Outdoor Leadership: An Exploratory Study


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ISBN 978-0-9561425-2-8
Price: £12.99

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Outdoor Leadership: An exploratory study


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Background

In April 2018 we conducted a leadership survey with Mountain Leaders and related organizations and, through Facebook, with members of groups that walk in the mountains. We received 459 completed questionnaires. The purpose of the survey was to: 1) get an understanding of the ‘mountain/hill-walking’ community; and 2) to explore perceptions of leadership among both professional and lay groups in relation to ‘Mountain Leadership’. This report sets out our preliminary findings based on descriptive statistics. Further detailed findings will be reported at a later date once our analysis is complete.

Characteristics of respondents

Of the 459 respondents 85 were female and 362 (80%) were male. Three people chose not to give their gender. The age range of respondents was from 18 – 65+yrs, with some gender differences. Most male respondents were between 46 and 65 years old (c. 62% compared to c. 45% of females) and most female respondents were between 26 and 55 (c. 75% compared to c. 65% of males). (See Figure 1.) These disparities in gender mirror the results typically found in surveys of outdoor activities and reflect the gender imbalance in organizational membership and leadership awards (e.g see 1, 2, 4).
Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents by gender. Vertical axes is percentage of respondents.

Figure 2. Age range of respondents
Around half of all respondents belonged to a club related to one or more of the listed activities. It remains to be seen if club membership results in higher levels of activity. Sixty seven percent of respondents engaged in ‘paid work’ related to the listed activities. Given the distribution of leadership awards this suggests that most respondents with leadership awards undertake some level of paid activity in the field. Eighty nine percent of respondents said they had a relevant First Aid Certificate. Forty eight percent of respondents said they spent between £500 and £1500 a year on clothing with 34% saying they spent less than £500 a year.

Most respondents (55%) said they took part in outdoor activities more than once a week, and 26% took part at least once a week. Forty nine percent of respondents spent, on average, ‘one day’ participating in outdoor activities, 14% spent ‘half a day’, and 26% spent two days or more, on average, at a time on outdoor activities.

Figure 3. Frequency of participation

Forty nine percent of respondents travelled, on average, for between one and three hours to participate, 35% travelled for less than one hour and only 17% travelled for more than three hours on average. The concern from these statistics is the impact of geographical location on participation. Having more immediate access to ‘the outdoors’, in terms of travel time, creates opportunities for participation. It is reasonable to assume that few people have the
resources travel three hours or more to participate, on a regular basis, in the listed activities. It does highlight a potential difficulty for people wishing to gain a mountain leader award.

Details of Activity Participation

Hill walking (including hiking and trekking) had the highest participation rate with 98% of respondents saying they took part. This was followed closely by Mountaineering with 77% of respondents taking part. Next was Wild camping (76%), Climbing (65%), Mountain biking (41%), Kayaking (32%), Fell/Mountain running (25%), Orienteering (23%), Caving (14%), Skiing (various forms) (7%), Canoeing (3%). These findings show a similar pattern to the participation results reported by the British Mountaineering Council: Membership Survey (2010) (2). (Activities with less than 3% participation have not been listed.)

When asked how many activities they participated in there was a fairly equal distribution of people doing between two and seven activities. Most people listed three to six activities. Only five percent of people reported doing only one activity. (See Figures 4 and 5.)

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents taking part in listed activities
Figure 5. Number of activities respondents participate in given in percentages

Organizational Membership

The majority of respondents were British Mountaineering Council (BMC) members (64%) and Mountain Training Association (MTA) members (62%). Following this there was a sharp drop off in membership with only 20% holding AMI (Association of Mountain Instructors) and British Canoe Union (BCU; now changed to British Canoeing) membership. A relatively large number reported being involved in Mountain Rescue (12%). Eleven percent of respondents reported they were members of Austrian Alpine Club (AAC: UK), 18% were members of British Association of International Mountain Leaders (BAIML), five percent of British Caving Association (BCA) and four percent were members of Mountain Scotland and Mountain Ireland combined. Three percent of respondents reported being members of the Fell Runners Association (FRA), British Orienteering Federation (BOF), and The Ramblers.

