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MEN MASCULINITIES AND ROCK CLIMBING

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About the author

Victoria Robinson is a Lecturer at the University of Manchester and an Associate Lecturer at The Open University. She has published in the areas of heterosexuality, masculinities and debates in Women's Studies and Gender Studies. She is currently carrying out further funded research on sporting masculinities and is the joint holder of an ESRC grant with Jenny Hockey, University of Hull for a study; 'A cross generational investigation of the making of heterosexual relationships'.

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Editorial Presentation

In this working paper entitled 'Men, Masculinities and Rock Climbing' Victoria Robinson contributes to the National Everyday Cultures Programme (NECP) concern with 'cultures of gender' and 'lifestyles' in contemporary British everyday life. She explores the tensions between the 'extraordinary' and the 'ordinary' in everyday life and challenges common assumptions in everyday life theory about the role of routine and habit.

Robinson investigates through semi-structured interviews, visual materials and some participant observation how the practices of climbers relate to a sense of gendered identity that both confirm and challenge hegemonic sporting masculinities. The body appears central to the ways men engage with their everyday practices either in climbing or in other everyday practices. Training regimes, dietary habits and body image support arguments of body consciousness. The climbing body appears gendered within a prevailing framework of hegemonic masculinity in everyday practices of care for the material support of the climbing activity. Risk is a prevailing issue that, although relating to hegemonic masculinity, remains meaningful even for the younger climbers who are more critical of the traditional masculinization of the sport.

Robinson found that conceptions of ordinary and extraordinary in climbing shifted as climbers got older. The reassessment of risk, obsession with the sport, and their own masculine identity takes a reflexive turn with age. Mundane aspects of everyday life like relationships and families become a necessity, which is not always welcome. Often climbing appears in the lifecourse history as a time when no responsibility of paid work, family or relationships existed in the climbers' life. The mundane is thus simply the extraordinary world of climbing.

In concluding her study Robinson remarks on the importance of widening the investigation to encompass comparisons with a range of other extreme sports and to include a study of the differences between women and men in relation to these kinds of sporting experiences.

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Men, masculinities and rock climbing

Victoria Robinson

Abstract

This paper is based on a qualitative study with rock climbers based in the UK. It is concerned with the 'extreme' or 'risk' sport of climbing to critically investigate whether hegemonic masculine identities can be regarded as more flexible and shifting than previously assumed. Central findings of this research have stressed the importance of the body, risk and gender relations. These findings both add to and problematize other research on masculinities, identities and sport. The paper also examines both ordinary and extraordinary aspects of the everyday, especially in the context of risk and competition. It concludes by suggesting that further studies of sporting masculinities could be fruitfully undertaken, arguing for a comparison of rock climbing with other sports, the importance of relational studies of sport with women participants and the need to study local sports in the context of globalization.

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Introduction

The social significance of sport at both local and global levels has become apparent since the 1980s through recent theoretical concern with sporting identities (see for example Donnelly and Young, 1988, Messner and Sabo, 1990, Coakly and Donnelly, 1999). More recently an interest in extreme sports has also been put on the sporting theoretical agenda. From different theoretical perspectives, an investigation of shifting, flexible and multiple hegemonic masculine identities has also emerged in the sociological and cultural studies literature. However, there are few detailed grounded studies available which explore the specific culture of extreme sports from the viewpoint of the everyday experience of participants. Rock climbing for instance has not been analysed in any major and sustained way. Although there is some theoretical work on climbing, for example Donnelly and Young (1999) and Lewis (2000), the sport has so far received little sustained critical attention as opposed to other extreme or 'risk' sports such as windsurfing or skateboarding (Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998, Wheaton, 2000a and 2000b, Borden, 2001).

Rock climbing is one of the fastest growing extreme sports in the UK. Though more men engage in climbing, it is a risk sport which is participated in by women and men. Recent figures from the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) reveal a notable increase in female members. In 1999 the BMC had 13,000 individual members with 12 per cent being female. In 2000 that had increased to 24,000 members, with 18 per cent of that total being women.

Though seen as a 'risk' sport, climbing is, in some forms, becoming more commercialized than it has been. Rock climbing seems a well placed activity to enable the exploration of how specific sports culture are affected by the processes of globalization such as the emergence of a world media system and an international sport system which gives sport a global character. Climbing also, in its specific UK features, reveals how a local sport responds in complex ways to these processes. My investigation of hegemonic sporting masculinities in the UK sporting environment examines how rock climbing challenges and allows for more fluid and flexible gendered identities to be developed. I argue that this was not previously recognized. Through a number of semi-structured interviews with British climbers, I investigate how the sport of rock climbing is experienced and practiced at the everyday level.

