Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

Chancing your arm: the meaning of risk in rock climbing

Amanda West [a] & Linda Allin [b]

[a] School of Humanities, University of Cumbria, Lancaster, UK

[b] Division of Sport Sciences, University of Northumbria, UK
Version of record first published: 10 Sep 2010.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Chancing your arm: the meaning of risk in rock climbing

Amanda West[a]* and Linda Allin[b]

[a]School of Humanities, University of Cumbria, Lancaster, UK; [b]Division of Sport Sciences, University of Northumbria, UK

This paper explores the relationship between risk-taking and risk management by examining meanings attached to risk by a group of lifestyle sport participants. Drawing from in-depth interviews with male and female rock-climbers in the UK, it outlines the ways in which climbers' construction of risk and risk management were intimately related to broader discourses of risk and self-reflexivity in contemporary western society.[1] Analysing the data through reference to Douglas' work on risk and identity[2] shows how climbers' discursive practices surrounding risk management are intrinsically related to their assumed identity as a competent, experienced and good climber. Consequently, this group of climbers established their credentials not by daring or risk-taking actions on the rock face but instead by demonstrating their competence in the way they managed and controlled risk.

Whilst participation rates in so-called traditional sports have declined, data suggests that participation rates in so-called lifestyle sports, both in the UK and the USA, have increased significantly in recent years.[3] The descriptor 'lifestyle sport' typically embraces sports such as BASE jumping, skydiving, snowboarding, mountain biking, windsurfing and rock climbing amongst others. Such sports stand in apparent opposition to mainstream sports like football, track and field athletics or tennis. Because of this they are sometimes referred to as alternative sports in the USA[4] or occasionally as extreme sports, although Olivier suggests that this term is a 'loosely understood' label used to glorify such activities by the media.[5] Beal also calls into question the oppositional status of such sports in her analysis of skateboarding. She concludes that,whilst skateboarders resisted formal sets of rules, regulation and hierarchy, their oppositional and potentially transformational potential did not extend to broader sets of social relations. Skateboarders, she maintains, displayed sexist and homophobic behaviour on a par with more traditional sports.[6]

In a wide-ranging review of the terms used to describe these sports, Wheaton concludes that her preference is for the term lifestyle sports because it is 'an expression adopted by members of the cultures themselves, and one that encapsulates these cultures and their identities ... and their wider socio-cultural significance'.[7] In this paper we, too, use the term lifestyle sports for the reasons articulated by Wheaton.

One of the key features of many lifestyle sports is participants' apparent willingness to accept not just a degree of risk which accompanies most sport participation but to actively embrace risk.[8] Indeed, Wheaton, citing a number of sources, identifies a desire to 'embrace and even fetishise notions of risk and danger' as one of nine defining characteristics of

*Corresponding author. Email: amanda.west@sunderland.ac.uk

lifestyle sports.[9] This view is also echoed in many psychological studies that have sought to establish a relationship between an individual's propensity for risk-taking and lifestyle-sport participation.[10] However, the assumption that participants engage in lifestyle sports to satisfy an intrinsic need to take risks has been challenged. Other research has demonstrated that situational and external factors play a more important role than personality traits in explaining lifestyle-sport participation. For example, the motivation for lifestyle-sport participation has been linked to friendship and self-efficacy,[11] as well as previous levels and frequency of experience.[12]

Situational-focused research has also questioned the received wisdom that participants perceive lifestyle sports as risky. For example, Slanger and Rudestam note from lifestyle-sport participants' responses on a number of inventories, including Sensation-Seeking and Self-Efficacy, that participants sought challenges not risks *per se*.[13] Moreover, the authors cited by Wheaton to support her claim that lifestyle-sport participants embrace and even fetishize risk often themselves present contradictory arguments.[14] For example, Stranger argues that surfing is a 'culture oriented toward risk-taking' yet he also states that it does not have a high fatality rate or high rates of serious injury.[15] Surfing is a 'risk-taking leisure activity' because it is pursued 'primarily for the thrills involved – a quest that typically entails critical levels of risk'.[16] In an earlier account, Lewis suggests that climbing is a potentially risky activity because of the high consequence of failure but in so doing he pays little attention to climbers' subjective experience of risk.[17]

Robinson maintains that climbers perceive risk in different ways, and that rather than taking risks they are often at pains to minimize them. She contrasts this attitude with the media representation of climbers as 'thrill-seekers engaging in a risky, even crazy, leisure pursuits'.[18] Heywood similarly tempers claims about the extent to which climbers embrace risk-taking. In his essay about climbing as an anti-rationalist practice, he summarizes climbers approach to risk-taking in climbing as: 'raw, medium or well done according to how they feel or what they want from the sport'.[19] In a later essay, he states that 'the courting of risk in climbing . . . is not simply foolhardy. . . . high risk climbing involves exacting physical and mental preparation, considerable knowledge, and a careful calculation of the odds'.[20]

Olivier also presents a number of apparently contradictory statements in his reflection on the morality of participation in what he terms 'dangerous' leisure activities including solo climbing, and big-wave surfing. He describes these activities as at the extreme end of sports, not just because of the environmental, physical and mental challenge they pose but because of the 'unpredictability inherent in these activities'.[21] For example, he cites loose handholds in solo climbing or a rogue wave in surfing. Yet Olivier recognizes that participants do not undertake such activities without having 'assessed the risk, considered the consequences (both positive and negative, to themselves and others), and have decided to continue with their attempts'.[22] However, he does not draw on the subjective accounts of participants to substantiate his contention, rather he cites a number of psychologically focused studies.

At one and the same time, the literature characterizes lifestyle sports as risky and inviting risk-taking, yet some writers acknowledge that participants seek to *manage* this risk. In this study, we intend to explore this relationship; that is, between risk-taking and risk management by exploring the meanings attached to risk by a specific group of so-called lifestyle-sport participants. We use empirical evidence gained through interviews with rock climbers based in the United Kingdom to suggest that the way these climbers construct risk in relation to their climbing participation is intimately related to living in a 'risk society', with its emphasis on self-monitoring, and risk management.

