

A CRUCIBLE OF COMPETITION AND COOPERATION: WHERE DO THE CONCEPTS FIT IN RECREATION ACTIVITY DELIVERY?

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ABSTRACT *The prevailing use of competitive activities in leisure, sport and recreation continues to inspire debate as people question the value, influence and outcomes of competitive behaviour for participants. In some forums it has been suggested that competition builds character, brings out the best performance in an individual and develops a positive sense of sportsmanship (Butler, 2000; Coakley, 1990). By comparison, others critique the anti-social role of competition, claiming it can simultaneously lead to dissonance, hostility and a divisive desire to win at all costs (Sobel, 1983; Thomson, 2000). Within the general leisure and physical activity field, cooperative games are sometimes presented as the antithesis to this dilemma as it is proposed that cooperation leads to the development of respect, challenge and cohesion (Orlick, 1978; Sutcliff & Patterson, 2001).*

This study reports on the perceived value and use of competition and cooperation from the perspectives of 20 recreation activity leaders drawn from the fields of sport, outdoor recreation, fitness and community recreation. The findings suggest that both competition and cooperation are valid techniques for achieving positive outcomes if they are used with applied intent, but that many leaders have an under-developed understanding of the use of cooperation as an instructional tool. For many, cooperation is identified purely in a behavioural manner, composed of an observed outcome of client's working together. For others, a more complex approach is evident as cooperation is viewed as a combination of actions and attitudes reflecting empathy, open communication and equity.

INTRODUCTION

There has been much debate over the years regarding the role and influence of competitive and cooperative structures on individuals' interactions. These discussions exist in a broad range of disciplines from psychology to education, business to leisure, with each identifying varying opinions as to the value and use of the two concepts. For some, competition is seen to be exploitative, encouraging an attitude of 'us versus them' that is damaging to participation and reinforces patterns of failure (Brown & Grineski, 1992; Sobel, 1983). For others it is identified as a source of life skills, a pathway to achievement and instills an attitude of fair play (Butler, 2000). Cooperation, on the other hand, is viewed as a sharing, positive interaction where no one loses and subsequently has to experience failure (Orlick, 1978). Through cooperative ventures it is suggested that individuals learn trust, cohesion and a positive perspective of self (Sutcliff & Patterson, 2001) and are encouraged to collaborate and work with others (Slavin, 1996). While these cooperative outcomes are recognised as positive qualities, they are often deemed of lesser use in competitive Western societies, where the strongest are deemed to

survive and where success is measured in terms of individual achievement (Brown & Grineski, 1992; Vaughn & Hogg, 1998).

Within the recreation field both perspectives continue to be narrowly considered with much literature tending to highlight the use of one technique to the exclusion of the other. When considered together however, the literature suggests that both competition and cooperation have valuable contributions to make to people's interpersonal skills and personal development (e.g., Schwartzman, 1997). This is particularly apparent when their application is chosen based on the context of the group, the situation and the desired outcomes. As Butler (2000) has pointed out, it is how competition is conducted and what is rewarded that most influences the outcomes, not the fact that a pursuit is competitive. In a similar vein, cooperation is not necessarily a by-product of group work and will most likely emerge when the group has a reason for incorporating everyone (Lippa, 1994).

Competition is inherent in many games, activities and interactions within recreation. Sport is an obvious example where competition is built into the interaction. Here, one team or individual competes against another in order to win and avoid losing, but competition is more prevalent than just sport. Rather it is seen in the division of opposing teams in games and is introduced through any incentive of rewards, grades and points. It is found in whole group activities such as scavenger hunts and capture the flag and is encouraged in playful pursuits as diverse as tag and pin the tail on the donkey. Informal leisure activities such as board games and interactive games on play stations have competitive structures and rules established to determine a winner, while many outdoor adventure activities encourage an internal competition with the self, as individuals strive to do better than they did before.

Each of these instances offers a different example of the form competition can take. It may involve challenging the self against others, competing against a previous personal performance, striving to beat a system or machine programmed to win, or endeavouring to gain recognition and reward. What each has in common is the incentive to perform at a level above that previously exhibited, or sufficient to achieve success. As a result it is recognised that competitive behaviour can act as an incentive to participation and effort (Coakley, 1990; Kohn, 1992).

