



Conceptualizing Adventure

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Chapter Aims

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the masculine, capitalist roots of adventure
- Define adventure
- Understand how adventure is often associated with privilege
- Explain key features of adventurous activities
- Understand the relative nature of adventures
- Explain Lynch and Moore’s ‘adventure paradox’

1.1 Early Meanings of Adventure

Adventure and society have a long and fascinating shared history (Bell, 2016; Lynch & Moore, 2004). A book entitled *Adventure and Society* should begin by defining those two words, both of which have very broad meanings. The origins of the word ‘adventure’ have been traced back to the twelfth century and, over time, the English appear to have arrived at their own word, with its own spelling that is derived from French (which came from Latin).¹

Zweig (1974) refers to universal ‘adventure myths’ from classical antiquity that comprise ‘perilous journeys, encounters with inhuman monsters, ordeals of loneliness and hunger, descents into the underworld’ (p. 3). The people involved in these stories usually did not choose to take part in these adventures, in the same way that Luke Skywalker and Frodo Baggins did not wake up one morning and decide to embark upon their epic journeys: the circumstances chose them, and they took part only because they saw no other course of action. Note that the actual term ‘adventure’ was not used in classical antiquity, but one can see how these ordeals were adventurous in nature.

The earliest actual use of the word adventure was in French: *aventure*. *Aventure* came to the fore in the middle ages (around the late 1100s) as part of a ‘knightly’ ideology. Knights of the court went on *aventures* in order to earn a livelihood, so that they could have a nice place to live and be an attractive marriage prospect. The big risk for a knight was not going on an *aventure* (Nerlich, 1987, p. 5), as that would have meant failure.

In the 1400s, in similar ways to knights venturing forth for personal gain, merchant adventurers sailed the seas. At this point these quests become more than personal, as they might involve ships with hundreds of men. Further, some of these expeditions would be blessed by the Crown and thus provide additional

1 The French word *aventure* and the Latin word *advenire*, which means ‘to come’ or ‘to arrive’, are both cited as precursors to our ‘adventure’. However, this history of the word does not seem as helpful as the French ‘courtly-knightly’ origins, as explained above.

morality-free rationales for the ‘exploration, subjugation, and exploitation’ inherent in such profit-seeking adventures (Nerlich, 1987, p. 129).

These perilous journeys have been directly linked to what Michael Nerlich (1987) called the ‘ideology of adventure’. In essence, Nerlich robustly argued that adventuring developed in the middle ages from the human desire to accrue capital: that is, to make money. Boje and Luhman (1999) explain how Nerlich’s ideology of adventure ‘makes the industrial revolution and enlightenment possible as a project of capitalism’ (para. 2). Nerlich showed how the stories, literature, poems, and plays of the time promoted an ‘adventure-mentality’ that became ‘appropriated in capitalistic commerce and production as adventure-practices’ (Boje & Luhman, 1999, para. 2).

These myths, histories, and meanings of adventure can be associated with what Campbell (1949) called the mono-myth of the ‘hero’s journey’. Loynes (2003) explains how Campbell identified 17 stages of the hero’s journey that will be very familiar to anyone who has read or watched epic stories like *Star Wars* or *The Lord of the Rings*. Bell (2016) further explains how the cultural production of today’s adventurous and heroic individual is located within ongoing ‘histories of imperialism and enforced inequalities’ (p. 8). From this perspective, the socially agreed concept of what it means to be adventurous is built on stories, images, and ideas which are tied in with certain dominant cultural forces.

What is important to be aware of is that these narratives are very male oriented: the activities are physically strenuous and the principal protagonists are able-bodied young men. As such, historical notions of adventure have, to a large extent, marginalized women. Writing more than 20 years ago, Warren (1996) warned us that:

- » the heroic quest is a metaphor that has little meaning to women. Each stage of a woman’s journey in the wilderness is a direct contradiction of the popular quest model. A woman rarely hears a call to adventure; in fact, she is more often dissuaded ... from leaving home to engage in adventurous pursuits. (p. 16)

Early adventuring did not only oppress women, but also everyone else (irrespective of gender) who was not part of this dominant adventure class. Consider for a moment the countless foreign lands (and the people who inhabited them) that were plundered and exploited for others’ benefit. In summary, the roots of the word adventure are very much linked to centuries of male capitalist endeavour and colonization. Those reading a book on adventure and society should see that adventures in antiquity, the middle ages, the renaissance, and the industrial revolution were very much influenced by the social norms of their times.