Briefly, my aims and objectives in carrying out this research were to explore sporting masculinities in everyday contexts. These were chiefly to analyse a range of climbers' responses to the sport of climbing and its associated practices in relation to their own sense of a gendered identity, to assess how a climbing culture contributes to the production of difference in terms of diverse variables in relation to identity, to explore whether and how old and new male identities co-exist and interact within the subculture of climbing and to theorize the culture of climbing in relation to both gender and identity.

Using this material from qualitative interviews with rock climbers who have climbed worldwide, the everyday experiences of men in specific sporting subcultures are problematized, so that the contradictions of their embodied experiences can be exposed and potentialities in relation to shifting identities explored. In this pilot study, I document how the subjective experience of masculinity is affected by age, gender and sexuality and how certain forms and practices of masculinity are produced.

My focus contributes to the study of everyday cultures by considering climbers as reflexive actors involved in the creation of diverse, fluid and contradictory identities. The analysis illuminates the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of everyday experience and cultural practices in a climbing sub culture and, more generally, it reveals the complex and nuanced relationship between society and culture. Eric Dunning (1999) argues that sport has been marginalized in attempts to come to grips with the social production of masculinity and that this can be linked to some theorists' insistence on linking sports with 'hobbies' and 'conceptualizing it as separate from 'the everyday world' (p.220). As suggested by Gardiner (2000), the everyday is not an undifferentiated and homogeneous set of practices, attitudes and cognitive structures. Like him, my goal is '.. to problematize everyday life, to expose its contradictions and tease out its hidden potentialities and to raise our understanding of the prosaic to the level of critical knowledge' (p.6).

Situating the study of masculinities, identity and male rock climbers

'Social agents are not "cultural dopes", but nor are their thoughts and actions fully transparent to them' (Gardiner, 2000, p.7). Gardiner says, in relation to developing a critical knowledge of everyday life, we must go beyond the pragmatic activities of social agents in particular social settings, relating this analytically to wider socio-historical developments. Hence the need to situate my study in a wider framework of contemporary sporting studies and masculinity. Through discussion and illustration of these issues it can be seen how a specific sporting culture constructs and negotiates forms of social stratification such as gender, age and sexuality. I also outline my methodology and preliminary research findings in more depth and compare the sport of rock climbing to other extreme sports.

Within a sociological/cultural studies framework and utilizing particularly feminist and critical studies of men and masculinities perspectives, a central assumption is that sport has been seen as a site of cultural struggle and cultural resistance in relation to gender (Hall, 1996). Climbing is seen in my investigation as a cultural practice and one which can be interpreted through a 'circuit of culture' (identity, representation, production, consumption and regulation) (du Gay, Hall et al., 1997).

In his study of globalization Maguire (1999) identifies in the latest phase of globalization an increase in a variety of sports cultures. Global processes are now seen as characterized by the organization of diversity and not uniformity; 'new' sports such as windsurfing, hand-gliding and snowboarding have emerged and 'extreme sports' have become the cutting edge for some devotees of peak experiences' (p. 87). In relation to the everyday, I am concerned with how practices in an extreme sport such as rock climbing both reveal the extraordinary, 'cutting edge' experiences of its participants and how those ordinary and extraordinary experiences can be problematized.

There have been a number of studies done on men, masculinities and identities in relation to sport (see for instance Sabo and Messner, 1994 and McKay, Messner and Sabo, 2000). A useful and often cited definition of masculinity is Bob Connell's who views masculinity as 'simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture' (Connell, 1995: 71). He also argues that '(i)n western countries, , images of ideal masculinity are constructed and promoted most systematically through competitive sport'. (Connell, 1987, p. 85)

However, as de Garis (2000) contends, most research on masculinity ideology in sport has been confined to young males in mainstream organized sports. Non-mainstream or marginalized sports have been neglected. But this is changing and there have been an increasing number of works which seek to expand the study of 'new sports' (Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998, Wheaton, 2000a and 2000b), or 'whiz sports' (Midol and Boyar, 1995). These sports are less about competition, status, bravado and supposedly more individualistic, potentially less gendered and more about co-operation. My research on climbing explores these possibilities as well as challenging the optimistic, if not simplistic, dichotomies of 'new' and traditional sporting activities. I take issue with the idea that extreme sports necessarily allow for a more relaxed sporting masculine ideology whilst more commercial sports do not.

