Introduction

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The social significance of sport at both local and global levels has become apparent through theoretical concern with sporting identities. (See, for example: Messner and Sabo, 1990; MacClancy, 1996; Coakly and Donnelly, 1999; Mckay, Messner and Sabo, 2000.) More recently, an interest in extreme sports has also been put on the sporting theoretical agenda. Lifestyle or extreme sports can be defined as individualistic. However, they also offer a collectivity to its participants which extends outside of the sporting activity itself, to embrace fashion, music, and other lifestyle choices. Participants are often western, white, and middle class and many have an anti-mainstream philosophy which encompasses a desire not to embrace commercialism, as more traditional sports, such as football have done. Though ironically extreme sports are now, of course, big business.

On a global level, Maguire (1999) argues that the West has been attracted to ‘non-achievement’ sports activities such as martial arts or extreme sports. He sees the existence of extreme sports as a challenge to the dominant achievement sports ideology as evidence of the fact that global processes are characterised by diversity, not the replication of uniformity. A fundamental way in which this ‘diversity’ has been both theorised and empirically investigated is through a consideration of sporting gendered identities as well as gender relations. Wheaton (2004) states that: ‘the central question lifestyle sports researchers have sought to answer is whether these newer non-traditional sports, offer different and potentially more transformative scripts for male and female physicality, than the hegemonic masculinities and femininities characteristic of traditional sports cultures and identities’ (2004: 16, emphasis in original).

However, though increasing, there are still relatively few detailed and grounded studies available which explore from the viewpoint of the everyday experience of participants, the specific culture of extreme sports. Rock climbing, for instance, has not been analysed in any major and sustained way. Though there is some theoretical work
on climbing (for example, Donnelly and Young, 1999; Lewis, 2000, 2004; Kiwewa, 2001; Donnelly, 2003; Dornian, 2003; and Robinson, 2004), the sport has so far received little sustained critical attention as opposed to other extreme or ‘risk’ sports such as skateboarding.

The contributors to this special edition are all concerned with diverse issues of gender in the context of the extreme sport of rock climbing. All are women, all climb, either in the UK or the US, and all have recently been postgraduate students. It is from this location that their concerns with sporting gender identities, gender relations and gendered everyday experiences emerge.

Dilley’s article on women’s climbing physicalities is situated in the theoretical contexts of sociology, cultural and gender studies. She is concerned with female climbing bodies and how they relate to gender, identity, subjectivity and power. As well as critically analysing theories of the body, in relation to the ideas of Grosz, Bardo, Bartky and Butler, she uses semi-structured interviews with UK female climbers to explore issues of embodiment, identity and the meaning of femininity and masculinity as lived, sporting experiences.

Her plea for theory to be informed by the material is taken up in Plate’s work on the need to include the everyday views of sporting participants in any analysis of a sporting sub culture, here in a US context. Her highly personal introduction to the article reveals a stress on the need to investigate ‘climbers’ passions, motivations and their relationship to the sport’. Her theoretical concern is in problematising the concept of gender in an attempt to analyse gender dynamics in the climbing community. Her ideas also have wider implications for feminist theory. As she notes, though work on sporting masculinities is emerging (Robinson, 2004, 2008 and Wheaton, 2004), the deconstruction of ‘femininity’ in sporting cultures has received relatively little attention.

Lastly, Summer’s work is not based on empirical data, but utilises the media and recent climbing literature to explore representations of the gendered implications of women and men who are mothers and fathers, and who ‘climb mountains’. Incorporating historical and contemporary climbing literature as evidence, she reveals alternative and rich sources that are available to academics, outside of the refereed journal article.
All the articles contribute to the study of everyday cultures by considering climbers as reflexive actors involved in the creation of diverse, fluid and contradictory identities. As suggested by Gardiner (2000), the everyday is not an undifferentiated and homogeneous set of practices, attitudes and cognitive structures. Therefore, a central assumption that links these articles is that sport is a site of both struggle and resistance in relation to gender, so that any shifts identified in sporting gendered relations and identities are seen in the continuing context of gendered and other power relations. What also emerges from these writings is the need to consider sport itself in a wider context than is usually the case. Our everyday relationships to others as parents, partners and friends should inform any theoretical sporting agenda, and is as important a consideration as what goes on at the rock face or the beach, or the city street. Only in this way can we adequately conceptualise the relationship of the extreme with the everyday, and in so doing, problematise this dichotomy between the extraordinary and the mundane.

References


