

‘You don't understand us!’ An inside perspective on adventure climbing

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Abstract:

This paper presents a specific [insider] perspective of a small group of experienced male Scottish adventure climbers and explores through in-depth semi structured interviews their attitudes, strategies and justifications associated with potentially high risk climbing situations. Attention is paid to how participants feel that they are represented and viewed by others [outsiders] who do not participate in mountaineering and climbing activities. Climbers identify the significance of media, commercial and social representations of them as risk takers.¹ The analysis explores risk as being socially constructed, with the associated assumptions being embedded in particular discourses (e.g. Giddens; Beck; and Breivik).² Climbers present themselves as rational managers of risk and provide examples of their risk management strategies, with such characterisations being central to their identity as climbers.

Introduction.

Sports governing bodies place a significant emphasis on risk management. The British Mountaineering Council (BMC) has stated that it recognises that climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury and death and participants should be aware of these risks and take responsibility for their own actions and involvement. In 2003 the BMC estimated that there were over 150,000 active climbers in the UK, and the body expected this figure to increase.³ There is evidence that more people from a wider demographic base are participating in activities such as climbing and mountaineering as part of their leisure activities and this has implications in areas as diverse as health, social issues (participation), economics (marketing, equipment industry), and policy (harm, insurance, liability).⁴

Climbing and mountaineering have been referred to as high risk sports. The association of climbing and mountaineering with risk taking and sensation seeking has a well established body of research which has been influential in

driving research agendas and establishing a focus on personality and biological predisposition to risk taking .⁵

The work of Zuckerman has been particularly influential in identifying a link between the attitudes and behaviours that may lead to risk taking and the personality profile associated with high risk sensation seekers. It is claimed by Breivik that high risk sports tend to attract sensation seekers because it meets their risk taking needs. He also cites evidence from empirical studies to support the claim that men are more willing to take risks than women. Further, he suggests that sensation seekers also engage in general lifestyles that could be interpreted as risky. Zuckerman explains the development of risk related behaviours and lifestyles as the product of strong approach behaviours, and holds that people with a disposition for risk taking will seek out and adapt to riskier environments. However, little or no attention has been given to the interaction with social and cultural influences that may be related to attitudes towards risk, or the opportunity structures to engage in risk related activities that might explain, for example, differences in how males and females engage with risk.⁶

A term that has been associated with mountaineering and climbing is 'extreme sports'. According to Thomlinson et al. this is one core component of what has become known as lifestyle sports and is associated specifically with risk taking, extreme emotions and the development of extreme skills. The important definition here is how these activities relate to cultural and social norms, and in this case the term extreme denotes a connection to mainstream values, but they are on the edge of them and take either an innovative or exceptional form.⁷

This concept of being extreme is associated with branding and co-modification of associated activities such as climbing. This process, it has been

argued, has influenced risk taking behaviours and attitudes.⁸ A specific commercial representation that has been identified with extreme sport is that of the ‘adrenaline junkie’.⁹ The media is influential in constructing our understandings and interpretations of risk taking in society and in specific domains such as climbing and mountaineering, and media representations of sport has become an important research field.¹⁰ Narratives such as the ‘adrenaline junkie’ are influential in constructing our understandings of so called high risk sports, the people who participate in them, and how they deal with risk.

Douglas emphasises the fact that our understandings and conventions associated with risk and risk taking are not objective but socially constructed, and that embedded within them are certain assumptions and expectations about what is normal, acceptable and legitimate.¹¹ Giddens and Beck both acknowledge that risk and risk taking is at the heart of the human experience and in modern western society we make reflexive existential choices about how, when and where we engage in risk.¹² Perhaps somewhat in contrast, Breivik states that risk taking is not natural but is a complex multilayered construction. A key aspect of modernist rationality is about risk aversion rather than risk seeking, and that to engage in risk is increasingly seen as being irrational. He stresses that it is not socially desirable to promote this view of risk taking or to try and turn people into risk processing machines.¹³

An important development in the research related to lifestyle sports is the understanding of the construction of identity and the integration with and across other areas of a person’s life. This is illustrated by the concept of ‘deep immersion’ where careers, families and relationships are all connected and integrated with climbing and mountaineering.¹⁴ The importance of identity and

identity construction in relation to risk and risk taking is a core area of investigation to lifestyle research.¹⁵