To support our analysis, we draw on broader discourses about risk articulated by Beck and Giddens in relation to self-reflexivity.[23] We also draw on Douglas's work on the cultural role of risk and its subsequent relationship to identity.[24] To this end, we attempt to explore the relationship between risk management in rock climbing and risk management in contemporary western society. We seek to understand risk as something akin to 'an obdurate reality lying beyond historical, cultural and social processes'.[25] We explore the tension that surrounds participation in a so-called irrational activity (involving deliberate exposure to risk, chance and harm) which defies the 'routines of ordinary life', yet reflects twenty-first century discourses of risk management and control.[26]

Beck and Giddens's analyses of risk have proved influential in theorizing risk in contemporary western society. Both see risk culture, that is, a heightened awareness of risk and the associated need to manage risk, as a key feature of late or high modernity. What is particularly helpful about Beck and Giddens's analyses of risk are that they extend their focus beyond high-consequence risks, to the management of risk in everyday life. In their view, because expert or traditional knowledge systems (that once existed as reference points for decisions about behaviour, for example, social class and gender) have broken down, risk management, self-monitoring and the need to act reflexively is now something which affects people's everyday and lifestyle choices. Every action requires a decision and every decision brings with it risks, both physical and emotional. Hence, risk management becomes a daily event bolstered by neo-liberal discourses which discourage reliance on institutional or state support and which encourage individuals to assume responsibility for their actions.[27]

Beck and Giddens's work on the idea of a risk society has been very influential. Beck's discussion about technological and environmental risks, together with Giddens's discussion of reflexive modernity and self-reflexivity, with an attendant need to reflexively manage and negotiate risks, resonate through a great deal of academic literature. Their work captured a mood and expressed a growing sense of uncertainty and loss of once secure reference points. Moreover, there is recognition in the academic literature of the significance of the cultural importance of risk as an organizing principle in society.[28]

Whilst their ideas have been extremely influential, they are not without criticism. A number of writers have criticized Beck and Giddens for failing to ground their analyses in nothing more than a very loose historical time-frame.[29] More recently, some writers, notably those from what Lupton defines as a socio-cultural tradition, have challenged the very concept of a risk society.[30] Lash, in particular, takes issue with the idea of a risk society, suggesting that it privileges a generalized sense of risk over the more local, context and epoch-specific understandings of risk.[31] For Lash this has led to a failure to attend to marginal, what he terms, 'third space' groups which occupy places between the private and public spheres. Such groups, he argues, are influenced less by institutional and organizational regulation where risk manifests itself cognitively, and affected more by 'aesthetic reflexivity' which is as much about collective identity as it is individual reflexivity. Donnelly adopts a similar approach when writing about sport. He defines risk culture as something that is integral to many sports, including lifestyle sports such as rock climbing.[32] For Donnelly, a culture of risk maybe celebrated, embraced and embedded in a sport and, indeed, central to participants' identity.

From a similar socio-cultural stance, but much earlier work about risk, Mary Douglas examines the cultural significance of risk in some detail and in so doing she highlights the culturally mediated and constructed nature of risk.[33] In the first instance, she draws attention to the weaknesses in so-called rational (cognitive scientific) accounts of risk and risk management. The latter, she believes, over-emphasize the extent to which risk-taking

is a consequence of rational decision-making (a criticism which can be usefully applied to some risky sport literature).

In her analysis of the relationship between culture and risk, Douglas notes that not all risks are weighed equally; some are seen as more acceptable than others pointing to the socially and culturally mediated nature of risk. In so doing, she teases out the relationship between risk-taking and identity construction. In particular, she highlights the significance of risk for maintaining and sustaining community or group boundaries. She proposes that risk-taking and risk perception are inextricably linked to the process by which in-groups differentiate themselves from out-groups. In this way, the meanings attached to risk help to mark an 'us' and a 'them'; constituting a process of 'othering'.

This process is much in evidence in two studies about young people in the UK.[34] Reporting data collected via in-depth interviews with young single mothers and male youths, Mitchell et al. argue that it is impossible to separate aspects of risk in young people's lives from wider social and cultural discourses about risk which impinge on their identity, for example as being 'at risk' in the case of single mothers or a 'risk-taker' in relation to young men. The authors call for risk to be understood in terms of young people's subjective experiences and the 'wider social, ideological and economic context within which these young people live and interact'.[35] Lash, amongst others has criticized Douglas's work for its functionalism,[36] but her work is helpful for this study because it provides a framework by which to examine the relationship between risk and identity and notably the formation of insider and outsider groups.

Given the importance of sport as a cultural practice in contemporary western society, it is somewhat surprising that so few authors have paid attention to Mary Douglas's work on the cultural and symbolic aspects of risk to inform their analysis. Little climbing-related work draws explicit attention to the process by which participants attach meanings to risk in their sports through identity construction, although there are one or two exceptions. Donnelly and Young, for example, suggest that the process of identity construction in rock climbing involves novice climbers attempting routes to prove themselves capable and therefore a 'climber' to established climbers.[37] The climbs undertaken by novice climbers seemed risky to them, and having faced the risk and completed the route successfully helped novice participants to establish their climbing identity. De Leseleuc et al. endorse Donnelly and Young's claim that identity is forged through facing risk as part of their ethnographic account of a climbing community at a crag in France. Here too, novice climbers sought to establish their climbing identity by confronting the risks involved in climbing a route set for them by more experienced climbers.[38] This paper seeks to develop this broad line of analysis, that is, the relationship between identity formation and climbers' construction of risk, as well as exploring the meanings that climbers attach to risk more generally.

