

Rock Climbing is a Masculine Sport? Understanding the complex gendered subculture of rock climbing.

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I sit in the shade with my back pressed against cool red rock; I lean my head back and sigh. I am utterly exhausted after giving my all on a climb that, in the not too distant past, I never thought I would be able to do. As I feel some of the adrenaline that was coursing so fast through my veins begin to slow, my senses become more keenly aware of the pain that is present in my hands. I turn them over and note the red triangular patches where the skin was rubbed raw from repeatedly acting as the friction against the sandstone, allowing my body to move upward. I note that my hands hurt, but it feels good, a sweet stinging reminder of the effort that my body gave when my mind would not allow me to give up. I see the veins in my arms bulging and feel that my forearms are swollen, and I know that I couldn't be any happier than at this moment; I am totally spent. I look to the west and take in one of the most amazing spectacles of color that I have ever seen. Here in the desert the reds, blues, pinks, greens, and oranges are all on fire as the sun begins to set.

I notice the pain in my throat from the deep thirst I have acquired throughout the day, and I take a deep gulp from my water bottle. As I set it back down to continue basking in this wonderful feeling of bliss, I sense a presence in front of me. It is an older man, one I have seen around, but have never met. He gives me a quizzical look, and then looks over at the climb I just led, where my friends are currently top roping. He looks back at me and asks, 'Did you lead that?'

'Yeah,' I reply, curious about his question. He looks back over at my group of friends, two men and two women, and then back at me. 'So...are you the strongest climber in your group?' he asks. I think for a second, realizing that I am, but still wondering why he cares to point it out. 'I guess I am, at least here at the Creek,' I say. He continues to have that somewhat confused look on his face, grunts. 'Huh,' he tells me, 'I'm impressed,' and walks away. I sit there for a while longer trying to decipher the

cryptic conversation I just had but I look at the sunset again and feel a growl in my stomach, its time to head back to camp for dinner.

The conversation I had with that man didn't register until later that night when I realized that he wasn't just surprised because I, a woman, could lead a difficult climb. It was the fact that I was the most competent climber in a group of both men and women. I couldn't figure out what was so perplexing about the situation until I realized that he is probably more accustomed to climbing as a male-dominated sport than I am. Surely, he knows of strong female climbers, but he might not be used to women being stronger and leading their male partners. I know that climbing is male-dominated, and that there are more men climbing than women, but until that moment it had never seemed to be such a big issue. Since that incident, I have become more aware of issues surrounding gender in the climbing community, and began to notice more telling behaviours and conversations among climbers.

Climbing is a sport that is inherently dangerous and requires that you trust not only yourself, but also anyone you are climbing with. This context allows for powerful relationships to grow between climbers, and it allows for insecurities to surface and be reckoned with in the presence of others. It is because of this context that climbing is able to provide an incredible lens for understanding gendered relationships.

The ways society helps to construct our view of ourselves and of others is often laid out in the open through the intense situations climbers encounter. Many people are not comfortable putting themselves at risk and trusting in themselves and others, but climbers seek out this experience in a way that is normative to them. Thus, through examining the ways climbers approach the sport, the reasons why they climb, what motivates them, and the things that affect their experience climbing, we can gain an understanding of the gendered nature of the sport. In many ways the gendering is not obvious, while at other times it is blatant. By exploring the ways that climbers deal with these issues, this article will analyse the concepts of masculinity and femininity and female empowerment in the context of feminist theory.

Through an investigation of climbers' passions, motivations, and their relationship to the sport, by utilizing qualitative data including participant observation and interviews

with climbers, this article sheds light on the complexity and diversity of gendered relationships and identities in the climbing community. This is specifically accomplished through an emphasis on thinking broadly about the categories 'masculine' and 'feminine' in order to keep traditional frameworks that dichotomize gender from restricting our view of gender dynamics within the climbing community. This article provides first, an examination of literature concerned with climbing, gender and sport, and gender theories and research more generally to give background and context to this study. Next, methods and findings will be discussed and analyzed. Finally, I will point towards future directions for research and inquiry.

Context of the Study

The vast majority of anthropological and sociological research on gender and sport is concerned with organized and mainstream sports, namely team sports. Sport is a place where 'alternative norms and values are created' (Beal, 1995: 252). Thus, looking at sporting subcultures that are seen as alternative, extreme, or risky can shed new light on concepts of gender and sport. Most traditional organized sports have official rules that separate men and women into different teams and leagues. Since climbing is not usually organized in this manner, gender relations may be more dynamic and allow more flexibility from traditional gender roles, in this context. In most official climbing competitions, men and women are separated into different categories, but in everyday situations, men and women climb together on a regular basis.