My study of male rock climbers situates the activity of climbing as a sporting subculture. As Beal (1995, 1999) states, in relation to the subculture of skate boarding, 'sport has also been analysed as a place where dominant values and norms are challenged and where alternative norms and values are created' (1995, p.252). If sport is used by a diversity of people to express, manipulate and negotiate their identities, as well as to challenge the way they are identified by others, and to assist in the creation of new social identities (MacClancy, 1996), it is also crucial in the maintenance and reproduction of a specifically masculine identity. Elaborating on this idea, Dunning (1999) sees sport simultaneously as one of the most significant sites of resistance against, and challenge to, but also of production and reproduction of, traditional masculinity.

However, Gardiner's (2000, p.8) view that '(i)ncreasingly, the "everyday" is evoked in a gestural sense as a bulwark of creativity and resistance, regardless of the question of asymmetries of power, class relations, or increasingly globalized market forces' needs to be borne in mind if gendered (sporting) relations are also to be seen as sites of power and dominance in the context of feminist and other criticisms (see Creedon, 1994). This point is also important to bear in mind for any critical examination of the fluidity and possibilities of change in hegemonic masculinities, so that any shifts identified in sporting masculinities are seen in the continuing context of gendered and other power relations.

Taking risks: rock climbing, skateboarding and windsurfing

A conception of how men live their lives and what is going on in their heads, both now and in the past, as well as what guides their presentation of masculinity is, according to Benyon (2002), central to the project of theorizing masculinities. How masculinity is performed in 'spectacles' such as sport is a key aspect to this innovative research agenda. Benyon also notes the view that the study of contemporary masculinities currently limits our understanding of any changes taking place at the level of male subjectivities. A focus on everyday cultures and sporting masculinities allows men's subjective experience to be central to research investigation and so, potentially, enables our understanding of such changes taking place in relation to masculinities to be more nuanced and informed. This focus needs to take place across a range of extreme sports. In this paper, I place my initial findings on rock climbing in the context of a comparison with skateboarding and windsurfing.

My study

For this study, I have conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with British male rock climbers who have climbed worldwide. The climbers were from Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Wales and Dorset. All were white and in their twenties and thirties. Though my emphasis is on rock climbing, some of the climbers were also mountaineers.

As a climber myself and living in Sheffield, (which is (arguably) the central climbing city in the UK in terms of proximity to climbing routes and numbers who climb), I had access to a wide variety of climbers for my study and the climbers were also British Mountaineering Council officials, roped access workers, 'professional' climbers, traditional and world class competition climbers and/or worked in the climbing industry. Mainly, the climbers were part of a national 'scene'. Many of them knew each other, or had heard of each other by 'reputation'. As I climb and I knew some of the climbers personally, I had insider access to both finding my sample and some prior knowledge of some of the interviewees in personal and social situations.

I have utilized visual material as stimulus in the interview process. This was either in the form of photographs I had of others climbing, or photographs from climbing magazines, where some of the rock climbers I interviewed had been featured. Many of the interviewees will have taken photographs of themselves and other climbers. I was mindful of Nettleton and Watson's (1998) suggestion of the importance of visual prompts in using a range of methods for accessing lay accounts of the body, as well as Benyon's (2002) stress on the importance of the visual as a research method in accessing masculinities and male subjectivities. The utilizing of visual matter as stimulus in the interview process met with varied levels of responses. Some were not happy to talk about their self image either in photographs they had of themselves or pictures/articles of themselves in climbing magazines. Some were uneasy and seemed to think they were bragging about their climbing exploits to me. The most useful outcome from using the visual material was that I was able to further explore the notion of the denial of overt competition in climbing, how the climbers managed their reputations in

the climbing world and their own body image. For instance, one said in relation to being on the cover of a famous British climbing magazine:

It is definitely good seeing yourself when you are in a powerful position ..cos the thing is I'm never ever defined like some of the other people are so I always think I look fat. There's only a couple of times when I've seen myself on.. on.. on photographs, where you think, god I'm thin and ripped. (Climber, 27)

I had anticipated that my methodology would also incorporate participant observation, but this only happened for one interview, because of the climbers' availability generally and other practical reasons, such as weather conditions, not able to be fully anticipated.

Relevant questions in formulating my research proposal and questions were: How does the leisure activity of climbing relate to everyday expressions of masculinity? How do the experiences of diet regimes and body-building, male friendships and feelings of intimacy and vulnerability and expressions of sexuality inform an exploration of masculine subjectivities? How does greater numbers of women coming into the sport affect men's everyday experiences of gendered relations?

