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# Status and Expedition Group Dynamics

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Many outdoor activities and outdoor adventure education programs in Canada are group-based. Scouts, summer camps, outdoor therapeutic programs, Outward Bound, colleges and university's outdoor leadership programs are a few examples of organizations in which groups are central to the participants' experience. However, in any group, status hierarchies emerge (Forsyth, 2014) and impact group dynamics, outcomes, and individual experiences (Anderson et al., 2015; Carli, 2010; Ridgeway, 2001).

Until more precise definitions are presented later in this chapter, consider status hierarchies to be a rank ordering of group members according to the amount of respect afforded by others. The more status a person has, the higher they are positioned in the hierarchy and the more influence they may be able to exert over group dynamics

like communication, trust, conflict resolution, planning, decision-making, and problem-solving.

This chapter critically explores how status processes affect outdoor group dynamics. To achieve this aim, we will first define social status, examine how it is attributed, and who is generally status advantaged in northern societies. Second, we will review the social status research that has been carried out in the outdoor field. Third, relying on data collected in an ethnographic case study of a wilderness expedition group (in Québec), we will highlight how the different group members used behaviors and discourses to maintain or improve their status, and how these behaviors and discourses affect other group members (Ouellet, 2022; Ouellet & Laberge, 2021; 2022; 2023). Finally, we will suggest ways for outdoor educators to favor inclusive group dynamics and mitigate

adverse outcomes of status processes within expeditions and outdoor adventure education groups.

### **Status, Group Status Hierarchies, and Status Processes**

In any social group, status hierarchies emerge (Forsyth, 2014), and expedition or outdoor adventure education groups are no exception. According to the sociologist Ridgeway (2019), status is the amount of esteem and attention given to individuals. Status is culturally informed and rooted in shared historical and cultural beliefs about what and who is worthy. In goals-oriented groups, like expedition or outdoor adventure groups, members' perceived or expected competence to achieve collective objectives is the basis of status allocation (Berger et al., 1980; Berger & Fisek, 2006; Ridgeway, 2019). Group members can use context-specific status characteristics (e.g., specific competence) or diffuse status characteristics (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, physical appearance) to evaluate which members might be the most competent to reach the collective goals (Berger et al., 1980; Frevert & Walker, 2014; Jackson et al., 1995; Meeker & Weitzel-O'Neill, 1977; Ridgeway, 2014). When the status is assigned more on the basis of diffuse status characteristics, it can be stereotyped. For example, regardless of their competence, men are more often perceived as more competent than women in most outdoor activities. Thus, they often get a higher status within goal-oriented groups (Carli, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Taps & Martin, 1990).

Regarding status allocation in groups, two processes must be considered: personal beliefs about one's competence compared to others (first-order expectations) and others' anticipations (second-order expectations). Studies have suggested that the second-order expectation, what people expect of one another, is the most important determinant of behavior and influence (Anderson et al., 2006; Anderson, Willer, et al., 2012; Troyer & Younts, 1997). For example, in a study by Troyer and Younts (1997), participants were asked to rank their task competence

compared to others. They were then told that others expected them to be either less or more competent than they believed themselves to be. When teammates had to work together, others' expectations of that participant's task competence were the strongest predictor of behaviors and influences.

### **Status Hierarchies in Outdoor Groups**

As yet, only a few studies about status hierarchies have been carried out in the outdoor field (Eys et al., 2008; Jostad et al., 2015; Ouellet, 2022; Ouellet & Laberge, 2021a; 2021b; 2022; 2023; Pinch, 2002; 2007; Richmond and al., 2016). These researchers highlighted who generally gets a higher status within outdoor groups, why, and how status hierarchies affect individual members or some aspects of their groups' dynamics.

Eys and colleagues (2008) studied the effect of formal and informal status congruency (for members who were not officially assigned leadership roles) on perceived group cohesion (how much members are attracted to their group, its tasks and conflict-free relationships). They found that group members' perception of cohesion was "greater when higher status members were in formal leadership positions." (p. 86) They also found that when expedition group members attributed themselves to a higher status than other group members afforded them, their attraction to the social aspects of the group was lower. Jostad and colleagues (2015) also found that social status was significantly related to the affective and cognitive dimensions of group identification. More precisely, the participants with a higher status within their peers' group had a higher level of group identification.

