women's participation in outdoor adventure courses. The research critically appraised how Indigenous Welsh women ¹navigate gender, class, and racial landscapes in mountain leisure to create inclusive spaces. Facilitated by a National Charitable Organisation (NCO) that engages Indigenous Welsh communities in mountain adventure, we explored women's embodied experiences through mobile video ethnography. Methodologically embodiment facilitated a way of capturing bodily sensations and experiences, that provided a language to express those ideas through reflexive analysis (Ellingson, 2017). The findings highlight how women embody cultural identity in the mountains, which contributes to understanding issues of exclusion/inclusion in adventure spaces.

The value and interest of the case study

Although the presence of women in mountain adventure is increasing recreationally and professionally, Welsh-speaking women who use their local outdoor spaces for leisure and career purposes are largely absent. This study explores how deep-rooted cultural assumptions associated with mountains and mountaineering produce exclusion, and how the involvement of Indigenous Welsh women in non-traditional adventure activities can create inclusive spaces of leisure.

Background

The Welsh mountains are steeped in climbing and mountaineering heritage founded in the 1850s, and became a pivotal training ground during the golden era of European Alpinism (Schaumann, 2020). The rock being of exceptional quality led to Wales's popularity as a climbing destination and thus, the Welsh mountains underwent a process of mapping and colonisation fuelled by British imperialist dreams to conquer high-altitude peaks (Ortner, 1999). Successive generations of largely white male, middle-class, English climbers, flocked to North Wales as a testing ground for bigger

¹ We use the terms race and culture interchangeably within this case study and follow the definition that race and cultural identities are social constructs (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007).

projects overseas; notably Sir Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay's first ascent of Everest in 1953. Yet women's contribution to this climbing legacy is hidden, especially Welsh women, despite the significant efforts of early twentieth century women-only climbing clubs (Rak, 2021).

More broadly, mountain adventure has evolved to the exclusion of Welsh Indigenous communities, and little has changed since research conducted by Bangor University, identified that provision and uptake of local people's outdoor participation was poor (Muskett, 2019). Similarly, engagement in outdoor clubs and recreation facilities remains low in Wales, with a paucity of local role models employed in the outdoor industry. To address these issues, a National Charitable Organisation (NCO) was established (2004) to encourage participation through formal and informal skills development and professional outdoor leadership training. Our research focused on the NCO's women and girls' programmes, which provided affordable training events to encourage local women to access the Welsh mountains.

Women in the outdoors

Across the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of women involved in outdoor adventure recreationally and those qualifying as mountain leaders (O'Brien & Allin, 2022). The benefits of outdoor sports participation are well-established, with scholars and participants acknowledging the increased sense of competence (Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008), the ability to escape from the "trappings of modernity" (Atkinson, 2010), and the potential for positive self-transformation (Brymer & Oades, 2009). Nevertheless, there is significant evidence suggesting that women continue to face challenges and gender inequalities in mountain spaces (O'Brien & Allin, 2022). As such, women-only spaces have been created through skill development courses (e.g., Women's Climbing Symposium) and professional leadership programmes (e.g., The Outward Bound Trust). Previous studies have shown the benefit of women-only spaces, with participants acknowledging a sense of empowerment (Avner, Boocock, Hall & Allin, 2021). Although, women-only spaces can reinforce gender stereotypes (Hall & Brown, 2022), they have proven successful in

encouraging women to engage in mountain recreation by reducing the social politics experienced. Yet, scholarship that explores how Welsh women experience their native landscape, recreationally and professionally, is absent. This highlights a need to investigate the impact of mountain courses on Indigenous women and how this is experienced in multi-dimensional ways.

Intersectionality and outdoor recreation

Intersectionality offers scholars a lens to interrogate the processes of discrimination and exclusion across existing social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality and dis(ability) (Watson, 2018; McCall, 2005). To understand Welsh women's experiences, our research explored co-produced embodied mountain experiences, to study how difference and exclusion are inextricably linked within the processes of gendered and racial experience (Crenshaw, 1989). We focused on identifying how different articulations of power intersect to appreciate social complexity, and in doing so, contribute to a growing body of leisure scholarship that highlights how inequalities are experienced (McDonald & Shelby, 2018).

Methodology & Methods

We drew a parallel with Villa's (2011) research that shows how the complexities of social life intersect and are embodied in extraordinary spaces (unlike everyday spaces) such as dance, or in our case outdoor mountain skills courses. Extending beyond Crenshaw (1989), we explored the "live" situated nature of women only mountain skills courses and how simultaneously bodies become gendered, classed, and racialized in their complexity (Villa, 2011, p.181). Moreover, Watson (2018, p.326) identifies how "intersectionality often neglects the body and misses out, crucially, the somatic process of identities as embodied". Taking an ethnographic approach, we studied how Welsh indigeneity embodied processes of inclusion and/or exclusion in mountainous adventure. Fieldwork involved go-alongs (see Ellingson, 2017 for discussion on embodiment), where the researcher and research participant co-produce experiences. We combined mobile audio and video capture (using Go Pro 10 and handheld audio recorders), informal interviewing, observations and

fieldnotes. Fieldwork involved asking questions and observing taken-for-granted processes in-situ to elicit rich sensory and personal biographies.

