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# Not of This World – Death and Loss in Himalayan Mountaineering

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# Not of This World – Death and Loss in Himalayan Mountaineering

Jase Wilson

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the narratives of three deceased high-altitude mountaineers who lost their lives while climbing in the Greater Himalaya. These individuals were participants in part of a larger ethnographic study on 'Tourism in the Death Zone' conducted over the space of 150 days fieldwork in Pakistan and Nepal in 2019. The paper seeks to explore how these participants' depth of immersion in the 'social world' of high-altitude mountaineering eventually lead to their deaths. To do so, the phenomenological concept of the lifeworld [*Lebenswelt*] is utilized to show how the participants' lived realities and aspirations became entwined with high-altitude mountaineering – a serious leisure community. Previously, the connection between the lifeworld and serious leisure viewed within the context of extreme risk taking and possible death, has not been explored.

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## Introduction

The social worlds of outdoor sporting communities such as mountaineering or rock climbing, can be all encompassing. Recently, Stebbin's (2018) has highlighted the importance of the social worlds perspective to serious leisure. Social worlds (e.g. serious leisure communities) are distinct forms of human organization (Hughes, 2015) characterized by; high involvement of actors, a 'career' ladder or deepened trajectory inside of the social world, a lack of a centralized power structures, negotiations over rules and boundaries, symbolic interactionism, niche communication channels, shared knowledge and resources, and a culture that forms around a shared interest (Hughes, 2015; Hughes et al., 2016). The social world which I will explore in this article is that of high-altitude mountaineering on the World's 14 highest mountains which are exclusively found in Nepal, Tibet/China, Pakistan, and India.

Fox and McDermott (2021) have recently called for leisure scholars to explore *wholeness* in relation to leisure; to examine how leisure plays a role across the breadth of an individual's life, including death. This follows along efforts which seek to understand the role that leisure plays in an individual's wider life, for example understanding costs associated with serious leisure commitment (see Lamont et al., 2014; Thurnell-Read, 2016) or abandonment (Lovelock et al., 2018). Here the trajectory of the social worlds perspective for serious leisure pursuits can be deepened by employing the phenomenological concept of the lifeworld which was especially apparent in Heidegger's (2010)

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existential phenomenology [*lebenswelt*]. The lifeworld signals a more all-encompassing phenomenological analysis of participant's lived realities in relation to leisure, the degree to which one's subjective lifeworld becomes entwined, even dominated by the social world of a serious leisure community.

While this thought is applicable to a wide range of serious leisure communities, the social world of high-altitude mountaineering is especially unique to explore the individual lifeworlds given the context of death, high-risk, and the pseudo-professionalism of the adventurer/explorer scene which blurs the distinction between leisure and work. To demonstrate how utterly enmeshed a participant's life may become with a serious leisure social world, I will explore the narratives of three high-altitude mountaineers Ethan, Purna, and Adam. What will become evident in the narratives of three mountaineers explored here, is that each participant became fully immersed and absorbed into the social world of high-altitude mountaineering; they integrated much of their sense of identity, sense of purpose, goals, and aspirations into the social world—hence the merging of their lifeworld quite closely with high-altitude mountaineering. Since my encounters with these climbers during an extensive period of ethnographic fieldwork in 2019, each of these mountaineers have lost their lives to mountaineering accidents. In this paper I seek to make sense of their stories to understand how and why their participation in high-altitude mountaineering could have led to their untimely deaths. I will question what role the social world of high-altitude mountaineering played in relation to the choices each mountaineer was making in the lead up to their deaths, considering how their sense of investment, depth of immersion and attachment to community ideals may have made it more difficult to abandon their goals. To do so, an interdisciplinary philosophical bricolage will be employed to understand how and why these climbers endured in their 'scene of desire' (Berlant, 2010, 2011) and the complex and emotional set of decisions which resulted in the deaths of these three mountaineers.

### ***Social worlds and the lifeworld***

Studies of recreation participation draw upon foundational literatures such as recreation specialization (Bryan, 1977) which posits a linear developmental process as participants deepen their trajectory into their area of specialization. The career ladder of participants and level of devotion has led to theorists highlight and question the work-leisure divide (Scott & Shafer, 2001; Rojek, 2010) leading to concepts such as Stebbins's highly influential concept of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007; Stebbins, 2018). Stebbins defined six qualities which distinguish serious leisure—*perseverance, career, effort, durable benefits, unique ethos, and identity* (Stebbins, 2007).

More recently, Stebbins (2018) has sought to explore activity through the lens of social worlds. The social world perspective is heavily influenced by the anthropological tradition and theorists such as Victor Turner (see Turner, 1969, 1987). Turner's framing of *communitas* (1969; 1987) describes the antistructural properties of social worlds; the destabilization of common hierarchies and how power (capital in its varying forms) is fundamentally redistributed along new rules and norms. The antistructural nature of a *communitas* (or social worlds) however needs a semiotician's perspective; social worlds work and function because of meaningful signs and symbols that circulate

in-between and amongst participants. As Ness notes, “all vehicles of meaning-making imaginable are still, first and foremost, signs from a semeiotic point of view” (2016, p. 19). Vehicles of meaning making, in anthropology, are often referred to as totems which can be viewed as forms of power, that other participants recognize as socially meaningful currencies (Ness, 2016). Totems may be material objects, or performances and practices such as rights of passage. We can see the influence here on the social worlds perspective which again posits that participants have high involvement, a deepening trajectory into the social world, lack of centralized power structures, negotiations over boundaries, symbolic interaction, a distinct form of language, and so fourth (see Hughes, 2015; Hughes et al., 2016).

