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A limited part of sport studies concerns itself with a limited part of sports, viz. the so-called extreme sports. One might expect these modern expressions of the need for physical activity and perilous adventures would generate more interest from sport sociologists and psychologist than is witnessed by the body of publications in the area. It's reasonable to suggest that studies of phenomena outside the norm, beyond mainstream, is valuable not only for what it reveals of those phenomena, but just as much for what it tells us about the normal, the everyday life most of us live. An illustrative example of this is a new book by Victoria Robinson, established and productive sociologist in the field of gender studies at Sheffield University. The book, with the working title "A Different Kind of Hard: Everyday Masculinities, Identity and Rock Climbing", was published by Berg Publishers in 2008 without the obvious innuendo as *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport: Male Identity and Rock Climbing*. Robinson's book, reviewed here by Dr. Åke Nilsén, also a sociologist and researcher in the field of extreme sports, is a study of male climbers and the construction of their masculinity in relation to the everyday male identity. Our reviewer would have liked a macro level analysis, but he is on the whole very positive to Robinson's effort.

The performance of masculinity through extreme sports

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Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport: Male Identity and Rock Climbing

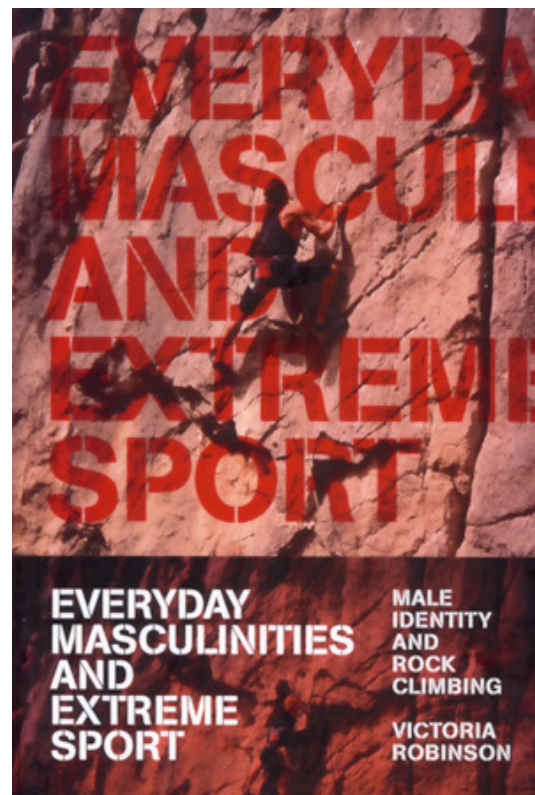
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Are we socially influenced in everyday life by an active participation in sports? If the participation is potentially lethal and performed in a masculine context, how does it influence the mundane male identity? These are the fundamental questions dealt with by Victoria Robinson in her book *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport: Male Identity and Rock Climbing*. Her aim is to trace possible and potential changes in the male identity within the context of climbing. Theoretically Robinson challenges the concept of hegemonic masculinity from R W Connell and argues for the possibility of new male identities developed in non-mainstream sports. The study is based on forty-seven in-depth interviews with climbers aged between 21-76 years, of which thirty-three were male.

Robinson focuses climbing, as the number one extreme sport in the UK (this partly as a side-effect of the economic regression in Thatcher's 1980s, when several unemployed young lads found an alternative occupation in climbing while on the dole). But her analysis would probably be more or less the same if the empirical material had been collected from another extreme sport. The



point is that it is a non-mainstream sport where a hegemonic male identity might be challenged.

In her quest, Robinson examines the male climber's relation to different aspects of everyday life such as the opposite sex, friendship, family and work, in search of contradictions in the experiences of men. What she discovers are devoted participants deeply engaged in a life-style where few other aspects of life are able to compete with climbing. The only real threat to a big commitment in climbing is ageing, and perhaps the forming of a family.

Robinson, herself a climber, is in my view managing the insider status in a balanced manner. From my own experience as a researcher in the field of adventure sports the status as an insider makes you part of a community with assumed shared experiences coming from the activity. This status is established early in the research-interview with the counter-question "Have you ever done??", which really address the subject "Do you know what I am talking about?". This way the insider is acknowledged as being part of a profound understanding of the inner logic and motivational aspects of the activity as well as an emotional dimension. But there are levels that she reached as an outsider too, which Robinson points out, for instance as a woman in a male context. She was given access to their emotional life in a way that a male interviewer probably wouldn't.

The book consists of nine chapters of which one gives a very thorough introduction to the field of masculinity and sport. Based on her profound acquaintance with the climbing world Robinson gives a close account of different aspects of it. But the text is far from technical and demanding when it comes to the reader's familiarity with this world. Clearly, it is written for an academic audience and very well written too. Maybe the book is not meant for students on a basic level, but it would be great on advanced courses in gender studies, sport studies and even in sociology.

I would like to discuss more thoroughly the chapter on risk, the point of departure of which is the understanding of climbing as a risk-activity and part of "edgeworks". These are activities performed in the context of escaping contemporary everyday life in search of new experiences and emotions. Robinson challenges this understanding by defining risk as a relational concept: risk judgements are never neutral; they are under the influence of social and cultural aspects. In the climbers view motor biking is more risky than climbing a steep rock. As Robinson points out the social situation (involvement in a relationship, having children), age, and even gender, influences the risk judgement. Even within the male community, risk judgement differs, which challenges the idea of a hegemonic masculinity. This is the area where Robinson identifies a potential for a change of the male identity. Male climbers who avoid dangerous paths and acknowledge their own vulnerabilities, challenge the strategy of trying to control the risk, as the hegemonic male identity would prescribe.

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There is clearly a paradox in the identity of the hegemonic masculine climber (and participators in other risk activities as well) which Robinson spots, and this paradox circles around the idea of "control". The rational approach on demand in order to achieve control is contrasted with the self-identity of being risk-takers and dealing with emotions of fear and a potential death. I would take this paradox one step further and suggest that this identity combines the capacity of a rational action, when it comes to achieving control, with a capacity of strong desire, when it comes to risk judgement. This desire is under the influence of non-rational aspects such as hierarchies of value and position within the community of participators. The direct and indirect influence of the group on the single climber's risk judgement is an area to examine further when it comes to male climbers. The willingness to re-evaluate a situation in order to fulfil expectations of a hegemonic controlling male identity is a possible source for injuries. From this point of view I would say that male climbers, as opposed to female climbers, are more inclined to act under the influence of a traditional male identity brought into the risk context from mundane life, and because of this exposes themselves for more risk.

There is one level of analysis that is lacking in Robinsons book – the macro level. She does not address the basic question of what the increasing participation in extreme sport signifies and in what context this is understandable. Whether this phenomenon is related to a need to disconnect yourself from life in a hectic information-society, or fulfills a desire for risk in a routinized late-modern society, or is part of the strategy of a defensive male collective, Robinson does not provide an answer for.

However, the answer Robinson does give is an optimistic one when it comes to the potential contribution of extreme sports to the male identity: this is a context where new male identities are developed.

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