A central finding of my study was the importance of the body which is not surprising given that it is the body which has perhaps captured the imagination of those writing on men, masculinities and sport more than anything else. As Woodward puts it; '... the human body is important not only because it provides us with the basic ability to live, but because it shapes our identities and structures our interventions in, and classifications of, the world.' (Woodward, 1997, p.65).

In relation to bodies, embodiment and everyday cultures, Nettleton and Watson argue that it is surprising, given the centrality of the body in relation to everyday life, that there has been little empirical research into how humans experience their body, particularly research which prioritizes '...engaging ordinary men and women in talk about their personal bodily experiences' (1998, p.2).

Nettleton and Watson's edited collection (1998) raised a number of issues around embodiment and everyday cultures. Centrally, that the lived body constructs and is constructed by the life world. This is relevant to my study of both ordinary and extraordinary everyday practices in relation to male climbers who take on new responsibilities with age, climbers' experiences of body control and peer approval and the notion of the separateness of male identity, which the near-death experiences of some of the climbers interviewed confirms. Nettleton and Watson's view, that our own body image is socially mediated and impacts on our own feelings and social relations and connects to an ideal image, had resonances with climbers' dieting and training regimes. So did their view that we usually take our own bodies for granted, except when it is diseased, or with climbers, when its failure to perform as we want it to do can have disastrous consequences for ourselves and others.

Challenges also remain in theorizing the role of the body in relation to structure, agency and material practice (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 2001). These challenges can be undertaken by a recognition that aspects of the body such as training routines, dieting and body image relate to men's everyday experiences of 'being men'. It is through taking account of people's perceived sense of agency in everyday situations that we can start to unpack ideas such as how, through sport, different cultures construct an image of ideal masculinity, a global archetype of manliness. Whether and how ordinary, and extraordinary, everyday practices disturb such archetypes is an issue to consider.

The climbers I interviewed who would be regarded, and who regard themselves, as a sporting 'elite', were openly obsessed with training regimes, dietary habits and body image, thus supporting arguments that men are becoming more body conscious, even anorexic, and that it is more socially acceptable to voice such concerns. All the climbers interviewed were concerned with weight gain in relation to their climbing. All but one, who was naturally thin, had dieted to different degrees. There was even an element of covert competition in terms of who dieted the most extremely or effectively.

The thing is. It's such a crucial thing. You lose sixteen pounds and you're ten percent stronger. It can be really obsessive, but it does work as well. I've been ridiculously obsessive at times. I used to weigh potatoes. I'd go on a 1000 calories a day diet. (Climber, 29)

For many of the interviewees, their everyday experiences of body management and practices and how they managed them effectively or not in their eyes, their sense of agency, either constrained or enabled them to have a negative or positive self image in relation to their perceived climbing levels. It is also important to study the male body and how it is perceived and experienced in everyday contexts such as these as this can reveal the gaps and cracks that exist between the public and private spheres. This gendered public/private dualism has traditionally associated men with the public arena and it is their public sporting performances which have received attention, not their activities in the private realm;

What athletes exhibit in games and other competitive events and what spectators watch and celebrate are embodied sports techniques that unite the private realm of everyday body practices with the public world of shared performances (MacAloon, 1984, Dyck, 2000, p. 24).

At the same time, we need more empirical evidence of how people experience their bodies in different ways according to their gender. In relation to climbing, Lewis (2000) has examined the climbing body in detail, specifically the hands of a climber, but does not differentiate the climbing body or body parts, in gendered terms. Starting to analyse the climbing body in terms of what is

perceived as 'masculine' or 'feminine' climbing styles, movements and skills in terms of everyday practices and how this connects to a gendered sense of self, as well as examining training regimes and dieting habits would elaborate on work already done on bodies and body practices, in specific sporting environments.

The gendered notion of 'risk' and competition was another particularly interesting finding. This provided material to both support and add to the findings of other studies of sports. The notions of risk, violence in sport and injury have been looked at in relation to masculinity and identity. For example, Bendelow and Williams, 1998, Curry and Strauss, 1994, Dyck, 2000, Young et.al, 1994, Young and White (2000, p.126) argue that 'the cultures of some sports continue systematically to produce high injury rates not only because of the financially driven emphasis on winning but also because of the connection between aggression and the process of masculinization'.

How is risk negotiated in (supposedly) non-competitive sports like climbing, for example? If it is common, as Young et al. (1994) assert in male defined sports such as athletics, that willingness to risk injury is as highly valued as demonstrating pure skill, how does this translate into more individualistic 'extreme' sports? In relation to skateboarding, Borden (2001) quotes young male skateboarders talking about the pain, danger and bodily injury involved in a new sport and links this to the 'competitively collective nature of the group' (p.53) created by an extreme set of individual attitudes and actions. Male bonding is created by such injuries through an aggressive masculinity.