Data were collected during the summer of 2022, across three separate outdoor skills courses in North Wales, totalling six days. The NCO courses targeted Welsh women and involved 3 – 6 participants per group (11 in total) and one instructor. All participants identified as women, aged between 25 – 55 years, and were in full-time employment or full-time mothers. Over six days, eight hours of footage (video and audio) were collected. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the visual and audio footage were coded, identifying key themes, such as decolonisation, inequality, accessibility to spaces and equipment, cultural/racial identity, and gendered physical and sensory experiences. The scope of this case study considers two key themes; firstly, how inequalities are experienced intersectionally, and secondly how gendered, racial, and cultural identities are embodied when participating in mountain adventure.

Embodying intersectional experiences in the Welsh mountains

Our field research identified how Welsh mining and farming heritage has a pervasive impact on local perceptions of Welsh mountains, embodied in classist notions that mountains are spaces of hard labour, low income and suffering. Thus, the perception that mountain spaces are of low socio-economic value pervades. For example, Lydia expressed how Welsh children were not encouraged to go to the mountains. Embodied early in childhood, Lydia and her community perceived that the mountains were not “for us”, which led to a sense of exclusion over generations,

as a kid, my parents took us up into the mountains, so we would be a bit more mountainous. None of my friends did that and ... hardly any of them do it with their children now (Lydia)

As a result, the lack of physical engagement with the mountains meant a loss of knowledge about how to enjoy them, which contributed to a sense of social anxiety and fear. Such anxieties, were

evident in a regional schools' initiative to enable every child to climb the highest mountain in Wales, Yr Wyddfa (Snowden), before they left primary school,

[one school] had to stop doing the annual trip up Snowden because they couldn't work out the risk assessment for toilet stops halfway up ...[because] some of the parents had complained on the previous year because the boys and girls were weeing [in sight of each other]. [Parents complained] It was degrading to be weeing outdoors and so [now] they don't ever go in the mountains (Charlie)

The study showed that gendered social norms associated with decency, moral behaviour and lack/loss of knowledge about how to participate in mountain recreation produced exclusion for younger generations. Charlie was saddened that Welsh children were denied the opportunity to engage with their cultural and natural heritage and missed *"that thing of ... you've climbed the highest mountain in Wales before you finished primary school"*. Intersecting class and gendered perceptions concerning economic value and social taboos have significant impacts, whereby Welsh school children are excluded from the Welsh mountains.

This was exacerbated by a pervasive sense of racial exclusion produced through the colonial legacy of English mountaineering (Ortner, 1999). The inequalities felt and validated by the participants believing that Welsh-based outdoor centres are managed exclusively by and for "English Mountaineers" (Lydia),

Wolverhampton have got their mountain base [outdoor centre] and knowledge of places where they bring the children from the city, so we were really jealous as children, because the children from Wolverhampton were getting opportunities that we couldn't have, and I think it's unfortunate really... The number of people who live in [Wales and have] never been in the mountains ... they don't see it as something for them (Lydia)

The research participants embodied this sense of inequality and asked questions about how inclusivity could be facilitated for Welsh people,

how do we ... make it, not just physically accessible, but kind of mentally accessible? For people not just to think it's for people from Manchester for the weekend, it is for all of us. ... We might not have been before but there's nothing to stop us learning and exploring and having that confidence to explore (Lydia)

Two decades of formal NCO engagement of Welsh people in outdoor recreation has done little to tackle the intersecting social complexities of race, gender, and class that underpin Welsh people feeling excluded from the Welsh mountains.

This is evidenced by the paucity of Indigenous Welsh women mountain leaders, which was apparent through the participants' experiences elsewhere "you know the climbing club ... there's no Welsh-speaking instructors ... the instruction is in English" (Lydia). As a result, this has left Indigenous Welsh speakers feeling awkward,

The instructor doesn't speak Welsh, so we all have to speak English. That is really hard. That's really awkward because it feels alien, ... particularly if you know them already... It feels like, you know, you talking to your mum in Spanish. ... you don't quite use the same words (Lydia)

Although the NCO has facilitated training programmes to encourage participation and develop Welsh-speaking mountain leaders since 2003, the woman hired to lead the NCO programme in this study was English. The instructor expressed how she embodied this inequality through feeling shame,

I'm always a little bit embarrassed... it's a good thing. ... It's reignited my desire to continue learning Welsh. Whereas before the [NCOs] work, I was always working with visitors to the area, ... because hardly any locals had booked and,

I've noticed it because I do quite a lot of instructor training and assessment courses for mountain leaders (Sophie)

Sophie expressed how “from a Welsh perspective” the National Mountaineering Centre (NMC) in North Wales, has “*never really integrated itself with the Welsh community in a way that perhaps it should*” and this produced a sense of exclusion for her Welsh clients (Fieldnotes, 6 June, 2022).