Scott et al. (2005) attempted to bring into vogue the concept of ‘hardcore leisure’ which places a greater emphasis on authenticity as a key articulating concept whereby participants differentiate themselves between in and out groups based on interpretations of authentic practice. While authentic practice is an interesting and important angle through which to view hardcore leisure, what is equally as compelling is each participant’s relationship to *being* part of the hardcore community in which they are situated. While the social world perspective has a lot to offer here to understand the broader context of the community ideals in which one participates, a deeper phenomenological analysis of being in relation to the social world, as suggested above, necessitates an understanding of the lifeworld.

The lifeworld, or *lebenswelt*, (Heidegger, 2010) is both subjective and intersubjective, it examines how an individual’s life (their subjective lifeworld) is enmeshed with broader intersubjective social structures (social worlds) in which they anchor their desires, goals, identity, and so fourth. For Heidegger, the lifeworld is constituted in a close relationship with broader social worlds hence his emphasis on using the term *Dasein*. *Dasein* broadly translates to *being there* (Critchley et al., 2008). Evidently, for Heidegger, *being* cannot be separated from *thereness*, which is why being is always *being-in-the-world*. The *lebenswelt* situates an individual’s highly personal and subjective motives for action amongst the broader influences of social world(s) which create the context for individual striving. As such, the focus on lifeworlds combines both the concept of the social worlds perspective found in serious leisure, as well as subjectivity—how participants wrap their lives, individual meanings, and very sense of wholeness around and within such the social worlds of serious leisure communities. The social world of a serious leisure community, I will argue here, can become a fundamental part of an individual’s *being-in-the-world*.

Phenomenological approaches in sport and leisure studies, increasingly, have been adopted to discuss embodiment (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011) gender (Chisholm, 2008) or ecocentricity (Brymer & Gray; 2009) to give a few examples. However, not all focus explicitly upon the lifeworld which can help to explicate the depth of everyday lived experience that participants have of their leisure activities (Froese & McDermott, 2021; Mayoh & Jones, 2015; Mayoh et al., 2020). This turn toward the lifeworld deepens the emphasis on the role that leisure plays in a participants daily lived realities and the degree to which participation orients their life course. For example, the lifeworld perspective shows that participants persevere in leisure careers due not only to identity, but also to how they manage the full course of their lives; how they cope with trauma or negative life events (see Hutchinson et al., 2003; Kleiber et al., 2002).

### ***Postmodern perspectives in serious leisure***

The Bourdieusian discussion of social capital and habitus has been widely utilized to examine outdoor sports and serious leisure more broadly (Backlund & Kuentzel, 2013; Bixler & Morris, 1997; Lovelock et al., 2018; Thurnell-Read, 2016). This trajectory has led to discussions of 'leisure capital' (Backlund & Kuentzel, 2013) which explains that participants accrue types of currency within the social world of their chosen leisure community. Here the turn toward Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital (see Lee et al., 2014) and more broadly metaphors of capital (see Backlund & Kuentzel, 2013) are useful in that they signal ways in which a deepening trajectory into the lifeworld is an investment that gives returns for participants. What is evident is that the social worlds of serious leisure become central to participant's lives and this has led some researchers to question the distressing experience of 'abandonment' (Lovelock et al., 2018) or leisure career 'retrogression' (Bartram, 2001) but also the possible negative effects and costs of serious leisure to a participants normal life (Lamont et al., 2014; Thurnell-Read, 2016). This later trajectory of costs associated with serious leisure careers constitutes an important and interesting trajectory—participants can become so absorbed in the social world of their serious leisure pursuit that they may begin to swap social norms and currencies vs those of wider society. This is presented as a cost, but what it rather shows is a friction between the antistructural nature of social worlds in which goals, currencies, hierarchies are intentionally unsettled by the community which shows a preference for different forms of currency and competence. This 'swapping' of social norms is crucial when understanding death and loss in leisure and how social worlds can play a role, for example, when examining highly risk-positive serious leisure communities whose membership can be defined by capacity to control oneself in situations of possible death. The margin for error in such cases can be razor sharp. While costs have been explored in relation to serious leisure, the possibility of death as a cost needs greater exploration.

Evidently the Bourdieusian perspective and leisure capital metaphors (see Backlund & Kuentzel, 2013; Lee et al., 2014) help to explain why participants invest so heavily in serious leisure. The capital metaphor helps to explain why participants may endure at the hard-core center of a serious leisure community even though it may pose a risk to their well-being—social capital and the privileges which it affords can be lost if one does not practice at the cutting edge. The postmodern philosophical canon has further offered a lot to leisure studies through the works of Beck, Giddens and Bauman (Atkinson, 2010). This stream of work has sought to theorize the drive for individuals to seek authentic social worlds in the first place by understanding alienation. Within a postmodern framework, for Beck (1992, 2006) and Bauman (2007) modernity and the never-ending march of progress (social, economic technological, scientific, etc.) has resulted in neoliberal individualism, or tragic individualism. They argue that such forces have, over time, dismantled the social and cultural institutions which had previously been the 'glue' for individuals and communities (marriage, religion, local identity, tradition, the commons). These 'institutions' had previously insulated individuals from risk and grounded their sense of identity, purpose and belonging. As neoliberal capitalism and scientism has assaulted family life, traditions, religion, this has led individuals (who crave belonging) to mobile, global, and

purportedly authentic leisure communities (Cohen et al., 2013; Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Vidon et al., 2018).

Whether alienated from capital and labor in the Marxian sense of alienation (Knudsen et al., 2016) or the forces of neoliberalism, the role of the social world here is to provide meaning, identity, clarity of purpose, goals, social networks, and so fourth. The level of commitment that participants feel for their serious leisure community borders on the religious/spiritual. This can present a complication in such situations when, in order to or gain membership one must demonstrate competencies important to the community such as navigating situations of extreme personal risk and possible death. As well, in order to accumulate leisure capital (Backlund & Kuentzel, 2013) participants may need to devote themselves completely to develop competency which presents a different type of social and economic risk. What we see is that the social world of a serious leisure community is not some benign entity; it can lead participants into situations of death which they otherwise would have never negotiated. In such a way, building and maintaining the terms of membership can be problematic within the specific context of risk-positive serious leisure pursuits in the outdoors.

