‘But you didn’t think what you were doing was risky’: The Role of Risk in Mediating the Identities and Practices of Rock Climbers

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AMANDA JAYNE WEST
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the multiple meanings attached to risk by a small group of climbers based in the North of England. The study is anchored, empirically in sustained observational fieldwork, and in-depth interviews with adult subjects (9 females aged 22-77, 14 males aged 20-70). In completing this thesis, I believe I have made an original contribution to knowledge in three areas. In re-imagining risk in climbing, I argue that climbers do not participate in climbing because of a desire to take risks, rather, they make every effort to assess, manage and control risks when climbing. In reconceptualising risk in climbing, I present a conceptual model derived from the interviewees’ accounts of risk. This model situates risk in climbing with risk in everyday life. The basis of my third original contribution to knowledge lies in the relationship between risk and identity. The interviewees differentiated between safe and unsafe climbers through reference to embodied climbing practices. The way a climber in this study assessed and managed risk marked them as a safe climber or conversely an unsafe climber.

Furthermore, the data revealed both a gendered and an age-related dimension to the relationship between risk and identity. The desire to retain the identity of a climber over time was so strong that older climbers reported modifying their practices to sustain their status as a member of the insider group. In addition, the female interviewees described how perceived family responsibilities mediated membership of the insider group, and their identity as a safe and qualified climber. The female climbers in this study described how such responsibilities led them, like older climbers, to draw back from the edge.

These findings have implications beyond the sport of rock climbing and its participants. This research has the potential to inform and enhance our appreciation of risk in other lifestyle sports and moreover, whilst there is a tendency to distinguish between lifestyle and traditional sports, there may be some application of the account of risk presented here to an exploration of risk in traditional sports. The arguments presented in this study also contribute to an understanding or risk more generally. A key conclusion from this study is that risk is best understood where the meanings attached to it are derived from individuals’ everyday lived experience and relatedly where risk is situated within the broadest context of their lives. Finally, the data reported here suggests that risk activities and risk-taking should be explored in relation to an individual’s perceived identity and crucially, the significance of risk for the construction of that identity.

Amanda Jayne West, University of Manchester, PhD, ‘But you didn’t think what you were doing was risky’: The Role of Risk in Mediating the Identities and Practices of Rock Climbers. April 2012
DECLARATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am not a climber in the sense that the participants in this study would understand, nor will I ever be. I dallied with climbing as a way of developing my confidence to complete, what I perceived to be ‘nasty little scrambles’ whilst Munro-bagging. This brief dalliance worked as I walked upright rather than crawled across the crest of Crib Goch (not a Munro), and completed the Aonach Eagach and the Cullin ridges. That aside, my status as a bumbly climber led me to question the commonly held belief that climbers are mad, bad or indifferent to the world around them. The climbers I met were none of those things and indeed their awareness of risk and their concern to manage and control it was glaringly obvious. For that revelation I thank all those climbers I met who, without realising it, provided the stimulus for this thesis.

I would also like to thank the climbers whose experiences are reported in this study and those climbers interviewed as part of the pilot phase. They could not have been more generous with their time and it goes without saying that without them I could not have written this thesis.

Financial and moral support for my work was forthcoming from the University of Cumbria and the University of Sunderland. I would like to thank a number of individuals who made this possible; at Cumbria, Dave Harrison, Dr Dave Houlston, Professor Robert Hannaford, Charles Mitchell and Karen Chubb who worked tirelessly to resolve administrative issues and at Sunderland, Bill Sheldon and Professor Tony Alabaster.

My next vote of thanks goes to Dr Linda Allin who interviewed seven of the interviewees and with whom I collaborated on a journal article which helped develop my thinking around risk and control. Linda and I share a similar approach to risk and I look forward to working with Linda writing articles about risk in the future.

Linda is a former colleague at the University of Northumbria and a second former colleague provided a source of valuable advice throughout my PhD (usually over dinner). Dr Lesley Fishwick may not know how to get from A to B (C, D or E – she’ll know what I mean) or how to engage with anything vaguely concrete. However, her ability to work in the abstract makes her a legend in my book.

Almost last, but certainly not least, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Dr Penny Tinkler, my supervisor. Somehow and despite my best efforts to veer away she managed to keep me on the straight and narrow, providing support when it was needed and the space and encouragement to explore my data. Although I never believed I would reach the point of a final draft to submit for examination, she did. Her belief in my capacity to complete this research was crucial to my persistence. Ultimately, I did better than I could ever have hoped and the award of my PhD was subject only to typographical amendments.
Lastly, I extend my grateful thanks and love to my partner, Dr Rebecca Wiseman who managed my stress levels throughout and especially as the viva date approached. She is the reason I will only use my new title in an academic context, for she is a ‘real’ doctor and I wouldn’t want to be confused for someone who could actually do something useful. Having said this, she showed no interest whatsoever in anything I wrote and cheerfully pronounces that she finds the social sciences in general and sociology in particular unfathomable. It’s a good job opposites attract!
PREFACE

Author’s Qualifications

BA (Hons) Human Movement Studies                                          1987
Leeds Polytechnic

Postgraduate Certificate in Educational Development                   1992
University of Northumbria

Master of Philosophy                                                    1996
Sheffield Hallam University

‘Women as Sports Coaches’
Chapter One

Introduction
1.1 Introduction to the Study and Original Contribution to Knowledge

In this thesis, I explore the meanings attached to risk by a small group of rock climbers, juxtaposing risk with the reasons these climbers gave for climbing. In addition, I consider the articulation of risk with climbers’ identities and the subsequent influence this had on their climbing practices. The stimulus for this research is my belief that both common sense understandings of risk as well as some academic writing misrepresent risk in rock climbing and relatedly, they misrepresent rock climbers. Both narratives frame rock climbing as a high-risk activity and position rock climbers as risk-takers. All too often such claims owe little to accounts derived directly from participants and instead are based on the assumptions of individuals who have little understanding of the sport or who have failed to reflect critically on the notion of risk. In this study I attempt to redress this imbalance by reporting the results of in depth interviews conducted with a small group of self-identified rock climbers and a subsequent close and critical analysis of the climbers’ transcripts.

In undertaking this work, I make three claims to an original contribution to knowledge. First, I challenge some of the assumptions made about risk in much of the academic literature and relatedly, offer an alternative reading of risk in the context of lifestyle sport participation. Secondly, I offer a new conceptual model to assist a re-evaluation of both risk activities and risk-taking in such activities. Lastly, utilising Douglas’s work about the relationship between risk and identity, I develop this analysis foregrounding gender and age. I develop each of these aspects of my work in the succeeding three sections in this Chapter before outlining the background to the study, defining the limits of the present study and describing the structure of the thesis.

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1 Climbing is one of several sports encapsulated by the term lifestyle sports. Other terms include adventure sports and extreme sports. I use the term, lifestyle sports to reflect the importance of climbing for the interviewees’ identities in this study (see also Section 4.3).
1.1.1 Original Contribution to Knowledge 1 - Re-imagining Risk

As I will show later in this Chapter, much of the current literature focuses in a rather uncritical way on risk in relation to lifestyle sports without adequately defining either the nature or extent of apparent risks. There is a tendency to project risk as physical and not multi-faceted and/or examine risk in a decontextualised manner. Such approaches have led to the literature reproducing common sense assumptions about risk, notably in the sense that it is considered the main reason for participation in lifestyle sports. I wish to challenge such assumptions on two counts, first by analysing risk within the broader contextual framework of everyday life and secondly, by considering risk in relation to the reasons participants give for climbing as opposed to assuming that risk is the main or only reason for climbing. I argue that far from pursuing risk, self-identified rock climbers seek to assess, manage and where necessary, mitigate risk.

1.1.2 Original Contribution to Knowledge 2 – a New Conceptual Framework

In re-imagining risk in the context of lifestyle sports, I propose a new, two-part conceptual model. The first part of this conceptual model focuses on risk activities and differentiates between ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities. In drawing this distinction, I conceive of risk activities as existing on a continuum from the mundane experiences of everyday life such as commuting to work, cooking, and socialising to activities at the other end of the continuum which required the climbers in this study to recognise and confront potential risk contexts much more consciously and explicitly. I labelled this dimension *ordinary risk activities* describing mundane and everyday risk activities at one end and at the other, *extra-ordinary risk activities* which included rock climbing. Underpinning the division between
ordinary and extra-ordinary is the notion of control, or the perceived control exerted by an individual over a particular activity. Much more conscious monitoring takes place during extra-ordinary risk activities and it was during these activities that perceived control was higher. In contrast, ordinary risk activities resulted in much lower levels of conscious monitoring and perceived control was lower. In the latter instance, ‘other people’ constituted a risk, whereas in the former, one’s destiny rested largely within one’s own hands.

The second part of the two-part conceptual framework focuses on risk-taking and distinguishes between qualified and unqualified risk-taking. At the outset, I should state that I do not recognise the description of a climber as an unadulterated risk-taker because my interviewees did not see themselves in this way. The terms qualified and unqualified risk-taking reflect two meanings of the word, qualified. In the first instance, qualified reflects criteria by which someone might be deemed competent (or qualified) to climb. This might be demonstrated by reference to years experience, grade or knowledge. Conversely someone who is unqualified lacks or is lacking in these criteria. In the second instance, qualified describes those occasions when a climber moderated or qualified their activities in response to particular circumstances, for example, poor weather or difficult rock conditions. The division between qualified and unqualified risk-taking enables a focus on the relationship between an individual’s actions and the conditions or circumstances in which those actions take place.

I argue that this two-part conceptual framework, delineating as it does between risk activities and risk-taking offers a more nuanced and contextualised reading of risk (in relation to the reasons given by participants’ for climbing) and facilitates an interrogation of the production and maintenance of a climbing identity and its role in shaping their climbing practices.
1.1.3 Original Contribution to Knowledge 3 - risk and identity: foregrounding gendered and age-related identities

The source of my third original contribution to knowledge rests with my attempt to develop Mary Douglas’s work about the articulation of risk and identity construction. Douglas argued that risk is intimately involved in the construction of insider and outsider groups. In this study, I show how notions of risk are intertwined with notions of who constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘safe’ climber or conversely a ‘poor’ or ‘unsafe’ climber. In so doing I consider the impact of identity upon practice and vice versa. In developing this aspect of my analysis, I recognise that identities and practices are shaped by gender and age. Therefore, I consider the significance of gender and age in the production of both the meanings attached to risk and the production of identities which ultimately shape practice.

1.1.4 Relevance to Sociology

Beyond the narrow confines of rock climbing, I believe that this study contributes more broadly to a greater sociological understanding of risk. First, it demonstrates the importance of contextualizing risk to fully comprehend the meanings that individuals attach to risk. This includes recognising that individuals place great store on assessing, managing and even negating risk. Crucially, knowledge, experience and competence enabled participants in so-called risk activities to judge risk and act accordingly. In a world seemingly evermore risk averse, conditional upon sufficient knowledge, skill and competence, this study highlights the potential benefits of managing as opposed to avoiding risk altogether. Next, this study proposes that risk may be better understood as mediating the reasons individuals participate in an activity and not as a reason per se for participation in that activity. Thirdly, this study posits that the meanings attached to risk must be considered in
conjunction with the production of identity and embodied practices, and moreover that those identities are multiple and more specifically, both gendered and age-related.

1.2 Background to the Study

The origins of rock climbing lie in the exploits of (mostly male) British Victorians who pioneered mountaineering in the Alps in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Their daring-do attempts on peaks such as the Matterhorn, first climbed by Edward Whymper in 1856 reflected both heroic and the horrific; for Whymper’s successful ascent was not without consequences. Of the seven men in the party who reached the summit only three returned to the valley alive. The risk to life and limb was clear and such potentially fatal exploits brought with it reprobation. As Thompson (2010) writes:

When British climbers first ‘conquered’ the Alps in the mid-Victorian era, the sport was regarded with mildly disapproving comprehension, that men should risk their lives for such a useless ambition. (Thompson, 2010, p. 5)

Despite the occasional climbing fatality the sport continued and post World War I it assumed a new place in the consciousness of the British public. Indifference and incredulity gave way to recognition of climbers’ courage, determination and heroism embodied in the sacrifice of climbers and mountaineers, such as Andrew Irvine and George Mallory on their fatal and presumed unsuccessful 1926 Everest expedition (Thompson, 2010, p.49).

Climbers and climbing captured the public imagination and mediated through press and television and more recently through internet websites, climbing magazines, and books, a revised perception of climbing and climbers emerged. This new discourse recognised the courageous and heroic individual but highlighted the presence of risk of injury or death. Indeed in
recent times, the media has played an increasingly important role in promoting the celebrity status of climbers, as well as publicising disasters turning climbing from a sport into a spectacle (Davidson 2008; Krakauer 1998; Simpson 2008). A spectacle, however, is not necessarily an authentic representation, in the sense that it is constructed to attract and sustain attention. The sensational is usually privileged over the mundane, illustrated by media representation of climbing as a high-risk activity undertaken by octane fuelled adrenaline junkies even if, as Gregory (1989) suggests, the reality is somewhat different. For example, films such as *Cliffhanger* and *Vertical Limits* portray climbing practices in ways that are divorced or even entirely absent from the experience of everyday (or for that matter, elite) climbers.

Academic research has granted further impetus to media constructions of rock climbing as a risk activity and of its participants as wilful and persistent risk-takers. Despite the fact that all activities in life carry some element of risk, whether this risk is physical, emotional or social, so-called risk sports have provided a rich source of data for those wishing to explore psychological and sociological conceptions of risk. Researchers have consistently targeted participants in these sports to explore thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with risk-taking. This is understandable given the common sense perception that activities like rock climbing, mountaineering, white water kayaking, skydiving, B.A.S.E. jumping as well as mountain biking, and snowboarding constitute ‘extreme’ sports (Puchan 2005).

In electing to study some sports or activities and not others, researchers have helped to construct and shape common sense assumptions about those activities. If a researcher studies risk and elects to question, interview or observe climbers, surfers or skydivers as opposed to footballers, swimmers or gymnasts, then it is logical to assume that underpinning their
choice of sport is a belief that the former group of sports involve risk, whereas the latter group do not. Wittingly or otherwise, those writing about so-called risk sports variously termed lifestyle, extreme and adventure sports reinforce the notion that these are indeed risk activities.

Similarly, researchers have again wittingly or otherwise, encouraged and endorsed the idea that climbing and other ‘extreme’ or ‘lifestyle’ sport participants are risk-takers. Although more recent research from a sociological perspective has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of risk activities and risk-taking (Laurendeau 2006a; Lois 2005; Lyng 2005), the assumed relationship between risk activity and risk-taking persists. For example, Wheaton (2004) citing a number of sources (Fiske 1989; Le Breton 2000; Lewis 2000; Midol and Broyer 1995; Palmer 2004; Stranger 1999), identifies a desire to ‘embrace and even fetishise notions of risk and danger’ (pp. 11-12) as one of nine defining characteristics of lifestyle sports of which rock climbing is deemed to be one. In other words, one of the key features of such sports is participants’ apparent willingness to accept not just a degree of risk that accompanies most sport participation but to embrace risk actively.

Heywood (1994) however, tempers claims about the extent to which climbers embrace risk-taking. In his essay about climbing as an anti-rationalist practice, he summarises climbers’ approach to risk-taking as: ‘...raw, medium or well done according to how they feel or what they want from the sport’ (p. 187). In a later article, he states: ‘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’ (Heywood 2006, p.456). Robinson (2004) too, maintains that climbers perceive risk in different ways and that rather than taking risks, they are often at pains to minimise them. She contrasts this attitude with the media representation of climbers as ‘thrill-seekers engaging in
Bonington’s response to a reporter’s question about his intention to make an ascent on the North Face of the Eiger illustrates Robinson’s point.

**Reporter:** Chris, you’ve done the ordinary route up the North Face. Why on earth are you going on it [Eiger Direct] again risking your neck?

**Bonington:** Well for a start, Mac, I don’t like that term, ‘risking your neck.’ We’ve taken a lot of trouble and time thinking about and going on this route. We’ve planned the route for a long time. We’d also be prepared almost to turn back. We’re certainly not taking unjustified risks.

*The Eiger, Wall of Death (2010) BBC4*

Moreover, writers from the discipline of psychology and social psychology have concluded that extreme sport participants do not pursue risk *per se* but instead acknowledge the interplay of different factors with regard to supposed risk-taking behaviour. Shoham, Ross and Kahle (2000) for example, employed Zuckerman’s Sensation Seeking questionnaire as well as inventories measuring arousal to show that participation in rock climbing is linked to self-efficacy and camaraderie as well as the pursuit of risk. Slanger and Rudestam’s (1997) earlier work with climbers also used Zuckerman’s Sensation Seeking questionnaire and a range of other inventories to explore motivations for engagement with risk-taking sports. They concluded that climbers seek challenges as opposed to risks, and that thrill-seeking should be defined in terms of goal achievement and mastery not risk-taking alone.

It is likely that some of the difficulty in defining the relationship between participation motives and risk seeking lies with the way that motivation is defined and correspondingly measured. The literature on motivation for sport participation is voluminous. Summarising the ever-increasing body of work about motivation, Roberts, Treasure and Conroy (2007) concluded that it is
often ill-defined and over-generalised, see for example, Sage’s (1977) definition of motivation as ‘the direction and intensity of one’s effort’ or ‘the drive to engage in an activity’ (Taylor and Wilson 2005, p.4). Citing work by Ford (1992), Roberts et al. (2007) note that there are at least 32 theories of motivation each derived from a slightly different method of construction and measurement. The challenge posed by the concept of motivation has led sport psychologists to conceive of it as a process and encourage them to explore factors that ‘energize, direct and regulate’ goal-related behaviour (Roberts et al., 2007, p.3). Reflecting this situation, investigators have examined participants’ reasons for initial and sustained sporting involvement (Mullen and Whaley 2010) and assessed the motivations given by participants of different ages, genders, from different countries and in different activities (see for example, Ampofo-Boateng, Yusof, Rahim, and Suun 2007; Bradley, Kolt, and Williams 2005; de Andrade Bastos, Salguero, Gonzalez-Boto, and Marquez 2006). Invariably, motivation is assessed in these studies by one or more of the 32 instruments designed to measure motivation, for example, the Participation Motivation Questionnaire (after Gill, Gross, and Huddleston 1983).

Perhaps because of psychology’s ‘ownership’ of the concept of motivation, and a concomitant focus on the individual agent as opposed to broader structural influences, motivation is rarely mentioned within the discipline of sociology. However, the factors that affect sport participation and the influences on participation are very much the concern of the sport sociologist. As such there is a considerable body of literature which variously examines broader structural influences on sport participation (see for example, Adair and Rowe 2010; Collins and Buller 2003; Hylton 2010) as well as research which considers the factors likely to attract participants to sport and
help give meaning to their experiences (see for example, Beal and Weidman 2003; Donnelly and Young 1999; Fletcher 2008; Miller 2009).

Fletcher (2008), for example, argues that participation in risk sports is not distributed evenly across the population, rather it is concentrated amongst members of what he terms, the professional middle class (PMC). Drawing on an ethnographic study of white water kayakers, auto-ethnography as well as academic and popular writing about risk sports, Fletcher contends that the characteristics and qualities of the PMC habitus (after Bourdieu 2003) are consistent with those required of risk sport participants. He cites a number of shared characteristics including asceticism, deferred gratification, self-reliance, self-discipline and the pursuit of continual progress. As such he maintains that risk sport participation reinforces the PMC habitus. It does this not only by serving as a means through which participants emphasise their social and cultural distance (distinction) from other class fractions but by bolstering a more general set of PMC qualities. He concludes:

… the PMC habitus cultivates a number of qualities conducive to the risk sports field. It seems apparent, therefore, that risk sports are so valued by members of this class, in part because they provide an arena for the accumulation and display of cultural capital appropriate to class membership. (Fletcher 2008)

Paradoxically, Fletcher suggests that in addition to reinforcing the PMC habitus, risk sport participation also provides a vehicle by which to ‘provide a temporary relief from the anxiety and discontent caused by the very qualities, outlined above that constitute PMC habitus’ (Fletcher, 2008, p.321). Synthesising a number of pieces of academic writing, he argues that risk sport participation enables individuals to step away from their everyday routines and seek a transcendent state or a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988). Such states and experiences position the individual firmly in the present, responding to the situation in which they find themselves.
Stranger (1999) for example, defines flow as the moment at which experience and consciousness merge to bestow a sublime experience. Fletcher maintains that members of the PMC require a particularly high level of ‘optimal stimulation’ to draw them away from a focus on the future to attend to the present. In other words, risk activities offer participants a heightened sense of sensory stimulation which is sufficient to divert attention from their everyday experiences which are future oriented and pleasure-free.

Although Fletcher focuses exclusively on the value of risk sports for the PMC, other writers suggest that their significance applies more widely (Heywood 1994; Kay and Laberge 2002; Lyng 2008; Simon 2002). In a wide-ranging review of the risk-sport nexus, Giulianotti (2009) asserts that some academics have conceived risk sports as an ‘antidote to oppressive social relations of advanced capitalist societies’ (p. 544). However, other research indicates that that the apparent link between class position (or any other set of social relations) and risk sport participation is more complex. For example, Stuessy, Harding and Poff (2005) measured the level of creativity, control and challenge reported by 358 ice climbers in the workplace and when climbing. Analysis of the results yielded positive correlations for challenge and control and no association for creativity; running counter to the thesis that risk sport participants’ everyday lives lacked challenge and control. Therefore, risk sport participation may not necessarily act as an antidote to the routinised and alienating experience of paid work.

In summary, what differentiates sociological approaches to risk sports from psychological approaches is the former’s attempt to situate participants’ experiences within a broader contextual framework. Such frameworks recognise the socially contested and constructed nature of sport participants’ experiences and in particular the significance of identity construction. Furthermore, unlike psychology, sociological research frequently adopts
qualitative methodologies, and is rarely characterised by attempts to measure motivation as if it were an objective, verifiable concept. More often sociologically-based research lays claim to explore the meanings assigned to participation from the perspective of the participant.

At this juncture, it is worth reiterating the key points made so far. First, rock climbing emerged as a sport during the Victorian era since which time it has received both positive and negative media coverage organised around a perception of the sport as risky and its participants as risk-seekers. Moreover, academic research particularly psychological studies about lifestyle, extreme or adventure sports including climbing, has tended to underscore the risk associated with involvement in climbing often conflating risk as a motivation with risk as an integral part of the activity. Secondly, I have shown how the common-sense perception of so-called extreme, adventure or lifestyle sports, focused on risk as it is, does not align with some recent academic literature which points to the need for both a more nuanced reading of risk and a recognition of other reasons for participation. I seek to address these issues through interviews with a small group of self-identified rock climbers based in the North of England.

1.3 The Present Study

In this study, I will challenge the assumption that risk is the reason why individuals engage in lifestyle sports, and further argue that risk in lifestyle sports should be considered in a broader context of everyday life. I characterise risk as an ‘absent presence’, after Shilling (2003), that is, risk is best understood as something which in the first instance mediates the reasons given for climbing and in the second, plays a role in shaping climbers’ identities. Accordingly, I intend to explore how risk articulates with the reasons climbers give for participation. Specifically, I analyse the way that risk
articulates with the reasons given for participation by a small group of self-identified but not elite climbers based in the North of England. I conceive of climbing neither as a risk activity or climbers as risk-takers, but I consider risk in the context of the broader reasons given by the interviewees for participation.

By so doing, I seek to understand how the meanings the climbers attached to risk manifest themselves in their climbing practices and identities. I will argue that whilst most climbers do not cite risk in and of itself as a reason why they either started to climb or continued to do so, risk was ever present in their narratives about their climbing experiences and practices. Hence their understanding of risk helped to give meaning to their experiences as a climber and their climbing and other related identities. Furthermore, in selecting self-identified but not elite climbers I acknowledge Donnelly’s (2006) call for (subcultural) research about sport to broaden its focus and acknowledge a broader range of participants, beyond the ‘core’ or ‘extreme’ members of a particular sporting subculture.

In exploring the practices and identities of my interviewees I draw attention to the way that both are gendered, for as Connell amongst others has shown, the gendered body is marked as such by practice (Connell 1987; Connell 1995). However, as Bordo (1997) and Butler (1993) have argued, gender is also framed through discourses about the body. In this thesis I recognise the influence of both discursive strategies and embodied practices and point to the work of Iris Young (2005) who exposed how discursive strategies and embodied practices articulate to limit women’s, or heighten men’s, sense of physicality.

The notion of gendered experience in relation to risk extends beyond physicality to encompass an affective dimension. Lois (2005), for example, identified different strategies by which male and female members of an
emergency rescue team managed their emotions. Lois’ work is significant for this thesis for two reasons. First, because it highlights the gendered nature of emotion management in the context of what could be termed a risk activity and secondly, because it points to the temporal quality of such experience. In her account, Lois (2005) draws on Lyng’s (2005) concept of edgework, which describes a situation where an individual pushes him or herself to their mental and physical limit whilst retaining control. She identifies four stages of edgework, namely preparing for edgework, performing edgework, completing edgework and a retrospective final stage involving redefining feelings. As such Lois’s work provides a starting point by which to examine the temporal (as well as the gendered) nature of the rock climbers’ experiences in this study. In this thesis, I acknowledge the different phases of a climb, namely, advance preparation, the act of climbing, the sense of achievement or failure on completing a route and post-climb reflection.

However, I wish to extend my exploration of temporality to consider other dimensions. In addition to considering the phases of a climb, I recognise the historically contingent nature of the interviewees’ experiences and I show how, as a consequence of advances in equipment and technique (Smith 1998), my informants’ accounts reflected different approaches to risk assessment and control and ultimately influenced their climbing practices. Lastly, in relation to temporality I intend to examine the relatively under-theorised but increasingly significant (in light of demographic trends in western societies) notion of ageing in the context of physical activity. The ages of the interviewees in this study ranged from 24 to 77 years of age with the oldest active climbers aged 68 years old. This sample of older climbers provides an opportunity to analyse constructions of ageing in the context of physical activity and more specifically, a so-called risk activity. To this end, I take up Tulle’s (2008) call, where she argues that the ageing body is too often
theorised as a threat to ‘social and self identity’ (p.4) and is rejected or distanced in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. Tulle advocates an alternative approach, one based on an assumption that negotiating ageing is less about how to separate the mind and body to mitigate ageing and more about the way that people incorporate discourses and practices in relation to ageing that constitute sites of resistance.

To summarise, the main themes I examine in this thesis are the reasons given for climbing by a small group of climbers based in the North of England and the meaning they attached to risk. In addition, I explore the articulation of gender and temporality with the reasons given for participation and the meanings attached to risk. These themes are reflected in the following statements.

Central research questions
1. How does risk mediate the reasons participants cite for participation in rock climbing?
2. How do the meanings climbers attach to risk mediate their (climbing) identities and climbing practices?

Subsidiary research questions
3.1 How does risk articulate with gender and mediate climbers’ reasons for participation, their (climbing) identities and practices?
3.2 How does risk articulate with age and time to mediate climbers’ reasons for participation, their (climbing) identities and practices?
1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis contains nine chapters and is structured conventionally. Immediately following this chapter I explore, in broad terms, the way that risk has been conceptualised in the academic literature. I reflect on competing theoretical positions, namely realist, constructionist and critical realist/soft constructionist. In particular I reflect on work within a cultural/symbolic tradition and on Mary Douglas’s (1992) work about risk and blame in particular. In addition to a discussion of risk in general I draw out a number of themes including the gendered and temporal dimensions of risk, affective and social as well as physical risks, and the relationship between risk and identity. Finally, I consider some research about risk in sport and outdoor contexts to show how risk articulates with the reasons participants gave for their involvement in sport or outdoor activities.

Chapter Three comprises a description and reflection on the methodological issues and challenges posed by my epistemological and theoretical positions in the context of my data collection and analysis. The research process described in this thesis is best characterised as ‘messy’ and therefore I spend some time unpicking the various phases of the research. I reflect on the cyclical and iterative nature of this study and in so doing I seek to justify the decisions I made at each stage of the process. I situate these claims within the broader literature about research methodologies and methods.

Chapters Four, Five, Six, Seven and Eight comprise the substantive findings presented in this thesis. I begin by outlining my conceptual model (briefly alluded to above, section 1.1.2) as this provides the overarching analytical framework for the subsequent chapters. In the four succeeding chapters I tackle the central research questions and explore how climbers’ understanding of risk mediates the reasons they gave for their participation in
climbing and shapes their climbing identities and practices. In light of my subsidiary research questions I also scrutinize the dimensions of gender and temporality. I assess the data in relation to relevant literature within each chapter as this provides a more coherent narrative than separating the literature from the data and duplicating some of the material in a discrete literature review.

Each chapter in my discussion of results reflects one of the four main reasons identified by the interviewees for their climbing participation. In Chapter Five I consider the importance attached to thrill-seeking, challenge and mastery. In Chapter Six I investigate the significance of expressions of physicality when climbing and in Chapter Seven I analyse the importance of climbers’ personal relationships. In the last chapter of my discussion of results, Chapter Eight, I examine the appeal of the spatial context of climbing. The final chapter of the thesis, the Conclusion, draws together the different strands developed in this thesis and develops the extent of my original contribution to knowledge. In addition, I signal some potential consequences for the way we approach risk in contemporary society and point to the challenges this poses. I suggest that a more nuanced reading of risk in everyday life would bring multiple benefits and that a greater appreciation of the processes by which individuals embrace risk-taking in a so-called risk activity can support a re-conceptualisation of risk more generally.
Chapter Two

Review of Literature
2.1 Introduction

In the previous Chapter I outlined my original contribution to knowledge, defined the broad aims of the study and identified the central and subsidiary research questions. The central concept in my research questions is risk and therefore I take the opportunity in this Chapter to consider this concept. I show how risk, far from being an objective concept is both socially constructed and contested. I go on to review the way that the academic literature has defined and explored risk in relation to so-called risk sports and where appropriate I highlight the articulation of risk with notions of identity, gender and temporality. In addition, I acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of risk and I reflect on the different theoretical approaches applied to its study.

In the first half of this Chapter, I appraise the broad theoretical perspectives used to consider risk and in the second part, I explore risk in the specific context of sport and outdoor activities charting some key insights offered by this research. This discussion on risk sports is wide-ranging in the sense that it draws on research reflecting an array of epistemological, theoretical and methodological perspectives. Where appropriate I spell out the implications of the ideas advanced in the literature for understanding the reasons the interviewees in this study gave for climbing and how these reasons articulated with the meanings they attached to risk.

Although the issues, concepts and theoretical insights offered in my data analysis extend beyond risk, I do not intend to provide a wide-ranging critique of such concerns in this Chapter. Instead I integrate literature about physicality, relationships and space/place in the appropriate chapters in my discussion of the results. For example, relationships materialized as one of the substantive themes in my data and the articulation of risk and trust emerged as a key lens through which to scrutinize the importance of climbing
relationships. Consequently, I made the decision to integrate most of the literature I identified as supporting my data analysis in the relevant chapter of my discussion of results. This approach seemed to produce a more coherent narrative than the alternative which would have been to disaggregate much of the literature from the data and place the former in a more substantial chapter.

2.2 What is Risk?

The volume of research on risk in the social sciences has increased significantly since the publication of Ulrich Beck’s seminal and prescient text, *Risk Society* in 1986 (first English edition 1992). This is evident in the increased frequency of ‘hits’ using the word ‘risk’ in a keyword search using JSTOR. In 1986, only 585 journal articles listed under Sociology were recorded as having risk in their keyword list. By the time I registered for my PhD in 2003, that number had increased to 973. Those writing about risk have done so from a myriad of contexts and different circumstances.

In a wide-ranging review of the concept and citing her personal research, Lupton (2004) identified a number of dimensions of risk including physical, emotional, environmental, financial and social risks amongst others. When asked to define the term risk, her interviewees variously reported that risk meant weighing a decision to take an action or making a considered assessment; stepping out of a comfort zone or sensing a loss of security; incorporating danger or the chance of something going wrong; bringing pleasure or discomfort; opening up challenges or bringing excitement; and finally, as shared and a part of everyday life. In summary, the interviewees defined risk as something that brought pleasure as well as discomfort and involved challenge and excitement as well as opening up new possibilities.

Other writers have reflected on the way that risk is deemed to apply to some groups in society, defining them as ‘a risk’, for example hoodies or ‘at
risk’, for example, single mothers (Bunton, Green, and Mitchell 2004). In the next section I explore some broad theoretical approaches to risk.

2.3 Theorising Risk

Risk is a contested concept and the definitions vary in relation to the perspective adopted to consider risk. Ekberg (2007) for example, outlined three perspectives on risk which he terms, realist, cultural relativist and moderate social constructionist. Zinn (2006) identified six approaches to research about risk which range from rational choice and perception theory common place in economics and psychology respectively, to governmentality associated with Foucault, systems approaches reflective of some German writers, as well as cultural accounts such as those produced by Douglas (1992) and finally, reflexive modernisation commentaries associated with Beck (2003) and Giddens (1991). In contrast, Lupton (1999) identifies two much broader perspectives on risk namely, realist and social constructionist. She defines cognitive scientific and psychological approaches more broadly as realist perspectives and three perspectives under the broad heading, social constructionism, specifically cultural/symbolic, risk society and governmentality. In this chapter, I adopt Lupton’s broad perspectives outlining the underlying premise of each position and where appropriate I highlight the implications for this study.

2.3.1 Realist Accounts of Risk

Realist accounts define risk as real and, as such risks can be calculated by assessing the probability or chance occurrence of an event. In so doing such accounts differentiate between expert knowledge of risk and lay or subjective (and often deemed ‘inaccurate’) understanding of risk. Adams’s (1995) work characterises this approach where he argues that people over or
under-estimate risks and that it is the role of an experts to educate the public according to the statistical or ‘real’ risk. Realist studies also include those which explore comparative differences in risk perception between predefined groups (see Boholm 1998 for a comprehensive review of studies in the area of cognitive science which explore the effect of national/cultural differences, gender, media, and poverty on risk perception).

Douglas (1992) amongst others has criticised such studies for failing to problematise the notion of risk, assuming that ‘expert’ definitions count as some sort of ‘gold standard’ and as such, more authentic than lay or subjective experiences. Douglas also criticises cognitive sciences’ view of individuals as rational actors for whom a direct relationship exists between increased knowledge of risk and subsequent rational action. Evidence suggests that an increase in knowledge about risks does not always leads to an appropriately rational response. For example, as successive British Crime Survey (BCS) Reports show, although young men are at greater risk of assault than young women, it is young women who express a greater fear of assault and who modify their behaviour accordingly (Stanko 1997, cited in Chan and Rigakos, 1997, p. 754).

Moreover, realist constructions of risk pose questions about what counts as a risk, what constitutes rational action and perhaps more importantly, who gets to define what is risky and what is rational. In essence, cognitive scientific approaches to risk often fail to acknowledge the effect of wider structural factors in constructing definitions of risk. For example, cognitive science research that concludes that women take fewer risks than men (Davidson and Freudenburg 1996; Sjoberg, Kolarova, Rucai, Bernstrom, and Flygelholm 1996) ignores the wider socio-cultural influences on both women’s experiences of risk and what counts as risky (Chan and Rigakos 2002; Lupton and Tulloch 2002).
It would be wrong to dismiss all cognitive science research as irrelevant, however. Cognitive scientists have been sensitive to issues of power. For example, Flynn, Slovic and Mertz (1994) found from their research about gender differences in risk perception that the group who perceived fewer and lower levels of risks in society were white men, with power, with higher incomes and education in comparison to other groups sampled. They hypothesised that this was because this group occupied the most advantageous position in society exerting greater control over their lives than other groups and consequently perceiving fewer and lower levels of risk in their lives. Flynn et al. concluded that further research must acknowledge the role of ‘power, status, alienation, trust, and other socio-political factors’ (p. 1107).

Whilst research from a realist perspective cannot explore fully the subjective meanings associated with climbing, nor the wider structural factors that shape climbers’ experiences it can point to areas worthy of further investigation. For example, the sport psychology literature points to the significance of concepts such as mastery and the influence of experience and competence. In addition, with respect to climbing it is difficult to reject outright realist constructions of risk. A fall could result in injury or death and it is possible to ascertain the probability of such an event, for example, by using data collected by the Mountain Rescue Council for England and Wales which records the number of ‘incidents’ and fatalities associated with rock climbing. Such data can then be examined in relation to the estimated number of climbers or climbing hours to determine the statistical likelihood of injury or death. This provides a baseline measure by which to make comparisons with other activities. It can also serve as a starting point by which to delve more deeply into the meanings associated with participation in rock climbing, albeit without necessarily accepting the premise of divisions between
objective/subjective or expert/lay accounts of risk. Such data is useful to dissect the relationship between public stories about risk and rock climbing and the private stories of individual climbers.

2.3.2 Social Constructionist Accounts of Risk

Realist accounts draw heavily on a natural science model of research ultimately positing scientific evidence as the most legitimate form of knowledge. In contrast, social constructionist approaches have been particularly critical of such assertions, arguing that scientists’ views are no more authoritative or objective than other views. Given these claims to relativism, unsurprisingly poststructuralist accounts attempt to situate discourses on risk in terms of the specificity of an individual’s geographical, temporal and socio-cultural location. Given that individuals can never share the same location, risk cannot be defined outside their subjective personal experiences. In other words, risks do not exist outside of our construction of them and therefore it is nonsensical to consider risk in terms of a dichotomy of real (expert-defined) and subjective (lay-defined), because they are nothing more than competing discourses. Ewald (1991) writes:

Nothing is a risk in itself: there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyzes the danger considers, the event… (Ewald, 1991, p. 199)

Social constructionist accounts offer a potentially useful perspective from which to examine risk in rock climbing because they emphasise the socially constructed and contested nature of risk. This is helpful because they provide a basis by which to critique what cognitive science perspectives tend to define as irrational risk-taking (when juxtaposed with expert knowledge systems). For example, Lewis (2000) challenges the received wisdom of risk-taking as irrational, arguing that a turn away from a focus on the rationality of
experience to the aesthetic of experience offers a more useful way of understanding so-called risky activities. Lewis (2000) reflects on two bodies, namely a metropolitan body and a climbing body in his deconstruction of participation in climbing. He argued not that climbing was irrational, but rather that the aesthetic experience of climbing compensated for the mechanical and routinised experience of everyday life in the metropolis.

Less usefully, such accounts sometimes fail to acknowledge that risk has some basis in reality in the sense of shared meanings individuals attach to risk. Moreover, risks exist materially in the form of practices and therefore they exist outside discourses. For example, soloing, that is climbing, without a rope carries a greater risk because the consequences of a fall are greater, regardless of whether an individual climber sees it as such or however long and hard one deconstructs the risk associated with this activity. In addition, relying on a climber’s subjective experience of, or discursive practices about, risk does not necessarily develop good practice on a more general level. Safe practice in climbing reflects consideration of the risks posed by particular climbing practices that stand outside individual experience. Therefore, climbers might be expected to share an understanding of risk which draws on discursive practices about rationality and aesthetics as well as acknowledging their material experiences.

Having drawn a distinction between realist and social constructionist perspectives, social constructionist perspectives on risk are not uniform rather they vary in the degree of construction adopted. Whilst they might share an opposition to realist/objective accounts of risk, they exhibit fundamental differences too. Lupton identifies three social constructionist perspectives, namely, governmentality, risk society and cultural/symbolic, ordered last to first in terms of their application to the data reported in this study.
2.3.3 Governmentality Approaches and Risk

Governmentality approaches to risk tend to draw on Foucault’s concepts of discipline, surveillance and regulation to examine the construction of risk in a way that encourages individuals to monitor and regulate their behaviour (O’Malley 2009). For instance, Joyce (2001) reviewed approaches to health risks in light of NHS policy and determined that policy decisions about priorities and rationing encouraged individuals to take personal responsibility for risks to their health. In Australia, Tait (1995) examined the effect of the Finn Report into vocational qualifications on discursive narratives about ‘at risk youth’, and Aradau (2007) explored the notion of precautionary risk as evidenced in the practices of western governments to manage the (unknown) risks linked to terrorist activities.

Although more often directed at appraising spheres of life affected by government policy, such as education, health and the criminal justice system, Foucauldian-based approaches can also inform an analysis of risk sport participation. The Lyme Bay\(^2\) canoe tragedy, for example, brought about greater government regulation in a previously unregulated industry in an attempt to reduce risks. Running counter to such regulation is the notion of individual responsibility which runs large through risk sport sub-cultures and has done so from the origins of such activities (pre-dating the era of high or post-modernity). For example, the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) website states on its front page:

The BMC recognises that climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement.

(British Mountaineering Council, 2011)

\(^2\) Four teenagers died whilst on a sea canoeing expedition as part of a school trip. In the subsequent public enquiry, the leaders were deemed to have insufficient experience and the centre’s owners tried and found guilty of corporate manslaughter.
Consequently, although governments have legislated to manage risk in the sport and outdoor industries, individual risk sport participants have long embraced the notion of self-regulation and resisted attempts to limit individual freedom. Therefore whilst a governmentality approach offers a lens through which to explore risk management in the risk sport industry and individual attempts to balance freedom with responsibility, this is not peculiarly post-modern. Nor does risk sport participation reflect the situation in the health, education or criminal justice sectors since the 1990s, that is, concerns have not been expressed about risk-taking in lifestyle sports. Tales of daring-do and of challenges posed by the hardships of the natural environment pre-date post-modernity, see for example, Franklin’s search for the North-West passage, Shackleton’s heroic rescue of his crew from the Antarctic and Scott’s failure to beat Amundsen to the South Pole. Moreover, the governmentality thesis encourages reflection on discursive practices which define risk within the parameters of institutional and personal risks. However, the context for an examination of risk in this study is (sub) cultural and personal rather than institutional and for this reason two other constructionist theoretical frameworks have greater significance for this study.

2.3.4 ‘Risk Society’ Approaches to Risk

According to proponents of this approach, the source of risk in contemporary society lies in the unintended consequences of scientific achievements (Ekberg 2007) as witnessed in the damage caused to the nuclear reactors in Fukushima, Japan in 2011. Although technological and scientific developments have provided human beings with ever increasing control over their environment they also constitute potentially catastrophic risks to the environment. At the same time, people have become increasingly sceptical of the government and/or scientists’ ability to control the risks
associated with the technology they have developed. Beck (1992) writes that scientific rationality has been replaced by ‘communities of anxiety’ not reassured by science but antagonistic towards it, and distrustful of scientific claims. He concludes that science’s role in society is problematic precisely because it evades control by social and political institutions.

Beck proposes that in order to deal with such risks individuals should become reflexive about science, technology and the risks posed by environmental catastrophe. He calls for ‘reflexive modernity’: applied collectively and individually to minimise such threats. This means challenging the claims made by ‘experts’ and reflecting more carefully on our actions in the social world. Like Giddens (1991), Beck argues that individual reflexivity is an increasing feature of everyday life not just because of the proliferation of risks in society but also because of a decline in the influence of traditional reference points, specifically, the family and social class. Where once individuals’ lives were structured within class, gender and familial norms these norms have fractured. Beck writes:

One even has to choose one’s social identity and group membership, in this way managing one’s social identity, changing its image. In the individualized society, risks do not just increase quantitatively; qualitatively new types of personal risk arise, the risk of the chosen and changed personal identity. (Beck, 2003, p. 136)

A decline in the significance of ascribed characteristics (such as class and gender) means that individuals have greater opportunity to shape their identity and pursue a particular lifestyle. However, the consequence of this is that people suffer from what Giddens terms, ontological insecurity. Giddens writes:

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3 See for example, a significant decrease in parents’ take up of the Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR) vaccination due to one piece of research which linked the MMR vaccine to autism. Despite numerous studies rejecting these claims and exhortations to parents to have their children vaccinated a significant number failed to do so Bedford, H.E. and D.A.C. Elliman. 2010. "MMR vaccine and autism." BMJ 340:655.
In the charged reflexive settings of high modernity, living on ‘automatic pilot’ becomes more and more difficult to do, and it becomes less and less possible to protect any lifestyle, no matter how firmly pre-established, from the generalised risk climate. (Giddens, 1991, pp. 123-126)

Giddens argues that we are increasingly expected to self-monitor and to be reflexive, to self-fashion and make lifestyle choices; in so doing we create a ‘narrative of self-identity’ (Giddens, 1991, p.81). In essence, one’s whole life is a risk. Although Giddens is predominantly concerned with the relationship between risk and identity construction (important in its own right for assessing the relationship between risk and identity formation amongst rock climbers), he also acknowledges, albeit briefly, the idea of conscious risk-taking, which he terms, ‘cultivated risk-taking’. This is significant given this study’s focus on rock climbing conventionally defined as a risk activity and participants as risk-takers.

Giddens states that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary risks is blurred as risks have an institutional dimension. For example, he proposes that driving a car for pleasure might be considered a voluntary risk, whereas driving to work, essentially the same activity, might be defined as an involuntary risk. By referring to smoking and alcohol consumption, Giddens also alludes to a moral dimension in the construction of voluntary and involuntary risks. In other words social disapproval of any given action helps construct actors as ‘to blame’ because they could elect to do something differently but choose not to. Such narratives define such actions as lifestyle choices for which the individual must assume personal responsibility. By individualising actions, risk is presented as an individual concern and not a structural or institutional responsibility. In this context, this argument has some similarity with the governmentality approach to risk described in the previous section.
Giddens argues that risks should not be considered in isolation however, rather they must be considered in the light of an individual’s total lifestyle. This suggests that climbing participation can only be understood with the context of an individual’s broader economic and socio-cultural position. A focus on the activity of climbing alone cannot achieve this goal. Interestingly, Giddens maintains that cultivated risk-seeking activities present participants with immediate gratification, in contrast to the deferred gratification of involuntary risk-taking. This point warrants closer scrutiny for whilst cultivated risk-taking activities may be subject to some element of planning, it is unclear as to why they would necessarily afford immediate, as opposed to, delayed gratification. Whilst climbing may afford immediate gratification in some circumstances participation may also be mundane and routine. For example, climbers using an indoor wall for training purposes to develop technique in order to push their grades might not conceive of their actions as immediately gratifying.

Whilst recognising the fluidity of the boundary between voluntary and involuntary risk, Giddens describes cultivated risks as on the ‘edge of routine’ (p.132), constituted by thrills derived from exposure to danger. He draws on Balint’s three-point definition of risk-taking activities which is that individuals are conscious of their exposure to danger, that they voluntarily expose themselves to danger and finally that they are reasonably confident of overcoming danger. Seen in this light cultivated risk-taking is an experiment with trust, with confidence and with one’s self-identity. Giddens recognises that risk-taking involves an element of mastery, that is, individuals do not simply engage in cultivated risk-taking for a thrill but because they want to put themselves ‘on trial’ (p. 132). Significantly, the relationship between participation in risk sports (specifically climbing) and mastery as opposed to
simple thrill-seeking emerged as a key area in the data and consequently is explored in detail later in this thesis (see Chapter Five).

Beck and Giddens’s account of the risk society resonate at an individual, organisational and institutional level; their accounts seem to make sense at an intuitive level and reflect the experiences of life in contemporary western society. However, their notion of the risk society is not universally accepted and one of the reasons is their claim to universality. Both writers have a tendency to theorise risk as a universal experience, yet empirical evidence does not bear out this claim. Chan and Rigakos (2002) for instance, offer a further challenge to Beck’s suggestion that the logic of risk has replaced the logic of capitalism as well as to Giddens’s suggestion that gender, class and race have declined in significance. In their analysis of the gendered nature of risk with specific reference to women’s experiences of crime, they concluded that some research fails to engage with the gendered nature of risk. They contend that women’s experiences of risk are, in part, constructed through their relationships with men and compounded by class and ‘race’. For Chan and Rigakos, wider structural relations influence women’s experiences of risk. Women are expected to avoid risks and their failure to do so means they are seen as contributing to their own downfall by, for example, risking assault by walking home alone at night. The risk is a consequence of women’s failure to take appropriate precautions not by a (male) assailant’s actions. As such, they contest Beck’s attempts to disconnect risk from capitalism and from patriarchy and patriarchal institutions.

Drawing on Douglas’ (1992) work, Chan and Rigakos contend that risk must be conceptualised as socially and culturally mediated. Rejecting an essential or universal definition of risk, they conclude that:

A recognition of risk as gendered relies on acknowledging that there can be no essential notion of risk; that risk is variable; risk
Chan and Rigakos’ paper supports the idea that risk is not evenly experienced across society, and that is both socially and culturally constructed. In acknowledging the articulation of the social and cultural meanings attached to risk, Chan and Rigakos’s work reflects what Lupton (1999) defines as a cultural/symbolic perspective on risk. In the next section of this chapter, I explore this approach, summarising its main features and explaining the potential value it holds for analysing both the meanings attached to risk and the articulation of risk with a climbing identity.