Risk and risk taking are investigated from the perspective that considers intrinsic motives and rewards such as 'flow states' and 'peak performance'.¹⁶ Other aspects associated with taking risks are how attitudes towards risk taking define membership and affiliation to groups and sub groups. In relation to mountaineering and climbing this extends to learning what it means to be a mountaineer and climber.¹⁷ The issue of gender and risk taking identity construction has become another important line of research and is relevant to this study.¹⁸ There is some evidence that male and female climbers do not necessarily fall into clearly defined hegemonic gender groups. However, rational decision making and being in control are identified as being important in climbing. Burnstyn identifies traits such as: being in control, emotionally distant; taking risks; and focussing on success as being characteristic of what she calls hyper masculinity. The ability to regulate fear and anxiety are important psychological skills and traits, that impact on safety and performance.¹⁹ This is about being in control and is a crucial part of any participation in potentially high risk sports, and according to Kajtna et al.:

“High risk sports athletes are emotionally stable which means that they are able to control their emotions in the face of sudden changes: they are stable, patient, relaxed; they appear to be calm and satisfied and they can deal with stress optimistically.”²⁰

Climbing and mountaineering cover a range of different activities. For example a typology of seven climbing styles are outlined in Lito Tejada-Flores essay 'Games Climbers Play'.²¹ These games are bouldering; crag climbing; continuous rock climbing; big wall climbing; Alpine climbing; super Alpine climbing; and expeditions. As climbers progress from bouldering towards the expedition game there is a corresponding increase in the seriousness of risk and adventure elements. Adventure climbing is about risk seeking and it is characterised by the fact that it takes place in remote locations where there are real objective dangers.²² Climbers use their technical and decision making skills to climb routes and place protection, and it is highly demanding both physically and psychologically. Elite climbers have invested a great deal of their personal resources - time, money and energy in developing their skills and abilities. The development of expertise and high level performance is acquired over an extended period of time and places an emphasis on the development of cognitive skills required in risk management and performance.²³ Rather than seeing themselves as adrenaline junkies it is reported that climbers define themselves as being rational managers of risk. This is an important part of the activity when it is properly understood. This was supported by the work of Robinson who also found that climbers defined themselves as risk managers. West and Allin found that the ability to manage risk was an indicator of competence as a climber. It is not surprising that those climbers who identify themselves as experts place considerable emphasis on their ability to manage risk.²⁴

Methodology

We wanted to explore the perspectives on risk taking of a select group of participants who could be classified as expert adventure climbers. In order to qualify as being an expert they were required to have at least 10 years specialised climbing experience and to have climbed consistently at a technically high standard. This is consistent with a definition of expertise as defined by Ericsson. A specifically important characteristic of this notion of expertise is the development of knowledge and its application to decision making and strategic skills.²⁵

Participants were recruited initially through the Scottish Mountaineering Council via the Development Officer and the Association of Mountaineering Instructors. A purposive sample was selected from this group. Particular difficulties were found in accessing female participants. This is supported by West and Allin who stated that they found that men rather than women find it easier to express a climbing identity.²⁶

As a result of this a group of nine male participants between the ages of 27 and 45 years were selected. The study focussed on the views of expert male climbers. This is a limitation but nevertheless provides a specific insight into the perspectives of this group and enabled the deeper exploration of issues related to masculinity, male identity and the management of risks in climbing.²⁷ All of the participants live and work in Scotland and seven of the participants are currently employed as mountaineering instructors or mountain guides. One participant described himself as a professional climber in that he climbed full time and managed to make a living from commercial sponsorship and lecturing. Only one participant did not earn a living directly from mountaineering but climbed every

week during the winter climbing season and was actively involved in producing climbing guides and making first ascents on new Scottish winter routes.

All of the participants identified themselves as being experts in mountaineering related activities such as: high altitude mountaineering in the Himalayas, the South American Andes, North America and Europe; winter mountaineering and ice climbing in Scotland; and traditional adventure climbing. Their status as experts was also supported by externally verified qualifications and membership or affiliation to professional mountaineering organisations. The rationale for selecting a relatively small sample was the fact that the focus was on obtaining rich qualitative data that entails the deeper exploration of each individual participant's subjective reality.²⁸ Saturation was seen in the data after approximately the sixth interview. According to Seidman saturation of data should be the defining factor on the number of participants.²⁹

The study was approved by the University's ethics committee. Before the interviews commenced informed consent was obtained. Following the interview participants were given the opportunity to ask further questions and discuss the nature of the research in more detail. Specific care was taken to debrief participants and to make sure that they consented to the use of their interview responses being used for publication purposes. The names of the participants have been anonymised.