Unfortunately, competition is also encumbered with a downside that for every winner there is a loser. Psychological studies have found that when people are competing in groups there is a tendency for competition to engender prejudice and hostility toward the other group (Lippa, 1994; Vaughan & Hogg, 1998) and 'in groups' (e.g., my team) and 'out groups' (e.g., the other team) are formed. Subsequently there is a tendency for the interaction between competing teams to involve knowing enough about the opposition simply to assist in their defeat (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988).

While this outcome is not inherently wrong or necessarily hostile, it has been found that the focus on winning which is endemic in competition can be problematic beyond just creating winners and losers. For example, Fitzclarence & Hickey (1999) have suggested that coaches and administrators may be disadvantaged through a sole focus on competition. Their research revealed that when success is measured by winning, coaches potentially lose their sense of responsibility to nurture individuals and an element of positive motivation can be lost. In addition Butler (2000) identified that the ethic of fair play can be lost through a dominating focus on winning while Brown and Grineski (1992) found

that competition can bring out negative traits such as cheating and creates a team whose participation is contingent on continuous performance. Since not all individuals are capable or desirous of winning in recreational pursuits there is a likelihood that repeated failure in competition can lead to a loss of motivation to even try (Brown & Grineski, 1992).

Cooperative games and cooperative learning address some of these concerns through a focus on inclusion, equality and supportiveness. Here, the goal is to teach team-work and group unity through participants playing together, not against one another. The emphasis is on sharing, acceptance, recognition of everyone and positive social interaction skills (Little, 2003; Orlick, 1978; Sobel, 1983). In cooperative pursuits, the experience of participation is the goal, as participation is encouraged through fun engagement without the need for extrinsic motivation.

While there are acknowledged benefits to be gained through the use of both competition and cooperation, the question of how activity leaders themselves understand and utilise these concepts remains uncertain. Though it is possible to observe, for example, competitive tasks in sport and cooperative intent in outdoor pursuits, it is important to gauge activity leaders' conscious practice of these concepts in providing appropriate and socially positive outcomes. Only then will we be able to recognise whether a full range of techniques, processes and skills available to leaders are being adequately utilised or whether a shift in leader training and awareness may be needed.

RESEARCH METHOD

To explore recreation practitioners' understandings and experiences of competition and cooperation, qualitative data were collected on: recreation leader's use of competition and cooperation as leadership techniques; their personal experience of leading; and their interpretations of group outcomes. To do this an interpretive, grounded approach was used in an effort to seek a rich understanding of the leaders' experiences (Blumer, 1969; Merriam, 1998). Through the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews, the leaders were encouraged to freely express their experiences, understandings and meanings in a supportive environment (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Throughout the research process the aim was to understand and examine the leader's perceptions of the concepts and how these relate to their own behaviour. As such, the respondents were seen to be central to the study and their own words were used in a search for patterns, commonalities and difference (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The sample consisted of 20 recreation activity leaders with a range of experience. Five leaders were interviewed from each of the industry sectors of sport, community recreation, outdoor recreation and fitness and the resultant sample ranged in age from 26 to 64 with leadership experience levels varying from 18 months to 24 years. Throughout their activity leading the respondents had worked at fitness centres, outdoor education facilities, in private practice, in schools, at community recreation centres, for local councils, within advanced care facilities for the aged and disabled and within sporting clubs. In-depth interviews with the leaders were conducted in a location selected by the respondent. These occurred in an environment where the leader felt at ease and that offered minimal disruptions and included their home, their office and their workplace environment (e.g. nature, playing field). The interviews lasted an average of 50

minutes and each was audio-tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis and comparison.

Following the interviews the data were transcribed and interpreted for meaning. Themes and sub-themes were identified through a process of coding used to tag units of meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss, 1987) and a constant comparative method was enlisted to search for commonalities and differences in the leader's descriptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The results were then compared with current literature related to competition and cooperation to search for similarity or missing discussion.