In the past few years, the research on gender and sport has both increased and expanded to include 'lifestyle sports' a term that encompasses what some would consider extreme sports such as rock climbing. As Wheaton explains, 'the central question lifestyle sport researchers have sought to answer is whether these newer non-traditional sports offer different and potentially transformatory scripts for male and female physicality, than the hegemonic masculinities and femininities characteristic of traditional sports cultures and identities' (2004: 16). The purpose of this article is to further explore this question. It is important, however, to problematize the concepts of gender, masculinity, and femininity. Gender is often seen to be the 'cultural difference of women from men, based

on the biological division between male and female' (Connell, 2002: 8). This definition can lead to a confining dichotomy however, one that stresses differences between men and women rather than similarities, while disregarding differences among groups of women and within groups of men. Thinking in terms of gender relations, can thus be a more inclusive way to theorize how society gives meaning to women and men. The concept of gender relations encompasses expressions of masculinity and femininity by both men and women, avoiding a strict gender dichotomy that essentializes both sexes.

With these concepts of gender relations and expressions of masculinity and femininity, rock climbing can be analyzed as a lifestyle sport that may allow for the transformations Wheaton emphasizes. Specifically, I challenge the conception of rock climbing as a masculine sport. The sporting domain in general has traditionally been conceived of as masculine with femininity and athleticism often viewed as being contradictory (Krane, 2001). Yet, the relationship between femininity and athleticism remains unclear, and the ways such 'femininity' is expressed in rock climbing has the potential to illuminate new aspects of the relationship between femininity and sport. Koivula (2001) has researched the perceptions of sports considered to be masculine, feminine, or gender neutral, though has not done explicit research on rock climbing. Her findings show that the primary qualities of feminine sports emphasize grace, balance, non-aggression and the ability to show beauty and aesthetic pleasure. Masculine sports are seen as those that involve more risk, strength, and aggression.

Climbing is thus an odd blend of these characteristics since it involves high levels of risk and requires strength, yet good technique demands balance, grace, and is very aesthetic. Since men have traditionally dominated the sport of climbing, and continue to outnumber women, the sport can be considered male-dominated. Yet does this necessarily imply that climbing is 'masculine', or reinforces hegemonic masculinities? What can be inferred from men using traditionally feminine characteristics such as grace and balance to show strength and courage, while women utilize their femininity to engage in risky 'masculine' behaviours? As one of my male informants, who has been featured in *Climbing* magazine, a US-based publication, states, 'In the end, good, proper technique looks smooth, there is a lot of finesse involved, foot work, not grunt work is

the key.’ Other research suggests that women are more focused on relationships while men are more focused on activity (Kiewa, 2001), an assumption that will be contested by my examining climbers’ relationship to the sport.

Existing academic literature centered on gender and rock climbing has started to encompass studies of masculinity (Robinson, 2004, 2008), gender relationships (Kiewa 2001), and gender differences (Ewert, 1985). But there has still been little work to date on concepts of femininity or female empowerment within this sporting subculture. Through a focus on masculinities in lifestyle sport research, it could be argued that female voices are often missing, or marginalized (Wheaton, 2004). This article will bring some of these female voices to the forefront in relation to expressions of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity.’

With academic research focused on the concept of gender relationships and climbing still growing as a ‘lifestyle’ sport, it has also been, and continues to be also widely discussed in the popular climbing media. In climbing magazines the debate about the differences between, and the equality of, male and female climbers, is a popular topic. One article espouses: ‘Rather than squeeze themselves into the masculine systems, today’s outdoor women are carving their niche by their own design and in their own time’ (Scully, 2005). Yet, what does that really mean, what does this niche look like, and how do men and women situate themselves around a rapidly changing gendered sport? Specifically, Scully’s observation points toward the concept that women do not need to take on ‘masculine’ traits to be successful climbers. Without losing aspects of their ‘feminine’ identities, these women may still be strong and independent.

Methods of the Study

For an exploratory study I conducted participant observation, as well as ten structured interviews with five male and five female climbers in the US, specifically in Colorado and Wyoming. My sample consisted of climbers with at least two years of experience, who are competent traditional lead climbers. It is important to discuss here, that while many point to the existence of a climbing community or subculture, this is not necessarily a unified community. There are many variations to the sport of climbing, which include, but

are not limited to, bouldering, sport climbing, traditional climbing, alpine rock climbing, ice climbing, and mountaineering. I chose to specifically study traditional climbers for my study because this type of climbing requires a fairly high level of commitment from participants, but is not as involved as alpine or mountaineering can be. Traditional climbing involves climbing a route while placing protective gear as one climbs up. The level of risk involved with this type of climbing increases due to the possibility for human error in gear placement and unpredictable sections of rock that may not allow for gear placement. In contrast, sport climbing allows climbers to use pre-placed bolts with a lower risk for error and higher predictability.