### 2.3.5 Cultural/Symbolic Accounts of Risk

Lupton describes the third of her three social constructionist perspectives as symbolic/cultural and identifies Mary Douglas as a key contributor. In a body of work spanning four decades, Douglas (1966; 1986; 1992) examined the cultural significance of risk and in particular the use of risk to construct and maintain identities. According to Douglas, risk is not determined in any rational way or objectively calculated, rather culture helps individuals to determine risk by constructing the criteria by which risk is judged. Douglas writes that the ‘dialogue about risk plays the role equivalent to taboo or sin’ (Douglas, 1992, p.28), that is, it affords the opportunity to apportion blame and position some individuals as ‘to blame’. Moreover, being ‘at risk’ or ‘a risk’ conveys membership of the out-group or groups on the margins of society. Douglas argued that notions of risk play a role in maintaining group boundaries marking differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In other words, risk is intimately involved in the process of othering through the construction of some people/events/actions/circumstances as risky and others as not. She proposes that risk-taking and risk perception are inextricably
linked to the process by which in-groups differentiate themselves from out-groups.

Douglas's conceptualisation of risk positions risk-taking and risk activities as determinedly negative, framing particular activities and individuals as a risk or at risk. Douglas was particularly critical of so-called border groups who occupied the margins of society. In contemporary British society such groups might include 'out of control' young people or 'hoodies' or teenage mothers, positioned as symbols of social malaise and sources of moral panic. Once defined as 'a risk' or 'at risk', something must be done to address the risk posed either by the individuals concerned or by the government and related agencies. Pike (2007) illustrates this point in her study about the relationship between physical activity and teenage sexual activity. However, Pike assumes a more critical perspective than Douglas, challenging the definition of teenagers who are sexually active as 'at risk' or 'a risk'. Citing evidence from the Department of Health, Pike writes that 'the suggestion that sexual activity among young people is problematic is, in itself, a judgement made from an adult viewpoint on behalf of children' (p. 313). Crucially, Pike recognises the contested nature of the construction of risk, and in so doing distances herself from Douglas's conservative and functionalist perspective on risk.

Lash (2000) amongst others has also criticised Douglas's work for its functionalism and its conservatism. However, Douglas's reactionary and rather conservative analysis of risk does not render the whole approach redundant. Douglas's conception of risk is useful if one ignores her theoretical position, restricts her conceptualisation of the symbolic and cultural construction of risk to a micro or mid-theoretical level, embraces positive as well as negative aspects of risk and finally acknowledges a temporal dimension. 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. In particular, her approach to risk 
offers a means by which to explore the meaning climbers attach to risk, 
particularly in the context of differences between groups within the sub-culture.

Other writers have also provided accounts of risk which acknowledge 
the significance of culture and overcome the leanings of risk society 
approaches to grand theorising. Lash (2000) for example, accepts Beck and 
Giddens’s assertions that traditional social orders in society have broken down 
and that risk has taken on increasing significance as an organising principle in 
society. However, Lash conceives of risk as assuming a cultural significance 
which helps bind communities. For example, middle class home owners 
submit objections to planning proposals for a hostel because of the risk posed 
to the valuation of their houses, whilst ‘helicopter parents’ (Byron, 2008) 
zealously mind their children to keep them safe. Such risks are both known 
and unknown and contribute to the construction of both real and imagined 
communities, in these instances, middle class neighbourhoods and mothers. 
A shared sense of insecurity and threat produce ‘risks’ and constitutes the 
basis around which people coalesce.

However, as Sharland (2006) explains, the idea of ‘communities of risk’ 
does not necessarily mean that risk is defined as entirely and universally 
negative. This is particularly evident in respect of members of the so-called 
‘out group’. Citing work about risk and young people (Green, Mitchell, and 
Bunton 2000), Sharland describes how risk is hierarchically constructed 
whereby practices can confer both status or stigma. For example, smoking 
and drinking alcohol confers stigma from most adults in society, but amongst a 
young person’s peer group, such behaviour may confer considerable status 
and indeed the risk of censure from non-participation constitute a greater risk 
to their sense of self than adult disapproval. Further evidence of the centrality
of risk-taking to group membership emerges in Donnelly and Young’s (1999) account of a university rock climbing group. These authors suggest that membership of the group was only conferred upon evidence of risk-taking behaviour by novice climbers. Set a problem by the established members, novice climbers were expected to rise to the challenge. In other words, the socially constructed and culturally accepted approach to risk in such instances encouraged a positive acceptance of risk-taking. In such activities, risk-taking does not transgress boundaries it actively reinforces the identity of participants as members of a sub-cultural community.

Douglas’s and Lash’s work offer helpful analyses of the cultural dimensions to risk and crucially they provide a potentially useful framework by which to explore the meanings attached to risk by rock climbers. However, theirs are not the only accounts to sit within a cultural/symbolic perspective. Lupton and Tulloch (2002) adopt such an approach to summarise the outcomes of their research about the significance of risk for 74 Australian interviewees. Their interviewees saw risk as a pervasive feature of contemporary Australian society and they appeared to have adopted individualised and reflexive biographies to manage the risks posed. The interviewees were both aware and critical of the government’s role in the production of risks and expected the government to respond appropriately. Therefore, whilst their data resonates with the idea of a ‘risk society’, it is not supportive of Beck’s suggestion that there has been a loss of faith in the ability of (modernist) political institutions to act on behalf of the people. Lupton and Tulloch further suggest that their interview data is more consistent with Lash’s (2000) idea of complexity in the relationship between risk and reflexivity noting that individualisation and modernity run concurrently.

More generally, in their study, Lupton and Tulloch noted that the interviewees identified financial, emotional, physical and health risks but in
contrast to Beck, not environmental risks. This suggests that risk has a cultural as well as a temporal dimension, that is, risks are culturally and temporally contingent. Lupton and Tulloch also observed variations in their interviewees’ account of risk aligned to their age, gender and parental status. For example, the interviewees reported that they engaged in more risky behaviours when they were young although they did not view their actions as risky at the time (that is, when they were younger). Moreover, parenthood tended to reduce risks taken by both men and women although for different reasons. Men said they reduced their risk-taking behaviours because of perceived economic responsibilities; women indicated they did so because of increased emotional responsibilities. Women also differed in their subjective experiences of risk-taking behaviours. Women referred to travel, sexual activity and crime whereas men cited sports and travel.

Overall, symbolic/cultural approaches to risk appear to offer the most helpful framework by which to examine the meanings attached to risk by a small group of rock climbers based in the north of England. This approach is ideally suited to an analysis of sub-cultural groups potentially on the margins of society. This marginal status is in part constructed through the meanings attached to risk by in-groups and out-groups, of which climbers could constitute the latter in relation to wider society. However, in this study I will show how self-identified climbers also define themselves as members of an in-group in relation to other groups of climbers. Moreover, the idea of insider and outsider groups organised around risk resonates with the discursive and material practices employed by climbers to differentiate sub-groups with both real and imagined climbing communities. In other words, the meanings

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4 Beck’s original text was published in 1986 at the time of the Chernobyl nuclear power station disaster and proliferation of nuclear weapons on European soil. Australia is thousands of miles from Europe and by the time Lupton’s work was undertaken the ‘Cold War’ was over.
attached to risk help construct a climber’s self-identity, not just in a generalised sense of a climber, but in a more nuanced fashion, recognising the influence of age, experience, competence, gender and parental status, for example. In summary, the ideas of Mary Douglas provide the theoretical framework for risk and subsequently the starting point from which to explore the significance of risk in the construction (albeit contested and sometimes contradictory) of rock climbing identities (plural).

2.4 Risk and Sport

In the previous section I outlined the broad approaches adopted by social scientists to examine risk as a way of establishing the parameters of an understanding of risk. In the second half of this chapter, I repeat this exercise in relation to activities so defined as risk sports. This second part of the review is relatively concise for, as I have already explained, I integrate much of the literature about risk sports into my discussion of the results of my data (see Chapters Four to Eight). Most research about risk sports falls into one of two broad approaches, namely cognitive scientific or realist or symbolic/cultural social constructionist. The succeeding review of research about risk and lifestyle sports reflects this broad division.

2.4.1 Realist Accounts of Risk and Sport

The perceived desire of some people to court risk actively through participation in ‘cultivated’ risk activities has proved a rich area to mine for academic research. And lifestyle sports, in particular, have provided a popular context for researchers because they provide a sample of volunteer participants engaged in a legal activity. Many sports psychologists adopt a realist approach to risk, focussing on the relationship between participation in lifestyle sports and participants’ personality traits (Feyer, Meyers, and Skelly
1998; Goma i Freixant 1991; Robinson 1985). This research suggests that some individuals are predisposed to take risks and therefore engage in risky sports to satisfy this desire. What this research also assumes, although it fails to demonstrate, is that the activity is either objectively risky, in the sense of the probability of injury or death, or subjectively experienced as such by participants. Presumably, the researchers define the activity as risky because of the high consequences associated with failure in these activities; whatever their reasons, they are rarely stated.

Other research has moved away from the idea that individual differences account for participation in favour of situation specific accounts, and those that acknowledge the interplay of different factors with regard to risk-taking behaviour. Shoham, Ross and Kahle (2000) for example, employed Zuckerman’s Sensation Seeking questionnaire as well inventories measuring arousal to show that participation in rock climbing is linked to self-efficacy and camaraderie as well as the pursuit of risk. Earlier work by Slanger and Rudestam (1997) with climbers also used Zuckerman’s Sensation Seeking questionnaire and a range of other inventories to explore motivations for engagement with risk-taking sports. They concluded that climbers seek challenges as opposed to risks, and that thrill-seeking should be defined in terms of goal achievement and mastery not risk-taking per se.

A more recent study reinforces this argument. In a naturalistic study of mountaineers attempting to summit a Himalayan peak, Delle Fave, Bassi and Massimini (2003) recorded online self-reports of mood state during the expedition. The results indicated that the mountaineers sought challenges more than risks as reflected by the relationship between positive mood state and personal challenge. Moreover, challenge was situation specific and inextricably linked to the mountaineer’s skill level. For instance, the mountaineers reported more positive mood states when completing some
aspects of camp craft than they did climbing because the former were perceived as more challenging. Whilst this research acknowledges a more complex interplay of factors than that which focuses on personality differences, it fails to demonstrate either objectively or subjectively that the activity is risky or conceived of such as risky by participants. Again, the implicit assumption made by the researchers appears to be that such activities are risky because of the high consequence associated with failure.

Creyer, Ross and Evers (2003) provide a further example of researchers’ somewhat uncritical assumptions about risk sports in their study of risk and mountain bikers. Creyer et al. write:

Rock climbing, scuba diving, storm chasing, skydiving, white-water rafting, and paragliding are a few of the activities with the potential to cause serious injury or death... (Creyer et al., 2003, p. 239)

In this instance, the underlying criteria by which Creyer et al. define an activity as a risk sport is explicitly stated as one with high consequence risks. This is problematic because the researchers fail to engage with the multi-dimensionality of risk, seeing it solely in terms of a particular type of risk, that is, physical and high consequence risk. The assumptions made by researchers about risk sports and risk sport participants raises questions about how far the researchers’ and the participants’ definitions of risk elide.

However, despite the constraints posed by their definitions of risk, Creyer et al.’s results reveal some noteworthy findings.

Creyer et al. observed that mountain bike riders with higher levels of experience reported lower levels of perceived risk, a higher propensity for risk-taking and greater expectation of positive affective outcomes. Riders who rode more frequently also reported lower levels of perceived risk, higher propensity for risk-taking, and greater expectation of anticipated affective outcomes. Therefore, both experience and frequency of participation affected
mountain bikers’ perceptions of risks and their propensity to take risks. Cryer et al. concluded that risk propensity is therefore acquired and not innate. Additionally, these authors hypothesised that motivations may evolve over time as experienced riders’ perceptions of risk decrease and anticipated positive affective outcomes increase. This points to the idea that risk perception is dynamic. It alters as participants’ skill levels increase and reflects a routinisation of risk as both Dingwall (1999) and Strong (1990) suggest.

Taken together, the studies mentioned so far indicate that risk sport participation cannot be explained solely in terms of participants’ innate motivation to take risks. Rather, they show that motivation to participate in risk sports is related to a number of factors including challenge, skill level, experience, camaraderie, affective outcomes as well as perceived risk. In turn, risk perception is mediated by experience and frequency of participation that affect participants’ motivations for participation together with their understanding of risk. These findings point to the dynamic nature of the meanings attached to risk, by risk sport participants. They might also point to temporal shifts in perception, for example, an activity not considered risky at one point in time might be considered so at an earlier or later point in time as knowledge and experience increase, or as physical capacity declines.

However, these studies do not explore participants’ perceptions of an activity outside a narrow remit, concerned as they are, to establish causal links between small numbers of narrowly defined variables, for instance, risk and motivation. Moreover, realist approaches to risk, of which these studies are all examples, do not facilitate an exploration of the potentially multiple meanings individuals may cite for their involvement in risk sports. Finally, just because researchers define risks (all too often implicitly) as high consequence does not mean that participants do so.
2.4.2 Symbolic/Cultural Accounts of Risk and Sport

Understanding the multiple meanings associated with participation in a risk sport and the way that actors construct these meanings requires a different approach, one which acknowledges the subjective dimension to risk. One way by which some researchers have achieved this is through ethnographic accounts of risky sports (Albert 1999; Celsi, Randall, and Leigh 1993; de Leseleuc, Gleyse, and Marcellini 2002; Donnelly and Young 1999; Stranger 1999). These accounts reflect cultural/symbolic approaches to risk because they recognise the multi-dimensional nature of risk and the subjective meanings attached to it by actors.

Celsi et al. argued on the basis of their research with skydivers that a number of inter-personal and intra-personal motives for risk exist: normative (adherence to group values), self-efficacy (feelings of competency in a dangerous activity), and hedonistic (pleasurable, ‘spiritually moving’). Like Creyer et al. they proposed that skydivers’ motivations change over time shifting from normative to self-efficacious and finally to hedonistic reasons. As this transition is made risk becomes normalised through increased familiarity and mastery of the situation. Creyer et al.’s findings also hinted at risk normalisation where more experienced and more frequent mountain bikers reported lower perceptions of risk than less experienced and less frequent participants.

Albert’s (1999) ethnographic study of road cyclists explored the idea of risk normalisation. He concluded that cyclists deal with risk (primarily from cars) through humour and by downplaying the gravity of an accident or injury. This makes both the potential risk and an actual accident seem less serious, distancing the rider from the incident and making him (sic) less responsible. Additionally, Albert noted that riders 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 an experienced rider to gain an advantage or an unskilled rider displaying poor judgment. Albert concluded:

Cyclists were not seen to court risk for its own sake. Rather, due to the unavoidably risk-laden nature of the activity, the subculture of cycling has incorporated the dangers of riding in ways that inextricably link them to the very enactment of that life, that bike life. (Albert, 1999, p. 169)

Albert’s work supports the conclusions of Antonella et al., (2003) and Slanger and Rudestam (1997) that risk sport participants do not seek risks per se. Rather, it suggests that the inherent risks of the activity are incorporated into the sporting subculture itself.

Although Albert does not make this point, it might also be suggested that experience and frequency of participation bring with them both a greater awareness of the risks and the ability to manage them. Therefore, the normalisation process is a function of both a reduction in the perceived risk of the activity (supported by Creyer et al.) and a growing sense of immunity to the danger of the activity as participation becomes routine (after Strong, 1990). Again, this emphasises the dynamic and temporal nature of risk and points to a need to conceptualise risk diachronically as opposed to a synchronically.

A proposed link between the normalisation of risk in the risk-sport subculture resonates with a second point to emerge from Celsi et. al.’s work where they suggest that participation in sky diving involves a rejection of one’s everyday existence and identity. These authors argued that participation in skydiving enabled skydivers to construct a new personal identity for example, even novices reported a shift in their identity, seeing a ‘clear boundary between actor and nonparticipating audiences’ (Celsi et al., 1993, p. 19). Celsi et al. continue that ultimately skydivers seek to transcend their everyday identities. Although not unique to sport, the term ‘transcendence’ is used to
describe a flow experience that requires complete immersion in the activity, becoming a ‘phenomenological state where self-awareness, behaviour, and context form a unitised singular experience’ (Celsi et al., 1993, p. 20). In this way, skydivers step outside their otherwise relatively constrained daily existence.

Stranger (1999) has also pursued the idea of transcendence through participation in risk sports in relation to postmodernity. Drawing on the work of Freud, Simmel, Lyotard and Featherstone, Stranger concluded in his ethnographic account of surfers that participants seek the ‘sublime’ experience, that is, the experience of flow where fear and desire, and experience and appreciation of experience, merge. To this end, the surfer loses him/herself in the activity and there is a temporary loss of an awareness of self. The signifier-signified relationship (activity-fear) breaks down and distorts any rational assessment of risk, over-riding all fear as it does so. What is interesting here is that Stranger uses the term ‘rational’ which suggests that he believes risk assessment to be a rational exercise. He shares this belief with many cognitive scientists who are at quite the opposite end of the spectrum from postmodern thinking.

Stranger’s work again raises interesting questions about the conceptualisation of risk. He argues that surfing is a ‘culture oriented toward risk-taking’, yet he also states that it does not have a high fatality rate nor high rates of serious injury. For Stranger, 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’ (p. 267). Here, Stranger conflates risk-taking with thrill-seeking which, as the research cited above shows, is largely unsupported (see Delle Fave, 2003). It appears that risky sport participants may construct the meaning of their participation in terms of challenges and mastery, amongst
other things, and that the importance of thrill and risk-seeking needs to be examined more critically.

Lewis (2000) also makes claims about the potential for transcendent experience through climbing from a social constructionist perspective, drawing on Foucault to do so. In a textual reading of climbing, Lewis argues that the possibility of death raised by participation in climbing heightens participants’ awareness of life. For Lewis and Stranger, risk activities defy the sensibilities of safe, contemporary living and provide participants with a way of transcending reason in favour of an embodied, aesthetic, sublime experience. Lewis’s conceptualisation of risk mirrors that of many of the cognitive science studies cited above. He too assumes that climbing is risky because of the high consequence of failure not because of the objective assessment of risk, nor of climbers’ subjective experience, other than his own.

Additionally, Lewis, Stranger and Celsi et al.’s work also fails to problematise the notion of ‘constrained’ daily existence. Constraints can take many forms and the resources required to challenge such constraints are not evenly distributed. Echoing Fletcher’s (2008) research about risk sports and the professional middle class (see section 1.2), Chan and Rigakos (2002), draw this conclusion in their paper about risk, crime and gender, making specific mention of skydiving:

The need to escape from the mundanity of life through the exercise of individual risk taking is an impulse most often associated with a lack of generalized risk susceptibility in everyday social relations. It is to be expected that most skydivers should be middle class white males. Unnecessary staged risks, that is, non-instrumental or indulgent individual risks, are almost exclusively the purview of the privileged. … They seek to slum it outside their upper/middle class, gendered and racial fortifications, both symbolic and physical, that insulate them from these everyday urban risks. (Chan and Rigakos, 2002, p. 757)
The potential repercussions of Chan and Rigakos’s claims for understanding risk in the context of rock climbing is that cultivated risk-taking is most profitably explained by situating such risk-taking in relation to the totality of one’s everyday experiences. Giddens (1991) also alludes to this point in his discussion of cultivated risk-taking (see above) but he does not make an explicit reference to the way that modernist categories such as class, gender and race might impinge on imagined participation in such activities.

Conceptually, the idea of safe contemporary living might seem at odds with Beck’s and Giddens’s claims of a risk society. However, Giddens was at pains to point out that high modernity is in many ways much safer than earlier historical epochs. What has changed is the growth of high consequence risks, for example, nuclear catastrophe as noted by Beck. Although the claims to inhabit an objectively safer modern world are consistent with claims about a risk society, what is less clear is why people would elect to participate in risk sports when the risk posed, that is high consequence risks, are those which have grown. Such sports, research informs us, are risky precisely because they are high consequence.

2.5 Research about Climbing and Risk: Methodological Implications

In the penultimate section of this Chapter, I want briefly to situate my methodological approach to an analysis of risk in climbing within a wider frame of reference of existing academic work. In broad terms, it is possible to identify three methodological approaches to an analysis of risk in rock climbing (or in so-called high-risk sports more generally). These three approaches are: quantitative, qualitative and deconstructionist narratives. Quantitative accounts of risk in rock climbing draw mostly on psychological instruments such as personality tests or motivation inventories to assess climbers’ predisposition to risk-taking or their propensity for risk seeking (see for
example, Castanier, Le Scanff, and Woodman, 2010; Shoham et al., 2000). Qualitative studies typically employ ethnography (including observation, interviews and diaries) to explore subcultural norms, values and practices which include risk-taking (Donnelly and Young, 1999; Kiewa, 1999). Finally, deconstructionist accounts attempt to reflect critically on risk in climbing and situate participants’ experience in reference to the conditions of (post or high) modernity (Heywood, 1994; Lewis, 2000).

Although the three broad perspectives identified have quite different methodological, theoretical and epistemological positions, they share assumptions about the supposed riskiness of climbing and risk-taking of climbers. Castanier et al. (2010), for example, define that rock climbing by reference to the potential for physical harm or death without reference to participants’ perceptions. Whilst Donnelly and Young (1999) discuss the significance of risk-taking for novice climbers wishing to prove themselves and Lewis (2000) suggests that part of the attraction of climbing is that participants confront death in an activity with a high physical risk.

It is precisely these assumptions that I wish to question and my method of data collection, semi-structured interviews reflects that ambition. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees to talk about risk in their own words rather than respond to researcher-generated definitions. Furthermore such interviews facilitate a focused discussion about risk, grounded in the interviewees’ concrete experiences as climbers. This avoids an abstracted conceptualisation of risk which is often all too narrowly focused on physical harm. Finally, this approach allows the interviewees to situate their understanding of risk in climbing within the wider context of risk in their everyday lives. In conclusion, I argue that data collected in this way provides the basis for a detailed consideration of risk in climbing and in the next
Chapter, I continue this theme where I describe my methodological approach as well as reflecting more critically on the research process.

2.6 Summary

In summary, the literature on risk and risk sports provides a basis from which to begin to explore some of the meanings attached to climbing by participants. There appears to be some level of agreement that risk is a pervasive feature of high modernity although there is considerable disagreement with respect to the form this takes and the extent to which class, gender, race as well as geographical and temporal locations mediate notions of risk. Theoretically, risk has been conceptualised in a number of different ways but the overwhelming tendency has been to discuss risk in terms of harm, loss or misfortune, that is, to see it as having a negative impact on one’s life. The risk sport literature does not really differ in this respect although this is not evident from any explicit claims made but implicitly through the conception of particular sports as risky because of the high consequence of failure or accident.

In this chapter, I have tried to draw attention to the problems of conceptualising sports as risky on the basis of high consequence risks, for although this is consistent with Beck’s and Giddens’ claims about risk in society it is not necessarily or inevitably consistent with participants’ subjective accounts of risk. Consequently, the literature on risky sports has invariably failed to look beyond risk and acknowledge the significance of mastery and challenge or indeed other influences on participation. Moreover, most of the risk sport literature pays little attention to the ways by which wider structural relations shapes conceptions of risk in risky sports. The risk sport literature often fails to problematise risk and adopts an insufficiently critical approach to
the construction of risk (mediated as it is by factors such as gender, experience, competence amongst others).

This study seeks to engage with risk as something which individuals construct through participation in sport, in this specific instance, rock climbing. Risk is explored through the lived experiences of a small group of rock climbers and contextualised in relation to the factors deemed to motivate their involvement in this particular sport. Consequently, this study represents a departure from much other work about risk in lifestyle sports because it does not presume to define the existence of risk in such sports either implicitly or explicitly. Nor is the focus on risk confined to the activity itself; rather risk in climbing is juxtaposed with risk in everyday life to produce an understanding of risk which is contextualized in the broader sense of climbers’ lived experiences.
Chapter Three

Methodology
3.1 Introduction

Methods speak to the processes by which researchers collect and analyse data as reference to any one of the thousands of textbooks on ‘social science research methods’ testifies. Holdaway (2000) writes that methods are not discrete from other aspects of research and not wholly explicable by reference to the research question. Therefore, it is not sufficient for researchers to attend only to the research process in terms of aspects such as the design, sampling frame, control and measurement of variables and the selection of appropriate data collection techniques to ensure ‘good’ research. This is because measurement cannot be conceived independently of the social processes by which data are obtained. Hughes and Sharrock (1997) articulate why this is so when they state that research tools only operate within a ‘given set of assumptions about the nature of society, the nature of human beings’ (p.11). In other words, methods are not neutral tools in the sociologist’s armoury; they are inextricably linked to theory, epistemology and ontology and consequently, this obliges researchers to present a coherent rationale for their selection of a particular methodology. Bough (1990) writes that implicit in all research are a number of ontological, epistemological and theoretical positions which mould the research process and the claims made about data and knowledge. Cooper (2001) expounding on this point writes:

these [methodological] perspectives... are crucial in shaping the ways in which we investigate the world. They highlight particular features of the world as significant, they direct our attention towards certain forms of behaviour and they suggest certain kinds of research question. (Cooper, 2001, p. 4)

As such, researchers must justify their methodology, for methodology provides the basis by which readers may judge their knowledge claims (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). This means engaging in a critical reflection of the decisions taken at every level and stage of the research process
(Alvesson and Skolberg 2000; Clough and Nutbrown 2002; Cooper 2001). For Cooper, on a practical level, it also helps the researcher to keep control of the direction, meaning and implications of their work. However, Clough and Nutbrown also suggest that such paradigms are ultimately no more than 'post hoc frameworks for characterising the means and concerns of any given study' (p. 15). This, they argue, is because researchers make decisions in relation to the specific issues that confront them at a given time and not on the basis of an over-arching schema.

3.2 Origin of the Thesis

In reflecting on my experiences, I suggest that there is some truth in Clough and Nutbrown’s assertion; my methodological perspective seemed to owe as much to the issues and problems that arose during the research process as it did to an overarching methodological stance at the outset. For example, the original focus of my study was to examine the relationship between social class and gender on rock climbing practices and identities. Initially risk was just one of several potentially fruitful areas of interest but little more. I intended to employ Bourdieu’s (2003) concepts of habitus, field and capital in pursuit of my original goal and issued some 400 questionnaires as part of a collaborative project and one of several studies for my PhD. The results of this small-scale study were jointly presented at the Leisure Studies Association’s Annual Conference and subsequently this paper was published in an edited collection of articles arising from the conference (see, Allin, West, and Ibbetson 2005). Despite this small-scale success, I was not convinced that I had sufficient focus for a PhD and felt that I needed to do further preparatory work.

The aforementioned preparatory work for my PhD was intended to be another collaborative small-scale study to investigate the significance of risk
for a small sample of climbers based in the North of England. Given the significance of risk in contemporary British society, we were also interested to compare and contrast the perceptions of older and younger climbers and keen to examine how far their experiences and understanding of risk might differ due to their age and contrasting experiences of climbing. Through our personal experience of outdoor activities and contrary to common sense discourses about risk, we wanted to consider how far rock climbers perceived their sport as risky and themselves as risk-takers.

From my perspective, this small-scale study about risk would provide an insight into one dimension of what, at this point, I still envisaged would be a much larger study about class and gender relations in rock climbing. I deemed risk important because research typically demonstrates that men engage in higher levels of risk-taking and in more risk-taking activities than women (Byrnes, Miller, and Schafer 1999b) and secondly that there is an assumed class dimension to risk-taking whereby individuals in the lower socio-economic groups participate in more risky behaviours, (if only because they are deemed to be ‘at risk’ or ‘a risk’ by those with the power to define them as such).

3.3 Demarcating My PhD From My Collaborative Research

There are several ways in which the PhD research process overlaps with collaborative work undertaken with Linda Allin. Briefly, my collaboration with Linda included the development of the interview schedule, completion of two pilot interviews and seven main study interviews, a jointly presented conference paper and co-authored journal article juxtaposing perceptions of control with risk-taking in rock climbing (West and Allin, 2010). However, in compiling this list of joint work, I recognise that it depicts a linear process commencing with the identification of a research question, continuing with the
act of data collection and data analysis and culminating in the publication of a journal article.

In truth, this is neither a fair nor accurate reflection of our joint work or my PhD. Rather the collaborative work and the sole authored work intersected at specific points in the research process and diverged at others. The course of our work and my PhD is best characterised as iterative and as such, it reflects the conventions of qualitative inquiry. To illustrate this point, I refer to the co-authored paper. This was first submitted to a journal in 2005 but returned with a request for modification and crucially signposting, by one reviewer, to interrogate notions of identity more rigorously. Due to a change in my circumstances (change of role at work), we put on hold all serious work on our paper and I on my PhD for almost two years. During this two-year period, I undertook and transcribed an additional eight interviews to broaden the age range of the interviewees in the sample. Neither Linda nor I did any further work on our paper.

As it had been some four years since I had engaged in any systematic way with the literature about risk, I renewed my PhD studies by updating my knowledge and in the process completing a substantial rewrite of the first section of the journal article. I also reworked the discussion of results to include data from the recently interviewed eight interviewees; their responses were consistent with the earlier interviews undertaken previously with the climbers aged 24 years of age or younger and 60 years of age or older. At this point, Linda and I worked on the draft paper, reshaping it slightly. It was only once the paper had been submitted for peer review that I started work on coding the data for my PhD. To reiterate, the extent of the collaborative work with Linda and its influence on my thesis is evident in the journal article (West and Allin, 2010). It helped unpack the notion of control in the context of rock climbing and highlighted the importance of identity.
3.4 From ‘Pilot’ Studies to PhD

To return to my narrative account, Linda and I secured a small amount of internal University funding to progress this project which we commenced three months after I had registered for my PhD. By this stage I had already begun to review some literature in the area of risk and this literature review supported the development of a semi-structured interview schedule to explore the meaning that climbers attached to risk.

Between the two of us we completed five pilot interviews after which we encouraged our informants to comment on the questions as well as the overall aim of the study. This enabled us to assess whether our assumption that climbers sought to manage risk as opposed to court risk had some validity. We felt this was important because if the climbers had rejected our nuanced approach to risk in favour of a simple goal to court risk, the study would inevitably have taken a different focus. The data collection phase for this small-scale project progressed until we had interviewed eight climbers aged 24 years of age or younger and nine older climbers aged 60 years of age or more. In total, I conducted ten interviews and Linda carried out seven. It became apparent to me long before the data collection phase had ended that the quality and depth of material in these interviews was potentially consistent with that demanded of a PhD.

To summarise, the interview schedule and its development was a joint enterprise and the interview schedule was used unchanged as the main source of data for this PhD. Of the twenty-three interviews used in this PhD, I completed sixteen across all ages whereas Linda’s seven interviews were conducted with four climbers aged under twenty-four and three aged 60 or more (see table below). Pseudonyms replace the climbers’ real names.
Table 1 Summary of interviewees and interviewer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Coral</td>
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<td>Linda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
</tr>
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<td>Julie</td>
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<td>Linda</td>
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<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
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My decision to interview climbers of different ages reflected a broadening of the aims of my PhD whereas the collaborative project had a more narrowly defined purpose. In the first instance, it was to consider the extent to which climbers concerned themselves with the management of risk as opposed to risk-taking. In the second instance, the project aimed to explore what differences, if any, existed between the meanings younger and older climbers gave to risk. In our collaborative work, we did not do the latter but I do develop this aspect in this thesis. In respect of risk management, we considered the importance of risk management for climbers in relation to control in a jointly authored paper (West and Allin, 2010). Our paper is not reflective of the more nuanced and conceptually advanced account of risk I present in subsequent chapters of this thesis, but it does touch on some of the same themes notably risk management and identity.

In summary, some of the interview data was collected by Linda and analysed collaboratively culminating in the production of one journal article. This collaboration helped sensitise me to the principle of control and thanks to a reviewer's comments heightened my awareness of the potential relationship between risk, climbing identity and climbing practices. However, I made a conscious decision to complete our paper before I began to analyse the data reported in Chapters Four, Five, Six, Seven and Eight. This was done in an effort to demarcate our joint work from my PhD.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have shown why I believe that the first few months and years of my PhD did indeed reflect Clough and Nutbrown's claim that researchers respond to the myriad of problems and opportunities that arise during the research process; in doing so, theoretical and methodological approaches emerge. Having provided the background to the origins of this study, what I want to do in this chapter is to provide the reader with a summary of how I managed the research process to the completion of
my thesis. In keeping with the current sociological canon, I present a reflexive account of my methodology, one that acknowledges from the outset the twists and turns which characterise the research process.

3.5 A Reflexive Methodology

Reflexivity is not an automatic panacea for the age-old problems of both validating and generalising research data. Moreover, the value and purpose of reflexivity is sometimes unclear, a point which is wholly understandable given the multifarious ways in which the term is used. A number of writers use the term to describe the turn to self-reflexivity in people’s everyday lives (Beck 2003; Featherstone 2002; Giddens 1991). In this sense, self-reflexivity refers to the increasing extent to which people negotiate their lifestyles, choices and tastes in a way that they did not previously. Contemporary society requires people to make choices and decisions about their lives, to entertain risk as and when they do so, and to review and consider the personal consequences of those choices and their impact on those around them. Beck argues that the reason for this turn to self-reflexivity is a loss of the old reference points of class and gender and a loss of faith and trust in institutions and authority figures, for example, government and scientists respectively.

The notion of reflexivity in research is not completely divorced from this conception of self-reflexivity produced by writers such as Beck, Giddens and Featherstone. In a research context, methodological reflexivity describes the process whereby researchers interrogate their findings and the assumptions inherent in those findings. Methodological reflexivity has its roots in the emergence of feminist and poststructuralist critiques of what constitutes knowledge and who is privileged to lay claim to know things. For example, in one of the earliest feminist critiques of what she called, ‘malestream’ research,
Smith (1974) argued that research misrepresented women because it applied findings about male subjects to women and because the assumptions made about women were done so from a male perspective. One of the key goals of feminist research which emerged in the late 1970s was to challenge the misrepresentation of women and to do research for women not on women. Smith’s seminal work sparked a spate of writing which challenged the previously unquestioned relationship between subject and object (see for example, Stanley and Wise, 1983 and Stanley, 1990) characterised as feminist standpoint epistemology. Undoubtedly, work such as this helped to challenge the accepted tenets of sociological research and introduce a more critically reflexive approach to methodology. Reflexivity encouraged researchers to challenge the basis of their knowledge claims as well as question the effect of such claims on research participants and others potentially affected by the research.

However, mindful of Payne and Payne’s (2009) assertion that reflexive narratives can sometimes resemble a narcissistic exercise of ‘more interest to the author than the reader’ (p.194), I do not believe that it is helpful to present a detailed autobiography. Indeed, Payne and Payne (2009) continue that reflexivity should avoid ‘confessional accounts’ which promote the author’s version of events. Rather, reflexive accounts should ‘aim at assisting the reader to handle problematic elements and, in turn, to reflect upon them’ (p.194). In other words, my reflexive account should help the reader to judge the veracity of the claims I make about my data, and assess the ‘truthfulness’ of my account.

A commitment to reflexivity also requires the researcher to pay attention to the way that knowledge has been produced as well as focus on the impact that the researcher has had on this process. For exponents of this approach, like Alvesson and Skolberg (2000), for example, interpretation
should be the central focus of methodological reflexivity. This process obliges the researcher to interrogate empirical evidence in relation to measurement, collection, analysis and interpretation. Essentially, Alvesson and Skolberg call for an interpretation of interpretation, that is, a systematic reflection at all levels of research from the question through to the data and to the theoretical framework within which the researcher interprets the data. Furthermore, they argue that the researcher should situate themselves within this process by scrutinising their status within their particular research community which involves reflecting upon the intellectual, linguistic and cultural traditions of that community. In applying this approach to this study, this means recognising that ‘facts’ are not available ‘out there’ waiting to be captured by me, the researcher. Instead, it encourages me to reflect on the production of knowledge across all the stages of the research process.

In his analysis of reflexivity, May (1999) concludes that sociological research should reflect two types of reflexivity. The first is a reflexivity which acknowledges the subject position of the researcher and is termed endogenous reflexivity, the second interrogates the data by focusing on the disruptions to everyday and normal events which produce a reflexive understanding or referential reflexivity. Latour (1991) goes further, questioning the extent to which endogenous reflexivity, or what Latour terms, meta-reflexivity, provides a more authentic account than one where it is not practiced. For Latour, self-consciousness does not make a text more correct nor does it undo the positioning of subjects within a text. Rather it repositions and re-inscribes the text and its interpretation.

To illustrate this point, I refer to articles by Adkins, Williams and Roper. Adkins (2002) describes one instance of this in a critique made by Williams (1997) of her subject position (a woman ethnographer investigating the tourism industry). Williams argued, in his comparison of Adkins’s and Roper’s
(1994) work that Adkins had missed the reality of the structuring principle of work whereas the male ethnographer, Roper had got it. Roper explored masculinity in corporate culture and concluded that the structuring principle was male homosociality. For Williams, Roper’s consciously and referentially reflexive account validated Roper’s claims. In contrast, Williams accused Adkins of engaging in a less referential form of reflexivity which blinded her to the influence of male homosociality because her age and gender precluded her access. Subsequently, Adkins challenged Williams’ criticisms by questioning how it is that we know that Roper did not experience problems with female executives in the way that Adkins reported problems with male executives. Might Roper’s failure to acknowledge a problematic blind him to Adkins’ claim that heterosexuality, not homosociality, is the organising principle of social relations within corporations?

Perhaps the ‘truth’ if such a thing exists, lies in both accounts for as Griffin and Phoenix (1994) suggest, the narrative accounts individuals offer vary according to the subject position of the researcher and the consequent researcher-researched relationship. Such inconsistencies in the narrative accounts need not reflect a binary divide between truthfulness and falsehood, rather, they reflect the different stories individuals tell depending on the subject position they perceive the receiver (researcher) to occupy. Moreover, David and Sutton (2009) referring explicitly to the interview situation posit that interactions may be as much a function of ‘the product of the dynamics of the interview situation as it is a reflection of the interviewees’ everyday lives’ (p.89). The interrogation of Adkins’s and Roper’s work by Williams and the subsequent criticisms levelled by Adkins at Williams resonate beyond the confines of the research and reflexivities offered by those three authors. The issues raised in this three-way spat highlight tensions about what it means to be reflexive and to what end. They also highlight the potential for the creation
of a new hierarchical order which privileges a male voice over a female identity and more broadly, the powerful over the less powerful. Latour’s solution to this problem is to propose a version of reflexivity which places the subject at the centre and a search for reflexivity not in the author but in the world.

Whilst my sympathies lie with Latour’s assertion that reflexivity rests with the data and the research process as opposed to the author, it is worth highlighting the potential influence of my status on the research process. In this research, I presented myself as an academic researcher working at a university with an interest in understanding more about the way that rock climbers perceived risk. This undoubtedly put me in a privileged position relative to my informants for I was the person defining the research problem and asking the questions. However, my self-reported climbing status as a ‘bumble’, that is as novice or beginner climber, put me in the position of comprehending what my informants said but positioned my informants as both more knowledgeable and more experienced about the subject matter of climbing and risk in climbing.

Perhaps my bumble status also influenced my decision to talk to self-identified but not elite climbers? I cannot remember consciously thinking through this line of reasoning in selecting my informants, but I may have sub-consciously acknowledged that my relative lack of status as a climber may have constrained my access to elite climbers. Sub-consciously, I might also have questioned how far elite climbers would be interested to speak to me as a novice climber and secondly, concerned that my limited understanding about the social world of elite climbers would compromise the richness of the data.

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5 Given the collaborative nature of some aspects of the research process, I was unsure as to whether I should use ‘I’ or ‘We’ of ‘I’. Having highlighted the collaborative nature of the research process I have opted to use ‘I’ in most instances for clarity of expression.
analysis. Lastly, an absence of shared understanding about climbing in the interview situation might diminish the interviewer-interviewee relationship either by my misunderstanding elements of elite climber’s narratives or interrupting the flow of the narrative by querying and checking my understanding. However, as Grosz (1995) writes:

… the author’s intentions, emotions, psyche, and interiority are not only inaccessible to the readers, they are likely to be inaccessible to the author herself. (Grosz, 1995, p. 13)

Therefore, there has to be an element of scepticism about all aspects of the research process and perhaps as Mauthner (2003) suggests, it could be ‘more useful to think in terms of degrees of reflexivity’ (p. 425). All I can say at this point is that consciously, Linda and I agreed to interview a sample of committed but not elite climbers at the outset of our project because I wanted to tell the story of ordinary climbers, those with whom I had shared some experiences. I saw no reason to change this decision when I decided to use the same interviews plus others for my PhD.

3.6 Reflexivity and Theory

I want now to elaborate on how my theoretical and methodological stances influenced the research process. In essence, what I am trying to do at this stage is to highlight the potential impact of my epistemological and theoretical position on the research process, which as Holland (1999) suggests, helps to ‘expose the underlying assumptions on which arguments and stances are built’ (p. 467). Corbetta (2003) proposes that from a researcher’s ontological position should flow their epistemological and methodological stance and beyond this their choice of methods. The premise with which I began this study was that risk was something that exists both externally, that is, ‘independently of human consciousness, and at the same
time [as] a dimension which includes socially determined knowledge about reality’ (Danemark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, and Karlsson 2006, p.6) In other words, I understand risk not as an objective phenomena (positivist) nor as an entirely discursive phenomena (poststructuralist), but rather as a phenomena which is causally if variably related to other phenomena and which can be examined through reference to multiple, indirect events and experiences.

My reading of risk means that I do not offer a single definition of risk because I do not believe this is possible. But I do recognise that the concept is, in and of itself meaningful, and that whilst individuals attach different meanings to risk, these meanings can be understood in relation to an individual’s subject position and explored through reference to their personal experiences and narratives. To this end, my ontological and epistemological position is that of a weak constructionist. I would add to this, that our understanding of the material world is only ever partial. Undoubtedly, my ontological reading of risk and more broadly, ‘the world out there’, influenced not only my theoretical and conceptual frameworks but the way I reflected on the literature to help make sense of my data. For example, I have drawn on literature from quantitative and qualitative psychology as well as more traditional qualitative sociological approaches. Additionally, I employed contrasting theoretical positions (including functionalist, see Luhmann (1979) in Chapter Seven, neo-Marxist see Lefebvre (2004) in Chapter Eight and Young (1987) from a linguistic tradition in Chapter Six). I accept that some might accuse me of theoretical eclecticism but my approach to theory is practical or pragmatic in orientation. I believe that theory is a tool by which to better understand data and that different approaches contribute variously and variably to a deeper insight, in this specific instance, about the mediating effect of risk on my informants’ motivation for climbing.
Furthermore, the relationship between methodology and method as espoused by Corbetta (2003) is evident in the adoption of a qualitative approach to research and the method of semi-structured interviews to collect data. I did consider ethnography as a potential approach because it is commonly used in studies about risk/adventure/alternative sports (Celsi, Randall, and Leigh 1993; de Leseleuc, Gleyse, and Marcellini 2002; Donnelly and Young 1999; Holyfield 1999; Kiewa 2002; Laurendeau 2006a; Olivier 2006; Stranger 1999). However, I ruled out an ethnographic approach because my status as a bumbly would have denied access to most self-identified climbers who would climber much harder grades. I would have occupied the position of outsider and potentially of too low status for elite climbers to want to speak to me. Therefore, whilst such a position is valid in its own right, it might have resulted in much less rich data. Moreover, I was unsure about participating in an activity where I could have responsibility for other people’s lives at the same time as trying to observe and listen to what was going on around me. This posed a distinct ethical consideration heightened by my relative lack of climbing competence. I identified a further option later in my PhD work, namely narrative interviewing, but as I explain below, with regret and without the benefit of hindsight, I did not adopt this approach (see section 3.8).

3.7 Sample

The sample comprised 23 rock climbers from the United Kingdom all based in the North of England (Cumbria, Lancashire, Tyne & Wear, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire). All were white, nine women and fourteen men. The youngest climber was 20 years of age and the oldest 77. Given the age range of the climbers interviewed I had not assumed that all the older climbers would still be climbing, but a majority were; the
exceptions were Hattie (77), Jessie (68) and Aubrey (70). Thirteen informants were single and ten married. There were two married couples, Aubrey and Jessie and Rob and Sarah; all four were interviewed separately. All those below pensionable age were in paid employment or else full-time students. Twelve participants had children, but only two interviewees had children under the age of 16. A summary table of the participants’ employment status, age, grade climbed, and familial status can be found in Appendix V.

Potential interviewees were identified via a popular internet climbing forum, at climbing walls and crags and via a snowball method of sampling, whereby interviewees suggested other informants. Many more climbers indicated their readiness to be involved in this study than we could accommodate. This, I suggest, is testimony to the willingness of climbers to share their stories and to their generosity in giving up their time to do so. Only two refused a request to be interviewed, as they were about to return home having holidayed in the Lake District. They were, however, willing to be interviewed at a later stage in their home if I could travel but to reduce costs and travel I declined their offer. I contacted the ‘middle-aged’ climbers in the same way after Linda and I completed the original fifteen interviews with older and younger climbers. Again I had many more people who offered to talk to me than I could accommodate.

In terms of my sampling frame, more than grade climbed or period of time involved in the sport, I wanted to secure a group of interviewees who were committed climbers. On a conscious level, I was also keen to represent the accounts of ‘ordinary’ climbers whose voices are heard less often in respect of risk. More commonly it is the voices of elite climbers through biographical or auto-biographical narratives who define risk-taking and risk activities or else their exploits are feted or lambasted in the media depending on the success, failure or foolhardiness of the climb. Crucially, we did not
want interviewees like us, for whom climbing was an infrequent pastime. According to the Creyer et al. (2004), novice and inexperienced performers have a different understanding of risk (under or over-estimating risk) in comparison to more experienced performers. Hence I wanted to talk to committed climbers who would, by the level of their commitment, have engaged with the notion of risk in a significant and considered way.

Ironically, given that identity would materialise as a central concept of this thesis, I have to admit that its significance was not considered fully at the time we decided to interview committed climbers. I wanted self-identified climbers but I did not foresee the significance of identity. Therefore, in making my selection of potential informants, I asked each the question: ‘Do you see yourself as a climber or as someone who climbs’? I considered only those informants who defined themselves as ‘a climber’ and tested that hunch informally with climbers known to me, that the distinction between ‘a climber’ and ‘someone who climbs’ differentiated between committed and less committed climbers in the way I thought it would.

Furthermore, given our focus on the meaning of risk, I interviewed only those climbers who were, or had at some point, privileged traditional or adventure climbing over other forms of snow free climbing (bolted/sport or bouldering) and mountaineering. Traditional climbing is deemed more risky relative to bouldering which calls for high technical ability but where the moves are performed at a low height and without the need of a rope. Traditional climbing is also perceived as more risky than sport climbing where a climber clips into bolts pre-drilled into the rock face; this type of climbing is very common in Europe but relatively rare in the UK and arguments about the ‘ethics’ of sport climbing are often furiously played out on internet forums.6

6 Although the popular climbing literature is replete with arguments about the relative merits of different forms of climbing (see for example, a posting started by ‘Mark B’ on the biggest
However, traditional climbing is seen as less risky than mountaineering that is, 
climbing on snow and ice. Most of the interviewees had some experience of 
at least one other form of climbing alongside traditional climbing and they 
often drew on these experiences during the interview. This proved helpful as I 
was able to juxtapose their understanding of risk in different contexts, 
providing a more nuanced account of risk. This was not something I had not 
anticipated at the outset.

In deciding exactly whom to interview, Linda and I were guided by one 
of the original themes in our research proposal which was to explore 
differences between older and younger climbers’ perceptions of risk. As such, 
in selecting informants the first group of interviewees were either aged 
between 18-24 years old or aged over 60 years of age. This gave a 
sufficiently large difference in age to compare and contrast older and younger 
interviewees’ responses. However, the decision to interview climbers in these 
age brackets was not only borne of a desire to achieve a large difference in 
the age of climbers. I also considered ethical factors, such as a need to seek 
parental/carers consent in order to interview climbers aged seventeen or under 
and given time considerations, this determined that only climbers aged 
eighteen or older would be interviewed (the youngest was actually 20). In 
setting the older climbers’ lower age limit at 60 years old, I had in mind the 
period of time when they could have been introduced to climbing. The 
interviews with the older climbers took place between 2004 and 2005. Aged 
between 60 and 77, they would have been born between 1926 and 1944.

This is significant as it contrasts their childhood experiences in the 
decades between 1930-1956 with the younger climbers’ childhood

web-based climbing forum community, UKClimbing.com my informants voiced few opinions 
experiences of the late 1980s and early 1990s. More generally, the immediate pre and post-war periods contrast sharply with the economic, social and cultural conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Furthermore, the experiences of individuals who learned to climb in the 1950s would have contrasted sharply with the experiences of climbers aged under 24 who would have been introduced to climbing sometime in the 1980s or 1990s. When compared alongside one another, climbing equipment in those two eras (a thirty to thirty-five year gap) is almost unrecognisable (Smith 1998). Whereas climbers in the 1950s fashioned their own nuts, climbers in the 1980s and 1990s bought mass produced, safety-tested and conforming to British Standard ‘gear’. Friends or cams (sprung devices that contract and then expand) alongside peanuts (very small nuts), climbing harnesses, helmets, belay devices and ropes all make climbing a potentially very different experience as the older climbers having lived through the changes were quick to point out during the course of the interviews.