BAIML was not included on the original list of organizations and this membership was calculated from the responses given in the ‘other’ write in section. Going by the number of participants with IML awards it may be that BAIML membership is underrepresented in the data.
Figure 6. Percentage of respondents with membership of listed organizations

(See appendix for glossary of acronyms)

Figure 7. Number of professional memberships held by respondents in percentages
Organizational membership as given by respondents did not directly reflect their reported activities. At the time of writing we don’t have an explanation for this. Nonetheless, what the data does show is the distribution of reported membership among respondents, and there are some similarities to participation. A proportion of respondents did not hold organizational membership (8%). This may indicate that a number of people take part in activities without having organizational membership. That is, on a less ‘formal and organized’ basis.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents and the number of activities they participate in, the number of organizational memberships they have, and the number of leadership awards they hold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of:</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Organizational membership</th>
<th>Leadership awards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Between eight and 13% of respondents had no organizational membership and around 18% had no leadership awards.

When asked how many organizational memberships they held, most respondents held between one and three memberships. The highest percentage was for two memberships (33%), followed by three memberships (21%), and single membership (18%). Once again, a large number of respondents had no organizational membership (13%). See Table 1.

Leadership Awards

Respondents were asked about key leadership awards (please see glossary for details of acronyms used in this section). That is, awards relevant to mountain country, and other
leadership awards that are recognised as either leadership awards or that have some leadership component.

The MLS was most held award with 67% of respondents. The next most held award was the MLW (26%), followed by the MIA (19%), and no awards (none) 18%. Next was the MBLA (15%) then the IML (13%). From this point there was a further drop. The MIC was held by only nine percent of respondents, and the HML by six percent. Only four percent were BMGs and only three percent held the LLA. Three percent held the IFMGA and only two percent held the CIC.

**Figure 8. Percentage of respondents with listed leadership awards**

See appendix for glossary of acronyms

The distribution of awards seems to reflect the participation percentages. We should also bear in the mind that awards with an international recognition, the IML and BMG, are held by small numbers of people in any case relative to other awards. This suggests that a relatively high number of international mountaineers responded to the survey.

Thirty percent of respondents held one leadership award, 19% held two awards and 10% held three. Around 18% held no leadership awards. See Figure 9.
Perceptions of others as leaders

Perceptions of others as leaders were measured using the Leadership Behaviour Questionnaire (13). This instrument measures perceptions of what leaders do and how they act. It asks about perceptions of leaders’ behaviour in terms of ‘task behaviours’ and ‘relational behaviours’. Behavioural Leadership focusses on what we might consider technical skills and goal or objective orientation. Overall leaders tended to be rated as high on both ‘Concern for People’ and ‘Concern for Results’. This is labelled as a ‘Team Management’ approach to leadership. In theory this is style of leadership emphasises both tasks and interpersonal relationships, promotes participation and teamwork, and involves participants. We need to note, however, that there is little evidence to suggest that this style of leadership is either ‘best’ or leads to ‘high performance’. That having been said it is a style that is in keeping with the desirable qualities promoted in the current outdoor leadership literature, both in academic publications and in organisational publications (e.g. 7, 8).

The strong ratings for a Team Management approach indicate a leadership role characterised by clear priorities, goal orientation and achievement, participation, getting issues out into the open, having a common purpose, and enjoying the work. On the face of it these results suggest that ‘Leaders’ in the mountain/hillwalking context at least, and perhaps even in the wider outdoor context, tend to be perceived as demonstrating the behaviours given in the relevant literature.
Behavioural Leadership as a theory and model is not without its critics and neither the instrument nor the model have been rigorously tested over time. The Team Management approach may also indicate a lack of the flexibility, preferring instead to stick to ‘what they know’ or a particular ‘way of doing things’. The advantage of any theory of Behavioural Leadership is the underlying assumption that anybody can learn and develop leadership behaviours. In other words, being a good leader is simply a case of learning, and becoming skilled at, the relevant behaviours and demonstrating them.