Method

To research climbers' constructions of risk, we located individuals who 'identified themselves as climbers'. This was important in that, whilst 5% of the UK population has climbed,[39] we wanted to explore the views of those who self-identified as climbers rather than people who climbed; in other words, those for whom climbing was a part of their identity and hence an important part of their lives. This is consistent with the definition of rock climbing as a lifestyle sport used in this paper. By adopting this sample definition, we would be able to explore the notion of risk and the meanings participants attached to risk, in greater depth. We located potential participants via a purposive sample,[40] through informal acquaintances, posting advertisements at climbing walls and via a popular UK internet

climbing website. We had more volunteers for our sample than we could interview and therefore once we had identified equal numbers of male and female climbers and were assured of a wide age-range we chose to interview volunteers who articulated a climbing identity by reference to the importance they placed on their participation. This was not necessarily in terms of frequency of participation, for some had retired from climbing, but rather in terms of the significance they attached to climbing relative to other identities in their lives.

We noted that in terms of accessing participants, it was more difficult to access young female climbers. We speculated that this might be for a number of reasons. First, this may be related both to the fact that there are more male climbers than female climbers.[41] Secondly, defining our sample as people who identified themselves as climbers may militate against women's inclusion, as men may find it easier than women to express a climbing identity. This could be because a climbing identity brings with it connotations of physicality and masculinity which may be more positive for men than women.[42] It might also be because women typically embrace multiple identities as a consequence of their greater number of roles and responsibilities in their everyday life which makes their self-identification with sport leisure more complex.[43]

The final sample for this paper comprised 22 climbers, 12 men and 10 women, aged from 20–78 years. Their length of climbing experience ranged from 2–57 years. Three older climbers (one male and two female) no longer climbed but expressed very strong climbing identities during our early discussions, supported by the climbing literature which substantiated their climbing experiences. Consequently, we took the decision to include these participants to ensure that our sample was not restricted to relatively young participants but acknowledged the experiences of a more diverse group of climbers.

In accordance with standard ethical procedures, we asked participants for their informed consent and provided contact details should they wish to clarify any issues about the project or to view findings. We collected the data via in-depth interviews organized around a series of themes including the notion of risk in general, their early experiences of being physically active, as well as their involvement in climbing and how they saw risk in climbing terms. Participants were also asked to reflect on their experiences and to describe how, if at all, their approach to risk in climbing had changed over time. The interview was supplemented by a short questionnaire which gave us background details of individual climbers including demographic information such as age of introduction to climbing, routes climbed, highest lead grade, type of climbing and number of times climbed outdoors in the past year.

Pilot interviews, followed by the main project interviews, were conducted during the spring and summer months in the United Kingdom (coinciding with the peak climbing period). A digital recording device was used to record the interviews and these were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

As female qualitative researchers, we were not comfortable with the traditional masculinist view of an interview as depersonalized data gathering.[44] Rather, we were aware that interviewing is a complex interpretive process and that our subject positions, as well as our personal experiences of and attitude toward risk, undoubtedly shaped the interviewer–interviewee relationships we formed and the narrative we present here.[45] We were two white, middle-class, 'forty-something' female academics with experience of the outdoor environment (as fell-walker and kayaker) but less familiarity with rock climbing. We shared similar subject positions in terms of ethnicity and class to those we interviewed, but held our own attitudes to risk borne of experience (having been in our own 'risky' situations in the outdoors) and through our engagement with broader academic discourses about risk

in the literature. This may have influenced the way in which participants in this study talked with us about their understanding of risk.

We perceived that we established rapport more easily with the middle-aged and older climbers than with younger climbers regardless of gender. This was reflected in the longer length of the interviews and the ease with which we felt we obtained detailed responses to our questions and were able to identify with their experiences. We also found we were not on the receiving end of tales of daring deeds on the rock face from either male or female climbers, though we might have expected male climbers to have been eager to demonstrate their masculinity to us through such tales of risk-taking.[46] When the interviewees recalled their climbing experiences they did so in a more reflective way, in an effort to make sense of risk. This may be linked to our subject position as female academics as opposed to climbing peers, with whom interviewees may have felt more of a need to establish their status position as climbers.

Our experiences reflected the very complex dynamics that can play out between interviewers and interviewees, and the way in which different subject positions can come to the fore at different times in the interview situation. Perhaps our status as 'academics who were knowledgeable about risk in the outdoors' resonated louder than our status as inexperienced climbers or as women.[47] However, we feel the narratives reflected a reflection on risk as opposed to tales of risk-taking to impress an audience.

Throughout the interviewing period and subsequent transcription we, as researchers, maintained contact with each other to discuss emergent themes during the data collection phase and to situate the ideas in relation to the lifestyle-sport literature. In doing so, we acknowledged both the artificiality of separating the different phases of the research project and the significance of ourselves as researchers in the interpretation and construction of the research findings.[48]

Analysing our questionnaires showed that all climbers undertook mainly lead climbing, with two younger female climbers indicating that they 'seconded' as often as they led climbs. All climbers climbed mainly 'trad' or 'traditional' routes, that is, routes where the climber puts in their own protection, typically using ropes, karabiners and slings or metal nuts to attach themselves to the rock as they climb. Three interviewees explicitly indicated that they also 'bouldered', that is, climbed without ropes over large boulders on the ground or around lower parts of a crag.

In order to make sense of our qualitative data, we began a process of coding the interviews by reading through the transcripts and selecting key quotes that related to our interests in participants' perceptions of risk in climbing. We provided descriptive labels for quotes that contained similar meaning, using a process of constant comparison to compare and contrast quotes.[49] We moved from descriptive labels to broader, more analytical themes, for example, in exploring risk in climbing, when participants identified lead climbing, or soloing as 'risky', these were amalgamated into 'perceived "risky" climbing situations'. Subsequently, they became part of a larger category of 'climbing risks'. The findings we present here should be considered as arising from the above research process and relating to the particular climbers interviewed. Climbers' names have been changed in order to protect their identities.