Both researchers are actively involved in adventure sports as participants, coaches and academics. The first author has over 30 years experience as a climber and identifies himself as an experienced mountaineer and is still actively involved in the sport. Consequently it is acknowledged that both researchers hold similar subject positions to the participants. This permitted the interviewer to ask

and probe questions that only an insider could ask. However, the researcher was also aware of how their position could bias the interview data.

Semi structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants over a period of two months. Specific locations were all semi-private and included domestic and working contexts. The interviews lasted for between one and two hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Initial questioning focussed on general background issues such as what activities they took part in and at what technical level. Following from this the questions turned to formative experiences. These questions were used to set the scene and establish the flow of the conversation before moving to the main focus of the interview.

An initial interview guide was developed drawing upon previous theoretical and empirical research related to attitudes towards risk, risk management, strategies and justifications. This schedule was revised through bracketing interviews. Bracketing interviews and pilot interviews were undertaken with the purpose of assessing the effectiveness, relevance and flow of the interview and to identify and account for biases and presuppositions.³⁰

This research followed a grounded approach as advocated by Glaser and Strauss and Strauss and Corbin that allowed for themes and issues to emerge from the research process.³¹ This approach is reflective in nature and requires a high level of personal awareness.³² The schedule served as a template for directing the interview and there was an acceptance that appropriate deviations were a part of the research process. As interviews progressed it became apparent that particular codes were significant and that the interview reflected the emerging themes. The most significant themes to emerge related to how participants felt that they were

viewed by others. This extended to media representations and how their commercial involvement and promotion has influenced their attitudes and risk taking behaviours. This provided an important counter balance against which to explore their own [inside] perspective specifically in relation to how they justified risk and risk taking.

A thematic analysis of the raw interview data was undertaken. Key phrases were identified from the transcripts related to the participants' attitudes towards risk, risk management strategies and justifications. These were identified and labelled and segments of text were grouped together under these themes that contained similar meanings. This was an ongoing process where these units of meaning were compared and contrasted. There was a general progression from descriptive codes to interpretive and pattern codes.³³

A reflexive journal was kept throughout the data collection and analysis stages and both authors worked towards gaining an agreement regarding the key themes. A process of member checking was conducted.³⁴ Follow up interviews were conducted with some of the participants where issues were explored further and understandings verified. Following the analysis interviewees were contacted and invited to comment on draft versions of the analysis.³⁵

Discussion

Attitudes to risk and participants' position with the media.

Many of the participants are in a position where they are regularly in contact with various forms and sectors of the media because they are seen and acknowledged as being at the cutting edge of climbing innovation, expertise and

performance. This includes the climbing press, television, radio, the popular tabloid press, and commercial advertising.

The relationship between elite climbers and the commercial industry is potentially problematic. Sponsorship allows time and space for them to participate in activities full time but it inevitably impacts on how they operate. They are expected to produce images of themselves and engage in activities that have both high levels of symbolic capital and are adventurous.³⁶ Commercial pressures have impacted on the way some of these elite climbers approach climbing and acknowledge that they engage in risk taking in order to obtain these images. Paul commented on the way they are encouraged to record their activities and the images they produce:

“There is a market for adventurous images of activities and the more adventurous these images are the greater the demand, climbers do not just climb in the mountains they film and record their activities”.

Some like Leo Houlding are sponsored by companies to engage in an adventurous lifestyle, rather than to climb *per se*.³⁷ Elite adventure practitioners are operating at the edge of performance and they establish the norms and aspirations of their peer group and others.

Representation, misrepresentation and resistance.

The participants generally acknowledged the wide range of narratives, images and metaphors around climbing, but they commented on particular representations and images of themselves and their peers. Many of these elite climbers are derisive about how the press manipulates representations of them

and their activities. This is illustrated by a Paul who was undertaking a press promotion of a film for the Edinburgh film festival. Part of this promotion involved a photographic session of him climbing. According to his account the popular press had described him as being reckless and irresponsible for not using conventional safety equipment during this promotional photographic shoot. For Paul, the popular press had deliberately missed the point; it should have been about climbing one of the hardest routes in the UK:

“They just have no concept of what we do and why we do it.....at this level the consequences are very serious and you just can’t get away with acting irrationally and being reckless. Things are misreported on TV and the press without really knowing anything about the background, they are just trying to get a story, it’s sensationalised and misrepresented certainly in relation to the risks and dangers, it’s got a great deal to do with the language used”.