RESULTS

Findings from this research confirmed the dilemma of using competition and cooperation in activity leading as many of the leaders noted a dichotomy in their practice as they struggled between participant expectation and behaviour (emphasising competitiveness) and leader desired outcomes (a cooperative, supportive environment). The results revealed six key themes that serve to describe the context of competition and cooperation for the research respondents. These included three themes of competition: as an expression of self and society; as a desire to perform; and/or as a source of wariness as some leaders questioned competitions role in their practice. Three themes of cooperation were also evident, namely: cooperation as observed behaviour; as an attitude and process; and as teamwork. Each of these is discussed separately in the following section to explore the complexity of the leaders' understandings.¹

Competition

"I am competitive": Expression of self and society

When asked to explain the role of competition in their activity leading, many of the respondents referred to their own competitive spirit to contextualise their experience of competition. Frequently, explanations of competition were prefaced with an acknowledgement of the leaders competitive spirit. For example, Peter, a sailing master, explained competition from his own experience, noting that "I desire to win and I try hard to achieve that in a competition". Others similarly expressed an appreciation of the power and joy competition provided in their own life. As a professional tennis coach explained "look, I'm a competitor and always have been, so even my leisure is a combination of competition and some tranquil nature based stuff" (Colin, coach).

The value of competition was seen to be a natural and positive aspect for these leaders who had grown up competing with their friends and siblings whether at home, at school or through games. "Competitiveness, I think it comes through growing up with 3 brothers and you're always competing in the back yard, for attention – be louder, be the best, be seen" (Steve, fitness leader). This was further reinforced through the leaders' social world as they recognised the reverence given to elite sporting heroes. "A competitive spirit is the heart of the nation surely. Look how we stop when someone performs well internationally, look how the nation cries with joy ... Of course competition is ingrained" (Ros, outdoor educator). As Dane, a community recreation leader further explained, "competition is everywhere. It's in our business, it's in our sport, it's in our schools. You're hard pressed to avoid it".

¹ The respondents are identified by their recreation activity field and an assumed name.

Given the embeddedness of competition in the respondents lifeworlds there was a belief, particularly from the sports coaches, that activity leading demanded competition and that every coach (at least) needed to be competitive. "I think every coach has to have that competitive edge in them, otherwise it would be a waste of time for them coaching a team" (Simon, football coach). While this was not viewed as a coaching tool for the youngest athletes, it was perceived as a requirement for any sport as the competition moved beyond a child's game. "I know in junior sports, under 6's and under 8's they don't have competition with finals. And that's changed some things because the players don't have that competitive edge, but they soon learn that and display that hunger to win when there is a prize" (Stuart, soccer coach).

Though the sentiment was not explicitly expressed by every leader, it was evident from the responses that the majority of activity leaders identified competition as either an element of their own practice, or most commonly, as a reflection of modern society. As a result, competition was expected in their practice and accepted as a reflection of the world they lived in, but it could also be seen as an efficient instructional tool.

'Competition brings out the best': A desire to perform well

Prizes, rewards and recognition were seen by most of the leaders to encourage competition, but these also served to engage the group's best efforts. Here, competition was seen as a positive motivational tool to enhance individual and group application. For example, external motivators were readily used by leaders in the fitness industry who saw competition as a way of achieving two outcomes. The first involved challenging clients to achieve their best performance and comparing that with others. Referred to as a 'body exchange competition', this required participants to "work as hard as they can and after 3 months we test them to see who's made the biggest difference" (Tess, fitness instructor). This type of competitive motivator included male and female prizes for the most fat lost, the most fitness gained and the most strength achieved. Award nights were instigated and designed to encourage and applaud as many people as possible.

The second outcome entailed clients competing to outperform the leader. Again using fitness leaders experiences, stories were told of motivational events which served to provide variety and focus to client training. Founded on competition, the goal of the events were to encourage participants to perform better than their fitness leaders. Here, competition amongst the participant group was promoted to push clients to perform and improve, although in this latter instance the prize was pride and a sense of achievement at beating the mentor.

