

New Zealand's Adventure Culture: In Hillary's Steps. A Bourdieusian Exploration

Maurice Kane – Graduated 2009

Abstract

Historically adventure has been associated with successful, yet, dangerous endeavours that expand the knowledge, wealth, reputation, or safety of society. Previous research would suggest that the practices and stories of adventure have guided and benchmarked societal morals and ideas considered common 'truths'. In New Zealand, society's understandings of adventure are entwined with a mythologised cultural identity based on the egalitarian minded and physically active, outdoor pioneering male. These ideals were complimented and presented as a global representation of New Zealand by Sir Edmund Hillary's successful climb of Mount Everest in 1953. The purpose of this thesis is to examine New Zealand's understandings of adventure since 1953. The thesis centres its enquiry on a group of individuals who have obtained social distinction as adventurers, seeking to scrutinize in their adventure practice and narratives, adventure understandings that are legitimised or invalidated.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts guide the enquiry approach. Bourdieu sought to transcend the false antinomy of sociology that presented dualist perspectives, such as the individual and society, conceptualising all practice in a dynamic matrix of relational social space. The individuals with distinction as adventurers personify the socially recognised and valued features of adventure. Equally, however, an amalgamation of features does not infer a definitive understanding. The substance of understandings, Bourdieu suggests, is in the relational strategies, consistencies, transformations, and knowing misrecognitions that frame the features of a practice in a social space. The research process adopted to question the social space of adventure and its contested understandings is an examination of prominent adventure narratives and the stories of New Zealand adventurers with social distinction. These biographical stories of adventure articulate the individual's adventurer identity and, in their social prominences, delineate the relational struggle of adventure understandings in New Zealand society.

The published autobiographical adventure narratives, media interviews, and related accounts of 12 New Zealand adventurers provided the initial research material. Additionally, nine of the adventurers took part in research interviews. The interpretation of the research material was framed by three of Bourdieu's prominent conceptual ideas; the development of 'habitus', the struggle for 'capital' in the field of adventure and the legitimacy of 'distinction'. This interpretation was facilitated by theories related to adventure and leisure practice, the risks and contexts of adventure, and to individual, subcultural, and social identity.

By applying a Bourdieusian lens on the practice and narratives of New Zealand adventurers with distinction, this thesis illuminates new aspects of New Zealand's cultural understandings of adventure. It revealed a contested and relational struggle to have some practices legitimised as adventure and others devalued as contrived common thrills, or fortuitously survived reckless epics. A practice that typifies the thrill spectrum is 'Bungy Jumping', the contemporary global

representation of adventure in New Zealand. In regard of epic practices, topical through the period of adventure interviews was the 2004 motion picture 'Touching the Void'. Although this involved English climbers in South America in the 1980s, it has retained global prominence as a modern adventure/survival epic. The interpretation of this contested adventure space details the valued and recognised features that construct New Zealand's understandings of adventure. The findings also provide an empirical basis for the equally valued misrepresented adventure understandings related to injury, exclusivity, and normalisation of practice. Additionally, the research interpretation indicates the potential for transformation of adventure understandings. In conclusion, although New Zealand's adventure culture is but one example, and adventure understandings change through time and space, this research adds to the continuing discussion of the historically pervasive, socially venerated and ambiguous phenomenon of outdoor adventure practice.