

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE AND SOCIAL THEORY

*Edited by Elizabeth C.J. Pike
and Simon Beames*

1

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE AND SOCIAL THEORY

Simon Beames and Elizabeth C.J. Pike

Consider all of the conversations that you've had with friends, colleagues, and family members in the last week. These conversations have taken place in kitchens, offices, parks, cafés, buses, bars, and locker rooms. To a certain extent, most of these encounters have involved people trying to make sense of their lives by sharing their perspectives and opinions with each other. This sense-making is a natural, normal part of human life.

Unfortunately, however, analyses of our social world are often limited by our (in)ability to arrive at a balanced and considered interpretation of what is happening around us and how it came to be. Sometimes we are left with having an opinion about something that affects our life that is not based on any robust, systematic examination of the surrounding circumstances. While this may not worry some, others may be searching for a way to help them understand the intricacies and complexities of human social existence at a much deeper level. That 'something' is social theory.

At its most fundamental level, the principal aim of this book is to enable readers to more rigorously interpret why people think and act in certain ways. As the title suggests, we'll use examples and scenarios from the world of outdoor adventure to illustrate how social theory can help us make greater sense of what's going on around us, in all facets of our lives.

Some assumptions

As editors of this book, we have made some assumptions about you, the reader. You have probably made some assumptions about the book's content and, perhaps, about the contributing writers. Let's get these assumptions out in the open, shall we?

We assume that you are a university student, field instructor, or lecturer involved in some form of outdoor leadership, adventure education, tourism and recreation management, or sport and leisure studies. We assume that you have an interest in outdoor and adventurous activities, such as canoeing, backpacking or climbing. We also suspect that you are not really interested in a book on social theory, as the content sounds rather dry and boring. Finally, we're almost certain that you'd rather be out doing some kind of outdoor adventure than be indoors, reading about it.

Thinking about who you are is one thing, but thinking about who you think we are is even trickier. So, we won't try that! As editors, we can tell you that every one of the contributors to this book knows some things about the world of outdoor adventure and about social theory. While no one author is an expert in all things adventurous and theoretical, each writer is an outdoor enthusiast of some kind (e.g. a paddler or skier) and each is an academic who has read, thought, obsessed, and written about how adventurous activities can be more deeply considered, analysed, and interpreted.

Clarification of terms

Before going any further it's necessary to clarify two main terms that we'll be using a lot: outdoor adventure and social theory. It's important to ensure that when we say 'outdoor adventure', we all attach a similar meaning to the term. The word 'outdoor' is easy enough; it's an adjective that refers to the open air, and is obviously the opposite of 'indoor'. Having said that, some of the chapters in this book will also discuss the movement indoors of what have been traditionally considered 'outdoor' activities – indoor climbing is an obvious example.

Conclude Rules
The meaning of the word 'adventure', however, is somewhat contested and not so easy to define. Hopkins and Putnam (1993) suggest that adventure can be described as 'an experience that involves uncertainty of outcome' (p. 6), while activities are usually defined as adventurous if they involve risk, challenge and inescapable consequences (Goldenberg, 2001). It is arguable that this book concerns risky, challenging and daring experiences that are usually performed outdoors, and this broad definition will probably have to suffice at a very basic level.

We'll add two caveats to this understanding, however. First, most of the adventures to which we are referring are those that can be considered outdoor 'lifestyle sports' (see Wheaton, 2004). Without this qualification, activities such as stealing cars and spray-painting graffiti on the side of a train could be considered outdoor adventure. After all, to some, these are 'challenging' and 'daring' outdoor activities that involve a certain amount of risk. This brings us to our second caveat: the meanings that individuals attach to certain activities are relative. So, what one person deems adventurous may not be to another person. An example of this is how some traditional alpinists think that bolted rock climbing is not adventurous because much of the risk of hurting oneself from a fall has been eliminated (and so it is not really dangerous or daring). Others think that there is plenty of adventure inherent

in this kind of sport climbing; indeed, getting to the top is not guaranteed, a fall of two or three metres is quite common, and changing environmental conditions will influence a climber's success. We can say, then, that the amount of adventure inherent in a given activity is relative to the participant.

Another way of seeing outdoor adventure activities is as alternatives to mainstream Western sports (Rinehart, 2000; Wheaton, 2004). Although many adventurous sports are becoming formalized and commercialized through the X-games and the Olympics, these and other 'underground' activities (e.g. skateboarding and free-running) exist to a greater or lesser extent in contrast to the long-established sports of soccer in the UK, ice hockey in Canada, baseball in the USA, and rugby in New Zealand.

