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Outdoor Adventurous Sport: For All Ages?

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Deficit, Heroic and Everyday Experiences of Ageing

The focus of this chapter is on the experiences of older adults who choose to become involved in outdoor adventurous sporting activities in later life, giving particular consideration to the ways in which age affects the way that people think about sport and the impact of such activities in later life. Activities such as mountaineering and watersports in open water are generally undertaken in the natural outdoor environment and are associated with a degree of risk-taking (Collins and Collins 2012). When older people participate in such activities it may be seen to subvert the traditional 'deficit' model of ageing that growing old is a period of inevitable decline, dominated by the experience of deficits, diseases and other age-related problems that require interventions and treatment. In response to the deficit model of ageing, there has been a movement

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towards a more positive view that ageing can be associated with a pleasurable lifestyle, including engagement in a range of activities in later life. This shift has been defined as a 'heroic' model of ageing, which defines ageing as something to be fought and defeated, while conversely giving into ageing is regarded as a failure.

However, neither the deficit nor the heroic model of ageing fully reflects the views and experiences of older people (Reed et al. 2003), and both views are ageist (see Dionigi 2008). Nevertheless, these models continue to inform much of the research and policy agendas that affect the lives of older people. Indeed, social scientists are increasingly arguing that these perspectives are used as a strategy for marketing and/or regulating certain groups of the population, including financially comfortable retirees, and may marginalise those who adopt alternative styles of ageing (see Gard et al. 2017 and Dionigi and Litchfield, this volume). In this chapter, I respond to the proposal that we should pay more attention to ageing in ways that are meaningful to the individual or what has been described as 'authentic ageing' (see Biggs 2004; Ranzijn 2010), drawing on Bourdieu's (1986a) concept of capital and the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and his conceptualisation of the development and display of character. In particular, I argue that engagement in outdoor adventurous activities should not be understood solely as something 'brave' or 'heroic', but rather that these are part of what I refer to as 'everyday ageing' for those who choose to participate in them, a point I will develop later in the chapter as I tell Robert's story.

The heroic model of ageing, which claims that people can engage in a whole range of activities into later life, has the potential to exacerbate problems for the ageing population:

> Positive images of older people engaged in heroic activities such as rock-climbing and wind-surfing, and displaying a determination not to 'give in' to ageing, may provide an alternative to deficit models of growing older (and, incidentally, represent a commercial opportunity for suppliers of anti-ageing drugs and holidays). However, they leave people who are not able or do not want to be heroic with little support or recognition. (Reed et al. 2003: 1)

Such 'heroic' images of older people are also reinforced through the media. Fenton and Draper (2014) provide the example of a BBC News story which implied that ageing well means engaging in youthful, adventurous activities: 'Daphne Bernard: She is in her 90s, but remains fit and active, playing badminton and going to her local gym in Eastbourne every week. Last year she did a 12,000 ft tandem skydive for charity' (Triggle 2013). There are now specialist magazines targeting 'Third Agers' and selling active lifestyles through articles with titles such as 'Take a Jump! You Can Parachute At Any Age' (*Good Times* cited in Blaikie 1999: 74). However, the research of Fenton and Draper (2014) identifies that many older people find this kind of portrayal of 'positive ageing', with the emphasis on youthfulness, as unhelpful and even deplorable. Furthermore, it is important to be aware that, regardless of sport's potential benefits and how it is promoted, such activities are often enjoyed by like-minded, middle-class, already active people. That is, it may not necessarily offer an attractive lifestyle option to people from other demographical sectors of the older population (as shown in most of the chapters in this edited volume).

It is the purpose of this chapter to move away from a model that suggests it is necessary to be brave to cope with an inevitable aspect of the life course, and to give voice to the experiences of those who do not want to be perceived as heroic, but still engage in outdoor adventurous activities as a meaningful part of their everyday life. To ensure that our understanding of ageing is informed by older people themselves, in this chapter I draw on a case study of a 75-year-old male participant in outdoor adventurous activities with whom I undertook an extended semi-structured interview and participant observation. For the purpose of this chapter, he will be referred to by the pseudonym Robert. The themes which provided the framework for the case study were informed by previous studies undertaken with other older people who also engaged in similar pursuits (Pike 2012; Pike and Weinstock 2013), and I will cross-refer to findings from these studies in what follows. This approach provides reasonable confidence that the issues explored are those that are meaningful to the older adults themselves (see Reed et al. 2003).