### ***The social world of outdoor adventure sport***

Literature on niche outdoor sports has expanded considerably within recent decades often referred to as extreme sports (see Brymer & Gray, 2009) or Adventure Sport (Frühauf et al., 2022; Houge Mackenzie et al., 2023). The discussion of such activities understands that they take place in and involving travel to outdoor, natural areas, where participants practice specific physical movements (manoeuvring on a rock face) and technical skills (rope work, safety skills) (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). Mountaineering and other outdoor adventure sports have had a distinctly masculine and counter-cultural tone (see Bott, 2013; Chisholm, 2008; Ortner, 1999; Frohlick, 2003) with participants abandoning normative social values, often endearingly referring to themselves as ‘dirt-bags’ (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). The social worlds which surround these activities are distinctly antistructural; participants may scrimp by on a meager living to invest all their time and energy into learning the trademark skills of mountaineering leading to a significant investment in terms of time and emotions.

A key aspect of outdoor adventure sports, broadly speaking, is the presence of risk and possibility that errors could lead to significant physical harm or death (Brymer & Gray, 2009). As such, theories of voluntary risk-taking behavior have been popular research themes in adventure sport (see Bunn, 2017; Lyng, 1990, 2012). Extreme risk taking, as some authors note, has durable benefits. For example, Willig describes how some of his extreme sport participants, “felt that without extreme sport they would be using drugs or alcohol, respectively, in order to meet their emotional needs” (Willig, 2008, p. 698). This emotional ‘trade off’ effect which occurs in extreme sports has been discussed through theories such as ‘edgework’ through which, as Barlow et al. note, participants “seek out situations of chaos, stress, and danger so as to demonstrate or reassert their agency and emotional control” (2013, p. 459) which allows them to manage ‘existence tensions’ in creative and purposeful ways (Willig, 2008). Edgework has been highly influential in voluntary risk-taking behavior (see; Bunn, 2017; Lyng,

1990, 2012). This discussion is psychologically oriented around a desire to experience feelings of control. Critiques of 'edgework' place a greater emphasis on the role that social capital plays (see, Holland-Smith, 2017; West & Allin, 2010) or empowerment when viewed through a feminist lens (Ourahmoune, 2013). Nonetheless, what is evident is that risk taking in outdoor sport is a central perspective and competency in terms of risk-taking is an important aspect of what it means to be a community member, it is a durable and central form of currency in outdoor adventure sport. Although outdoor adventure sports have been viewed as forms of serious leisure, the connections between such activities and possible death are not often directly discussed. Some studies have examined possibly deadly forms of serious leisure (see Lewis et al., 2013; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002) however death falls into the background of each study as a possibility. Even in more targeted discussions of 'extreme' risk taking, death is framed as possibility *if* mistakes are made, etc., (see Brymer & Schweitzer, 2012). The literature is bereft of examples which have examined the stories of serious leisure participants *who have died* as a result of their participation in a serious leisure activity.

### ***The social world of extreme high-altitude mountaineering***

Extreme high-altitude mountaineering describes mountaineering that takes place on the highest mountains on Earth, 'The 14' or The 8000ers as they are often referred to as. The term 'Death Zone' has become increasingly popular in recent decades to describe spaces above 8000 meters altitude where, due to a lack of atmospheric pressure, oxygen content is roughly 30% of what it would be at sea level (Banasiewicz et al., 2014; Wilson, 2012). There are only 14 mountains on Earth which reach above 8000 meters, and these are found exclusively in South Asia (Nepal, India, Pakistan, China/Tibet). 'The 14', are characterized by otherworldly harshness; high winds, frequent storms, avalanches, and arctic temperatures can all lead to death by accidents or exposure for climbers. High-altitude mountaineering and mountain leisure travel - as a practice, a logic, a way of seeing the mountain landscape(s) - has now roughly 150 years of historical relevance in the Greater Himalaya (Isserman & Weaver, 2008). However, it was not until the 1990s when commercial, touristic mountaineering on any of The 14 began in earnest, this process was set in motion first on Everest when American mountain guide David Brashears took Dick Bass to the summit of Mount Everest (Elmes & Barry, 1999) allowing Bass to become the first person to climb the now popular Seven Summits challenge (the highest mountain on each of the 7 continents). Since that time Everest has been climbed as a high-altitude mountaineering tourism objective and today there is a burgeoning industry of capitalistic, service-oriented tourism actors which have made strong use of the embedded symbology of Himalayan mountaineering for profit and lifestyle-oriented ventures (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Bott, 2009). The process of commercializing or commodifying mountain-based tourism activities, and by default mountains themselves, has been widely written about (see Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Higham et al., 2015; Johnston & Edwards, 1994; Loewenstein, 1999).