The reactions of the rock climbers I interviewed to sports injuries supports Young et al.'s (1994) argument that privileging forceful notions of masculinity are highly valued and serious injury is framed as a masculinizing experience. One climber, who had never been able to climb properly for more than 9 months in a year without having an injury which stopped him climbing for up to 6-8 weeks said:

I probably take risks with what I do. It's one of those sports where you learn by your mistakes. But also I don't give up. So I keep trying something, trying something, keep trying something until I either do it or my body's falling apart, till your fingers are bleeding whatever. I just keep going. I like being obsessive. (Climber, 35)

Young and White's (2000) conclusion that men expose themselves to risk and injury because the rewards of hegemonic masculinity remain meaningful for them, despite the attendant dangers attached to this, needs to be investigated in diverse sporting context to assess whether the potential, actual or symbolic rewards are the same for all men. In relation to climbing, a pertinent question to consider is how does risk taking in relation to potential death take on its meaning in relation to masculine identities?

Neil Lewis (2000) explores the experience of the 'marginal situation of death' in relation to rock climbing and argues that adventure rock climbing embodies the possibility of witnessing the death of others and anticipating one's own death in real life and in the imagination. Such notions of risk in extreme sports need to be examined, but in a gendered sense, for it to be fully appreciated how consideration of these new sports adds to our understanding of the extraordinary in everyday life. As well, arguments such as Heywood's (2002) that question exactly how adventurous sports such as climbing really are because of coming recently under rationalizing commercial and social pressures, also need to be borne in mind when examining climbing and risk.

What was particularly noteworthy with the climbers I interviewed was how their perceptions of the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of participating in an extreme sport differed from non climbers. Climbers, like other extreme sport participants, are often characterized as crazy or mad for engaging in such a perceived dangerous sport. Certainly, as I have acknowledged, risks are taken, particularly by those climbers determined to achieve a high standard of climbing in terms of the grade of climbs they can achieve. But for many, including many of those climbers determined to climb at hard levels, minimizing the risk is all important. The point is to live to climb another day, in a way ordering and controlling what they see as an ordinary aspect of their life, not the extraordinary, as climbing may be perceived as being in the non climbing world.

Furthermore, for those climbers who may be seen as, and who may well see themselves as obsessive, what is perceived as an extraordinary activity from the outside, becomes more like the mundane for those climbing day in day out either for a living or obsessively as a leisure pursuit. For the climbers I interviewed who arranged their lives for years around being able to climb, the desire was often to stop what was extraordinary when they first started to climb, from becoming mundane after years of climbing involvement. This was attempted by some climbers by moving the sporting goalposts, for example by climbing harder routes or trying different styles of climbing such as big wall climbing abroad. For climbers who were not as obsessive, and whose identity was not so connected to climbing, their conception of the ordinary and extraordinary may well be something else again.

So what is considered ordinary or extraordinary shifts according to the location a person has to the sport of climbing as insider or outsider. It also shifts for climbers themselves. A particular example of this would be how climbers' conceptions of the ordinary and extraordinary in relation to their own masculine identities changes as they get older in having to reassess where a life dominated by the obsession to climb was taking them. If climbing as a pursuit is often taken up to put the rest of the world in perspective, or to escape the ordinariness of much of everyday living, the mundane and everyday aspects of life were seen to be needing to be re-adopted when getting older did not allow for the climber to climb at the level he wanted or when priorities such as relationships and families were changed throughout the life course. Such transitions, according to some of the climbers I interviewed, were not always desired or easy. The embracing of the ordinary was seen as a necessity, not necessarily a welcome choice or act of agency.

Briefly, another central finding from my interpretation of the data has been the importance of men's climbing friendships. Many of the climbers did not have many friends who were not climbers themselves. Perhaps because men do not have much space, privately

or publicly to talk about close friendships, most welcomed the chance to talk at length about their friendships in specific contexts, like in dangerous or even near death situations. It was in extraordinary and 'risk' situations that they felt closest to, and able to express that closeness to, other male climbers. Though they varied in whether they thought that 'closeness' could be expressed in a non climbing context, possibly for fear of being thought homosexual. As one 28 year old climber said: 'cos you can share a near death experience and then you go down to the pub and that's it and its over.' So male 'closeness' is negotiated and is context dependent, able to be shown in specific sporting everyday experiences.