For example, whilst the older interviewees climbed in an era where the rule was you did not climb up anything you could not climb down, and you could not rely on gear to protect you in the event of a fall. The development of reliable gear for protection during the 1960s has made it possible for climbers to dangle on gear and take rests (known as ‘dogging’); such practices were inconceivable prior to 1960 (Pennequin 2001). By interviewing older climbers who had very different gear available to them in comparison to that available to the younger climbers, I hoped to explore how far this gave rise to differences in the meanings they attached to risk and to their climbing practices as well as to the way they framed their identities as a climber.

Having completed the interviews with the older and younger climbers, I took the decision to broaden my sample and include climbers aged between 24 and 60 years of age for my PhD in order to widen my inquiry.
Consequently I interviewed an additional six interviewees aged between 34 and 54 years of age. Although I remained interested in potential differences between the narratives of older and younger climbers, I wanted to extend my remit to include middle-aged climbers rather than exclude a climber because they were too young or too old.

I do not claim any particular representativeness of my informants for climbers in general, but I tried to identify a diverse range of climbers with different levels of participation, competence (measured by grade climbed and/or led), and years of participation. In asking the question, ‘whose voice was not heard’? I find myself reflecting that there were no climbers from Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) groups, fewer female than male climbers and relatively few climbers from Socio-Economic Classifications (NS-SEC) V-VIII. Having raised the issue of possible missing voices in my study, I should make the point that climbers from BME backgrounds as well as climbers from ‘working class’ backgrounds are typically under-represented as rock climbers. Data from the British Mountaineering Equity Survey (2006) indicates that of the 1000 respondents, a majority of climbers in the UK were young (25-44 years of age), white and male, whilst SportEngland’s (2009) Active People Survey Factsheet Series indicates that approximately twice as many mountaineering participants fall into NS-SEC I-IV as V-VIII. Overall, the climbers interviewed for this thesis are not unrepresentative of the wider climbing community.

Although I use the terms older/younger climber, male/female climber, I recognise that in so doing I limit and narrow the identities of my informants. As Skeggs (1997) writes, identity is always plural and never singular. Therefore, when I use terms such as ‘older male climbers’ I caution the reader against making an assumption that all ‘older male climbers’ share a set of common experiences. Instead, where I employ such terms, I do so when the
evidence suggests a degree of common understanding exists in relation to a specific issue. Otherwise, I have applied pseudonyms to secure my informants anonymity and given their age at the time of interview to identify them in my thesis.

3.8 The Interview Schedule

I employed a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of 14 questions with a number of prompts to secure a common set of data. The questions reflected a broad focus on the meanings climbers attached to risk, potential divergence in younger and older climbers’ understanding and experiences of risk and the relationship between my informants’ climbing practices and the way they imagined risk. As such, the interview schedule contained questions about the interviewees’ understanding of risk generally, risk when climbing and the reasons for their initial involvement in the sport. Recognising the importance of temporality, it also included questions about how far the informants’ approach to risk had changed over time as well as how far they perceived their climbing, childhood and other experiences as risky both at the time, and on subsequent reflection. Given contemporary discourses around ‘helicopter parenting’ and risk avoidance in contemporary society which has severely limited children’s ‘freedom to roam and explore’ (Byron 2008), I also asked the interviewees to tell to me about the types of boundaries imposed on them as children and by whom. A copy of the final interview schedule can be found in Appendix III and copies of the pilot schedules in Appendix I and Appendix II.

This was not an exercise in narrative interviewing although some questions solicited information about the interviewees’ past and current personal experiences as well as their understanding of risk. With hindsight, and knowing now how my research question was to alter over the course of
my research, I believe that I should have embraced this approach more fully. However, as I have explained elsewhere (see section 3.2), at the time of carrying out the interviews I viewed these interviews as a partial rather than a complete source of data for my thesis. On reflection, I missed an opportunity to adopt this approach.

Although I did not adopt narrative interviewing, my interview schedule did include one key feature of narrative interviews which was questions about the interviewees’ experiences past and present. For example, the interview schedule included the following questions: ‘What was the riskiest thing you did before you started rock climbing’?; ‘What was your riskiest climb’?; ‘Did you think what you were doing was risky at the time’? On analysing the data, I noted that questions which encouraged my informants to recall concrete experiences secured more detailed responses than questions rooted in the abstract. For example, a question such as ‘What does the term, risk, mean to you’? typically elicited shorter responses than the question, ‘What was your riskiest climbing experience’? In summary, I obtained more detailed responses where the interviewees had an opportunity to describe their experiences as opposed to answering abstract questions. This observation is supported by the broader social science literature. For example, Popay and Groves (2000) argue that narratives hold the key to deepening our understanding of specific issues (health in their specific instance). Additionally, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) compared data secured from an interview schedule which included traditional ‘why’ questions with data using an interview schedule with questions designed to facilitate the interviewees’ recall of personal experiences. They noted that the data was richer and offered new insights when interviewees were encouraged to recall their experiences.
Additionally, other critiques of experience-focused interviewing or narrative interviewing have suggested that such an approach may help to mediate the inevitable power imbalance that exists between researcher and researched. This is because informants find it easier to respond to questions about their experiences than to abstract questions. This puts interviewees, particularly those without comparable levels of cultural and social capital to the interviewer, in a more privileged position than interviewees posed more abstract questions (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Mason 2002). Moreover, in responding to questions about their experiences, my informants had the opportunity to take on the position of raconteur, to respond in their own language, to narrate events (Bates 2004; Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000).

I suggest that many climbers are familiar with taking the role of raconteur; they are used to telling stories. However, I accept that male climbers may be more used to doing so and hence this subject position may have presented a greater opportunity for male climbers than for female climbers. This was particularly evident in respect of age. Whilst there was little difference between older male and female climbers, there was a marked difference between the younger climbers. The experiences recounted by the young male climbers were more detailed than those recalled by the younger female climbers. This difference could be for several reasons. First, male climbers may have more climbing experiences to talk about, in other words their climbing experience was greater. Secondly they may have rehearsed those experiences previously and therefore been comfortable recalling particular events and experiences. Lastly, stories about their experiences may help construct a more clearly defined sense of self and identity as a male climber. For women, identity is invariably plural and multiple.
The significance of ‘experience’ is not solely restricted to issues of depth and quality of data or to the sensitivities of the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched. Scott (2002) writes:

It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. (Scott, 1992, p.26)

Crucially, Scott suggests that experience is central to the constitution of identity. Whilst recognising that access to experience is problematic, it remains central to the production of self and therefore of knowledge. Problematising experience means acknowledging that individuals construct and reconstruct their experiences, giving meaning to those experiences as they do so. As such, Scott suggests that meaning has already been given to experience, and some clear examples of the relationship between experience and identity emerged during the interviews. For example, Leonard explained his commitment to climbing in his youth as a reflection of ‘his generations’ belief that a nuclear war would overtake them all. For that reason he ‘didn’t bother with a career’. Similarly, Mark’s highly self-critical stance toward his early ‘silly’ climbing practices, defined by a poor belaying technique, contrasted sharply with his description of more recent experiences which emphasised his current identity as a ‘safe climber’.

As a successful PhD candidate wrote:

... knowledge is not the product of experience but rather that experience produces the knowing subject. (Clark-King 2003, p.46)

In Clark-King’s opinion, it is possible for researchers to grasp knowledge in a similar vein to one’s informants because experience only exists in relation to a pre-existing interpretive grid that requires communication. This aligns with Crossley’s (2001) consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s work about communication which he considers to be both pre-discursive and discursive. Merleau-Ponty, writes Crossley, maintains that we access the world through
our bodies and therefore our experience is embodied, but our experiences are framed, reframed and given meaning through communication. This can be pre-discursive, that is, thoughts or discursive, that is the spoken word. Therefore, although I was not present at any of the events described by my informants, I was the audience for their account of those events. Given my exploration of the relationship between experience and identity, the latter is probably the more crucial aspect in this instance. Mattingly and Garro (1994) assert that narrative is especially useful because, through concrete events, it makes knowable the relationship between an individual’s ‘inner world of desire and motive to an outer world of observable actions and states of affairs’ (p.771). In other words, narratives may provide an opportunity to understand the relationships between identities, experience, and meaning within broader structures and discourses of power including gender, class and age. Moreover, as Popay and Groves (2000) suggest, narratives can also provide an historical perspective on identity formation played out against the informant’s life and broader social, economic and cultural circumstances. This latter point is important in the context of this study because it affords an insight into the process by which a climber self-identifies as a ‘good’ or ‘safe’ climber as opposed to a ‘bad’ or ‘silly’ climber.

3.9 The Interviews

The interviews lasted between forty minutes and one hour fifty minutes with the interviews with the older climbers typically lasting longer. The interviews were carried out either in the interviewees’ homes or a place of their choice such as a work or social venue. I opened by thanking the interviewee for giving up their time to participate in the study and explained the purpose of the study. The study’s aims were presented in a very general manner as being to explore the meanings attached to risk by rock climbers and that I
hoped to publish the work in academic journals. I assured the informants that anything they said would be treated in confidence with secure data storage on computer, accessible only by the two researchers and the person transcribing the interviews (this later point applied to the older and younger climbers only as I transcribed the interviews for the ‘middle-aged’ climbers).

Before the interview commenced the interviewees read and signed a consent form which described the interview process, data management and crucially informed them of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point. Participants also completed a short questionnaire giving details about their occupation, familial status, age and a brief summary of their climbing participation and grade climbed. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix IV and a summary of the biographical information in Appendix V. All of the interviewees appeared genuinely interested in the research project and very willing to respond to the interview questions. Skeggs (1994) maintains that a degree of reciprocity of experience in the research process is ideal, whereby research participants enjoy the interview process. Although the interviewees were exceptionally open and willing to describe their experiences, I remained sensitive to potentially difficult situations which the informants revealed. This was not something I’d thought much about beforehand but from reviewing the transcripts it is evident that I refrained from pursuing lines of inquiry about serious accidents or falls. For example, I did not probe for more information about how the interviewees’ felt about serious accidents or deaths, beyond asking if such events had changed their approach to climbing unless the interviewees offered to talk further about these.
3.10 Data Analysis

In the final section of this Chapter, I describe the process by which I progressed from the interview transcripts to the account you will read in Chapters Four to Eight below. This process was far from linear; rather it reflected the cyclical and iterative nature of the research process with attendant blind alleys. For example, although I begin this section by restating my research questions and underlying conceptual framework, both emerged during the course of, not prior to, my analysis of the interview transcripts. To reiterate, my central research questions are:

1. How does risk mediate the interviewees’ reasons for rock climbing?
2. How does risk mediate the interviewees’ climbing practices and identities?

My conceptual framework consists of two facets of risk, namely, risk-taking and risk activities. In respect of risk-taking, I have developed a binary model of qualified and unqualified risk-taking whilst in respect of risk activities I have identified a further binary model, namely, ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities. In this section, I will explain how I finalized my research questions, developed my conceptual model, and determined an organizational framework by which to present my data.

Unfortunately, and in keeping with many studies, I have omitted a significant quantity of data relative to the amount I collected. Decisions about which data to include and which to omit, in itself poses a potential challenge. The glib answer to a question about the thought process behind the inclusion of some data at the expense of other data is to say that I included the data that aligned best with the research question. On one level, I am happy to argue that this was indeed the case. For example, the depth of material about risk in climbing meant that I have omitted most of the data about the
interviewees’ childhood experiences. However, on another level, I am more circumspect in my comments, for I recognise that ultimately the lens through which you, the reader, view the data is not the interviewees’ but rather is structured and filtered through my reading of their accounts. I am also conscious that my presentation of the data is made within the norms and expectations of my own academic discipline. Indeed, the fact that I have sought to adopt an open and self-reflexive approach in this Chapter is testimony to the influence of the current sociological canon about research methodology.

My first attempt to code and organize the data was made within the context of the research proposal submitted by Linda Allin and myself to explore how age mediated the meanings attached to risk by a small group of climbers based in the North of England. Needing to delineate the boundaries of the research article from the PhD, we confined the research article to challenging the common sense perception that climbers take risks by exploring the significance they attached to risk management, risk assessment and notions of control when climbing. On the advice of the first set of reviewers, we also developed our analysis of the relationship between the meanings climbers’ attached to risk and their climbing identity (West and Allin 2010). This marks a point at which the jointly authored work breaks with my PhD thesis. Although we re-wrote the article in response to the reviewers’ comments and incorporated data from the additional interviews I carried out with ‘middle-aged’ climbers, the article’s focus remained unchanged. As such, the research questions, conceptual model and organizational framework contained in this PhD thesis reflect a much more sophisticated and nuanced approach to risk in rock climbing. Moreover, although this had been a motivating factor in the original project proposal, we did not consider the
significance of a temporal dimension in our article so that I could develop this idea in my thesis.

Collaborative research is hardly uncommon in the social sciences (witness the number of jointly authored journal articles), however, at this point it is worth rehearsing some issues for data analysis arising as a consequence of two different interviewees. Aware of potential issues of joint working, Linda and I spent time agreeing the questions included in the schedule, and confirming the information sought from each question. We piloted the interviews separately and then swopped recordings to compare content. We did this until we were satisfied that we were obtaining relevant and sufficient data about risk to progress our research goals. Subsequently, the production of a journal article required us to work together to listen, read and confirm the transcript content and develop a shared understanding of the data.

On completion of all the interviews and subsequent analysis of all the transcripts for this thesis, I checked to see if I had favoured accounts from the climbers I had interviewed. I grouped the climbers into younger men, younger women and older men and compared the number of times I referred to them in thesis. On reviewing Chapters Four to Eight, I noted that whilst there were variations in the number of times the younger male and female climbers were mentioned these differences did not appear to be linked to the interviewer. I did note differences in the older men, however, I mention Aubrey 50% more frequently than the other four older male interviewees (Brian, Doug, Leonard and Maurice). However, Aubrey’s interview was much longer than the other interviewees perhaps because he was the most skilled of the older men interviewed and therefore had a greater wealth of experience on which to call. Certainly, his anecdotes outdid all of the other interviewees which may have drawn me to him.

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7 To recap, I interviewed all the middle age range climbers and all the older female climbers.
It is obviously very difficult for me to determine the affect of a second interviewer on my analysis, but in a final attempt to confirm that my data fairly and faithfully reflected the interviewees’ accounts, I asked Linda to read drafts of Chapters Four to Eight and confirm that the analysis presented here reflected her understanding of her interviewees’ transcripts.

Our article had explored one aspect of risk, undoubtedly an important one, namely the notion of control. Having submitted the article for publication, I began a more detailed exploration of the data for my PhD. I directed my initial efforts at trying to identify and describe themes in the transcripts linked to risk, paying particular attention to any evidence of a temporal dimension. This reflected my interest in age differences in climbers’ experiences and perceptions of risk. In addition, I looked for similarities and differences in the responses of male and female climbers. I constructed descriptive summaries of the data which I organised around broad areas focused on risk. These descriptive summaries included space/place, fit bodies, moving on the rock, injured bodies, protecting the body of the rock. This allowed me to focus on risk in a variety of dimensions and contexts, and explore how the meanings my informants attached to risk aligned with identities as a ‘good’ or ‘safe’ climber. It also gave me an opportunity to immerse myself in my data.

I had made some progress. I had a considerable quantity of data which I had coded and I had drafted somewhere in the region of 40,000 words in descriptive summaries. However, my on-going frustration during this period was that I had yet to uncover an original contribution to knowledge which defines a PhD. After several false starts, and what now seems by chance rather than design, finally by immersing myself in the narratives about risk, I was able to work through the conceptual model which underpins this thesis (see Chapter Four). This process of immersion in the data was a crucial part of the research process and not only supported the development of my
conceptual model but came to typify my approach to the analysis of the interview transcripts. I adopted a close reading of the text searching for subtle changes in content to reflect a nuanced reading of the meanings attached to risk and their juxtaposition with the reasons stated for climbing.

More specifically, by focusing my reading and re-reading of the transcripts on risk in a climbing context, I was able to distinguish between two facets of risk, namely risk-taking and risk activities. Risk activities speak to practice, in the sense of what it is climbers do when they climb, or prepare to climb juxtaposed with what they deemed non-climbing risk activities. Through this approach I differentiated between ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities. Whilst risk activities are aligned with practice, risk-taking aligns with identity (as a climber and in other arenas) and I delineated between qualified and unqualified risk-taking. Conceptualising risk in this way provided the tools by which to explore what was at that time my sole and broad research question, namely how does risk mediate the practices and identities of this small group of rock climbers.

The advantages and disadvantages of conceptual models is well rehearsed in the literature (Sartori 1984). Their value and purpose is to differentiate between things, in this specific instance, I have differentiated between risk-taking and risk activities. As Sartori explains, concepts can be empirical or theoretical but they are always rendered meaningful by theory. Moreover, as Sartori (1976) illustrated through his ladder of abstraction the degree of abstraction associated with a particular concept renders it applicable to more or fewer categories. The concepts of ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities as well as qualified and unqualified risk-taking are relatively abstract and thus have few properties but can be applied to many cases. As such, I employ this conceptual framework as a means of unpacking my data throughout my discussion of results. Having said this, and in keeping with
Goertz (2006), I take a ‘causal, ontological and realist view of concepts’.

Goertz continues:

It is an ontological view because it focuses on what constitutes a phenomenon. It is causal because it identifies ontological attributes that play a key role in causal hypotheses, explanations, and mechanisms. It is realist because it involves an empirical analysis of the phenomenon. My approach stresses that concept analysis involves ascertaining the constitutive characteristics of a phenomenon that have central causal powers. These causal powers and their related causal mechanisms play a role in our theories. A purely semantic analysis of concepts, words, and their definitions is never adequate by itself. (Goertz 2006, p.2)

My personal view of causality is that it is particular not universal; partial not complete; and more circular and spiral than linear. However, although I had a crucial element of my thesis, my conceptual framework did not provide an over-arching organisational framework. Neither were my descriptive summaries of the data fit for purpose. Ultimately, although I included significant elements of these descriptive summaries in the final draft, their biggest role was in helping to construct the over-arching conceptual framework by which to present my data and allowing me to immerse myself in the data.

At this point, I returned to my research question and started to review my descriptive summaries. In a moment of inspiration I revisited what it was that I wanted to say about climbers and risk. From the outset of this thesis, I wanted to reflect critically on popular discourses which often portray rock climbers as adrenaline-seeking junkies. I did so because this was in direct contrast to my knowledge of ‘ordinary’ or ‘average’ (as opposed to elite) rock climbers. In my experience, I found such climbers to be meticulous in their preparation, obsessive about assessing as well as managing risk and rarely had I heard them citing ‘risk’ per se as a primary, or even secondary reason for climbing.
If climbers did not climb to take risks, nor perceive the activity as risky, then precisely why did they climb? In asking this question, I had my primary organising question: why did climbers’ climb? In due course I identified these reasons as one, a desire to be outside (space/place), two, the physical sensations from climbing (climbing bodies), next, relationships (social and familial) and lastly, thrill, challenge and mastery. Subsequently, I used the reasons given for participation to do a number of things, first to illustrate the significance of risk for this group of climbers. Secondly, and more specifically, to show how risk articulated with their motivations for participation and thirdly, to demonstrate how risk influenced their climbing practices and finally, to reveal how the meanings they attached to risk helped to shape their identity as a rock climber. This approach provided an holistic account of the meanings my informants attached to risk, the significance of these meanings for the construction of a climbing identity, and the effect their perception of risk had on their climbing practices.

Initially, I began with the idea of writing two large chapters; one about the informants’ motivations for climbing and how these articulated with the meaning climbers’ attached to risk and the second, about climbers’ practices and identities and how these articulated with climbers’ constructions of risk. However, it soon became apparent that this did not work because risk acted as a fulcrum on which motivations, practices and identities revolved and pivoted. In other words, by divorcing climbers’ motivations from their identities and practices, I seemed to lose sense of the way in which risk articulated with climbers’ motivations and identities. Moreover, my goal was to show that whilst risk was important to climbers it was not their main motivation. In the final instance, it made sense to focus on the motivational factors the climbers’ cited and explore their practices and identities within this context.
Having confirmed the overall organisation of the thesis and the process by which this emerged, I want to describe the manner by which I moved from the raw data and my descriptive summaries of this data to the discussion of results you find in Chapters Five to Eight. In the first instance, I reviewed the interview transcripts for references to the particular theme on which I was focused and I cut and pasted these excerpts into a new document file. As I did so I sought to ensure that the ‘true’ meaning in which the informants made their statements was not lost. This sometimes meant including longer excerpts to provide an appropriate context for their commentary. I then worked with my new document to familiarise myself with the data on any given theme. I started the process of writing quite early because I found that it helped, indeed forced, me to make connections in a way that was not always apparent where I restricted my actions to simply coding and re-ordering the data. I suggest this was because the excerpts often contained several ideas wrapped up in just a few sentences and therefore, it was not always easy to reorganize the data into discrete coding systems. In summary, writing descriptive summaries of my transcripts helped crystallize the boundaries of particular themes as well as elicit connections between those themes.

On completing the descriptive summaries of my data and having determined the likely boundaries of my data for any given theme, I returned to the literature to move my analysis from one that was purely descriptive to one that was conceptually and theoretically grounded. I had already reviewed the literature on most of the themes sometime before I began to analyse my data, and I had completed substantial pieces of writing on ‘risk’, ‘the sporting body’, and space/place. The exception to this rule was the literature about relationships. I had not reviewed much literature in this area prior to undertaking analysis of the data. Ultimately, I was compelled to review new literature across all my themes for two reasons. First, my initial reading of the
literature did not cover all of the themes uncovered by my analysis, for example, ‘trust’ emerged as a significant theme in my reading of relationships and secondly, I needed to update my review of the literature, for example, several new studies had been published on risk and ‘edgework’ since I had conducted my initial review of literature about risk.

To this end, my approach was neither inductive nor deductive nor was it one characterized by linearity. Rather, it was a circular process as I worked between my data and the literature, moving back to my data and on again to the literature until I felt comfortable that my account reflected the over-arching narratives of my informants and was conceptually and theoretically secure. My goal was to present a reasoned and reasonable account of my data which demonstrated the connections in my data and the intra- and inter-relatedness of my themes. For example, although I began by exploring the themes of mastery, challenge and thrill-seeking separately, it quickly became apparent that they were often linked. The writing process was crucial to my attempts to identify connections between different themes. Whilst the coding process supported the development of key themes, the writing process was crucial to the development of connections within the data. Aborted attempts to write up my data sent me back to my codes to review my original analysis and re-present my ideas, this time with more transparent linkages between my themes. For instance, whilst I sought to tease out the underlying issues associated with mastery, challenge and thrill-seeking, I recognized that although thrill-seeking was underpinned by novelty and glamour, it was also related to challenge and mastery. Yet, challenge and mastery were motivational influences in their own right.

Working between the data and the literature, I reorganized and rewrote my initial descriptive summaries to reflect my developing and revised understanding of thrill-seeking, mastery and challenge incorporating the
literature to unpack my analysis. Additionally, my conceptual framework, namely qualified and unqualified risk-taking and ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities, provided an over-arching framework at every point in my writing. Furthermore, I sought to review my data to expose any underlying issues pertaining to gender or age. These usually emerged as I was writing my descriptive accounts of the transcripts, but I reviewed the evidence at least once more in light of my engagement with the literature and reconstructed analysis.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) provide one of the most oft-cited and comprehensive accounts of qualitative data analytic techniques. They write at great length about different forms of coding, for example, open, axial and selective, describe the stages involved in moving from description, to conceptual ordering to theorizing and spell out the value of micro-level analysis and the importance of seeing relationships in the data. Underpinning their widely used idea is the notion that theory is derived from data generated via a systematic approach to data analysis. In reflecting on Strauss and Corbin’s detailed account, I recognize some aspects of their approach in my own, but feel my approach was more eclectic.

This eclecticism depended on the complexity of the theme or concept, my familiarity with the ideas or emergent themes prior to starting my analysis and the degree to which ‘new’ and unanticipated themes emerged during my coding and analysis of the data. For example, having already drafted several thousand words summarizing the literature about space/place, I drew on theoretical models espoused by Lefebvre of which I was already aware, to explore my data. In contrast, as I examined the way that risk articulated with my climbers’ personal and familial relationships, ‘trust’ surfaced as a significant concept underpinning my informants’ narratives. Therefore, although I worked between data and literature and found this to be an iterative
process, I did not adopt a uniform approach in so doing. Given the nature of my data, my research questions, sub-questions, concepts and themes I felt that I needed some flexibility in how I analysed my transcripts. As such, whilst I was aware of different possibilities pertaining to data analytic techniques, notably Strauss and Corbin (1992), I did not seek to identify a preferred model. Instead I elected to analyse my data in the way that I have described because it best helped me make sense of my data.

This process of presenting my data begins in the next chapter where I introduce my conceptual framework and continues through Chapters Five to Eight. In these latter chapters I use my conceptual framework to underpin my analysis of how risk mediates the reasons given by climbers for climbing.
Chapter Four

Re-conceptualising Risk in Rock Climbing
4.1 Introduction

Over time, different academic disciplines (engineering, economics, statistics, and medicine) have variously sought to calculate, assess, and model risk-taking, whilst others (psychology) have tried to explore the motivations behind so-called risk-taking. What I want to do in this thesis is to explore the relationship between the apparent motivation to engage in risk-taking behaviour and the calculation, assessment and management of risk from a sociological perspective. I will demonstrate how climbers' reflections about their personal approach to risk as well their generalised perception of risk were intimately entwined with the production and reproduction of their identity as a climber. In so doing I will show how the meanings climbers attach to risk and their climbing practices help to produce and reproduce a climbers' identity or rather identities.

The story that I seek to tell in this thesis is underpinned by a conceptual model of risk I developed through analysis of my data (the process of which was described in the previous chapter). This conceptual model is both drawn from my data and subsequently employed to analyse my data. In other words, this model is both a product of my data and employed to produce my data. In this Chapter, I present this conceptual model as a precursor to my discussion of my results. I begin by reflecting on risk and drawing attention to a distinction between risk-taking and risk activities. In respect of risk-taking, I propose that this is best understood by considering qualified as opposed to unqualified risk-taking. In respect of risk activities I suggest that the dimension of ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities helps interrogate so-called risky activities or practices.

This distinction between risk-taking and risk activities and my use of the terms qualified and unqualified as well as ordinary and extra-ordinary reflects the theoretical influence of Mary Douglas's work in this thesis. I do not
intend to rehearse Douglas’s arguments again as I have done this already in
Chapter Two, but I draw attention to her work about risk and blame in
particular. I believe that Douglas’s work about risk and blame and the
symbolic role played by blame in the construction of in groups and out groups
resonates with the distinctions I draw between qualified and unqualified risk-
takers.

4.2 Differentiating Between Risk-takers and Risk Activities

Research shows that the meanings attached to risk vary depending on
a myriad of factors that include someone’s identities as well as the situation or
context in which they experience or reflect on risk (Lupton 2004; Lupton and
Tulloch 2002). As such, I intend to examine the way in which climbers’
understanding of risk and embodied risk-taking is influenced by their identities
outside climbing, for example, as fathers, mothers, children, by being young,
middle-aged or older, by being male or female, a novice or an experienced
participant or having a particular level of competence.

Before I begin to tackle some of the very complex areas mentioned
above I want first to examine critically the assumptions about risk, risk-taking
and so-called risk activities. The term ‘risk’ is a simple four-letter word, but as
I will reveal the meanings attached to the word are multifaceted. I intend to
expose the multi-faceted nature of risk in the first instance, by focusing on two
ideas, first that of a risk-taker and secondly, the concept of a risk activity. I
draw attention to these two terms for two reasons, first in order that I might
challenge some common sense discourses about risk and secondly, to
present a broad-based framework by which to understand risk. I start this
process by considering some of the common-sense assumptions about risk
and those who engage in seemingly risky activities.
Risk-taker describes an actor, a participant, or performer who takes risks. Indeed the term risk-taker may go further and hint at someone who not only takes risk when confronted with a given situation but as someone who actively seeks out or embraces risky situations. Risk activity describes a movement or action, or a series of movements or actions that people might imagine as involving excessive or perhaps unnecessary risk. To this end, the terms risk-taker and risk activity are much more than simple descriptions. They serve to frame discourses about risk, about the people who apparently take risks and about the activities framed as risky.

What I want to do next is to interrogate the discourses about risk-takers and risk activities by questioning so-called common sense understandings of these two terms as they emerged through the interviews. More specifically, I will examine the extent to which the interviewees viewed themselves as risk-takers and rock climbing as a risk activity. In search of even greater clarity, I will explore the interviewees’ accounts of their non-climbing associates’ perceptions about climbing as a risk activity and of climbers as risk-takers.

4.3 Risk Activities

All activities in life are to some extent risky, that is, they pose some type and degree of risk to participants. What some might consider routine activities such as walking up and down stairs, cooking, ironing, commuting to work and gardening all pose risks to our physical well-being. Data from The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) indicates that there were 234,295 DIY/Maintenance/Repairs/Gardening accidents in 2002 and 221,175 Household Activity/ Cooking/Washing accidents in the home in the same year (RoSPA 2002). The BBC, citing a Department of Trade & Industry (DTI) report noted that on average 76 people a week died due to accidents in
the home in 2001 a figure which exceeds the number killed in road traffic accidents (DTI 2001). Bizarrely, the same BBC article mentions that ‘10,733 people are hurt in accidents involving socks and tights’, whilst 800 injure themselves using a sponge or loofah and 590,00 need treatment ‘after colliding with a person or object in their homes’.

Taken together these data demonstrate the risks posed to physical health by mundane, everyday activities yet some individuals apparently not satisfied with negotiating the everyday risks in late modernity voluntarily participate in activities perceived in society at large as well as in research terms as risk activities. One such group of activities are sports variously labelled as lifestyle, alternative, adventure or extreme sports.

The descriptor ‘lifestyle sport’ typically embraces sports such as B.A.S.E. jumping, skydiving, snow-boarding, mountain biking, surfing, canoeing and rock climbing amongst others. Such sports stand in apparent opposition to mainstream sports like football, track and field athletics, or tennis. Because of their oppositional status, commentators sometimes use the term ‘alternative sports’ in the USA (Rinehart 2000). Less frequently, the media describe such activities as ‘extreme sports’, although Olivier (2006) suggests that this term is a ‘loosely understood’ label used to glorify such activities to attract readers’ interest. In a wide-ranging review of the terms used to describe these sports, Wheaton (2004) concludes that she prefers 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 (p. 4).

Elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapter One), I have proposed that regardless of the terminology employed to describe lifestyle sports, researchers have consistently targeted participants in these sports to explore thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with risk-taking. In electing to study
some sports or activities and not others, researchers have helped to construct and shape common sense assumptions about those activities. Intentionally or not, those writing about lifestyle sports reinforce the notion that these are risk activities. Moreover, and again as I argued in the opening Chapter, the representation of climbing through the media, further reinforces the idea that climbing is a risk activity, exemplified by scenes from films such as *Cliffhanger* and *Vertical Limit*.

In summary, broader societal as well as more narrowly focused academic discourses frame sports such as climbing as risk activities. Undoubtedly, preconceptions about climbing as a risk activity prevail but some research has questioned the extent to which participants recognise such narratives (Heywood, 2006; Robinson, 2004). Therefore, it seems logical to open a discussion of the findings by considering how the small group of climbers in this study reflected on climbing as a risk activity in the context of their personal experiences.

4.3.1 What counts as a risk activity?

When asked to say what risk in general terms (not climbing specifically) meant to them, the interviewees defined a range of things as risk activities including the more mundane and everyday activities of driving a car, riding a motorcycle, travelling abroad or by air, taking on a mortgage, gambling, making financial investments, changing jobs, committing to or leaving a relationship, changing social circles, over-eating, drinking too much alcohol, smoking, being inactive, and running or cycling alone (and at night). They also cited other so-called risk sports such as caving, paragliding and sky-diving as risk activities. In broad terms the interviewees identified risk activities as those posing an opportunity to enhance, or more usually threaten their physical and emotional well-being, their financial security, their social
capital, relationships with significant others, as well as their employment status. Dot (68), for instance talked about travel by car, train or plane as everyday risk activities and alluded to control, or rather a lack of it:

[short pause] Traffic [short pause], things that could happen to you that you've no idea are likely to happen and other things, sort of road traffic, aeroplane smash, train smash, all those things that you've no control over. (Dot 68)

The specific examples of risk activities given by the interviewees seemed to bear some connection to their personal circumstances. For example, one young male climber said:

I suppose the main one I consider a risk would be going out to pubs and bars, which I don’t really do any more, especially round here you can find a lot of fights, but apart from that it’s pretty easy going isn’t it. Don’t meet that many problems do you? (Steve 23)

The British Crime Survey (BCS) for 2005/06 reports:

The risk of being a victim of violent crime in the 2005/06 BCS was 3.4 per cent. Young men, aged 16 to 24, were most at risk, with 12.6 per cent experiencing a violent crime of some sort in the year prior to interview. (Walker, Kershaw, and S. 2006 p.61)

Therefore, statistically, young men are more likely to be a victim of violence than other groups in society. Additionally, people visiting a pub or bar more than three times a week were one of the groups defined as ‘most at risk’. Steve’s personal experience of drink-related fights in bars and clubs reflects this situation. Consequently, for him a risk activity is going out for a drink in the evening. In contrast, some of the female climbers mentioned that running or cycling at night were risk activities.

I think you know being outside at night, late at night for a woman or anybody that might be a little bit more vulnerable. Every time I go running at night I like running, it’s quieter but it crosses my mind about that might be risky. (Anna 34)

The same BCS survey reported that 77% of violent assaults by strangers were committed against men, as were 61% of assaults carried out by acquaintances and 67% of muggings (Walker et al., 2006). However,
although women were less likely to be a victim of violent assault they were significantly more likely to be a victim of a sexual offence. 84% of indecent assaults and 92% of rapes were committed against women. Having said this, sexual offences accounted for just 5% of all police reported crime in 2005/06. Therefore, it is fear of crime which may explain Anna’s comments, for the same BCS report notes:

For each age group, women were over twice as likely to be worried about violent crime as men and this was especially apparent in the younger age groups; among 16 to 24 year olds 32 per cent of women had high levels of worry compared with 12 per cent of men. (Walker et al., 2006, p. 37)

Older women also talked about their fear of crime but this time in relation to their home. For Hattie (77), leaving her home constituted a risk activity as she feared the ‘kids standing outside the gates and out here, messing the hedge, and the noise’. Evidence from the BCS again suggests that those aged 65 (whether male or female) and older are the least likely to be victims of violent assault (Walker et al., 2006). Yet Hattie’s perception was that ‘others’, in this case, young people posed a risk. Hattie also expressed concern that she would return to her home to find that it had been burgled or the car damaged.

Jessie too talked in terms of leaving the home as a risk activity as a particular concern for older people. She explained:

… because old people or older people are scared now. Sometimes they’re scared of going out because… I mean it’s not so bad around here but there was somebody mugged walking along our road. She’d gone to see her daughter and she was knocked down and her bag taken. If that happens to you once you get wary really and you think it’s risky to go out and I think people think now that there is a lot of risk. You know, having your house broken into.

Crime related?
Yes really.

And do you think that perception matches reality…?
I think they overestimate it really, yes. Well you’ve only got to be pushed if you’re old or if you fall and things like that and you’re never happy going out again. My next door neighbour here at the bottom, she’s German and her husband and I think they’d both been on holiday at the same time. Normally never went on holiday together, husband always used to go to Whitby and she went to Germany. Normally not away at the same time and they were and they were broken in and she said, ‘That’s it. I’m not going away again’ and I thought, ‘Oh, that’s a bit hard isn’t it? I think that’s a perception isn’t it? Of being worse than it is?’ (Jessie 68)

Jessie acknowledged the impact that being a victim of crime could have on someone. In this instance, close neighbours sought to minimise a perceived risk to their property by suggesting that they would remain in their home. Yet Jessie also recognized an inherent tension between the perception and the reality of certain risk activities, that is, that the former sometimes outweighed the influence of the latter. Sarah expressed a similar belief:

Cycling in the dark. For example somebody in a hedge even though I know there’s no one there. (Sarah 49)

This last response, in particular points to the idea that perceptions, even if logically unfounded, influence actions. It also illustrates the weakness of rational approaches to risk which assume that people will respond logically when presented with information about risk.

Somewhat paradoxically, some interviewees saw attempts to minimize their participation in perceived risk activities as ultimately giving rise to more significant risks to one’s health and well-being. This highlights two things. First, risk activities are temporally located and can be short, medium and long-term. Secondly, avoidance of one risk activity in one area of life might have consequences for risks in another. Maurice talked about the risks associated with doing nothing or leading a sedentary lifestyle:

… I think one of the biggest risks is the imbalance in activity, the lack of, er, physical activity and the over indulgence in sedentary occupations and activity. You know it’s the old thing, television, instant music as against healthy active lifestyles and
I feel that there is a risk, a hazard that might occur, a hazard which would create a risk is a dietary thing as well, I see it quite a lot. (Maurice 60)

Other climbers in this sample also mentioned risk activities and health citing diet, drinking and smoking.

I think we overdo it and the way we eat as well, I think there are quite a few health risks today. (Stella 60)

I think most of the risks are to do with self-indulgence. Eating the wrong foods and drinking and doing irresponsible things. (Rob 50)

... I'm really pleased that people can't smoke in places now. I do see that as a risk. (Ivan 48)

These comments reflect contemporary western society’s concerns with health and well-being and are consistent with notions of self-monitoring and self-reflexivity explored elsewhere (Bourdieu 2003; Foucault 1979; Giddens 1991; Lash 1994). The notion of control also feeds through in the excerpts cited above. For example, the ability to exert control over our desires and our body through an ability to limit the amount and type of food we consume, as well as exhibiting restraint so that we avoid over-indulgence and avoid doing ‘irresponsible things’. There is mention of control over others too in respect of legislation prohibiting smoking in enclosed public spaces. A number of writers have engaged in well-rehearsed discussions about the significance of Foucauldian concepts such as discipline and surveillance for sport generally (Andrews and Loy, 1993; Cole 1994; Markula 2003). A concern with bodily performance inevitably leads to internal and external monitoring of an athlete’s diet, weight, strength, speed and endurance as well as their psychological readiness for competition (Johns and Johns 2000). Although the climbers in this study did not climb competitively rock climbing is a sport and therefore the physical demands of the sport might lead to a heightened awareness of the body and a degree of self-monitoring thereof.
Although a list of risk activities provides some degree of insight into the way this small group of climbers talked about risk, in and of itself, it does not really deepen our understanding of how they construct such events and experiences as risk activities. Therefore, rather than focus on the activities themselves I want to concentrate on the underlying message conveyed by the interviewees in their response to questions about risk activities. Because the interviewees self-identified as climbers, and because the purpose of the interviews was made clear at the outset, their responses to questions about risk would almost certainly have as a reference point their experiences as a climber. This reference point is significant, as it appears to provide a framework by which the interviewees’ gave meaning to risk activities more generally and to their climbing experiences in particular.

This framework is notable in two particular contexts. The first is in respect of the interviewees’ attempts to differentiate between everyday mundane risk activities as opposed to exceptional or so-called high-risk activities. The second is in relation to the way these climbers appeared to use this distinction as a means of rationalising their participation in a risk activity. Turning first to ordinary and extraordinary risk activities, those interviewed differentiated between the two, primarily in relation to control or a lack of it.

Brian talked about accidents being caused by other people:

The difference between risk in climbing and motoring is that a lot of accidents in motoring are caused by other people. In climbing, I’m relying on my own ability and it’s just me, apart from the possibility of rocks falling on me, whereas in motoring it’s about other people. (Brian 60)

Younger climbers like Nick also talked about control when attempting to differentiate between mundane everyday risk activities and extraordinary risk activities:

… because the risks in climbing personally, when I go climbing, I always feel in control whereas when … well I’ve never not felt in control. Well I think if you felt like that you’d probably end up injured or dead or something. If you fell off there’s no risk.
Outside the risks there but I don’t feel like there’s anything I can do about it. Mainly because it’s other people, whereas it’s only yourself when you’re climbing. Like when you’re driving on the motorway you’ve got a lot of other people driving really close to you and there’s no accounting for them you’ve just gotta stay out of their way basically. And on a council estate its hard to know what to do, they could get you for no reason if they wanted to. (Nick 22)

Coral framed control in a slightly different way. She argued that what differentiated climbing from other risk activities was that risk in climbing was expected. It was something she anticipated.

**Is risk in climbing terms different from other types of risk do you think?**
No, no. I think in climbing the risk is more something that you’re expecting because you don’t go out climbing and know that nothing’s going to happen to you whereas you can walk down the street and always be 100% certain that nothing’s going to happen to you unless you’re really unlucky or something like that. It’s more expected. (Coral, 22)

For her, mundane activities by their very nature presented little risk, only unexpected and unlikely risks, what she termed ‘unlucky’. On first reading Coral’s line of reasoning appears to differ from that expressed by other climbers. For her, climbing is a risk activity because the risks are immediate and greater than those encountered in everyday life. However, I would argue that narratives about control are present here too if a greater expectation of risk equates to a greater potential to respond to that risk.

In summary, this group of climbers differentiated between an ‘ordinary’ risk activity such as those encountered in everyday life and an ‘extra-ordinary’ risk activity such as climbing through reference to the greater sense of control they perceived to exert over the situation. This idea of greater control seemed to stem from a belief that the individual climber assumed personal responsibility for what might happen to them when they climbed. In contrast, a mundane risk activity such as driving put the climber ‘at risk’ and subject to the actions of others. In other words, climbers exerted less personal control, and were paradoxically both less prepared for, and less able to manage and
assess, possible difficulties and problems. In contrast to some of the common sense discourses about climbing, including those perpetuated in the academic literature which define it as a ‘high-risk’ activity, many of those interviewed failed to subscribe to such ideas. Instead, those interviewed delineated between everyday and ordinary events not in terms of the statistical risk they posed or the high consequence of failure, but in terms of the degree of perceived control over any given situation. Hence, the data reported in this thesis will question the validity of both conventional wisdom and some academic literature which suggests that those who engage in extraordinary risk activities do so in order to experience a heightened sense of excitement and thrill not apparent in their everyday existence (see for example, Lewis, 2000; Stranger, 1999).

It would be simplistic, however, to suggest that climbers exert complete control when climbing. They do not. Climbers rely on equipment, for example, a rope and ‘gear’ all of which can fail. Other equipment on a climber’s harness or about their person can include slings, quick draws and karabiners. They also rely on at least one other person, unless they solo climb, a belayer. Furthermore, as Brian states, there is always the risk of a rock fall. Consequently, it would be wrong to accept the notion that climbers’ exert complete control when climbing. Laurendeau’s (2006a) ethnographic research with skydivers is helpful on this count. He concluded that skydivers maintained the illusion of control and where events so obviously defied such characterisation, skydivers attributed ‘accidents’ to participants’ poor decision making or to fate. The skydivers maintained the illusion of control in so doing.

Scrutiny of the data again revealed that this small group of climbers also drew on narratives of control to help them provide a rational account of their participation in a so-called extraordinary risk activity. More generally, 

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8 A general term for nuts and cams which they place to protect them in the event of a fall
they identified other risk activities as ‘more risky’ than climbing and in so doing they represented their involvement in climbing as rational and considered. Extracts from interviews with Mark, Rob, Sarah and Coral reveal the underlying concern with control

… and then other people do things like go caving which is the most stupid activity by the way, I’d like to put that on tape, you wouldn’t find me doing that. (Mark 24)

But elsewhere Mark defined caving, white water kayaking and climbing as high-risk activities, stating that he only had time to do one of them, namely, climbing.

Is climbing more or less risky than other things in your life?
It’s less risky than caving.
Why?
Because you’re more in control climbing than caving ‘cos it’s bolted or you put in protection. Caving’s more dangerous… it’s a more subjective danger. There’s flooding, you could get stuck, lost, lose your lights. Basically, it’s more beyond my control than climbing when its light and you can see and fall towards the ambulance!

Anything else?
Paragliding. There’s serious potential to hurt yourself. You can’t guarantee the wind won’t pick you up, your rotor and collapse your canopy as you’re coming into land.

So other sports are more risky because you’re not in control?
Yeah. I did the paragliding course but the potential for hurting yourself is so big. (Rob 50)

Yeah, but caving’s more risky than the things I do.
Why’s that?
Well with climbing there’s a rope above and below so as long as you’re careful it’s ok. With caving more things come in. Its slippery for a start and I’m worried what’s below me. Caving’s definitely scarier or riskier. (Sarah 49)
With diving, say, you’re very reliant on the equipment, if something fails under the water, it’s not really you that’s in control of it as much, whereas in climbing obviously you’re still reliant on the equipment should you fall, but whether or not you fall is down to yourself. (Coral 24)

Occasionally, climbers appeared to rationalise their participation in climbing by comparing this activity with ordinary risk activities as opposed to
extra-ordinary risk activities. Leonard, for instance referred to rock climbing and driving arguing that of the two, driving was the more risky.

I always say to people that the most dangerous bit of climbing is actually driving there, it tends to be, but I don’t know whether that’s entirely true. I don’t think it’s really true, because you stand a lot of chance of having a small climbing accident. I do know of all the climbers I know, three of them who I know well have died in road accidents in England and I think all the climbers I know who have died, have died abroad, I don’t think they’ve actually died in England, but all the people I know who have died, the other climbers I know have died in road accidents in England and not abroad, see what I mean [laughs]? So that means climbing in England is more dangerous driving to the crag. (Leonard 62)

Underpinning these comparisons of different risk activities from the mundane activities such as driving or riding a bike through to the extraordinary risk activities of paragliding or caving is once again the notion of control. Nowhere is this more forcefully or clearly explained than in Miles’s observation. Having originally stated that cycling was the activity with the highest risk, he went onto describe how a risk activity is inextricably linked to control and ultimately to narratives about risk-taking:

Why is cycling risky?
Well I don’t do cycling anymore. You see what I’m trying to get at is that I understand risk from the point of view of me taking the risk and me being fully in control ‘cos I think when I’m climbing I’m much more... much more in control. Whereas with cycling it’s... a proportion of the risk is belonging to others so I can’t stand the fact that on the roads you can’t really cycle anymore without... you hear of so many cyclists getting killed. So for me risk is about me taking the risk and about me being in control of that risk and being able to make decisions upto a point obviously. But in others sports like cycling, the risk belongs in the domain of other people that hold responsibility for what you’re doing. That would relate to drivers driving recklessly so I don’t do it anymore. No I don’t cycle anymore. But I will do scrambling and rock climbing and lots of walking and taking a risk from that point of view. (Miles 53)

The articulation of what constitutes a risk activity with notions of what constitutes a risk-taker run as a consistent narrative throughout the interviews with this small group of climbers. This is highlighted in Jessie’s comment in
response to how far the risks in climbing differed from risk in other activities.

She said:

Probably, probably. Because climbers don’t think climbing’s risky. The accident rates really aren’t bad, you know when you, I mean you do see the awful results of accidents but most of them aren’t on rock, most of them have been people hill walking, trying to come down in the wrong places, things like that. (Jessie 68)

The relationship between the activity and the actor is clearly articulated in this short extract. In Jessie’s mind because climbers do not consider what they do as risky, the activity is not a risk activity. In justification she refers to climbing’s low accident rate and points to fell-walking’s higher incidence of accidents because of errors of judgement.

In summary, these climbers’ narratives about risk activities are in part a way of rationalising their participation in the sport of rock climbing. They do this through the juxtaposition of climbing with other lifestyle activities such as paragliding or caving as well as with other mundane and everyday risks. Underlying the distinction between ordinary risk activities (mundane and everyday) and extra-ordinary risk activities (unusual and rare) is the idea of control. Ordinary risk activities are unplanned, the risks typically not anticipated or expected and the climbers perceived themselves as unprepared. Crucially, despite the everyday nature of such risk activities, the climbers in this study perceived them as a source of greater concern than extra-ordinary risk activities.

This perception was almost entirely because these climbers identified ordinary risk activities as those over which they exerted less control. In particular, the interviewees cited the presence of other people as a factor which differentiated between ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities. Other people posed a risk because you could not predict how they would react or what they might do in any given situation. Seen in this light, it is easy to
understand why climbers view climbing as relatively risk-free and everyday activities as posing a risk. Climbers are prepared to trust themselves, or to actively trust those with whom they climb. They are much less prepared to trust other people more generally.

4.4 Risk-taking

Research about lifestyle sports like rock climbing often focuses on the motivations of participants working on two related premises. First, that climbing is a ‘risk activity’ and secondly and relatedly, that climbers are risk-takers. As I explained in Chapter One, such research constructs climbers and other adventure or lifestyle sport participants as risk-takers or ‘adrenaline junkies’. Despite research which reflects a more nuanced account of risk-taking (Laurendeau, 2006a; Laurendeau, 2006b; Lois, 2005; Lyng, 1990), the presumed intention behind participation in so-called risk activities persists as evidenced by the claims of a number of writers (Fiske, 1989; Midol and Broyer, 1995; Le Breton, 2000; Lewis, 2004; Palmer, 2004; Stranger, 1999). Moreover, in defining nine characteristics of sports like climbing, Wheaton (2004) describes participants as sharing a desire to ‘embrace and even fetishise notions of risk and danger’ (pp. 11-12). Here, risk is not simply integral to the activity but deliberately courted.

