

The Price We Pay For Adventure

August 26, 2014

Imagine that you have an extraordinary opportunity—a once-in-a-lifetime chance to ascend Everest or sit with the Dalai Lama or rocket into outer space. This will be the peak experience of your lifetime and, what's more, you will have the added pleasure of narrating your adventure for years to come.

Or will you? Many of us hunger for special experiences, things none of our friends have done or will do. But do these adventures really make us happy in the long run? Are they worth having?

Harvard University psychological scientist Gus Cooney is not so sure. He doesn't doubt that the adventures themselves can be dazzling and delightful, but is it possible, he wondered, that such experiences have the unexpected consequence of isolating us socially? Could owning an amazing story make us a stranger to others, who envy and resent and even avoid us?

Cooney and his colleagues—Daniel Gilbert, also of Harvard, and Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia—wanted to explore the social costs of enviable adventures. They wanted to see if such exclusion indeed occurs, and if so, why people don't see it coming. They ran a couple experiments to test out their ideas.

They recruited volunteers and questioned them about their mood at the moment. Then they took them, four at a time, into the laboratory to watch videos. The scientists had pretested two videos to make sure that one video was ordinary and the other special to most people. Three of the four watched the ordinary video, while one lucky volunteer got to watch the special video. Importantly, the volunteers were told truthfully which video they and other others would be watching.

After watching the videos, the scientists escorted all four volunteers into a room to have a completely unstructured 5-minute conversation. Afterward, the scientists questioned them again about their mood, and also about their feelings of inclusion or exclusion during the social interaction.

The idea was to simulate real life, where only the lucky few have special experiences. These lucky ones know who they are and they are well aware that they—not you—have been privileged with this opportunity. The scientists wanted to see if such good fortune has a downside, and the findings confirmed that it does. After the 5-minute encounter with peers, the “lucky” ones reported feeling excluded by the others, and these feelings of exclusion made them feel worse than the others who had just a run-of-the-mill experience.

So the benefits of being blessed with extraordinary opportunities do not match the social costs. But that finding just raises a more perplexing question: If special experiences ultimately leave us feeling bad, why do we seek them out? One possibility is that we don't anticipate the costs. We look forward to captivating others with our tales of our excellent adventures, and never imagine that these tales might actually spoil our fun later.

The scientists tested this idea by asking volunteers to predict how they would feel in social situations after the excitement is over. They basically asked them to imagine the experiment just described, and then, first, to take the part of the one lucky one and, second, to take the part of the less fortunate others. How do you think you will feel after watching the video, after the conversation, and beyond?

The results, reported in a forthcoming article in the journal *Psychological Science*, were clear. The volunteers correctly predicted that lucking into a special opportunity would make them feel good, better than having a more routine experience. But they failed to realize that this unusual experience would leave them feeling worse later on, after mixing with a group of peers. In short, people are not very good at predicting the social costs of their good fortune.

Pleasure comes in two shapes, the scientists conclude. Nonsocial pleasures—the thrill of summiting the peak or jumping from an airplane—are wondrous but fleeting. But we also crave social pleasures—belonging, acceptance, camaraderie—which come with fitting in rather than standing out. Paradoxically, these two forms of pleasure lead to incompatible desires—to do what nobody else has done, on the one hand, and to be just like everyone else.

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