**Perceptions of self as leader**

Perceptions of ‘self as leader’ were measured using the Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire (14). The instrument measures four components: Self-Awareness; Internalized Moral Perspective; Balanced Processing; and Relational Transparency. Authentic leaders, the theory suggests, are purposeful, value centred, relational, self-disciplined, and compassionate. This is somewhat at odds with the Behavioural model, which has a more technical and goal related focus.

Authentic Leadership scores are categorised simply as ‘high’ (16 or above; average four or above) or ‘low’ (15 or below; average below four). Overall people tended to rate themselves as borderline between ‘high’ and ‘low’. The highest average was for the component ‘Internalised Moral Perspective’, suggesting that people perceive themselves as holding to a good moral standard in a leadership role. The lowest average was for ‘Relational Transparency’, which may suggest people have concerns about showing their true feelings when in a leadership role. Scores on the components of ‘Self Awareness’ and ‘Balanced Processing’ were more or less the same.
Authentic Leadership as a model and theory is in its infancy. However, there is some suggestion that Authentic Leaders strengthen the moral and ethical behaviour of followers and the wider organization and are perceived as trustworthy.

It may be worth considering the developmental opportunities provided by the two contrasting leadership theories, or models. While a Behavioural Leadership model implies that team members may develop specific skills, assuming the ‘leader’ is able to convey them, an Authentic Leadership model implies the opportunity for personal development for both the leader and group members (see the work by Eric Langmuir, for example. 6).

**Love of the outdoors**

We developed a measure of ‘Love of the Outdoors’ based on the universal principle of hiraeth, a longing and/or strong feeling for a place, person, or similar, and the work of Eric Langmuir (6). Our questions aimed to draw out people’s strength of feeling for the outdoors, particular in relation to the hills and mountains.
Overall average scores on this measure were high. In simple terms, most people who responded to the survey had strong, positive, feelings about being outdoors. The strongest reported agreement was for the item ‘I feel at home when I am outdoors doing the activities I enjoy’, followed by the item ‘Being outdoors leaves me with wonderful memories’. The least agreement was with the item ‘When I am outdoors I feel like I am in touch with the long-forgotten past’.

**Barriers to participation**

We developed a measure of ‘Barriers to Participation’ based on the reverse of Love of Outdoors. It is important to know if people are experiencing barriers to ‘getting outdoors’ and what the barriers are. Perhaps unsurprisingly the average scores on this measure were low. That is, people did not typically experience strong barriers to participation. However, it seems that these barriers are present and do impact on people.

The strongest barriers to participation were time, ‘I do not have time to do as much outdoor activity as I want to’, and the sometime competitive nature of outdoor activities, ‘I do not like the competitive nature of outdoor activities’.

**Perceptions of skills**

Perceived Self Efficacy is your perception of what you can do with the capabilities you believe you have (e.g see 9). While a full understanding of PSE is complex, it is one of the most powerful known indicators we have of performance related behaviour and how we respond to success and failure. It is also deceptively simple to measure. We developed two measures of PSE: 1) perception of outdoors skills related to hillwalking; and 2) perception of positive environmental behaviours. Unfortunately, the number of items for each was small (seven and three respectively), which does not give as strong a picture as we would like.

People’s perceptions of their relevant outdoor skills received the highest overall average rating of all the measures. In other words, on average people tended to rate their outdoor skills highly. This suggests an exceptionally high level of confidence that is, if anything,
perhaps a little too high. High scores on PSE measures can indicate a tendency to overly attribute mistakes and failings to external factors and a lack of reflective practice. From a positive perspective this high level of confidence people have in their own skill set should result in a high level of performance as long as people are in ‘known’ situations they are familiar with and have some experience with.