In the case of those who participate in adventure climbing the most typical of these messages was reported to be the presentation of them as being adrenaline junkies:

“You get dubbed as an ‘Adrenaline Junkie’ – High buzz and no skill”

“They need this stereotype of you as being a reckless adrenaline junkie and they are constantly trying to fit you into that model”.

“The sensation seeking adrenaline junkie” is one generalisation which they feel has been applied to the whole adventure sport’s population without any differentiation or qualification. For this group of experienced and climbers this was seen as a misrepresentation. This particular representation was commonly

cited, and has also been identified in other research.³⁸ It represented an image of them that was fundamentally different to how they perceived themselves. It was an image that they wanted to challenge. They identified that this image was a generalisation that informed peoples' views of them and of climbers more generally.

This notion of the “adrenaline junkie” has been associated with a range of adventure activities. Jack Osbourne’s popular television series “Adrenaline Junkies” (www.itv.com/jacosbourne 2009) presents images of ordinary people engaging in activities such as bungee jumping. “Bungee jumping” is associated with the adrenaline rush, but requires almost no skill or judgement, and poses little risk to participants. The general public can, as part of a vacation or casual encounter with the sport, experience the thrills and flirt with the lifestyle through engaging in forms of adventure tourism.³⁹ Such forms require little personal investment in terms of developing skills, and experience. The responsibility for technical and risk management is undertaken by experts.

Another factor that adds to the lack of clarity in differentiating between the levels of skills and experience of practitioners is the fact that this discourse of thrill seeking is applied without distinction to all adventure sports and fails to discriminate between the different forms. No distinction is made between forms of activities which are related to adventure tourism and sensation seeking, and those which are about the exercise of skill, judgement and authentic involvement.

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The association with the term ‘junkie’ is synonymous with a deviant drug culture. The issue of addiction has some foundation in physiological research related to risk taking and sensation seeking.⁴¹ The term junkie is associated with

an addiction to drugs and according to Zuckerman “sensation seeking” has been labelled as an addiction.⁴² The association with addiction implies dependency and a lack of control over their engagement with high risk activities. This discourse also brings into question participants’ sanity and competence and consequently they are represented as being irrational, deviant and out of control. It undermines their identities as competent climbers and such representations provoke a robust defence and counter responses.

“The adrenaline junkie” as a discourse taps into a number of elements conforming to and identifiable with criteria central to the masculinity construct: control and risk taking. Care must be taken in the application of this analysis to climbing because it is unclear as to the extent to which climbers conform to or are influenced by hegemonic gender positions. An interpretation of the function of the adrenaline junkie discourse is to subordinate climbers in relation to other hegemonic groups and the dominant ideology of risk aversion because it implies that they lack control, judgement and sanity; but most significantly provides a basis for the legitimisation of external control.⁴³ This is particularly significant to this group who are politically and socially under pressure to justify their risk taking and are in constant vigilance against external regulation and legislation.⁴⁴

There is a strong resistance to the notion that they should justify what they do and the risks they take. Mark, an elite performer, stressed that he didn’t like the idea of justifying his behaviour:

“I don’t like the idea, ultimately it’s my life it’s my decision I’m not insane or incompetent which is the implication of such questions”.

Certainly there is a clear position in relation to maintaining their right to take risks.⁴⁵ This position was emphatically stated by one climber who said that he would defend the right to put his own life at risk and that for him climbing epitomises this right. They see mountaineering and climbing as embodying the values of freedom, liberty and self regulation. This extends to having the right to take risks and put life in danger.

Risk, testing skills and being in control.