Established as an outdoor recreational facility in 1955, it is one of two of the United Kingdom’s NMCs, yet its integration within Wales, in tandem with developing Welsh female leaders, has been less than successful. This presents a key challenge and, if removed, could encourage more Welsh women to be active in the mountains.

We next discuss how the research participants embodied their cultural and racial identity within the mountains and show how this offers hopeful signs for building inclusivity for Welsh women in mountain adventure.

Embodying the mountain: Gendered and racial sensations of inclusion

Protecting Welsh national identity is a highly politicised agenda and reflected in the successful revival of Cymraeg (Welsh language) through the introduction of Welsh-medium education and legal reforms, including the 1993 Welsh language Act and the Welsh Government’s 2003 *Iaith Pawb* – A National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales. This is reflected in one of the central strategic aims of the Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park Authority, to protect the cultural and social life of local communities by preserving the Welsh National language. As such, the Eryri has begun the process of renaming the Welsh mountains with their Indigenous names, notably including Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon). This development has been prominent in the marketing of Eryri as a tourist destination but has also invigorated a sense of local and national pride in Wales. Many, if not all Welsh mountain names are associated with folkloric tales, which can reconnect Indigenous communities with their cultural heritage. All the research participants discussed the importance of using Welsh names for the mountains and how this connected them to local legends, histories and ancient medicinal uses of

plants (Field notes, 13 June, 2022). The situated nature of being-in-the-mountains directly connected them with their sense of place, belonging and identity. In addition, to feel a sense of belonging participants commented on the importance of feeling physically connected to the mountains Pat talked about,

how she liked to touch and feel the rock and how she was enjoying the different body shapes and movements on the rock, how it felt, whether it was rough or smooth. So, it was about really enjoying that deeper connection with the mountain as she travelled up and through the Y Gribin ridge (Field Notes, 14 June, 2022).

Embodiment has become central to exploring “how we feel – as well as think – through the body” (Davidson & Milligan, 2004, p. 523). Thus, paying attention to the sensory experience of exercise, can reveal the therapeutic potential for various, diverse, and individual bodies who engage in it (Brown, 2017). As such, for the participants, the *hands-to-rock*² experiences allowed them to tangibly connect with their heritage, language, and Welsh culture. They embodied this by discussing climbing route names, and how the subtleties of pronunciation changed feelings and connected the participants to their heritage. Lydia noted that “speaking in English in a Welsh speaking group makes me feel awkward”, demonstrating how language acted as a bridge for Welsh women to feel connected to the Welsh mountains. The outdoor course became more than just a skill development exercise, but a connection to the participants Indigenous cultural landscape. Importantly, all the research participants agreed this was facilitated by offering a women’s only course led by a female mountain guide. This created a sensation of safety, “it’s less competitive than it might be if it was a male group” (Lydia), free of the pervasive masculinities in traditional mountaineering (Hall & Brown, 2022). Our research nuances how the “cultural significance of sport lies in its power to represent,

² Captured through reflexive ethnography we identified how the physical experience of placing ‘hands to rock’ combined with emotional responses triggered through speaking Welsh and sharing cultural knowledge produced embodied sensations of cultural identity (Ellingson, 2017).

and reshape beliefs about gender, physicality, race, and sexuality” (Douglas & Jamieson, 2006, p.134). It does so, by showing how bodily expression is powerfully influenced by facilitating the use of Indigenous language. Importantly, when Indigenous language was embedded and embodied within women-only courses the research participants felt free to express their cultural, racial, and gendered identity and thus, feel sensations of inclusion.

Conclusion

Our research advances Adams et al.’s (2016, p.86) call for leisure scholarship to realise the “generative possibilities” of a feminist intersectional approach, and move us closer “toward justice” in adventure spaces. Through innovative video ethnography, we captured rich data to explore how an NCO sought to reconnect Indigenous Welsh women with their native outdoor spaces. We have highlighted how a colonial legacy of English mountaineering has excluded Welsh people from their mountain heritage. Yet, there are hopeful signs, facilitated through the political and social processes of reinvigorating the Welsh language in the mountains. This, combined with gender-sensitive interventions through women-only outdoor courses, has enabled Welsh women to connect with their natural and cultural heritage, and transform sensations of exclusion into feelings of inclusion. Nevertheless, there is a mountain still to climb to address a pervasive sense of exclusion felt by Welsh people, particularly women, and enable Indigenous communities to access the Welsh mountains.

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