Other writers observe more caution in outlining the relationship between lifestyle sports and a propensity to take risks. Olivier (2006), for example, recognises 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...’ (p.98). In other words, the corollary of risk-taking is risk management. Heywood (1994) concurs, describing climbers’ approach to risk-taking as: ‘...raw, medium or well done according to how they feel or
what they want from the sport’ (p. 187). In a later article, he alludes to the importance of risk management commenting that ‘...high risk climbing involves exacting physical and mental preparation, considerable knowledge, and a careful calculation of the odds’ (Heywood, 2006: p.456). Finally, Robinson (2004) despite her reference to climbers’ fetishisation of risk, maintains that risk is particular not general, that climbers perceive risk in different ways and that rather than taking risks, they are often at pains to minimise them. She contrasts this attitude with the media representation of climbers as ‘thrill-seekers engaging in risky, even crazy, leisure pursuits’ (p.120).

When asked a direct question, ‘Do you see yourself as a risk-taker’? a majority of climbers interviewed for this study did not recognise such a characterisation of themselves. Indeed only six climbers responded with an unqualified ‘yes’ to this question. In light of the small number of climbers interviewed, some caution must be exercised in interpreting the data but it is worth noting that all six of the climbers who defined themselves as unqualified risk-takers were aged 48 years or older and five of the six were men. The relative absence of women in this small group bears comparison with research which shows that men engage in and indeed report higher levels of risk-taking behaviour than women (Davidson and Freudenburg 1996; Sjoberg et al. 1996). However, elsewhere in the interview transcripts the five self-defined risk-takers talked at length about risk management and risk assessment. Therefore it would be inappropriate to simply accept at face value their ‘Yes’ response to the direct question: ‘Do you see yourself as a risk-taker?’

Moreover, any analysis should move beyond an uncritical acceptance of some interviewees’ description of themselves as risk-takers to reflect on the potential influence of discourses about masculinity and about risk-taking for invariably, such discourses are mutually reinforcing. For male climbers these discourses provide a potentially coherent narrative of their identity as men and
as climbers, but for women there may be no such coherence as Donnelly’s (2004) comparison of the portrayal of professional mountaineer, Alison Hargreaves’ death on K2 and commercial guide, Rob Hall’s demise on Everest indicates. Donnelly describes how the media focused on the loss of a mother to two small children suggesting that she was ‘irresponsible’ in her actions by comparison with those of expectant father, Rob Hall who was lauded as a hero for staying with a client rather than descending the mountain. Whilst for men risk-taking is an acceptable or possibly even a desirable trait or action the same appears less certain for women.

The concept of self-sacrifice is useful in this instance to expose the differing standards and judgments applied to men and women. When applied to women, self-sacrifice describes their commitment to their marriage and to their children (Thompson and Walker, 1989; Thompson, 1993). The emphasis is on caring for others at the expense of their personal desires and needs. Hargreaves fateful attempt of K2 contests the presumption of self-sacrifice expected of women. In contrast, the reaction to Hall’s decision to remain with his client, losing his life in the process, reflects a quite different understanding of self-sacrifice. Hall was perceived as an actor, making a personal decision to sacrifice his life; crucially, no criticism was made of that decision in relation to its impact on his family. As this example illustrates, the relationship between gender and risk-taking is complex, and later in this study I will develop more fully an analysis of the gendered nature of climbers’ reported experiences of, and associated narratives about, risk-taking.

Although the predominance of male climbers who described themselves as unqualified risk-takers reflected research findings about risk-taking and gender, the age demographics of those who described themselves as unqualified risk-takers was somewhat surprising. All six climbers were aged 48 years or older. Most research suggests that younger men in particular
take more risks than other groups in society (Byrnes, Miller, and Schafer 1999b) and therefore this data appear to contradict such evidence. Perhaps the differing context in which older and younger climbers climbed might explain this apparent contradiction. Older climbers climbed in an era when ropes, boots and protection were technically less reliable if indeed they were available. Rates of injury and death would have been higher relative to the number of climbs attempted. Consequently, based on their first-hand experience older climbers might have perceived the risks as greater than younger climbers. With the luxury of hindsight, older climbers could compare their experiences over the course of their climbing participation and conclude that overall they were indeed risk-takers.

Furthermore, older climbers acknowledged risk-taking through reflection and comparison of past and present. In contrast, younger climbers might resist more forcefully notions of a risk-taker preferring to privilege notions of risk management and control. This line of reasoning is not inconsistent with that offered by Laurendeau (2006a) in his ethnographic studying of sky-diving. Laurendeau concluded that skydivers sought to retain the ‘illusion’ of control even where control has obviously failed and accidents including fatalities had occurred. They did this in one of two ways, either by blaming the accident on pilot error or attributing the accident to bad luck and an event outside the skydiver’s control.

This opening description of how many climbers did and did not see themselves as ‘unqualified’ or for that matter ‘qualified’, risk-takers with reference to their age and gender does not in itself provide a particularly insightful account of risk-taking. What it does do though is challenge the findings of some earlier research that seeks to explain participants’ involvement in climbing as a consequence of their desire to court risk. In contrast to those studies cited in Chapters One and Two that conflate
participation in a risk activity with risk-taking, the majority of climbers in this study did not describe themselves as unqualified risk-takers.

Risk-taking, like risk activities discussed previously should not be conceived as something that either does or does not happen. Risk-taking is far more nuanced than this, for instance, this group of climbers described themselves as ‘sometimes’ taking risks or taking ‘little ones [risks]’ or else they suggested that whilst they did not see themselves as a risk-taker, their non-climbing friends did. Others mentioned that risk-taking was something they did ‘in the past’. Even those climbers who responded ‘yes’ to the question ‘Do you see yourself as a someone who takes risks?’ referred at other points in the interview to their attempts to assess and manage risk. In other words, these climbers resisted the idea that their risk-taking was ubiquitous, but they accepted that in particular contexts they took risks. It is these ‘particular’ contexts that I wish to explore in more detail to appreciate which actions constitute risk-taking. In addition, I want to scrutinise the circumstances under which climbers apparently take risks and consider what sanctions and proscriptions exist in mediating such risk-taking.

I want to underpin this analysis with a dimension of ‘qualified’ and ‘unqualified’ risk-taking. These terms have a double meaning. First, this dimension conveys the idea that risk-taking can be both free of constraints – unqualified risk-taking – and subject to constraints – qualified risk-taking. Secondly, it communicates the idea that those taking risks can be more or less ‘qualified’ to do so, through for instance, their previous experience or skill level. What I want to do now is to examine more thoroughly the nature of those ‘qualifications’ in order to better understand risk-taking.
4.4.1 Qualified Risk-taking

Qualified risk-taking embraces a number of different circumstances and situations. Scrutiny of the data revealed that the ‘qualifications’ for risk-taking included having appropriate knowledge, experience, competence and self-awareness about one’s limits as a climber. These qualifications enabled climbers to make judgements about risk, that is, to assess, calculate, manage and even control risk. These narratives about risk-taking attach weight to the rational and the cognitive and consequently, are in sharp contrast to popular discourses about risk-taking which emphasise its very ‘irrational’ nature.

Moreover, the interviewees’ accounts of their own risk-taking were frequently punctuated with reflexive commentaries in which they described the effect of their risk-taking experiences on their personal climbing practices. An extract from one particular transcript illustrates the complexity of risk-taking. In the same breath, Nick described himself as a risk-taker, said that he did not take ‘unmeasured’ risks, reiterated that he was someone who ‘definitely take[s] risks’ yet conceded that he ‘never think[s] things are risky’.

I would say I was a risk taker, but I wouldn’t take an unmeasured risk if you like. I would say I definitely take risks but that’s part of it. I wouldn’t ever take on something I was thought I was gonna fall off basically. So I never think things are risky. (Nick 22)

The key phrase in this short excerpt which gives coherence to an otherwise seemingly confused narrative is: ‘but I wouldn’t take an unmeasured risk…’. What Nick is doing here is emphasising the rational, that is, the thought processes and consideration he gives to climbing. It is his ability to measure the risks that enables Nick to describe himself as a ‘risk-taker’ but not recognise what he does as ‘risky’. Other climbers expressed similar sentiments. Rob for instance, mentioned ‘control’ and ‘management’ in relation to his risk-taking:
Do you think you’re a risk-taker?
Yes. It’s like in Deep Play. You’re gonna hurt yourself if you get it wrong but and there’s a big but in that there’s a big element of control. It’s about managing risk especially where there’s high consequences. I think for me I want to feel competent… I want to feel in control. (Rob 50)

Rob talks explicitly about ‘competence’ and this is a common theme in several climbers’ accounts of risk-taking. Maurice said:

I find it [climbing] a challenge within my remit and I think it’s [climbing] a worthwhile risk but I always, but I feel as if I’ve got, this sounds arrogant, the skills to the best of myself in that risk activity. (Maurice 60)

Ivan too sets risk-taking in the context of decisions made with reference to his ability to estimate the skill level required to complete the task ahead:

But, you estimate that your own skills are going to be of a level that you’re going to be able to tackle that [activity]. In other words, you’re evaluating it and making a decision… I think there’s often a greater risk from not doing things than there is from actually partaking so I’m more towards action than inaction because of the… there’s a consequence to inaction as well which is much longer and to me much more severe. (Ivan 48)

Like a number of climbers in this study, Ivan feels the need to justify his risk-taking. In the discussion about risk activities, several climbers contrasted the less risky sport of rock climbing with what they perceived as higher risk activities such as caving or white water canoeing. Ivan adopts a similar approach, claiming that ‘action’ is better than ‘inaction’. His claims may well have basis in his expert knowledge as a physiotherapist as later in the same extract, Ivan talks about the ‘risks’ or potential consequences of physical inactivity saying:

... what you have to do is to weigh up that risk which is more prevalent in sport with what might happen to you if you if you

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9 There are several books which include the term, Deep Play in the title so the exact reference is uncertain. The origin of the term lies with Jeremy Bentham who describes activities where the stakes are so high as to be irrational. More recent usage suggests that Deep Play describes activities where the outcome is uncertain but the level of control vis a vis the level of challenge high (see Macaloon, J. and Csikzentmihalyi, M. 1983. “Deep play and the flow experience in rock climbing.” in Play, Games and Sports in Cultural Contexts, edited by J.C. Harris and R.J. Park. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics
don’t take part in sport and you sit on your sofa and you become immobile and inactive. (Ivan 48)

The apparent need to justify or rationalise risk-taking is a consistent theme in the interviews with this group of climbers. Narratives about rationality pervaded climbers’ accounts of the way that risk-taking is calculated, assessed and managed. Their attempts to rationalise risk-taking and their involvement in risk activities challenge common sense discourses which highlight the emotional and irrational aspects of risk-taking and risk activities. By demonstrating the rational and the cognitive aspects associated with risk, this group of climbers produced a narrative that is consistent with wider discourses about rationality. Overall the transcripts provided many more examples of the cognitive or rational aspects of climbing as opposed to the expressive or emotional elements of the experience.

Evidence of the way that climbers privileged the rational and the cognitive over the emotional in relation to risk-taking littered the transcripts. Stella’s response to a direct question about whether she saw herself as a risk-taker was a case in point:

**Do you see yourself as someone who takes risks?**
I think I take calculated risks. I’m not totally carefree about taking risks; I tend to calculate the odds. (Stella 60)

Other climbers made similar claims, using language that suggested that risk-taking is indeed qualified in the sense that Stella conveys, that is, it is not ‘carefree’. Moreover, some climbers suggested that different degrees or levels of risk-taking were available as Mark intimated:

… and I think you just need to be very realistic about that [risk] and choose the level of risk that you want to accept… (Mark 24)

Again, the qualification applied by Stella and Mark to risk-taking was in respect of the ‘need to be very realistic’, that is, to apply a rational set of thought processes to the degree of risk they took on a given climb. Perhaps
the predominance of the rational over the emotional is no more than should be expected given the tenor of the questions posed to this group of climbers. They were encouraged to reflect explicitly on risk generally as well as comment on climbing as a risk activity and themselves as risk-takers. Less frequently, climbers like Evie did talk about ‘being scared’ and on these occasions the emotional component to risk-taking was privileged over the rational.

I don’t think I take great risks, no, I think when it comes to climbing I think I’m fairly safe and generally as well. I get quite scared quite easily I would say and that stops me from taking massive risks, but I do take occasional risks.

**What does fairly safe mean?**
It’s stuff like, if I haven’t been leading a route then I won’t do it if I think there’s a chance that I can’t do it, if there’s a chance that I might fall off and hurt myself.

**So you’d pull back in those cases?**
Yes. (Evie 23)

Until now I have used the term ‘qualified risk-taking’ to reflect the strictures and caveats that climbers place on their approach to risk-taking. But as I pointed out in the introduction to this section, the term ‘qualified risk-taking’ can assume a different meaning, if the word ‘qualified’ is understood in the sense of qualifications. In other words, what ‘qualifications’ do climbers consider necessary to take risks? Analysis of the data revealed these ‘qualifications’ included experience and knowledge, competence and/or ability – all of which ‘qualified’ climbers to make good decisions. Paradoxically, examples of such qualifications were often apparent when climbers talked about situations when they eschewed risk-taking, as shown in comments made by one of the older female interviewees talking about the importance of knowing when to turn back:

I think a lot of this risk thing is knowing when to turn back. And that’s a feeling you only really get with experience I suppose and not sort of being, not being scared to turn back I think or
thinking what people think or something like that but sometimes it is sensible to turn back… (Jessie 68)

A second older interviewee described how she ‘qualified’ her risk-taking:

Well, for example, if I say I’m doing a climb and I’ve got a hard move to make I will look at the, I will try to assess the possible consequences if I fall and if I think the consequences will be too dire then I don’t do it if I have a choice, yeah. (Stella 60)

In both these excerpts, the interviewees convey the idea explicitly in Jessie’s case and implicitly in Stella’s case that appropriate knowledge and experience assist in the evaluation of risk and subsequently, the degree of risk they are prepared to take.

4.4.2 Unqualified Risk-taking

In contrast to qualified risk-taking, the circumstances which gave rise to unqualified risk-taking seemed to favour emotional and/or less rational actions over cognitive and/or more rational responses. Whereas climbers talked about qualified risk-taking in terms of the calculation, assessment, management, and control of risk, they characterised unqualified risk-taking as instances where they or others had been silly or stupid. In addition, ‘unqualified’ risk-taking seemed to include occasions where they had embarked on high consequence risk-taking. Finally, unqualified risk-taking also reflected actions taken for the sheer thrill or excitement of the experience.

What was significant about the interviewees’ responses was that they often tied together two or more of these features of unqualified risk-taking. Two extracts from interviews conducted with climbers at the opposite ends of the spectrum – a 23 year old male climber and a 68 year old female climber illustrate this point:

I think there’s two sorts of risks: there’s sensible risks which you can take and then there are silly things that you risk but a risk is
something that you either do for excitement or just because it’s easier to do something a bit risky than do it the proper way sort of thing [laughs]. Something that you might have an accident if you’re being stupid really. (Jessie 68)

But in general if you don’t pick these ridiculous routes to try to do you are fairly safe as long as you’ve go the right gear… but I think probably people think climbing is riskier than it actually is. I mean very few people die, generally they are people who are pushing the boundaries, are unlucky or are just shit and probably shouldn’t have been doing it anyway. (Steve 23)

In her response, Jessie mentions being ‘silly and ‘stupid’, doing something for ‘excitement’ or failing to act appropriately because it is ‘easier’ than doing something the ‘proper way’. Steve refers to ‘ridiculous routes’ or to instances where people engage in edgework, that is climbing at the limits of the ability or are ‘just shit and probably shouldn’t have been doing it anyway’, that is, unqualified climbers. Steve’s summary matches Laurendeau’s (2006a) conclusions. Laurendeau noted that skydivers either blamed poor decision-making or ‘fate’ and factors outside a skydiver’s control for accidents.

Therefore, one example of unqualified risk-taking is making a move or a climb so as to act in a way which is silly or stupid. What makes a particular move silly or stupid seemed to vary, and included: lack of preparation, lack of knowledge, lack of competence or experience, and attempting a climb that was too difficult for a variety of reasons. Jessie, for example, described a particular incident as risky because it was stupid and it was stupid because the climb was ‘too hard’ and the rock ‘too wet’. What is significant about this excerpt is that Jessie only really considered the seriousness of the situation after she had completed the climb.

What do you think was the most risky, not at the time because you didn’t see it, but now looking back on it, can you think of anything that you did that was, you know particularly more risky than other experiences? Well I remember once in W___, well it did seem risky actually, I wasn’t very happy when I did it. I was soloing off a climb that was too hard for me and I thought, that wasn’t a good thing to
do because it was wet and so I thought, ‘Oh I don’t like this very much’, but you don’t really think of the risks when you’re taking them, it’s afterwards you think, that was a stupid thing, but you don’t think it’s risky, you think it’s stupid and I suppose it is risky really because it has been stupid. (Jessie 68)

In this excerpt, Jessie begins by suggesting that the ‘climb seemed risky’, at the time, but then adds that the riskiness of a situation was only actually considered after the event. This is consistent with work by Lois (2005) who identified a temporal dimension to risk-taking in her study about a volunteer emergency rescue team. Referring to this type of activity as edgework, Lois asserted that it is the fourth and final stage of edgework which is important in redefining feelings. Jessie’s account seems to align with Lois’s claims where she redefined her actions as ‘stupid’ on reflection after the event.

The climbers in this study did not just provide examples of self-reported ‘stupidity’, some gave accounts of others they had witnessed or experienced:

**Do you look back at that now and think, that was risky?**
Yeah, oh yeah, I still think that was a very stupid place to be. The guy I was climbing with at the time, well he’s a moron but never mind. I’ve never climbed with him since.

**Why not?**
Because there was a couple of instances on that trip even now, there’s a couple of like, couple of things that we were very lucky not to have either died or seriously hurt ourselves because of his errors of judgement, and he was the experienced climber, he was, well more experienced than me. I was still really just starting out outdoors so, I was having to sort of like trust him and what have you and even now I still would never climb with him again, never even tie him to a rope again because the risk of climbing with him [laughs] is just really too great. Bit ridiculous. (Dan 20)

In this instance, Dan defines his climbing partner as unqualified and a threat. His climbing partner was not safe; he did not exhibit good judgement.

Other factors that contributed to unqualified risk-taking included the physical state of the climber. Several interviewees talked about the relationship between their fitness level and risk-taking including Dan (20) who
described a fall caused by him being ‘a little bit stupid’ which he in turn explained was a function of his poor physical shape as well as inappropriate weather conditions for the rock on which he was climbing. When asked to describe her ‘most risky climbing experience’, an older female climber reflected on a particularly bad fall as a consequence of which she suffered a number of injuries to her head, back and chest.

It was a combination of different factors really. It was just at the end of the foot and mouth era and so I was quite unfit, hadn’t done anything much and I don’t like sports that you do them to keep fit, very boring and I can’t be bothered, you know, running and that. So I was not fit and I went out to do a climb which was a hard VS and there was a very, very difficult move on it which was well protected, and I struggled and struggled and struggled on this and got quite tired and in the end I did it and then carried on the rest of the climb which had lots of cracks and I put lots of gear [protection] in. And it was a ramp and delicate climbing which I’m better at and then at the final bit I got to this vertical crack which was quite a big crack and a jammy crack and I had to, I put some gear in at the bottom of it and then I’d used all my gear up, all the big gear and I’d nothing else that would go in it and I was tired and it was strenuous and I got to near the top and it was a difficult move and I thought well I’ve just got to this, and I was scared. And I was still quite surprised when I fell off and, because my last piece of gear was a long way below me I must have fallen about 30’ I suppose and bashed onto a rock and broke a whole lot of ribs and that was very, very risky and I think, you know it was a sort of combination of small mistakes. You know, first of all not being fit enough, second not checking that the climb, although it was a hard VS was actually was at the top of the hard VS list and was probably an E1 and thirdly not being more cautious with my use of gear, you know, thinking about, you know what I’m going to need for the climb ahead. So there were quite a few factors that built up to that really. (Stella 60)

Stella relives in considerable detail the climb and the fall and in so doing seeks to make sense of what happened. At the end of this extract she summarises the reasons for her fall as her lack of fitness, failing to assess the climb at the outset and using too much gear in the early stages of the climb. In recounting this incident, Stella implies that she could have avoided the fall if she had been more qualified, that is, had she been fitter, assessed the climb and hence the risk more carefully and been more skilled and judicious in her use of gear. Significantly, Stella accepts responsibility for the risks she took.
and for her fall. In keeping with Laurendeau’s (2006a) research about skydivers, Stella seeks to maintain the ‘illusion’ of control.

Some interviewees differentiated between those aspects of climbing which could be controlled and therefore reduced risk-taking with those which could not. Mark, for instance, talked about unpredictable weather conditions which might catch out a climber and lead to risk-taking with a failure to wear a helmet which in his view led to ‘unnecessary’ ‘stupid’ and ‘random’ risks.

And we always wore helmets ‘cos we were scared and that’s a good job because otherwise I’d be dead so I always wear a helmet even leading on grit or even seconding on grit and anyone who doesn’t is just taking a random risk and there’s just no need and it’s not like, I don’t know, climb a big route in the Alps and there’s a certain risk of snowfall and you can’t do much about that, but leave your helmet off, there’s so many people that have died falling like 5 metres at Burbage and it’s completely unnecessary, so stupid but anyway. (Mark 24)

For Mark, planning and forethought could reduce the consequence of a fall in a risk activity, and therefore the action, or rather the inaction of not wearing a helmet increased the risk of physical injury. As such, this lack of preparation amounts to unqualified risk-taking because an un-helmeted climber did not embody adequate recognition of high consequence risks.

What I have tried to do in this section is to highlight the sense in which the interviewees’ narratives about risk-taking occupied one of two spaces, that of ‘qualified’ risk-taking or of ‘unqualified’ risk-taking. In the former instance, climbers talked about how they calculated, managed and sought to control risk when climbing. Typically, their knowledge, skills and experience qualified them to do this. In the latter instance, when engaging in ‘unqualified’ risk-taking climbers embodied experiences reflected a lack of knowledge, skill and experience. Furthermore when climbers participated in ‘unqualified’ risk-taking they demonstrated little awareness of the consequences of their actions. In the case of qualified risk-taking, climbers stressed the importance of rational thought and the cognitive over the emotional or affective dimension.
Conversely, in describing unqualified risk-taking, they tended to characterise such actions as irrational and/or privileging the affective over the cognitive dimension.

In summary, in this Chapter I have outlined a conceptual framework by which to examine the meaning attached to risk by the rock climbers in this study, differentiating between risk activities and risk-taking. In the succeeding chapters I employ this framework to consider how risk mediates the reasons climbers give for climbing. I begin by focusing on the significance of excitement and thrills, challenge and mastery. Next I examine the significance of physicality. Thirdly, I scrutinise the value attached to social and familial relationships, finishing with a review of the value climbers attached to space/place.
Chapter Five

Excitement and Thrills,

Challenge and Mastery?
5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters I have argued that research about risk-taking in sport implicitly or explicitly identifies sports such as big wave surfing, white water kayaking, mountain biking, skydiving and rock climbing as risk sports and their participants as risk-takers. To this end, much of the research about risk-taking in so-called risk sports assumes a direct correlation between the riskiness of the activity and the motivation of participants. In other words, participants seek risk-taking experiences and pursue activities such as rock climbing which facilitate such experiences. However, other research has suggested that risk-taking is sometimes conflated with other motivational influences notably thrill-seeking, challenge and excitement as well a desire for mastery.

Consequently, in this first of four chapters comprising my discussion of results, I want to explore the efficacy of the claims that participants in a so-called risk-taking activity like rock climbing actively engage in risk seeking or whether others factors possibly conflated with risk in the literature, assume more significance for climbers. By the end of this introductory Chapter, I hope to show that risk was less a source of motivation to climb and more something that climbers’ negotiated in relation to the reasons they gave for climbing. I will argue that the climbers interviewed in this study sought excitement and thrills as well as challenge and mastery but not necessarily risk(s) *per se*. Moreover, I contend that understanding the relationship between excitement/thrills, challenge, mastery and risk supports an analysis of the production and maintenance of climbing identities as well as climbing practices.

5.2 Thrills and Excitement

Two of the questions asked of the interviewees were what motivated them to begin climbing and then secondly, what encouraged them to continue
their involvement. Despite common sense discourses about risk sports, in response to these two questions not one climber interviewed for this study mentioned risk-seeking explicitly as a reason for climbing. A small number of climbers did refer to risk but when they did so, they referred to risk in relation to other factors such as challenge as well as their experience and competence. The closest that any climber came to the word risk in common parlance was the use of the word ‘thrill’ or ‘excitement’.

Common sense discourses pertaining to rock climbing frequently frame participants as thrill-seeking junkies, and although I spend much of this thesis seeking to counter this generalised perception, references to thrills and excitement did indeed arise in the interview transcripts. However, whilst the interviewees mentioned feelings of excitement and/or thrill, such references did not dominate their narratives. Moreover, when they did describe feelings of excitement or a sense of thrill, the context in which they did so was not necessarily in relation to risk-taking, danger or a perceived physical threat. Instead, the source of their excitement was often something quite different and not at all linked to physical risk-taking. The contexts included the relative novelty of a particular experience or the perception of an activity as ‘cool’. However, a small number of climbers did refer explicitly to chasing ‘excitement’ and it is with their accounts that I begin my discussion of thrill-seeking as a motivating factor for participation in climbing.

5.2.1 Adrenaline Junkies

One common sense description of risk sport participants, such as climbers, is that they are adrenaline-seeking junkies and analysis of the data revealed that a small number of climbers did indeed refer to the buzz or thrill they experienced from climbing. Notably, it was only male climbers who talked
about their climbing experiences in this way. Asked if he perceived climbing as risky, Rob responded:

I just liked the rush of doing it. I didn’t think it was risky at the time. It was high consequence behaviour. If you got it wrong you got injured or you might get caught. I didn’t see it as risky then and I don’t now either. (Rob 50)

Rob’s over-arching concern seemed to be with the adrenaline ‘rush’ he felt when climbing and the emotional response generated. Notably, he rejected the idea that his climbing activities were risky either then or now but like Aubrey he demonstrated a keen awareness of the high consequence of his actions. He recalled:

**Once you started, what did you get out of climbing?**
I found it all consuming.

**How long did it take before you found it all consuming.**
Oh, once, twice maybe.

**Why was it all consuming?**
You know, the adrenalin really does run when you try something which you know is very difficult for you and you get up, you made the right judgement, you’ve got it right, it’s great.

**So what were you getting out of it?**
The thrill really.

**But not because it was difficult?**
No. Providing I was stretched, I had to be making judgements and I had to be right and there had to be a punishment if I was wrong. (Aubrey 70)

Aubrey too highlights the emotion he felt when climbing. For both climbers, however, the cognitive, in the sense of making judgements, seems to over-ride the affective dimension. Or rather, the need to keep one’s emotions in check appears crucial to good decision-making and success on a route. There is also the sense that both Rob and Aubrey engaged in edgework, that is, they stretched the limit of their ability to a point where the experience and the activity merge, a situation described by Stranger (1999) in reference to surfing as the sublime.
Aubrey’s account, together with Maurice’s comments (which I discuss in the context of risk and control below, see Section 5.5 below) and Brian’s reference to ‘the excitement so it was the risk’ were the closest that any of the interviewees came to stating that a motivation for climbing was the risk the activity posed. However, although Aubrey used the word ‘adrenaline’ he did not refer explicitly to the risk the activity posed. Instead, he referred to the difficulty, or what could be described as the challenge, the activity posed and his feelings on successful completion of the activity. When pushed, it was not the route difficulty on its own that provided the source of the thrill rather, it was the opportunity for Aubrey to test his judgement in situations where there was a consequence if his judgement was in error; a ‘punishment’ if he got it wrong.

What this extract also suggests is that the meaning attached to a particular activity does not derive from the activity in and of itself but from the way that a climber perceives that activity relative to their competence and experience.

The thrill Aubrey derived seemed to stem from ‘making the right judgement’, and affirmed his competence and crucially, his identity as a good decision maker in the context of high consequence climbing situations. In other words, Aubrey was qualified to climb. With such a small sample, it is difficult to draw generalisations but he and Maurice were older climbers who learned to climb in an era when safety equipment offered less protection than it does today. Moreover, Aubrey, above all the other interviewees defined himself as a ‘hard man’, someone who deliberately courted routes which required not just a high level of technical competence but a high degree of focus to maintain one’s nerve on a route. Taking into account technical and equipment developments over the sixty-year period between 1944 and 2004 (Smith, 1998), Aubrey was the most accomplished climber of those I interviewed.

Finally, I suggest that as well as defining themselves as qualified to complete these climbs, the activities described are consistent with the notion of
an extra-ordinary risk activity. The climbers were prepared as opposed to unprepared and responsibility for what happened rested with the individual climber as opposed to other people. Consequently, the interviewees felt that they were in control and the outcome depended largely on their good judgement.

5.2.2 A Novel Experience

Several climbers talked about their feelings of excitement in relation to a novel experience. Ivan (48) described the fun and thrill he experienced when he first started to climb:

Anything to do with climbing I was just into so we did the few weeks I was up in S___, on S____ did some quite long routes. If it was to do with climbing it was everything. It wasn’t necessarily big walks, if the weather was bad you’d go somewhere else. If you’d finished work you could only nip to one place, we’d go there and there was no discrimination whatsoever for any sort of climbing or anything at all at first. It was all just new and great fun. It was a thrill. (Ivan 48)

Ivan describes how all routes seemed exciting when he first started to climb; everything and anything was ‘great fun’ and a ‘thrill’. Miles (53) talked about the ‘buzz’ he got from climbing which unlike Ivan he located less in the act of climbing and more in his perception of both the activity and climbing buddies as ‘different’ from his everyday experiences:

So did the reasons for you climb change? You said it was a buzz at the start? What about as you got more and more into it? What else was good about it?
I just think I liked... I’m a spontaneous climber. I like being outdoors. I like the physical activities because... the physical activity of doing it and using all your different muscles and things. It felt very good. It literally for me felt physically very good and it was being different and adventurous and being outside and being very different from other arts-based people. I remember that was interesting because they weren’t mostly interested in that at all. Can’t remember anyone even some of my best friends would never do that. It was a different set of friends. (Miles 53)
However, whilst the reasons given by Miles and Ivan for the excitement climbing generated differed, both climbers alluded to the novelty value of the activity which in their eyes provided the source of the thrill or buzz. A young female climber identified the source of her excitement not as climbing *per se*, but from her status as a lead climber. Recalling an ‘unexciting’ climb, Evie said:

**So, what was that like when you first started to lead, what was that experience like?**

My very first lead, I remember that, it wasn’t very exciting because it was probably something like a Diff\textsuperscript{10}. I’d seconded my friend up a route on the same crag and then said, ‘I want to have a go at leading’ and then while I was leading [he] showed me how to place gear and sort the rope and so he said, ‘I’ll second this.’ So I did this... the scrattiest ever route ever and not very nice. I got to the top and said, ‘Was that it?’ I could see the ground, it’s just there. It wasn’t very exciting.

**What were your feelings?**

I think probably excitement. I remember thinking, how cool this is, I’m leading, it’s exciting. (Evie 22)

In this instance, Evie’s first experience of leading a climb aroused feelings of excitement even though she described the climb as unexciting. It was Evie’s relative inexperience and hence the novelty of the situation, first time leading, that defined the activity as exciting.

The association between thrill or excitement and the novelty of a situation is significant because it reveals a potential temporal dimension to the feelings experienced by climbers. It is the extra-ordinariness of the experience defined by its newness, the activity’s variation from the ordinary and Evie’s control over it as lead climber that seems to mark the event as thrilling. The claim that an activity either is, or is not, a risk activity and therefore a source of thrills or not, holds up less well than the idea that thrills arise from unfamiliar experiences or activities. Therefore, one might expect that as repeated exposure to the unfamiliar re-orientates the activity to a point where it becomes familiar.

\textsuperscript{10} Second easiest climbing grade.
opportunities for thrill-seeking decline unless climbers seek out new situations, for example, by pushing the difficulty of the route. There is some evidence of this in the data. Jessie, for example, talked about how she became increasingly reluctant to climb unless it met certain conditions, such as the route being particularly good or the weather fine.

I think it’s got to be something good or exciting, you don’t really [pause], probably got a bit lazy really. If it really was ghastly weather you would stop in because you didn’t think it was worth doing anything... (Jessie 68)

5.2.3 It’s Cool

Other climbers in this study appeared to derive excitement from the ‘coolness’ or ‘glamour’ they associated with a particular climbing experience. Evie used the word, ‘cool’ in describing her feelings after her first lead climb (see section 5.2.2 above). Miles too seemed to have been drawn to climbing because of the ‘cool’ factor, defining both his climbing partner and the activity as such. Miles basked in the status of his climbing partner who was both older and, in his eyes, a ‘real’ climber.

What did you like about it? That first experience... what was good?
I think what’s interesting is that because he was quite a good climber and he belonged to a club in London and it kind of like formalised it for me. I got quite a buzz because I wasn’t a member of anything but I thought: ‘Wow, doing it with someone he’s a year or two older than me. I’m doing it with someone who is a real climber’. For me it seemed like that. (Miles 53)

Relatedly, interviews with two young male climbers point to the significance of a temporal dimension emerging from the climbers’ responses to two questions. The first question was: ‘What attracted you to climbing in the first place’? The second was: ‘Did your reasons for climbing change over time’? Steve and Nick’s answers to my questions were as follows:

What was it that attracted you to climbing?
Ok, yeah, it was just because my friends were doing it... I suppose it was kind of vaguely glamorous perhaps, climbing,
but not too glamorous, it was just something to do basically, but then the more I did it the more interested I became till I was going out on my own, climbing.

So would you say your reasons for climbing have changed?
Oh yes. Definitely. Now I want to go climbing on my own, regardless of whether anyone else is, or will try to find people to climb with, whereas before I was being dragged out climbing, ‘Come on! Let’s go climbing’. (Steve 23)

Have the reasons that you climbed now changed at all?
I guess not greatly. They’re still some of the main reasons why. The only other reason wasn’t then, well maybe it wasn’t so big then as now, was to improve by doing it. I can improve by doing it now. Whereas at the time I thought it was cool and it was something I enjoyed doing. Now I always try to progress to get better, you know. (Nick 22)

In the beginning both Nick and Steve described their attraction to the sport as rooted in their perception of it as ‘vaguely glamorous’ and ‘cool’ respectively. However, as time progressed this aspect was replaced by a genuine interest in climbing for its own sake (Steve 23) and with a desire to improve (Nick 22). This data aligns with Ewert’s (1985) study about rock climbers’ motivations. Using a factor analytic technique he concluded that inexperienced climbers were more likely to cite recognition and socialisation as factors motivating participation than more experienced climbers.

The data in the present study lend support to Ewert’s earlier work in suggesting that external reference points are key motivating factors at least at the outset. In Stella’s case, for example, she considered climbing to be cool and exciting prior to any actual involvement. Although commenting that she could not be exactly sure what she thought as this was sometime ago, Stella said:

Well it’s very hard to remember what was in your mind at the time but I think probably it seemed quite exciting to me and in some ways quite glamorous as well and also different because even as little as 20 years ago there weren’t an awful lot of women climbers around and if there were you never heard
about them and they certainly weren’t in the forefront of climbing. (Stella 60)

When asked to say whether her reasons for climbing had changed over time, Stella said she thought they had:

They possibly have. I’ve certainly become more ambitious in terms of personal achievement in climbing. I’ve come to enjoy the company of other climbers and the sort of, the comradeship if you like, that aspect of climbing and particularly I like climbing in sort of places where there aren’t any people or very few people around and I very much enjoy that aspect of it. (Stella 60)

Novice or inexperienced climbers have to draw on external reference points to generate an understanding of climbing which may include other climbers as well as media representations of the sport. Such external reference points can present a generalised view of climbing as ‘exciting’ or ‘cool’ through first hand experience, second-hand narratives, or through media reports and images (Davidson 2008).

In summary, both male and female climbers across all age groups associated climbing with a sense of glamour and coolness and cited these as factors that made climbing attractive in the first instance. However, whilst the age of the climber at interview did not appear to influence whether climbing was perceived in this way, the time frame of the interviewees’ involvement in the sport did. Specifically, notions of glamour and coolness pertained to the period in time of participants’ early or initial climbing experiences. Subsequently, their reasons for climbing changed as they became more committed to the activity. This analysis is reflected clearly in Stella’s response to a question about the image of climbing she had before she started.

Whilst some climbers rejected discourses about climbing as a bastion for risk-taking, thrill-seeking, adrenaline junkies, they did sometimes encourage this image. Leonard (62), for example, recounted his role in contributing to a
generalised view of climbing as a dangerous activity, a view that was contrary to his own. This extract illustrates how Leonard affirms non-climbers’ perception of climbing as a dangerous (or risk) activity as much by what he left unsaid as by what he said:

If I’m sitting having a meal with people and they say, ‘What were you doing at the weekend’? And I say, ‘Well I was actually rock climbing or caving’. They say, ‘Wow! That sounds dangerous’. And you think, ‘Well yeah [laughs], pretty dangerous’. The fact that I was actually climbing second on a VDiff\(^{11}\) at the time [laugh], I sometimes forget to tell them that. (Leonard 62)

This excerpt illustrates the difference between the common sense view of climbing in general as a risk activity and a climber’s ability to differentiate between routes and grade them according to their expertise and experience. Leonard’s account also points to a potential paradox in the sense that whilst both climbers and non-climbers would probably define rock climbing as an extra-ordinary activity, they would do so for different reasons. As far as the climbers in this study are concerned planning, preparation and perceived control differentiate an extra-ordinary activity from an ordinary one. What less unclear, is why non-climbers might perceive the sport as high-risk. This could be because non-climbers perceive participants as ‘at risk’ because they presume an absence of control. Their lack of understanding of the meanings climbers attach to risk as well as limited understanding of the activity may lead non-climbers to misunderstand risk. Further work is required to establish whether this is so, but if it is, then it would support analyses of risk which privilege accounts of risk grounded in people’s lived experience. In contrast, analyses of risk which ignore people’s lived experiences and rely on expert opinion or common sense understandings may, as Douglas (1992) suggests, misrepresent risk.

\(^{11}\) Third easiest climbing grade
5.3 Challenge

In the first section of this chapter, *Adrenaline Junkie*, Aubrey referred to his decision-making prowess, and in so doing alluded to the challenge climbing posed for him. In this section, I want to develop an analysis of the significance climbers attached to the idea of ‘challenge’ as a factor motivating their involvement in climbing. Returning to an extract from Aubrey’s interview (cited in Section 5.2.1), he begins by highlighting the relationship between successful completion of a route and the adrenaline rush or thrill this produced. However, he also suggests that it was not mastery of, or success on, a particularly difficult route *per se* but rather it was the challenge that this route posed which provided a sense of fulfilment.

**Why was it [climbing] all consuming?**

You know, the adrenalin really does run when you try something which you know is very difficult for you and you get up, you made the right judgement, you’ve got it right, it’s great. You can get that and we did get just that from a Diff\(^\text{12}\). It doesn’t have to be a desperate route. It isn’t the thrill of getting up this or that route, something daft if you want to mention. I’ll even bail out of a moderate you know. We went out one Christmas, we were staying in W____ H__. I went out with me girlfriend onto G___ and one of our great local heroes, CD had got topped\(^\text{13}\) on a route called C___B___ so we’ll start on C___B___, see where he got killed. Well there was a lot of ice on it, it was like glass everywhere. And I failed on this first pitch which I found was a hard start up Moderate\(^\text{14}\) so I spent half a day on this and eventually I had to bail out with a sling and a karabiner and get down and it was a terrific day on a Moderate. I’d done me best and couldn’t get up and it was a great, in that it was icy and we used to go to C___ in winter and we didn’t think, ‘Hey we’ll do N___S___, we’ll go to C___ and have a great [macho voice]’. We’d go up there and pick the easiest route or the hardest route we thought we could get up on the day and it didn’t matter what… (Aubrey 70)

The route he describes was not a particularly difficult one in good conditions, but ice on the rock provided the challenge. Ultimately he failed to complete this route and ‘had to bail out’ but there is a sense here of Aubrey communicating

\(^{12}\) The second easiest climbing grade.

\(^{13}\) Killed

\(^{14}\) The easiest climbing grade.
his qualification or competence as a climber, as someone able to make a judgement about when to push on and when to pull out. The tone he adopts towards the end of this extract contrasts the ‘macho’ approach with his own where he assesses the conditions and adjusts his goals accordingly. Here, his primary concern seems to be to present a climbing identity by highlighting his good judgement rather than privilege a masculine identity. Indeed Aubrey’s account suggests that he believed a ‘macho’ approach to climbing was wholly inappropriate.

The idea of challenge was a feature of many climbers’ accounts of the excitement and thrill that they felt when climbing. One young female climber, recalled one of her most memorable climbs:

There was lots of little challenges while you were going up to see what you’re doing, you can’t just use all your strength or whatever, you have to use your brain, that’s the most important thing in climbing? (Coral 22)

What made the climb stand out was the challenge the route posed physically and mentally. The degree of challenge in the climb provided fun and excitement too. Coral continued:

The climbing was fun, there was lots of, each pitch on it was different, like there was one pitch where it was all in a corner so you were using a lot of smearing\(^\text{15}\) and then the bottom pitch was almost a scramble and then the next, the last 2 pitches were a lot of different boulders and things to climb over, but yeah it was just, it was an exciting climb and just an absolute gorgeous climb. Freezing. I had to keep rubbing my toes for about 20 minutes before I could move because it was frozen solid but it was really good. (Coral 22)

An older female climber made a similar comment:

I think it just seemed a challenge really, I think the challenge attracted me because it’s hard, it’s never easy, you know I don’t think, unless you choose a really easy climb but certainly when you’re beginning it’s always hard and I think that was part of the motivation… (Stella 60)

\(^{15}\) Climbing technique where the climber maintains maximum contact with the sole of the foot and the rock.
In contrast to the male climbers who seemed to associate challenge with feelings of affect, for example, ‘thrill’, the female climbers appeared to define challenge in terms of the demands of a climb both mental and physical.

Some research about risk sports has also identified the importance of challenge for participants’ motivation. Slanger and Rudestam (1997), for example, used Zuckerman’s SensationSeeking questionnaire and a range of other inventories to explore motivations for engagement with risk-taking sports. They concluded that climbers seek challenges as opposed to risks, and that thrill-seeking should be defined in terms of goal achievement and mastery not risk-taking per se. Aubrey, Stella and Coral’s narratives appear to correspond with Slanger and Rudestam’s findings.

A more recent study reinforces the significance of challenge as a key motivational factor for climbers. In a naturalistic study of mountaineers attempting to summit a Himalayan peak, Antonella, Bassi and Massimini (2003) recorded online self-reports of mood state during the expedition. The results indicated that the mountaineers sought challenges more than risks as reflected by the relationship between positive mood state and personal challenge. Moreover, challenge was situation specific and inextricably linked to the mountaineer’s skill level. For instance, the mountaineers reported more positive mood states when completing some aspects of camp craft than they did climbing because the former were perceived as more challenging. This conclusion is consistent with Aubrey’s account cited at the beginning of this sub-section where he emphasises the relative importance of the challenge over the absolute difficulty of a route.

Further analysis of the interviewees’ narratives about challenge provided evidence that the factors motivating their involvement in climbing changed over time as this extract illustrates:

**What attracted you to climbing?**
It was, I want something to keep me physically fit but I also want something that my sister does so I can share some experiences with her and meet up with her.

As you started to get more involved in climbing, did you find your motivation for climbing changed at all from those first 2 weeks?
Yeah because I made it competitive. They're the most competitive people that you can meet.

How did that change... your motivation?
I tried other things in the couple of years before, I tried, not so much sports but other activities. If I couldn't do them then I'd give up after 6 months.

Rather than your 6 months, see how it is and then?
Yeah, I do recognise in climbing I'm never going to be the best in the world, I'm not going to be the best in the UK, I haven't got the finger strength. I've started it too late which is a regret, I should have started – I packed in rugby at 28 and went back to it and I should have started climbing at 28, not 32. Another four years I think would have made a lot of difference in that earlier life. But I just thought, ‘Yeah, I'm enjoying it, you can push yourself to whatever level you want. There's always a challenge out there for you’. Yes I can get it in me head that I'm never going to be British champion, but I could be quite good at a local level. (Donald 39)

In the example cited above, Donald explains how his initial involvement in climbing was motivated by a wish to keep fit and do something socially with his sister, but that those reasons were replaced by a desire for competition and challenge. Earlier in this Chapter (Section 5.2.3), I cited research indicating that the reasons for participation in climbing changed over time (Ewert, 1985). Other studies about risk sports also point to a temporal dimension in the motivational influences on participants. Celsi, Randall and Leigh (1993) argued, on the basis of their research with skydivers, that a number of inter-personal and intra-personal motives for risk exist: normative (adherence to group values), self-efficacy (feelings of competency in a dangerous activity), and hedonistic (pleasurable, ‘spiritually moving). They proposed that skydivers’ motivations change over time shifting from normative (including thrill-seeking) to self-efficacious (challenge and mastery) and finally to hedonistic reasons
with a concomitant normalisation of risk through increased familiarity and mastery of the situation. They also highlight the importance of friendships (camaraderie) and a developing sense of identity (self-identity) as motivating factors for skydivers initial and continued participation. Where this study departs from Celsi et al. is in the implied linearity in their motivational stages. Instead, I would argue that not only do the motives overlap (as illustrated in my analysis of excitement/thrills and mastery earlier in this Chapter), but depending on the conditions, the route, as well as the physical and emotional state of the climber, the reasons for climbing vary in the short-term. For example, Stella indicates that she attached increasing importance to friendship and being outdoors, whilst Steve had also grown to value outdoor environments.

5.4 Mastery

Closely linked to the notion of challenge, is its corollary, mastery. Stella’s description of the excitement she experienced in completing a particular route further illustrated how it is not necessarily climbing in general which conveys excitement but achievement or mastery of a particular route. Describing one of her most memorable climbs, Stella recalled:

**What grabs you about that one?**
I think the excitement of being so high up, you know, you can see for miles and miles, it’s a huge climb and the challenge of the actual climb although mostly not very difficult, some of it, there were some tricky bits and just being at the top was a brilliant feeling, yeah.

**Was it [that feeling] once you’d finished it?**
No it was all the way through, no it was all the way through, and we were really climbing well and climbing fast and efficiently and we overtook some guys and they were not pleased and D found a friend\(^{16}\), a brand new friend, it ended up being a brilliant day. (Stella 60)

\(^{16}\) An expensive piece of gear for protection also known as a cam.
The excitement Stella experienced appeared to be linked to a series of factors all of which resulted in positive feelings of affect (although elsewhere Stella talks about the importance of a physical and mental challenge) and included ‘just being at the top’, that is, concluding the climb successfully. Nick also talked about the importance of mastery again highlighting the affective dimension in talking about the excitement he felt having successfully completed a route:

So a lot of other things had gone through my head by the time I got to the top. So at the time the foremost thing in my mind was I’d done it and it was quite something I’d wanted to do. So I was quite excited about it cos it was a route I’d always wanted to do. (Nick 22)

The importance Stella and Nick attached to achievement and mastery were related to specific routes undertaken as experienced climbers. However, as the following extracts illustrate, the importance attached to mastery was also apparent at the outset of an individual’s involvement in climbing. Describing his early experiences, Leonard recalled:

But actually when I did go climbing I could do it immediately. I tied a rope round my waist and went up the climb and then went up a harder climb and a harder climb and a harder climb and I could do it all so I suppose, I don’t know why I could do it. I must have known, I somehow knew it would work from being younger. I mean if I could only have a go. (Leonard 62)

This extract provides a further challenge to Celsi et al.’s (1993) linear model of motivation. Leonard embraced a sense of mastery over climbing from the outset.

Moreover, mastery, like challenge, can be a general reason for climbing or apply to a specific situation. Dan, for example, acknowledged that mastery could constitute just one move more than last time. Mastery did not necessarily mean the completion of a whole route and as such reflected the relative ability of a climber rather than an absolute measure of achievement:
What was it that attracted you [to rock climbing]?
I don’t know, maybe just being able to go up [laughs]. At the
time that would probably be about it really, just the feeling of
achievement when you do, even if you do just one more move
than you could the previous time or... First time I went in there
was just this one very, very easy thing I’d been trying. I’d tried it
and tried it for about 2 hours and then I got it right at the end of
the session and it was like, the feeling once you’ve done that is
just great and I think, I like this feeling so I’ll do it again. (Dan
20)

Early success or a sense of mastery seemed to provide climbers with a degree
of reward and positive affirmation sufficient to secure their continued
participation in the sport. Mastery seemed to be a key source of motivation for
some climbers because the interviewees could recognise the improvements
they were making as Anna explained:

What did you love about it?
Cos I felt like I was good at it. I liked bouldering because it was
something I could do on my own. I just like the movements
really. I could use my fitness. And it’s the sort of thing that you
could see yourself improving as well you know it didn’t feel like
you were chasing your tail with it so you’re getting somewhere.
I was just like a dog with a bone when I get at a particular
problem. (Anna 34)

Anna’s account is also interesting because it demonstrates how her motivation
for climbing varied. When asked to say whether mastery was still the most
significant aspect of the experience, she explained that it was but there had
been a period when her focus had been on ‘big boot’17 routes:

Is it still about improving? And being good at it? Are they
still important?
That sort of improving thing took a bit of a back burner to doing
lots of sort of big boot routes for a few years. I think that was
because of the people I was climbing with... they were into that
sort of stuff. And then I could feel myself in the last couple of
year I wanted to push my grade again on rock and em yeah that
was coming back. (Anna 34)

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17 ‘Big boot’ routes are those which demand walking as well as climbing and can be at the
lower end of the scale in terms of technical ability.
Anna’s account suggests that social factors, that is her friendship group led to her focus on ‘big boot’ routes.