Discussion

Risk as a motivation for climbing

Participants in this study described climbing as a voluntary risk-taking activity; one they had chosen because of the opportunity to select a degree of exposure to risk or more

importantly the amount of control they could exert when climbing. This group of climbers did not express a need to escape from the mundane experience of everyday (urban) living as Lewis[50] suggested, nor a desire to free themselves from increasing societal rationalization. Rather, they contrasted their ability to control risk when climbing with the out-of-control risks in everyday life, such as crime, traffic accidents and illness. As Mike explained: 'but I think it's a control thing . . . the risk in climbing, you are able to control the risk and the risks in life I always feel are [pause] out of control' (Mike, 60 years old).

These data are consistent with Heywood's account of rock climbing where he suggested that risk can be 'raw, medium or well done'.[51] More broadly, the importance these climbers attached to their ability to exercise control and relatedly, to choice, in the context of risk-taking is consistent with Giddens claims about a move to increasing self-reflexivity and self-monitoring in relation to a diversity of lifestyle options.[52] However, Laurendeau has proposed that control is potentially illusory.[53] Through his ethnographic research about skydiving, Laurendeau concluded that skydivers attempt to maintain the illusion of control even when control is obviously lacking. They do this by presenting one of two narratives. The first is through blaming the victim, referring to errors in skydiving practice as opposed to any inherent risk in the activity itself. The second is by reference to fate as something over which there is no control. These narratives make it possible for skydivers to maintain an underlying sense of control and concomitantly, their identity as a skydiver.

The multi-dimensional nature of risk in climbing

When asked to define risk in climbing terms the interviewees variously mentioned the chance of hurting oneself, breaking bones or death – principally physical risks. Some participants referred to particular forms of climbing that were 'risky' in this sense. For example, 'hard' routes, routes without protection, multi-pitch climbing, climbing where there were long run-outs (risk of a long fall), and soloing (climbing without a rope) were constructed as particularly 'risky'. In this study, climbers' constructions of risk mirrored dominant assumptions of an inherent risk in climbing linked to physical harm, and consistent with the discourses about risk presented in some of the lifestyle-sport literature.[54]

Older climbers made specific mention of a need to manage risk more carefully for fear of injury. In some cases this was because they had suffered a fall and been badly injured, for others it was because they recognized that older bodies take a longer time to heal and therefore might prevent them climbing. These climbers reported a heightened sense of physical risk to their bodies which in turn influenced their risk-taking. This group of climbers seemed more aware of the frailty of the material body, and therefore the potential risk to their climbing identities seemed greater and consequently required greater reflexivity, monitoring and management. We suggest that the effect of ageing on lifestyle-sport participation in general is under-explored in the literature and is an area that warrants further attention.

Although, as we have shown, several participants in this study were aware of the presence of physical risks, this was not the focus of their attention when climbing. In other words, awareness of risk was not present at all points in time. Mark explained:

> You construct it in your mind as safe, or you're willing to take the risk and you accept that and then you just concentrate on the route, because you can't be . . . on some irreversible . . . and then suddenly think oh I don't want to be here. (Mark, 24 years old)

Mark's comment implies that some climbers may find a way of reconceptualizing risk due to the inherent dangers of the activity, so that it is accepted and then pushed to the back of one's mind. This might be because thinking about a risk would break one's concentration and the

focus required to complete a route. Mark appears to be suggesting that the point at which one's concentration is broken is at a crux move where the climber cannot reverse the move easily. Lois's work on emotional risk in volunteer search-and-rescue organization provides a helpful framework by which to explore the temporal dimension associated with potentially risky situations such as that described by Mark.[55] Lois contends that, in order to focus on the task in hand, rescuers manage their emotional responses to risk differently depending on the stage of the rescue, for example, preparation, performance and reflection. In the performance phase, rescuers suppressed their emotional concerns about risk so that they could be more effective and the safety of the mission would not be compromised.

In addition to physical harm, there was awareness by some climbers in this study regarding the social and emotional risks in climbing. Sarah (60 years old) referred to the failure to complete a climb as a risk to one's self-esteem, in that 'you feel disappointed when you fail'. Whilst Mike commented:

> 'cause if it looks impossible I won't bother 'cause I actually want to do it for fun 'cause I like the sense of achievement. Risk for me also involves . . . I don't want to . . . I want to achieve it . . . I don't want to fail so I'm that sort of person. (Mike, 53 years old)

Lois suggests that women are more likely than men to acknowledge emotional risks and, though this was supported by our data, Mike's comments illustrate that men are not immune from such risks.[56] The implications of a risk of disappointment to self or others can also have consequences for climbers who do not want to turn back from a difficult ascent. Speaking from personal experience, Jane (68 years old) thought this especially problematic for informal group leaders, as opposed to a formally nominated instructor. She explained, 'if you're taking a party out I think it's very difficult to say "it's too bad, we're not going", isn't it?' These comments support Giddens's assertion that in late modernity, where the anchors that ground identity are increasingly insecure, each decision constitutes a potential risk that individuals self-reflexively manage. Risk-taking in climbing therefore cannot be divorced from the process of risk management in society more generally, where 'What to do? How to act? What to be?' become questions that 'all of us answer, either discursively or in our day to day behaviour'.[57]

Some climbers also alluded to social risks associated with climbing, notably the risk posed to others by their actions. Some interviewees, notably older climbers, talked about how increasing family commitments had affected their approach to risk. In response to these commitments, they explained that they did not climb such exposed or risky routes as they had once done. A minority of climbers, however, indicated that family commitments had no impact on the routes they attempted or the way they climbed. Those who suggested this did acknowledge that there should have been some effect. In other words, they reflected that they probably should have altered their approach to risk and climbing once their personal circumstances changed. Donnelly comments on the gendered nature of responsibility, highlighting the differential treatment accorded Alison Hargreaves and Rob Hall, mountaineers whose deaths each left their partner a single parent.[58] There was some evidence to support Donnelly's claims about the gendered nature of responsibility in our interviews. Whilst both male and female climbers indicated that family responsibilities altered their climbing practices, men reported being less likely than women to restrict their climbing practices. Whilst physical risk is the most overt and visible form of risk to climbers, our research suggested that there is also a need to take more account of emotional and social risks that are involved, and their implications.