Traditional Outdoor Adventure Sports

Before considering these lived experiences from my research participants, it is important to provide some context to the development of outdoor adventurous sporting activities. Many of these activities developed during the late 1800s and early 1900s informed by the dominant developmental theory that such activities would enhance the physical growth and character development of young people (Cook 2001). In contrast, older people were discouraged from engaging in adventurous sports due to a widespread perception that ageing bodies are frail and would be overstressed by these events (Coakley and Pike 2014), with such activities deemed inappropriate 'at your age' (Laventure 2007). Robert told me that, for him, the age-related changes in his body were 'just one of those things, you get old, you slow down, things pack up'. However, for Robert, this was not the reason to avoid engagement in such activities, although he did experience other limiting factors, such as time, money and social support, as will be explained later. As a result, while some outdoor adventurous activities have challenged the participation trends witnessed in more traditional sporting activities, most have been predominantly undertaken by the young, middle-class, white, able-bodied males who also dominate traditional competitive sports (see Wheaton 2004), and older people have often felt marginalised and unable to readily access these opportunities (see Pike and Weinstock 2013).

A sense of exclusion from full involvement in social life is experienced more widely among older people than the specific issue of marginalisation from sporting activities. For example, an older woman interviewed by Reed et al. (2003) described how growing older involves a number of difficulties with insufficient support for those who want to enjoy their later life. It may be helpful to understand this marginalisation by drawing on Bourdieu's (1986a) concept of capital.[1] For Robert, economic capital provided particular constraints to his involvement in adventurous activities and he identified specific barriers of 'money and time':

> Doing so much of the same thing all this time, you're not progressing any further, and if you want to progress further you've got to go on courses and that can cost money, so you have to say 'alright, I'm now retired, there's a limit to what I spend'.

Furthermore, there are the limits of dwindling social capital, or the networks of people that provide tangible advantages, including the mutual support necessary to continue engagement in an active lifestyle. As Robert told me, this lack of social capital limited his involvement in activities that require more than one participant: 'I can't get a team together …. Trying to find people to go with. I find people are not reliable these days to do things with …. I don't try to persuade people any more. I've given up on them'. It is important to recognise that engagement in outdoor adventurous activities offers challenges such as those explained by Robert but, in what follows, I will focus on the potential benefits of outdoor adventurous activities for older adults as informed by the stories of Robert and other older participants. Telling these stories is important given that policies and provision for physical activity are being planned in the context of significant demographic changes and a shift to an ageing population, but that the experiences and perspectives of older people are not always considered in the planning process (see Reed et al. 2003).

Contemporary Trends in Outdoor Adventure and Everyday Ageing

As we witness increased life expectancy in most countries, there is growing evidence that many older people are seeking meaningful ways to fill the time in the years following formal employment or other responsibilities including a variety of sports. In particular, as older people are encouraged to age 'actively' for health and social benefits, many appear to be attracted to social and inclusive activities that emphasise health, fitness and cooperation (including outdoor adventurous sporting activities), rather than traditional sporting activities which feature competition and physical force (Pike and Weinstock 2013).

Robert explained that he enjoyed participating in activities such as climbing and kayaking because 'they're challenging' and it means 'being outside in that lovely sunshine'. In an earlier study that I conducted with 'wild swimmers', the participants choose to swim in natural outdoor waters including rivers, lakes and the sea, often in conditions that are challenging due to tides, currents or cold (Pike 2012). The lifestyles of Robert and these swimmers contrast with the more usual perception that

older people are frail, dependent and socially isolated. For example, one male, aged 64, interviewed in the study of wild swimmers explained:

> My friends and family take it for granted that I go swimming and know it is a significant part of my life. They are interested and amused at the odd places I have found to swim in when on holiday [e.g. every ocean I've visited from the tropics to the arctic, remote rivers and lakes]. (see Pike 2012: 499)

For many older people, engagement in outdoor adventure has been a consistent feature of their life course. Robert described how his childhood had involved several periods of relocation during a short time frame which meant he attended multiple schools, eventually leaving formal education at the age of 14. From what he described as a 'disruptive life', with little sense of a stable home or social networks, he became involved with the Scout Movement, the Boys' Brigade and then entered National Service. It was as a result of these experiences that he was introduced to outdoor adventurous sporting activities which became a focal point of his life henceforward. An outdoor educator (aged 70) similarly told me that he had always been involved in outdoor adventure and described such activities as 'ageless', since in the outdoors the age of the participant is secondary to the shared pleasure from the activities and environment (see Pike and Weinstock 2013). Of course, there are others who have not been engaged in outdoor activities from an early age, in some cases indicating that they became involved with outdoor adventure by way of reflecting on their sense of self and having a desire to redefine themselves as a more adventurous type of person in later life. These decisions to get active can be encouraged by significant others, such as the 'interested' and 'amused' friends and relatives of our wild swimmer mentioned above.