However, mastery was not always identified as the most important motivating factor when an interviewee started climbing. Dot, for example, described how mastery was an important motivational influence as she became more involved in climbing but that other factors were more significant at the outset notably a sense of physicality and the opportunity to be in an outdoor environment. Although Dot acknowledged the importance of mastery, it did not replace her initial reasons for climbing, namely, an appreciation of the outdoor environment and the physical sensations she felt when climbing.

When you got out that first day, what was it that made you keep going back, what did you get out of it? You said you found it hard.
I just loved being in this new world in the country and the freedom and the gymnastic part of it I enjoyed. I really liked that once I, ‘cos it was rather gymnastic is what they used to call it. I mean what they do nowadays is much more like that but…

Did your reasons for climbing change as you got more involved in the sport?
I wouldn’t say… I began to realise what it was and be able to do it, yes, it was just the feel of being on rock, there’s nothing quite like it and outdoors, the freedom of outdoors and in the mountains and on a rock climb. (Dot 68)

Anna and Dot’s comments again highlight how motivational influences are not necessarily linear in their development in the way that Celsi et al.’s (1993) suggest. The trajectory proposed by Celsi et al. where skydivers pass through different motivational phases is not borne out by the interviewees. Anna’s account highlights the potentially cyclical nature of the reasons given by the climbers for their involvement in the sport. This is not to seek to discredit Celsi et al.’s work for it synthesises a number of key themes which provide the basis of much work that has gone since (for example, edgework and flow, self-efficacy and friendships) and reflected in this study. It is simply to point out that
the reasons this group of climbers gave for climbing varied and did not progress in the fashion suggested by Celsi et al.

Why such inconsistencies should exist is uncertain, but this study’s explicit recognition of the circularity of climbers’ experiences as opposed to a desire to identify a model of motivational progression could be one reason. Methodology may also play a role in the sense that Celsi et al.’s study was longer term and their data collected at a proximal time to jumping. The data reported in this study consists entirely of climbers’ recollections of past events, some relatively recent (weeks) but some several decades after the original event. As such, factors which might influence recollection include time after the event, the event itself, the feelings all worked and re-worked over time, reflection with the incorporation of different frames of reference – climbing friends, the imagined climbing community as well as a broader social context.

Mitszal (2003) argues that memory is individual and collective as well as socially and culturally located. In other words, private memories are not immune from the influence of public perceptions of events and indeed the two things interact to produce and reproduce actors’ recollections. Hence the temporal dimensions in Celsi et al. and in this study may account for some contrasting findings. A further difference between the two studies lies with the samples. Celsi et al.’s may have exhibited greater homogeneity drawn as it was from one skydiving club over a five-year period. The climbers in my study shared the status of ‘self-identified climber’, that is, a climber as opposed to someone who climbs, but the individuals climbed to differing standards and with different frequencies. As such, it would be reasonable to assume that their trajectories in terms of climbing participation motives would be more varied.
5.5 The Relationship Between Excitement and Thrills, Challenge, Mastery and Risk

I elected to begin my discussion of results with this chapter about thrills and excitement, challenge and mastery because I wanted to show how risk-taking is sometimes conflated with these as a reason for climbing. From the outset it was clear that very few interviewees cited either risk-taking or risk-seeking as factors motivating their involvement in climbing. However, this should not be taken to mean that risk was entirely absent from the meanings the interviewees’ attached to participation. It was not and in this next section I intend to illustrate the complex and nuanced relationship between the reasons the interviewees’ gave for their involvement in climbing and the meanings they attached to risk. I do this to show how the meanings they attached to risk help to frame their identity as a climber.

In this extract, Anna (34) talks about ‘feeling comfortable’, and mentions excitement as well as fear all in the context of a ‘risky situation’:

**What’s your understanding of risk?**
Think it’s relative, based on what you’re comfortable with and how much skill you’ve got really. So what might be risky for me somebody might not see that as a risk at all. And it varies as well like with the sort of climbing I would do and what I’m comfortable with. It’s definitely about emotions.

**Ok in what sense?**
When I find myself in a risky situation I’ll go through a whole range of emotions and thoughts associated with that and again it depends on the sort of climbing. I think…. It’s a difficult one risk. When I think risk I think fear. I think excitement as well.

**So there’s a positive and a negative?**
Yeah.

**At one and the same time?**
Yeah, yeah. And it’s about obviously reducing that risk. It’s about keeping yourself safe from risk as a part of managing that risk. (Anna 34)
The ‘risky situation’ generates feelings of affect which Anna perceives as having both positive and negative aspects, excitement and fear respectively. Yet, there is little evidence to suggest that Anna courts risk; rather risk is positioned as integral to the activity. It provides a source of both positive and negative feelings, which regardless of their nature need to be managed. Ultimately, Anna is concerned to maintain her safety by minimising and managing (or controlling) risk. Anna’s account is consistent with ethnographic research done by Celsi et al. (1993) and more recently, Laurendeau (2006a). Both articles draw on the notion of the ‘illusion of control’ which describes how skydivers maintain their sense of ontological security by emphasising the degree of control they exert over risk.

Lyng’s (1990) concept of edgework is also helpful here because it describes a situation whereby those who engage in so-called risk activities, occupy a space between control and loss of control. Their position on this boundary edge provides, at one and the same time, a source of both excitement and fear or what Celsi et al. (1993) describe as a hedonistic state and Stranger (1999) a flow experience (after Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988). Anna’s reference to both positive and negative affect (fear and excitement respectively) also reflects Lupton and Tulloch’s (2002) findings in a study about the meanings attributed to risk by a group of 74 Australian interviewees. These authors recorded that their interviewees perceived risk as inducing both positive and negative feelings; risk meant taking a chance where the outcome could lead to a benefit or to a loss.

In addition to the reference to affect and control, Anna also mentioned ‘skill’ and in so doing acknowledges the relative as opposed to absolute nature of risk. She discusses this in the context of individual climbers’ perception of the difficulty posed by a route relative to their competence, what she terms ‘her comfortableness’ and I label qualified risk-taking. Her expressed concern to
manage risk qualified her as a climber and reaffirmed her identity as such. Maurice (60) too mentioned excitement and risk in the same breath but he was more frank than Anna in the way he stressed the importance to him of feeling in control:

When you come and do an activity, a sport which is enduring... your desire for your excitement and challenge and you acquire skills and those skills allow you to control the risk and reduce the hazards to an acceptable level.

...There were times when I felt that I was getting better but I never pursued it, so I think the message is, I wanted to chase risk and excitement and challenge and in some cases I got the technical ability to reduce the controllable hazards to an acceptable level, in others I didn’t and I think canoeing was like that but I never felt 100% comfortable in what I was doing, you know [laughs]. (Maurice 60)

In these two excerpts from Maurice’s interview transcript, he recounted how he sought excitement and that he wanted to ‘chase risk’ and ‘challenge’ and ‘excitement’ but this desire was mediated by his approach to risk-taking. Maurice limited his risk-taking as he sought to control risk by developing an appropriate level of technical ability to ‘reduce the hazards to an acceptable level’. However, where he considered that his skill level was below that ‘acceptable level’ his pursuit of risk and excitement reduced and in Maurice’s case this meant that he gave up one such activity, that is, canoeing (kayaking). Maurice stepped back from the edge and did not appear to engage in edgework. His perceived unqualified status threatened his identity as a safe, competent and qualified participant. This observation is consistent with Llewellyn and Sanchez’s (2008) psychological study which investigated the relationship between risk-taking and sensation-seeking traits. Surveying 116 climbers with a psychological inventory, the Impulsive Sensation Seeking Scale, they concluded that risk-taking and sensation seeking were only evident where climbers felt able to manage those risks.
However, crowding the edge was important for some climbers too. Aubrey (70) for example, described the importance he attached to being ‘stretched’ as he termed it when climbing.

**So what were you getting out of it?**
The thrill really.

**But not because it was difficult?**
No. Providing I was stretched, I had to be making judgements and I had to be right and there had to be a punishment if I was wrong. (Aubrey 70)

Elsewhere in the transcript, he described his daughter’s reaction after he had driven from Scotland to West Yorkshire:

> My daughter, grand-daughter came back for the first time with me, rather shocked me, from Scotland and said that ‘she'd nearly died at least...’ you know what they're like, ‘50 times, always overtaking and whatnot’. There is still the thrill, isn’t there? It’s getting it right. (Aubrey 70)

Reflecting on his daughter’s concerns about his driving he did not admit to reckless over-taking, but he did appear to accept that he had courted risk, seeking a challenge in ‘getting it right’. It seems that Aubrey’s desire for edgework in climbing translated into routine activities such as driving. An apparently ordinary risk activity, driving manifested as an extra-ordinary risk activity as he contrived to alter the nature of the situation.

As stated elsewhere in this chapter (see Section 5.2.1) Aubrey was the only climber who came close to epitomising the characteristics of the adrenaline junkie popularised in media and evident in lay discourses about climbing. I suggest that his account may in part reflect his attempt to construct and present an identity as a ‘hard man’ of climbing. Aubrey described his competitiveness several times during the interview and by comparison to other interviewees he was the most accomplished climber. Aubrey probably crowded the edge more often than any other climber interviewed in this study but his attitude to risk was still constructed in relation to the challenge posed by the
activity, his competence and the potential consequence of his decisions. Regardless of the level of the route climbed, his climbing identity was predicated on the same criteria as the other interviewees.

Reflecting on her climbing experiences, Jessie concluded that she rarely considered climbing risky, but she did consider it exciting. In contrast to Anna who thought that risk and excitement were interlinked, Jessie conceived of risk and excitement as separate. Jessie’s rejected the idea that climbing was a risk activity because she felt in control. This sense of control was absent only when the rock was wet or loose which made slips or failed holds more likely.

**Why didn’t you feel upward climbing was risky?**

[pause] Well you were just in control really, you know the rock wasn’t loose and it wasn’t, well you did climb on wet rocks sometimes I suppose but it didn’t feel risky, it didn’t feel risky.

**And keeping the control?**

Yes, I think probably so, it’s exciting, I wouldn’t really say it was risky.

Nick also denied that risk was something he looked for when climbing. Rather, he sought a challenge and ultimately, mastery on completion of a route:

On the risk point I suppose having a bit of risk seems the same. I don’t find having more risk is more exciting… it’s more like I wanna do certain routes at certain times and you’ve just gotta get over it and just do what I wanna do. I don’t actively go out looking for it. (Nick 22)

Nick’s focus was on mastering a route, not on risk and he did not recognise a link between increasing risk and increasing excitement. This is consistent with the data reported in the first half of this chapter where I suggested that the source of excitement was less risky situation or risk activities generally but more precise in focus, for example, successful completion of route.

The data presented here revealed that risk, excitement and challenge varied in proportion to one another mediated by a climber’s assessment of their qualification to climb (their technical ability and crucially the degree of control they felt about a particular route). In other words, climbers qualified their risk-
taking in relation to the level of challenge and excitement they perceived in any
given situation. This finding is also consistent with Antonella et al.’s (2003)
study about mountaineers. They concluded that mountaineers sought
challenge and mastery over risk per se noting that during the expedition,
mountaineers viewed some aspects of camp craft more positively than routine
mountaineering experiences. Moreover, they concluded that the participants in
their study sought an appropriate level of risk, one which demanded the
attention and commitment of the actors, where success was not a certainty but
neither was failure guaranteed.

As such the data reported in this Chapter illustrates how the concept of
qualified risk-taking helps our understanding of climbers’ experiences. The
interviewees’ did not appear to seek risks per se but they did view risk as
integral to climbing when they sought excitement, challenge and/or mastery.
Pivotal to their reflection on the relationship between risk and excitement,
challenge and mastery was their perceived competence, that is, the extent to
which an interviewee was qualified to attempt a move, to seek a challenge, to
master a route.

5.6 Summary

In summary, the climbers in this study did not profess any over-riding
desire to seek risks through climbing, nor did they recognise the sport as one
undertaken because it was a risk activity nor did they define themselves as
risk-takers. Although, they acknowledged feelings of excitement and a sense
of thrill in relation to climbing, the source of such feelings was not necessarily
derived from a desire to court risk as such. The novelty of an experience for a
climber or their perception of it as ‘cool’ or ‘glamorous’ proved common sources
of ‘excitement’ or ‘thrills’. Indeed, several climbers rejected quite forcefully the
suggestion that risk correlated with excitement.
In keeping with some research which rejects the risk-taking – thrill-seeking nexus, the interviewees in this study were more likely to cite challenge and mastery of a route or even success on one particular move as greater sources of motivation than the pursuit of risk itself. However, whilst I found little evidence that the climbers in this study used climbing as a vehicle to pursue risk-taking, this did not mean that risk was entirely absent from their narratives. Quite the contrary, risk was ever present or perhaps an absent presence on occasion. By this, I mean that risk was integral to climbing in a way that risk is a part of everyday life.

The meanings climbers ascribed to risk mediated their motivation for climbing and helped to structure the practices they adopted on the rock face. Furthermore, these meanings helped affirm their identity as a climber because as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, the interviewees identified a good climber or a real climber as one who was in control. Underlying this rejection of risk was the climbers’ claim to be in control. Being in control meant by definition that one was not at risk. Indeed where an interviewee perceived that they had lost control, they altered their practice to sustain their identity as a qualified climber.
Chapter Six

Physicality, Risk and Rock Climbing
6.1 Introduction

In the previous Chapter, I challenged the idea that the climbers in this study pursued risk activities or engaged in risk-taking. Instead, I discussed how climbers sought thrills and excitement (not always through risk-taking), challenge and mastery all of which are sometimes confused with risk-taking. In summary, I argued that risk was integral to, but not the central focus for, climbing. Risk mediated their climbing experiences and practices but it did not drive them. In this Chapter, I adopt the same approach in considering the notion of physicality, that is, I explore the significance of physicality for the interviewees’ initial and continued involvement in climbing. And in so doing, I show how risk influenced their sense of physicality, shaped their identity as a climber and mediated their climbing practices.

This chapter explores interviewees’ narratives about their physicality recognising that climbing provided an opportunity to express their physicality and hence was an important reason for taking part in the sport. This Chapter is organised into two main sections. In the first, I intend to show how positive physical experiences when climbing encouraged climbers’ involvement in the sport. In the second half, I want to show how climbers’ sense of risk posed limits for their physicality and shaped their climbing practices and ultimately mediated their identity as a competent, that is, a qualified climber.

Paradoxically, the positive climbing experiences reported by some amongst this group of interviewees had their origins in a quite contrasting set of experiences in other activities. Consequently, I want to begin the substantive discussion of the data about physicality with a brief exploration of the sometime negative experiences associated with one’s physicality in the context of sport generally. I do this to demonstrate the relationship between perceptions of risk and one’s sense of physical and emotional self.
beginning this task I briefly outline the work done by sociologists in relation to the body to situate this data within a broader framework.

Sociology’s willingness as a discipline to address matters physical or corporeal has been relatively recent. Indeed it is only since the early 1990s that substantial numbers of sociologists have paid serious attention to corporeality, and acknowledged physical bodies in explicit terms in their writing. Perceptively, Shilling (2003) describes the body as an ‘absent presence’ in sociology whilst Lloyd (1998) writes that it is only recently that the body has become a more central concern for sociologists; publication of the first issue of *Body & Society* in 1995 lending support to Lloyd’s assertion.

The absence of the body in the discipline was probably because sociologists viewed matters physical as less relevant than matters social and because the divide between the social and the biological helped mark the discipline boundary between the social and biological sciences. In other words, in helping to shape their discipline and articulate its distinctiveness from other disciplines, sociology eschewed a focus on corporeality (Hargreaves 1993; Maguire 1993; Turner 1991). Even those working within the sub-discipline of sport sociology, during the 1980s and early half of the 1990s, with its explicit concern with physical activity concentrated on the social aspects of sport and ignored the embodied experience of participants (Hall 1985; Hall 1996; Hargreaves 1994; Hargreaves 1986; Hargreaves 1993; Theberge 1985). Shilling (2003) traces the increasing recognition given to bodies, corporeality and ultimately physicality, to broader social change. Such changes reflect individuals’ greater ability to mark their bodies, for example through surgical procedures as well as to an increased sense of uncertainty about ourselves leading to an increased reflexivity about our bodies.

Giddens (1991) explores this notion of uncertainty and its relationship to the way we perceive and comprehend our bodies in his work on risk and
reflexivity. He suggests that in traditional societies, bodies had clear religious and cultural functions, whereas in modernity, bodies and body regimes have less stable reference points and therefore people are increasingly reflexive about their bodies and the symbolism expressed through them. Giddens writes:

The body cannot be anymore merely accepted, fed and adorned according to traditional ritual; it becomes a core part of the reflexive project of self-identity. A continuing concern with bodily development in relation to a risk culture is thus an intrinsic part of modern social behaviour. (Giddens 1991, p. 178)

However, this increased freedom can be problematic for individuals because they have to make many more decisions and choices about their bodies without recourse to a stable knowledge base (derived, for example, from religious beliefs or social position).

In this sense, as Foucault argued and before him Merleau-Ponty (1962), one cannot be in the world without one’s body; in other words ideas and practices are embodied (Brace-Govan 2002). The key point here is that bodies are key messengers of social communication. In summarising the significance of the body for contemporary sociology, Shilling (2003) writes:

The body is central to our ability to ‘make a difference’ to, to intervene in, or to exercise agency in the world, and our bodily emotions, preferences, sensory capacities and actions are a fundamental source of ‘social forms’ (even if many of these social forms have ossified and become separated from their founding desires and dispositions). (Shilling 2003, p. ix)

Essentially, Shilling argues that it is through embodied practices that we come to know the world in which we live and make the sense of that world. In other words, the old dualism of mind and body, represented as separate entities (vis a vis Descartes) is an erroneous conception. For Crossley (2001), Merleau-Ponty usefully bridges the divide between structure and agency, between the subjective and the objective and between mind and body.
Crossley suggests that the mind and the body are intimately and inextricably intertwined, such that an individual forms an understanding of the world and makes sense of the world, through his or her interaction with the environment. This interaction is not a priori a consequence of cognition and thought; rather an individual acts and thinks in tandem or more usually just acts.

In this Chapter, I show how this small group of climbers gave meaning to the physical experience and sensations associated with climbing. I demonstrate how risk influenced those experiences and additionally, how the meanings attached to physicality articulated with the identity of a ‘safe’ climber. I begin by interrogating the ways in which male and female climbers reflected upon their physical self in activities outside climbing. Next I explore the positive physical sensations reported by the interviewees, highlighting differences between male and female participants. Finally, I consider climbers’ narratives about their physical self which reflect negatively on the body, because they draw attention to the limits of the body. More specifically, I probe the relationship between climbers’ accounts of ageing and injury and the meanings they attached to climbing as a risk activity and to themselves as risk-takers.

6.2 Negative Physicality, Other Sports and Climbing

Many writers argue that sport represents a rite of passage for adolescent and young men in western society, helping as it does to affirm a sense of their masculine self (Delaney and Madigan 2009; Messner 1990; Messner and Sabo 1990; Whitson 1990). The relationship between masculine identity and physicality is not straightforward, however. This is because different sports demand different anatomies, physiologies and physicalities of participants. For example, any ball sport necessitates hand-eye co-ordination; distance running demands good aerobic capacity; gymnasts requires
kinaesthetic awareness and an above average power-weight ratio. Loland’s (1999) study about elite ski-jumpers, cyclists and footballers illustrates this point. He noted tension between their perception of their sporting body and an idealised masculine body. Loland concluded that this tension arose because of a mismatch between the ideal body type for an elite male performer and the hegemonic idealised masculine body which is typically defined as someone who is tall, broad shouldered, with narrow hips, proportionately muscular and toned. In contrast, to the idealised western masculine body, both ski-jumpers and cyclists were shorter in stature, and both ski-jumpers and cyclists had slightly built upper bodies but very well developed lower bodies. Football players appeared the most content with their body shape, but here too, positional differences gave rise to different degrees of satisfaction. For example, midfield players expressed greater satisfaction with their body shape than defenders; Loland suggests this is because the body shape of the former is more consistent with the idealised masculine body.

Furthermore, different cultures privilege different sports. In England, there exists a tendency to valorise team sports and games over other sports.\(^{18}\) This is for a number of reasons but primarily because of the influence of the public school and universities in Britain in the mid to late nineteenth century (Hargreaves, 1986). The emerging middle class saw sport as crucial to the development of moral fibre and transferable skills such as team-work, leadership, fair play as well as physical prowess. Such discourses about team sports and games have changed little since the codification of modern sport in mid-nineteenth century (Green 1998; Penney and Evans 1997).

Despite criticism of the over-representation of team sports in the physical education curriculum, team sports, and football and rugby in

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\(^{18}\) Witness the interest that the men’s cricket, football and rugby World Cups generates during their four-yearly cycles.
particular, dominate the physical education curriculum in British schools. This situation persists despite evidence showing that a majority of boys and girls dislike such activities (Flintoff and Scraton 2006; Smith, Green, and Thurston 2009). This observation is significant because whilst young women experience little pressure to excel at team sports, the opposite is true for young men. However, not all young men like team sports or define themselves as being ‘good’ at team sports, yet the pressure to demonstrate one’s masculinity through (team) sporting prowess persists.

An examination of the male climbers’ accounts of their early sporting experiences revealed that most had played a range of sports when they were young. They played these sports informally with their friends, more formally at school or in a few instances at clubs. Unsurprisingly, those interviewed mentioned playing rugby and football more often than other sports. What was revealing about this data was that several male climbers indicated that their participation in climbing was linked to their dislike of, and/or perceived lack of competence in, team sports. In other words, their participation in climbing was a consequence of a perceived failure or negative experiences in another sporting activity, as the following extracts illustrate:

I didn’t really do football or rugby. I was never chosen, never good enough so I opted for outdoor pursuits. I did swim and run for the county. (Rob 50)

… but I’d always be doing physical things. Played a lot of sport but I wasn’t very coordinated with ball sports so I tended more to gravitate towards things that were you might say an adventure. The playing around type of stuff. (Ivan 48)

I’m not good at things like football and cricket although I did play those things with my dad as I said. I was more good at things like… running. Running was my best sport actually. If I’m to be honest. (Miles 53)

I could do no sport at school, couldn’t do football, couldn’t do cricket, couldn’t do gymnastics, most of the reason was I couldn’t wear my glasses. You couldn’t wear glasses while
The privileged status accorded team sports is evident in these extracts. Perceiving themselves as poor at team sports appears to have encouraged these four male climbers to pursue an alternative means of securing their rite of passage into adult masculinity. If they could not embody a hegemonic form of masculinity through team sports, they attempted to secure it through a ‘B-list’ sport, like rock climbing.

Other male climbers reported that they had played team sports, but stopped, fearing injury. In total, four climbers Nick, Tim, Donald and Aubrey gave up one particular sport, rugby because of the fear of, or actual injuries they sustained:

The game [rugby] is quite a physical game, quite a dangerous game. And when you’re at school it’s quite a tough game. You’re playing against quite a lot of people different ages, different builds and quite often small bloke ends up at the bottom. (Tim 24)

... I always used to think the riskiest thing was rugby just because I just felt that everyone else was much bigger than me. There was the potential for me to damage. In fact, I did actually break a bone in the second ever game of rugby that I played at school. It was just an accident someone stood on my foot. But, I always did think in that game because of the size of people, if I ever was gonna get hurt that was it. (Nick 22)

What other sports did you do when you were climbing?
Well I had to drop them. I played rugby but I got hurt at rugby because that’s the way rugby is, and I found that when I went climbing on Sundays I couldn’t climb ‘cos I was too stiff, always getting bent or damaged, happens all the time, so I dropped that and I never was good at running. (Aubrey 70)

Conventional wisdom would undoubtedly position climbing as the riskier of the two sports, yet the interviewees were clear that rugby posed a greater physical threat. A number of writers have highlighted the paradox that
exists where participation in a sport like rugby affirms a particular form of hegemonic masculinity yet at the same time it poses a threat to the physical body (Pringle 2001; Sparkes and Smith 2002; White and Young 1997). Ultimately, these climbers gave up playing rugby and elected to pursue climbing. To a lay reader, the idea that a rock climber might give up rugby because it was ‘dangerous’ or ‘risky’ might seem perverse. I suggest that the way these climbers defined rugby as an ‘ordinary’ risk activity, as opposed to rock climbing as an ‘extra-ordinary’ risk activity confirmed their understanding of rugby as a dangerous sport. They noted the varying physical sizes and shapes of those on the field of play at any one time and drew attention to how, in their opinion, unevenly matched opponents and team-mates increased the risk of injury. Therefore, potential injuries in rugby were deemed as being outside their control. Climbers felt less prepared, could not plan and were at risk from other people. For example, Nick broke a bone because someone accidentally stood on his foot, Tim expressed concern about being at the bottom of a ruck, whilst Aubrey mentioned being tackled hard enough to cause bruising and stiffness the next day.

In contrast, there is little evidence in the academic literature to suggest that women view sport as integral to their developing sense of self in the way that men do. Indeed, more often the reverse is true; sport undermines the dominant norms associated with femininity and female physicality in western society. Young women do not perceive sport participation as the rite of passage in the way that many young men do. Nor is their sense of femininity enhanced through sport participation. On the contrary, participation in team sports or sports where participants present overt displays of strength such as boxing or weight-lifting undermine hegemonic femininity.

An analysis of the female interviewees’ accounts of their childhood sporting activities revealed little to contradict the literature. They spoke less
than the male interviewees about their sporting experiences generally and made few references to sports played at clubs or outside school. Whereas a number of the male interviewees talked about representing their school or a club in a sport, only Coral (running) and Anna (tennis) mentioned doing this. They were much more likely to recall playing individual rather than team sports and the sports mentioned were almost exclusively those recognised as conforming to a dominant understanding of female physicality.

That dominant understanding means that many women limit displays of overt physicality or compensate for them in some way, for example, by using make up, wearing jewellery or growing their hair long (Mennesson and Clement 2003). They included badminton (Sarah 49), dancing (Hattie 77, Stella 60), gymnastics (Evie 22, Stella 60), horse-riding (Coral 22, Evie 23, Dot, 68), ice-skating (Coral 22, Evie 23), tennis (Coral 22, Evie 23, Anna 34, Hattie 77) swimming (Evie 22, Julie 24, Stella 60). Only three of the women interviewed mentioned playing team sports (hockey, lacrosse and netball).

However, where they did comment on their participation in sports other than climbing there were some similarities with comments made by the male climbers in this study. Stella, for example, recounted:

We had quite a good range of physical activities and we had the usual netball, hockey, rounders. We had dance, sort of free dance which was quite good and gymnastics.

**Did you excel at any?**

I was quite good at gymnastics and dance. Not particularly good, I enjoyed the others but not particularly good. I was very small as a child and I was a lot smaller than most of the people my sort of contemporaries. (Stella 60)

In this extract, Stella conveys a concern about her small physical stature and gives this as a reason for preferring gymnastics and dance. Evie too eschewed a team sport, namely lacrosse – which she ‘hated’, going on to note that tennis and swimming were ‘alright’. Her preference for tennis and
swimming indicate that she was comfortable with some physical activities, although Evie did not explain why she hated lacrosse. Given that Evie was relatively short, perhaps 5’2’ and lacrosse is a game where taller players have an advantage, she may have been at the same physical disadvantage as Stella when young. What is common to these recollections is an underlying concern with physical stature which suggests perhaps that one’s physical self, large or small, tall or short, co-ordinated or uncoordinated, affects the way one feels about different physical activities, so much so, that negative experiences in one activity can encourage individuals to try others.

Although climbing puts the physical body at risk, several of the interviewees appeared to see this as less risky than some other sports and potentially less threatening to their sense of physical self and for some their emotional self (in terms of their self-esteem). Climbing is a risk activity, but it is an extra-ordinary risk activity, that is, one where risk is ever present and as such calculated, assessed and managed actively. Consequently, the level of perceived control is greater than in ordinary risk activities like team sports, for example. The presence of team-mates, opponents and the complexity of the game render it a much more unpredictable activity and one over which a climber perceives they exert much less control than when climbing. Moreover, the potential risk to one’s self-esteem by not being selected by one’s peers to play alongside them or being on the losing team or being outplayed by opponents appeared to act as a push factor for some, particularly male interviewees, into the sport of climbing.

6.3 Body Positive: Physicality and Climbing

Almost half of the climbers referred to positive physical sensations as something they valued when climbing. They mentioned feeling strong, liking the movements associated with climbing, and enjoying the exercise.
Significantly, there was a gendered dimension to the climbers’ responses, whereby the female interviewees were more likely than the male interviewees to make explicit references to positive physical experiences.

... and then when I climb, I think the thing I like most about it is the movement, getting into different situations, things like that. The athleticism on rock. (Evie 22)

I can’t think about anything else, just doing it. I like the uncluttering of my mind, and the exercise. (Sarah 49)

..., and the gymnastic part of it I enjoyed. I really liked that once I, ‘cos it was rather gymnastic is what they used to call it. (Dot 68)

I just liked the idea of the actual physical, the kind of physical moves that are required in climbing ‘cos they are quite gymnastic and I was always very keen on gymnastics, (Stella 60)

I’ve got to have… where like I’ve got a long walk in you know because if I just walk to the foot of a crag and just climbed I think I’d feel just so frustrated cos I’d want to be legging it about. I like the time for reflection that belaying can give you and then you can sort of take in views I love that. But I need to sort of had a really good leg it about before I get there. (Anna 34)

These extracts show that a number of female climbers expressed positive feelings derived from the physical act of climbing or in Anna’s case, the walk-in prior to a climb. As such this data is consistent with the small number of studies that have explored women’s sense of physicality in the context of outdoor activities. For example, McDermott (2000) concluded from her research about a group of female canoeists, on a commercial trip, that they reported an extended range of physicalities, greater opportunities to extend perceived body limits, and more opportunity for an enhanced understanding of their body. Whilst Little (2002) writing about the role of adventure education in women’s lives, surmised from interviews with 42 women adventure activists that risk and physical challenge were important...
elements in their experience alongside a sense of newness, learning, personal
development and creativity.

This aspect of women’s participation in physical activity, that is, positive feelings derived from physical exercise is sometimes overlooked or under-estimated. I would suggest that this is because much of the literature suggests that physicality is more significant for, and consistent with, the production of masculinity than it is with femininity (Connell, 2002, 2005; Pringle, 2001 and White and Young, 1999). As part of this general trend, other authors have posited the centrality of physical risk-taking in the construction of a particular form of hegemonic masculinity (Beal and Wilson, 2004; Kay and Laberge, 2004; Palmer, 2004; Robinson, 2004). Closer examination of the data obtained from this study, however, reveals that whilst female climbers highlighted positive feelings from the physical sensations associated with climbing, their narratives were consistent with the dominant discourses about femininity. The way these women talked about their practices might be said to reflect a feminine/female habitus which provided a framework for the meaning they attached to their sense of physical self. By this I mean that the female climbers talked about their physicality in ways that are consistent with the parameters of femininity. As Brace-Govan (2002) argued, bodies are key messengers of social communication and the women’s preference for climbing routes having delicate holds19 and requiring balance over strength potentially marks women climbers as less strong than their male peers.

Extracts from interviews with Hattie, Stella and Dot illustrate this point. In describing particular movements or routes, they said:

… and it’s very balanced, a very delicate move.. (Stella 60)

19 The term ‘delicate’ in climbing typically describes a move or a route which demands good balance often with small foot and hand holds.
… it was a balancing-thing I think… (Jessie 68)

I like bridging moves and I like delicate ones but I like to feel they’re not too long… (Dot 68)

… but I didn’t really like strenuous climbs, I liked the delicate ones better. (Hattie 77)

This data indicates that climbing represents an opportunity for some female interviewees to explore their physicality in a way that is rewarding. These women climbers expressed a preference for routes which played to their strengths, notably routes demanding a good sense of balance with small hand and foot holds as opposed to routes requiring strength. However, reference to gymnastic or athletic movements as well as to delicate climbs is also consistent with conventional images of female physicality – slim and toned, and with an emphasis on aesthetic movement as opposed to strength or power. As such, the interviewees’ reference to the pleasure they derived from the physical act of climbing do not depart from dominant discourses about female physicality. Significantly, both Dot and Hattie contrasted their preferred types of climb with those they disliked, namely strenuous or long climbs.

Young’s (2005) analysis of the cyclical and self-perpetuating relationship between words and actions which serve to constrain women’s physicality is helpful here because it points to the invidious nature of the relationship between discursive and embodied practices. Young uses the example of throwing to illuminate how discursive practices about women’s feebleness constrain the physical effort they put into throwing a ball. She contrasts women’s attempts to throw a ball which are typically limited to an arm movement to men’s which is much more a whole body movement. The parameters of women’s physicality remain limited by dominant discursive
practices about femininity which label some embodied practices as unfeminine, less feminine or impossible. Having said this and although the representation of rock climbing in the media, for example, presents it as an activity requiring considerable strength, not all routes require climbers to be strong. As these female climbers demonstrate, some routes demand balance and an ability to negotiate small hand and footholds. Therefore climbing might be said to offer participants a relatively broad range of physical experience and reward and perhaps as a consequence, provides a cultural space which is open to a broader range of physicalities than some other sports. However, it would be appropriate to sound a note of caution in relation to this assertion by referring to Robinson’s (2004) observations about masculinity and climbing.

Robinson suggests that rock climbing contributes to conceptions of physicality by gendering routes as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’. Through interviews with elite male climbers, she noted that her interviewees viewed steep, slab climbs which required balance and nimbleness as naturally more suited to women. Robinson does not suggest that a hierarchy of particular routes exists, in the sense of privileging those more suited to men and/or underplaying those undertaken by women. But it is a potentially short leap of inference to suggest that one exists, whereby less value is attached to women’s successful ascents, attributed as they are to women’s apparent natural advantage as opposed to a high level of competence.

Whilst the female interviewees tended to celebrate gymnastic, athletic or delicate type movements, their male counterparts rarely mentioned the sensations of moving on the rock as a reason for participation. The men did refer to physicality, however, but in very different ways as illustrated below:

… you become more confident in your abilities. I mean when you first start climbing - the only thing I’d really climbed before was a tree, and it was: ‘Oh, my God this hold’s not very good, I can’t hold onto this’, but once you’ve got some experience you know that it might be a mini little crimp but that you can hold
onto it for a fair amount of time and you can see all these big holds... (Steve 23)

... and what I found was that I got strong very quickly for wall climbing, generally speaking biggish holds, I could do yeah I think ‘I’m ok at this’, you know, shoddy footwork but strong muscles and quick muscles and then it was: ‘Oh yes, well I’m not bad at this.’ ... something you’ve got to be fit at, you’ve got to be quite strong at, yeah. (Donald 39)

I like the physical activities because... the physical activity of doing it and using all your different muscles and things. It felt very good. It literally for me felt physically very good... (Miles 53)

The words ‘muscles’ ‘strong’ and ‘fit’ serve as a consistent theme in these extracts, but the idea of the movement being valued for its own sake was much less in evidence. Where male climbers talked about movement it was not for its own sake; rather, it was in the context of advancing their climbing ability or demonstrating their strength and mastery on the rock as Dan’s (20) and Doug’s (68) remarks illustrate:

I actually understand movement on rock a bit more, like the way your body moves and the way that your body alters when you start climbing and you train to climb (Dan 20)

... the physical sensations of climbing are very great.

Such as?
Well I think if you’re fit and I was reasonably fit until I was ill in 1996, I mean I still run. I was still capable of say doing nearly 20 pull ups and things like that, but this very, very good feeling that you got when you soloed, you went out and maybe soloed 20 climbs somewhere like A___ or 20 climbs at I..... and the general feeling of well being that you were fit and active and you’d taken on a challenge... (Doug 68)

In contrast to the female climbers, the male climbers were much more likely to refer explicitly to feeling strong and to associate their strength with a commensurate increase in their rock climbing ability. What is particularly striking about their comments is the extent to which they discuss physicality in
the context of increased confidence in their bodies to achieve a goal, that is, to complete a move, or a route in its entirety. Male climbers seemed more likely to depict the body as a vehicle, a machine perhaps, used to complete a climb, than as a medium through which one experienced the sensation of movement on the rock. Performing on the rock appeared to reinforce male climbers’ self-belief about their physical prowess. In other words, they derived a sense of confidence about their bodies from their bodies.

In keeping with the earlier discussion about discourses of physicality and femininity I would argue that the same holds true for discourses of masculinity and physicality. In the same way that female climbers drew on a narrative of physicality (by reference to balance and delicate moves or routes) which reflected a feminine habitus, so the male climbers drew on a dominant discourse of masculinity which reflected a masculine habitus. Male climbers’ narratives of physicality included references to strength and power as well as control and mastery of the route and rock face. In other words, their embodied experiences aligned with a masculine climbing habitus.

In the first part of this chapter, I explored physicality with limited reference to the relationship between it and risk-taking or risk activities. I suggest that this is because the climbers’ accounts of physicality reflected those occasions during which they felt in control and hence the risks posed were minimal. In this next section, I want to switch the focus of my analysis to scrutinise climbers’ narratives about the limits of their bodies, notably in the context of ageing and injury and here risk comes to the fore.

6.4 Knowing Your Limits: Physicality and Climbing

In this section, I want to shift the focus away from the positive associations with physicality and the possibilities the physical body affords to
examine the extent to which climbers perceived their physicality as limiting rather than enabling their experiences on the rock face. In so doing, I will describe the different ways by which this group of climbers reflected on their physical limits and explore the extent to which these perceived limits articulated with notions of risk.

In their accounts of their climbing experiences, the interviewees discussed the impact of their physical state on their fitness or preparedness to undertake and complete routes. Analysis of the data revealed that at a general level the climbers expressed concern about their ‘fitness’ to undertake a climb. However, fitness should not be viewed narrowly as meaning muscular strength. Rather, it should be viewed as reflecting a broader concern with a climbers’ overall physical preparedness including how tired and/or hung-over they were, their emotional state as well as their perceived level of physical fitness. Tim (24), for example, talked about how he delayed decisions about which routes to undertake until the day of a climb because he wanted to evaluate his energy levels at the end of a week spent working in a pub. Similarly, Dan (20) mentioned that he took into consideration his level of alcohol consumption the night prior to a day’s climbing. Other climbers talked specifically about a lack of fitness to undertake particular types of route. In these examples, without explicitly mentioning risk, the climbers’ narratives convey a sense that they assessed their fitness to complete a route. In other words, these climbers modified the level at which they were prepared to climb if, in their judgement, they deemed themselves ‘a risk’.

This analysis is important for two reasons. First, it highlights the extent to which climbers’ general feeling of fitness influences their climbing practice. Secondly, it reveals the existence of a temporal dimension to the way that climbers manage and assess risk. At the outset of a route, climbers considered not only the risk posed by the route, but also the risk posed by
their personal mental and physical fitness. If they felt less fit at any given point to complete a climb, they sometimes elected to climb well within their ability, that is, to stand back from the edge. A climber’s knowledge and experience of a route, as well as of their physical and mental fitness served as criteria by which they judged themselves qualified to complete a climb. In pronouncing on their qualifications, I argue they also affirmed their identity as a ‘competent’ climber.

Some climbers talked more generally about the limits that tiredness placed on the body. Steve (23), for example, described taking rests in between moves and placing gear securely on ‘long steep routes’ which he described as being ‘quite hard’ because he did not have the fitness for them. Steve managed the risk associated with such routes by adopting practices that he felt would reduce the risk of non-completion, that is, taking long rests between moves and ensuring that the gear he placed would hold him in the event of a fall. Elsewhere I have discussed Stella’s (60) relatively serious accident (see Chapter Four). Stella felt that poor physical fitness caused by a long lay-off due to the Foot and Mouth outbreak in 2000 had contributed to a serious fall:

So I was not fit and I went out to do a climb which was a hard VS\(^{20}\) and there was a very, very difficult move on it which was well protected, and I struggled and struggled and struggled on this and got quite tired and in the end I did it... and then at the final bit I got to this vertical crack which was quite a big crack and a jammy crack and... it was strenuous and I got to near the top and it was a difficult move and I thought ‘well I’ve just got to go for this’.... And I was still quite surprised when I fell off ... and that was very, very risky and I think, you know it was a sort of combination of small mistakes. (Stella 60)

Stella’s reflection about her accident provides an opportunity to redefine her feelings in what Lois (2005) defines as the final stage of edgework. At the beginning of the route, Stella deemed herself qualified to undertake that route.

\(^{20}\) HVS is grade of above average difficulty.
In reflecting on this specific event, Stella acknowledges that she made a bad decision, but in her narrative there is a sense that she is trying to recover her status as a qualified climber and retain a coherent sense of identity as a good and safe climber. Despite describing actions which render her unqualified to undertake that route, Stella presents a rational account of why she fell, identifying the factors which she believed contributed to her fall. These factors included the grade of the climb and a particularly difficult move early on in the route which sapped her strength and on which she used a lot of gear. Consequently, by the time she reached the crux move, she was both tired and short of gear.

Stella suggests that she had no alternative but to ‘go for this [crux move]’ and she concluded by saying that her fall was due to a series of ‘small mistakes’ each one acceptable on its own, but not in combination. In this account, I believe that Stella maintains her identity as someone qualified to climb by attributing her fall to a series of small mistakes each of which was manageable on its own but not in combination. Notably, she suggests she had no choice but to attempt the crux move. Her account is reasoned and rationale and in this way Stella re-establishes her status as a qualified climber.

6.5 Physicality, Risk and Age

Although aged 56 when she fell, Stella did not mention age as a factor contributing to her fall. Other climbers, however, did refer to their age as something that mediated their fitness to climb. Unsurprisingly, older climbers were more likely than younger climbers to mention injury and chronic conditions such as arthritis as placing limits on their ability to climb as well as when they were younger. Brian, for example, felt that he took fewer risks due to his age and when asked to clarify this he talked about a loss of strength due
to frostbite and to a loss of suppleness, referring to a climbing partner to demonstrate the impact on climbing practice:

**What is it about age?**

For me, it’s partly physical, the feeling in my fingers is not the same because I’ve had frostbite, or my joints aren’t as supple, and it changes your style of climbing. L [climbing partner] has changed his style because he can’t lift his arm in this way (gestures arm above his head) any more, so it changes what you do. (Brian 60)

In a similar vein, that is, talking about both age and chronic injury, Dot intimated that she had changed the way she climbed. She said:

I’m certainly not jamming\(^{21}\) now… because I’ve got arthritis (Dot 68)

Ivan too reflected on the effect that getting older had on his sense of what he could do:

So you can go if you have a lot of reserves you could be happy to be in a position where its… you know you’re gonna have to move quickly or else you fall off. Where as when you’re getting older and you’re not as strong, you haven’t done as much that worry of how fine you’re cutting it, maybe comes on earlier and I think that would change on overall how you viewed the situation. (Ivan 48)

Ivan qualified what he can do as an older climber. That is, he described how he has fewer reserves of strength and is at greater risk of not completing a climb. In order to retain control, Ivan explained that his assessment of his reserves of strength and a decline in those reserves altered his judgment of what constitutes the boundary between being in control and not in control – ‘how fine you’re cutting it maybe comes earlier…’. This again demonstrates the existence of a temporal dimension to an analysis of embodied risk-taking. In the first instance, a link exists between ageing and declining physical strength. In the second instance, climbers like Ivan, who recognise a decline

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\(^{21}\) Jamming describes a move where a climber jams a hand or foot into a crack (common on gritstone routes) and pivots that extremity to provide a secure, non-slip hold.
in physical strength, manage this risk by drawing back from the edge at an earlier point.

Thus, I would argue that recognising the importance of a temporal dimension to risk-taking, allows for a more nuanced account of Lyng’s (1990; 2005) notion of edgework. Lyng argues that edge-workers ‘crowd’ the edge, that is, they seek a heightened experience by operating at the limit of their competence. This space constitutes the boundary or the fine line between participants being in control and out of control. Drawing on the data in this study, I argue that a climber’s relationship to the edge is marked not only by their knowledge and experience, but by their perception of declining physical ability due to age and a need to adjust their climbing practices accordingly. Central to their revised practices is a concern to retain their identity as a qualified climber. The extra-ordinariness of climbing supports this concern because participants prepare, plan and crucially exert control over their actions. Practice and identity are mutually reinforcing.

As I have argued elsewhere, control was a consistent theme in the interviewees’ comments about the limits of their physicality and the impact this had on their ability to assess and manage risk. As such, the older climbers expressed relatively more concern to ensure that they assessed and managed risk in the context of an ageing body. In the previous extract, Ivan talked about ‘how fine you’re cutting it’, that is, his need to assess his ability to complete a climb successfully relative to the demands of that particular climb. Brian expressed a similar sentiment when he described how he took more care over a decision to make a particular move and how he was prepared to back off if he was uncertain.

…now I’ll make sure that if I get to a stage where I have to make a move and I decide if I’m sure I can do it, and if I think I can’t I can climb back down. Before I’d have thought well I’ll probably be able to do it, and so I’d go for it, and I probably would… (Brian 60)
Brian contrasted his approach now, aged 60, with his earlier climbing days, when he ‘would go for it’. Brian described how he only attempted routes if he felt he was pushing himself when he was younger whereas now he takes only ‘calculated risks’.

Overall, older climbers were also more likely to report feelings of uncertainty about their physical capacity on the rock in comparison to when they were younger and in comparison to the younger climbers interviewed. The body’s declining strength meant that older climbers allowed for a greater margin of error, on the basis that they would not be able to draw on the physical reserves they once had.

6.5.1 Ageing and Edgework

This heightened sense of uncertainty for older climbers played out in their motivations for climbing. Older climbers talked about not feeling a need to push their grade but rather to climb within the limits of their ability. They did not crowd the ‘edge’ in the way that Lyng (1990) suggests is true for those engaged in risk activities and risk-taking. Rather they stood someway back from the edge which accommodated a perceived loss of physical strength and suppleness and a concern about the increased length of time taken to recover, should they suffer an injury. In other words, these climbers made a greater allowance for the management of risk. In doing so, their understanding of risk to the body reflected two temporal components. First, they assessed and managed risk in the context of their increasing age and experience and secondly, they acknowledged that injuries when they happened took longer to heal and lengthened their time away from climbing.

Perhaps the older climbers were more aware of their mortality and therefore less willing to accept time away from climbing. Perhaps they were
less willing to have injury threaten their participation and, subsequently, their identity as climbers. The risk posed by injury to both their climbing practices and identity posed a greater risk than any loss of self-esteem or emotional benefit gleaned from crowding the edge. Moreover, all the interviewees typically expressed their identity as a climber in terms of their competence or their qualification to climb. As such edgework could be viewed as much less significant for these climbers than for elite climbers; a situation that was amplified in relation to older climbers.

In contrast, Coral, a much younger climber said:

**Have there been changes in your approach to risk in climbing since you first started?**
I think that I accept that if I want to move on, if I want to get better, I have to sort of almost forget that some of the risks can happen and just hope that they don’t.

**Is that a conscious strategy to do that?**
Yeah, maybe, I don’t know. Yeah, I think to push yourself you have to take risks. I think as you’re pushing yourself, you are taking a risk but you don’t know if your ability’s good enough to be doing what you’re doing but you want to be able to so you won’t ever know until you take that risk kind of thing.

**How far do you think you take risks when you’re climbing nowadays?**
Oh [pause]. I think that’s the only risk you take, sort of in pushing my grade.

**How often would you say you try to push your grade?**
Well at the minute the climbing season’s only really just started [pause] so probably I’ll start, I mean I’ve started off kind of nice and easy at the minute but I’ll probably start pushing it so that I’m on time for the grade so that by the end of the summer I’ll have achieved it. (Coral 22)

Coral’s account accords much more closely with Lyng’s (1990) analysis of edgework, whereby participants can be said to crowd the edge. In Coral’s case, this is to improve the grade at which she climbed. Like older climbers, younger climbers also talked about limits, when they did so they communicated their capacity to push those limits, that is, to crowd the edge rather than pull back from it. I suggest that this difference between older and younger climbers’ relationship to the edge reflects their sense of self as both
climbers as well as young or old people. Younger climbers’ willingness to crowd the edge reflects not just their physical ability, but security in their identity as a climber. There seemed little in their appreciation of their physical ability or limits that posed an immediate threat to that identity. In contrast, older climbers, aware of their declining strength, have to renegotiate that identity in order to sustain a coherent sense of self as a climber. If older climbers continued to crowd the edge, their identity as a qualified climber could be threatened from potential failure and/or injury which would restrict future climbing opportunity. In the few instances where older climbers acknowledged being in situations where they crowded the edge, they reflected on that experience in a different way to the younger climbers as Leonard’s account illustrates:

If I get going and I’m enjoying myself I just don’t think about it [risk] at all, I just go and that’s the best thing about it really and then you get to the top and you know what, you think: ‘What have I done?’ And you got away with it [laughs]. I did yesterday, and it made me think: ‘I’m 62 and I got away with that, yeah I can still do that.’ For me, I picked a Hard Severe"" 22 I didn’t know, had a look at it and thought: ‘I’ll do that.’ and it was a little bit harder than I thought it was going to be and polished and I nearly fell off it. My wife was quietly behind a tree not noticing anything [laughs]. Yeah, so I suppose I felt good about that. (Leonard 62)

In this extract, Leonard’s encounter with the edge appears to reaffirm and re-energise his sense of self and identity as a climber. This extract exposes a tension between a desire to crowd the edge and a recognition that ‘getting away with it’ does not quite fit with the notion of a qualified climber, that is, as someone who manages and assesses risk in order to control it. In a majority of instances, however, climbers privileged risk management over risk-taking.