To be clear then, for the purposes of this book, outdoor adventure refers to lifestyle sports that have a certain degree of perceived excitement on behalf of the participant, exist as alternatives to mainstream sport, and which take place outdoors.

Next, let's turn our attention to defining 'social theory'. We understand 'social' as the organization and ways of life of people who interact with others within certain geographical, cultural, economic and political conditions. A 'theory' is a way of describing, analysing and explaining something – often with a view to reflecting on what has been learned and applying this knowledge to making change (see Coakley and Pike, 2009).

There are, of course, many different social theories, and all of these can be studied within the discipline of *social theory*. You will have heard the term *sociology*, which has a slightly different meaning to that of social theory. Generally speaking, there are sociologies of different topics, such as ageing, leisure, deviance, and sport. For example, the International Sociological Association has 55 research committees and eight groups that each focus on a different sociological area. These sociological examinations may draw on a number of social theories to help explain specific issues.

What does social theory have to do with outdoor adventure?

At this point, despite being clear on the two key terms, you may still be wondering what social theory has to do with outdoor adventure. Well, it probably won't surprise you to read that we think that social theory has everything to do with outdoor adventure! Let us explain.

What do going ski touring with two friends, taking an introduction to white-water kayaking course, or competing in an adventure race have in common? Well, besides the fact that they fit our definition of outdoor adventure, they all take place in the company of others; they are social affairs. The mere 'practice' of outdoor adventure is only one part of its social element. There are countless other related features that are social and which exert great influence on participants. Some examples of these influences include the media, equipment and clothing manufacturers, official sport governing bodies, family and friends, and customs/traditions. All five

of these examples can be used to show how society shapes individuals' adventurous practices. This explains how solo adventurers are still influenced by social factors, even if they are walking to the South Pole on their own!

As we can see then, it is perhaps naive to think that the practice of outdoor adventurous activities is all about the activity. The ways in which adventurous activities are practised by participants are significantly influenced by numerous and varied social factors. We would argue that it is impossible to arrive at any deep understanding of outdoor adventure activities without examining the social forces that enable and constrain the behaviour of its participants.

Social theory isn't just helpful for understanding different kinds of outdoor adventures; it enables us to find deeper meanings in all kinds of ideas and practices that are part of our daily lives, such as education, politics, religion, leisure, and employment. In plain terms, our social worlds shape what we think and what we do. Part of being human is to try to understand the world in which we live (Craig and Beedie, 2010). Indeed, as noted earlier, when people converse at cafés, in kitchens, and at climbing walls, they are often trying to make sense of their 'worlds'. The trouble is that, without an adequate knowledge of social theory and its language, attempts to understand our social lives may be limited to what our colleague John Kelly calls 'pub chat'.

This book offers different theoretical perspectives that will (hopefully) provide you with new ways of seeing familiar practices. With this increased knowledge, you should, at the very least, become more aware of the ways in which you influence your social world and how it influences you.

Before we get into the meat of the book, there are some social theory basics of which we should all be aware. While not quite a course in Social Theory 101, the next section of this chapter looks at basic concepts and questions that will help you get more out of your chapter readings.

Social theory basics: the least you need to know

Studying the organization of society is something that people have been doing on an informal basis since humans have been humans. The actual formal study of society is quite young, however – just shy of 150 years old. Although the Frenchman Auguste Comte is widely regarded as being the founder of sociology in the late 1800s, it is scholars such as Durkheim, Marx and Weber who helped lay the theoretical foundations for the discipline. These writers and others found much material for their theorizing during the industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth century, as this period in history involved tremendous changes in the social organization of work, family, and leisure.

From its French and German roots in classical theorists like Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, the development and use of social theory feature in most academic institutions around the world. While new theoretical concepts do emerge, it is arguable that much research is applied and involves using existing theory to interpret social circumstances that have been under-examined. This kind of theoretical

examination is available to all of us – it's not just for those in ivory towers! Before tackling the chapters that follow, we believe that there are three main points of which all aspiring social theorists should be aware.

First, *all social theories offer explanations of how society influences individuals and how individuals can influence society*. While media, government, and peer groups shape what we think and do, so too are we able to shape them. Different theories have their own ways of accounting for this recursive relationship of society and individuals simultaneously influencing each other. Some social theories pay more attention to the *structural* features of society than to those of individual *agency* and vice versa. Structural features of society can be big, such as a national government, or small, like a typical family of four. These features can be formal rules or laws, or they can be informal, as in the *norms* that 'regulate' what people wear at posh restaurants. Agency is an easier term, since it simply refers to the power that people have to shape their social world. We all have some degree of agency in each of our different social arrangements.