Furthermore, there are also companies targeting the ageing adventurer. For example, one relatively recent trend has been the increasing numbers of 'grown up gappers': older people who are taking career breaks during which they travel overseas and engage in adventurous activities that are more usually associated with teenagers on a 'gap year'.[2] An industry has now developed to meet the needs of older adventurers such as the Travellers Worldwide agency which targets older people to undertake

volunteer opportunities with a statement on their website that 'If you've always thought that gap years and volunteering are for the 18 year olds out there, think again' (Travellers Worldwide 2012). Such is the demand for adventurous activities in later life that, in 2013 in the UK, a Parliamentary Group on Adventure and Recreation in Society (ARISc) was re-formed, including in its remit the promotion of adventure sports and engaging older people.

ARISc was supported by Andrew Denton, Chief Executive of the Outdoor Industries Association, who confirmed the commercial value of such activities in a statement that:

> Adventure isn't just taking a risk or a state of mind, it is a £20 bn economy that underpins UK tourism, contributes to wellness and the nation's state of mind, for instance helping fight the battle against obesity and inactivity. Adventure, just getting active outdoors, is an easily accessible and integrated solution for many of the nation's issues. (Denton 2013)

I have argued elsewhere (see Pike 2011) that such perceived benefits of exercise for older people stated in this way as a scientific 'fact' and a 'solution' to social ills are concerning in their simplicity. Such messages also reinforce neoliberal discourses which emphasise individual responsibility for active lifestyles and overlook the broader social constraints I outlined above, such as access to various forms of capital. Furthermore, increased commodification of outdoor adventurous activities could undermine their potential to offer an alternative to traditional sporting activities, if they are to become more highly organised, structured and costly. However, Robert was in favour of actively recruiting older people to outdoor activities through the media, proposing a media campaign using the phrase: 'Are you bored? Why are you bored? How would you like to do something challenging with your life?'

In contrast to other sporting activities which take place in the 'safer' spaces of rule-bound activities within controlled environments, and which might normally be associated with ageing bodies (Bhatti 2006), outdoor adventurous activities may be a sign of the 'agelessness' described by the 70-year-old outdoor educator in Pike and Weinstock (2013: 130), who continued to explain that 'in here [pointing at his head], I'm still 17.

Why should age make a difference to what I do?' One 64-year-old wild swimmer was keen to distinguish the activities that he did in the sea from older people whose involvement with the sea is related to travel on holiday cruises, describing his involvement 'in sea and rough water activities. I still enjoy going in the sea (but definitely not any sort of cruising!)'. In the next section, I will consider the ways in which engagement in these activities may be part of the display of an alternative personal identity or character that disrupts traditional deficit and heroic views of ageing.

Everyday Ageing and the Display of Character

Engagement in outdoor adventurous sporting activities in later life may enable participants to demonstrate what Erving Goffman (1967) described as 'elements of character'. Goffman argued that the development of character is predicated upon degrees of sacrifice and risk. To understand this, we need firstly to consider the basis of this perception of danger and risk. Risk is generally defined in terms of uncertainty and lack of control regarding the outcomes of an activity, such as that experienced during participation in outdoor adventurous sporting activities. Risk can create anxiety and/or also be central to the experience of pleasurable emotions. Robert described the influence of other people in creating a perception of risk: 'When you speak to people who are advising you on how to do this, how to do that, it starts to bring in the element of fear that I'm putting my life in danger'. He went on to explain that he felt 'I am losing my nerve a bit with various parts of the activities … maybe it's not losing nerve, maybe it's balance. As you get older, so your balance goes'.