Today, Mt. Everest is still the face of high-altitude/Death Zone tourism, with over 8,000 ascents, it has been climbed more than all other 8000 m peaks combined (Miller & Mair, 2020). However, the 'Everestisation' of all the 8000 m peaks is becoming increasingly apparent within the past decade especially. This process involves the heavy



use of local, ethnic workers to fix ropes and carry supplies up the mountain while tourist clients are sheltered from risk and toil (see Wilson & Dashper, 2022). Death remains a complicated subject in high-altitude mountaineering given how most deaths are by Pakistani, Tibetan or Nepalese workers who are physically exposed to more risk due to the frequency of their trips up and down the mountain. Nonetheless, mountaineering tourists do indeed die, most usually on ‘summit days’ when climbers are at their most exposed position; exposed to the effects of extreme altitude (such as hypoxia), exposed to the extreme climatic conditions, and finally it is at this point in which climbers are the furthest point away from the relative safety of basecamp and possible rescue. In all, over 400 climbers have died on Everest alone with notable tragedies taking place in recent decades such as the 2014 disaster, or the 1996 disaster (see Wilson & Dashper, 2022). While mountaineering has received considerable attention by researchers, there is a dearth of research which specifically focusses on high-altitude mountaineering as a serious leisure pursuit. Furthermore, despite the clear connections to death and loss, there is scant research which has examined participant’s subjective meanings to understand how each individual translates their engagements with death through the high-altitude phenomenon into personally meaningful terms.

### ***Ethnographic methods***

Ethnography traditionally involves primarily distanced observation into groups bound by space and time (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). However, observation is not just a stance on data collection, it constitutes the membership roles which a researcher is willing to play whilst ignoring the ‘situations’ a researcher brings to the study (i.e. gender, sexual orientation, age, social class, ethnicity) (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011). More recently, there has been a widespread acceptance among ethnographers that distanced objectivity is largely untenable and unrealistic and as such active participation in social worlds has become the norm (Kennedy et al., 2019). This has resulted in a turn toward autoethnographic voice as a manner of which to write of social worlds and increasingly ethnographers are utilizing autoethnographic voice as a means to explore the researcher’s phenomenal, embodied, and emotional experiences of fieldwork which add transparency to the analytical process (see Farkic, 2021; Pocock, 2015; Willis & Trondman, 2000; Witte et al., 2022). Because of this, the distinction between ethnography and autoethnography is becoming less apparent. Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that analyses personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). This form of research unveils the researcher as a vital part of the qualitative research apparatus by placing the researcher’s voice, politics, and social consciousness center-stage in the process of writing (Ellis et al., 2011). As a method, autoethnography is both process and product as the writer gives access, through the reflexive, and the biographical, to the evolutionary aspects of their thinking—moments, places, times, people who have ‘bent’ the researchers thinking.

Over the space of 150 days of ethnographic fieldwork during the Spring and Summer of 2019, I was immersed in the social world of high-altitude mountaineers whilst living at various staging points such as the Mount Everest basecamp (EBC) and K2 basecamp (K2BC) in Pakistan. During this time, 75 formal semi-structured group and

individual interviews were conducted with 93 participants (both workers and tourists) who were gathered through a snowball approach; 25 were women and 27 different nationalities were represented in the study. Interviews were conducted in English with a variety of stakeholders and later transcribed verbatim. The project sought to explore the emotional and affective aspects of high-altitude mountaineering tourism and this was blended with a narrative inquiry approach to interviews (see Douglas & Carless, 2009; Sparkes & Partington, 2003). Participants were asked how they began their journeys into the world of high-altitude mountaineering, and I focussed on emotions as points of articulation to prompt deeper into the participant's story. I found that participants placed emotions at key junctions in their stories, and as such often their phenomenological meanings (motivations, reasoning for participation, 'triggers' which catapulted them toward their new paths and journeys) began with emotional traumas or experiences. In such a way, participants were highly oriented by their emotional historicity (Pocock, 2015) which often foregrounded and underpinned their stories. Methodologically, emotions as were a very successful route through which to explore and grasp participant's phenomenological lived-realities.

Of the above noted participants, the voices of just three are included here; Ethan, Purna, and Adam are the pseudonyms given to these participants. Ethan and Adam died on K2 in recent years, and Purna on Everest in 2019 whilst I was residing at Everest basecamp. I have chosen to explore these participants lives and narrative constructions *via* a blending of autoethnographic vignettes reconstructed from journal notes, memory, and interview material. The choice of autoethnographic voice for this paper is very deliberate. I have personally felt a complicated ethical relationship to these transcripts given the later context of their deaths. This was especially the case when Purna died whilst I was in the field and during one of the deadliest seasons in the Nepalese Himalaya where 22 climbers died across Nepal. The aftermath of this season was characterized by the viral photograph shared by prolific Nepali climber Nims Purjal of the 'traffic jam' leading to the summit of Everest. This image spurred high demand for Everest related stories and media requests in my direction. However, the act of drawing attention to myself and somehow benefiting from my proximity to death (i.e. profiting off the death of my friend only days earlier) felt extremely problematic. Years later, when Adam and Ethan died, and especially when Ethan's family launched an expedition to retrieve his body, I again felt a jarring sense of emotional connection to these transcripts and stories. How could I even begin to 'code' small strips of text from these climber's transcripts ignoring the fact of their deaths? Because of this sense of complication, autoethnographic voice felt the appropriate tone with which to write this article. Each story is centered around Ethan, Purna and Adam's lifeworlds which played a leading role up until their deaths and this paper serves as an opportunity to explore their stories more meaningfully.

## Participants

### *Adam*

"Happy people don't go into the mountains" Adam had said to a room full of mountaineers. It was this comment that introduced us as I sought to gather more depth

about the statement. Adam, an Eastern European man in his mid 40s, turned to the mountains after he divorced from his first wife. The first adventure was a long-distance 'thru-hiking' trail across his countries biggest mountain range.

I went for the first time for a 600km mountain trek after my divorce, I met one man on the trail, he had a wife and children, a happy life. He used to say 'why am I here four this!?' And eventually he quit and left for home. The mountains are like medicine for people who have a broken heart.

The connection between mountain experiences and coping with negative life events, was a central part of his journey, and his divorce, as he described to me, is what originally triggered his turn toward the outdoors.

At the time Adam had just began a vegan diet. Over the course of the years after his divorce, he began a plan to become the first vegan climber to summit Mount Everest and eventually the Seven Summits (which he completed). It was after completing this journey that he decided to also try to climb all of the 14 8000 meter peaks. Below, an excerpt from our interview reveals his reflections on the dangers of his project.