While these examples emerged in one industry sector, other leaders expressed similar comments regarding the role of competition to motivate participants. For example, while outdoor recreation and community leaders tended to make less use of awards, they did acknowledge competition as a tool for encouraging personal performance. Within outdoor recreation this was often explained as managed through the challenge by choice principle which sees participants encouraged to set their own parameters for participation. Here, participants are given some freedom to choose the intensity and level of their participation and an individual's competitive spirit can be a motivating factor. "Once you've got challenge by choice in place individuals sometimes choose to hop in and compete and that's fine where it doesn't intrude on someone else's experience". This type of approach was particularly appropriate where the activity

was meant to be fun, a one-off experience and the risk consequences were low. In these cases personal competition could give an individual a “spurt of higher performance” (Alex, outdoor educator).

In part, the leaders viewed competition as a chance for participants to do better than others, but it could also be experienced as participant instigated desires to compete with oneself. As another outdoor leader noted, potential positive outcomes could evolve from this form of personal competition: “I think competition can be healthy and it can make certain activities more compelling and possibly change the motivation of the group and the people involved in the group. The reality is it’s often the group that makes it competitive” (Tonia, outdoor educator). Thus, building on the leaders understanding of competition as socially and personally constructed, the leaders found competition could emerge not only through their own preference and intent, but from within the group itself.

Extending this experience, community recreation leaders also found competition at times became inevitable. While they personally disliked the use of competition with their clients, they found “it’s unavoidable when we do sports. It’s part of society and for these kids it’s part of the game” (Dane, disability leader). Another who taught belly dancing believed that “women are competitive by nature” so while she did not actively promote competition between her participants, she acknowledged her clients wanted “to be the best they could be. So there is a competitive aspect there. I think that’s just human nature” (Roslyn, belly dance instructor).

The leaders interviewed recognized that competition could provide positive outcomes and evolved in their practice through their intentions as well as from the groups’ expectations. It is important to note however that not all leaders viewed competition as a singularly positive tool or outcome, as some expressed a level of concern regarding its practice in the recreational arena.

‘I’m not entirely convinced’: Competitive wariness

For some of the leaders, an understanding and acceptance of competition was couched in a wariness for its potentially negative outcomes. This was particularly evident for the outdoor leaders, but was implicit in the understanding of all the leaders. A realisation was evident in the leaders’ comments noting that competition may at some stage need to be managed to enhance positive outcomes and minimise negative impacts.

For the coaches, that entailed balancing the competitive team with a group who could also work together. “It’s no point having a group of people who are so competitive they don’t know how to work with each other” (Stuart, soccer coach). For the community leaders it could mean trying to balance the team so the competition was fair. “I try to manage competition in groups by making the teams even if I can. Keep the skill level even on both sides” (Dane, disability leader). Another found she strove to encourage people to be their best and “actively discouraged the competitive nature”. This was done by supporting and encouraging each individual but never “making comparisons between them” (Roslyn, belly dance).

An outdoor leader was even more explicit in his approach to competition finding he never “put peer groups up against each other”. In part this was because he believed,

there's too much of a spur to do damage. I mean psychological and physiological damage. Competition is powerful. I'm very competitive and I know the times I've come unstuck as a consequence and it's not a healthy thing necessarily. People are left out, pushed aside or pushed beyond their abilities for the sake of some arbitrary team. I use it for fun, but I'm cautious (Alex, outdoor educator).

Another leader expands the idea of caution, acknowledging her concerns but grounding these in positive ways she feels competition can be used.

I appreciate that it can be unhealthy, it can draw people apart, create schisms and become the sole focus. But a lot of what I do is about team work and I do sometimes deliberately programme opportunities for people to compete, but I don't set it up as a competition. I leave it to the groups and then we debrief how they are doing – are they supporting one another, or working against one another? Competition does not have to be about someone winning, or making sure everyone wins. At it's healthiest it's about people combining to achieve a common goal (Tonia, outdoor educator).

Overall, these activity leaders understood competition to be part of their practice and reflective of the social world, and to be a potentially useful tool for motivation. In addition however, it was also viewed as an approach that needed to be used with some caution to allow positive outcomes for all participants. Supplementing these findings, the leaders' understandings of cooperation as a leadership tool were also explored revealing further insights into activity leaders practice and intentions.