The interviews also provided relevant material on competing and conflicting masculinities especially in relation to gender relations. I will discuss these findings in the next section in the context of other extreme sports.

Extreme everyday experience

Studies which connect a concern with hegemonic masculinities to less achievement orientated sports have been concerned with skateboarding and windsurfing, for example, Beal, 1995 and 1999 and Wheaton, 2000a and 2000b. My study on climbing can substantiate and add to these investigations, contributing further to a knowledge of masculine identities. Rock climbing as a sport has some interesting parallels as well as points of departure with the subcultures of other extreme sports. For instance, as Iain Borden in *Skateboarding, Space and the City* relays, skateboarding is a sport which produces space, time and self, which for its practitioners '... involves nothing less than a complete and alternative way of life' (Borden, 2001, p.1). Many of the climbers I spoke to could be seen in these terms. However, skateboarding is seen as an urban phenomenon, whilst climbing traditionally is not. Though with increasing numbers of climbers choosing to climb only at indoor climbing walls, often in big city locations, the sport can also be seen to be spatially fluid.

Becky Beal (1995, 1999) acknowledges that a variety of subgroups skateboarded and that there were those who wanted to skate professionally and those who rejected the sport's professionalization, demonstrating 'a continuum of hegemonic to counter-hegemonic behaviour' (p.255). This is similar to climbing which is currently in the process of diversifying as a sport, so that there are sponsored competition climbers, climbers who climb for a living and those who view climbing as purely a leisure activity. The climbers I interviewed were aware of such divisions and also categorized them. A central distinction being that for the 'elite' climbers, other climbers who 'only climbed at weekends' or whose level of climbing skill was perceived to be lower than their own were classed as 'bumblies'.

Beal (1995) recognizes that numerous individual and daily resistances occur in mainstream sport, but chooses her subcultural form of resistance because it entails ritualistic patterns which go beyond individuals testing the limits of organized sports practices. Others, for instance Salisbury & Jackson, 1996, have asserted that in relation to boys' sporting activities, alternative sports such as climbing, canoeing, outdoor pursuits and orienteering will allow boys who hate the often humiliating and pressurized climate of team games to have personal challenges, as such sports can offer confidence building and self esteem. Boys can find their own comfortable levels with no comparative pressure being brought to bear. This assumed and unproblematized dichotomy between team competitive sports and more individualized 'relaxed' ones needs to be further explored through different sports.

The men in my sample often saw climbing as having a competitive element, but tended to deny competition as existing between each other:

It's not me versus you, it's us versus that, be it the problem or route or whatever. (Climber, 36)

You just totally compete with yourself. (Climber, 35)

But when pressed on this, the same climber said:

Everyone thinks I'm really competitive, but I'm not. When there's competition I climb a hell of a lot better.

The existence of competition between different climbing subgroups is borne out by my experience of climbing, where people are 'sandbagged' into thinking a route is easier than it is, and so are set up to fail. This is done sometimes as a joke and sometimes more seriously.

What Beal (1999) does not do is to look at participants who manage to have links with different sub-groups within the subculture, where a competitive ethos may differ. It would be useful to look at the relationships between different subgroups through individuals who 'cross over'. For example, in climbing, though there are diverse groups who range from the professional to the 'bumblies', there are those climbers who link the elite groups with bumblies – whose climbing partners may come from either/or both sub groups. Through this examination, the notion of competition in different sporting contexts can be broadened out.

Some of the climbers interviewed would not consider, now that they had reached a high standard of climbing, or a reputation in the sport, ever climbing with those who were at a lower standard than themselves. However, because the climbing world is a relatively 'local' one in relation to some other sports, others I interviewed climbed with different standards of partner. For instance, one climber I interviewed spoke about climbing over a number of years with climbers who were at a standard much higher than himself, some of them world famous climbers:

Some of them were really good at motivating me...and even though they are infinitely better than me. They're friends and you just get out there enjoying yourself climbing. And I climb a lot better because of that. (Climber, 34)

Furthermore, in climbing it is not unusual to find oneself on a route, climbing next to one of the sports elite or world famous climbers, and drinking with them in the pub afterwards. So in that respect climbing is an interesting milieu to examine, for in a sport such as football or tennis, that sporting and social crossover would not generally occur.