Leonard also acknowledged that he had grown more cautious in his approach to risk management, but sometimes it was only on reflection that he realised that he had crowded the edge, or as he termed it: ‘got away with it’.

22 Slightly below average climbing grade.
For example, in the interview, Leonard expressed concern about the consequences of potential injury, citing the experiences of a friend:

... if I break my leg now that’s going to be a real bummer because that’s probably going to take me a long time to recover from it because I’m older. Like I know if I break my hip for instance, I’ve got a friend who’ve had a hip replacement and it’s difficult climbing and caving or anything, he mostly just walks and I know that he doesn’t, he is slightly, he is jealous with the fact that I can still go climbing and he can’t. So, I just think of that. I more than ever don’t want to fall off and hurt myself. I don’t mind hurting myself but I don’t want to actually break anything because that would lay me up for a year and I haven’t got that many years so that’s self preservation, to carry on with activity. (Leonard 62)

Although Leonard seems to revel in a near miss at ‘his age’, he also demonstrated his awareness of his mortality through his friend’s physical decline and a consciousness that injury could limit or even curtail his involvement in climbing. I propose that when he talks about not having ‘got many years [left]’, he is not contemplating the time between now and his death but between now and the end of his climbing days. Of course, the effect of his friend’s injury on Leonard’s approach to climbing could have transpired at any point in his life. However, Leonard narrated, at another point in the interview, how some thirty years previously, aged 36, a close friend was killed climbing in the Himalayas adding that he was unaffected by his friend’s death. Perhaps this is evidence that there is a temporal dimension to the effect of other climbers’ accidents, or perhaps it indicates that we ‘learn’ lessons or alter our practices only when we can draw a direct or close parallel between the actions of others and our personal circumstances.

The threat posed by old age to one’s identity has received relatively little attention in the sociological literature. Spector-Mersel (2006), for example, argues that cultural scripts for what constitutes a ‘true man’ and an ‘ageing person’ are largely absent. As such, she claims that older men can struggle to build respectable identities. Herron (2007) observed through
interviews with older men that they continued to define themselves in relation to their participation in the workforce beyond retirement. In contrast, Gildeard and Higgs (2000) propose that whilst old age identity was once forged by roles once occupied or performed, there is increased evidence of agency in late modernity and old age identities are more fluid. The data in this study suggests that a climbing identity was enduring. There was little evidence of a need to ‘build a respectable identity’, nor much evidence of an identity framed in terms of paid employment. Rather, the interviewees presented an identity as a qualified and safe climber and upheld this identity even where their participation in climbing was now restricted, for example, Doug (68) or Dot (68) or completely absent (Aubrey 70; Hattie 77; Jessie 68).

6.6 Injured Bodies

Climbers’ worries about injury had a major influence on their climbing practices. Specifically they attempted to manage and control the risks associated with falling. Climbers adopted practices to avoid falling or else they took steps to minimise the harm caused by a fall through the placement of gear, use of a rope, and the wearing of a harness and a helmet. Despite all these measures, however, climbers do fall and they do injure themselves. Injuries from climbing falls can be relatively minor – a sprained ankle – or much more serious such as a head injury or broken bones. Although a climber may recover sufficiently from an injury to enable them to climb again, I want to explore what impact their injuries had on their approach to climbing. In other words, whilst the body might have recovered physically to climb again, injury could affect both their motivation to climb and challenge their identity as a qualified climber. Additionally, a physical injury may have longer-term consequences for an individual’s climbing practices.
Although all the climbers responded to the question: ‘What does risk mean to you in climbing terms?’ by citing predominantly physical risks such as falling and injury, not all reported that they had actually been injured whilst climbing. Female climbers reported fewer climbing injuries than male climbers and older climbers reported more injuries than younger climbers. Analysis of the data revealed that two younger climbers reported overuse injuries including, tennis elbow (Mark 24) and a shoulder injury caused by climbing (Nick 22). These injuries led them to stop climbing for up to eighteen months to allow ligaments and tendons to repair. Furthermore, Rob mentioned that he limited his climbing because of concerns about the length of time he might have to stop climbing. Citing one particular knee injury sustained several years previously, he explained:

I think it’s because the recovery takes longer... all those niggling injuries. Like my knee. I did my knee jumping into a river that was too shallow about twelve years ago and it’s never been right since. It’s realising the longer term effects so I moderate what I do now. (Rob 50)

Rob altered his practices to manage his participation, but in contrast the younger climbers expected to recover from their injuries and return quickly to climbing without adjusting the frequency or nature of participation. In keeping with the line of reasoning in this and the preceding section, older climbers seemed to manage their exposure to risk, that is, to step back from the edge. They seemed to communicate a greater concern with what might happen in the future than the younger climbers interviewed.

Three younger male climbers, but no younger female climbers mentioned minor physical injuries caused by falls. Mark (24) and Tim (24) had sprained ankles through falls, whilst Tim had also hit his head on the ground and suffered mild concussion. In contrast, four of the climbers aged over sixty
described falls that had resulted in injuries severe enough to stop them climbing for up to eighteen months.

Oh I was taking somebody climbing, at I____, CCPR [Central Council for Physical Recreation], and instead of going the easy way, I went on the outside, I had some mud on me boot and I just stood up on this little ledge and fell off. And I got this double fracture, when I hit the ground cos it was on a slope as well so I flipped me tail\textsuperscript{23} a few times and I did me back as well. I had to have crutches for three months. (Hattie 77)

I mean I ended up with my ankle – I'd been climbing 50 years before I had a serious accident, but I just slipped from the top of a climb I was soloing and I still don't know what happened. But I hit the ground from 30' and smashed my leg and ankle and five months on crutches and a year in and out of hospital. So I can't turn it. (Doug 68)

In these accounts the climbers’ attributed the cause of their fall to a number of different factors including a piece of rock giving way, having mud on their boots (as well as perhaps seeking a more challenging route when leading someone less competent) and the poor condition of the rock in conjunction with feeling tired. Doug explained that he had little idea of why he fell and expressed surprise that he had done so. None of those who experienced a bad accident intimated that its cause was, in anyway, linked to a lack of technical skill, experience or knowledge on their part. These climbers' accounts of their accidents reflect Laurendeau’s (2006a) study of skydivers in which he noted that skydivers attributed accidents and mishaps to factors outside their control, thus maintaining an illusion of control. I suggest that these narratives serve an additional purpose. Not only do they minimise the threat to climbers’ perceived sense of control as Laurendeau (2006a; Laurendeau, 2006b) suggests, but they also sustain and maintain a climbers’ sense of identity as a ‘qualified’ climber. In other words, the climbers did not

\textsuperscript{23} Rolled over
ascibe the cause of accident to their personal climbing practices but to factors unrelated to their personal practice.

Moreover, these narratives reflect the interviewees’ construction of climbing as an ‘extraordinary’ risk activity, whereby the risk associated with climbing is managed to a point where falls and injury are a result of accidents rather than a failure to control risk. At this point extraordinary risk activities merge with ordinary risk activities in the sense that failure, that is a fall is reconstructed as difficult or impossible to anticipate, and therefore outside the control of an individual climber.

Given that the injuries sustained by climbers are sometimes severe enough to result in an enforced break from climbing, I wanted to see how far serious injury affected climbers’ motivations to climb and/or changed their climbing practices. For some climbers like Aubrey, it appeared to have no effect whatsoever:

… I fell off at M___, this ledge I was mantelshelfing\(^{24}\) on came off and I was held on a runner\(^{25}\) and the ledge hit me on the back while I was still on the runner. So they lowered me off and carried me away and I had a long, long lay off. I was in bed for some months…

**Did that change you at all?**
No. Did it change me like that? No. Falls don’t, you think you’ve been lucky. (Aubrey 70)

Similarly, Hattie responded with an emphatic ‘yes’, to my question about whether she climbed again after her accident. These extracts reveal how climbers make sense of accidents that befall them in a way that makes it possible for them to continue climbing. Aubrey alluded to luck whilst Doug ultimately distanced himself from the possibility of future accidents by adopting an attitude of ‘it isn’t going to happen to me’:

\(^{24}\) Climbing onto a projecting ledge of rock from below by pressing down on it with the hands to raise the upper body, enabling a foot or knee to reach the ledge.

\(^{25}\) A sling wrapped around a section of rock or used to extend an anchor to avoid rope drag.
... obviously you sat back and, but then the attractions were always greater than the... [risk], and I think there is definitely this attitude with people in high-risk activities that it isn’t going to happen to me. (Doug 68)

I suggest that both climbers were able to maintain a degree of ontological security in their identity as a qualified climber and of climbing as an extraordinary risk activity by attributing the cause of their accident to bad luck in Aubrey’s case or in Doug’s by embracing the idea that accidents happened to other people.

Not all climbers were able to maintain the same sense of ontological security, however. I return again to Stella’s account of her accident and its affect on her:

I think I was just tired, you know, and the rock was kind of quite dirty, you know it hadn’t been climbed for a long time because of foot and mouth you see, so there again it wasn’t in very good condition either. It was dry and had dried moss and lichen and stuff on it and I slipped, just slipped off, and my hand slipped I think and that was it.

You say you don’t climb as hard now, so that incident really has shifted the way...[you climb]? Actually I think yeah, I mean unfortunately because I was at least wiser after the event and you know probably prepare more carefully and you know think about a climb a lot more carefully before I choose what to do. But it certainly has shaken me, I think it must have, you know, it’s made a difference to me. (Stella 60)

Closer scrutiny of the Stella’s comments revealed that she saw herself as partly responsible for her accident.

You know, first of all not being fit enough, second not checking that the climb, although it was a hard VS26 was actually was at the top of the Hard VS list and was probably an E127 and thirdly not being more cautious with my use of gear, you know, thinking about, you know what I’m going to need for the climb ahead. (Stella 60)

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26 A slightly above average climbing grade.
27 An above average climbing grade.
In identifying the cause of her fall, Stella mentioned the poor condition of the rock – an external factor akin to Hattie’s mud on her boot, but crucially she also described herself as not being fit enough due to a long lay off from climbing (a consequence of the 2000 Foot and Mouth outbreak in the UK) and she suggested that she had used too much gear early on the route.

I propose that the factors Stella identified as the cause of the accident may help to explain why her fall had more effect on her approach to climbing than falls experienced by Aubrey, Doug or Hattie. Hattie and Aubrey attributed their falls to mud and a dislodged piece of rock, things neither could reasonably be expected to know about in advance. Doug could not explain why he had fallen, referring to his fall as: ‘the biggest surprise of my life’. Consequently, he could not attribute the reason for his fall to any factors, inside or outside his control, and he did not attempt to guess at a reason. As such, he could learn nothing from the fall in terms of it affecting his approach to risk, but the physical injuries he sustained were so severe that he cannot risk falling again so he can only second climbs.

In contrast, Stella, attributed her fall to the poor rock conditions, it was covered in vegetation because it had not been climbed due to the Foot and Mouth outbreak, but crucially she also recounted that she was very tired and elsewhere in her account that she had placed too much gear early in the climb. Stella also acknowledged that her fitness levels had been compromised by the Foot and Mouth outbreak. Moreover, Stella suggested that she failed to ‘check’ the difficulty of the route, and on reflection she estimated that the route was a grade harder than she thought at the outset of the climb. Taking all these points together, Stella appears to imply that she was not qualified to lead this climb. Crucially, in reflecting on her accident, Stella identifies not only the reasons that contributed to her fall, but also to the
lessons learned. In so doing, I suggest that this represents a partial attempt to re-qualify as a competent climber.

To illuminate this point, I draw on the work of Young (1987) and Norris (2009). Young proposes that there are two realms in reflective narratives, a ‘tale world’ and a ‘story realm’, as well as two people, namely a ‘character me’ and a ‘teller me’. Young proposes that these realms and people can be almost indistinguishable in younger people because of the proximity between the tale and the story; the character and the teller. Norris (2009) argues that in older people’s narratives, the story/tale realm and the character/teller-me can be quite separate as the period of time which has elapsed between the event (tale/character) and its telling (story/teller) is potentially greater. However, chronological age, in and of itself, does not indicate proximity between story and tale as an analysis of Stella’s narrative illustrates. Stella was 60 at the time of the interview and her accident had happened some four years previously, when she was 56. Four years between tale world and character me and story world and teller me is not such a long time.

Having criticised the conflation of chronological age with elapsed time in reflective narratives, I do want to make use of Norris’s (2009) analysis of rhetorical devices used in such accounts where the recipient of the information is younger than the giver. As well as drawing on techniques which help the younger person to contextualise an event, or experience (for example, via age disclosure, reference to age-related roles and health), Norris postulates that older informants also employ temporal framing processes. Such processes include adding past perspectives to a current topic expressing self-association with the past, recognising historical, cultural and social change and crucially disclosing narratives of self-discovery. Narratives of self-discovery effectively allowed Stella an opportunity to position her character-me as unqualified in her
risk-taking, but present her teller-me as qualified; she had reflected on her accident and was able to communicate the lessons learned.

I contend that this process of disclosing narratives, which communicate a sense of self-discovery, is prominent in all the transcripts obtained during the course of this research. Regardless of age, many of the interviewees described lessons learned from ‘epics’, accidents, close calls or near misses. For example, in similar circumstances to Stella, Dan (20) recounted how he took a fall climbing when he was unfit and unqualified on a slab\(^{28}\) in hot conditions which made it a very difficult climb route; whilst Mark (24) described a near miss very early on in his climbing experiences. In this lengthy account, Mark appears to straddle the identity of both a qualified and an unqualified climber. He starts by conveying the key lesson learned, that is, ‘not to onsight solo out of our limits’ and then describes how this lesson was learned and what he took away from this incident – notably the importance of wearing a helmet.

We also learned not to onsight solo out of our limits because we were doing that at S____ E____ and we went through this phase of doing as many routes as possible in a weekend and it was like, ‘Go!’ and we would leave home at 5 in the morning and go and you know, we just came and it was really good fun, it was really good fun and then one day we went to G____ and we did some routes there and we like, we’ve done some routes here and then we went to F____ and then we were going to go to C____ and then we were going to go home and we were on a bit of a roll. So we were at B____ and we were at one end of the cliff and we working our way along and doing everything we could. We didn’t climb that hard, we were doing a VS\(^{29}\) at that time and I tried this route and it was the hardest to do I think and I got 10, 11 metres up and there was a move and I was like, I can’t see how to do that so I climbed back down and I was like to my mate:

‘Give us a belay\(^{30}\) on that then because I can’t solo\(^{31}\) it, give us a belay.’

\(^{28}\) A slab is particularly slippery in hot conditions.
\(^{29}\) Average climbing grade.
\(^{30}\) A climbing partner protects the lead climber from a fall by halting the movement of the rope through use of a belay device/technique.
\(^{31}\) To climb without placing protection.
‘Oh I can’t be bothered, it’s hot, I’m going to sit around.’
And I was like: ‘Bollocks to you, I’m going to do it.’

So I did it and I got to that point and I still couldn’t figure out
how to do this sodding move and I got pissed off, so I tried it
and fell off and I hit my ankle on this ledge about a metre and a
half down, flipped upside down, passed out, went bang like that
into a boulder in a gully and I landed on my side in a nicely
shaped piece of ground and I just sprained my ankle and the
mountain rescue were climbing a route next door and took me
to hospital and my friend saw it and got traumatised. That’ll
teach him not to belay me - so that was bad. And we always
wore helmets ‘cos we were scared and that’s a good job
because otherwise I’d be dead so I always wear a helmet even
leading on grit or even seconding on grit and anyone who
doesn’t is just taking a random risk and there’s just no need and
it’s not like, I don’t know, climb a big route in the Alps and
there’s a certain risk of snowfall and you can’t do much about
that, but leave your helmet off, there’s so many people that
have died falling like 5 metres at B____ and it’s completely
unnecessary, so stupid but anyway. (Mark 24)

In the first instance, Mark describes how they climbed multiple routes in
a short space of time, but emphasises that they climbed within their limits. In
the rest of the extract, Mark describes a potentially life threatening fall where
had he not worn a helmet, he might have died. In recognising the value of a
helmet, Mark demonstrates through a reflective narrative his identity as a
qualified climber. Additionally, he is able to distinguish between an
extraordinary and an ordinary risk activity such that his capacity to assess and
manage risk, albeit within the limits of his relative inexperience, saved his life.

I suggest that through such narratives, the climbers in this study were
able to sustain a degree of ontological security around their status as a
qualified climber. In recounting tales of accidents or falls, they did one of two
things, they either attributed their fall to bad luck or to factors outside their
control in which case their status as a qualified or competent climber went
unchallenged. Alternatively, they accepted that their actions had contributed
to the accident and in so doing highlighted their status as an unqualified
climber. However, they attempted to reassert their status as a qualified
climber by conveying to the interviewer the lessons learned from their accident or fall as Norris (2009) suggests, by presenting themselves as having undertaken a journey of self-discovery. I also suggest that those interviewed sometimes interpreted accidents and falls resulting in physical injury or near physical injury as a crucial aspect of what could be conceived as their journey toward the status of a qualified climber; Mark’s account is illustrative of this point.

Finally, it would not be appropriate to end this section without some acknowledgement of the positive effect that falls had for a climber’s confidence. When the gear a climber had placed held their fall, climbers in this study reported that this experience gave them more confidence. Steve said:

**You said you had a couple of falls whilst climbing, did your approach to risk change at all after that?**

In climbing, certainly yes. Before I’d taken a fall on trad [traditional] gear I was going on the theory that it was going to work, but I’m still not going to fall, [laughs] but then once I did take a fall, you know in your head it’s going to work. But then there is always a doubt, well it still could rip or a rock could break, or maybe I haven’t put it in right, but it’s never ripped so - you definitely become more confident in climbing after you’ve taken a few whippers\(^{32}\) - it’s actually quite good fun [laughs].

(Steve 23)

In Julie’s case she intimated that such a fall, should she take one, would give her more confidence:

I think if I fell off and the protection stayed in (laughs) then I think I’d be more confident in the future about trusting it, not ever having had to rely on it, I’ve kind of still got this doubt as to whether or not it will, if you can understand that? (Julie 24)

Paradoxically, some climbers perceived failure on a route (in the form of a fall) as a very positive experience. It demonstrated beyond doubt that their gear placement was secure and perhaps gave them confidence to attempt ‘risky’ moves and push their grade.

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\(^{32}\) An especially hard or dynamic fall.
This approach was not universally accepted, however, and it was more prevalent amongst younger and male climbers than older and female climbers. Female climbers expressed much more concern about falling and sought to avoid it, whilst older climbers also talked about attempting a route or a move that it was possible to reverse, that is, climb down or one that they were ‘guaranteed’ to make. In contrast, younger climbers tended to see gear placement as an integral part of their climbing practice and one that enabled them to attempt moves, that is, to risk a fall in a way that older climbers did not at an equivalent age or level of experience. Hence technical developments in gear can be seen to have played a role in shaping their perception of risk and their subsequent practices on the rock. There are two aspects to the temporal dimension to risk identified here. First, and most obviously, younger climbers seemed more willing to crowd the edge, for example, to push their grade, than older climbers (a point made earlier). This is consistent with research that suggests that physical risk-taking declines with age. Secondly, however, it is possible that the older climbers’ reluctance to crowd the edge is partially linked to their climbing experiences in their youth where falling was not an option in the way that it is today.

6.7 Physicality, Bodies and Parts

Equally revealing in these extracts is the way that climbers’ narratives articulate the mind-body nexus. For the most part, climbers typically used the first person pronoun, ‘I’, to describe what they can do or conversely what they can or cannot do. In other words, a climber would say ‘I can’t jam anymore’ as opposed to ‘my fingers can’t jam anymore’. Dot did not say, ‘my body has arthritis’; she said, ‘I have arthritis’. Brian did not say, ‘my body’s had frostbite’; rather he said ‘I have frostbite’. This is a potentially important distinction because it suggests that the mind and body of the climbing self are
a single entity and accords with the ideas of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and more recently, Crossley (2001). As such, this data supports the notion that the mind and body are a single entity and that this is reflected in our narratives about ourselves. Having said this, there were occasions when climbers did refer to parts of the body, in conjunction with or instead of ‘I’. For example, they used phrases like my foot slipped as opposed to I slipped as the following extracts illustrate:

I think the biggest surprise of my life was when I slipped off and fractured my leg and ankle because, you know I’d done things like fractured my ankle running and I fractured my ankle bouldering at F___ and I fractured my ankle at F___ E___ once bouldering, but I’d never done anything like that in all the years I’d been climbing in the Himalayas, I’d been 8 times to the Himalayas and I never expected to slip off the top of a gritstone climb that I’d done maybe 20 times before and I still don’t know how it happened. My foot just came off and I was in the air. (Doug 68)

Yeah, if you’re gonna hit the ground you’re quite close to something and you know what it’s like and when you’ve climbed quite a lot you get a good sense of that. There is always a possibility of your foot slipping off something or a hold pulling off but I’d say you get a fairly good idea for that and that might be quite a small risk. (Ivan 48)

I mean last year I did on B___ C___ and it was maybe VS... Me feet were little matchstick ledges going away from you... and I just, yeah that was a little bit, ‘Oohh God!’ So yeah that was bad because if you’d fallen off there was enough slack to take you back onto the ledge where your belay was and if you’d come off, it was about 12, 14 foot onto the ledge. With one number two holding you, I think I was a bit worried if I fell ‘cos you were going to take a really nasty one. (Donald 39)

... I’d been away travelling for about a year and I’d hardly climbed, hadn’t climbed that much. I was fat, out of shape, I wasn’t really... My mind knew what I wanted to do but my body wasn’t really following and then when my body doesn’t follow, my mind gets a little bit uncertain [laughs]... it was about 30°, it was the middle of summer when we were having a hot summer and it’s not good conditions to be doing a slab33, you want them as cold as possible for a slab, sort of about zero would be a

33 Rock face is at an angle of less than 90° but protection is sparse and balance and friction required.
good temperature to be doing slab routes in. And I just felt my foot roll because my body wasn’t in the right position and I wasn’t. I wasn’t used to the movement again because I’d had a long break and I wasn’t thinking right... (Dan 20)

In these extracts, those interviewed appeared to create a degree of distance between a generally positive, and in control self and a more negative, out of control self or other body. Typically, the interviewees positioned this less able body and parts of the body a ‘at risk’

Where climbers substitute ‘my body cannot’ for the first person pronoun singular ‘I’ this perhaps suggests that the climber is in less control and the activity less under control. In such a scenario the climber is potentially unqualified to climb and their identity as a climber, threatened. The key point of departure from this general rule occurred where climbers talked about parts of their body, for example, ‘my joints aren’t as supple now’ or where they positioned the body as ‘other’. Where climbers did refer to specific body parts, using phrases such as I felt ‘my foot roll’ or ‘me feet were little matchstick ledges going away from me’, they appeared to sub-consciously distance a whole ‘me’ from the event. One way of interpreting this data is seeing it as an attempt to maintain a coherent sense of identity as a climber, a ‘whole’ climber in the face of a substantial threat, either through ageing or injury to that identity, by referring to parts of the body. The body is literally fragmented in these discourses and this potentially mirrors the potential fragmentation of one’s identity as a climber.

6.8 Summary

The climbers in this study valued the physical sensations they experienced when climbing, but their narratives reflected a gendered dimension to those sensations. Male climbers’ accounts of physicality typically included references to strength and power as if they were seeking to
master the rock or a climb. In contrast, women climbers reflected on their physicality using words such as, gymnastic, delicate and balance. Overall, these narratives reflected a gendered habitus and whilst women climbers embraced their physicality and participated in a sport not traditionally identified with women, they did so within the boundaries of a feminine habitus.

Notably, older climbers were much more likely to reflect on the limits of their physicality than younger climbers. They stepped back from the edge rather than pursue edgework, seemingly keen to preserve their existing physicality, for example, by avoiding injury. Younger climbers expected to recover quickly from injury, older climbers perceived injury as a greater threat to their physicality. They anticipated a longer break from climbing and therefore they adopted practices which saw them step away from the edgework. In contrast, younger climbers were more likely to engage in edgework, to test the limits of their physicality.

Crucially, a climber’s physicality underpinned their status as a qualified or unqualified climber. Their qualification to climb was mediated by their physicality and climbers evaluated their qualification not only in terms of their strength or athletic ability, but also in terms of their energy levels and sobriety. Climbers adjusted their goals depending on the way they felt and in so doing maintained their identity as a qualified climber, that is, a safe climber, qualified to judge their personal competence. A temporal dimension also mediated the relationship between risk and physicality. This is evident in the older climbers’ accounts where they talked about stepping away from the edge in later life to preserve their involvement in an extra-ordinary risk activity as well as their identity as a qualified climber.
Chapter Seven

Relationships, Risk and Rock Climbing
7.1 Introduction

Climbing is an individual sport and common sense discourses often portray climbers as hedonistic, individualistic and occasionally anarchic, see for example, Bollen and Gunson’s (1990) description of climbers in their research about injuries as well as articles by Donnelly (1997), Heywood (2006), Loynes (1996), Robinson (2004). However, there is a strong social component within this sporting sub-culture. Climbing clubs abound throughout the UK with most major towns and cities, even the flat ones such as Norwich, having one or more climbing clubs. In addition, the largest climbing forum on the web, UKClimbing.com, had until recently a forum which encouraged postings on non-related climbing themes, entitled ‘Down the Pub’ (recently renamed, ‘Off Belay’, perhaps to foster a more inclusive approach) reflecting the importance of Apres Climbing.

Famous climbing or mountaineering partnerships provide further evidence of the importance of social relationships in climbing. Such partnerships are often synonymous with successful or unsuccessful mountaineering or climbing exploits; witness Hillary and Tenzing, Mallory and Irvine, Brown and Whillans; Haston and Scott. Indeed, climbing annals usually attribute first ascents of multi-pitch routes to both climbers. In contrast, unsuccessful attempts, which result in injury or death, provoke debates both within and outside the climbing community about the role of the second or belayer.34

Research about sport participation generally indicates that participants cite friends and social benefits as a key reason for their participation but as these examples illustrate, in comparison to many sports, the social benefits climbers receive through participation may well be produced in extreme, adverse, stressful, uncertain and risky conditions. Consequently, whilst social

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34 For example, Claudio Corti’s reputation foundered on untruths promulgated by two Italian climbers implicating him in the deaths of three others on the Eiger, including that of his climbing partner.
relationships undoubtedly encourage participation in climbing such relationships also mediate climbers’ experiences as well as their approach to risk. In addition to social relationships, another set of relationships, standing partially or entirely outside a climbing context, affect climbers’ approach to risk and their climbing practices. These relationships are best characterised as personal or familial relationships. Therefore, in this Chapter, I consider two broad themes, first the influence of social relationships on climbers’ motivation for climbing and the extent to which these relationships mediate their approach to risk and their climbing practices. Secondly, I examine how climbers’ personal relationships mediated their climbing practices. In scrutinising the data, I draw on the conceptual framework of risk-taking and risk activities described in Chapter Four as well as sociological understandings of trust, particularly the work of Moellering (2001) and Giddens (1991) to illuminate my analysis. It is to a discussion of sociological conceptualisations of trust that I turn now.

7.2 Conceptualising Trust

Sociological work about trust is sparse in comparison to that derived from psychological or social psychological perspectives, but some writers, for example, Luhmann, Moellering and Giddens have made a useful contribution to a broader sociological understanding of trust. Jalava (2003) argues that Luhmann’s work on trust underpins a key range of work on the subject including texts by Misztal (1996) Seligman (1997) Sztompa (1999) and Mollering (2001). Luhmann (1979) draws on the founding father of structural functionalism, Talcott Parsons, to illustrate the role that trust plays in stabilising communities through shared norms and values in the face of change and disruption. In so doing, he differentiates between psychic and communication systems, that is, between people and society arguing that they
are autopoietic, whereby each system has different codes and rules governing its operation.

Although Luhmann focuses primarily on the significance of trust in social systems, he outlines a three-stage process in respect of a psychic system of trust which can be applied to climbing situations. These stages are as follows: trust demands mutual commitment from the person being trusted and the person who is doing the trusting; each person recognises and can interpret the circumstances in which they find themselves; and finally, that trust can only be given and received it cannot be coerced or demanded. In the context of climbing, the person being trusted is the belayer and the person doing the trusting is the lead climber. It would be reasonable to expect that both parties recognise and interpret the specific circumstances of any given situation and whilst the belayer cannot demand trust, the lead climber can bestow it.

Significantly, in this study where control is a recurrent theme, Jalava (2003) asserts:

> Trust, then, involves communication between (at least) two communicative actors. These actors are observers of social systems. Trust, is just like control, a means of reducing complexity. (Jalava, 2003: 184)

Developing this theme, he adds that ‘where control ends, trust begins’. Thus increased trust offers the potential for increased risk-taking as the need to monitor performance decreases and relatively more attention can be given to the task at hand. This insight resonates with the notion of edgework first proposed by Lyng (1990) and developed by Lois (2005) and Laurendeau (2006a), in the sense that edgework embodies the boundary between control and trust. Those pushing the edge might be said to possess higher levels of trust in themselves as well as others.

However, Luhmann’s claims about the circumstances under which trust is played out are not without criticism. Luhmann appears to assume that
in any given situation trust is something that both parties mutually recognise. As such, Luhmann’s account fails to capture the tension that sometimes exists in the relationship between knowledge and ignorance or between certainty and uncertainty of outcome. Therefore, whilst Luhmann’s work provides a useful starting point, it fails to capture the complexity of the circumstances in which trust is played out vis a vis control.

In an attempt to develop a more nuanced account of trust, Moellering (2001) draws on Simmel’s work about trust in an attempt to explore its underlying basis. Moellering argues that trust involves three elements. First, expectation, that is, whether the outcome is likely to be favourable or unfavourable. Secondly, interpretation, which captures an individual’s predisposition to trust, based on “good reasons” or their previous life experiences. Lastly, suspension describes the ‘leap of faith’ required to bridge the gap between interpretation and expectation. This element reflects the ‘transition from ‘good reasons’ to actually favourable expectation’ (p. 412) and this is something which Moellering believes is overlooked by many of those writing about trust, because of their less than critical stance about its supposed functional qualities. The ‘good reasons’ alluded to by Moellering, reflect those derived from rational and cognitive grounds as well as those which stem from intuition or which have an emotional foundation. In this aspect of his analysis, Moellering aligns broadly with Luhmann’s distinction between psychic and social systems of trust.

Where Moellering differs is in respect of the emphasis he attaches to the relationship between expectation and interpretation. Whilst Luhmann assumes that there is a strong connection between the reasons for trust and the expectation of a successful outcome, Moellering contends that this relationship is much more complex. This complexity is manifest in the need to suspend judgement, to ‘bracket[s] out uncertainty and ignorance’ (p. 414) in
order to make possible a leap of faith. Furthermore, the relationship between expectation and interpretation as well as between knowledge and outcome is reflexive; trust is placed under continual scrutiny being influenced by what has gone before and what might be to come. In other words, there exists a temporal dimension to what, who, and how much we trust, something that Luhmann (1979) too recognises. He writes that ‘to show trust is to anticipate the future. It is to behave as though the future were certain’ (p. 10).

Notions of certainty as well as reflexivity play strongly in Anthony Giddens’s (1991) writing about modernity notably, in *Modernity and Its Consequences* and *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Giddens develops his analysis of trust within the context of his conception of modernity which he characterises as one which is increasingly obsessed with risk. Giddens does not claim that life is any more risky than in previous eras, rather he suggests that people need to calculate and manage risk on a more frequent basis and this creates a heightened sense of risk. Giddens proposes that whilst it might be possible to seek refuge in more traditional forms of life, this action in itself carries a risk in that it might not work. Consequently, individuals assess risk in an attempt to ‘colonise’ the future. Crucially, the potential risks associated with any given action are so great that typically individuals filter out unlikely contingencies, or as Giddens contends, establish a protective cocoon to make life possible. An individual’s ability to bracket out most possibilities which might threaten their physical or psychological well-being and to ignore most risks and danger is essential for normal everyday living. He writes:

> If most [people] successfully bracket out such possibilities [high consequence risks] and get on with their day-to-day activities, this is no doubt partly because they assess the actual element of risk involved as very small. But it is also because the risks in question are given over to fate – one aspect of the return of fortune (Giddens, p. 183)
Those who are confident about the present and the future possess a high level of basic trust; for such people, life is more manageable. Paradoxically, a high level of basic trust, also allows individuals to take greater risks as they perceive the consequences less negatively. Those individuals who hold a high level of basic trust (with its origins in childhood) are in the best position to take risks because they are able to avoid becoming overwhelmingly anxious. Instead they present a persona of invulnerability based less on feelings of security, and more on a sense or illusion or what Giddens terms ‘unreality’. Such feelings of invulnerability can be threatened but if there is no immediate consequence then a persona of invulnerability returns. Giddens gives the example of a road traffic accident which often has the effect of causing a passing driver to slow before returning to their original speed. This persona of invulnerability resonates with Laurendeau’s (2006a) reference to the illusion of control manifest when skydivers sought to account for a skydiving accident. Where a skydiving accident occurred, participants either attributed it to fate, that is, an event outside a skydiver’s control or else, to poor judgment or practice on the part of the skydiver. It also helps to explain why successive positive outcomes can diminish the perceived risk or expectation of a negative outcome.

Giddens alludes to a boundary between what is known and secure as opposed to what is unknown and insecure. This description is akin to Moellering’s element of suspension. Significantly for this study, Giddens develops his analysis to suggest that the boundary between what is known and what is unknown (and which requires trust on the part of an individual to proceed) provides a space for cultivated risk-taking; a space for opportunities for thrill-seeking and excitement, or alternatively, a source of anxiety. Giddens’s (1991) reference to the idea of a boundary chimes with Lyng’s
concept of edgework, for both authors seek to describe the conditions under which potentially excessive risk-taking takes place.

Having reviewed the way that Moellering and Giddens conceptualise trust, I want to use trust to underpin my analysis of climbers’ relationships with their climbing partners on both their motivation to climb and the meanings they attached to risk. More specifically, I want to investigate the way that trust or its absence mediated the interviewees’ approach to risk and their climbing practices. One obvious and already mentioned source of trust is a climbing partner, but other sources emerged from the data. These included references to real as well as imagined climbing communities, climbing instructors and climbing partners.

7.3 Relationships in the Climbing Community

Some climbers reported that they had been attracted to a particular group of climbers or to the climbing community in general because they perceived them as ‘different’ in some way. Crucially, it was precisely because of this difference, that they viewed such people as attractive characters. Doug, talking about the friendships forged during his early climbing experiences said:

I just started going to I___ every weekend on the bus... It was after the war and it was a very unusual sport and it was a very unusual group of people taking part, a mixture of young and old people, particularly people who had been in the war. ...

What was unusual about them? Well they were very anarchistic and also they had strong, they had very strong political views. They were all left wing, yeah very left and wanted to change society. Now I mean it's entirely different. I think, you know the same things happened after both wars. I think even after the last war more so, that the returning servicemen had seen that there could be a better life, particularly for working class people and they wanted it. But as our group spread we had a fair sprinkling of university climbers as well and people like X University and they of course came from a different social background. At that time to go to university you had to be middle class. You couldn't possibly be
working class. Very, very few working class people went to university. (Doug 68)

Maurice (60) described how he was introduced to climbing through school and from this went onto forge friendships with people unlike those he had met before. Maurice mentioned how their accent as well as their attitudes were different and effectively launched him into a new social scene.

Referring to a much later era, Ivan described a similar sentiment, mentioning the personalities involved and his perception of them:

... they were people who were a little bit more self-assured than others that I’d met. Bit more self-contained and within that the ones we got on best with were sort of fairly rebellious you might say... bit more social outcasts. But having said that in the club there were some great people. Many of them had had university educations and were sort of... if not academic then certainly better educated than others that we'd seen and that was what that particular club was like. And many of them were quite gentle and a little bit... not judgemental but a little bit, not of the ilk of the wilder ones you might say. But they had something in common – they were climbers and in the same club so there was a camaraderie but they definitely were split into little groups and I was out with guys who were pretty much 10 years older. And we were just really into the physical aspects of climbing and going to find particular routes and seeking out challenges. (Ivan 48)

Ivan uses the terms self-assured’, ‘rebellious’, ‘social outcast’, ‘better educated’, ‘gentle’, ‘wilder’ to describe the climbers in his club. These descriptors reflect his belief that climbers inhabit one or more sub-groups within the broader climbing community. The interviewees commented that their new climbing friends shared their personal values as well as interests in a way that other people with whom they came into contact did not. Perhaps these friends acted as a mirror reflecting and positively reinforcing Doug’s and Ivan’s sense of self.

Whilst Louw et al. (1998) might be correct in suggesting that men forge relationships primarily through activities, this does not exclude the possibility that some men may also seek emotional attachments and an opportunity to
bond with others whom they perceive as like-minded. In an uncertain world, a ‘real’ as well as an ‘imagined’ climbing community may provide a potential site of comfort, reassurance and indeed a source of trust. To this end, some climbers might be thought to take refuge in more traditional forms of society as a way of mitigating the increasing absence of trust in modern society (Giddens, 1991). This tension is evident in Leonard’s musing about the threat of nuclear war which was the backdrop for the period when he started to climb:

One of the problems I have in life is I’m of the generation and I think it was at the same time as when I started climbing, and it was the whole nuclear thing and I was totally convinced, so were most people, that I would not get to the age I am now. So, I didn’t bother with a career [laughs]. Let’s go climbing, and I wonder if that comes from it as well. But I mean people still go climbing now. It’s that thing, we all felt, I thought we were all going to die anyway, I mean I really did, that nuclear war thing was just, it was all going pear-shaped in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s so you’re far too young to remember that [laughs]. We were thinking, ‘Well we’re ok if things came from the north, we were in a basement’! Yeah, I was, I was really frightened, so yeah. (Leonard 62)

Therefore, whilst technological advances in climbing equipment encouraged trust in an individual’s ability to complete a move or a route, other technological advances with the potential to devastate societies at large, dispelled trust and led climbers like Leonard to seek security amongst a community of climbers. This resonates with Giddens’s (1991) suggestion that when individuals find themselves in contexts which produce a loss of trust, they seek security in more trustful situations, in this instance, a generalised or real climbing community.

The data also indicated that some climbers appeared to transfer easily the trust they held in the generalised climbing community to their interactions with other, unknown climbers. For example, Maurice (60) talked about a ‘famous’ climber being so keen to climb that ‘he would climb with anyone he
met in the pub’, whilst Jessie (70) described how her climbing partner and boyfriend had handed her over to another climber on a route in Wales, saying: ‘just see my girlfriend up this’, whilst he shot off on a different route. Warren (1999) suggests that trust in strangers is possible where one or more of the following conditions have been met, namely, that individuals have sufficient information by which to judge the technical competence of others; that an individual has second-hand knowledge of another; that an individual identifies with the beliefs and values of another and holds that they are is likely to take into account their interests when acting. Moreover, Gilson (2003) suggests that those with more power find it easier to trust than those with less power.

Taken together these conditions may explain why the ‘famous climber’ to whom Maurice referred was able to climb with anyone, even complete strangers. Perhaps, the ‘famous climber’ used what he perceived was a shared sense of beliefs and values as a starting point for trust, but then trusted his advanced skill and experience to judge the competence of another. In the incident described by Jessie, her boyfriend seems to have used his personal skill and experience to judge another climber competent to take-over leading her on a route. Perhaps he also judged the route manageable and Jessie’s competence to complete it adequate. In both instances, a climbers’ ability to trust another was dependent on their good judgment as a safe and qualified climber.

Older climbers seemed to attach more importance to the people they met climbing as a factor motivating their involvement in the sport than younger climbers, although why this should be so is unclear. Perhaps the greater social and geographical mobility, for example through the expansion of university education, provided greater opportunities for the younger interviewees to come into contact with like-minded people. Younger interviewees had access to a web-based community of climbers, for example.
There was certainly less of a sense in the younger interviewees’ transcripts that they were searching for something or some people that might reinforce their sense of self. Neither was there much evidence that younger climbers communicated a need to place trust in a climbing community to counter feelings of mistrust elsewhere.

As such, this data appears to contradict arguments that identity is more fluid in late modernity causing higher levels of uncertainty. Having said this, a counter explanation might point to the way that identity is played out in late modernity, whereby older climbers may have self-identified more fully as a climber than their younger peers. Numerous writers have argued that identity in contemporary western society is less fixed and more fluid (Beck, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Lash, 1992). Perhaps the need to identify with like-minded people was less significant for younger climbers precisely because their identities were more numerous and more fluid.

### 7.3.1 Climbing Friends & Partners

The value attached by the interviewees to relationships with their climbing partners emerged primarily in response to two questions about their motivations for climbing. The first of these questions asked why they had begun to climb and probed whether their reasons for remaining in the sport were the same as when they had started or had altered over time. The second of the questions to elicit responses about social relationships, invited climbers to describe their ‘best’ climbing experience. In responding to these questions, the interviewees frequently alluded to the influence or presence of others.

Analysis of the data revealed that friendship sometimes mediated a way into climbing. Six climbers, all male, mentioned that their initial climbing experiences had come about through friends as Brian’s account illustrated:
Well, I used to be a swimmer and I played water polo at University, and I used to surf and a friend who climbed came and said: ‘You should try this, it’s really good sport, very exciting’, so I went along with him, thought that if he liked it, then so would I.

**What attracted you?**
Initially as he was a valued friend, as I said, it was going along with him, and then afterwards I was hooked. (Brian 60)

Although no female interviewees mentioned being introduced to climbing via a friend, two mentioned being introduced to climbing by a life partner and a third explained that her interest in climbing was stimulated by a work colleague whom she ‘fancied’ at the time. In total, five female interviewees had life partners who climbed compared to two male interviewees.

This data reflect research by Louw (1998) about gender differences in respect of relationships. Louw contends that men’s friendships, like Brian’s, are often based on activities and interests as this assists with the maintenance of self-concept. In an earlier study, Berger (1994) suggests that this is linked to the idea that through participation in particular activities, men are able to reveal strengths as opposed to weaknesses. In contrast, women’s social relationships tend to privilege intimacy and emotional attachment with an expectation of reciprocity in terms of trust and support and an acknowledgement of vulnerability (Muraco 2009).

In addition to the value some climbers attached to friendships at the outset of their involvement in the sport, other interviewees highlighted the significance of friendships and/or climbing partnerships in their descriptions of their ‘best climbing experience’. This suggests that friendship acts as a motivating factor not only to draw climbers into the sport but to sustain their involvement. Six climbers included a reference to their climbing partner when
describing their best climbing experience (which was not necessarily their most challenging climb) as the following extracts illustrate:

Yes, well when I look back, a lot of the [best climbing] experiences have been because of the people I’ve been with rather than the particular climb. (Doug 68)

**What made it a perfect day?**
The sun was shining and there was nobody else at the crag and they’re both very vertical, nice spaced filled climbs and we felt equal. We were a team, you know. It was a good team and LW is a big steep wall with lots of big holds on it. It looks hold-less but it’s got lots of big holds on it and I’d always wanted to do it. I could have led it myself, I mean it wasn’t even a hard climb, but I don’t know, it was just right, there was just something about it. The fresh air, the company ‘cos I particularly will only climb with people that I like climbing, that I like, for me the experience has got to be either soloing climbs or with someone, I’d sooner do a VDiff\(^{35}\) with somebody I like than an E5\(^{36}\) with somebody that I didn’t particularly get on with, you know. (Leonard 62)

**So good conditions, challenging route?**
Yeah, and like I say I like moving together as well that was good. … that particularly trip with A___ we had… we had three days and I just really liked the time with him. Driving up to Scotland, you know the conversations we had and just that sense of achievement as well… you know. (Anna 34)

In each of these extracts, other people are a central feature of climbs selected as the ‘most memorable’. The physical challenge posed by the climb seemed to be a secondary aspect of the climb and the presence of a climbing partner privileged. Although climbing is an individual sport, a shared sense of achievement came through in the interviewees’ accounts further emphasising the significance of other climbers and climbing relationships to positive feelings about their climbing experiences in general.

Other interviewees mentioned their climbing partners in relation to occasions when their mood was contemplative with an emphasis on the opportunity to appreciate the physical environment and the relative solitude.

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\(^{35}\) An easy climbing grade.

\(^{36}\) A very difficult climbing grade.
Such occasions were usually when they had completed a route and were anchored at the top, belaying their partner. Some interviewees place stress on the importance of being outdoors, and ‘away from it all’. Although they talked about there being ‘nobody else at the crag’ this was not strictly true. Unless they were climbing solo or perhaps bouldering, at the very least, their climbing partner would have been present (see Chapter Eight for a more detailed discussion of risk, climbing and space/place). In these instances, climbing partners seemed such an integral part of any given climbing experience that the claim ‘there was no one else at the crag’ was meant quite sincerely.

Some of the interviewees suggested that the friendships they forged through climbing were borne not only of shared values and interests but of adversity. Evie, for example, emphasised the presence of her climbing partner when describing her most challenging climbing experience.

**Can you tell me about your best climbing experience?**
That’s really hard [pause]. There’s lots of really good [pause]. Ok, one, I don’t know if it’s the best but one I can think of I definitely enjoyed was in the Alps last year climbing with another girlfriend of mine. I think it was an 11 pitch\(^{37}\) sport\(^{38}\) route grade up to 5a\(^{39}\) and we climbed this. Normally I climb with my boyfriend who’s a very good climber. She does the same but we went and climbed this ourselves and did it all ourselves and had a complete nightmare abseiling\(^{40}\) off just because, it was perfectly straightforward abseiling off but you need to make sure you do 40 metre rope lengths and I went first and I don’t know how long 40 metres is! You’re near the end of the rope and you’re thinking you’ll get to the end of the rope and get stuck and have to climb to re-climb up the rope so we spent a long time doing that with 20 abseils and going all over the place so just as long as we get down [laughs]. (Evie 23)

This extract showed that a number of factors contribute to a ‘best’ climbing experience but common to all was the presence of a climbing partner.

\(^{37}\) An ascent involving 11 belay stations.
\(^{38}\) A sport route is a bolted route. Gear placement is unnecessary for protection.
\(^{39}\) A measure of a climb’s technical difficulty. 5a is average-to above average difficulty
\(^{40}\) Controlled descent of a rock face
Part of what made a particular climb memorable was the opportunity to share that experience with a companion. Hence the presence of another in whom one trusted generated a positive emotional response which encouraged the interviewees participation in the sport. This data presents a degree of challenge to common sense discourses which represent some climbers as self-obsessed, individualistic thrill-seekers. The value placed by the interviewees in this study on the presence of others emphasises the importance of the social aspect of climbing.

Closer scrutiny of the data also indicated that the presence of a climbing partner mediated the interviewees' understanding of risk and their climbing practices. Moreover, trust or its absence, appeared central to the construction of risk in the context of climbing relationships and next I examine the relationship between perceptions of trust and those of risk in the context of climbing partnerships. I begin with an excerpt from Stella’s interview. Although Stella does not use the word ‘trust’, I would argue that ‘trust’ is exactly what she is talking about when she says: ‘You also fail to form friendships with people that you can’t really rely on’. In response to my question about the attractions of the camaraderie, she found through climbing, Stella commented:

I think it’s because you’re very reliant on one another and you form some very lasting friendships. *You also fail to form friendships with people that you can’t really rely on [emphasis added],* or very close friends but it’s, there’s a lot of pleasure in doing something together with a person that you enjoy being with as well in activities that you both like doing because you kind of motivate each other and spur each other on in a way as well. (Stella 60)

In other words, Stella maintained that the very nature of the circumstances in which climbers found themselves (often difficult and challenging) encouraged the formation of strong climbing friendships which in turn strengthened her motivation to climb. Conversely, Stella alluded to occasions when friendships
failed to materialise precisely because she felt unable to rely upon some people. As Luhmann (1979) suggests, trust is not something that can be demanded, it can only ever be volunteered. Therefore, as Stella’s account demonstrates, the emotional relationships climbers forge with their climbing partners can be both positive and negative and depend on the degree of trust one climber affords another.

The value of a trustful as opposed to a distrustful climbing relationship is further illustrated in Anna’s comments. She maintained that having a shared goal with her climbing partner and a good relationship made her feel safer.