1.2 Defining Adventure

While, on one hand, we can see that the word ‘adventure’ and its meanings have a long history, those meanings do not have the semantic precision required to grapple with our questions about adventurous practices in contemporary society.

According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary, an adventure is ‘an unusual, exciting, or daring experience’ (Soanes & Stevenson, 2008, p. 18). Colin Mortlock (1984), a British adventurer and educator, claimed in one of his influential early works that adventures involve ‘a degree of uncertainty’ (p. 14) and ‘demand the best of our capabilities – physically, mentally, emotionally’ (p.19). Indeed, most scholars seem to contend that uncertainty (or unpredictability, if you prefer) is a crucial feature of adventures. Some authors, such as Goldenberg (2001), claim that adventures should have inescapable consequences, but as we will see below, Mortlock and others emphasize the subjective and relative nature of adventurous experiences.

If we accept that adventures are challenging experiences, have a degree of unpredictability, and demand physical and mental skill to overcome, then let us put some of these features to the test.

? Discussion Questions

Discuss which of the following situations could be considered adventures and why.

1. Getting a flat tyre while driving alone in the middle of the night on a country road
2. Going to a huge city for the first time
3. Drag racing with another car on a backroad
4. Trying a new kind of food while on holiday
5. Going outdoor rock climbing for the first time
6. Spray-painting graffiti on the side of an office building
7. Losing electricity at one’s home for 48 hours
8. Starting at a new high school

It is reasonable to suggest that all of the above circumstances could be considered adventurous. One crucial distinguishing factor in the above examples is the degree to which these circumstances were planned, expected, and desired. Seen this way, most people would not have foreseen, nor wanted to be inconvenienced by, a flat tyre or a power outage. Conversely, both trying an exotic dish and going climbing at a beautiful outdoor location might have been experiences that were very deliberately courted.

The kinds of adventure germane to this book are those on which one has wilfully chosen to embark. There are many inhabitants of planet earth who do not seek to add any uncertainty or challenge to their everyday lives. Can you imagine pre-industrial

and traditional subsistence farmers—who were working the land day in and day out and surviving on the bare minimum of shelter, food, and water—discussing how they would like to climb to the top of the local hill after they finished 12 hours of grafting in a field? From this perspective, we can say that adventure is culturally relative (Beames & Pike, 2013).

The very idea of seeking adventure for adventure's sake might be, for some cultures, an absurd concept. Those living an agrarian life in a drought-ridden village in sub-Saharan Africa and those who have fled war-torn Syria and are living in squalid refugee camps probably do not seek experiences that are especially daring, exciting, or unpredictable; they seek stability, peace, shelter, clean water, food, jobs, and schools.

When we are fortunate enough to live in relative comfort and stability, the opposite of the everyday holds a special draw. It is not unusual for people in the dark of a northern hemisphere winter dream of Mediterranean sun; it is relatively common for office workers in a nine-to-five routine to seek uncertainty, spontaneity, and physical activity in fresh air. How much of this do you think is about the activity and the individual, and how much is about their everyday social setting? Our focus in this book is primarily on those lucky enough to undertake adventures more or less on their own terms. Indeed, if you are reading this book, you are most probably one of these people.

The late German sociologist, Georg Simmel (1919/n.d.), suggested that adventure has to do with leaving one's routines and doing something 'alien, untouchable, out of the ordinary' (p. 2). Simmel's compatriot, Peter Becker (2016), further explains that at the 'structural core' of adventure² is the 'interplay between crisis and routine' (p. 26). The space between the polar opposites of reasonably predictable day-to-day life and a full-on crisis is large, but there is some elusive territory within that space which attracts many of us. A crucial point to our foundational discussions on what constitutes an adventure is their relative nature. For example, skiing down a couloir high in the Rocky Mountains might be routine for a ski guide. For an intermediate 'resort' skier, standing at the top of that couloir would be a crisis. It is obvious, then, that 'what one person deems adventurous may not be to another person' (Beames & Pike, 2013, p. 2). As we will see in later chapters, relative adventure can be wonderful for individuals seeking that sweet spot where their skills meet the challenge that lies before them (see Lyng, 1990), but it can pose all kinds of problems for tour operators and outdoor education organizations, who might have one standardized product that must cater to a multitude of skills and abilities (Becker, 2016; Cater, 2006; Loynes, 1998).