Risk, identity and climbing practices

Although the interviewees acknowledged the existence of risk in climbing, there was limited evidence in our interviews that they embraced risk, as suggested in some lifestyle sport literature.[59] Indeed, when asked how they viewed the notion of 'risk' in climbing, many interviewees explained that they did not view their own climbing practices as risky at all (though most participants acknowledged that climbing in general did involve risk). This finding is consistent with Porro's assertion that the focus ought to be on risky practices as opposed to risky activities.[60] One male climber said: 'I didn't think it was risky at the time . . . didn't see it as risky then and I don't now either (Ryan 50 years old).

The idea that climbing was risky but that individual climbing practices were not risky appeared at first glance to be contradictory. However, the extent of this contradiction diminished once the analysis brought to the fore the notion of identity. Identity emerged as a central mediating influence between our climbers understanding of risk and their own climbing practices. Crucially, the lens of identity signposted a potentially logical explanation of the paradoxical views expressed by this group of climbers where they recognized climbing in general as risky, yet perceived their own climbing practices as much less risky. In this section, we present an account of the mediating influence of identity by reference to the meanings climbers attached to risk in relation to their own climbing practices.

Participants in this research could typically be described as constructing their climbing practices in terms of managed risk, a description that is consistent with Robinson's depiction of rock climbers as risk managers.[61] One young climber, for example, described his personal climbing practice thus:

> Now there is a degree of risk that you take with any particular climb. Depends on the route, depends on the conditions on the day, depends on yourself, depends on how competent or retarded you are at the climbing. (Mark, 24 years old)

In other words, the discursive practice adopted by these climbers helped to frame risk and give meaning to risk, whilst at the same time helping to produce and sustain their identity as a climber. In Douglas's terms, this means being located as a member of the in-group as opposed to the 'Other'.[62] Mark's comment suggests that for him, part of being a climber rather than someone who climbs is limited to a climber's competence and ability to manage risk. Similar comments from other climbers in this study help us to understand what kind of risky practices are acceptable and consistent with membership of a perceived 'in-group', that is, competent climbers.

To further illustrate this point, Hilary was adamant that for her, climbing was not risky. She commented: 'I don't think anything [was risky], you had your protections, you know, you put your slings on, and if you couldn't do it, you came down . . . that was the principle we used to have (Hilary, 78 years old). Hilary was framing risk in relation to judgement and making an appropriate choice of route that enabled her to make 'safe' descents, but in relation to the understanding of what constituted a 'safe' descent for climbers like her. That is, it was reflexively self-managed. Reflecting on his early climbing experiences one male climber said: 'I was a cocky little sod about climbing. I probably did some things I wouldn't want to do now. . . . at the time I think I was more in a cocky sort of mindset than a calculating one' (Noel, 24 years old).

Both Hilary and Noel's comments highlight the extent to which risk helps to sustain an identity and as such is both socially and culturally mediated. Moreover, Noel's description of the way he changed from being 'cocky' as a beginner to 'calculating' with age and experience hints at the contradictory nature of the identities of young man as opposed to

that of a climber. Further exploration of the significance of gender and early experience of risk-taking in the light of current practice are beyond the scope of this study, but both are deserving of closer attention.

The significance of good judgement and preparation was further highlighted by some of the climbers by references to individuals 'at risk' as being those who picked 'ridiculous' routes, who were being 'daft':

> Most of the time I don't think it is actually that dangerous, I mean...up to sort of E5 [climbing grade equivalent to 7b sport grade or 5.12b, USA) I think it's relatively safe most of the time. It's different here [Yorkshire, gritstone], because around here you can get totally tricky and unprotected routes that are not E5 and you can get unprotected routes at E2 [climbing grade equivalent to 6b sport or 5.10b, USA] as well, but in general if you don't pick these ridiculous routes to try to do you are fairly safe as long as you've got the right gear. (Steve, 23 years old)

> I think on single pitch climbing you can always rule out risk unless you're being daft. [Why's that?] Because most areas that you do single pitching, people go and climb there all the time and any loose stones that are hanging around are gone. I guess there's always the risk of someone at the top kicking a stone down or something, but I think if you're sensible enough when you're doing single pitch climbing, you won't really come across any risk (Carol, 22 years old)

In these excerpts from the transcripts, climbers here distinguished between 'normal' and 'abnormal' risks. In particular, they were distinguishing between accidents that could not be prevented (e.g., loose stones falling, or unprotected routes) and risks that were caused by the actions of a climber displaying poor judgement either in his/her choice of climbs, or having inadequate equipment for the climb, or by going beyond his/her competence levels. Carol talks about being 'sensible' or not being 'daft' whilst Steve mentions that routes are fairly safe as long as they are not 'ridiculous routes'.

This data resonates with Laurendeau's ethnographic study about skydiving.[63] Laurendeau concluded that in their attempt to maintain the 'illusion' of control, skydivers reported that control was only lost when participants stepped outside safe skydiving practices. When accidents occurred, fellow skydivers examined the judgements and choices made by the victim and, by identifying these as poor practice, were able to distance themselves and underplay the risks involved. Alternatively, as reflected in the extract cited above, their narratives reflected a degree of fatalism; acknowledging risks posed by loose rock but accepting that there was little that could be done to negate such events.

Some of the interviewees also contrasted the relative risk-free nature of climbing with other lifestyle sports which they defined as much more risky, such as mountaineering (Dave, 39 years old) and caving (Ryan, 50 years old), because of the potential uncontrolled events such as stone falls and avalanches or flooding of a cave system respectively. In essence, the climbers in this study conceptualized unacceptable (abnormal) risks in terms of being 'stupid' or 'silly'. In this way, they climbers also constructed the boundary between 'good' climbers, that is, 'sensible' and competent climbers and an 'other' who were irresponsible climbers, who lacked preparation and therefore put themselves (and others) at risk.