Cooperation

A link between competition and cooperation was apparent in many of the leader's comments. This occurred because some tried to balance competitive tendencies through the use of cooperative pursuits, but also because cooperation was seen as core to developing a competitive team. Sporting groups have long acknowledged the continuum between competition and cooperation as they strive to build a collaborative unit, well prepared to cooperatively combine in competitive rivalry with an opposing team (Mull, Bayless, Ross & Jamieson, 1997). But, cooperation was also accepted or used across other teaching and recreation activities as a motivational tool for initiating participation.

What is cooperative behaviour?: Cooperation as observed behaviour

The findings revealed that many of the leaders did not have a developed understanding of cooperation, viewing it largely as a natural outcome of group division, not a leadership tool. A community recreation dance teacher for example believed "all the time we're being cooperative. I love to get the girls to work within groups because then they express what they might be feeling and it's more relaxing for them. It's just sharing isn't it?" (Renee, dance teacher). Similar sentiments were expressed by a sports coach who dismissed cooperation as a coaching focus. "Cooperation, of course they cooperate. They cooperate as they work together on drills, on the team. They know they need each other so it's not

my concern to facilitate that" (Colin, tennis coach). Judy, a fitness leader supported the notion that cooperation was not necessarily her concern and questioned whether cooperation had any relevance to her practice. In her experience "people don't like contact with others". As a result she does not encourage them "helping one another or working together". For her cooperation implied encouraging participants to physically assist one another through an activity or make physical contact. She perceived neither as relevant nor necessary, thus cooperation as a leadership tool was confusing, "how do you mean cooperation?"

While these explanations revealed an understanding of cooperation based on social contact and the act of physically grouping people, other leaders saw cooperation as anything that was not actively promoted as competition. As a result, encouraging broad participation and supporting people's individual desires were also defined as being cooperative. Graham, a Police Citizen Youth Club (PCYC) manager explained that his emphasis was on "involvement, more participation than competition. Our organisation has produced national and international champions, so we don't hinder competition, but cooperation's more about being a part of a community on any level". By extension, cooperative activities also meant supporting clients by working with them to achieve their goals. Using the example of boxing classes Graham noted,

we have 3 or 4 training to compete to fight. We have some who just want to have a few amateur fights and some who want technique and fitness. We're happy to try and support that, to meet their needs and what they want and for us the cooperative element occurs that way (Graham, PCYC).

This idea was also raised by a coach who found that cooperation was more important for the support network of the athlete. Recognising that no one person is independently responsible for high level performance, she found building connections between various support networks was the focus of her practice of participant cooperation.

You have to develop the rapport, with the family, with the individual. It's a collaborative approach, whether that's so someone has their \$500 to go to Nationals, or \$5 to attend a programme, have they got the right equipment, whatever. I think cooperation is a key part to the whole leadership, coaching area (Anna-Louise, swim coach).

What is cooperative behaviour?: Cooperation as an attitude and process

A few of the leaders' understandings of cooperation went beyond these practical interpretations and were grounded in an active guided process and attitude of collegiality, rather than an observation of behaviour. For them, cooperation emerged when the group was encouraged to openly communicate and strive for equality of participation. "Not every activity is inspiring for all participants but we structure the interaction to involve everyone and support those roles with importance. People cheering and motivating are contributing, people taking the caring seat and monitoring the relationships are also acknowledged" (Alex, outdoor educator). For these leaders, cooperation was about sharing and awareness, as individuals were encouraged to be empathetic to one another. "We

have everyone rolling together in a sequence, but for it to work they have to be very aware of everyone around them and know what's going on. Catering for difference, helping and listening are all part of that cooperative environment" (Madge, Feldenkrais instructor).

In addition, it was recognised that cooperation did not truly eventuate unless the leader shared their power and encouraged the group to do the same. "It really only happens if they hear each other, accommodate and don't look to one leader. I have to step back or step in to the group if I'm going to be part of the process. Silence can be golden" (Ros, outdoor educator). For this smaller group of leaders with a more detailed understanding of cooperation, the process involved encouraging an inter-dependent relationship between the group and leader. As Andrew, a youth leader summed up:

cooperation means giving each individual a role and a reason for working together. We promote cooperation in the tasks we do, but also in the atmosphere. Why always have to fight against others to prove yourself – it's easier to work with them. We just need to find a shared goal.