2 Becker also discusses the closely related German term, *erlebnis*.

With these items of cultural and individual relativity addressed (for the meantime), we can expand our working definition of adventures to also include a certain element of *desirability*. Adventures, then, are actively sought and therefore planned to a greater or lesser extent. It follows that adventures are *planned, challenging experiences that feature a degree of unpredictability and which demand certain physical and mental skills to undertake*.

Having an agreed definition of adventure may be well and good, but there remains one caveat which needs to be highlighted, and that surrounds the anti- or pro-social nature of the activity (Beames & Pike, 2013). We can see how skateboarders hanging out and pulling tricks on the steps of a city hall might fall within what we would label adventurous. While this can be understood as an act of resistance against private and political control of urban spaces (Borden, 2001), we can still say that the skaters are principally concerned with challenging themselves to respond to, and move creatively through, a dynamic environment. Furthermore, there are growing instances where activities like skateboarding are practised and even supported by communities in pro-social ways, for the common good (Atencio, Beal, McClain, & Wright, 2018). Conversely, there may be elements of adventurousness inherent in some forms of anti-social behaviour, such as hopping a fence and spray-painting the side of an office building. When the activities' central aims focus on harming people or property through bullying or vandalism, however, it is difficult for us to include them in our discussions on adventure and all-encompassing terms such as 'adventure sports'. We will revisit the subject of adventure being used to change behaviour in ► Chap. 9.

To a large extent, the kinds of pro-social adventure with which we are concerned are what Breivik (2010) labelled 'adventure sports'. Midol (1993) referred to this trend towards adrenaline-fuelled pastimes as 'whiz sports'. Another French writer, Loret (1995), called these sports—which seemed to share the common feature of sliding along snow or water—as *sports de glisse*. Rinehart (1998) has written extensively on the X-Games and how powerful commercial forces have institutionalized and popularized these alternative sports. Indeed, as captured in Booth and Thorpe's (2007) volume, the whole notion of 'extreme sports' made for television covers fascinating sociological ground, which we will examine in ► Chap. 5.

A label that has become very common in the academic literature is that of 'lifestyle sports', which was developed by scholar Belinda Wheaton (2004, 2013). Wheaton herself, along with Robinson (2008), has noted that it is probably not that productive to get caught up in the terms themselves, and suggests that it is of greater importance to focus on the meanings ascribed to them.

1.3 · What Is Society?

Norwegian scholar Gunnar Breivik posits that adventure sports share certain features:

1. Have elements of challenge, excitement, and (in most sports) risk;
2. Take place in demanding natural or artificially constructed environments;
3. Are more loosely organized than mainstream sports;
4. Represent a freedom from or opposition to the dominant sport culture;
5. Are individualistic pursuits but tend to build groups and subcultures around the activity. (2010, p. 262)

Breivik's five defining characteristics of adventure sports, combined with our Mortlock-inspired definition of adventure, together provide a useful platform for forthcoming discussions on adventure and society. As we have seen, many different labels have been ascribed to the kinds of adventures that we are discussing. While we will use these terms somewhat interchangeably, we will refer to them predominantly as adventure sports.

1.3 What Is Society?

So, what about the 's' word: society? What do we mean by society? In the most general terms, we can assert that societies comprise sets of human beings and their complex, ever-changing relationships. Defining society beyond this very vague assertion invariably attracts critics! Fear not, readers, as we will endeavour to gain more precision on this term.

A society is effectively a large web of individuals. Usually, societies are much too large for people to have direct contact with each other. For example, Matthew Atencio is part of American society, but he has not interacted with most Americans. Understanding what a society is may be helped by also understanding what communities are. Communities—whether bounded by geography, built around a common activity, or connected across continents through technology and social media—usually feature a stronger sense of identity, interaction, common ways of thinking and acting, and belongingness than do societies (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Societies can comprise countless communities and these can come in hugely contrasting sizes and status, such as the Greater Toronto Area, which comprises upwards of 5 million people, or those few who dare to BASE jump (Building, Antenna, Span, or Earth skydiving) within the boundary of Yosemite National Park (where the sport is outlawed).