**Figure 11. Average ratings for the variables listed**

![Average ratings for the variables listed](image)

In terms of skills there was little to choose between the items’ ratings, but ‘Lead and manage a group’ and ‘Navigate effectively under any and all conditions’ received the highest level of agreement. The item with least agreement, or confidence, was ‘Manage a medical emergency appropriately’, despite 89% of respondents saying they had a relevant First Aid Certificate.

**Perception of caring for the environment**

We developed a PSE measure of positive environmental behaviours. People’s ratings on these measures were high, as for PSE Skills. On the face of it this suggests people perceive themselves as having a positive and appropriate response to the environment, and how they manage themselves and their group in relation to environmental matters. Respondents rated their ability to demonstrate environmental responsibility highest, and their understanding of nature and the local area as lowest, although the difference in average ratings is very small.
Overall respondents appeared to have marginally less confidence in their environmental awareness and knowledge – as a wider remit to include knowledge of the local area and so on – than in their relevant skill set.

**Group Needs**

Appreciating ‘group needs and requirements’ is especially important in outdoor environments. After a careful reading of the relevant practice handbooks and literature we decided on four key items for group needs and one item each for both Health and Fitness of participants.

The four factors we considered that impact directly on the group are: 1) the leadership qualities of the leader; 2) equality of provision; 3) safety; and 4) quality of experience. In order to get a relevant measure we asked people how important they thought these factors were in relation to outdoor activity (not to leading a group *per se*).

The four Group Needs factors were again given a high average rating in excess of four. Simply put, people rated the needs of the group in terms of the provision of leadership, equality, safety, and quality of experience as important. This suggests that overall people are strongly aware of Group Needs and making sure these needs are meet.

The Health and Fitness of participants seemed to be less of a concern and received lower ratings. That is, the health and fitness of participants was not rated as important as ensuring the group’s high-level needs were met.

**Gender Differences**

**Overall participation by gender**

Clear gender disparities emerged and female respondents tended to be younger, on average, than male respondents. We did not set out to investigate gender differences. The differences emerged when we began to analyse the data.

The biggest differences in participation emerged for Climbing (13% more males than females reporting participation) and Mountain biking (16% more males than females reporting participation). Other activities showed some differences with Kayaking having
eight percent more males participating and Wild Camping having seven percent more males. The four percent difference in favour of males engaging in mountaineering may be relevant given the high numbers participating.

Hill walking etc., Fell and Mountain Running, and Orienteering all had equal percentages of males and females reporting them as an activity. While Caving did have four percent more males than females reporting the numbers are small making this comparison a bit less reliable.

While some activities seem to have a good balance of male and female participants it may be that some of the activities are skewed more towards male participation than female participation.

Figure 12. Gender differences by listed activity (in percentages)

Organizational Membership by gender
Gender differences in organizational membership, broadly speaking, match the gender differences in participation. More males than females reported membership of the AMI and
BC (16% and 15% respectively). Far more females than males reported no organizational membership (16% to seven percent respectively).

Many of the remaining memberships ‘balanced out’ when considered in respect of percentage of members overall, although the majority of organizations listed seemed to have around five percent of more males than females saying they are members. The BMC, MTS, BAIML, AAC (UK), and MR all had five percent or less more males than females with reported membership. The FR and BOF had more females than males reporting membership.

A worthwhile point to be made here is that engaging in competitive activity does not seem in any way to be a barrier to entry for females. Pretty much equal membership was reported for both Fell/Mountain Running and Orienteering, which are competitive activities.

**Figure 13. Organizational Membership by gender (in percentages)**

See appendix for glossary of acronyms

**Leadership Awards by gender**

Males dominated the reported the leadership awards by an average of around 15%. That is, on average around 15% more male respondents reported holding a leadership award than
female respondents. Three key exceptions emerge. Firstly, equal numbers of males and females reported holding the IML. This was mirrored in both participation and organizational membership. Second, more females than males reported having the HML (15% to four percent respectively). Third, more females than males reported having no leadership awards (31% to 17% respectively).