For leaders with this understanding cooperation did not just necessarily occur, it was an intentional outcome that emerged through group attitude and leader efforts. For some, this unfolded through their general practice, for others, it was predominantly achieved through a focus on teamwork and team development.

Cooperation in Practice: Teamwork

Extending the cooperative process, a number of the leaders recognised the conscious use they made of cooperation to build teams. While sports coaches acknowledged the opportunities and role of competition to building performance, they actively used cooperative practice to develop team-work and a sense of identifiable group (i.e. esprit de corp). In part this entailed helping individual's recognise the strengths of others and providing cooperative training activities that required mutual interaction. "They have to be strong together so we do a lot of coordination drills, get them to encourage each other along and also run purely social activities away from training to encourage the commitment to team" (Stuart, soccer coach). In this way cooperation was used as part of the process of creating a more effective competitive team but was also a technique used to develop a team who could perform or achieve a desired outcome.

Moving beyond sporting teams, a community drama teacher also discussed the need to create team effort for performances so everyone committed their best contribution. As he said, the show "is not one person's vision, it's everyone's. And everyone has to get that same vision and work as a team to create it" (Byron, drama teacher). In part this was done through the voluntary nature of each person's attendance and through acknowledging the inter-relation of each of the parts to put on a performance – actors, backstage, lighting and sound.

Outdoor leaders also found cooperation "to be a bit like teamwork, it's happening all the time" (Gil, outdoor educator). As a result they would often consciously "set up activities that require cooperation through whole group problem solving and one group challenges" (Tonia, outdoor educator). By removing subgroups it was anticipated that the team would work together to

achieve an outcome, though realistically, it was found that groups often failed to cooperate effectively:

That's why we debrief, to challenge their assumptions and sometimes that's on competition and cooperation. People are making choices and decisions based on cultural expectations and their own history and it effects the way we behave. A group may not really be cooperating in a cooperative activity and discussing that is an integral part of what we do (Alex, outdoor educator).

For these leaders, cooperation could be a very effective tool in encouraging supportive and functioning teams. Though the socio-cultural milieu could serve to make cooperative intentions more difficult (e.g. "the groups I work with just don't seem to want to cooperate"), cooperative activities and intentions were part of some of the leaders' practice.

DISCUSSION

It was evident from the findings that competition and cooperation are utilised in activity leadership, but that leaders do not always control their use. Even where intentions were focused on drawing out specific learning's or creating a certain atmosphere, there appeared to be complicating factors presented both by leader expectations and desires, as well as individual and client group histories and habits.

This was evident both in the practice of utilising competition and in the apparent difficulty of establishing solely cooperative activities. It has previously been acknowledged within sporting forums that a continuum of cooperative/competitive activity exists as teams exhibit both collaboration ('in' group) and rivalry (with 'out' groups) (Mull et. al., 1997). It is apparent from the current findings however, that there are a number of other factors impacting on the use of both competition and cooperation.