At each of these levels, from societies down to the smallest communities, individuals' actions and behaviours interact with social structures. There are many different ways to understand the

reciprocal flow of influence between individual actors and society depending on which sociological perspective you use to look at the world, and three key terms that will help you to use some of these different perspectives to understand adventure in society are *culture*, *values*, and *norms*.

According to Giddens and Sutton (2017), the ‘values, norms, habits and ways of life characteristic of a coherent social group’ (p. 995) can be characterized as that group’s *culture*. These groups can be of any scale, geographically dispersed, and have a membership consisting of individuals who also belong to other social groups but are united by the culture which their members hold in common. Let us take surfing as an example to illustrate these terms. There are distinct forms of art (e.g. films and music), ways of dressing, language, and important places with which many surfers identify: they are produced and consumed by surfers. This is surf culture, which is representative of the everyday practices and ideas that most people who identify as surfers participate in and value.

These ways of doing things are linked to the *values* of creative individual expression, connection with nature, travel, and (increasingly) clean living, which the surfing community identifies as important. These values are maintained through social *norms*, such as the unspoken etiquette of the ‘line-up’, where informal queuing and respect for more competent surfers ensure that waves do not go unriden. Surfers do not ‘snake’ the line-up or ‘drop in’ on someone who is already standing up on a wave and, if they do violate these norms, may face sanctions specific to the local setting. For example, some surf breaks have histories of violent localism, while at other spots you might get some friendly advice or simply be branded a ‘kook’: someone who poses as a surfer, but does not act ‘authentically’.

? Discussion Question

To which cultures (or social groups) do you belong and what are the unwritten values and norms of each of these groups?

At a certain level, debates about what makes a society a society become unhelpful. What we are interested in is how groups of people—whether card carrying members of the International Orienteering Federation or a gang of skateboarders doing tricks at a local park—influence individuals. The flipside of that is equally important, of course: how individuals influence groups of people.

This reciprocal influence between individuals and groups of people is, in essence, the study of sociology, as put forward by early sociologists like Durkheim, Marx, and Weber.³ This book is

3 See introduction to sociology textbooks, such as Giddens and Sutton (2017), for more information on sociology’s origins.

chiefly concerned with another reciprocal tension, which is that between adventure and society. At one end of the spectrum, we seek to more deeply understand how larger structural forces such as governments, the media, and multi-national companies influence the adventurous practices of individuals in the Global North.⁴ At the other end, there are single people and small groups who have transformed the way certain activities are practised and given currency within our society. Take parkour, for example: the popular emergence of parkour has influenced the way millions of (mostly) young people use their bodies in urban spaces. It is an adventurous activity that has been directly shaped over decades by the geographical, physical, cultural, and political circumstances in which it was located.⁵ Adventure and society are thus influencing each other.

1.4 Adventure as Escape

From our discussion in this first chapter alone, we hope you will agree that the broad topic of adventure and its symbiotic relationship with our social world is complex and multi-faceted. Cohen and Taylor (1992) discuss the different forms of ‘escape attempts’ that people make to cope with the constraining, predictable routines of everyday living. This is more complicated than it seems, Rojek (1993) argues, because our values are so tightly intertwined with society that our escape attempts themselves are artificial: so, escape is not possible! A simpler way of explaining this paradox is that while we might feel like our adventures provide freedom, they are still ‘tightly determined and modified by cultural, social and economic settings’ (Lynch & Moore, 2004, p. 2).

What cannot be emphasized enough is that most—but by no means all—of the adventure practices that we are interrogating are those undertaken by people in positions of relative privilege. Quite often, it is those who have high-enough paying jobs to have the money to buy specialist technical equipment, coupled with the holiday to use it. Seen this way, adventures are ‘romanticised as escape’ (p. 2) from, and a ‘psychological palliative’ (p. 3) against, the trials of late modern life (Lynch & Moore, 2004).

Pip Lynch and Kevin Moore (2004) label this the ‘adventure paradox’ that features, on one hand, ‘the crucial role of adventure ideology in the historical development of the modern, industrialised world and economy’ and, on the other hand, ‘the current promotion of adventure as the romantic escape from that world’

4 The Global North is used to describe what might otherwise be considered the ‘developed’ or ‘first’ world—a world of relative privilege.

