

*This paper appeared in Horizons with unauthorised edits. This manuscript is the original version that was sent to the editor, although the page numbers have been altered to reflect those of the published version.*

Beames, S., & Stonehouse, P. (2007). Liberty and social order on expeditions. *Horizons*, 40, 22-24.

## **Individual liberty and social order on expeditions**

As expedition leaders over the years, we've tried to run useful reviewing sessions that explored participants' interactions with the group. Did they contribute as much as they took? Did they consider the needs of others as much as their own? We often stumbled through these important discussions, drawing on a mixture of humour and less-than-coherent reasoning as our tools of facilitation. What we needed was to introduce some basic theory as a way of making these outdoor journeys more educational in nature.

While it may be possible for participants to develop an ethic of care for others during an expedition, this is probably more likely to happen if healthy discussion accompanies the interpersonal issues that inevitably surface during a trip. My impression is that many youth workers and outdoor educators hope that participants will become more caring for the others in their group, and that this will happen because the rigours of the expedition demand that people put their own needs after those of the team. There may be some truth in this assumption, but as educators who still work on the front line from time to time, we want to be armed with a more substantial theoretical base that can be used to underpin a meaningful group discussion.

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between the individual and community in the context of short, UK-based, overnight expeditions for young people. For the purposes of this discussion, an expedition can be considered a self-sufficient journey with the explicit educational aim of personal and social

development for each participant. What follows is a basic framework for exploring the themes of individual liberty and social order.

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1996) considers a good society to be one that “nourishes both social virtues and individual rights” (p. 4). An important aspect of good societies is that they find a healthy tension between the needs of individuals and those of the group. In order to understand this balance that Etzioni seeks, we can take examples of individualism and social conservatism to extremes. Individualism is based on the notion of universal right (Taylor, 1991, p. 45), where everyone should have the right to be themselves and to do what they please. An expedition team that fully espoused the virtues of individualism would not mind if one person played their harmonica all night, while someone in another tent sang operatic arias from dusk until dawn. Anyone demanding silence so they could sleep would not have a philosophical leg to stand on.

This kind of radical individualism has its critics. As Taylor (1991) says, this individualism “underlies soft relativism as a moral principle” (p. 45).<sup>1</sup> Soft relativism dismisses external conceptions of right and wrong in favour of a truth and reality that is found within each individual. Although soft-relativism attempts to offer a solution to the problem of contrasting values, it is an impractical position, as it leaves no one with the “right to criticize another’s values” (p. 45). As our previous example noted, harmonicas and arias make poor bedfellows.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from individualism lies social conservatism. Social conservatives are more interested in strengthening moral order and “if necessary, to have it undergirded by the state” (Etzioni, 1996, p. 7). Rather than relying on normative means of influencing individual behaviour such as education, leadership, and moral voices within the community, social conservatives favour the use of legislation to promote the values they hold. (Etzioni, 1996).

On an expedition this legislation might come from “laws” laid down by the group leaders. The laws may also come from an expedition group full of social conservatives who draw-up a list of rules, one of which is that there is “no noise allowed between 10pm and 7am”. In both cases, an external “rule book” is used to manage individual behaviour. In our experience, this practice is not uncommon and may be a useful exercise, if the young people themselves are the ones who create the rule book (a.k.a. the group contract). We would argue, however, that after some time, the rule book limits critical thinking and moral reasoning, as people may be less likely to weigh each case on its individual merit.

Another way to view the bedtime scenario is through Etzioni’s (1996) ideas of *Communitarianism*. No, it’s not a cult! It is a way of encouraging communities to have a “carefully maintained equilibrium of order and autonomy, rather than the ‘maximization’ of either” (p. 4). Etzioni probably would not want the expedition team to have a rule book outlining the times that people were to be quiet. We suspect that he would rather that the group had a discussion about how a compromise might be met – one where social order could be blended with a reasonable degree of individualism.

Communitarianism advocates that one person’s liberty (e.g. playing music late at night) destroys the social order once it infringes on another person’s liberty (e.g. the right to be able to sleep without noise). This tension demands what Etzioni (1996) calls the *New golden rule*: “Respect and uphold society’s moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy” (p.xviii). As outdoor educators we simply need to replace the word “society” with “expedition team”. The new golden rule offers us a solid platform from which to launch a discussion about individuals and their levels of autonomy within, and responsibility to, the group.

The motivational continuum for upholding Etzioni’s New golden rule ranges from sole self-interest (“I compromise only to ensure I get my share”) to genuinely valuing and caring for others (“I truly

---

<sup>1</sup> Taylor claims that individualism and the “me generation” is one of society’s principal “malaises”.

want what others want”). The communal nature of expeditionary life can encourage this consideration of others and foster a sense of care (McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006, p. 101).

We are not suggesting that the needs of the individual be abandoned. There are good things associated with modern individualism, such as getting hamburgers dressed exactly the way we like them or having flexible work arrangements. Taylor (1991) acknowledges these positives while highlighting the “dark side” of individualism, which he describes as a “...centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society...an abnormal and regrettable self absorption” (p. 4). Etzioni (1996) is careful to point out that healthy communities do not seek to crush all that is individual. On the contrary, he argues that the “social fabric sustains, nourishes, and enables individuality rather than diminishes it” (p. 26). Is it possible for someone to develop an ethic of caring for others without denying them their basic needs for individual liberty, fulfilment, and expression?

We suspect that for a large proportion of educators working with young people in the outdoors, expeditions play an active role in addressing the sort of individualism that Taylor (1991) is worried about. Our hope is that this short paper will provide expedition staff with some reasoned, back-pocket theory that can be applied on the trail. Are expeditions a viable place for young people to find the balance between individual rights and social responsibility? We believe they can be, and that this balance has relevance beyond the expedition and into the communities to which the young people will return.

As educators, it is natural for us to want people to feel a high level of self-fulfilment in their lives. However, whether in the mountains or in the city, the individualism and autonomy of one should not destroy the shared values and social order of a community.

## **References**

- Etzioni, A. (1996). *The new golden rule: Community and morality in a democratic society*. New York: Basic Books.
- McKenzie, M. & Blenkinsop, S. (2006). An ethic of care and educational practice. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* 6(2), 91-106.
- Taylor, C. (1991). *The ethics of authenticity*. London: Harvard University Press.