Gender also seems to play an important role in the status allocation processes in an outdoor context. Richmond and colleagues (2016) identified factors influencing social status among adolescents enrolled in National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) courses. They found that males generally had a higher status than females regardless of their outdoor experience. Pinch (2002; 2007) explored how gender ste-

reotypes operate and affect social recognition in mixed-gender groups of adolescents enrolled in an Australian outdoor program. She found that gender stereotypes influenced participants' behaviors and perceptions of their peers' abilities. For example, the girls' physical strength was unrecognized even when they demonstrated it. She also found that "masculine" abilities like strength had more value within the groups than the attributes socially allocated to femininity.

Other researchers in the outdoor field also highlighted how the great value attributed to physical and technical skills in adventure education programs in North America advantaged men (Lugg, 2003; Warren et al., 2018). They showed how the historical influences and dominant cultural values, which emphasize endurance, strength, independence, and individual autonomy, advantaged men in the outdoor field. They called this phenomenon the "hidden curriculum," which they defined as "unspoken or implicit messages, beliefs, values, and assumptions in the educational setting, including the unstated promotion and enforcement of certain behavioral patterns and professional standards." (p. 141) Depending on individual characteristics, behaviors and trajectories, the hidden curriculum is likely to influence who will get recognition and who will not. It is strongly associated with the meaning of competence and the established standards, which are socially constructed, never neutral, and tend to be defined by the dominants in the field and advantage them (Lugg, 2003).

Interestingly, it seems possible to challenge this dominant hierarchy of values that tends to advantage men. In an ethnographic case study, Ouellet and Laberge (2021a) observed that the local hierarchy of values seemed to favor women's recognition and mitigated the traditional male advantage. The group members highly valued relational and emotional skills. Accordingly, experienced women were more recognized by their peers as models of good outdoor leaders than men; they mastered both technical and relational skills. These results are somewhat promising; they suggest that it is possible to challenge and transform, at least locally, the dominant culture.

As we have seen, previous studies have highlighted how status processes in the outdoor field could affect group outcomes and participants' experiences. Researchers also highlighted that status processes can influence individuals' sense of competence, self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of belonging, well-being, learning, individual performance, and decisional processes (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 2015; Giskevicius et al., 2009; Marr & Thau, 2014; Thomas-Hunt & Philips, 2004; Willer, 2009). Therefore, in order to promote an inclusive group dynamic, understanding group members' behaviors and discourses to maintain or improve their status within an expedition could be helpful for outdoor educators. In the following sections, we will examine these practices and explore how they might influence outdoor group dynamics from an inclusion and exclusion perspective. We will further suggest ways for practitioners to mitigate harmful status processes and promote equity.

### Social Positioning Strategies

An ethnographic case study was carried out during a 28-day canoe educational expedition in northern Quebec (Canada). The findings from the data collected have been reported in three articles (Ouellet & Laberge 2021; 2022; 2023) and a doctoral dissertation (Ouellet, 2022). Each of these articles relies on a different dataset and focuses on specific aspects of the group dynamics. In the following section, we will present and summarize the most prominent findings associated with status processes that impacted the group dynamics. Building on Bourdieu's sociological theory, Ouellet (2022) observed what people do and say to maintain or improve their status. She identified four main categories of social positioning strategies as shown in Table 1 that were employed by expedition group members:

1. the symbolic influence,
2. the symbolic strategies based on the values of activities, tasks, and skills,
3. the competence-based strategies, and
4. the relational strategies.

*Table 1: Defining the four Social Positioning Categories of Strategy (adapted from Ouellet, 2022).*

SYMBOLIC INFLUENCE	Strategies aimed at influencing the social norms, the hierarchy of values and the meaning attached to certain activities, tasks, and/or personal characteristics in a way that favour one's own characteristics and ways of being or behaving.
SYMBOLIC STRATEGIES	Strategies, based on the value of tasks and activities, aimed at calibrating implications, according to the symbolic value associated with the different tasks or activities.
COMPETENCE-BASED STRATEGIES	Strategies aimed at appearing competent in the eyes of others, that could be explicit or implicit, where implicit strategies could be a bluff.
RELATIONAL STRATEGIES	Strategies aimed at interacting and using relationships instrumentally, consciously or not, to maintain or improve one's status.