This tension between the 'macro' (society's structures) and the 'micro' (society's individuals) is regarded by most social theorists as an inherent part of human life. Indeed, many would argue that within these tensions lie the most fascinating debates and discussion. A good question to ask yourself while reading and considering different scenarios throughout the book is: *how does social structure constrain and enable individual agency?*

The second point is that *there is not one 'best' social theory*. Put another way, there is no one 'super theory' that adequately explains every possible kind of social arrangement (although some theorists have tried!). What we can argue with greater conviction, however, is that for each set of circumstances – be it small office groups, little league baseball teams or seniors' residences – *there may be a particular theory that is especially useful* for understanding how these specific social circumstances have come to be.

The final point that we believe should be considered when appraising the usefulness of any social theory or theoretical framework is one of *equalities*. We need to ask *how the theory accounts for the ways in which certain people in society are more or less advantaged by the written rules, laws, and policies and the unwritten norms of behaviour*. How do these theories explain who has made the rules, why they are perpetuated, and how they can be changed?

Organization of the book

As noted earlier, this book does not explicate grand, over-arching, all-inclusive theories. Rather, each of the chapters features a specific *theoretical framework* and uses a particular adventurous activity to illustrate the concepts within it. A theoretical framework is a structure with boundaries used to understand, explain, and give meaning to the inter-related concepts that affect a phenomenon (Ennis, 1999). This book introduces a series of theoretical frameworks. The chapter on Marx, for example, does not seek to provide a summary of everything written by the great

thinker. Instead, two of Marx's concepts are presented (alienation and false consciousness) and then brought alive with examples from the world of adventure tourism.

This structure is followed for the first two parts of the book. In the third part, each chapter uses a framework that draws on a number of scholars and which addresses a particular social issue, such as feminism, the ageing population, globalization, and climate change.

Part I outlines the work of three seminal thinkers in social theory: Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Marx's ideas surrounding *alienation* and *false consciousness* are brought to life by Carl Cater and Greg Dash. Chapter 2 uses examples from the New Zealand world of adventure tourism to explore the degree to which people are aware of how much they are buying into a highly commodified and manipulated activity. The authors also consider the circumstances that have contributed to the adventure tourism industry being developed and, naturally, why people might choose to go bungy jumping or white-water rafting in the first place.

In Chapter 3, Mike Brown focuses primarily on Durkheim's concept of the *collective conscience*. He uses the example of a single-handed around-the-world sailor, who uses promotional materials to try to connect observers and supporters with broader Scottish culture.

Chapter 4 features Max Weber's notions of rationalization, bureaucratization and control. Here, Peter Varley examines how so much of our adventuring tends to be constrained by space, time and formal rules. Examples of sport national governing bodies are employed to highlight how the development of training schemes, handbooks, and written policies all conspire to govern how canoeists and kayakers behave. Ultimately, the chapter asks if these forces of rationalization are diluting our own quests for adventure.

The second part comprises six chapters and introduces concepts by theorists in more recent times – although our first two writers, Gramsci and Elias, both conceived their seminal ideas as far back as the 1930s. Jerry Tracey starts this part by using Antonio Gramsci's notion of *hegemony* to investigate the ways in which informal, sociable playboating has evolved into competitive, freestyle kayaking. Tracey explains how this evolution of an adventurous activity has been driven by capitalism, yet widely accepted by those who might have resisted it.

Michael Atkinson's chapter explores the world of Parkour through Norbert Elias' concepts of the *civilizing process* and *mimesis*. Atkinson draws on Elias' work to show how activities such as Parkour (and or participation in them) do not happen in the absence of long-term (and often fascinating) histories.

Ken McCulloch's interest in sail training is given a theoretical interrogation by Erving Goffman's landmark essay on 'Total Institutions'. Here (Chapter 7) McCulloch considers how physical boundaries play a vital role in helping the institution achieve its aims. In the case of sail training, the boundaries inherent in not being able to leave the ship during its passage are of fundamental importance to creating the desired feeling of independence and self-sufficiency within the participants.

The eighth chapter is written by Simon Beames and John Telford. Here the fictional tale of two aspiring rock climbers is deconstructed using three of Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual gifts to the body of social theory: *habitus*, *capital* and *field*. Bourdieu's work is especially helpful in demonstrating how the 'rules' of climbing are shaped by those possessing various forms of capital.