Albert drew a similar inference in another ethnographic study, this time with road cyclists.[64] Whilst acknowledging that road cyclists do not usually fall into the category of lifestyle-sport participants, the risk of physical injury is ever present for participants. Albert observed that the road cyclists in his research distinguished between 'normal' risks, that is, accidents for which there was no obvious cause, and 'abnormal' risks, that is, those

caused by the deliberate actions of a skilled rider seeking to gain an advantage or an unskilled rider displaying poor riding technique and judgement. Accidents caused by a skilled rider were excused, whilst those caused by an unskilled rider were criticized as rash and foolish and served to condemn him to the role of 'outsider' or 'other'.

Albert's suggestion that there was something acceptable about skilled road cyclists' risk-taking to gain an advantage was also supported by some of the climbers in our study, albeit in a different context. Risk-taking was seen as acceptable where the intention was to improve one's climbing standard sometimes described as 'pushing the grade [at which one climbed]'. For these climbers, risk-taking was an inevitable corollary to pushing the grade because this was only possible if they were prepared to step outside their comfort zone. One female climber maintained: 'Yeah, I think to push yourself you have to take risks. I think that's the only risk you take, sort of in pushing my grade' (Carol 22 years old).

Such an attitude to risk remains consistent with a developing identity as a climber, whereby risk is only entertained in relation to enhancing their status as a climber by improving the grade climbed. Kay and Laberge make this point in their ethnographic account of adventure racing, arguing that risk management or calculated risk-taking seemed effective and necessary for success whilst risk-taking without foresight was viewed as irresponsible.[65] These authors suggest that in the context of adventure racing, 'authentic' risk-taking was framed in a masculinist way, that is by privileging the risks taken by men and underplaying those taken by women. In this study, both male and female climbers talked about risk-taking.

Practices and/or experiences that constituted an acceptable risk also varied with life experiences in relation to both their climbing practices and factors outside climbing. Several climbers talked about how the birth of children had led to them making a conscious decision to reduce the risks they took when climbing. An older climber reported: 'obviously, when I got married and I had a family I was much more cautious then and when the children were young I never went off on a climbing expedition or anything' (David, 68 years old).

David's words illustrate the way in which responsibility for self and others features in his construction of risk-taking in climbing. This way of constructing risk-taking is echoed in findings by Mitchell et al. in relation to prostitutes who were also mothers, and who framed their risky identities in terms of responsible risk-taking.[66] These women explained how they took greater steps to manage the risks of their profession, and used the discourses of good mothering to distance themselves from particular aspects of street work. In climbing practices, responsibility to others in risk management also featured in examples where climbers in this study referred to their responsibilities to their climbing partners, which influenced the type of routes they would undertake. For example, Dan (20 years old) identified the need to 'think about your partner' such that they were not put 'at risk' (of falling).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the meanings attached to risk by a group of committed, experienced and skilled (but not elite) climbers based in the north of England. Drawing on Douglas's and Lash's work on risk and identity, as well Giddens' account of risk management in late modernity,[67] interviews with 22 climbers revealed that contrary to lifestyle-sport literature, the pursuit of risk was not a significant influence on their climbing participation. However, the ability to select and manage the level of risk in their climbing practice was important. This finding is consistent with Giddens' and others'

accounts of self-reflexivity and individualized risk management in late modernity as well as Heywood's account of the motivation for climbing.[68] That is, climbers reflexively manage risk and attempt to select the level of risk to which they expose themselves.

The meanings attached to risk by this group of climbers were in the main physical risks such as injury caused by a fall, but emotional risks were also mentioned, in terms of failure to complete a climb. Differences emerged between older and younger climbers' approach to risk in this study, with older climbers being more likely to express concern about injury and providing longer narratives about risk. Again this data is consistent with Giddens' claim that the body is self-reflexively managed in late modernity. However, older and younger climbers' divergent approaches to self-reflexive risk management of the body suggests that future work might be usefully directed at examining the significance of a temporal dimension to the meanings attached to risk acknowledging the influence of both experience and age.

The interviewees reported that, whilst climbing was risky, their own climbing practices were not. In respect of the latter, this group of climbers talked about managing risk and controlling risk. Indeed, they contrasted the control and management of risk in climbing with uncontrolled risks in everyday life such as illness, financial worries, road traffic accidents and crime. Probing this more closely, it became apparent that risk management for the climbers in this study was intrinsically linked to their climbing identity and helped to define them as a 'good' or 'safe' as well as a competent climber. Drawing on Douglas's work about risk and identity formation, we surmised from the data that those participants who managed risk were good climbers whilst those who exercised poor judgement about risk were poor climbers. In essence, in the way they controlled and managed risk climbers in this study secured for themselves an identity as a climber as opposed to someone who climbed. They secured this identity not so much by scaling great routes but through demonstration of competence gained through experience. The only exception to this state of affairs was where climbers stepped outside their comfort zone in an effort to improve, that is, to 'push their grade' or engage in what Lyng calls 'edgework'.[69] In this situation, climbers seemed to make some allowance for poor judgement because they deemed this an acceptable risk. In summary, although climbers acknowledged climbing, the sport, as risky, an individual climber's own climbing practices were not defined in this way. Rather risk and climbing practices were framed in relation to attempts to control and manage risk. As such, these climbers established their credentials as a climber by demonstrating their competence in the way they managed and controlled risk.

Notes

[1]   Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*.
[2]   Douglas, *Risk and Blame*.
[3]   Tomlinson et al., 'Lifestyle Sports'.
[4]   Rinehart, 'Emerging Arriving sport'.
[5]   Olivier, 'Moral Dilemmas'.
[6]   Beal, 'Alternative Masculinity'.
[7]   Wheaton, *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*, 4.
[8]   Finch and Cassell, 'Public Health Impact'.
[9]   Wheaton, *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*, 11–12.
[10] See for example, Feher, Meyers and Skelly, 'Psychological Profile'; Freixanet, 'Personality Profile'; Robinson, 'Stress Seeking'.
[11] Shoham, Rose and Kahle, 'Practitioners of Risky Sports'.
[12] Creyer, Ross and Evers, 'Risky Eecreation'.
[13] Slanger and Rudestam, 'Motivation and Disinhibition'.
[14] Wheaton, *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*.