By examining an aspect of climbing that increases risk, I hoped to study a domain that might be considered as traditionally more 'masculine' due to that risk. Through studying traditional climbers, I was able to study a part of the climbing world that is extremely popular and represents a large proportion of the climbing population, while still allowing me to focus on committed climbers. Traditional climbing (trad climbing), unlike bouldering, requires a partner and due to the increased risk compared to sport climbing, can provide more rich and complex relations between climbing partners. Since 'trad' climbing often involves taking turns in regards to who leads a climb (climbing a route first while placing gear and an anchor for the second climber, a task that is both more challenging and risky), it also involves taking turns taking more risk. Yet, not all climbers will share leading equally, and more power resides in those who are able to lead more of the routes. As one female informant in her twenties stated, 'leading gives you independence,' implying that those who are unable to lead must depend on others in order to climb.

The climbers involved in this study participate in many types of climbing, but all had in common that they were traditional lead climbers. Thus, all of the participants put themselves at a very real level of risk when they climb, and are self-sufficient and devoted to the sport. Another reason for looking specifically at one type of climbing is that it minimizes differences that arise because of a climber's focus and specialization within the sport. I was not primarily concerned here with the variables of experience, age, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation in looking at the effects of climbing on

identity however, these aspects of my research not discussed here, could, be explored in the future.

As a climber myself, I had many advantages in accessing people to interview, as well as conducting participant observation. This insider status also allowed climbers to open up to me in a way that they knew I could relate to. Being able to interview climbers that I was also able to climb with was extremely beneficial in furthering a connection with those people that gave me a particular insight into their personal motivations and goals. Yet, even as an insider, I still encountered difficulty in finding women who had led trad climbs for two years. Interestingly, the problem wasn't that there were not women out there, but that they were harder to locate, even for someone in the community. Since women have been increasing their numbers in climbing recently, this trend could be related more to the increased popularity of bouldering and sport climbing, especially among younger climbers, rather than 'trad' climbing.

Why Do You Climb?

Many climbers shy away from answering the question, why do you climb? Perhaps, because such a question usually comes from someone who does not understand the risks involved, or is not really familiar with the sport. Many climbers also find it nearly impossible to give one reason why they climb, stating a multiplicity of factors that influence their enjoyment, involvement, and commitment. Climbers also come from diverse backgrounds, some grew up enjoying the outdoors, while others were gymnasts, or played basketball, soccer, or other organized sports. Some were not really involved in sports before they started climbing, and may not even see it as a sport, focusing more on the lifestyle than the activity itself. Many crave the intense focus that they experience while climbing.

When speaking to men and women about the reasons why they climb, the answers are numerous and varied. As one climber, a white male in his thirties who is a professional climbing guide, put it: 'There are as many reasons why people climb as there are climbers'. Though the answers are not quite this varied, they are, nevertheless,

diverse. Looking at the reasons why people climb gives insight into the ways that they approach the sport.

Among traditional climbers, it was not surprising that many were drawn to crack climbing (which requires jamming various body parts into a crack in the rock to climb up, rather than gripping and stepping on holds to move) and explained that nothing was as motivating as a natural 'line.' That is, a climb that you can see from afar as aesthetically pleasing and continuous, part of this earth's natural beauty. These climbers see a 'line' as a challenge that is presented as something to rise up and meet, rather than bring it down to your level, as some traditional climbers see sport climbers doing. Traditional climbing is often seen as more 'natural' than sport climbing, since it is less contrived or artificial (Lewis 2004). This type of climbing is seen as pure, with respect for nature shown. Those who are passionate 'trad' climbers are often more supportive of the climbing community as an alternative to our modern mainstream society which lacks, it can be argued, this same respect for nature. Therefore, as a subculture going against traditional values, there is potential for a 'bending' of traditional gender roles through climbing. However, as a male-dominated sport, patriarchal relations are still present, complicating climbing gender relations.