Chapter 9 features the work of Anthony Giddens. Paul Beedie illustrates how elements of Giddens' *structuration theory* can be used as tools to analyse mountaineering practice. Beedie explains how activities ranging from indoor climbing to first ascents in the greater ranges have evolving resources and rules that both constrain and give us freedom in how we can behave.

The final chapter of Part II highlights the work of Michel Foucault. Robyn Zink employs Foucault's concepts of *power*, *surveillance* and *governmentality*, to assist us in understanding how challenge courses (aka aerial ropes courses) have become a widely accepted part of outdoor adventure education practice. Foucault's approach would have us first 'back up a step' and question how whatever we see as being 'true' about challenge course practice has come to be seen as the truth.

Part III of the book moves away from the format used in the first two parts and explores topics in outdoor adventure through bodies of literature, rather than through the eyes of one single theorist. Linda Allin and Amanda West start this part with an examination of female outdoor instructors. They show how the small proportion of female outdoor instructors can be examined through four different *feminist* perspectives.

Chapter 12, by Elizabeth Pike and Johnny Weinstock, draws on critical interactionism to explore how participating in outdoor adventurous activities can shape an older person's identity. The analysis highlights how people can come to view themselves as outdoor adventurers rather than as individuals who are ageing and perhaps have a disability.

The next chapter of Part III concentrates on *globalization* and how market forces and big business are influencing the kinds of adventures in which we are participating. Chris Loynes reveals how, in this era of late modernity, outdoor adventure practice from one culture can be replicated and exported to another – often across national boundaries.

With climate change being arguably the biggest threat to human life, it is appropriate to have the final chapter focus on *low-carbon adventure*. Kate Rawles discusses how the kinds of adventures on which we embark need to shift towards ones with a less detrimental impact on climate change and bio-diversity.

The book is organized in such a way that it doesn't have to be read in chronological order. Readers can choose to read particular chapters that interest them, without fear of having missed a key piece of information from the chapter before.

Finally, two specific limitations of this book need to be acknowledged. First, we are only introducing a small number of social theorists; there are many well-known and influential sociologists who do not feature. This is an introductory text, after all, and while we have included many seminal thinkers, we haven't been able to give space to everyone we might have liked to. Second, and related to this

first point, there are myriad issues and topics that we could have chosen for Part III. Consider the 2010 UK Equalities Act, for example, which identifies nine characteristics that cannot be used as reasons to treat people unfairly. As with the theorists, we couldn't look at all of these marginalized populations, and so a number have been left out.

Closing

We've now explored some assumptions about you, us, and the book; defined some terms; and outlined key points to remember when reading the chapters. We close this introduction by sharing our hopes for this book.

Our aim is for readers of this book to:

- a move away from using 'pub chat' as their principal means of making sense of social aspects of outdoor adventure;
- b examine outdoor adventure through different theoretical perspectives, angles, and lenses;
- c consider how outdoor adventure may disadvantage some people and privilege others;
- d explore the role that outdoor adventure does/does not/could play within society; and
- e ensure that policies and practices are informed by theory.

We hope to see you again in Chapter 15, where we will revisit these aims and discuss how we can more deeply consider the 'so what?' questions that probably emerged during your reading.

Further reading

For accessible introductory reading on social theory and sociology, consider Coakley and Pike (referenced below) and the following sources:

- Jones, P. (2010) *Introducing social theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Layder, D. (2005) *Understanding social theory* (2nd edn), London: Sage.
Swingewood, A. (2000) *A Short History of Sociological Thought* (3rd edn), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

References

- Coakley, J. and Pike, E. (2009) *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*, London: McGraw-Hill.
Craig, P. and Beedie, P. (2010) *Sport sociology* (2nd edn), Exeter: Learning Matters.
Ennis, C.D. (1999) 'The theoretical framework: The central piece of a research plan', *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 18, 129-40.
Goldenberg, M. (2001) *Outdoor and risk educational practices*, Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse.

- Hopkins, D. and Putnam, R. (1993) *Personal growth through adventure*, London: David Fulton.
- Rinehart, R. (2000) 'Emerging arriving sports: Alternatives to formal sports', in J. Coakley and E. Dunning (eds), *Handbook of sports studies* (pp. 501–20), London: Sage.
- Wheaton, B. (ed.) (2004) *Understanding lifestyle sports: Consumption, identity and difference*, London: Routledge.