Yeah... definitely a shared goal I think. It’s about the relationship with the person you’re climbing with that helps me feel safer. (Anna 34)

For Anna, one of the consequences of a strong relationship with a climbing partner is an enhanced perception of one’s personal security, safety and control as well as a diminished sense of risk. Luhmann argues that one of the advantages of a trusting relationship is a reduction in the need to monitor the performance of another with a corresponding opportunity to increase the complexity of any given task. For a lead climber, trust in a climbing partner offers the potential for him/her to focus more fully on climbing as opposed to needing to divide their attention between the climb and the actions of their second. Logically, a lead climber might reasonably perceive the risk as less where they could give the route their undivided attention.

Coral illustrates the value she placed on an emotional connection with a climbing partner and makes explicit the importance of trust in risk management:

...so I think the one thing that can cut a lot of risk down is your climbing partner.
In what way?
In that you know and can trust them and know what they’re thinking and know how happy they are with whatever they’re climbing and they understand what you’re thinking while you’re climbing and they’ll know what your limits are and you’ll know what their limits are, yes. (Coral 22)

The risk associated with climbing decreased where she felt that she could trust her climbing partner. Coral draws attention to the importance of a strong emotional bond between two climbers as a way of ensuring that each party recognises the needs of the other. This bond helps to affirm a shared sense of understanding about the gravity of a particular climb and reflects one of Luhmann’s conditions of trust, namely a shared understanding of any given situation. In Moellering’s words, the conditions for a leap of faith had been met.

Miles (53) also highlighted the importance of trust as one aspect of climbing relationships, stating: ‘I think you have to be with people you are pretty close to really and you trust’. He went on to state:

I like the fact that you’re working with other people when you have to work with them – using ropes, and trusting other people and the person in front of you. If I’m with other people it’s about a group sense of achievement. (Miles 53)

In this passage, Miles makes an explicit reference to ‘trusting other people’ in describing how he likes working with others and how the outcome is always a group outcome as opposed to an individual one. This is noteworthy because it contrasts with the way that common sense discourses sometimes portray climbers as hedonistic and individualistic (outlined in Chapter One and elsewhere).

I would also argue that the strength of a personal relationship provides the basis for what Moellering (2001) defines as the necessary stage between interpretation and expectation in relation to trust, namely suspension, that is a ‘leap of faith’. Moellering (2001) develops the contribution made by Georg
Simmel and argues that to move from interpretation (the bases for trust, that is, 'good reason') to expectation of an outcome (favourable – trust or unfavourable – distrust) requires a leap of trust, that is, the suspension of ignorance (or the unknowable). In keeping with this line of reasoning, I propose that the stronger the personal relationship that exists between two climbers, the easier it is to suspend the unknown. In such instances, a climber draws on both affective and cognitive elements of trust. Indeed Zinn (2008) goes so far as to argue that calculative strategies for risk management when combined with affective components including trust and emotions assist what Giddens (1991) terms the 'colonisation of the future', that is more effective control of the future.

Notably, Anna, Miles and Coral’s comments stress the affective value of trust as opposed to the cognitive (or rational) dimension. Gilson (2003) defines the affective basis of trust thus:

Rather than calculation, the grounds of affective trust include the emotional bonds and obligations generated through repeated interaction, empathy and identification with the other’s desires or intentions, or the desire to treat the other as I would wish to be treated. (Gilson, 2003, p. 1456)

Whereas some authors have argued that individuals calculate the likely outcome (benefits or costs) of trusting behaviour and ‘trust’ accordingly (Coulson 1998; Gambetta 2000; Jacobsen 1999; Warren 1999), writers such as Mansbridge (1999) and Ulsaner (1999) suggest that trust has an affective dimension which the data supports. Having said this, there were instances when the interviewees appeared to put trust or a lack of trust on a cognitive or rational basis. Dan, for example, identified a situation where he felt as though he was climbing with someone who put him at risk:

Do you look back at that now and think: ‘that was risky’?
Yeah, oh yeah, I still think that was a very stupid place to be. The guy I was climbing with at the time, well he’s a moron but never mind. I’ve never climbed with him since.
Why not?
Because there was a couple of instances on that trip even now, there’s a couple of like, couple of things that we were very lucky not to have either died or seriously hurt ourselves because of his errors of judgement, and he was the experienced climber, he was, well more experienced than me. I was still really just starting out outdoors so, I was having to sort of like trust him and what have you and even now I still would never climb with him again, never even tie him to a rope again because the risk of climbing with him [laughs] is just really too great. Bit ridiculous. (Dan 20)

In this instance, Dan initially put his trust in his partner because he was the more experienced climber, yet he recognised the risk to both of them once they embarked on the route, despite his lack of experience, because his partner was so negligent. This loss of trust meant that Dan subsequently refused to climb with this person again.

The same climber flagged the burden of responsibility he felt towards a climbing partner. For Dan, his climbing practices determined how far he put himself and his partner at risk and he was keen to ensure that through his practices, he minimised that risk:

… with climbing it’s to do with, yeah I think it’s more falling or hurting yourself or endangering your partner, like for instance if you’re on a long traverse⁴¹, you don’t just need to place protection for yourself, it’s got to be well placed for your partner as well, because normally your anchor will, just if it’s like a straight vertical route or something, will protect you but you need to think about your partner because otherwise you’re putting them in danger or at risk, because if they slip off on a traverse or something, they could still maybe hit the ground even if they should in theory be perfectly safe. (Dan 20)

Dan’s extract illustrates that a lead climber is responsible not only for themselves but also for their climbing partner. As they climb, their ability to place gear securely can increase or reduce the risk posed to their second. This burden of responsibility was not borne lightly. Anna admitted that she felt some frustration at being the better climber and therefore leading most of the

⁴¹ Climbing sideways across rather than up a rock face.
time. She believed that this led her to take more risks, something with which she was uncomfortable:

I climb with a couple of blokes and a woman and S who’s my [life] partner. And A and T and the blokes I’m climbing with it’s like I’m leading all the time and I’ve just had a really odd summer climbing with A. He’s been frightened a lot and I’ve started… whereas before I’ve always thought I could look after people quite well and I’ve started to feel resentful. I’ve wanted it to be an equal partnership and I’ve found that frustrating and I’ve ended up taking more risks with leading all the time and that’s quite tiring and I think that’s impacted on how I feel. (Anna 34)

Anna’s comments resonate with Luhmann’s assertion that trust can provide the opportunity for individuals to undertake more complex tasks than if trust was absent. In this instance, an absence of trust, however, did not automatically reduce task complexity and because a reduction did not occur, Anna perceived an increase in the risk when climbing. This increased risk resulted from her designation as the lead climber for the majority of a multi-pitch route. Lead climbing demands more from the climber than seconding. A lead climber needs to identify the correct line of the route and place gear to protect themselves and their partner. Some climbers preferred to lead, believing it afforded them greater control but leading is overall a more physically and mentally demanding activity than seconding. On multi-pitch routes and in situations where climbers perceived themselves as equals, the responsibility for lead climbing would usually be shared. Anna expressed frustration because, in her opinion, she was leading most of the time and bearing the additional responsibility that went with that role. This activity challenged her identity as a qualified climber. Her practices were less safe; she acknowledged she took more risks.
7.3.2 Climbing Instructors, Novice Climbers and Top-ropes

To date, I have concentrated on exploring climbing relationships where climbers negotiated the parameters of their relationship and accorded one another a level of trust. However, this was not the only type of climbing relationship. Novice climbers appeared to surrender trust and control to another more experienced climber; an act that was not based on their knowledge, competence or experience but on precisely their lack of knowledge, competence and experience. Paradoxically, in a situation which reflected their lack of control, novice climbers unquestioningly accepted the direction of others as these two extracts from interviews with Evie and Dot demonstrate:

**Can you remember thinking about the risks involved in climbing when you first started – university stuff rather than school?**
Probably not in the beginning because when you very first start it’s all top rope things and you didn’t really have a chance to do anything wrong and then at the wall. I guess when you first start leading indoors on the wall and then you have a chance to fall off, do things wrong and you’re like, you know, do the clip or the quick draws\(^{42}\) the wrong way round, things like that.

**So the risk when you first started was minimal?**
Yes, because I didn’t know enough.

**So do you think you did do some risky things but you just didn’t see them as risky?**
I think I probably didn’t because I didn’t have a chance to.

**Because it is a very controlled environment?**
Yes. (Evie 23)

**When you first started climbing, can you remember thinking about the risks?**
No, never entered my head [laughs].

**Why was that?**
I didn’t see any danger, no. I mean you were on a rope. That day when I first started I was on a rope, you know, I was being, I wasn’t leading and when I came off they lowered me [laughs]

\(^{42}\) Devices that allow a rope to run freely whilst attached to protection placed by a climber.
and I was furious ‘cos I had to come off, you know, so I, yes so it’s only when you begin to lead I think, you begin to appreciate there might be a risk, that would be a little later. (Dot 68)

These two extracts include references to a number of dimensions of risk. Evie and Dot define their early climbing experience as ‘not risky’ because they were top-roped.43 This is the safest form of climbing where the belayer manages the risk of the climber falling.

As beginners, Evie and Dot both recognised that they had neither sufficient knowledge nor experience to judge risk. This recognition of the situation in which they find themselves speaks to a temporal dimension to climbers’ perception of risk, whereby the ability to judge risks is enhanced with experience. In addition, the younger female interviewees reported that their introduction to climbing had been on a top-rope and this was one reason why, on reflection, they had not thought climbing risky at the outset. This is because whilst top-roped climbers might monitor their movement on the rock, they exert no control over, nor do they have to monitor, gear placement to minimise the risk of injury from a fall. As such, self-defined climbers might be said to perceive top-roped climbing as falling outside the scope of an extraordinary risk activity. A top-roped climber exerts only limited control on a route. Consequently, qualified climbers eschewed top-roping in favour of leading because the former undermines their identity as a qualified climber. Indeed research suggests that more accomplished participants in climbing or other sports police the practices of novice participants to sustain the boundary

43 Top-roping describes a method of ascent where a climber climbs with a rope secured above them to a pre-set belay. The climber is attached to one end of the rope, whilst a belayer controls the other end. It constitutes the most secure form of ascent. Given the security of this method of climbing, it is commonly used with novice climbers as the risk of a fall might be the same as for an elite climber tackling a difficult climb, but the consequences of any fall are much less because of the security of the belay and the distance fallen is potentially much less.
of acceptable activity or what I define as extra-ordinary activities (Kiewa 2002; Laurendeau 2006b).

Significantly, this distinction between top-roping (an ordinary risk activity) and other forms of climbing such as traditional (an extra-ordinary risk activity) also appears to mark the difference between self-identified climbers and/or those who climb infrequently or are novices. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its association with novice climbers (and groups who ‘hog’ routes), top-roping is usually described in a disparaging way. There was little evidence that the interviewees held such views but they were not asked specifically to comment on the merits or otherwise of top-roping. Mark, however, remarked that he would not top-rope a climb if he did not feel confident tackling it as a lead or second:

If I don’t feel right about it or happy with it, especially if it’s badly protected, just leave it, it doesn’t matter, come back to it, don’t top rope it, don’t try it [laughs], a few days later come back to it or don’t do it, whatever. (Mark 24)

Kiewa (2002) concluded from her ethnographic account of traditional climbing in Australia that top-roping was dismissed as an unacceptable form of climbing. The climbers in her study tended to distance themselves from top-roping and in so doing reaffirmed their identity as a ‘real’ climber. In this study, the evidence suggests that real’ climbers climb traditional routes, sport climb or solo but they do not use a top-rope.

Therefore, although as a climbing practice it carries the lowest risk, top-roping is not consistent with the identity of a qualified climber. Climbers might sanction this practice, which affords control and trust to another, amongst beginners but only on rare occasions to themselves. These rare occasions included injury or to allow time to recover one’s confidence. For instance, due to an injury sustained several years previously, Doug (68) had to be top-roped as any further fall might mean he would have to lose a leg. The seriousness
of the consequence of a fall allowed Doug to justify top-roping yet maintain his identity as a ‘real’ climber, bolstered perhaps by his previous experiences as a well known climber and mountaineer. Doug’s intention to continue climbing despite the threat to his physical well-being could reflect a desire to sustain a coherent sense of self. Barnes and Parry (2004) observed that men, in particular, experienced a loss of identity on retirement. Although Barnes and Parry referred to retirement from the workplace, retirement from climbing could prove similarly traumatic for Doug and hence he was keen to forestall that event.

Coral also talked about top-roping climbs after a fall which knocked her confidence:

... I didn’t want to lead for a while. But then when I wasn’t leading, I was sort of top roping much harder stuff to sort of keep the ability there and pushing myself... (Coral 23)

Therefore it seems that there are some situations where, for example, due to injury and/or a loss of confidence, where an individual can maintain an identity as a qualified climber even though they no longer conform to those very practices that embody that identity in the first place.

The data in this study offers an interesting insight. In both these cases, trust was displaced from oneself to another and with it risk was minimised. Doug and Coral’s ability to exert control over their climbing experiences diminished alongside the degree of risk they perceived they were taking. Both climbers appear to have taken a conscious decision to bestow trust in others because they had experienced a loss of trust in themselves. In so doing, these climbers have effectively qualified their risk-taking by affording others responsibility for their safety bestowing trust to others. Although this contrasts with other climbers’ accounts of control which is deemed greatest
when it rests with oneself and not others, control still rested with Evie and Doug. Ultimately, it was their decision to place their trust in others.

Having focused exclusively on climbing relationships in the first part of this chapter, in the second I turn my attention to other types of relationships including social and familial. In so doing, I consider how these relationships in the context of risk mediated climbers’ experiences and practices.

7.4 Risk, Climbing and Familial Relationships

Actuaries calculate insurance premiums based on the statistical likelihood of an event occurring, that is, the risk that something might happen. In making this calculation they take into account a wide range of factors and load insurance premiums accordingly. In respect of car insurance, for example, one of the most significant factors contributing to the cost of a premium is car driver’s age, a second their gender and a third the number of years they have held a licence. This is because road traffic accident statistics overwhelmingly indicate that age, gender and experience affect the probability that a driver will be involved in an accident for which they are deemed partially or wholly responsible. Those most likely to be involved in a car accident are under 25, male and have recently passed their driving test.

This is just one area of society where research highlights young men’s propensity for risk-taking. Research also records the effect of experience as well as gender on risk-taking and Chapter Two reviewed some of this evidence. A fourth factor taken into account by some car insurance companies is a driver’s marital status. A married driver is seen as statistically less likely than an unmarried driver to have an accident, although the reasons for this are unclear (Whitlock, Norton, Clark, Jackson, and MacMahon 2004). Some writers suggest this is because marriage brings with it a change in lifestyle with more time devoted to family-based activities, others that marriage
provokes a greater sense of responsibility and hence a reduction in risky behaviours. Including a partner on car insurance can significantly reduce a car insurance premium too. Significantly, insurers seem less concerned about whether a driver has childcare responsibilities.

This brief overview of some factors to which insurers pay attention when they calculate the risk a driver poses to their profit margin, is relevant for this study because it highlights the potential affect on risk-taking of factors outside any particular practice. Consequently, in the remainder of this chapter, I want explore the articulation of broader influences on climbers’ approach to risk. More specifically, I want to examine the affect of climbers’ familial relationships and responsibilities on an individual climber’s perception of risk, their climbing practices and their identity as a climber. For the purposes of this discussion familial responsibilities include dependent adults, children and/or partner/spouse.

Before the interview, I collected demographic data about the interviewees’ marital status and whether they had children. Four of the eight climbers aged under twenty-four years of age reported that they had a partner but none were married and none had children. Ten of the remaining sixteen climbers were married, whilst three had partners, two were single and one widowed. Ten had children and six did not. Although the climbers in this study constitute a small sample, some trends emerged in the way they discussed or did not discuss familial relationships.

Unsurprisingly, the presence of children or a partner or spouse seemed to determine the likelihood that an interviewee would raise the issue of familial responsibilities. For example, none of the interviewees aged under twenty-four referred to familial responsibilities during their interviews, and only two talked explicitly about a partner – both in the context of climbing (see next section). In contrast, all but three of the sixteen climbers aged 34-77 years of
age mentioned their partner and/or children during their interview. Of the three that did not, two were single and one had remarried after her husband had died and she had no children.

Analysis of the transcripts of those climbers with familial responsibilities revealed few common or consistent themes. Some climbers acknowledged that marriage and children had caused them to scale back the risks they took when climbing, others that children curtailed the time they could spend climbing. A few asserted that children had not affected the time they committed to climbing and that motherhood or fatherhood had not altered their approach to risk. In the subsequent sections, I try to show how their identity as a climber as well as other factors might account for their differing responses. In order to achieve this I first consider the impact of a non-climbing partner or spouse on a climber’s perception of risk and their climbing practices. Next, I examine the affect of the presence of a climbing partner who is also a spouse/partner on the meanings attached to risk and climbing practice, and lastly I investigate the effect of children on a climber’s understanding of risk and their climbing practices.

Climbers expressed different views on how far marriage, a partner and/or children affected their perception of risk and their approach to climbing. For some, like Doug, the shift was readily apparent, that is, he reported taking fewer risks when married than he had when he was single:

I mean, the first time I ever went to the Himalayas I was lucky to come back alive, I had about three very, very near misses. We took this in our stride, the attitude was, if you go out to the Himalayas, I wasn’t married, I had nobody relying on me and you knew at that time going to the Himalayas and climbing was dangerous. (Doug 68)
And later in the transcript he added:

**Did you think your approach to risk in climbing changed over time?**
Yeah, I think 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 because, when they got a bit older I intended going to the Himalayas again and then my former wife was ill and I couldn't go at the last minute and I didn't go. I was supposed to be leading the expedition and PB took over from me and when I retired, for the first few years I guided, so I was going to the Himalayas and going to the Sahara and things like that and the climbing wasn't the same, you know, we were doing very easy climbs and things. I wasn't doing anything that was sort of technically extensive but you were still having to be very careful 'cos you were responsible for other people.

**So basically your approach to risk shifted once you had a family?**
Oh yes, yeah I think, yeah. And I think your whole attitude to life changes in that, you know, you wouldn't want to be taking big risks driving or anything like that, you've got other people relying on you. (Doug 68)

In the first part of this extract, Doug defines climbing in the Himalayas as a high-risk activity; he 'was lucky to come back alive'. The unpredictability of the weather, extreme cold, high winds, avalanches, rock fall and high altitude, all of which combined with the difficulty of rescue in the event of an accident ensure that fatality rates are much higher for mountaineering than for snow-free climbing. Doug justified his participation in this high-risk activity by reference to the fact that he was single and had no one relying on him. In essence, he excused his risk-taking on the basis of his single-dom; a single man with no dependants he did not need to qualify his risk-taking. On this evidence, a climber's subject position outside climbing appears to mediate his or her qualification climb.

On reflection, Doug indicated that he altered his behaviour once he married and had children, claiming that he stopped going on expeditions although this was something he intended to pick up once the children were
older and presumably less financially or emotionally dependent upon him. When he did climb, Doug recalled that he attempted easier routes and ‘was very careful’ because of his responsibilities.

Dot expressed very similar sentiments. She acknowledged that she took more risks when she was single than when she was married with children and although she did not say so explicitly she intimated that any accident that befell her would be significant for those around her; not perhaps economically, she was 68 years old, but perhaps emotionally:

**Are there any other reasons why your approach to risk changed?**
Well I had more at stake, I’ve got a family and, you know, there’s not just me, it would be a whole family and grandchildren and husband and, you know.

**Was your approach to climbing quite different when you were single, when you were married and then when you had children?**
Yes, yes definitely. I think it’s unavoidable that you are actually taking some risks, your foot can slip, you can be hit, you can think it’s a hold and happily go for it and it isn’t so you are taking risks but you try to minimise them. (Dot 68)

In both Dot’s and Doug’s cases, familial responsibilities qualified their risk-taking activities, with both reporting that they made a conscious effort to reduce their risk-taking. The sample size in this study is too small to generalise, but Dot’s perceived familial responsibilities in later life are consistent with data reported by Eurofound (2009). Eurofound noted that:

even in older age, family commitments typically impinge on women more than men. This situation exists for many women throughout their lifetime and continues into their retirement when they devote much more time to looking after dependant relatives, elderly persons and/or children than do their male counterparts. (p. 11)

Olivier (2006) discusses the extent to which those who engage in ‘dangerous leisure activities’ including mountaineering should balance their responsibilities to others with their right to pursue their individual interests.
Drawing on philosophical frameworks of duty, outcomes and costs as well as free will, Olivier concluded that it is the right of the individual to engage in any activity of their choosing. He holds this to be so even where the activity is potentially outside their competence and where an individual has dependants, although Olivier accepts that decisions are always context specific.

Whilst Olivier’s work provides a framework by which to explore tensions between the right of the individual and their responsibilities to others, the influence of familial relationships on participation in risk activities is largely under-researched. What this study shows is that some participants in this study moderated the degree of risk taken in the light of their familial responsibilities. What is not known is how far climbers qualify their risk-taking based on decisions taken alone or through negotiation with others and this area warrants further study.

For some climbers, a change in their approach to risk as a result of familial circumstances did not only apply to a climbing context. Doug suggested that the shift in his approach to risk translated into other areas of his life. He believed that he reduced the risks he took in his life generally, because other people were dependent on him. Miles also recounted that his awareness of risk appeared to have been raised not just in relation to climbing, but in his everyday life. He explained that he felt an even greater sense of responsibility to his children since the recent death of his wife:

I didn’t always think that, I didn’t even think about it [risk] at all actually when I was young. It’s something that I’ve only thought about as I’ve got older. And you know… I think because things have happened in my life as personally… my wife died about three years ago and I’ve realised how valuable I am to my children so it doesn’t make me go around being ultra careful but I am aware of taking risks. (Miles 53)

It is possible to recognise in Mile’s account the influence of both his age and gender where he suggests that whilst his wife was alive, primary responsibility
for his children rested with her and therefore his climbing practices were largely unaffected by his status as a father. Miles admitted that he gave risk little thought when he was young and it was only the death of his wife that caused him to reflect more deeply on his climbing practices. The data sets obtained in this study are too small to draw broad generalisations about the effect of gender on risk-taking, but a meta-analysis of 150 studies reflects the trend observed here. Byrnes, Miller and Schafer (1999a) found that of sixteen types of risk-taking, men scored more highly on fourteen. Whilst the scale of the difference between men and women varied, it was largest in respect of intellectual as well as physical risk-taking; this gap narrowed as men and women aged.

However, in sharp contrast to the data reported above, some climbers rejected forcefully the idea that marriage and children had altered their approach to risk or their climbing practices. Brian gave no indication that he qualified his risk-taking. He described how his only concession when he went to the Alps was to take out life insurance to secure the financial well-being of his wife and son. He appeared to justify this by indicating that, in his view, his wife approved of his actions and that his son has followed him into climbing and ‘driving fast cars’:

How has marriage and/or children changed your approach to risk?
Not at all, though it probably should have done. It was quite selfish. I used to go off to the Alps every year and before I went I would make sure I’d taken out insurance in case I was killed and didn’t come back. And I was quite happy to do that. And my wife was quite happy that I did that. And my son, who is now 31, he has been climbing since he was 5 and is still climbing, and driving fast cars…. (Brian 60)

The extent to which families’ attitudes towards risk-taking and risk activities affect climbers’ climbing practices is uncertain. Brian suggests that his wife was quite happy that he went climbing in the Alps, an attitude reflected by
Alison Hargreaves’ partner, Jim Ballard. Hargreaves died descending from K2 leaving behind two young children and was criticised for so doing in the press. However, Ballard stated that mountaineering was part of who Alison was and that he would ‘continue to be adventurous, to take the children climbing…’ (O’Connell 2003).

There is also some evidence, albeit in other contexts, that the risk-taking attitudes and practices of parents influence their children’s approach to risk. La Hatte and Le Pape (2008) found in a psychologically-grounded study that that parents who reported taking risks when driving and were perceived as doing so by their children resulted in an increase in the likelihood that their children would take risks when driving. The authors acknowledged that peers also exerted an influence over risk-taking when driving and that whilst young women reported being influenced by both male and female parents, young men reported being influenced by the male parent only.

Aubrey too, emphasised the limited impact that marriage and children had on his attitude to risk and to the way he climbed. Although he acknowledged that other people changed, he was adamant that children did not change him nor those with whom he climbed:

**But having the family didn’t change how hard you climbed?**
No it didn’t. No. It did change some people, I do know. But no, it didn’t change me. Nor would I have expected it to change any of the people I was climbing with. (Aubrey 70)

The next extract offers an astonishing insight into the way Aubrey thought (previously cited in Section 6.6). He described a bad fall that prevented him working for his father who had to manage without him and support his wife who gave birth whilst he was hospitalised. Aubrey explained that he gave little thought to his wife and the baby during his hospital stay and when pressed to say whether this incident changed him, he assumed that I was talking about the effect of his fall on his climbing practices and approach to risk. I was
actually alluding to whether the consequences of his fall for his wife, new-born baby and his father's business had caused him to rethink his approach:

I worked for my father, a very small business so when one person is out, there's only 3 of you in it. It's a very big slice and it's hard is that. I didn't think about J [his wife]. J was expecting and I fell off at M_____, this ledge I was mantelshelfing on came off and I was held on a runner and the ledge hit me on the back while I was still on the runner. So they lowered me off and carried me away and I had a long, long lay off. I was in bed for some months and I never thought about me wife and this infant. I sent me dad over to look after J when she had it born, I weren't there and all I could think of was poor dad. He's putting up with this and he's not saying a word and I'm off for four months.

**Did that change you at all?**
No. I was, you change gradually. Did it change me like that? No. Falls don't, you think you've been lucky.

**Well not so much the fall but the consequences with your responsibilities?**
It didn't change it, no. (Aubrey 70)

As I have stated elsewhere, Aubrey's attitude may well stem from his self-identification as a 'hard man' of climbing, a reputation sustained through his focus on climbing at the expense of other identities.

Like Brian and Aubrey, Jessie too rejected the idea that children altered her approach to risk when she climbed but she did acknowledge that children affected her climbing in another way:

**Did having children change your attitude towards risk in climbing or what you did?**
No, it didn't change my attitude. It just really changed my, the possibilities of doing things really. (Jessie 68)

Miles (53), Sarah, Doug and Ivan also related that the acquisition of a family changed the time they could devote to climbing. Married to a climber, Sarah recalled that it was she and not her husband, who stopped climbing on the birth of their children:

Then we had the kids and I stopped. I went to watch at the walls and I just didn't get the appeal watching D [husband].
Then I went with Ben [son] when he was 8/9y and I got back into it at K____ wall.  (Sarah 49)

Sarah’s experiences, like Jessie’s, reflect the experiences of women with children. Whilst men seem able to persist with their leisure activities, women reduce or cease participation on the birth of children and, as studies have shown, service and support their children’s leisure activities as well as those of a male partner, (Green, Hebron, and Woodward 1987; Thompson 1988; Thompson 1999).

Ivan also talked about how children had reduced the time he spent climbing:

… I stopped going out as much [laughs] and that’s a moot point. Parental responsibilities… no I don’t think I’ve ever thought I wouldn’t do something because of the kids. I think it becomes quite a reasonable excuse but just the time wise things… where you’re at home with the kids or you take them out or looking after them… that that, that is the real change. Part and parcel of the same thing but I think its much more getting out less and doing things less and a change in your role than because of the kids per se. I think its mocked by climbers on the whole that because of the kids or even better ‘her indoors’ but I think its often a… time its often a convenient excuse. I think that if you don’t… if you’re not willing to do it because you and your partner or do something because of that then it’d be the same with the kids. But no I don’t think its …

But it didn’t change the nature of the risk that you took, just the volume of climbing that you were able to do?

I think you get out less you’re in the situation less often, you’re not as used to it and so you… you do less. You can’t go on routes cos you’re just not as, not as fit. (Ivan 48)

Ivan’s appraisal of the effect that children had on his climbing practices is interesting because it raises a number of issues. In the first instance, Ivan proposes that a link exists between his approach to risk, his climbing practices, and the birth of his children but that this link is indirect. Ivan implied that he did climb less difficult and challenging routes but not because he deliberately reduced the grade of climbs he attempted but because he could
not climb as frequently because of his childcare responsibilities. As such, he climbed less risky routes because he was not as fit. It is also possible to read ‘men’ for ‘climbers’ in Ivan’s narrative. He refers to ‘kids’ and ‘her indoors’ as reasons given by some climbers as reasons given to their friends as to why they are unable to climb.

Miles (53) and Ivan’s comments about their children also highlight two further issues, the first relates to how children affected their personal approach to risk and their climbing practices. The second addresses how they supported their children’s participation in risk activities and risk-taking. Both climbers wanted to encourage their children’s involvement in outdoor activities and they went walking and climbing with their children as these extracts illustrate:

As I got older I realised I had other responsibilities too especially when you get children, they’re actually coming with you so what you do changes totally. But I have had one or two surprises and gone scrambling and they’ve gone way ahead, easily in front of me and it’s actually quite frightening. In fact the first time that happened was surprisingly on H____. I never go up S____ E__ cos you think there’s lots of rocks on top and loads of moving people. So we go up S____ E___ and it’s quite crowded sometimes so there’s me treading up a normal route waiting for people and they’re on the top, somewhere ridiculous that I wouldn’t dream of going and that scared me a lot. So my attitude to risk has changed and my attitude toward risk in relation to them I’ve realised you can’t really control it. (Miles 53)

It’s been worrying with them starting climbing that they both have a very good sense of balance… they’ve always climbed trees and done stuff. They’re fairly rough and tumble kids, not out and out tomboyish and they have very good motor skills balancing bikes and that are great but what they don’t have is any judgement. So, if they start soloing something they have no idea of when they wouldn’t be able to jump to the ground. They have utmost confidence in their abilities but no idea of the downside and I find that really disconcerting. I wouldn’t say I’m overly protective as a dad but I like… I like to think it’s a healthy fear but I know it will be an issue if other people watch you saying: ‘Let ‘em get on with it.’ That’s a wee bit different. It’s their lack of judgement that’s the thing that I really struggle with rather than the activity. Its their inability to what you might say if you’re talking about risk assessment they don’t give enough
thought to what the potential outcomes might be they only see
the fun side of it. (Ivan, 48)

The similarities in these two extracts are striking. Both climbers expressed
difficulty in reconciling their children’s risk-taking with their personal
understanding and appreciation of risk. Miles and Ivan acknowledged their
children’s ability but believed that they did not appreciate fully the risks
associated with their actions and as such, these fathers tried to curtail their
children’s activities when they thought it appropriate to do so.

Miles and Ivan’s attitude to risk in respect of their children is interesting
because it speaks to the way we interpret and manage risk for others. Both
fathers mentioned that their children were confident climbers and it was not
their lack of competence that caused them concern, but their children’s lack of
judgement and crucially, the fathers’ inability to control the situation. This
attitude resonates with other accounts where climbers expressed comfort in
situations where they exerted control and discomfort where control was
lacking. This feeling appears to translate into the attitude to risks taken by
others and research suggests that parents constrain their children’s practices
to those they can control. For example, in contemporary British society,
‘stranger danger’ amongst other moral panics has led to a significant reduction
in the time children spend playing outdoors (Valentine and McKendrick 1997)
but an increase in time spent on a computer (Gill 2007). The irony is that the
threat to children from ‘stranger danger’ is miniscule and as Skenazy (2009)
notes in reference to data from the United States, children under fourteen
years of age are forty times more likely to die as passengers in a car than as
murder victims. Armed with this knowledge and the known benefits of play for
children’s social and intellectual development (Hughes 2010) and the
importance of adult-free play physical exercise for children (PlayEngland
2007), it seems illogical for parents to limit play outside. However, such an
approach is entirely logical when control is privileged above other guiding principles; parents perceive that they have greater control over their children in the home than they do when they are outdoors. Moreover, contemporary discourses construct the parents of free-roaming children as uncaring and irresponsible (Skenazy 2009; Sutton 2008). Therefore internal and external reference points encourage parents in Britain to oversee and supervise their children’s experiences to an unparalleled degree (Future Foundation 2006).

Research about the relationship between a person’s ability to judge risk for themselves and for others sheds further light on risk assessment of self and others. In relation to financial risk-taking, Hsee and Weber (1997) found that people are egocentric in their assessment of risk-taking in others, that is, they judge others in the same way they judge themselves. In some respects this should mean that parents who climb should be better able than parents who do not climb to assess risk for children. This is because we use our knowledge and experience as a benchmark when we make judgements about others (Clement and Kruger 2000; Dunning and Hayes 1996).

Harvey, Twyman and Harries (2008) refined research in this area when looking at four areas of risk-taking namely: recreation, drug-taking, modes of transport and hazardous occupations; their findings differed in one major respect from Hsee and Weber’s. Harvey et al. observed that self-other differences in judgements about risk occurred only for activities for which people demonstrated risk aversion. In other words, self-other differences in risk judgements were similar for risk-seeking (recreation and modes of transport), and where the values of self-other were perceived as similar for risk aversion (hazardous occupations and drug-taking). Self-other differences in judgements about risk existed only in relation to risk aversion where the values of self-other differed. Harvey et al. concluded:
In summary, we do not consider that people regard risk aversion or risk seeking per se as desirable or undesirable. Instead, risk aversion and risk seeking are considered desirable or undesirable in the context of particular activities (Harvey, et al., 2006, p.36).

Moreover, the authors interpreted these results in the context of self-enhancement, that is, people are more likely to judge risk aversion or risk seeking acceptable where by so doing others perceive their actions as desirable. In conclusion, judgements about others’ risk-taking are egocentric, that is, they reflect one’s personal experiences and knowledge which may affect their validity when applied to others.

There are implications of Harvey et al.’s work for climbers and their familial relationships where close family members participate in risk activities. In the first instance, climbers will tend to judge risk based on their personal experience and knowledge. Secondly, their perception of risk will be influenced by an absence of control over their family members’ activities. I suggest that Miles (53) and Ivan’s (48) comments reflect this interplay. Both fathers have encouraged participation climbing/scrambling yet Miles bemoans his lack of control over his sons’ actions, whilst Ivan raises concerns about his daughters’ ability to assess risk accurately. Both fathers’ accounts reflect a desire to support their children’s participation in climbing, but they also reflect an attempt to manage that involvement by judging acceptable levels of risk and thereby structure their offspring’s experiences. Having said this, other climbers such as Brian and Maurice talked about how their children had taken up outdoor sports or sought challenges and thrills in their lives. There is insufficient data to present a compelling explanation for why parents perceive their children’s activities differently, but Maurice’s reflection on non-climbers’ attitudes to risk more generally sheds some light.
Do they think what you do is risky? Why do you think they think climbing is risky?
Well they don’t think people can do it physically. Their concept isn’t there and when you go out and do things like that. See their concept of risk and ours is slightly different, I think. I’m talking about perhaps falling, getting trapped in the water, trapped in a cave, hurting myself physically. They wouldn’t go anywhere near that. They think it’s silly, there’s no need for it at all and if I talk to them about balanced life, character building, you know, they just dismiss it out of hand, it’s not on, it’s silly. So they’re the people who, some of them have got children, but oddly enough their children are doing the things, some of the things that I do and they’re looking askance at their kids and they don’t get it from them, they get it from other people. But they do things and think what I do is an unnecessary risk and it’s of no benefit to me. (Maurice 60)

Maurice seems to suggest that participation in activities such as climbing is part of a balanced approach to life which can have a positive influence on a person more generally. For Maurice, the benefits outweigh the costs; the ‘risk’ is worth the effort.

7.5 Climbing partner/spouse and risk
Nine of the twenty-three climbers mentioned that they had, at some point, climbed with their spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend. Of these only two were aged twenty-four or under whilst seven of the nine were female. Some accounts contained little more detail than a simple acknowledgement that they had climbed with a spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend. A few provided more information but there was little consistency or commonality in their comments. This is not surprising given that the interview did not solicit explicit information about their climbing experiences with a spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend. Consequently, when the interviewees recalled such experiences they did so at different points in the interview and in relation to different contexts. However, when they did pass comment, their accounts did shed further light on the meanings attached to risk. Accordingly, I plan to interrogate this small number of comments in the succeeding paragraphs.
Sarah provided one of the lengthiest descriptions of how climbing with and occasionally without her husband produced contrasting emotional and physical responses. In the first instance, Sarah explained that she was very aware of the risks involved in climbing because she had watched her husband climb so many times. This in itself is interesting because it alludes to Sarah’s status as a spectator rather than a participant. Further evidence of her spectator status emerged in relation to her comment that she gave up climbing on the birth of her children and instead she spent time taking them to the climbing wall as youngsters.

In the second instance, Sarah explained that one of her most memorable climbing experiences was when she had climbed with two other women:

This summer though I was ‘bold’ I was climbing with E, she’s doing a PhD at Y University. The guys were off doing stuff so we went off as a ladies group – E, me, and my niece. And in this group I was the bravest. We did the three at F_____.

What grade was that?
4c\(^{44}\). It gave me a real boost. I thought ‘I’m the bravest here so I can do it’. I’m always of the view that I don’t like to do more unless there’s something I can get a hold of. I was focussed though. And this summer I got a glimpse of why D [husband] can do it. I just stopped ‘what-iffing’ if I fall off! (Sarah 49)

The climb was memorable because Sarah was put in a position where she was the ‘bravest’ and therefore unusually for her, because she preferred not to lead, she led the climb. There is much to consider in Sarah’s recollection of this climb. Perhaps what is most striking is that Sarah differentiates between this climb and her usual approach to climbing. Here she took the lead rather than allowing her husband to lead and her reference to being the ‘bravest’ in her group suggests that she provided moral leadership too. Sarah’s

\(^{44}\) Sport grade akin to VS in traditional climbing which is an average climbing grade.
perception of herself as the ‘bravest’ in this group suggests that she does not see herself in this way when she climbs with her husband.

Evie also related how she rarely led climbs but that she seconded hard climbs with her boyfriend. Like Sarah, Evie described herself as risk averse and indeed of all the climbers, male or female, these two appeared to be the most risk averse. There were several references in their interviews to being scared and not taking risks as these extracts illustrate:

Would you consider yourself as someone who takes risks?
I don’t think I take great risks, no, I think when it comes to climbing I think I’m fairly safe and generally as well. I get quite scared quite easily I would say and that stops me from taking massive risks, but I do take occasional risks. (Evie 22)

And then as you started to do more exciting routes, more interesting routes, and you were leading those, were you conscious of the risks involved there?
Yeah, I think as it got a bit harder, I got a bit more scared, thinking, oh I can fall off here, there’s potential here, or, I don’t know exactly how to place this knot properly, it can come out if I fall off, things like that. But I haven’t done a lot of leading. I’ve done much more seconding than leading and second a lot harder grade now, at the probably about a VS up to E2 so there’s no way I could lead that, I don’t have the right head for it because I get too scared that I could fall off. (Evie 22)

Do you see yourself as someone who takes risks?
I don’t know. I don’t really take great risks cos basically I’m a wimp but others don’t think that. (Sarah 49)

Well D____ [sea cliff route on Anglesey] was cold and rainy and Dick abseiled over the cliff and disappeared and I was left on my own. And I’m thinking I’ve got to go down. I think you’ve a certain amount of braveness and I think you can use it up. And I was scared. (Sarah 49)

It is difficult to comment with any certainty on how far the clear distinction in roles between Evie/Sarah and their male climbing partners affected their perception of risk and their climbing practices. Both women described themselves as risk averse generally, not just in climbing situations,
but Sarah's account reported above suggests that the dynamic of her relationship with her husband shaped her climbing experiences. What is unclear is how far Sarah’s approach to climbing is affected by her personal relationship with her husband, the fact that he is male and male climbers tend to lead more than their female partners, or that she perceives him as a more confident and able climber. Sarah undoubtedly believed that her approach to climbing changed in the absence of her husband, but whether this was because he was her husband or because he was male or because he was a braver climber is unclear.

There is much evidence to show that gender affects the roles that men and women assume in society and there is no reason to believe that climbing would differ from society in general in the proscriptive roles assigned to men and women. The pejorative term, *belay bunny*, is used within the climbing community to describe a female climber who acts as the belayer and general support to a male partner.

However, the relationship between a ‘belay bunny’ and her male partner may be more complex than first thought. Given Evie’s self-defined status as second to her boyfriend, some in the climbing community might consider her a belay bunny. Yet, Evie recounted how she brought to bear her influence on the routes and manner in which her boyfriend climbed. She explained that when she first started to climb she knew little and on one occasion another climber pointed out that her belay provided no protection for her partner because he had not placed any gear. On realising this, she said that she now insisted he placed gear otherwise she refused to belay him. Essentially, she qualified his climbing practices and in so doing demonstrated her influence albeit from a position of seeming powerlessness. Evie’s concern for the well-being of her boyfriend also points to her concern with a lack of control or influence that she could exert to protect him when he is climbing. In
the event of a fall, as a belayer she could make a difference. As someone standing at the bottom of a route, she makes none.

The third and final example I wish to include highlights a different concern. Anna gave one of the most interesting accounts of the affect of a life partner on one’s approach to risk contrasting how her attitude to risk changed because her current life partner was a kayaker. None of her previous life partners had been participated in outdoor activities and Anna explained that she had given little consideration to how they felt when she went away climbing for days or weeks at a time, leaving them behind. Her relationship with S caused her to reflect on her approach:

... S [partner] is a paddler\textsuperscript{45} and it’s the first time I’ve had a relationship with somebody who’s just mad keen on the outdoors and it’s causing a lot of problems for me. Sort of my outdoorsy thing in relationships before and it’s the sort of thing that... Somebody meets you and they like it but not a right lot and then when they actually realise how much you’re into it there’s that. Or just how interested I am in talking about it or something. I could easily spend every week-end just going and doing something like that. And I think being with somebody who’s going off and doing her thing and I’ll do my thing or join together and do stuff and how much I worry about her and it’s the first time I’ve thought, ‘God I realise now how people have felt when I’ve gone off’. (Anna 34)

Moreover, Anna went on to indicate that she had seriously considered giving up climbing. I quizzed her as to how far she was projecting concerns for S onto concerns for herself:

\textbf{Do you think that the relationship with S has caused you to start thinking – bearing in mind that you’re now having a bit of concern for her – do you think that’s projecting back on you’re concerns for yourself?}

Yeah, yeah. Cos S... S’s not keen at all about me packing in. She climbs with me and she climbs really you know... and she doesn’t lead but she’s such a positive person to climb with. Em in comparison to other people I’ve been climbing with. And you know but I feel very protective as well... I’m not particularly into climbing with girlfriends its emotional stuff and it kicks in there. So I think yeah. She’ll go off to the Alps as well and I just found myself wanting her to check in you know so I know ... she’s

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\textsuperscript{45} Kayaker
been on a river and is she ok? And she’s absolutely fine but there’s a thing at the back of my head, in the back of my mind really. I wouldn’t ask her to pack in. She wouldn’t… I wish she wouldn’t kayak. I think that’s really risky but S doesn’t. She’s sort of in a comfort zone with that really so its dead odd that I’d be thinking of packing in now when I’m with somebody who just thinks ‘its ace!’ (Anna 34)

Anna’s response to this question reveals a growing ambivalence and certainty about her own participation in climbing caused by her new personal relationship. Anna’s reflection on whether she should continue to climb might be seen a ‘fateful moment’. Giddens writes:

Fateful moments are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence; where a person learns of information with fateful consequences. (Giddens, 1991, p. 113)

Caring for someone who also engaged in a risky sport, kayaking, had the effect of heightening Anna’s sense of risk. She worried about her life partner’s safety and appeared to project those concerns onto her own experiences.

7.6 Summary

Climbers talked about two broad types of relationships, with other climbers and with family. The relationships forged through climbing encouraged and sustained climbers’ involvement in the sport, providing a source of emotional attachment. Such attachments were keenly felt perhaps because, as some interviewees suggested, the heightened emotional state experienced during adverse circumstances. Trust, or a lack of it was the basis for climbing relationships and participants in this study made judgements about how far they deemed their climbing partners trustworthy or untrustworthy. Those judged untrustworthy were essentially unqualified, they were characterised as lacking knowledge, short of experience or competence to practice safely as a climber. Conversely, this group of interviewees
perceived themselves qualified to determine the trustworthiness of another climber in a range of different situations.

One exception to this rule was in relation to novice climbers. Novice climbers tended to abdicate responsibility for their practices and relied on an instructor or leader. Here the relationship altered as novice climbers placed their trust in a more experienced and more qualified climber. Beginners assumed that such a person was better able to assess risk and manage their climbing practices more competently than they could themselves. However, qualified climbers eschewed the practice of top-roping because this reflected a type of climbing undertaken by novices.

There was also evidence that both cognitive and affective dimensions were at work in determining how far a climber trusted another. There was certainly reference to observation of practice, but there was also a sense that climbers shared a common understanding via an imagined climbing community. This sometimes led to climbers climbing with people they barely new but such a course of action also reflected their confidence in their qualifications to judge another climber’s competence.

Risk also mediated these climbers’ approaches to their familial relationships. Whilst none of the younger climbers indicated that they moderated their climbing practices because of familial relationships, many older climbers reported that they did precisely this. Moreover, these older climbers revealed that their attitude and practices had changed as their familial responsibilities increased. A difference also existed between male and female climbers, where female interviewees were more likely than male interviewees to cite a change in their practices with familial responsibilities. As well as a growing sense of responsibility for their families, climbers also cited practical constraints associated with childcare as factors negating their involvement in edgework. For example, fewer opportunities to climb meant a
loss of fitness and readiness to climb so some climbers adjusted their practices accordingly in order to retain their status as a qualified climber.

Finally, a small number of climbers talked about managing risks for their children in outdoor environments. These climbers made judgements about the competence of their children to engage in risk activities and risk-taking. They defined themselves as qualified to make such judgements and construct boundaries for their children.
Chapter Eight

Space – Place, Risk and

Rock Climbing
8.1 Introduction

References to the outdoor environment occurred primarily in response to questions about climbers’ motivations for climbing and a request to talk about their best climbing experience or experiences. The context in which these responses emerged is important because it shows how notions of space/place are intimately intertwined with the narratives about the positive feelings associated with climbing. Therefore in this Chapter, I explore the significance attached to the outdoor environment by this small group of climbers. More specifically, I attempt to do three things. First, I consider the specific reasons given by the interviewees for their enjoyment of climbing in mountain landscapes. Secondly, I consider how these climbers appeared to mark their identity as a climber through the ways in which they used the outdoor environment. Lastly, I examine how their narratives about the outdoor environment articulate with the meanings they attached to risk. However, before I begin to interrogate the data, I want briefly to reflect on constructions of space and place. I do this to situate my analysis and the literature I employ within a broader framework.

8.2 Contested Spaces and Places

Some older and geographical approaches to outdoor/sport environments view those environments uncritically. In such accounts physical locations are little more than the physical coordinates determining the boundary of an area to be mapped or examined for some purpose. Examples of such work include environmental impact studies by Grijalva, Berrens, Bohara and Douglass Shaw (2002) and Hanley, Alvarez-Farizo and Douglass-Shaw (2002). Whilst concern for the influence of human activity on the environment is laudable, such studies often fail to reflect critically on the construction of space and places. For instance, the authors cited above paid
little attention to which groups might be included or conversely excluded from wilderness areas by a requirement to walk as opposed to cycle or drive to particular locations.

Early sociological accounts of sporting spaces and places were equally uncritical. For example, in 1993, the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* devoted one issue to space, publishing articles drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives. Reviewing the papers published in this issue, van Ingen (2003) concluded that, with the exception of Bale’s (1993) study of football arenas from a Foucauldian perspective, none displayed a critical analysis of sporting spaces. In other words these articles failed to examine the production and reproduction of meanings attached to spaces and places, seeing them more as neutral physical locations.

Other authors, writing about the outdoor environment have also challenged the reduction of physical or geographical areas to mere coordinates on a map. In their review of discourses about walkers’ ‘rights’ in the countryside, for example, Kay and Moxham (1996) reveal how access to the countryside and the practices within it are both socially and culturally constructed. Kay and Moxham suggest that a minority of walkers, albeit the most frequent users of the outdoor environment establish norms and values affirming acceptable (and conversely unacceptable) practices. These norms include a preference for minimal use of cairns, way markers or other human constructions and a preference for unkempt paths over well-maintained trails. The effect of these discourses and practices is such that only individuals with appropriate knowledge and skills to be in the outdoors do so regularly and with ease. Kay and Moxham concluded that the meanings associated with walking in the outdoors privilege a minority who already enjoy access, at the expense of those who might like to access the outdoors but in less traditional ways.
Following the line of reasoning adopted by Kay and Moxham, I argue that recognising space and place as both socially and culturally constructed as well as historically contingent produces a more nuanced reading of the climbers’ narratives about the outdoor environment. In sections 8.3 – 8.5, I show how the interviewees’ narratives about the environment in which they climbed typically reflect contemporary and largely positive discourses about that landscape. Moreover, I show in Section 8.6 how climbers’ particular use of that space marks their identity as a climber. In the final section, I suggest that where risk articulates with the outdoor environment, the imagery used to describe the environment can be more negative and contrasts sharply with the more positive narratives of the outdoors reported elsewhere.