All of the participants emphasise the stark reality of making errors and that accidents are the product of misjudgements, which usually correspond to a lack of experience. However, according to Jim it is important that people operate at the margins of their ability when they are developing their skills. For David this is also where learning takes place and he states that the real art is being able to manage the experience. The development of skill and judgement requires them to explore the extremes of their ability and the edge between being safe, unsafe, in control and out of control.⁴⁶ The issue for David is: 'I think it all comes back to that ability to assess skill and risk and make good judgements and to be at the right side of the line'. As a mountaineer David justifies what he does in terms of managing risk and being in control:

“We need a certain amount of risk in order to test our skills- it would be like a great swordsman who never gets to pick up the sword, if you stop taking risks you stop living, it’s a necessity to have these experiences in my life”.

Uncertainty is desirable and they engage with it because they want to and in some cases actually actively seek it out:

“In essence it is almost impossible to participate in adventure activities such as climbing without putting yourself in to a position where you have to take control. This is part of the empowerment that comes from accepting the risks and taking responsibility for yourself and any resultant consequences. It is in some respects a lonely place but one which requires the exercise of choice and personal autonomy”.

David and other climbers report that they would not ride on a roller coaster on the fairground because they find it frightening. This fear comes from their feelings of being out of control. References are also made to the dangers inherent in driving on busy roads and the lack of control over other’s actions. They emphasise that being out of control is an unpleasant and frightening experience.

Jim, an elite mountaineer, commented on how he was seen by some of his closest friends and reported that they were surprised that he was into climbing because they saw him as being cautious. This comment emphasises the perception that he feels that people who do not engage in these activities view climbers and mountaineers as risk takers.

There is a strong emphasis on being in control and taking ownership of their decisions and responsibility for themselves. Climbing is about being in control and that is what they find satisfying and enjoyable. The experience of fear is reported to be positive and enjoyable, because it is balanced against feelings of self efficacy, and risk taking is most pleasurable when participants are using their skills and are in control. This supports a general consensus across a range of

different extreme sports activities and cultures regarding the emphasis on being in control.⁴⁷ John described his views on climbing as a sport and he clearly saw fear and overcoming it as an important and enjoyable part of the experience:

“I enjoy being committed and in control, it puts responsibility on to you, but being committed and out of control is a frightening and an unpleasant experience”.

Ethics, risk and competence.

Climbing and mountaineering have ethical practices that are important for defining the nature of the activity and how risk can be understood. Adventure climbing is a game with rules which determine style and means for evaluating performance as well as competence. Scottish climbing has a clear and well articulated set of ethics which are clearly identified by these climbers.⁴⁸ For example their comments illustrate the role these codes have in defining the nature of climbing and mountaineering. Climbs which involve high technical skill, in remote locations, using natural protection and involving high levels of potential risk are considered to have greater symbolic capital and to climb such routes ethically and in good style infers status and recognition on individual climbers. This is illustrated by Martin:

“Everybody has an ethical code, a general ethical code is about what is good style, and good style ultimately is that you walk to the bottom of the crag, stark naked and you solo to the top and that’s your new route and then everything after that is a little bit of a degeneration. I mean you look at where the level is and good style would be, you do a route on sight and you

climb it well and if you don't do it quite like that there's no shame in saying, I hung on a rope at that point or I hung on and practiced the crux. If anyone's honest about how they did those things then you get a good way of measuring ability and who actually is a good climber and who isn't".

Connection with the environment.

David acknowledges a close personal connection with the environment but resists the temptation to dwell on the notion of spirituality and opts for a more logical and rational discourse. There is evidence that David's relation with the environment is complex and there are a number of reasons for enjoying being in the natural environment. This is explained by David:

"If I wasn't prepared to be observant enough and aware enough and trying to be at one with the environment enough then I'd have been dead a long time ago, there's no two ways about that, you can't work on large terrains unless you get yourself in tune with what's around you and make the right decisions. That doesn't have to be from a spiritual perspective it can equally just be just logical and assessing if it's a good day to go into that environment".

Risks are partially justified because of these potential benefits associated with the quality of the experience in the natural environment. Climbers emphasise their feelings of connectedness with the environment and are intensely aware of being 'in the moment'. One of the most important factors is that the natural environment provides a physical space where they can test their skills.⁴⁹ Such factors and conditions are closely associated with transcendent flow states and

these states have been identified as important motivating factors for participating in high risk activities such as adventure climbing.⁵⁰ Flow states are also associated with peak performance in elite sporting environments, and with peak levels of experience and performance.⁵¹

Risk management and the environment.