Belinda Wheaton's (2000a and 2000b) studies on masculinity, identity and windsurfing culture are concerned, amongst other things, to look at how competing masculinities are negotiated within a sporting environment and how this can broaden out recognized boundaries of sporting masculinities. A central research question for her is whether gendered relations, in particular sporting masculinities in a specific sports culture, are re-negotiated and/or reconstructed. Her chosen conceptual framework of hegemonic, plural and contested or competing masculinities, is useful in exploring masculinities in the context of other extreme sporting cultures such as rock climbing. There were similarities to my study and how the data could be interpreted in her recognition that age and life experiences were key variables in terms of how the windsurfers interviewed competed with and related to each other, as well as providing a context for how they conceptualized and made sense of their own sporting achievements.

For instance, many of the older climbers I spoke to conceptualized a 'golden age' in the 1980's in Britain, where many climbers were on the 'dole' and honed their climbing talents sometimes to world class standard. Areas such as Sheffield in Yorkshire and Llanberis in North Wales were known centres of the sport, where climbers who climbed at a range of grades formed close subcultures, sometimes over a period of years. These times were often conceptualized by a number of climbers as a period of them having no responsibilities in terms of paid work, family responsibilities or relationships. These times were mourned as passing because of wider changes in society, often defined by the connection of climbing to becoming more commercialized in a material world and because of their own sense of ageing. Many had taken jobs in connection to the climbing world to maintain those links as they got older. As one 39 year old climber said: 'I have my job because I want to be involved in climbing.' Another, after talking about getting older, the passing of 'the golden age' of climbing for him and new found responsibilities of paid work said:

One day you enjoy the fact that you're dead scared. Then the next day you enjoy the fact that you are really strong. And the next day you enjoy the fact that you're just having some banter at the crags with people. And it's different when you're sixteen as to when it feels like now. Now sometimes it just feels like the only time I can shut off completely from the world. (Climber, 35)

The everyday experiences of male rock climbers regarding age can also be examined in relation to the sporting gaze between performers and onlookers. In rock climbing, the contemporary gaze is gendered, as well as mostly white and middle class. The gaze is between males gazing on each others sporting prowess and between men cautiously and privately gazing on female climbers better than themselves. It is also women looking at men as their bodies fail them and they crash and burn off some hard route which got the better of their technical ability, stamina and 'courage'. In addition to this, the gaze is between older males, who stare with a variety of feelings towards up and coming climbers younger, fitter and more reckless than themselves. What is the relationship between men's ageing bodies and their changing masculine subjectivities? Such questions point to the fluidity and changing disruptions of masculinities and male subjectivities.

Theorists of masculinity have been accused of studying masculinity at the expense of gendered power relations between the sexes. There is evidence, as McKay, Messner and Sabo (2000) state, that this tendency is being rectified but, as they argue, we continue to need studies of both men's and women's sports but need to be more aware of taking into account unequal power relations in single gender sport contexts. The studies by Beal (1995, 1999) and Wheaton (2000a) look at newer, less traditional sporting environments to examine men's attitudes to women participants. Beal's (1999) findings that of the 41 skaters interviewed, only 4 were women and other women associated with the sport were 'skate bunnies', stands in interesting comparison to Wheaton's 'surf babes' or, here, climbing 'belay bunnies', women who don't often climb but who hold the ropes of their boyfriends to ensure that they can climb safely. With an increasing number of female rock climbers already referred to, some pushing hard at the grades, men's attitudes to increased female participation needs further analysis. In the interviews I conducted, a significant aspect of identity for those I interviewed was gender difference in terms of male climbers comparing themselves to female climbers, where there were diverse responses to women climbing better than themselves for example.

In the framework of her identification of this specific sport as a 'male heterosexual arena', through men's attitudes to both female participants and those labelled 'beach babes', Wheaton's (2000a) findings on female and male windsurfers revealed diverse attitudes to women windsurfers ranging from respect and acceptance to negative attitudes. Borden (2001) found that skaters are mostly young men in their teens and twenties, with 'broadly accommodating dispositions towards skaters of different classes and ethnicity' (p. 263), but here too, gender relations are problematic, with female skaters being discouraged by convention and including sexist objectification. Older skaters were also seen to face prejudice whilst homophobic attitudes and homosocial masculinity were created in a skateboarding environment.

The climbers interviewed also revealed diverse attitudes to being asked if they thought women climbers faced prejudice:

It's a mixture. I mean some they'll get preferential treatment, but they'll get a lot of bad reaction, analysing exactly how they did it (the climb) much more than they'd analyse men. (Climber, 26)

Others rarely, if ever, climbed with women, though this was seen in relation to the fact that they would not climb with anyone who climbed at a lower standard than themselves. It was just that, for these climbers, there were not many women climbing at the higher grades:

I just never had any truck with girls coming out climbing with boys because. It's not girls actually. I don't mind climbing with women, anybody who's climbing the same grades. But in general, girls aren't as good as boys in the fact that there's not as many of them doing it. (Climber, 31)

There is rich material here to theorise in a more grounded way, differences between men in relation to women participants and gendered relations. As McKay, Messner and Sabo (2000) assert, we need more studies which consider how women and men relate to each other in single sex sports and in sports where they compete together.