I wanted to see if it was possible to eat only plant products, to do sport, and to climb high mountains. In 2013 I started with the 7 summits, now its been seven and a half years I am on this diet journey. I have summited 7 from the 14, so I am 50%. But twice I told myself ok I do not go anymore these 8000 metre expeditions because this is very dangerous, it is a lot of money, I am very long time without my family. But the biggest problem is the danger. So, two or three time I say "ok I stop this" but then I think "only one time more..." [laughs].

Of course, if I feel good, I want to finish this project, because it's not only for veganism, I also want to show people what is possible. But in the last few years it's getting harder, I have seen people die, I need a lot of money, I need to go to beg from sponsors. The most important thing for me is to stay alive, because my son is ten years old now and he waits for me, he told me 'father please come back the summit is not so important'. Also my father, mother, sister, all my friends, everyone told me before expedition, 'please come home'. My parents in the beginning with the seven summits, they were ok, but then I started "The 14", my father told me "please don't go, it is too dangerous". Before maybe they didn't fully understand the danger, now in the last two years two well-known climbers from my country have died on 8000 m peaks. There were only three of us going on 8000 m peaks, two have died and now I am the only one left.

In 2019 Adam did not succeed in climbing his mountain as he did not feel confident in climbing without 'fixed ropes' to the summit which today are set by local Nepalese or Pakistani workers. I was surprised when, in 2021, I had learned that he was part of a team to try and climb K2 in the winter season which is an exceptionally dangerous feat reserved for only the most experienced and technically competent mountaineers. Given Adam's statements above, it is clear that the risk of death was strongly on his mind, and his position on the matter, that it was not worth his life, seemed sincere to me. However, January 2021, Adam perished while climbing on K2 in winter, and I wondered what drew him into that engagement? We can see that Adam's life-world is utterly bound up with high-altitude mountaineering, and veganism, the two of which are entwined and acting together. Take veganism away, or mountaineering, and the story becomes vulnerable.

## Ethan

I met Ethan at the Broad Peak basecamp in Pakistan where I had resided for six weeks during the summer mountaineering season in the Karakorum mountain range. This basecamp is merely a one-hour walk from K2, the worlds second highest mountain which is largely regarded as the most difficult and often most dangerous of The 14. We had one formal recorded interview lasting sixty minutes, and otherwise we informally ‘hung out’ whenever Ethan was not higher on the mountain during his acclimatization ‘rotations’. Ethan was a white man in his late 30s who has a long history of endurance sports, and outdoor adventure sports such as base jumping, high-altitude mountaineering, rock climbing, and ski mountaineering. Our shared gender, similar age, and experience of mountain sports made us fast friends. His love of adventure, risk, and the social worlds in which he was immersed spilled into adventurous forms of travel to politically turbulent areas normally off limits to travelers. Ethan was a founding member of a large social media group that has thousands of members, and also periodically organized international adventure tourism experiences. In the summer of 2019, Ethan was going for his second 8000 meter peak (Broad Peak) and after succeeding at that challenged, he had an unsuccessful, but safe, attempt at K2 afterwards. After 2019, Ethan returned and reached the summit of K2, however, went missing on the descent. His body was found near advanced basecamp and later a group of his close friends embarked upon an expedition (one year later) to retrieve his body and give a proper burial nearby at the Art Gilkey Memorial site, where there are over 100 plaques dedicated to fallen mountaineers.

I asked Ethan about the sacrifices he made in his life to get to where he was. “*I hope I don’t sound rude, it is a little bit of an assumption to say they are sacrifices*” was his response. He described he needed to live aligned with what he loved doing and was conscious about where he invested his time. However, he did eventually describe some sacrifices (relationships, time, financial, the toll it took emotionally on his family, and opportunity cost where he could have invested time elsewhere). What is clear is that Ethan was exceptionally dedicated to his pursuits. Ethan’s rationalization for his participation moved across themes such as nature-based therapy, developing confidence and feelings of power, learning and self-knowledge, mastery and competence, and others. “*I love the pushing of the human experience*” he had described, what precisely that means to him, is explored in the flow of conversation below *via* excerpts from our interview.

You have recently broken off a long-term relationship, does that make it easier to be out here?

That’s a good question ... y’know, Jimmy Chin, when he was climbing his mother said to him “you can’t die while I’m alive” so his risk profile while his mother was alive was lower. Then sadly his mother passed away and then he thought ‘I could really push this out and do some potentially fatal things now and really see where the limit is’. In the past, I felt I had a responsibility to come back when I was in a long-term relationship. Now that I don’t have that, there is almost an inkling of that thought: ‘can I potentially push it a little bit further?’ Although I do have a family, sisters, brothers, parents and all that, its maybe a bit rude to them, but I feel as though I’ve got a little bit more liberty to push it a bit further now.

Do you think you've maybe lost perspective a bit?

That is absolutely a possibility. Maybe it's like someone who takes risks, you know they push the line out a little and they get away with it, then they push the line out a little further and they get away with it. Then you look back like two or three years later and you are so far removed from the line you don't know what's right and wrong. But, do I do that, no I don't think I do. I am very objective about risk assessment, again I try to be very calculated. So, I don't think that I have lost perspective at all.

So you don't feel though you've cornered yourself, like you need bigger/harder to get the same kicks?

The simple answer to the question is no. My view is no. But ... in another view, to be able to live at the pointy end of something, you have to really invest and push all the chips in. Because otherwise it's just practically not possible. You can't do it part time, you'd have to go all in. I think it's a great thing to be right at the pointy end of some big experience. Going right to the edge of the cliff, nobody goes there. That goes back to my comment right at the start, that is to push the boundaries of the human experience, that is where you can really really live and have some deep experiences in life. In an economic sense, in a physical sense, in a philosophical sense, in a psychological sense, this is where I invest my time and my everything [in outdoor sports]. But am I cornered? No.