It is possible for individuals to experience a sense of stigma when they no longer feel able to present the self that they have always been (youthful, healthy, fit), and the actual image that they now portray (not being able to move easily, loss of balance) is someway from this idealised self. Goffman (1963) used the term 'stigma' to describe how human interactions may be challenged if an individual does not look or behave in a way that conforms to socially desirable norms. This process of stigmatisation has the capacity to structure common perceptions of older people and stifle the possibilities of creative cultural living in later life. The title of

Goffman's (1959) seminal text 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' returns us to this notion of 'everyday ageing', that ageing does not have to be experienced as a deficit or as heroic, but an everyday sense of acceptance of who one is. As Goffman later explains, 'The painfulness of sudden stigmatisation can come not from the individual's confusion about his identity, but from knowing too well what he has become' (Goffman 1963: 133). Following Bourdieu (1986b), this may be understood as an ageing habitus, where one begins to acquire a particular cultural capital which involves learning what is regarded as appropriate and desirable behaviour for an older person (see Dumas et al. 2005; Vertinsky and O'Brien Cousins 2007).

According to Goffman (1967), the development of character occurs when a person perceives danger in a situation, but proceeds regardless of the risk. This is an indication that they have what Goffman termed courage. As we have seen in this chapter, Robert was aware of the increasing limitations of his body and expected behaviour but, at the time of interview, was proceeding with the activities regardless, or indeed because of, the perception of risk. As he explained: 'I don't do "risky things" now. Life's a risk. Every day is a risk'. The next stage in understanding the development of character in outdoor adventurous activities is regarded as gameness (Goffman 1967). This occurs if an individual recognises, but still takes, perceived risks, suffers a setback (whether physical, social or emotional), yet continues the activity with a full display of effort. Robert explained that despite feeling a loss of nerve and/or balance, he would 'still climb up that wall without a rope' and to him climbing without safety harnesses was 'like walking down the road, you get so used to it'.

When older people display courage and gameness, they are able to redefine themselves as someone other than a vulnerable 'old person', and such activities may even be a conscious display of a youthful risk-taking persona that challenges perceived limitations and vulnerability of the ageing body. For example, Robert said that his wife thinks 'I'm stupid, I go rock climbing, "it's stupid"', while one of the wild swimmers in Pike (2012: 499) described how, as a 60-year-old woman, her non-swimming friends thought she was 'utterly mad, doing all this exercising', but she continued with the activity regardless. Another, 65-year-old male wild swimmer explained how his friends 'think I'm a bit mad to go swimming

in lakes and the sea particularly in this country', but he could not imagine ever giving up his sport (see Pike 2012). Similarly, Robert said that the only thing that would make him give up his activities would be 'when I'm not agile, when I start to get stiff and can't walk any further'.

Engagement in outdoor adventure may also be seen as a means of 'impression management' (Goffman 1959), with older people literally managing their impression of themselves as a means of getting people to see them differently. Take, for example, Robert's description of kayaking out at sea with another older male friend, which was witnessed by his son and friends:

> My son and his mates saw two little boats way out in the distance, and my son said 'was that you Dad, you were miles out?' It wasn't that far out. But he was very impressed, the fact that I was way out there. My daughter takes it on board now, that it's just what I do.

The above may be illustrative of what has been described as 'sageing' (de Rozario 1998), which is a recognition and respect that people develop across the life course for their life experience, wisdom and abilities. I also heard the story of another older swimmer who was a leg amputee:

> I swim with a friend in the sea, it is an activity where my disability is not a disadvantage, and it is always good to keep fit. I tend to train with slightly younger able-bodied people who I can compete with and sometimes beat. While exercising I enjoy the challenge and feel good working hard, I like to keep fit and trim (harder with the years) in my circumstances I cannot afford to put too much weight on. I really enjoy swimming, it is the freedom of not having to wear an uncomfortable restrictive false leg and not being at a disadvantage. (male, age 60, see Pike 2012: 502)

These stories illustrate how it is possible to fend off the external appearance of an ageing (and disabled) body, and explore what, for them, is their 'true' everyday fit and able self beneath the exterior (Goffman 1963, 1969). The involvement in sea kayaking and wild swimming enables these men to redefine themselves as an outdoor adventure participant, rather than an ageing parent or older disabled person.