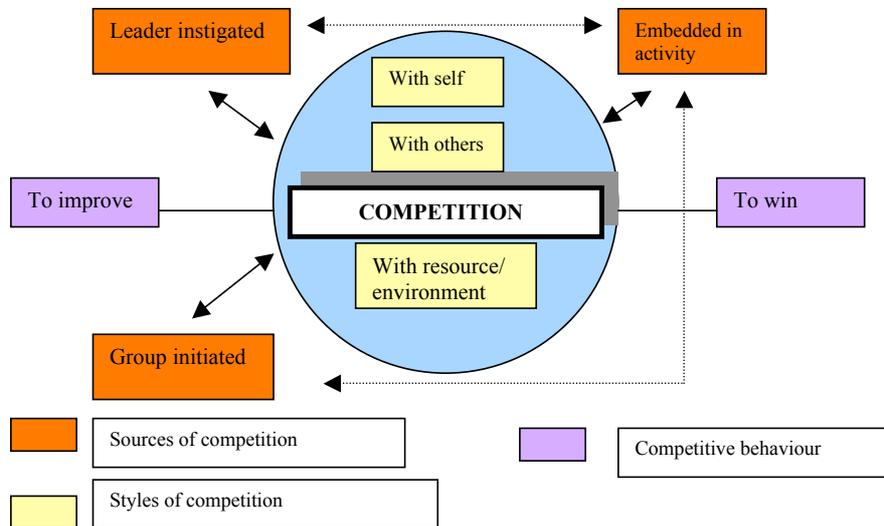


Figure 1. Sources and Styles of Competitive Behaviour

In competition, these include the form of competitive behaviour produced and the source of its instigation. As indicated in Figure 1, styles of competition vary and include competition with others, for example between groups or teams; with oneself, as the individual compares their performance with their previous best; or against some resource or environment. In this latter instance competition is not against other people, but may be against time (how fast), or an environmental challenge (get the group across the river).

For the leaders in this study, the source of competition could come from themselves as they intentionally programmed its practice; was embedded in the nature of the activity as certain pursuits were perceived as competitive; or emerged from the group. Expectations, habit and common practice seemed to inform this process as the leader, the group members or both parties expected a competitive approach to be dominant. In addition, the competitive behaviour exhibited was found to differ and could include an intention for the individual to improve themselves through personal challenge and benchmarking, or could involve the act of winning with its implications of beating others.

In terms of cooperation, the underlying process and understanding of the leaders appeared to be less clearly defined. While a range of behaviours were identified, not all leaders understood cooperation on multiple levels. Rather cooperation was defined as: simply dividing people into groups; as an outcome of encouraging high levels of participant involvement; or as a process of individuals working together to achieve a common goal (see Figure 2). The first two understandings reflected leader awareness of cooperation as a series of actions where people were physically pooled together. These could be leader directed actions encouraging aspects of group sharing, or arose spontaneously as the group socially interacted around the task. From these perspectives cooperation was identified based on the context or the situation and appeared more serendipitous than intentional. The third understanding reflected a more complex process where cooperation was understood not only as an observable aspect of effective group work, but as a process of empathy, communication, shared power and equity as individuals worked as a whole to achieve a satisfactory outcome.

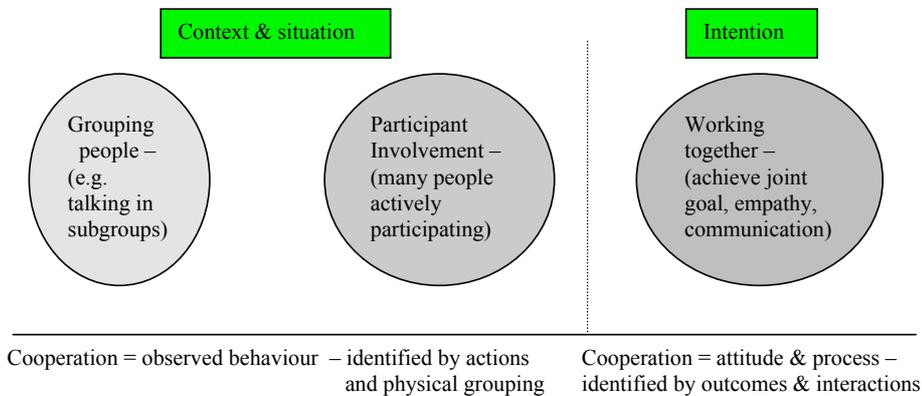


Figure 2. A Continuum of Leader Understandings of Cooperation

In effect this latter understanding exemplified leaders who appreciated a difference between people doing something together (participant involvement/group work) and the act of cooperatively working together to achieve a joint goal

based on participation and satisfaction. Even where such an understanding was evident however, leaders queried the capacity of groups to cooperate. Often competitive behaviour remained evident or individuals were under-utilised. More often, cooperation as an attitude of understanding and empathy was not even trialled. This may be a reflection of the leaders lack of awareness or ability to create cooperative environs, or it could be evidence of the socio-cultural influence that draws out competitive behaviour and acknowledges the achievements of successful competitors. With many recreational activities steeped in a history of performance, individual achievement, winning and being the best, cooperative outcomes for these recreation leaders were rarely achieved or even considered.