Conclusion

The analysis of this study has led me to identify some central emerging issues and questions around the body, the notion of risk and gendered relations in particular. Areas that I have only briefly mentioned are sporting masculinities in relation to heterosexuality and the realm of friendship, emotions and intimacy in the context of everyday experiences and activities. Both these areas are currently undertheorized in relation to hegemonic masculinities. Future analysis of the interview material would be able to address these aspects of the data in more depth. A reflexive reading would be useful here.

I have also highlighted the importance of placing my research findings in a comparative framework with a range of other extreme sports to enable a discussion of how an emphasis on the everyday experiences of rock climbers can add to and problematize other studies of risk sports. To allow further comparative study of sporting masculinities and enable a richer understanding of sports and gender, other sports, not necessarily those classed as extreme sports, such as boxing or martial arts could be investigated in relation to masculinities and race and ethnicity for instance.

The importance of studying gendered relations in terms of shifting masculine identities was particularly obvious in exploring male climber's attitudes to climbing with women. There was evidence in my study to support the argument that men have diverse and often contradictory attitudes to more female climbers entering the sport. Further study could extend the analysis to women climbers who climbed at different levels and with both male and female climbing partners. Such a focus could illuminate the everyday to explore what, if any, are the gendered differences between women and men climbers in taking calculated risks in their everyday sporting practices and routines to achieve a sporting goal, or dealing with pain and injury. Or, if and how do women and men deal differently with competitiveness in climbing situations given that women are now pushing hard at the climbing grades.

The problematizing of the ordinary and extraordinary I started to theorize in relation to male climbers and risk also needs to be further investigated in a relational way to see how differently female climbers negotiate the extraordinary climbing world with the mundane and the everyday.

For further and more detailed consideration of the everyday, a comparative study of individual men in their different contexts and habitats; the sporting world and their sense of their masculine selves, as well as how they feel at work, in their families and in relationships, could be undertaken. As Giulianotti (1999) observes in his study of men and football, masculine identity is complex and multi-faceted: 'Outside football, they adopt other masculine roles as partners, parents, children, workmates and social friends' (p.156). Whilst in relation to a more alternative sport, Borden (2001) argues that through graphics, words and ideologies, skateboarders reject the external world, especially paid work and the family. How does that rejection inform their relationships and family connections outside of a sporting context? Meanwhile, de Garris (2000) found egalitarian practices in the gym, for example, male boxers accepting female boxers, but no such evidence of egalitarian practices being extended to other areas of their lives. Any future research with male climbers, either through interviews or participant observation which prioritizes the investigation of the everyday in grounded empirical studies, would allow the charting of men's increasingly shifting and enmeshed relationship to both public and private spheres.

Finally, comparison of the extreme sport of rock climbing with other sports, extreme or otherwise, needs to be placed in a framework of how local sporting practices are informed in complex and nuanced ways by the diverse processes of globalization.

For instance, the impact of globalization on cultural identities and their social construction in the context of extreme sporting activities through a consideration of media representation of the sport and climbers' own accounts, could be analysed.

Wheaton's (2000a) conclusion that her research demonstrates that windsurfing is not a site for a radical 'new' embodied masculine identification, but that men's relationships with women and other men are complex and variable is borne out in my study. Clearly, climbing forms part of the changing discourse of identity and masculinities, but more analysis of the data and further fieldwork needs to be undertaken to explore in detail if climbers challenge traditional /dominant notions of gender roles, identity and power, or merely appear to re-invent them, while in reality are reconstructing old ones.

To extend this study, I intend to broaden the sample by interviewing a wider range of climbers in terms of age and motivations for climbing, including mountaineers and 'non-scene' climbers . For instance, here I was not concerned with those who had climbed, but now no longer did or those who climbed infrequently. This would allow further consideration of the everyday in both ordinary and extraordinary contexts.

Gardiner's (2000) view is that daily life contains 'redemptive moments that point towards a transfigured and liberated social existence.... ' (p.208), that can generate new forms of personal identity. This can be explored through analysis of men's (and women's) need to scale rocks and mountains and through their own very different stories of why they do something which seems extraordinary, as well as unfathomable, to most people.

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