These results may indicate that females are not taking up leadership awards at the same level as males (see 1, 3, 10, 12 in relation to gender differences).

**Figure 14. Leadership awards by gender (in percentages)**

See appendix for glossary of acronyms

There may be an age group effect confounding the results reported here. That is, female respondents tended to be younger than male respondents and it may be that more awards are taken up by an older cohort.

**Age Differences**

**Overall participation by age**
Six age categories were defined in the survey, but there was no forced response to this question. There were different age distributions between males and females which are
explored further below. These different distributions by gender were also present in the BMC survey (2).

People of all ages participated in hill walking, mountaineering, and orienteering. All other listed activities showed a drop-off in participation with increasing age. There are rapid declines in participation in climbing, kayaking, and mountain biking. However, the results do not show trends over time so caution should be exercised in the interpretation.

Kayaking and Mountain Biking had disproportionately high levels of 18-25 year olds participating. Climbing and kayaking were the two activities with the steepest decline in participation with age.

A number of activities had relatively stable levels of participation across age groups. Hillwalking, mountaineering, and orienteering showed little if any age bias in participation levels.

**Figure 15. Age differences by listed activity (in percentages)**
Organizational Membership by age

People in the 18-25 years category reported the lowest levels of organizational membership, the exception being membership of British Canoeing. For the most part organizational membership was reported by people over the age of 25 years, and continued through all later age groups. The exceptions to this were British Canoeing Union and the Association of Mountain Instructors.

Figure 16. Organizational Membership by age (in percentages)

See appendix for glossary of acronyms

Leadership Awards by age

The age distribution of leadership awards was somewhat complex but overall 18-25 year olds were less likely to report holding leadership awards than other age groups though a cluster of awards were reported by 18-25 year olds: MBLA; HML; LLA; BMG; MIC.
Figure 17. Leadership awards by age (in percentages)

See appendix for glossary of acronyms

**Discussion of results and implications**

In this first report we have focussed on descriptive statistics, and these have an important role in their own right. Some of the descriptive statistics seem clear. Most people report taking part in more than one activity. Levels of participation seem, in part at least, determined by the amount of time available and the amount of time it takes to travel to a suitable destination. Consistent with the findings from BMC surveys are the age-related patterns of participation and gender differences.

Caution is needed in interpreting these descriptive findings. What they give is a snapshot of reported levels of participation and engagement and the perceptions of leadership. Further work is being carried out to analyse the results in order to draw more in depth conclusions.
Survey distribution and respondents

The survey was sent directly to registered Mountain Leaders and related organisations such as the BMC and Mountain Rescue teams. A number of Facebook groups were contacted to request permission to post the survey link on their pages and the link was posted on the pages of all groups that responded. Overall we had 350 direct responses and 109 Facebook responses giving a total of 459 (in later analyses a further two respondents were added bringing the total to 461). These distributions are proportionately consistent throughout the survey but a number of questions allowed respondents not to record a response resulting in slightly under the expected 459 responses in total at times.

The survey allowed people to make a qualitative response with any further comments. A number of people used this opportunity to share their views and experiences. This data has yet to be analysed in a structured way and will be reported at a later date.
Glossary of acronyms

AMI - Association of Mountaineering Instructors
BAIML – British Association of International Mountain Leaders
BCU – British Canoe Union (Now British Canoeing)
BCA – British Caving Association
BMC – British Mountaineering Council
BMG – British Mountain Guide
BOF – British Orienteering Federation
CIC – Caving Instructor Certificate
FRA – Fell Running Association
HML – Hill and Moorland Leader
IFMGA – International Federation of Mountain Guides Association
IML – International Mountain Leader
LLA – Lowland Leader Award
MBLA – Mountain Bike Leader Award
MIA – Mountain Instructor Award
MIC – Mountain Instructor Certificate
MLS – Mountain Leader Summer
MLW – Mountain Leader Winter
MR – Mountain Rescue
MTA – Mountain Training Association
References