Ethan, is totally immersed in the social world of high-risk mountain sports, and it is clear the sense of wholeness of being he attributes to these worlds through which he explores the very idea of himself and his life. The point about perspective is an important one, as we can see Ethan refers to the narrative of a professional climber [Jimmy Chin] whose glorification of accepting possible death makes it permissible for others. Ethan points out that an important discussion on perspective, is its subjective relativity—over time taking more risks means previous high-points of risk negotiation are no longer intimidating in which case one has to keep 'pushing the line out'. Secondly, is the degree to which Ethan 'pruned' many dissenting perspectives about his risk profile over time; he describes above breaking off a long-term romantic relationship, however this also included other friendships. From a serious leisure perspective, I am suggesting that the scaling nature of participation and immersion into a social leisure world also involves a loss of perspective as individuals surround themselves primarily with supportive voices.

### **Purna**

Purna was a Nepalese mountain guide who was an 'aspirant' guide in the International Federation of Mountain Guides (IFMGA) programme established in Nepal. He was a passionate climber who had professionalized in the industry, as well as a recreational climber. This section has predominantly been reconstructed from fieldnotes rather than interview material and involves the perspectives of Purna's peers, all of whom I was familiar with.

Purna's father died of tuberculosis when he was just a boy. In Nepal, there is tremendous cultural stigma targeted at widow who are treated as beacons which emanate poor luck and excluded from society. It can be difficult to obtain employment and the stigma chases many for the rest of their lives. Purna's mother converted to

Christianity, as such, he was raised as a Christian, which led to his eventual donning of the official caste name Bista. “*Bista is like, when they don’t know what to call you*” he had told me.

Purna watched some of his closest friends meet tragic ends, three of which died when they went to work as construction workers in the Gulf states (e.g. UAE). Death seemed to be all around him when we talked. Why not be a mountain guide then? The work, while dangerous, at least carried attractive promises. He moved to Kathmandu as a teenager looking for his place in the world. Coming across advertisements by the Nepal Mountaineering Association, to train as a mountain guide, he attended some climbing/training sessions at Astrek Climbing wall—it was clear right away to him that he had found his passion. I met him in 2014 when I had lived in Kathmandu whilst working for a Canadian NGO. We were both regular fixtures at Astrek, die-hard climbing enthusiasts who practically lived there. On the weekends we would embark with groups of friends to develop new outdoor rock climbing [sport climbing and bouldering] areas. Since 2014 Purna had started a private guiding business focussing on lower altitude guiding in Nepal, on 5–6500 meter peaks.

In 2019 Purna and I climbed together on multiple occasions and spent a great deal of idle time together. He described to me some of his visions for the future, what he had planned on doing with the funds earned from climbing Everest. “*We have one farm, it is my family property. There I want to make a centre for widowed women. They can live there, they can work, have some animals, and they can learn some skills, to make things to sell.*”

However not all was well in the world. After Purna’s death his friends had revealed to me how much he had been suffering. “*I remember one night*” Pasang had told me “*we thought he was going to die...*”. During his mountain guide training he had entered into what could have been an epileptic seizure. Twice before that he had collapsed while working on Everest. Blackouts and collapses arrived in greater frequency the more and harder he ventured into mountains. Doctors had advised that he should at least stay away from the highest peaks. While this story revolves around a person who was working in the mountains, in 2019 Purna was not guiding on Everest, he was trying to prove to himself that he could finally climb the mountain.

On the day of his death, Durba had been climbing up the Lhotse Face from Camp 3 to Camp 4. Purna was struggling and Anub, the leader of our team, tried coaxing him back toward safety. “*Come on brother, we can go next year*” Anub had later described to me. According to Anub, Purna is physically and emotionally distraught. His attachments, to being an international mountain guide, to being powerful enough financially to help others, like the widowed women, all hang in the balance. As they turn for home, Purna blacks out and slides about 100 meters down between fixed anchor points. A dangerous long-line helicopter rescue is performed, and his body is picked off the mountain above 7000 meters, his bright fluorescent yellow Salewa down suit flapping brilliantly in the wind as the heli lifts off.

I go to sleep that night feeling guilty for being alive. Guilty for sleeping, guilty for eating, guilty for not, somehow, having been magically located in the ‘right’ place. In the morning I follow up with Kazi, our cook, for any information about Purna’s condition. “*Purna is not of this world*” came the response. Everything seems tainted by this loss of Purna and I wonder how and if I will ever be able to write about him

and whether that's even appropriate. Purna's story clearly demonstrates how his very sense of *being-in-the-world* was made possible through positive attachments (identity, sense of self, future goals) bound up within the social world of high-altitude mountaineering.

## Discussion

Fox and McDermott (2021) drawing upon Josef Pieper's (2009) works have recently called for leisure scholars to explore wholeness in relation participants leisure pursuits; to understand how leisure is central to an individual's whole reality. The argument I have sought to progress in this paper is a depiction of the social world of serious leisure communities as a refuge for these three participants who entwined their very sense of being-in-the-world, their *lifeworld* (Heidegger, 2010) with high-altitude mountaineering. The social world was not a segregated part of their being, rather it was utterly central to who and what they were and constituted a great deal of their meaningful engagements with others, either professionally or personally. Stalker (2019) further to this point, has recently sought to draw leisure scholars attention to the becoming—"becoming can be thought of as a change of relations to others and/or material objects that is generative of new ways of life" (2019, p. 348). What we see in each story is that each participants sense of *being and becoming* is tied in complex ways to their high-altitude mountaineering achievements; Purna dreamed of offering a refuge to widowed women with his earnings while Adam used the platform of his profile gained through mountaineering to promote his message of veganism.