These social positioning strategies are more or less conscious practices aiming to maintain or improve a social position within a group (Ouellet, 2022). Each category of strategies influenced how group members behaved and interacted during the expedition. This study also showed how gender and social class played critical roles in the strategies adopted by participants or adopted toward themselves by other group members. In the following section, each category of social positioning strategies will be described, and their impacts on outdoor group dynamics will be examined.

### **Symbolic Influence**

Culture and local hierarchies of values play critical roles in status allocation processes (Ridgeway, 2019). Therefore, trying to influence these can be an effective strategy to maintain or improve one's status. The French sociologist, Bourdieu (1998; 2015; 2016), has shown how dominant people in different fields, where struggle and competition take place, have an interest in universalizing classification principles that benefit themselves. This could be done through discourses by valuing specific ways of being and behaving, particular persons, or even by expressing one's view about meaningful topics in that field.

Ouellet and Laberge's (2021b; 2022) ethnographic case study of an outdoor expedition corroborated Bourdieu's findings. They showed that status-advantaged members (possessing

any characteristic that gives a comparative advantage over other group members) were likelier to express their opinions publicly and exert leadership, thus influencing the group culture to their own benefit. For example, a group member valued, through feedback to a peer, speaking manners that were representative of his own social class, thus, devaluing the linguistic practices of another group member who is from a different social class. In an expedition, this could lead to the devaluation and marginalization of group members whose characteristics and behaviors do not correspond to the dominant group culture.

Another way for group members to perform symbolic influence can be through their social capital, such as the resources associated with their relationships. Thus, even individuals whose status is not very high could indirectly influence the group culture through their solidarity with a powerful sub-group. It can be done by creating a sub-group identity that gathers people who value the same practices, support each other's opinions, and work together to create a local culture in which their own characteristics are the most valued. For example, Ouellet and Laberge (2023) observed that some group members publicly paid tribute to others who were alike or had the same kind of practice during the canoe expedition. The authors called this practice "self-celebration" by proxy as a way of joining with like-minded members. They argued that this kind of action could increase the subjective value of their practices within the group and, therefore,

their status and the implicit rules underlying the group status hierarchy.

Ultimately, the symbolic influence is akin to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) and even with the hidden curriculum in the outdoor field (Lugg, 2003; 2018; Warren et al., 2018). Symbolic violence is a type of violence that goes unnoticed, with underlying classification principles that are often taken for granted or give advantage to the dominant people in that field. For example, the unquestioned greater value of technical skills over relational skills in the outdoor field (Warren et al., 2018) and the endorsement of this hierarchy of value by a majority, even the dominated, could be an example of symbolic violence. The symbolic violence operates with the unconscious complicity of the dominated. By adhering to and endorsing classification principles that value the dominants' characteristics and devalue their own characteristics, the dominated unconsciously legitimizes their own domination. Therefore, the symbolic influence could either contribute to maintaining the marginalization of low-status group members, or it can, under certain circumstances, transform the classification principles and system of values that eventually flatten the social hierarchies.

### **Symbolic Strategies**

Strategies based on the symbolic value of activities, tasks and skills means calibrating one's involvement in the latter according to their relative worth in order to stand out (Ouellet, 2022). In this context, gender and social class played critical roles in group members' implications. The symbolic value put on activities, tasks and skills encouraged group members to behave and invest energy or time in the most valued tasks and activities, as well as in what was expected of them according to gender norms and their gendered and class dispositions (Ouellet & Laberge, 2021a).