8.3 Climbing Places

The climbers in this study said they climbed in a variety of outdoor settings. These settings included disused quarries (e.g. Trowbarrow, Lancashire), at small rocky, roadside outcrops (e.g. Shepherd’s Crag, Lake District) and large rocky outcrops (e.g. Stanage Edge, Peak District), in the mountains in Britain and abroad (e.g. Glencoe, Scotland, the Dolomites, Italy) and on sea cliffs (e.g. Gogarth, Anglesey). Some climbers also recalled their mountaineering exploits in the Alps or the Himalayas and, at the other extreme, bouldering at the foot of crags. The rock types climbed included granite, limestone, gritstone, and slate as well as snow and ice – each has its own character and requires a slightly different set of climbing practices and techniques for a successful ascent.

Several climbers expressed a preference for particular climbing environments as illustrated below:
I suppose it’s the remoteness of it, you go to a crag and it’s just like single pitch and near the road and it feels more sterile like, than going out and doing a route in the mountains. (Julie 24)

… it was just the wild factor, everything’s so big and there’s such a lot of space and there was a different smell, everything was different. I mean there wouldn’t be pavements to walk on… (Maurice 60)

I love climbing next to the sea as well. I love the sea, the view, the atmosphere, the sound of the waves, the birds. (Rob 50)

Yes, I’ve started to like it for the places it takes you. If you go to North Wales it’s just amazing to just wander around, wander around the slate quarries… (Steve 23)

These extracts included references to very different environments. Julie distinguishes between ‘sterile’ roadside crags and ‘doing’ mountain routes. Maurice contrasted the city life he was used to with what to him, was both a novel as well as awe-inspiring mountain environment. Rob stressed his love of sea cliff climbing because of the sounds and wildlife as well as the view, whilst Steve’s comments are interesting because he refers to the slate quarries in North Wales. The quarries are a product of human activity which some might suggest leaves the landscape scarred as opposed to a place of beauty.

These climbers’ descriptions of the outdoors reflect contemporary discourses about mountain landscapes which emerged during the Romantic Period\(^46\) (Edensor, 2000). Edensor argues that attempts to position the

\(^{46}\) The Romantic Movement characterised by its opposition to scientific reason and the Enlightenment project more generally, brought about a change in attitude to mountain environments. Myths, monsters and legends were replaced by literary and pictorial representations of the mountains that emphasised the beauty of such landscapes, and stressed their potential benefits to people’s physical and mental health. Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley eulogised, Cozens and Turner drew and painted them, whilst doctors sent their patients to mountain resorts like Davos in Switzerland to recuperate. Mountains were reframed as awesome, not awful. This widespread shift in attitude toward mountain environments illustrate with some clarity the extent to which spaces/places are less physical locations and more social constructions.
outdoors in opposition to urban environments had its origins in Victorian middle class discourses about rural landscapes. Such nineteenth century discourses portrayed the outdoor environment as a safe haven from the ills of the city, notably the latter’s dirt and smog. In so doing, these narratives reflect Romantic Movement ideals subsequently taken up by mountaineers and explorers, first in the Alpine regions and subsequently in Britain’s wilderness areas.

8.4 Being Outdoors

The climbers in this study communicated very positive feelings about the outdoors and their presence in this environment. In Evie’s case, the two things, being outdoors and being ‘outdoorsy’ were synonymous. Anna also made a general point of being outdoors and in the mountains (as opposed to indoors) and then went on to mention the fresh air as well as the sense of adventure and exercise:

It’s about being in the outdoors. I’m not over keen on indoor climbing. I just want to be outside. And in the mountains and that’s what it’s about first and foremost. The fresh air, the adventure, the exercise you know… (Anna 34)

In fact, Anna’s comments incorporate references to other reasons listed by the interviewees for their involvement in the sport, namely: adventure and an enhanced sense of physicality. Stella too mentioned excitement and challenge in addition to the view on reaching the top:

I think the excitement of being so high up, you know, you can see for miles and miles, it’s a huge climb and the challenge of the actual climb although mostly not very difficult, some of it, there were some tricky bits and just being at the top was a brilliant feeling, yeah! (Stella, 60)

The view of the surrounding environment was also important for Coral subject of course to the vagaries of the British weather:
Best climbing experience was last summer. It’s a Severe with 3 stars\(^{47}\) which is a really nice climb. It was a very cold day but you could see when you got to the top... When you got to the top you could see all the way down to B___ L___. It was absolute gorgeous weather and the climb was just... it was just fantastic. (Coral 22)

Views are obviously conditional on sunny days and/or clear weather, a point made by Dan:

> There’s still nothing beats the feeling of when you’re outdoors. It’s a nice day, you get to the top of a maybe a long multi-pitch route or even just a short hard route or something and it’s a nice sunny day. You’re sitting on the top and you’re belaying your partner up, it’s absolutely fantastic, you’ve got the view, your mate’s doing the moves you’ve just done [laughs], you can just totally relax and just sit there and it’s fantastic... (Dan, 20)

In his account, Dan linked being outdoors with good (sunny) weather conditions and the opportunity to relax and enjoy the view whilst belaying his climbing partner. Tim talked about relaxation too:

> Plus it gets you out of the city centre for a day, or an evening plus it gets you away from work and home and stuff.

**Why does it feel different being at a crag from the city centre?**

Just gets you out. Relaxed. Away from everything. Most of the time the phone doesn’t work so you’re not gonna get the phone calls, have you ordered this or where’s this? It’s just, just being out there, getting away for a few hours. (Tim 24)

The idea of a climbing space/place in opposition to an urban environment chimes with claims made by Lewis (2000) in his account of climbing bodies. Lewis focuses on the juxtaposition of a climbing body with a metropolitan body. For Lewis, a climbing identity effectively serves as an antidote to the logic of materialism and rationalism that govern modern life. Drawing on Simmell’s (1997) reflections about the metropolis and the negative connotations of urban life, Lewis contends that individuals become

\(^{47}\)Climbing grade of below average difficulty but deemed a 'classic' and accorded three stars.
desensitized to the world around them because the complexity and excesses of everyday urban life overwhelm their senses. Accordingly, Simmel says that modern life leaves us feeling empty, unsure of what is missing in our lives. In contrast, adventure argues Lewis, stands outside consumer capitalism; it is dangerous, emotional, uncertain, and is situated in the natural world. The body is spatially situated in the natural environment and hence enjoys an enhanced awareness of self. Outdoor adventure affords individuals and climbers specifically, the chance to experience sensations, to use their senses or re-learn what they have forgotten. ‘Adventurous activity... serves to unite body and world’ (Lewis 2000, p.68). Whereas, adventurous activities signal immersion, participation, and spiritual depth, metropolitan life suggests reservation, spectatorship and a life divorced from oneself. Having said this, it is important to reiterate that such accounts reflect contemporary observations about mountain landscapes. Eighteenth century conceptions of the mountain environments were much more negative with mountains seen as wild, inhospitable, barren and dangerous (Hope, 1997)

8.5 A Sense of Solitude

The opportunity for relaxation that climbing spaces/places provided overlapped with a sense of solitude that the climbers took from them. Whilst climbers accepted the presence of a climbing partner, more generally, they associated climbing outdoors with the absence of other people. For example, Dan, describing his best climbing experience said:

It was just an absolutely fantastic day. There was just me and one of my climbing partners so that was all that was there, nobody else there, beautiful day, had the whole place to ourselves. Great day. (Dan 20)
Stella commented:

... and particularly I like climbing in sort of places where there aren’t any people or very few people around and I very much enjoy that aspect of it.

**So it’s the getting away from it?**
Yes, yes. And the wide open spaces thing. (Stella 60)

Whilst writing about walking as opposed to climbing, Edensor (2000) suggests that contemporary discourses about outdoor landscapes still reflect Victorian middle class values which frame the outdoors as a place of solitude and ‘good fellowship’, primarily in the company of like-minded (knowledgeable and middle class) walkers with the capacity to appreciate the landscape. Stella’s comments reflect Edensor’s line of reasoning.

In addition to notions of the outdoors as an alternative to the city, those interviewed in this study also talked about the mountain environment as a place of (relative) solitude providing opportunities for quiet reflection. However, such notions of solitude are part of a socially and culturally specific narrative about the supposed ‘qualities’ of the outdoors. Curry (2004), for example, argues that the valorisation of solitude stems from the attitudes of wealthy British landowners from the late eighteenth century. He suggests that privileging quiet reflection and solitude above group use of, and active leisure in, the outdoor environment was taken up first by the middle classes and latterly by working class recreational users of the outdoors as access to roam the countryside broadened. To this end, Curry, citing the positive attitude to communal outdoor recreational activity in New Zealand with the more favoured solitary experience in Britain, maintains that the significance attached to solitude over communal activity is both culturally specific and socially produced.
8.6 Constructing a Climbing Identity Through Space and Place

Closer analysis of the data revealed that these climbers’ comments not only reflected their appreciation of the outdoor environment, but marked their identity as a climber too. More specifically, their climbing practices appeared to secure their identity as a particular type of climber as well as distinguishing them from other occupants of mountain spaces and places. Tim, Ivan and Coral all referred to the heightened emotional response they achieved because they reached the top by climbing and not by walking. When asked what he found appealing about climbing Tim replied:

… sense of achievement and more exercise than if I’d spent the whole day walking in the Lake District with a pack on. Beats just going round the tops [as a walker]. (Tim 24)

Tim’s extract affirms the view that climbing to the top as opposed to walking to the top engenders a different emotional response than he would have achieved walking. Ivan too differentiated between the experience of walking and of climbing in the hills:

At first I just loved being out in the fells. It was much more an idea of being in the outdoors I think and it was just I don’t know. I don’t know how it came about, what it was. I wouldn’t say there was any great high ideal but it was just fun… I suppose a very intense experience when you going out… whereas we used to go and walk up hills and they’d be lots of other people and its like you were moving into a different… a different circle. It was much more of a choice if you like… going out on walks we use to do that Sunday School, with other people, everybody went walking but there was different people went climbing. I think that was maybe it. (Ivan 48)

Ivan insisted that ‘everybody went walking’ whereas ‘different people went climbing’, that is people like him. Therefore, in Ivan’s eyes, space/place and importantly what is done in that outdoor environment reinforces his identity as a climber as distinct from a hill walker.

Coral also too draws on narratives of preferred activities in spaces/places when describing her feelings:
... more recently... I’ve started doing more multi pitch routes. And just getting to the top of something on a gorgeous day and being able to see for miles and realising that you’ve just climbed all of that rather than sort of walked up the grassy path.

So how would you say it’s [your reason for climbing] changed and why?
It’s more of being able to take everything in like the scenery and where you are than just a sport, yeah with single pitching it would just be like you just sort of do the climb and that would be it, you get to the top. Whereas now it’s like you see the whole mountain and you pick a route up the mountain. (Coral 22)

Coral sets up a division between climbers and walkers – she had not merely ‘walked up the grassy path’ – and between climbers who went into the mountain, like herself, and those who chose single pitch or sport routes. The latter were not granted sight of the ‘whole mountain’ nor had they had to ‘pick a route up the mountain’. Moreover, in this extract Coral identifies strongly with the ‘long walk-in’ brigade of climbers as opposed to those who attempt single pitch routes. The space/place occupied by climbers and walkers might be the same, but as a climber, Coral was keen to position herself as someone who tackles mountain routes by climbing as opposed to walking.

When Julie talked about her preference for longer routes she differentiated herself not from walkers but from other types of climber:

I prefer the longer routes, not just the single pitch routes, I don’t find them as challenging I suppose, as having the full height of a mountain to climb or whatever, not necessarily just climbing, but a mixture of climbing and scrambling. (Julie 23)

Like Coral, Julie is drawn to the longer routes because she perceives those to be more challenging. In addition, Julie’s earlier reference to a ‘sterile’ mountain environment in this Chapter (see Section 8.3) suggests that there is something barren and possibly less fulfilling about roadside climbing. Although she does not articulate how she sees the mountain environment it is not unreasonable to suggest that this is the opposite of sterile – perhaps she feels alive in what she defines as a natural environment? The wheel has come full
circle; climbers in this study defined easily accessible landscapes as sterile and more remote environments as more satisfying.

Finally, evidence of the way in which some climbers privilege one climbing space over another can be found in comments about being outside/outdoors as opposed to indoor wall climbing. Anna and Tim, for example, carve a distinction between indoor and outdoor climbing, stating:

I’m not over keen on indoor climbing. I just want to be outside. (Anna 34)

I thought it’d be boring going inside so I never joined them because I thought I don’t want to climb inside and the wall at L____ is quite small. Full of stories of 20 people on 20 panels and I thought well I don’t want to. I never wanted to do that. I quite like going outside. (Tim 24)

Although Tim, Ivan, Coral and Julie talked ostensibly about a geographical space/place and their appreciation of that space, they represent that space in a particular way. In so doing they position their use of, and therefore their presence in, that space, as legitimate. This attempt to legitimise one’s use of space/place reflects notions of space articulated in de Leseleuc et al’s (2002) ethnographic account of a climbing community in France and Lefebvre’s (1991) more theoretical tripartite conceptualisation of space.

de Leseleuc et al’s (2002) describes the appropriation of space/place by climbers for particular uses. The authors noted that climbers at a climbing crag in France established a community which was bound together, in part, through its opposition to mainstream societal values. They concluded that this community was built through strong intra-group communication and bonds, a non-materialist approach to life and recognition of environmental concerns such as protecting the rock and a shared history. de Leseleuc et al identified three forms of space namely, geographic, normative and identity through which the group’s boundaries were constructed.
The first form of space is geographic space and constitutes the physical boundary between the first and last routes at the crag. Next, normative space refers to practices which serve as symbolic sanctions or censure on climbers’ actions. Finally, identity space functions as a space for ‘us’ and a different one for ‘them’. In this space, climbers must either submit to the will of the community or face what de Leseleuc et al describe as “social violence” (p. 79). This separation of different types of space is useful for analytical purposes in that it differentiates between physical spaces and associated practices as well as recognising the relationship between practices and the meanings attached to particular spaces and places.

de Leseleuc et al’s attempt to distinguish between different types of space might also be said to reflect Lefebvre’s (one of the most prominent theorists on space) tripartite conceptualisation of space. The advantage that Lefebvre’s work has over de Leseleuc et al’s, is that it acknowledges the historicity of these three types of space; Lefebvre calls them ‘moments’ suggesting a temporal dimension to the social construction whereas de Leseleuc et al mention temporality in their account, but fail to develop it.

Lefebvre (1991) identifies three moments in the production of social space, spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation. Spatial practices, for example climbing or walking describe the aspects of life which take place in material spaces; this reflects geographical space in de Leseleuc et al’s account. Discourses about the experiences gleaned from climbing, such as climbers’ valorisation of the view from the top of climb, constitute representations of space and allude to de Leseleuc et al’s identity space. Lastly, Lefebvre’s spaces of representation refers to space as a lived expression of oppression and discrimination as well as the opportunity for a counter-space, that is for a chance to challenge, at an individual or collective level, the dominant meanings attached to particular
spaces/places. For instance, climbers characterise particular spaces/places in ways which legitimise their activities and diminish those of others. Both the distinction drawn between walkers and climbers and claims of a more ‘intense’ experience derived from climbing as opposed to walking help to construct climbing as the more worthwhile activity. In essence, this reflects de Leseleuc et al’s normative space. Through their descriptions of a climbing space/place (the representation of space), Coral and Tim articulate a privileged perception of climbers’ occupation of that space/place over walkers (space of representation) and in relation to Julie and Anna privileging one climbing space (mountains/outdoor) over another (roadside crags/indoor).

8.7 Risk, Space and Place

In the previous section, I demonstrated how climbers’ established their identity as a climber through their practices in outdoor landscapes and before that I described the interviewees’ positive representations of those landscapes. Their accounts typically depicted mountains as places of beauty and wonderment consistent with contemporary accounts of wilderness settings. However, some interviewees’ descriptions of mountain settings contained negative terms and closer analysis of the data revealed that when this happened such accounts often incorporated references to risk.

For example, the interviewees talked about feeling uncomfortable in a particular environment. Dan (20) referred to sea cliffs as being ‘an alien environment’, Ivan (48) described a climbing venture as ‘bloody dangerous where you were climbing greasy, wet rock… sometimes it was loose…’ and, of another climbing experience he said: ‘It was a very intimidating crag to go on I suppose and that’s one of the scariest things I can remember’. Similarly, Sarah (49) felt ‘scared’ when her climbing partner ‘abseiled over the cliff and disappeared and I was left on my own’. And Anna (34) talked about a climb
for which they hadn’t been prepared: ‘It felt dangerous ‘cos the rock was so slippy’.

Descriptions of the rock as ‘dirty’, ‘wet’, or ‘loose’ were common when those interviewed narrated accounts of risky routes or climbing experiences. In contrast, a less risky route was described as being ‘positive’, or ‘clean’. Such descriptions reflect Douglas’s (1966) work about the use of labels to differentiate between clean and dirty objects and the symbolism employed to mark people and objects as risky or otherwise. In this instance a difficult physical environment, be it rock conditions or poor weather, prompted the interviewees to employ negative terminology to describe that environment. Risk in such circumstances produced a fundamentally negative emotional response.

These accounts point to a heightened awareness of risk when confronted with difficult conditions, for example, loose rock, wet weather or where a partner disappeared from sight. In such circumstances, the climbers in this study responded by paying great attention to risk assessment and management. They acknowledged the extra-ordinariness of the activity and demonstrated a heightened sense of awareness of their physical environment and the danger posed. The interviewees seemed particularly aware of the hazards associated with the physical environment identifying rock falls, avalanches, unexpected bad weather, long run-outs on routes (because of scarce opportunities for gear placement), as well the idea of a climbing area as ‘having a reputation’ (Ivan, 48).

Such descriptions of mountain landscape as ‘awesome’ and ‘awful’ have their antecedents in pre-modern attitudes to unexplored regions. Whilst few regions are now unexplored in their entirety, an individual climber will enter a space/place for the first time at some point. As such perhaps it is unsurprising that when events conspired to produce an unpleasant day’s
climbing, climbers used terms such as hazardous, unsafe and risky to
describe their mountain environment.

Furthermore, the interviewees’ narratives about the climbing
environment reflected their concern for factors outside their control. These
were a significant source of concern. Brian, for instance, said:

In climbing I’m relying on my own ability and it’s just me, apart
from the possibility of rocks falling on me… (Brian 60)

Whilst Julie commented:

Yeah, em, I suppose the long routes, the multi-pitch,
particularly if the weather was bad, that would be more risky,
not so much the climbing wise, but if something happened,
you wouldn’t be able to get down so easily. (Julie 23)

Both these extracts point to the main risk as coming from factors outside a
climber’s control, but located within the physical environment. Moreover,
climbers seemed to distance themselves personally from risk by defining the
physical environment as a source of risk. In this attempt, their comments
appeared to reflect Laurendeau’s (2006a) notion of the illusion of control such
that the rock and the weather were sources of risk whereas the individual
climber was not. When accidents happened it was bad luck and sometimes
sourced to the physical environment; to quote Anna (34) ‘stuff happens’.

Not all of the interviewees spoke negatively about the risks associated
with climbing spaces, however, some suggested that particularly challenging
routes enhanced their appreciation of the physical environment. Indeed, in
this study, a number of climbers associated the memorable-ness of a
particular route with an outstanding view, solitude or time for reflection, good
weather, and/or friendship. The common thread running through the climbers’
accounts was that the route should be just sufficiently challenging to offer a
sense of excitement and an opportunity of success without being so easy that
it required next to no thought or concentration. Stella described one of her best climbs thus:

I mean I think one of my best ones was, I did the north route of the B____ with Dot and that was just fantastic, you know and it wasn’t technically a terribly difficult climb but it’s just so huge and long and it is in quite a well known climb so I was really pleased and that was exhilarating.

**What grabs you about that one?**
I think the excitement of being so high up, you know, you can see for miles and miles, it’s a huge climb and the challenge of the actual climb although mostly not very difficult, some of it, there were some tricky bits and just being at the top was a brilliant feeling, yeah! (Stella 60)

Whilst a much younger female climber, Coral recounted:

The climbing was fun, there was lots of, each pitch on it was different, like there was one pitch where it was all in a corner… and then the bottom pitch was almost a scramble and then… last 2 pitches were a lot of different boulders and things to climb over, but yeah it was just, it was an exciting climb and just an absolute gorgeous climb. (Coral 22)

These climbers’ accounts seem to reflect elements of what Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) define as a flow experience which describes a situation where the experience and the activity merge (Stranger, 1999). In climbing, flow experiences typically arise where participants experience substantial challenge but feel in control (Macaloon and Csikszentmihalyi, 1983). For some interviewees their appreciation of the outdoors, combined with a challenging climb (which presented a risk of non-completion) produced a heightened sense of awareness, a flow experience. Additionally, the physical environment seemed to provide an outlet for that same flow experience; climbers reported an enhanced appreciation of the views and landscape surrounding them.

Conversely, for other climbers in this study, climbing environments had greatest significance when a route was relatively easy. By being easy, the climb afforded time for reflection and contemplation as well as enjoyment of
their surroundings in which they found themselves. Mark who climbed quite
difficult grades described one of his best climbing experiences:

Well bizarrely one of the best, did an easy route with a couple
of good friends on D____ C____ in the Lake District, I think it was
only a Diff, but it was a really nice sunny day and it was really
calm and still and they had a good time… yeah it was just
because it was a nice peaceful day out in the mountains and a
route that was pleasant, it had interesting climbing, it was never
very hard and there were nice views and it was hot and sunny
and that was great. (Mark 24)

Leonard too described how he consciously chose to climb only grades that
were well within his ability in order to appreciate the landscape. He explained
that this allowed him to maximise his enjoyment of being in a location that was
away from his everyday life.

… I suppose [I lead] 5As, 4Cs\textsuperscript{48} something around there, I
never want to go any harder leading, ‘cos that’s fine, gets me in
all the situation I want to be in which is away from it all, up in
the air and it’s lovely. (Leonard, 60)

Therefore, climbing spaces seem to provide both an incentive to engage in
edgework and a disincentive. Where climbers had a heightened sense of
awareness due to the challenge of a particular climb this could enhance their
appreciation of that environment. Conversely, climbers’ appreciation of their
location sometimes increased when they stepped back from the edge and
found time to reflect on their surroundings.

8.8 Summary

For this small group of climbers, being outdoors, the views and the
landscape were key reasons why they climbed. Notably, the interviewees
spoke about climbing spaces as providing a welcome contrast to urban life in
terms of both the physical landscape and the solitude. The way they imagined

\textsuperscript{48}Technical grades equating to VS/HVS which describe routes of average/above average
difficulty.
the physical locations in which they climbed typically reflected contemporary discourses about the outdoor environment. In turn, such discourses have their origin in the Romantic era which bore witness to the reconstruction of mountainous regions as places of wonder as opposed to places of dread.

The climbers’ narratives about climbing places reported here reflected de Leseleuc et al. and Lefebvre’s tripartite conceptual frameworks about space. The interviewees’ basic descriptions of what they did in such environments were consistent with the idea of geographic/social spaces. The ways in which they talked about mountain environments (as places of wonder) paralleled identity spaces/representation of spaces. Lastly, their comments about how they used the mountain environment to self-identify as climbers and distinguish themselves from other users notably, walkers mirrored normative spaces/spaces of representation. In essence, climbing spaces and climbers use of those spaces reinforced the interviewees’ general climbing identity.

Whilst the participants in this study employed mostly positive terms to describe the physical locations in which they climbed, there were occasions where their terminology was negative. Specifically, this occurred where they identified the physical environment as a source of risk, for instance rock fall, wet/polished rock or poor weather. On such occasions, the interviewees’ negative descriptions reflected Douglas’s (1966) division between clean and dirty or safe and unsafe sources of risk. Moreover, these climbers perceived the physical environment as a potential source of uncontrolled risk citing rock falls, loose holds and poor weather on long routes. The physical environment was where ‘stuff happened’ or bad luck befell a climber. In this way, the physical environment assisted the interviewees to maintain what Laurendeau (2006a) describes as the illusion of control (see Section 7.2).
The interviewees also described positive experiences of outdoor climbing spaces which when coupled with risk or a significant challenge produced an enhanced appreciation of their environment. In so doing, their accounts seemed to resonate with the notion of flow experience described generally by Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) and by Macaloon and Csikszentmihalyi (1983) in reference to climbing specifically. Furthermore, some climbers reported a sense of pleasure and relaxation unrelated to the degree of challenge posed by a route, but still stemming from their outdoor location.

Finally in this Chapter, I want to say something about the content and structure for it differs from the previous three chapters where I presented a discussion of my results (namely Chapters Five, Six and Seven). It is much shorter and this is simply a reflection of the content of the transcripts. For this group of interviewees, space and place were important reasons to climb. But if judged by the number of occasions when they mentioned the outdoors, then this was a less significant reason. However, had I known at the outset of the interviews what I know now, I could have probed the interviewees’ references to space and place more fully and perhaps secured more detailed information. Moreover, at no time did I ask the interviewees to rank in order of importance, their reasons for climbing so my inference about the outdoors being less important may be unfounded. In addition, examples of the articulation of risk with space and place were few by comparison to the other reasons given by the interviewees for climbing.

Having reflected on the limits of the data about space and place, I want to suggest that it adds to the overall analysis in two ways. First, unlike the other reasons given for climbing, space and place marked the climbers as a particular group in the outdoor environment. Their reported use of climbing places, that is, their practices distinguished them from other users of the same
space. In other words, the physical environment served to construct their identity as a climber in a way that relationships, physicality challenge, mastery, thrills and excitement did not. Second, the interviewees employed the physical environment, more than any of the other reasons cited for climbing, to sustain an illusion of control (after Laurendeau, 2006a). The physical environment was where ‘stuff happened’ or bad luck occurred.
Chapter Nine

Conclusion
9.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings a small group of climbers attached to risk in the broader context of the reasons they gave for rock climbing. I wanted to examine how risk mediated climbers’ participation in climbing in relation to both their climbing identity and their climbing practices. Through in depth interviews I explored the meanings attached to risk by a small group of self-identified rock climbers based in the North of England. This methodological approach allowed me as the researcher to focus the interview around risk yet enabled the interviewees to talk about risk in their words, drawing on their experiences of life in general as well as when climbing.

The transcripts provided a comprehensive resource with data describing their climbing experiences and practices in relation to their understanding of risk. At first glance, the interviewees comprised a group of unremarkable, self-identified climbers or what Donnelly (2006) might define as ‘core participants’ as opposed to extreme participants. Yet close analysis of the transcripts revealed a deep understanding of risk contextualised within climbing and their everyday lives. Through close scrutiny of the interviewees’ comments, I believe I have produced a rich analysis of the meanings the climbers’ attached to risk.

As with all research, however, the outcomes of this research might have been different and perhaps enhanced had I an insight into the relative significance of different aspects of the data at the outset. I believe two modifications to the data collection process in particular would have enriched this thesis. First, narrative interviewing with follow up in depth semi-structured interviews focusing on key reasons for participation in climbing and the articulation of risk with those reasons may have produced even richer data. Secondly, I am conscious that this ‘insider group’ of self-identified climbers, to
use Douglas’s terminology, are not representative of climbers in general. Correspondingly, I am conscious that other groups of climbers, ‘outsider group members’ exist. To this end, I can only speculate as to how outsider group members’ narratives about risk might contrast with the accounts of risk reported here. Having reflected briefly on the methodological considerations which emerged at the end of this study, I now wish to explore the extent to which my thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge.

I believe that my original contribution to knowledge is threefold. First, I have contested common-sense understandings of risk in climbing thereby challenging assumptions promulgated in some academic literature about the significance of risk for climbers (and other lifestyle sport participants). Secondly, through the development of a two-part model, I have presented a new way of conceptualising risk. This model contextualises the meanings attached to risk by situating risk in climbing in the broader context of risk in everyday life. Finally, and as a direct outcome of my re-conceptualisation of risk, I have developed Mary Douglas’s work about risk and identity showing how both gender and age impinge on the articulation of risk with identity. In the next three sections, I consider each of these contributions to knowledge in more depth. Whilst acknowledging the speculative nature of my comments, I conclude each of these sections by outlining how my work might inform an analysis of risk more generally as well as pointing to prospective areas of research beyond this thesis.

9.2 Re-imagining Risk in Climbing

Research about the relationship between risk-taking and lifestyle sports has often reflected common-sense assumptions about such activities. Academic and lay thinking has often defined lifestyle sport participants as thrill-seeking, adrenaline junkies who must be slightly mad to deliberately court
risk in this way. I have challenged such thinking from the outset of this thesis, arguing that risk is not the only, or even the main reason self-identified climbers gave for climbing. Rather, participants in this study identified four main reasons for climbing only one of which was intimately linked to risk-taking, namely excitement/thrill-seeking. The other reasons given were mastery and challenge, an enhanced sense of physicality, social relationships and an appreciation of the environment in which they climbed (space/place). Closer scrutiny of the data, however, revealed that risk articulated with the reasons for climbing cited by the interviewees.

Whilst other research has identified some of the reasons given by climbers for climbing see, for example, Davidson (2006); de Leseleuc, (2002); Lewis (2000); Shoham (2000) and Storry (2003), few have situated risk within the broader context of those reasons. By examining how the interviewees’ accounts of risk interacted with the reasons they gave for climbing, I have sought to ground their understanding of risk within a broader context that encompasses not only their climbing experiences but their everyday lives too. In so doing, I believe I have produced a more holistic account of risk, recognizing emotional and social as well as physical risks. I have embedded such an account in the interviewees’ everyday and lived experiences. In this sense, my analysis of risk in climbing recognizes its articulation with the totality of the interviewees’ climbing experiences and their understanding of risk outside climbing.

9.2.1 Re-imagining Risk More Generally

Grounding risk in individuals lived experience avoids a tendency to view risk in an abstracted way and at the same time reduces the chance of misinterpreting or misrepresenting the meanings these climbers attached to risk. Consequently, I contend that my contribution to an analysis of risk more
generally has been to show the importance of grounding an analysis of risk in people’s lived experience. In my opinion, this suggests that a more comprehensive analysis of risk is secured where risk is considered more broadly, that is, in the context of an individuals’ lived experiences, rather than isolated for analysis in a more narrow context or set of circumstances. As such my work supports the weak constructionist approach taken by Lupton and Tulloch (2002) which recognizes the situated nature of the meanings attached to risk.

To conclude, risk is best understood where the meanings attached to it are derived from individuals’ everyday lived experience and relatedly where risk is contextualized. This is important because it questions the influence of so-called expert opinion on risk as a mechanism for effecting change in participants’ practices not only in lifestyle sports but life in general. In other words, analyses of risk, which assume increased knowledge will alter behaviour are misguided. Actors need to recognise the descriptions of apparent risks put before them for these to make sense in the broader context of their experiences. Conversely, expert and lay understanding of risk might benefit from recognising that some participants in so-called risk activities attempt to assess and manage risk, and that rather than actively seek risk they seek to minimise it.

9.3 Re-conceptualising Risk in Climbing

In an attempt to develop a more nuanced reading of risk, I derived a conceptual model from my data focused on two facets of risk, namely risk seeking and risk activities. I argued that climbers differentiated between qualified and unqualified risk seeking and between ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities. I characterised qualified risk-taking as undertaken by someone deemed to have the appropriate experience, knowledge and/or ability to
complete a route. In contrast, an unqualified climber fails to demonstrate sufficient experience, knowledge and/or ability.

Whereas the dimension of qualified-unqualified risk addresses identity, the concept of ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities pertains to practices. Ordinary risk activities reflect everyday and mundane activities including commuting to work, shopping, visiting friends or relatives. Extra-ordinary risk activities included those where individuals gave significantly higher attention to planning and preparation, such as climbing. Climbers identified two further differences between ordinary and extra-ordinary risk activities. First, individuals anticipated extra-ordinary risk activities and expressed a heightened sense of awareness and related need to actively manage risk. In contrast, the mundane and everyday nature of ordinary risk activities did not demand an equivalent level of conscious management. Secondly, climbers felt in control of extra-ordinary situations, as such situations were anticipated and hence they could plan and prepare. Climbers felt in control when participating in such risk activities because they perceived outcomes as wholly or largely dependent on their personal decisions and actions. In contrast, they perceived a reduced sense of control and even felt at risk from other people because they were less able to predict events when participating in ordinary risk activities.

The data reported here support work about edgework to explore the notion of control or the illusion of control (Lyng, 1990; Lois, 2005; Laurendeau, 2006a; 2008). In combination, these writers alongside others, argue that lifestyle sport participants’ identity is constructed and maintained by their practices and beliefs about risk and/or edgework. Such practices mark edgeworkers or lifestyle sport participants as members of an in-group of a specific activity, in this instance, rock climbers in this study. Crucially, edgework does not describe unadulterated risk-taking. Rather it describes the
boundary between chaos and order and reflects edgeworkers’ belief that they exert control.

However, the interviewees in this study did not routinely engage in edgework and their desire to maintain their identity as a ‘safe climber’ appeared to over-ride their propensity for crowding the edge. Significantly, younger interviewees were more likely to engage in edgework than older interviewees expressing a desire to push their grade. Older interviewees seemed more concerned to retain their identity as a qualified climber and hence stepped away from the edge. Climbers perceived aspects of everyday life as posing a greater threat to their personal well-being precisely because they could not exert control. This runs counter to common sense understandings of risk-taking which frame high consequence risk activities as posing a greater risk than everyday activities. I suggest that the reason the interviewees felt in control when climbing was directly linked to their perceived competence, experience and knowledge. In other words, their ability to assess and manage risk successfully was contingent on having an appropriate skill base.

9.3.1 Re-conceptualising Risk More Generally

I suggest that the conceptual model I describe and apply in this thesis could be extended to other lifestyle sports to first test its efficacy. Additionally, this model might have some relevance for an analysis of risk in other spheres of life again to test its efficacy and subsequently to develop a sociologically-based analysis of risk.

I have argued that risk activities are best understood in the broader context of people’s lives particularly as far as individuals’ understand the degree of control they exert in particular circumstances. The data reported in this study suggests that control is crucial to an individual’s perception of risk
and furthermore that control is linked to knowledge, competence and experience. I suggest that one implication of this analysis is the potential challenge it poses to the dominant narratives about risk in UK society which exert a particularly negative influence on young people. Whilst Giddens (1991) amongst others suggests that risk pervades all aspects of contemporary life, writers such as Furedi (2008) and Gill (2007) have focused on the potential damage to children done by an unhealthy obsession with risk aversion and an attempt to avoid all exposure to risk. In particular, Furedi notes the reduced opportunities for outdoor play available to children in contemporary UK society.

I believe that the positive experiences of climbing reported by the interviewees and their deep concern to manage and control risk through the acquisition of relevant knowledge skill and experience can act as an alternative to the current approach to children’s activities which is based on risk avoidance. Rather than diminish risk or remove it entirely, we might be better placed seeking to enhance young people’s capacity to recognise and manage risk in adventure, outdoor and other contexts. Such an approach distinguishes between potential negative outcomes and potentially positive experiences, valuing the process whilst acknowledging a need to educate young people to take control of their lives rather than have them managed for them. The latter stores up difficulties for the time when adults are no longer able to cast a watchful eye in a secure play environment or bedroom. The former offers a chance for new experiences and a chance to acquire an appropriate skill set with which to approach them.

9.4 Risk and Identity

In the previous section, I conceptualised risk-taking as existing on a continuum of qualified to unqualified. By this I mean that individuals
designated as qualified climbers have sufficient knowledge, experience and competence to attempt a route safely. In contrast, an unqualified climber lacks relevant knowledge, competence and experience. In addition, qualified refers to a variety of factors that might cause a climber to step back from the edge, to qualify their risk-taking, for example, because of family responsibilities or poor weather or rock conditions. In this final section, I want to build on this aspect of my analysis and document what I believe is the third element of my original contribution to knowledge.

Closer scrutiny of the dimension of qualified-unqualified climber revealed that it did not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is linked to both the construction and maintenance of an identity organised around the notion of a safe climber. ‘Safe’ or qualified climbers assess, manage and control risks; ‘unsafe’ or unqualified climbers fail to do and therefore take risks. In other words, participants in this study defined someone as a climber when they demonstrated appropriate qualifications (competence, knowledge and experience). Where would-be climbers demonstrated a shortfall or absence of such qualifications, for example by exhibiting poor judgment or failing to prepare adequately they were deemed outsiders. Risky climbing practices transgress subcultural norms and hence risk-taking serves to confirm or undermine a climber’s claim to the identity of a safe climber.

Such an analysis reflects Douglas’s work (1966; 1992) on the significance of risk in the construction of insider and outsider sub-cultural and societal groupings. Douglas asserts that insider groups perceive sources of societal harm as a threat and respond by defining individuals as either conforming to, or transgressing, social norms. Those who conform reduce their risk-taking and constitute members of the insider group; those who continue to take risks (and hence are deemed to pose a threat) are defined as outsiders. This application of Douglas’s work about risk and identity to
climbing represents part of the final element of my original contribution to knowledge. I believe I have shown how a culturally-located theory of risk, and specifically the articulation of identity with the meanings attached by individuals to risk, can enhance our understanding of the meanings climbers attach to risk.

Additionally, this thesis extends the application of Douglas’s ideas about risk and identity to show how both age and gender mitigate the relationship between risk and identity. In terms of age, the interviewees’ narratives revealed that many had made the transition from outsider, a silly/stupid climber to insider, a safe/good climber over a period of time. Lack of experience, competence and/or knowledge meant that several interviewees reported that they had demonstrated poor judgment when they were novice climbers. They did not always necessarily recognise the precariousness of the situation at the time and they attributed this to a failure to understand the risks and a subsequent mismanagement of risk. Significantly, through their narratives, the interviewees stressed how they believed they had learned from such experiences and they no longer climbed in ways which could be defined as silly or stupid. In other words, they had developed sufficient competence, knowledge and experience to confirm their status as a ‘safe’ climber and member of the insider group.

This data suggests that movement between insider and outside groups takes place over time, although the process and timescales by which this occurs varied. Some interviewees suggested that they identified as a climber within a very short space of time whilst others took much longer to do so. The degree to which their climbing practices embodied those of a safe climber and the associated timescales may help to explain the length of time between their introduction to climbing and self-identifying as a climber. In other words,
climbers who embodied the practices of a qualified may have climber defined themselves as a climber more quickly.

A small number of climbers in this study also indicated that their climbing identity once established had been compromised by their practices, that is, they failed to manage and assess risk appropriately and therefore adopted an unqualified approach to risk. They negotiated what was for them a temporary loss of identity by first recognising, secondly reflecting upon and lastly communicating the reasons for their unsafe and poor practice. In so doing, they demonstrated to their personal satisfaction as well as to others that they had learned from their experience. This action secured their identity as a qualified climber once more.

This desire to retain an identity as a climber over time was so strong that older climbers reported modifying their practices to sustain their status as a member of the insider group. Older climbers reported stepping back from the edge, that is, qualifying their climbing practices in response to a perceived physical decline. They assessed and managed risk to ensure that their practices continued to match those of a safe climber. Furthermore, older climbers’ commitment to climbing was such that they reduced their edgework to minimise the chance of a fall which might cause injury, and result in time away from climbing to recover.

In addition to age, gender also mediated the relationship between risk and identity. The female interviewees described how perceived family responsibilities mediated their identity as a safe and qualified climber. The female climbers in this study described how such responsibilities led them, like older climbers, to draw back from the edge. For some female interviewees, the perceived need to qualify their climbing practices supported the criteria for in group membership as well as that of a female caregiver, for example a mother. Overall, however, membership of the in group as a safe climber
reflected gendered practices. For example, the interviewees’ narratives about their climbing practices reflected conventional discursive practices about men and women. Whilst male climbers in this study talked about strength and power when climbing, female climbers framed their practices in terms of gymnastic movement requiring good balance.

9.4.1 Risk and Identity More Generally

In this thesis I show that risk may be usefully understood in the broader context of individuals’ lived experiences and that identity plays a crucial role in the way individuals perceive risk in relation to themselves and others. The relationship between risk and identity is such that the meanings actors give to risk helps construct and maintain their identity. Significantly, I suggest that identity construction does not always encourage or privilege overt risk-taking over more cautious, safety-conscious practices. On the contrary, I maintain that for some actors the assessment and management of risk is at the core of their identity. Furthermore, this approach to risk can constitute the dominant narrative within sub-cultural groupings. Indeed based on the data presented here, I suggest one further avenue for research is an analysis of both insider and outsider groups approaches to risk.

The data presented here indicate that analyses of risk should be sensitive to the presence of different approaches to risk and risk management which relate directly to actors’ perceived position and identity within a particular sub-culture. Actors may approach risk in quite different ways even in the context of the same activity and this knowledge suggests that those wishing to communicate messages about risk need to tailor their messages to specific groups and sub-groups. Armed with knowledge, experience and developing competence an individual can make the transition from unsafe and silly practices to ones recognised by them as safe and considered. Crucially,
it is individuals who determine their transition from outsider to insider group member. Potentially such a process offers a more effective strategy for risk assessment and management, relying less on expert knowledge and opinion and more on individual ownership of a problem or challenge. Moreover, where individuals assume control they do so from a position of intimate personal knowledge (as young or old, male or female) and can tailor their practices accordingly.


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APPENDICES
APPENDIX I

PILOT INTERVIEW

SCHEDULE 1
Risk and Climbing – Pilot Interview Schedule 1

1. How would you define the term, risk?
   a. in general terms?
   b. to you personally – do you consider yourself to be someone who takes risks?
   c. what do you see as the main risks in society?

I’d now like to get you to think about your early experiences, exploring the issue of risk in relation to these, and then later in relation to your involvement in climbing.

2. Can you tell me about the kinds of activities you did as a child?
   a. with whom – clubs, friends, parents, school?
   b. who set the boundaries/limits of your activities? in what way?
   c. what was the most risky thing you did prior to your starting to climb (formally?) – did you see it as risky at the time; do you see it the same way now?

3. Tell me about your first climbing experience?
   a. with whom?
   b. where?
   c. how old were you?
   d. what attracted you to climbing?

4. Did your reasons for climbing change as you got more involved – how and why?

5. At what point did you see yourself as a climber, rather than just as someone who climbs?

6. What does risk mean to you in climbing terms?

7. Can you remember thinking about the risks involved when you started to climb?

8. Did you see climbing as more or less risky that other things in your life or other things you did in your life?

9. When you look back at your early climbing experiences do you think that what you did was risky? Did you think they were risky at the time you did them? What was your most risk climbing experience in your early climbing days and what made it risky?
10. Did your approach to risk when you were climbing change over time?

11. How far do you think you take risks when you are climbing nowadays?

12. Do you see climbing as more or less risky than other things in your life or other things you do in your life now?

13. Can you tell me about your best climbing experience?

14. What’s your best lead and can you tell me how often you lead this or close to this?

15. Finally, how many accidents/fatalities associated with climbing do you think there are each year in England and Wales?
APPENDIX II

PILOT INTERVIEW

SCHEDULE 2
Risk and Climbing – Pilot Interview Schedule 2

1. How would you define the term, risk?
   a. in general terms?
   b. to you personally – do you consider yourself to be someone who takes risks?
   c. what do you see as the main risks in society?

   I’d now like to get you to think about your early experiences, exploring the issue of risk in relation to these, and then later in relation to your involvement in climbing.

2. Can you tell me about the kinds of activities you did as a child?
   a. with whom – clubs, friends, parents, school?
   b. who set the boundaries/limits of your activities? in what way?
   c. what was the most risky thing you did prior to your starting to climb (formally?) – did you see it as risky at the time; do you see it the same way now?

3. Tell me about your first climbing experience?
   a. with whom?
   b. where?
   c. how old were you?
   d. what attracted you to climbing?

4. Did your reasons for climbing change as you got more involved – how and why?

5. At what point did you see yourself as a climber, rather than just as someone who climbs?

6. What does risk mean to you in climbing terms?

7. Can you remember thinking about the risks involved when you started to climb?

8. Did you see climbing as more or less risky that other things in your life or other things you did in your life?

9. When you look back at your early climbing experiences do you think that what you did was risky?
   a. Did you think they were risky at the time you did them?
b. what was your most risk climbing experience in your early climbing days and what made it risky?

10. Did your approach to risk when you were climbing change over time?

11. How far do you think you take risks when you are climbing nowadays?

12. Do you see climbing as more or less risky that other things in your life or other things you do in your life now?

13. Can you tell me about your best climbing experience?

14. Finally, how many accidents/fatalities associated with climbing do you think there are each year in England and Wales?

15. What’s your best lead and can you tell me how often you lead this or close to this?
APPENDIX III
FINAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
Risk and Climbing – Final Interview Schedule

1. How would you define the term, risk?
   a. in general terms?
   b. to you personally – do you consider yourself to be someone who takes risks?
   c. what do you see as the main risks in society?
   d. do you think that there are more or less risks in society now than at other times? (probe perception over reality?)

I’d now like to get you to think about your early experiences, exploring the issue of risk in relation to these, and then later in relation to your involvement in climbing.

2. Can you tell me about the kinds of activities you did as a child?
   a. with whom – clubs, friends, parents, school?
   b. who set the boundaries/limits of your activities? in what way?
   c. what was the most risky thing you did prior to your starting to climb (formally?) – did you see it as risky at the time; do you see it the same way now?

3. Tell me about your first climbing experience?
   a. with whom?
   b. where?
   c. how old were you?
   d. what attracted you to climbing?

4. Did your reasons for climbing change as you got more involved – how and why?

5. At what point did you see yourself as a climber, rather than just as someone who climbs?

6. What does risk mean to you in climbing terms? Is risk in climbing terms different from other types of risk?

7. Can you remember thinking about the risks involved when you started to climb?

8. Did you see climbing as more or less risky that other things in your life or other things you did in your life?
9. When you look back at your early climbing experiences do you think that what you did was risky? Did you think they were risky at the time you did them? What was your most risk climbing experience in your early climbing days and what made it risky? (*probe reasons for shifts in perception and the importance of ‘knowledge’ in altering knowledge and behaviour*)

10. Did your approach to risk when you were climbing change over time? If your approach to risk changed was this because of your climbing experiences (e.g. an ‘epic’) or experiences outside of climbing (e.g. children)?

11. How far do you think you take risks when you are climbing nowadays?

12. Do you see climbing as more or less risky that other things in your life or other things you do in your life now?

13. What do you non-climbing friends think of your involvement in climbing? Do they think what you do is risky? Why?

14. Can you tell me about your best climbing experience?

15. What’s your best lead and can you tell me how often you lead this or close to this?

16. Finally, how many accidents/fatalities associated with climbing do you think there are each year in England and Wales?
APPENDIX IV
PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE
Risk and Climbing

1. At what age did you start to climb? _____ years

2. How old are you now? _____ years

3. At the moment how often do you climb indoors?
   - Less than once per month
   - Once per fortnight
   - More than once per week (please state number)

4. How many times did you climb indoors last summer?
   - None
   - Once per month
   - Once per week
   (please state number)

5. How many times did you climb outdoors last summer?
   - None
   - Once per month
   - Once per week
   (please state number)

6. What term would you use to describe the type of climbing that you do?
   - Mainly bouldering
   - Mainly top roping
   - Mainly seconding
   - Mainly leading
   - A mixture of types please specify

7. What term would you use to describe the nature of the routes that you climb?
   - Mainly bouldering
   - Mainly Single pitch
   - Mainly multi-pitch
   - A Mixture of routes please specify
17. What term would you use to describe the type of routes that you climb?

Mainly boulder problems [ ]
Mainly sport climbing routes (bolted routes) [ ]
Mainly ‘trad’ routes (placing your own protection) [ ]
A mixture of routes [ ]
Please specify ________________________________________________________

18. Are you a member of a climbing club? Yes [ ] No [ ]

19. Are you a member of the BMC? Yes [ ] No [ ]

20. What is your best lead to date
   Sport _______
   Trad _______
   Wall _______
   Boulder _______

21. What other sports were you involved in when you were climbing?
22. What is your occupation?

_____________________________________

23. What is your marital status?

_____________________________________

24. What are the ages of your children (if any)?

________________________
APPENDIX V

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLIMBER</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>MARITAL STATUS</th>
<th>CHILDREN (AGES)</th>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>HIGHEST TRAD GRADE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Coral</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Outdoor Instructor</td>
<td>Severe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evie</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>PhD student</td>
<td>Severe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>HVD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Waiter</td>
<td>HVS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Research student</td>
<td>E1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Postgraduate Teacher Training</td>
<td>E7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Rope access worker</td>
<td>E3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Chef</td>
<td>VS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Youth offending service manager</td>
<td>E1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>3 (18, 20, 23)</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>VDiff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>39</td>
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<td>None</td>
<td>Buyer - Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 (11, 14)</td>
<td>Physiotherapist</td>
<td>E3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miles</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Single (widowed)</td>
<td>2 (13, 17)</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>VS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>3 (18, 20, 23)</td>
<td>Deputy Head Teacher</td>
<td>E3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dot</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>4 (37, 39, 42, 44)</td>
<td>Retired (Teacher)</td>
<td>VS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hattie</td>
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<td>Retired (Factory machinist)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
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<td>4 (34, 38, 39, 42)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>3 (20, 22, 27)</td>
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<td>VS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>68</td>
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<td>3 (27, 30, 33)</td>
<td>Retired (Printer/Administrative Officer)</td>
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<td>3 (25, 32, 36)</td>
<td>Outdoor instructor</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurice</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3 (28, 29, 32)</td>
<td>Outdoor instructor</td>
<td>VS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>