Broadly speaking, each participant sought authenticity in their lives through the social world of high-altitude mountaineering. Each participant had high involvement; both Ethan and Adam managed a niche communications channel for high-altitude mountaineers where knowledge and resources were shared, and debates about the ethics (rules and norms) of mountaineering constantly took place (Hughes, 2015; Hughes et al., 2016). We can see multiple layers to each mountaineers serious leisure 'career' (Stebbins, 2018) and how each maintained their sense of identity around who and what they were within the social world.

Overtime, perseverance and continued engagement within the social world builds forms of 'leisure capital' (Backlund & Kuentzel, 2013; Lee et al., 2014). Metaphors of capital help to visualize the sense of participation as an investment; as mountaineers accumulate capital, it becomes difficult to abandon or turn away from a 'world' which recognizes their achievements as achievements. Here the discussion of costs related to abandonment, i.e. career retrogression (Bartram, 2001) is complicated by the fact that capital accumulated within the social world is often not directly tradable in material terms. It is precisely this reason why I asked the question to Ethan whether he felt 'cornered' or not. I had wondered how troubling or problematic it may be to reside within a social world that celebrates the constant pushing and negotiating of one's limits. How might one turn around if and when things got too serious? Ethan brushed the question off, but later when I asked him recently ending his relationship, he quotes from a popular mountaineering documentary film which he took to give direct forms of permission to 'possibly do fatal things'. Ethan, in the years leading up to his death, had 'pruned' many dissenting perspectives from his life; people who worried about

him, or encouraged him to take the edge off. Over time, as Ethan had described, surrounded by many others like him, it is possible that *'you are so far removed from the line you don't know what's right and wrong'*. Here we can see that the niche communication channels and media of the social world, as well as direct relationships, create a very risk-positive atmosphere where there is an explicit understanding that, if you want existential authenticity, *'you have to push all the chips in'*. What is clear in Ethan's narrative, is how applicable the 'edgework' theory (Lyng, 1990, 2012) is to his meaning making practices, and how competency at navigating risks (i.e. being 'objective') is a crucial part of membership.

We can certainly see that the social world contextualizes Ethan's decisions and it was clear to me that, over time, he had begun to 'swap out' the social norms of wider society and replaced these with the *unique ethos* (Stebbins, 2007) of mountain sports. For example, *being* the type of person who 'pushes all the chips in' needs to be recognized by others; there is a coordination problem at play where others need to recognize the individuals efforts as meaningful. Abandoning the social world is not to just abandon a set of practices or relationships, it is to abandon the accumulated leisure capital (Backlund & Kuentzel, 2013) which may be only distinct and meaningful when coordinated with others *via* the social world. The destabilized norms and rules of the social world points to its *antistructural* nature (Turner, 1969, 1987) and how power (leisure capital) may be distributed differently. This may be oriented around praxis; the demonstration of skill sets deemed important to the community such as risk-taking competency. The attractiveness of the social world for someone like Purna, is that he stood above or as an equal to foreigners despite their relative economic power. In the mountains, given his IFMGA badge which certifies his skills, he experiences power not normally available to him in other walks of life. Purna's story exemplifies how the destabilized social hierarchies of the social world are quite difficult to abandon, even if it is a sincere risk to one's life. This is why the world of outdoor sports can be so compelling for individuals; a 'dirtbag' (Rickly-Boyd, 2012) may have considerable social standing, or the son of a Nepalese widow from the lowlands may meet and guide affluent foreigners through the Nepalese backcountry. To lose the lifeworld and one's place within it is to abandon the worldview that one carries certain forms and power not normally deemed as valuable in strictly capitalist terms, or forms of power not normally available given one's socio-economic status in life. However, to demonstrate full competency (and thus membership among prolific high-altitude guides) Purna *needed* an ascent of Everest, a liminal right-of-passage central to Nepalese mountain guides.

At the heart of each of these stories is a search for moments of existential authenticity, and a yearning for deep and meaningful human experiences. Central to much of modern philosophical works, from psychoanalysis to existentialism, is the concept of alienation (Knudsen et al., 2016) which is a force that sends the individual in search of meaningful/authentic social worlds. Each participant expressed their own sense of alienation; Adam experienced a divorce and stress related to the climate crisis (which motivated his decision to become vegan), Purna's father and many friends died when he was a youth and further his mother was discriminated against while he was young. Again, we can sense how each participant took refuge in mountaineering and more



broadly mountain sports—Purna as a youth looking to find his place in the world, Adam in the moments after his divorce. Existential authenticity, viewed within the light of the social world, is socially located within a set of meaning-making practices that are co-habitated and coordinated with others, and furthermore, there is a historicity of social worlds, its *discourse*, which outlines the key monuments and totems (semiotic symbols), and more broadly praxis that when followed promises authentic being. Totems here are seen as forms of power, tokens of performances that other participants recognize as socially meaningful currencies (Ness, 2016). Purna's right of passage to climb Everest, for example, demonstrates the power of Everest as a recognizable token within the community that has the power to bestow good fortune.

For Ness, symbolic performances are “signs in motion”, argues that signs adapt, they are ‘living’ and ‘mattering’ symbols that are produced through embodied actions - impregnating space with emergent possibility (Ness, 2016). While Everest is a globally significant icon, it is also a multi-stable object (Ness, 2016) which holds many meanings. For Purna, Everest carried many meanings; a sense of redemption over the traumas of his youth, acceptance within a wider community, but also a desire to overcome the odds of his other ways of being [*Dalit—low caste*]. The argument I wish to carry forth in this paper, how an individual may become fully absorbed in a social world that it comes to constitute much of their lifeworld and subjective meaning-making practices, is most clearly exemplified in Purna's story. His yearning for authenticity, which he visualized in a multitude of ways, all hinged upon his ability to climb Everest, *to be*, an Everest guide. There was no separation, no privacy away from this vision, it permeated across the entirety of his being.