With regard to decision making and risk management strategies, various participants' accounts describe a systematic process of sampling and collection of information about the environment which corresponds to a form of ecological rationality.⁵² Information is gathered from a range of different sources, which includes the direct observation of wind, weather and wildlife behaviours; professional forecasts; scientific knowledge of the environment; personal experience and knowledge gained over many years. An example of this highly developed awareness is the ability to listen to the snow-pack and interpret small changes in texture and tone as indicators of potential danger. Mountain expeditions require participants to become attuned and connected to the environment.

Reflection.

Elite performers who are involved in teaching and coaching emphasise that the process of passing on this knowledge has added to their ability to reflect upon and analyse the decision making process because they have to consciously verbalise their problem solving, information gathering and decision making processes.

They recognise that the ability to reflect on decisions and understand decision making processes is particularly important in the development and evaluation of risk management strategies. There is clear evidence that participants reflect upon their own decisions and amend them as a result of reflection. Mountaineering is typical of an activity where there are long periods for contemplation and reflection, especially when things are not so challenging. Mike specifically comments on this:

“You have a lot of time to think and that’s what you are doing- weighing up the consequences and running them over in your head and monitoring as things change”.

In situations such as leading technical rock routes, climbers are able to make some global decisions so that they can live in the moment and trust their subconscious mind to get things right- they are still making decisions but it is a completely different process. Decisions can be divided into two main areas: those characterised by split second moment to moment decisions and those that are deliberated over for a prolonged period.

The logical and the rational.

This notion of rationality needs to be qualified. There is in some cases an over emphasis on the rational in the decision making processes described by some participants. It affirms being in control and competence. There is a sense in which they are recognising the dominant ideological position of risk avoidance and are

to some extent conforming to its rationality by presenting a discourse which emphasises their technical competence and the rational management of risk.⁵³

In emphasising the logical and the rational John used the metaphor of the three dimensional puzzle to describe his process of dealing with decision making and problem solving in the winter mountaineering context where he was attempting an “on sight” first ascent of a technically hard winter climb:

“The climb was broken down into stages and phases that could be understood and then slowly but surely ground down until I realised that I was going to do it. It was also about belief in my abilities and confidence in myself”.

This account of the process was in some way divorced from emotion and is presented as logical and rational with a focus on achieving a specific goal and emphasises clearly those traits associated with hyper masculinity.⁵⁴

Risk and performance.

These approaches are not just concerned with the management of risk but are also tied up with solving performance related issues such as how to climb the route. The two elements are inextricably linked and intertwined because performance failure can have serious consequences. In pushing performance risk taking is seen as being legitimate. This is referred to as pushing the grade.

Participants report that they use visualisation and imagery to enhance performance and solve problems. This is a specific cognitive and psychological skill, which is learned and developed by athletes.⁵⁵ As applied to climbing and mountaineering this is the ability to visualise and practice moves through holding

them in the mind. This process is about building theories, strategies and possibilities. For some of the most demanding technical problems this process was an extended project, which lasted for almost two years and involved literally thousands of different options, combinations and possibilities:

“The rock is trying to get you to climb it- I’ll come away from the climb and just be walking down the street and suddenly I’ll realise how to do the move. After climbing for years – I eventually started to develop this ability to think about the moves and discover how to do them in my head without being there”.

Theories are tested, refined and rehearsed in the climbing process, almost as a form of choreography, where the perfect sequence emerges and the moves become elegant, fluid and effortless. This technique allows climbers to see alternatives, and develop creative ways of solving problems.

From the different accounts, there does seem to be a prudent engagement with risk taking which takes a number of different forms. Most significantly they all see themselves as being involved in the evaluation and assessment of risk which corresponds to the notion of bounded and ecological rationality.⁵⁶ Decisions are influenced by such factors as individual emotions and preferences, limited cognitive abilities to process information, experience, time constraints and imperfect and incomplete information. Martin’s comments provide a detailed evaluation of the process:

“You can’t always be 100% in control, but it’s when things are out of control that things start to go pear shaped and usually with serious consequences. Sometimes if it’s 50/50 I might decide to go for it, but

ultimately it is my decision. You know when you are on the edge but you are able to assess the probability and the consequences. I know where my limitations are and this is part of the learning process and I always try to keep within them. If the decision is no I will just walk away but if the decision is yes I will go through an assessment process. This consists of considering how I'm feeling and performing on the day, looking at the seriousness of the consequences and the probability of being successful. Once I have made the decision I think positively about it and focus on the positives. I play it out in my head considering every move and how it feels, it's rational but not always logical".