Within educational models of learning the notions of competition and cooperation are repeatedly discussed with advantages from both approaches noted (Ediger, 2000; Schwartman, 1997). Competition has a role to play in engendering excitement and inciting performance, but it's method and measurement does not have to come at the expense of someone losing. Rather the thrill of competition can be found in overcoming an obstacle whether it be physical or emotional, real or metaphoric. As Dyson and Grineski (2001) found, teams can use competition to help them perform better, but it is possible to also shift the focus away from a 'winner' and subsequently 'losers' by honouring performances that reflect honesty, respect, teamwork, cooperation and interdependence.

The purpose of activity programmes will differ according to the circumstances of the individuals involved, the proposed outcomes, the contexts of delivery and the resources available. But if activity leadership includes some forms of educating for positive relationships, teaching skills for participation and/or encouraging lifelong recreation then processes that rely on competition where one pits oneself against an 'enemy' may prove counterproductive and demotivational, particularly to those who most often experience losing. Ways of altering this pattern include recognising the potential of cooperative pursuits and adjusting the form of competition so the opportunity for inclusiveness and equality may emerge (see Little, 2003 for specific examples).

These outcomes will only occur however if some form of educational process is put in place to train leaders to the role, process and positive outcomes of cooperative behaviour. Based on the experiences and understandings of the current leaders, it would appear there is a need for leader training in:

- 1) programme design and activity choice that accommodates meeting the needs of the client from more than a competitive perspective;
- 2) awareness of the value of cooperative games;
- 3) planning and design of cooperative process and activities that replace the thrill of winning with a sense of achievement or success;
- 4) the use of competitive activities that incorporate a shift from individual's or teams competing against other individuals; and
- 5) process skills to move cooperative learning from an assumption of group work, to one of empathy, equity and communication.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore how various recreation activity leaders understood and implemented competition and cooperation in their professional practice. The results suggest that there are diverse meanings attached to cooperation. Some

leaders struggled to link its relevance to their practice, others saw it as a support technique to draw out stronger competitive behaviour, while still others defined it by its outcomes of teamwork. Conversely, all leaders had similar understandings of competition explaining it as a potential tool to encourage personal challenge, achievement and excitement for a group or individual. This understanding was counterbalanced by some leaders however, who were also wary of the powerful influence that could emerge through competition and its subsequent divisory outcomes. All however, recognised that competitive practice was evident in their programmes.

In part this consistency of competitive behaviour stemmed from personal interest and expectation on the part of the leader, but it also emerged from group expectation of competition and measurement of success. That such a finding emerged should be no cause for surprise. Professional sport, that dominates media presentation of recreation activity, focuses on performance, selection and training with recognition and respect gained through elite performance. But as Thomson (2000) has pointed out, while such role models build a product of media entertainment, they may have little real value for the experience of recreation and sport as they do little to develop inclusiveness, equality or mass participation.

The choice between competition or cooperation depends on the group, the individuals and the goal. Often, it would seem that competition is the pathway used but there are indications that cooperation fosters a positive sense of community, reduces conflict (Kriedler & Furlong, 1995), and can produce positive learning outcomes for participants (McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin & Smith, 1986). Unfortunately, it would seem from the results of this study that activity leaders themselves are not sufficiently aware of the benefits to be gleaned from cooperation, or of how to implement cooperative practices. This raises serious implications for the trainers of leaders and for recreation leaders themselves as it is recognised that there are gaps in training and practice within the broad recreation leader field.

It is therefore suggested that a balance is needed to offer a broad range of client outcomes and activity programmes. If that can occur more people can be catered for, a greater range of skills can be developed and potentially a mind-shift can eventuate away from 'winning is the only thing'. New leaders need to be nurtured who recognise the independent value of cooperative learning that creates no losers, and new forms of competition that value each individual rather than just the winner. In addition participants need to experience recreation activity that is cooperative so they may be exposed to a breadth of participatory outcomes and experiences that are inclusive and collegial, not simply founded in success through defeat of others.

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