Does the Attribution Theory Affect Levels of Female Participation and Their Successful Completion of Multi-day Expeditions?

Introduction
For the first part of my placement year myself and Jade Holmes planned, organised and then completed a walking expedition from John O’Groats to Lands End. During both the walking and planning stages of this expedition it appeared to me that there were fewer females than males participation in multi-day expeditions. Nearly all the JGOLELE/JOG walkers’ accounts I read during preparation for the walk were written by males, and of all the people we met along the way, those that were also participating in multi-day expeditions were again mostly male. Although I am aware that there are many females that do take part in the JGOLELE/JOG expedition, similar expeditions and also much larger scale expeditions, walking or otherwise; these observations caused me to question why females may be less motivated to participate.

Reflecting back on the walk I feel that how I attributed success and failures played an important part in motivating me to participate in and successfully complete this expedition. Therefore, this poster is going to investigate if there is a link between attributions and female participation.

Literature Review
More recently as outdoor activities have become more popular, levels of female participation have risen; however there still remain a lot less females involved in comparison to males (Little, 2002). The outdoors has typically been portrayed by the media as a masculine field and this has led to the stereotyping of outdoor activities (Humberstone, 1990), with people often being raised with the perception that riskier activities such as those that take place in the outdoors are more suited to men and not appropriate for women (O’Brien, Saunders & Barnes, 2004).

Females are also underrepresented in the areas of maths and science (Heller & Ziegler, 1996 cited in Ziegler & Stoeger, 2004, p. 63). According to Reis (1998 cited in Tiri & Nokelainen, 2011) this is not due to lack of effort or ability but is down to girls not succeeding because they are not expected too. Females are choosing to avoid these subject areas and therefore psychological approaches relating to female participation in these areas have recently started to focus increasingly on motivational variables that may be affecting this (Ziegler & Stoeger, 2004).

The attribution theory is a cognitive theory of motivation which focusses on peoples perceived explanations for their successes and failures (Cox, 2002) and believes that all these explanations can be categorised under the headings of: stability (where success or failure is attributed to stable or unstable factors), locus of causality (where it is attributed to internal or external factors), and locus of control (where it is attributed to controllable or uncontrollable) (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). How people attribute events is important as it influences emotions and performance as well as future expectancies and persistence (Hanrahan & Biddle, 2008).

Ziegler & Stoeger (2004) conducted a study which investigated whether a model of attribution retraining could be used on girls to increase participation/ involvement in chemistry. The results of this study were positive and showed that after the training the girls were more likely to attribute success internally to effort rather than externally to an easy task. Siann et al. (1996) similarly discuss that "females are more 'external' and males more 'internal' in their attributions of academic success" however they then continued to suggest that this has begun to change and that more recently these gender differences have begun to decrease.

Discussion
Although referring to outdoor activities on a broader scale it can be assumed that Little’s (2002) findings that females have lower levels of participation than males also applies to expeditions, as I observed. Research into the attribution theory also confirms that how people attribute events also has an important impact on their motivation to participate as it influences future expectancies and persistence (Hanrahan & Biddle, 2008).

Although I struggled to find much research into the link between gender and attributions in an adventurous or more specifically - an expedition context - I did manage to find related literature based on maths and the sciences. I believe these findings are appropriate and related because females are also underrepresented in these areas (Heller & Ziegler, 1996 cited in Ziegler & Stoeger, 2004, p. 63) and similarly to females being stereotyped (Humberstone, 1990) and often made to feel that they aren’t suited to the outdoors (O’Brien, Saunders & Barnes, 2004), in these other subjects they also feel that they’re not expected to do well (Reis, 1998 cited in Tiri & Nokelainen, 2011).

The results from Ziegler & Stoeger’s (2004) study to increase female participation/ involvement in chemistry showed that after the attribution retraining the girls involved were more likely to attribute success internally to effort rather than externally to an easy task; thus implying that before the retraining their participation was less because they were more likely to attribute successes externally. As the literature has shown that females in chemistry are facing similar bias’ to females in adventure this suggests that gender does influence attributions and that the attribution theory could have an affect on levels of female participation and their successful completion of multi-day expeditions.

Other literature agrees with this difference in gender and attribution, as indicated by Siann et al. (1996) who also discusses that “females are more `external’ and males more `internal’ in their attributions of academic success” however, Siann et al. (1996) continue to discuss that this gender difference has begun to decrease. This is interesting and perhaps could explain why levels of female participation still remain lower than levels of males participation in outdoor activities, but are rising, as stated by Little (2002).

Conclusion
Based on the findings of Ziegler & Stoeger (2004) relating to chemistry, which through the literature has been shown to have similar gender issues as outdoor activities, and through the discussions of Siann et al. (1996), I think that the attribution theory does have an affect on levels of female participation and their successful completion of multi-day expeditions, however perhaps it doesn’t have as much as an affect as it once did. Further research would need to be continued into this.

References
Humberstone, B. 1999. Gender, Change and Adventure Education. Gender and Education: Vol. 2, Issue 2