As already stated, existing data suggests that men are more focused on climbing, the activity, while women are focused more on relationships surrounding that activity, a dichotomy that could be claimed to account for men climbing higher grades than women. Specifically, Kiewa (2001) suggests integrating these two perspectives in outdoor education, claiming that men could gain from focusing more on relationships, while women would benefit from focusing more on the activity at hand. She does acknowledge that these gendered categories are generalizations, and that variations from these exist. Yet, it is still assumed that the ideal situation is to have a reciprocal relationship through focusing on stereotypical characteristics shown in the sport by both men and women. Diversity can be lost in focusing on such a goal of androgyny, and there is the likelihood that stressing integration will result in the valuation of masculine traits. In a patriarchal society, views of androgyny generally require women to take on more masculine traits, requiring fewer changes for men (Crawford and Unger, 2004). Since men are still the

majority of climbers out there, the subculture is already directed more towards male participants.

Asserting that men and women need to be more integrated devalues feminine contributions to the community. It also assumes that men will possess these 'masculine' characteristics and women the 'feminine', simplifying gender relations and assuming that an integration of the two sexes will result in positive changes to gender dynamics. In contrast to the dichotomous approaches Kiewa reports, my examination of the ways that men and women approach climbing showed no clear dichotomy in the sample of climbers that I interviewed. When delving deeper into what truly motivates climbers and the factors that affect their performance and enjoyment of climbing, an interesting trend surfaced. Many women place emphasis on the importance of climbing with other women, and the experience it provides. This trend does not fall neatly into the conception of feminine behaviour that argues women focus more on relationships than activity in climbing. Instead, it suggests a possible area for transformation of traditional gender roles. These traditional roles do not arise from clear gender differences, but rather from society's gendered expectations. As the accepted norm, 'masculine' traits are already valued and respected within the climbing community whether found among men or women, while 'feminine' traits are still growing and finding their place within the subculture. This growth is evident in the US through a celebration of the 'feminine' seen in women specific events and groups.

Climbing with Women for Women

Climbing events and organizations specifically for women have been increasing in popularity over the past few years in the US. The popularity and success of events such as 'Chicks with Picks', 'Chicks on Cracks', and HERA's (Heath Empowerment Research and Advocacy) 'Climb for Life' events is evidence of this popularity. As HERA organizer Sean Patrick points out: 'The name HERA comes from the Greek goddess with the same name. In her earlier days Hera was a protector of women. Later she became known for shaking up the status quo of the ancient world of the gods' (HERA, 2005). These events are not meant to exclude or negate men, but to empower and enable women to challenge

themselves through climbing. It is common for women to climb with men, and men to climb with men because there are more men involved in the sport. It is less common for women to be able to climb with other women. These events give a space for women to connect with each other and experience a new dynamic in which to climb.

Many women find climbing with other women to be extremely rewarding on many levels. They discover more than simply the benefits of relating with other women, finding that they are actually able to climb harder with other women, are inspired more, and can feel free to be more themselves. One female climber, who has been leading for just over two years, explained, 'Women are doubted by guys, when I climb with other women I get the chance to step up, lead, and be confident, guys always try to prove themselves and compete.'

In some ways, through climbing with other women, there is less focus on partner dynamics and more energy going towards climbing itself. As one informant explained: 'Climbing with women sparks more of a fun competitiveness.' Often when climbing with men, she felt that they may want her to fail so that they can be the better climber, and it is rare that this sort of sentiment occurs among women. She claimed that when climbing with women at the top of the sport: 'I climbed better than I ever had before.' Thus, her reasons for enjoying climbing with women were based on her successes in climbing as an activity, not simply for the social or relational aspects.

This example of a woman finding climbing with other women a positive experience allows for a critique of a binary framework of gender which glosses over complex gender relationships. It is much more intriguing and freeing to think about the ways that focusing on relationships can accentuate activity and agency, instead of posing activity and relationships as opposites. By not thinking in dualisms, we can see that there are climbers who focus almost solely on the activity, some who are equally focused on the people and community of climbers they are surrounded by, while others still see a focus on relationships and community as a way to enhance the experience of the activity. One male with about five years of experience claimed: 'If I am not excited about the people who I am climbing with, I would rather do something else...only when there is a trust flowing between you and your partner, can you climb at your hardest.'

Even if there are men and women who fit into a traditional gender dichotomy that sees agency as masculine and intimacy as feminine, as Kiewa (2001) seems to show through her research, perpetuating a binary approach to gender when we know there are so many climbers who do not fit into these generalizations denies the diversity present in the community as it continues to grow and change. The area where I did see an important difference among participants was the specific emphasis among women that climbing with other women, or specifically that climbing with other strong women, was highly motivating. Not all of the women stated this factor as important, but none of the men found a need to explain that climbing with other men was motivating, though one man did express that climbing with women is motivating for him. This man in his thirties, who is active in the climbing community and industry, appreciates the support he receives when climbing with women. He cited the same phenomenon of feelings of positive rather than negative competition that improves his climbing performance. He claimed: 'I have done all of my hardest sends while climbing with women. I don't exactly know what it is, support, or trust, but I know I will climb hard when I climb with strong women.'