For the most elite performers, expertise is defined by the ability to match their skills with the demands of the situation. Matching is about being on the edge of their ability but not beyond it. The emphasis is on the key elements of skills, abilities and control as well as the awareness of fear and the seriousness of the consequences.

Conclusion.

The analysis provides a partial insight which is valuable in that it provides a perspective from which to evaluate risk taking in adventure climbing where the risk are potentially serious. These perspectives are representative of the views and interpretations of this specific sub cultural group. Climbers' involvement with risk and risk taking is complex and the motivations for climbing are not just about taking risks, but is sometimes justified because of the quality of the experience, but most significantly this is the physical space where they can use and test their skills; and develop mastery, control and efficacy.⁵⁷ Such factors are closely associated with transcendent flow experiences.⁵⁸ Their

development as climbers comes from engaging with risk through ‘edgework’ and exploring the boundaries between being safe and unsafe in control and out of control.⁵⁹

These elite climbers recognise that they are in a position where they are regularly in contact with a wide range of different forms of media, either as the subjects of articles or as contributors, because they are acknowledged as experts and elite climbers. Commercial sponsorship provides space and financial opportunities to participate in adventurous climbing and in return these athletes provide promotional materials and image that impact on their risk taking behaviours.

Participants recognise the significance of certain representations such as ‘the risk taking adrenaline junkie’ in legitimating external control, regulation and even the imposition of legislation. Climbers represent themselves as being managers of risk. Risk taking and engaging is not viewed as an irrational act and participants go to great lengths to rationalise their actions.

This emphasis on being rational and in control is connected to their identity and status as expert climbers, and there could also be an element that links to their masculine and professional identities. Specific accounts of risk management strategies emphasise a focus on goal achievement, emotional distance, being logical and rational and taking risks. Expert performers characterise themselves as having the ability to match their skills with the demands of the situation. Their perspective on risk taking is relative to skill, judgement and performance at the edge of their ability.

Notes.

- ¹ Robinson, *Taking Risks; Everyday, Masculinities and Rock Climbing*'.
- ² Douglas, *Risk and Blame*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*; Beck, *The risk Society*; Breivik, 'The Quest for Excitement'.
- ³ Fuller, *The Application of Risk*; British Mountaineering Council 2003.
- ⁴ Celsi 'Exploration of High Risk'; Creyer 'Risky Recreation'; Feher 'Psychological Profile of Rock Climbers'.
- ⁵ Zuckerman 'Behavioural Expressions', Zukerman and Khulman 'Personality and Risk Taking', Franken, Zijlstra and Muris 'Are Nonpharmacological Induced Rewards'.
- ⁶ Breivik, *Personality and sensation seeking; Empirical Studies of Risk Sports; The Quest for Excitement*; Zuckerman, 'Behavioural Expressions and Biosocial Expressions'.
- ⁷ Tomlinson et al, 'Life sports'; Wheaton *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*.
- ⁸ Olivier, 'Moral Dilemmas of Participation' ; Robinson, 'Taking Risks'; Beedie, 'Sport and Adventure'.
- ⁹ Robinson , 'Risk Taking'.
- ¹⁰ Bernstein and Blain, *Media and Culture*; Sparks *Introduction: The Panic over Tabloid News*; Boyle and Haynes, *Kirstiasen , Power Play*.
- ¹¹ Douglas, *Risk and Blame*.
- ¹² Giddens *Modernity and Self Identity*; Beck, *The Risk Society*.
- ¹³ Breivik, *The Quest for excitement*.
- ¹⁴ Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professional and Serious Leisure*.
- ¹⁵ Wheaton, *Understanding Lifestyle Sports*.
- ¹⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*; Jackson, 'Athletes in Flow'; Partington, 'The Dark Side of Flow'.
- ¹⁷ Beedie *Legislators and Interpreters*.
- ¹⁸ Robinson, *Taking Risks; Everyday Masculinities*.
- ¹⁹ Burnstyn, *The Rites of Men*.
- ²⁰ Kajtna et al, 'Personality in High Risk Sports', 29.
- ²¹ Lito Tejada-Flores, *Games Climbers Play*.
- ²² Breivik, *The Quest for Excitement*.
- ²³ Ericsson and Charness, 'Expert Performance'.
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