In their study, Ouellet & Laberge (2021a) looked at the gender division of labor during the expedition. They found that women were highly involved

in various valued and non-valued tasks, whereas men were more interested in being invested in valued physical, manual, and technical tasks with the latter being the most valued. Moreover, they also observed that women thought they needed to prove themselves by working unrelentingly, even when they were tired, sick, or injured. On the other hand, most of the men were minimally involved in less prestigious tasks like cooking, organizing the kitchens, and washing the dishes. The rationale underlying these involvement differences could be uncovered by three different concepts:

1. Bourdieu's sense of position (1982; 2016),
2. Biernat's shifting standard model (2003), and
3. Parker & Griffin's concept of over-performance demand (2002).

First, according to Bourdieu (1982; 2016), the dominants are less likely than the dominated to experience social sanctions should they transgress a social norm. Thus, the men's sense of position may be that they instinctively understand their status in a male-dominated outdoor field while also recognizing certain latitudes of freedom and tolerances for deviance afforded by their positions, which must have prompted them to think that being minimally involved in non-prestigious tasks was not a concern. Inversely, women's precarious positions in that same field do not allow them as much latitude or tolerance to play loose with the rules.

As for the shifting standard model (Biernat, 2003), little evidence is required to confirm a stereotype, whereas more evidence is required to invalidate it. Thus, Ouellet & Laberge (2021a) suggested that interiorized gender stereotypes about women's "supposed" physical weaknesses might have driven women to work harder to prove their abilities in an outdoor setting.

As for the over-performance demands, Parker and Griffin (2002, p. 196) indicate that these refer: "to an individual's perception that they need to overperform to gain acceptance and recognition within the workplace." Parker and Griffin



fin highlighted how women in male-dominated fields, were more likely to feel pressure to over-perform in order to prove their capabilities. They also showed that this feeling could be exacerbated by so-called “harmless” joking and teasing that make gender differences salient.

### Competence-based Strategies

As stated previously, in goal-oriented groups, like expedition groups, perceived group members’ competence to achieve collective goals is fundamental to status allocation processes (Bergner et al., 1980; Ridgeway, 2019). Therefore, it is in people’s best interest to convey an image of competence. This is often accomplished through various conscious and unconscious, implicit or explicit, practices aimed at appearing competent in the eyes of others (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Leary et al., 2014).

Explicit demonstration of expertise could be achieved through publicly practicing or performing technical skills. Implicit practices are much subtler. They are generally achieved through discourses and attitudes (e.g., dominance, self-confidence), and they may be a bluff or not. Ouellet and Laberge (2022) identified various implicit ways that group members used to appear competent in the eyes of others. For example, they observed that some status-advantaged group members afforded themselves the legitimacy to judge and evaluate their peers’ practices publicly. This performative act sends an implicit message that one is skilled enough to criticize or judge their peers’ performances. Another implicit manner of appearing competent that was employed by certain group members is what Bourdieu (2016) called a “theory effect.”

*A theory effect... is the specific product of anyone claiming to speak theoretically about the world.... It involves explaining, with a greater or lesser degree of social authority, the nature of the social world and how it is to be viewed (p. 474; unofficial translation).*

People openly expressing their views about what constitutes good outdoor leadership, and which characteristics leaders must possess or how they must behave, can be considered a theory effect. As it relates to status, this kind of practice might reinforce or sometimes challenge dominant discourses or social norms in the outdoor field. However, this might also generally benefit the speakers’ status by legitimating their ways of being and behaving.

Ouellet and Laberge’s study also highlighted how, in order to appear competent in the eyes of others, some men, who thought they had not received the recognition they deserved, had compromised others’ credibility, group climate, and decision processes. The following list provides a few examples of the behaviors observed during the 28-day canoe expedition.

- Exposing the weaknesses of a more experienced woman in order to seize an occasion to teach or show the right way of doing.
- Denying women’s expertise by dismissing their technical advices.
- Challenging women’s authority in order to show one’s technical expertise.
- Expressing one’s technical opinions assertively and overconfidently in the presence of more experienced women and, thus, influencing critical decisions.
- Engaging in a face-to-face confrontation with group members that might have prevented them from demonstrating their competence.