Another young, white, male informant explained that he is motivated by strong female climbers. He finds anyone who is breaking barriers in climbing as inspirational, and women pushing the limits of sport, such as the German mixed climber, Ines Papert, who is the current World Ice Climbing Champion, are breaking those barriers. Others rebel in a more general way against the competitive nature that is often found in climbing. One man in his twenties, a student who also works at an outdoor store explained: 'I don't like it when people I go with have a competitive attitude, they are forgetting why we're there in the first place, the spirituality of it.' Many agreed that the main reason they climb is to 'get away from everyday life.' This concept of escaping daily life continues the view of climbing as a subculture, or lifestyle sport that is contrary to hegemonic modernity. This lifestyle sees something transcendental in escaping the monotony we are presented with in modern society, through climbing. Further, this view of mainstream society as limiting allows climbing to be a space where there is a potential

for traditional gender roles to also be transcended, a place where new values are defined and roles may be altered.

It is important to understand that both men and women have diverse approaches towards the sport, from the mental and physical challenge, to spirituality or escapism and connecting with nature. For women, however, the gendered assumptions that men and sometimes other women may make towards them as women can be a hindrance to their own motivations and reasons for climbing. These assumptions come less from actual differences and more from perceptions of difference that align with hegemonic gendered stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Many women claim that climbing with other women simply has a different dynamic to it. Some explain it as a less competitive environment, or if competitive, then in a fun supportive way. As one woman, cited by Cottman explains: 'That's why I like to climb with women. There's less ego involved, and I love people's reactions when, after a successful ascent, I tell them my partner was a woman. If it were a man, people would assume he did all the difficult parts, even if that wasn't the case' (Cottman, 2002). Climbing with other women is also a way to express what she perceives as her 'femininity' and strength more freely. One female informant, in her twenties, who has been climbing for over eight years explained: 'If you see a guy and a girl together the stereotype and immediate assumption is that the guy will be the leader. It doesn't mean that the woman isn't a leader, but it is harder for her to gain the immediate respect from other climbers, why do I have to prove myself just because I'm a woman?' She went on to explain: 'The rock doesn't discriminate, women can climb just as hard as men.' Thus, she feels that she is able to prove herself to be just as good as the guys, and 'still be feminine, and be doing some bad ass stuff too... you know climb like a girl, and climb just as hard.'

This idea of 'climbing like a girl' has been popularized by slogans and T-shirts in the US, as women are able to take pride in their femininity. When looking at the ways that climbing with other women is beneficial to many female climbers, it is important not to essentialize women into yet another restrictive category. Women can also be highly competitive, and compete amongst themselves as well as with men. Many, however,

view this competition as destructive, one female informant explaining about competition amongst women stated: 'I don't like to see it, but I know it's there.' Most women find, however, that climbing with other women changes the dynamic, reducing assumptions and increasing confidence.

The idea that women's specific climbs and events, and the increasing numbers of female climbers is empowering for women needs to be understood also in light of expressions of femininity. If women are 'carving their niche by their own design and in their own time' (Scully 2005), are they perpetuating gender roles by restricting women to feminine behaviours within a masculine sport? Or will this niche be able to be a space where diversity truly is welcomed and celebrated? Comments such as 'We can climb and still be feminine, and be doing some bad ass stuff too' are empowering for many women, but must women continue to fit into feminine standards to be acceptable? Or, is climbing far enough removed from mainstream sports that the performance of traditional gender roles are subverted because of the specific context of climbing as a risk taking activity?

Conclusion

This article has examined the ways that climbing may allow for transformations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity. It appears that concepts traditionally related to expressions of masculinity and femininity may be transformed in the sport through valuing both feminine and masculine characteristics in both women and men. Yet, I argue that climbing will continue to reproduce hegemonic masculinity unless the value of feminine characteristics is emphasized within the sport. Emerging studies of masculinity in sport should be supplemented with research on female climbers and expressions of femininity to give a more holistic understanding to gender dynamics in the community. Research focusing on the effects of these transformations on climber's everyday lives could explore how transformative spaces affect wider society. The realities of the climbing community must be continually re-examined in respect to its changing culture if we are to gain meaningful understanding of the gender relations within it, and of the potential of the climbing world to transform hegemonic gender relations and roles.

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