5 See Atkinson’s chapter on ‘The quest for excitement in parkour’ in Pike and Beames, *Outdoor Adventure & Social Theory* (2013)

(p. 2). While these and other discourses are about leaving behind one reality temporarily to visit another (Becker, 2016) or to enter the unknown (Nerlich, 1987), this binary is probably too simplistic for most of our discussions. It may be more useful to think about temporary, adventurous separations from quotidian life on a spectrum of how ‘in the moment’ or ‘in the adventure reality’ one is. Naturally, this will be different for each of us.

This fictional case is, we believe, entirely plausible. Jane’s story reflects all of the key themes in this first chapter. First, it shows how the term ‘adventure’ is a relative concept (see Beames & Pike, 2013). For Jane, indoor climbing at the gym is not adventurous, when compared to a major unforeseen travel disruption on the other side of the world. Second, it shows how the climbing lifestyle (see Wheaton, 2004) is mediated by consumptive behaviour, as revealed by their clothing and holiday choices. Indeed, Jane and her friends have the financial power to buy adventure-related goods and experiences. Third, they see climbing as an escape from their relatively banal day-to-day existences (see Lynch & Moore, 2004). For Jane and her pals, climbing is a central organizing feature of their lives.

Case Study

Jane is a 27-year-old Scottish woman. She works as a bank teller in Edinburgh and is a serious sport climber. Jane loves climbing so much that she goes climbing at the gym at least three times during the week and once on a weekend, when she can drive out of town to a crag.

Most of Jane’s closest friends are also climbers. When not at the office, all of them wear a similar style of clothing that seems to come from the same few manufacturers who make trousers, shirts, and fleece tops specifically for climbers. As well

as spending their leisure time together, they also speak a language that few outside of the climbing community would understand. On some evenings they get together and watch videos that feature sponsored, professional climbers tackling cliff faces in exotic parts of the world. In the last four winters, they have gone to a different venue in southern Europe for a holiday on ‘hot rock’!

Jane and her friends do not think that climbing is at all adventurous. For them, pushing their bodies to the limit on

steep, artificial walls and taking roped leader falls is an inherent part of each session on the plastic. It is normal and routine, and provides a welcome escape from their highly predictable, indoor, sedentary, screen-based jobs. The biggest adventure in Jane’s recent memory is the time she lost her passport in Thailand, missed her flight, and ended-up having to miss ten days of work, while she arranged for a new passport, had her mum send her enough money to buy another air ticket, buy the ticket, and fly home.

Chapter Summary

There are five key themes that we have covered in this chapter and which should be summarized. First, we highlighted how the myths and recorded histories associated with adventure often have at their common root men embarking on perilous journeys with the principal aim of gaining wealth, capital, and status.

Second, although the word 'adventure' seems easy enough to define, we have seen that there are important nuances in its meaning that need to be articulated. While it may be reasonable to accept that adventures feature unpredictability, and demand some daring and mental and physical skill, our notions of adventure also involve an element of agency, where we have deliberately chosen to embark on them. Further, they do not seek expressly to harm people or property.

The third theme that needs emphasizing is the relative nature of the term 'adventure'. We understand that there may be many people in the world who do not seek additional adventures in their lives; the implication here is that anyone who does actively seek adventure inhabits a world of relative privilege, since they have the time to spend doing this rather than earning money, growing food, or seeking shelter, for example. On a more individual level, what we perceive to be adventurous is also highly relative. A terrifying and possibly harmful experience for one person might be a normal, everyday, and even banal experience for another.

Next, we briefly introduce what is meant by the term 'society'. In a nutshell, it is a large group of people who are networked at some (albeit distant) level. Societies are often quite diverse and feature people who have not necessarily chosen to be part of it; they have been born into it. Societies can comprise innumerable communities, and these can contrast greatly in terms of size, mission, and regulation.

Finally, we outlined how adventure sports are often seen as escapes from the stresses, rigidity, social norms, and institutionalization that are features of late modern society in the Global North. The next chapter outlines central features of society alongside some key sociological concepts, which will together arm us with the language necessary to have deeper and more meaningful discussions about adventure in subsequent chapters.

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