As per Ness's understanding of signs, it is problematic to divide the participant from the social world as both are acting and performing in collaboration with one another, dancing together (Brymer & Gray, 2009) merging into one's lifeworld. This is why Heidegger stressed the notion of the lifeworld found within the foundational concept of Dasein—*da* is the worldly *thereness* which frames *being* (Heidegger, 2010). As Critchley et al. (2008) note, taking Dasein seriously means that we must not ‘split the phenomenon’ of being and world—they cohabituate being. As such, routes to existential authenticity are through social worlds which participants wrap themselves around—both lovingly, but at times problematically.

## Conclusion

I have explored in this paper the question of how serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) participants entwined their personal lifeworlds with the social world (Hughes, 2015) of high-altitude mountaineering, and explored the reasons why they may have endured within the social world, even though they were consciously aware that their participation could have deadly consequences. Following Fox and McDermott (2021) recent call, I have worked to explore these participants ‘wholeness of being’. This paper has added significant detail around the thoughts and perspectives of serious leisure participants who lost their lives whilst performing their sports. Each in their own way, Ethan, Purna, and Adam explored alternative lives through high-altitude mountaineering, and it is through this social world that their lives gained traction and meaning. However, it was also their interactions in the social world of high-altitude

mountaineering that eventually led to their deaths. Here, Lauren Berlant's (2010) notion of cruel optimism provides a constructive route to explore problematic attachments:

To phrase "the object of desire" as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what is incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation for our sense of our endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises. [...] Cruel optimism" names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to impossible or sheer fantasy [...] What's cruel about these attachments [...] is that subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity [provides] continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living and looking forward to being the world. (Berlant, 2010, pp. 93/94)

It is clear that in the participants statements above, desire plays a central function in social worlds; individuals imagine their becomingness in and amongst the symbolic worlds in which they are situated. To lose or abandon the social world of high-altitude mountaineering, for Purna, Adam and Ethan, would be to suffer the loss of a scene of desire which encapsulates the cluster of promises they sought. To abandon the social world of high-altitude mountaineering would have meant ungluing their lifeworld(s) from the promises attached to and associated with high-altitude performances. To each of these individuals, climbing The 14 8000 meter peaks, or K2, or Everest, meant something specific, something that was subjectively liberating and it was through their ascents of these mountains that other things were meant to arise.

For each participant, Ethan, Adam, and Purna, death was a constant discussion to navigate. For Ethan, the *thrills* of his participation (Lamont et al., 2014; Stebbins, 2007) were centered around finding his physical, emotional, financial, and philosophical limits, which is central premise of the 'edgework' theory (Lyng, 1990, 2012). Ethan's case, however, is different from Purna and Adam both of whom had very real reasons to abandon high-altitude mountaineering—an extreme diagnosis, and a son. However, as we can see both had 'clusters of promises' (Berlant, 2010, 2011) that surround the first vegan ascent of this or that mountain or guiding on the most prestigious mountain in Nepal. So abandonment in serious leisure (see Lovelock et al., 2018) in this light, can be even more problematic as participant lose their very sense of continuity, of "what it means to keep on living and looking forward to being the world" (Berlant, 2010, p. 94). Abandonment in this sense does not have to be viewed as a full-stop abandonment of the social world, but for each of the participants I have questioned 'why could they not have turned around earlier on that particular day?' As per Berlant's (2010, 2011) Lacanian inspired discussion around the object of desire above, we can assume that what held them in place, enduring in the aspirations to summit, is their own unique collection of ambitions which are nestled around the goal of climbing their mountains.

Purna's story, for me, encapsulates many of the main arguments, which I wish to make in this paper. It is not necessity alone (to further his career) that drove Purna to go against reason and his doctor's advice to try for Everest again even though he had already collapsed twice whilst trying to climb it. His business as a lower altitude guide was successful. However, the prestige of guiding on Everest had lulled him to prove himself to his peers, and clustered around this desire to prove himself are his

attachment to find a sense of overcoming past ‘archaic traumas’ (Buda, 2015) of his youth.

What is evident from the discussion with Ethan is that ‘durable benefits’ (Stebbins, 2007) may too be sources of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2010, 2011) given the context of the ever-escalating nature voluntary risk-taking behavior. As the ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 1990) premise denotes, participants seek feelings of control over chaos as they cross their phenomenological boundaries of self (Barlow et al., 2013) and this is later viewed as a resource later in life. Symbolic interactions with risk give a sense of power, calm and comfort. However, limits and borders need to be tested in order for them to even appear (Ahmed, 2004) so participants are faced with either a sense of loss (of power or progress) or to push forward.

Losing these ‘scenes of desire’ (Berlant, 2010, 2011) as constituted by the social world, is to lose much of oneself. This is why participants endure, or persevere (Stebbins, 2007) in the social worlds of serious leisure communities. The ‘content’ of their attachments which provides a sense of continuity and willingness to continue *being-in-the-world*, are woven into performances bound up within social worlds. Purna, Ethan and Adam’s stories show us how the things that we love can actually cause us great harm, this is indeed the notion of cruel optimism. Here I have sought to explore this complicated relationship between individuals and the social world of a serious leisure community, high-altitude mountaineering, which I argue, over time began to constitute much of their lifeworld. These individuals were particularly at risk given how much of their identity, future goals and aspirations, community, media influences, (i.e. their whole sense of being, their lifeworlds), were completely centered around high-altitude mountaineering. To lose or abandon this, would feel as if it were to lose everything.

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