[15] Stranger, 'Aesthetics of Risk'.
[16] Ibid., 267.
[17] Lewis, 'Climbing body'.
[18] Robinson, 'Taking Risks', 120.
[19] Heywood, 'Urgent Dreams', 187.
[20] Heywood, 'Climbing Monsters', 456.
[21] Olivier, 'Moral Dilemmas', 98.
[22] Ibid., 98.
[23] See for example, Beck, *Risk Society*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*.
[24] Douglas, *Risk and Blame*.
[25] Mitchell et al., 'Situating Young People's Experiences', 220.
[26] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, 132.
[27] See, for example, Lash, 'Reflexive Modernization'; Powell and Edwards, 'Risk and Youth'.
[28] See, for example, Adkins, 'Risk Culture and Self-reflexivity'; Hier, 'Risk and Panic'; Ungar, 'Moral Panic'.
[29] See, for example, Chan and Rigakos, 'Risk, Crime and Gender'; Dingwall, 'Risk Society'; Strong, 'Epidemic Psychology'.
[30] Lupton, *Risk*.
[31] Lash, 'Reflexive Modernization'.
[32] Donnelly, 'Sport and Risk Culture'.
[33] Douglas, *Risk and Blame*.
[34] See, for example, Mitchell et al., 'Situating Young People's Experiences'; Mitchell, Bunton and Green, *Young People, Risk and Leisure*.
[35] Mitchell et al., 'Situating Young People's Experiences', 230.
[36] Lash, 'Reflexive Modernization'.
[37] Donnelly and Young, 'Rock Climbers and Rugby Players'.
[38] de Leseleuc, Gleyse and Marcellini, 'Practice of Sport'.
[39] Mintel, 'Sport Participation – UK', May 2000, http://reports.mintel.com.
[40] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*.
[41] British Mountaineering Council 'Equity Survey Report'.
[42] McDermott, 'Toward a Feminist Understanding'.
[43] Green, 'Women Doing Friendship'.
[44] See Oakley, 'Interviewing women'.
[45] Denzin, *Interpretive Interactionism*.
[46] See, for example, Robinson, 'Taking Risks'.
[47] See, for example, Wheaton's experiences in 'Babes on the beach'.
[48] See, for example, Denzin and Lincoln, *Landscape of Qualitative Research*; Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation*; Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*.
[49] Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.
[50] Lewis, 'Climbing Body'.
[51] Heywood, 'Urgent Dreams'.
[52] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*.
[53] Laurendeau, 'He Didn't Go'.
[54] See for example, Creyer, Ross and Evers, 'Risky Recreation'; Lewis, ' Climbing Body'; Olivier, 'Moral Dilemmas'. Stranger, 'Aesthetics of Risk'.
[55] Lois, 'Gender and Emotion Management'.
[56] Lois 'Peaks and Valleys'.
[57] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, 70.
[58] Donnelly, 'Sport and Risk Culture'.
[59] See for example, Le Breton, 'Playing Symbolically with Death'; Lewis, 'Climbing body'; Stranger, 'Aesthetics of risk'.
[60] Porro, 'Response'.
[61] Robinson, 'Taking Risks'.
[62] Douglas, *Risk and Blame*.
[63] Laurendeau, 'He Didn't Go'.
[64] Albert, 'Dealing with Danger'.
[65] Kay and Laberge, 'Mandatory Equipment'.
[66] Mitchell, Bunton and Green, *Young People, Risk and Leisure*.

67 Douglas, *Risk and Blame*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*; Lash, 'Reflexive Modernization'.
68 Heywood, 'Urgent Dreams'.
69 Lyng, 'Edgework'.

References

Adkins, L. 'Risk Culture, Self-Reflexivity and the Making of Sexual Hierarchies'. *Body & Society* 7, no. 1 (2001): 35–55.

Albert, E. 'Dealing with Danger: The Normalisation of Risk in Cycling'. *International Review for Sociology of Sport* 34, no. 2 (1999): 157–71.

Beal, B. 'Alternative Masculinity and its Effects on Gender Relations in the Subculture of Skateboarding'. *Journal of Sport Behavior* 19, no. 3 (1996): 204–20.

Beck, U. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage, 2003.

British Mountaineering Council. 'Equity Survey Report'. Manchester: BMC, 2006.

Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Chan, W., and G.S. Rigakos. 'Risk, Crime and Gender'. *British Journal of Criminology* 42, no. 4 (2002): 743–61.

Corbin, J., and A. Strauss. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, 1990.

Creyer, E.H., W.T. Ross, and D. Evers. 'Risky Recreation: An Exploration of Factors Influencing the Likely Participation and the Effects of Experience'. *Leisure Studies* 22, no. 3 (2003): 239–53.

de Leseleuc, E., J. Gleyse, and A. Marcellini. 'The Practice of Sport as Political Expression? Rock Climbing at Claret, France'. *International Sociology* 17, no. 1 (2002): 73–90.

Denzin, N. *Interpretive Interactionism*. London: Sage, 2001.

Denzin, N., and D. Lincoln. *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, 1998.

Dingwall, R. 'Risk Society: The Cult of Theory and the Millennium'. *Social Policy and Administration* 33, no. 4 (1999): 474–91.

Donnelly, P. 'Sport and Risk Culture'. In *Sporting Bodies, Damaged Selves: Sociological Studies of Sports-Related Injuries*, edited by K. Young, 29–57. Oxford: Elsevier, 2004.

Donnelly, P., and K. Young. 'Rock Climbers and Rugby Players: Identity Construction and Confirmation'. In *Inside Sports*, edited by J. Coakley and P. Donnelly, 67–76. London: Routledge, 1999.