Even if men were sometimes the target of these harmful behaviors, experienced women remained the principal victims. This may be explained by the renowned women’s expertise, the low probability of women counterattacking, and the women’s precarious position in the outdoor field. This was as if skilled women represented opportunities for status-driven men to appear more competent than the women with little risk of being sanctioned.

Moreover, women and working-class group members were more likely to deploy self-pro-

tection strategies to avoid criticism or being perceived as unskilled (Ouellet & Laberge, 2021a; 2022). Being distant and silent, hiding, or withdrawing from group activities are examples of the self-protection behaviors observed. Likewise, these researchers and others found that women tended to avoid public physical and technical implications in order to protect their image (Dingle & Kiewa, 2006; Ouellet & Laberge, 2021a). Ouellet and Laberge (2021a) observed that women interrupted or avoided technical practices that could expose their physical and technical skills, when other people were watching. Based on Biernat's (2003) study about gender stereotypes, we assume that since men's physical skills are taken for granted while women's physical skills are generally perceived as weaker, little evidence could be required to confirm the gender stereotypes about women's physical weakness. Therefore, it could be in women's interest to avoid failure in front of peers and to work harder to prove their value. However, this protection strategy may impair the development of women's physical and technical skills by limiting their practice time.

Women were not the only ones to protect their self-image. Group members pertaining to a labor social class adopted this kind of strategy. They were less likely to express their ideas and opinions during group discussions (Ouellet & Laberge, 2022) and more likely to withdraw from some group activities (Ouellet & Laberge, 2021a). For example, one man hesitated to accomplish various tasks because he was afraid to expose his weaknesses and be criticized. Actually, it can be said that most self-protection strategies aim to protect self-image. However, in the long term, it prevents these group members (women and working-class group members) from learning new skills, developing a greater mastery of valued skills, and even developing relationships with group members while working with them. Accordingly, self-protecting strategies might be detrimental to one's status improvement in the outdoor field.

Finally, as competent women in male-dominated fields are more likely to face social sanctions due to gender stereotypes transgression (Delacollette

et al., 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Rudman et al., 2012), they can benefit from employing specific strategies in order to signal their competence without being sanctioned (Carli et al., 1995; Ridgeway, 1982). They have to appear uninterested in status enhancement and being driven by collective goal attainment. For example, in the same canoe expedition, researchers observed two experienced women apologizing for speaking out their opinion and trying to reassure group members that they did not see themselves as worthier than anybody (Ouellet & Laberge, 2022). This strategy seemed to work, as these women were perceived to be competent and their humbleness was praised by their peers.

### Relational Strategies

Relationships and status processes are closely associated in various ways. In the following section, we will summarize three of the six relational strategies identified by Ouellet and Laberge (2023) during a canoe expedition conducted in Quebec, Canada. Relational strategies mean managing social interactions and relations with other group members to improve or maintain one's status within the group. Ouellet and Laberge (2021b; 2023) observed that social class played important roles in the relational strategies that expedition group members employed or that were used toward them by other group members. The three following relational strategies were particularly prominent, and impacted the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion during the expedition.

1. The affiliation strategy means "affiliating [attaching] with and/or highlighting interpersonal relationships with high-status individuals."
2. The distancing strategy means "keeping one's distance [separating] from a low-status member."
3. The protection strategy means "valuing and protecting [defending] low-status members" (Ouellet & Laberge, 2023, p.9).

These first two strategies rely on the principle that status spreads through association or disas-

sociation (Bourdieu, 1979; Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Goffman, 1951). Therefore, relationships could either be a means to get a higher status or a threat to one's status. The pseudo-consciousness of this process may influence how group members interact with one another. Indeed, on the one hand, having relationships with high-status individuals provides multiple advantages and it could be tempting to get closer to high-status members. On the other hand, keeping one's distance from certain lower-status group members may prevent someone from being associated with them. Ridgeway (2014) called this type of behavior "associational preference biases."

The affiliation strategy was the most important strategy observed during the expedition. The behaviors associated with it were "praising high-status members' characteristics, supporting their opinions, being familiar with them, and highlighting friendship with them" (Ouellet & Laberge, 2023, p.12). These behaviors could contribute to improving status-advantaged group members by legitimizing the classification principles that support their status, thus, reinforcing the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) that contributes to the marginalization of certain group members.