Despite some of the positive stories told above, an unintended consequence of increased numbers of older people engaging in such activities is a recorded increase in the number of accidents and injuries related to outdoor adventure among older people. For example, Robert described how 'I have slowed down in the last ten years', but that a recent ice climbing trip was 'a bit on the dangerous side' and 'very strenuous on my ankles', and that he had been in trouble for climbing without safety ropes while with some children: 'I wouldn't ask the kids to do what I do, but I like free climbing, it gets your adrenaline going'. A survey of sports injuries in Europe in 2012 found that, while there are less injuries in 'traditional' sports among people aged over 60 compared to other age groups, the 60 and over group is disproportionally involved in fatal riding, bicycling, boating and mountaineering accidents (Kissler and Bauer 2012). This trend has been described as 'boomeritis' by way of indicating that some members of the 'baby boom' generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) have increasingly active lifestyles which are now leading to consequences such as this (DiNubile 2017). Similarly, a report in 2010 indicated that injury claims made by Britons over the age of 70 from sports such as scuba diving, mountaineering and skiing had increased from five per cent of total claims in 2006 to nearly 20 per cent in 2010. These trends are no doubt at least partially related to the increasing numbers of older people undertaking such activities due to longer life expectancy and increased social acceptability of such activities. Such evidence provides an interesting example of the 'messiness' of public health discourse: on the one hand, Robert and others like him are the embodiment of healthy ageing messages as they engage in regular exercise; but, on the other hand, they are taking risks and becoming injured as is the case in many high performance sports (see Coakley and Pike 2014). It seems that people like Robert make the decision to engage in outdoor adventurous activities because they offer exercise in an alternative mode to traditional, competitive, rule-bound sports; however, the consequences of exercising in such uncontrolled environments carries similar health risks to their institutionalised, competitive counterparts.

Furthermore, I have discussed elsewhere how the high reportage of injuries in later life can also contribute to negative stereotypes of older persons and their (in)ability to safely engage in outdoor adventure

(see Pike and Weinstock 2013). Richard Doubleday, the director of Sport at Perkins Slade (a large British insurance broker that offers advice and cover for companies including sports organisations) reinforced the perception of the fragility of the ageing body and questioned the appropriateness of older people engaging in adventurous sports, in a statement that: 'While older people may think they are capable of taking risks with their bodies, the reality is that they are more vulnerable' (Perkins Slade 2012). It is also the case that older people may have to pay higher prices for insurance or may not be able to gain insurance at all, presenting a further barrier to outdoor adventure sport participation.

Concluding Thoughts

The story of Robert and of the other participants referenced in this chapter provide compelling narratives of the benefits of engagement in outdoor adventurous activities in later life. However, their stories are set against a backdrop of limited support and investment in such activities for older people, with a common perception that ageing bodies may be too frail to take such risks, and that it takes a certain amount of 'character' to pursue these activities and gain the perceived benefits. I have argued that traditional models which understand ageing as a 'deficit', or that older people engaging in outdoor adventurous sporting activities are 'heroic', are not necessarily meaningful or helpful when considering the provision of physical activities for the increasing numbers of an ageing population.

Older people already experience constraints related to economic, social and cultural capital which impact on their involvement in outdoor adventurous activities. In order to fully understand these constraints, and the value of improving access to these activities, the chapter recommends a greater need for the voice of the older person to be heard in the planning process. This is a key message for policymakers and providers because outdoor adventurous activities present opportunities to challenge traditional views of ageing, improve social networks and address the social isolation that many experience in later life. These activities also already provide the foundations for a lucrative economy; however, further

commodification of outdoor adventure for older people should be carefully weighed against the possibility of losing the appeal of activities which offer a genuine alternative to institutionalised competitive sports. In many ways, social policy needs to catch up with the desires of members of the older population who want risk and adventure, and recognise, and support the needs of these people as much as the social policies that target those who adopt other ways of ageing. To conclude in the words of Robert, engagement in outdoor adventurous activities should be recognised as a valued lifestyle choice as part of everyday ageing: 'do something challenging with your life … it gets the adrenaline going!'

Notes

1. Bourdieu (1986a) outlines four kinds of capital, which are resources that enable individuals to influence specific situations: economic capital (ownership of goods with financial value), cultural capital (knowledge and skills), social capital (social networks) and symbolic capital (the conversion of other forms of capital into celebrity status and reputation).
2. A gap year is a year's break, usually taken between finishing school and starting university, although sometimes taken as a career break, during which people generally travel and undertake voluntary work.

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