Douglas, M. *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Feher, P., M. Meyers, and W.A. Skelly. 'Psychological Profile of Rock Climbers: State and Trait Attributes'. *Journal of Sport Behaviour* 21, no. 2 (1998): 67–80.

Finch, C., and E. Cassell. 'The Public Health Impact of Injury During Sport and Active Recreation'. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* 9, no. 6 (2006): 490–7.

Freixanet, M.G.I. 'Personality Profile of Subjects Engaged in High Risk Sports'. *Personality and Individual Differences* 12, no. 10 (1991): 1087–93.

Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

Green, E. 'Women Doing Friendship: An Analysis of Leisure as a Site of Women's Identity Construction'. *Leisure Studies* 17, no. 3 (1998): 171–85.

Hier, S.P. 'Risk and Panic in Late Modernity: Implications of Converging Sites of Social Anxiety'. *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 3–20.

Heywood, I. 'Climbing Monsters: Excess and Restraint in Contemporary Rock Climbing'. *Leisure Studies* 25, no. 4 (2006): 455–67.

Heywood, I. 'Urgent Dreams: Climbing, Rationalization and Ambivalence'. *Leisure Studies* 13, no. 3 (1994): 179–94.

Kay, J., and S. Laberge. 'Mandatory Equipment': Women in Adventure Racing'. In *Understanding Lifestyle Sports, Consumption, Identity and Difference*, edited by B. Wheaton, 154–74. London: Routledge, 2004.

Lash, S. 'Reflexive Modernization: The Aesthetic Dimension'. *Theory, Culture & Society* 10, no. 1 (1993): 1–23.

Laurendeau, J. '"He Didn't Go In Doing a Skydive": Sustaining the 'Illusion' of Control in an Edgework Activity'. *Sociological Perspectives* 49, no. 4 (2006): 583–605.

Le Breton, D. 'Playing Symbolically with Death in Extreme Sports'. *Body & Society* 6, no. 1 (2000): 1–12.

Lewis, N. 'The Climbing Body, Nature and the Experience of Modernity'. *Body & Society* 6, no. 3 (2000): 58–80.

Lois, J. 'Gender and Emotion Management in the Stages of Edgework'. In *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-taking*, edited by S. Lyng, 117–52. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Lois, J. 'Peaks and Valleys: The Gendered Emotional Culture of Edgework'. *Gender & Society* 15, no. 3 (2001): 381–406.

Lupton, D. *Risk*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Lyng, S. 'Edgework and the Risk-taking Experience'. In *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-taking*, edited by S. Lyng, 3–14. New York: Routledge, 2005.

McDermott, L. 'Toward a Feminist Understanding of Physicality within the Context of Women's Physically Active and Sporting Lives'. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 13, no. 1 (1996): 12–30.

Mitchell, W., R. Bunton, and E. Green. *Young People, Risk and Leisure: Constructing Identities in Everyday Life*. London: Palgrave, 2004.

Mitchell, W., P. Crawshaw, R. Bunton, and E. Green. 'Situating Young People's Experiences of Risk and Identity'. *Health, Risk and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 217–33.

Oakley, A. 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms?'. In *Doing Feminist Research*, edited by H. Roberts, 243–63. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

Olivier, S. 'Moral Dilemmas of Participation in Dangerous Leisure Activities'. *Leisure Studies* 25, no. 1 (2006): 95–109.

Patton, M.Q. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. London: Sage, 1990.

Porro, N. 'Response to Donnelly's "Victory At All Costs!": Taking Risks in 20th century War and Sport'. Keynote address presented at the Japanese Society for the Sociology of Sport annual conference, Tokyo, Japan. Cited in Donnelly, P. 'Sport and Risk Culture' In *Sporting Bodies, Damaged Selves: Sociological Studies of Sports-Related Injuries*, edited by K. Young, 29–57. Oxford: Elsevier, 2004.

Powell, J.L., and M. Edwards. 'Risk and Youth: A Critical Sociological Narrative'. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 23 (2003): 81–94.

Rinehart, R. 'Emerging Arriving Sport: Alternatives to Formal Sport'. In *Handbook of Sport Studies*, edited by J. Coakley and E. Dunning. London: Sage, 2000.

Robinson, D.W. 'Stress Seeking: Selected Behavioural Characteristics of Elite Rock Climbers'. *Journal of Sport Psychology* 7 (1985): 400–4.

Robinson, V. 'Taking Risks: Identity, Masculinities and Rock Climbing'. In *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*, edited by B. Wheaton, 113–30. London: Routledge, 2004.

Shoham, A., G.M. Rose, and L.R. Kahle. 'Practitioners of Risky Sports: A Quantitative Examination'. *Journal of Business Research* 47, no. 3 (2000): 237–51.

Silverman, D. *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, 2000.

Slanger, E., and K.E. Rudestam. 'Motivation and Disinhibition in High Risk Sports'. *Journal of Research in Personality* 31, no. 3 (1997): 355–74.

Stranger, M. 'The Aesthetics of Risk. A Study of Surfing'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 34, no. 3 (1999): 265–76.

Strong, P.M. 'Epidemic Psychology: A Model'. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 12, no. 3 (1990): 249–59.

Tomlinson, A., N. Ravenscroft, B. Wheaton, and P. Gilchrist. 'Lifestyle Sports and National Policy: An Agenda for Research'. London: Sport England, 2005. http://www.sportengland.org/lifestyle_sports_and_national_sports_policy.pdf (accessed 5 October 2008).

Ungar, S. 'Moral Panic Versus the Risk Society: The Implications of the Changing Sites of Social Anxiety'. *British Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 2 (2001): 271–92.

Wheaton, B. 'Babes on the Beach, Women in the Surf: Researching Gender, Power and Difference in the Windsurfing Culture'. In *Power Games: A Critical Sociology of Sport*, edited by J. Sugden and A. Tomlinson, 240–66. London: Routledge, 2002.

Wheaton, B. *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*. London: Routledge, 2004.