The distancing strategy was observed through "subtle behaviors of exclusion, intimidation, or impatience" (Ouellet & Laberge, 2023, p. 11) from some moderately status-advantaged participants toward the least status-advantaged participants. It is as if certain group members, due to their moderate status, cannot afford to be associated with lower-status members. Thus, in the eyes of others, they have to underscore the differences between them and the lower-status members. The distancing strategy is likely to affect the well-being, sense of belonging, motivation, and self-esteem of low-status group members.

The last relational strategy involves protection. Ouellet and Laberge (2023) observed that the most status-advantaged group members defended and valued low-status members several times during the expedition. Because others are the ones who afford status to each group members,

one must benefit from the support of others to achieve status. Thus, behaviors of generosity, protection, and endorsement of low-status members by high-status members could be a pathway to gain or improve status (Hays & Blader, 2017). In this case, high-status members can not only afford to be associated with low-status members; they even can benefit from it. By restoring equity and defending the interest of low-status group members, high-status members may eventually be praised by low-status group members when needed.

### Implications for Practitioners

As we have seen previously, status processes within an expedition group can affect group members' experience in many ways. Building on these previous findings, the following section suggests ways for practitioners to foster inclusivity with regard to each of the social positioning strategies.

Regarding the symbolic influence, it could be beneficial to inform participants about the concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) and the tendency of the dominants in social fields to impose hierarchies of values and classification principles that benefit their own interests (Bourdieu, 2016). Raising awareness of group members about this stake can be done by explaining what symbolic violence means and how the value and meaning attached to different personal characteristics and ways of being or behaving in the outdoor field are socially constructed, not neutral, and so could marginalize group members from dominated social groups in the society.

Practitioners could also inform their participants that there are other pathways to maintain or improve one's status within a group than the universalization of one's own interest. For example, as others often utilize self-confidence as an indicator of competence that could benefit one's status, the valuation of a diversity of ways of being and behaving in the outdoor field could be a cue, in the eyes of other group members, that one is confident enough to value even characteristics that he or she does not embody.



In the section on symbolic strategies, we highlighted that women worked unrelentingly to prove their capabilities, whereas men generally did not. The pressure on women to prove themselves in the outdoor field or other male-dominated fields has been associated by previous researchers with a higher risk of burnout and mental distress due to physical and emotional demands (Parker & Griffin, 2002; Wright & Gray, 2013). This is somewhat problematic, and it exists various ways for practitioners to mitigate this phenomenon (Ouellet, 2022). Among these, an equitable repartition of expedition tasks and chores could be a solution to give some a break. Also, the public recognition of women's abilities by a credible third party, like the leader in charge of the group, is likely to weaken their pressure to overperform.

In the competence-based strategies section, we have seen that some status-driven men adopted strategies that threatened women's authority in order to appear competent in the eyes of others. They employed dominant and arrogant behaviors toward experienced women. The tolerance of these behaviors by outdoor leaders and group members sends a message of legitimacy that could potentially inspire others to adopt similar behaviors towards women and hinder other women from speaking up or acting assertively, thus perpetuating gender inequalities in the field. Therefore, this kind of behavior should not be tolerated by practitioners.

Regarding relational strategies, we have seen that low-status members were more likely to be victims of distancing strategies or associational preference biases. In order to mitigate this phenomenon and raise awareness about its adverse effects on some individuals, outdoor practitioners can present the three relational strategies to their participants. Moreover, they can emphasize to group members that behaviors that favor equity and generosity are pathways to gaining and improving status (Hays & Blader, 2017). This knowledge might encourage group members to act more inclusively.

## Conclusion

Armed with this knowledge of status processes and strategies, practitioners are poised to mitigate the adverse effects of status misuse and its potential impact on group dynamics. Status hierarchies within expedition groups could be detrimental to some group members' experiences and exacerbate social inequalities based on gender and social class. We hope this chapter will raise awareness about status in order to favor more inclusive groups' cultures in the future of outdoor learning.

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