The Journey to Elsewhere:
Climbers Who Start Early and Finish Late

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The emergence of adventure tourism is indicative of a process of commodification commensurate with the expansive mechanisms of the hospitality industry. The tension between excitement, thrill, and safety is on-going however and the emergence of climbing walls in urban areas has provided new ways of becoming a climber: It is in the interests of climbing as business to normalise pay-to-climb conditions. Such overt commercial connections are anathema to *real* climbers; nevertheless the convenience of climbing walls means they are well populated and used. The present study investigates the attitudes and methods of engagement by a group of older climbers who, for the most part, started climbing in their youth before climbing walls were commonplace. A typology of climbing *types* is presented as a framework for discussion. The methodology is ethnographic and the findings suggest that, despite subscribing to an organic and outdoor adventure climbing ethos in their youth, this group remains active and adventurously inclined as they consider wall-climbing to be making a positive contribution to their present collective identity.

Keywords: climber, climbing-wall, hospitality services, symbolic boundaries, adaptive behaviors

Introduction

Historically, people who engage in the adventure activity of climbing came from the leisured elite in countries such as the UK, the USA, and Western Europe (Craig, 1987; Macfarlane, 2003). Mostly men, these pioneers forged routes up intimidating rock faces in their countries and abroad, initially in the pursuit of science but increasingly for personal satisfaction and the accumulation of the symbolic capital that their climbs generated. It was the application of scientific principles and emergent technologies that catalysed the momentum of this new "sport". Tourism and hospitality systems grew responsively to support these exciting developments so that, for example, even though only experienced and competent climbers would attempt the hardest climbs, a generation of armchair mountaineers (Walter, 1984) and voyeurs were catered for with strategic viewing points from well serviced hotel balconies across the European Alps in particular.

The public's fascination with climbing has continued and now those creative technologies that built oxygen cylinders for high altitude mountaineering and weather proof clothing, shock absorbing ropes, and dedicated harnesses and carabiners have further advanced participation by creating climbing walls. Expressed succinctly, climbing walls have taken all the good things about climbing—the simian movements up a route and satisfaction of overcoming a challenge—and reduced or eliminated the bad bits such as time consuming travel to wild places, exposure to the elements, and the danger of hurting oneself in a fall. Climbing walls might

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be considered part of the hospitality industry because they provide a product (access to climbing) in return for payment and have additionally become spatial foci in cities for associated shops, cafes, and adventure tourism services all of which benefit the captive market needs of contemporary climbers. A person interested in climbing can buy clothing, climbing equipment, physiotherapy services, coaching services and sign up for adventure tourism packages all at the same location. In this respect the climbing *frame* (Beedie, 2005) has shifted from a fragmented and dispersed outdoor pattern of delivery, mostly in outdoor places with different degrees of accessibility, to a focused and commercially driven model based on taking climbing to where most people are most of the time, i.e., urban locations.

Climbing walls have, as a consequence of these innovative developments, significantly increased participation in climbing and have been around in our cities long enough for a whole generation of climbers to have grown up with them. The iconography of the pioneers still informs the narratives constructed around climbing as an activity, and, of course, there are plenty of climbers who practice their sport both indoors in these artificial settings and outdoors on real rock. However, this democratisation of climbing that access to walls has facilitated is relatively recent and therefore there remain people whose experiences of climbing might be thought of as *traditional* in so far as they learned to climb first on rock and accepted the adventure contingent in that experience.

This older generation of climbers has been given a new lease of life through climbing walls and their activities are not generally well documented for a number of reasons. First, in their youth they were probably climbing established routes rather than pioneering new ones. Second, when age, work, and family matters intervened to diminish their risk taking propensity, they may have climbed significantly less or even stopped. Third, the contemporary trend towards celebrity and professional climbers (a consequence of the *business* of climbing) means that public interest is focused on the few rather than on the many. The accumulated impact of these three trends, together with the emergence of climbing walls, means that climbing identity today is much more complex than it was for the pioneers: This older generation of traditional climbers is being forced to adjust to a contemporary climbing scene that is more diverse and nuanced than when they started climbing. The hospitality environment provided by climbing walls (and these indoor complexes often include café facilities on their premises) is, therefore, challenging established constructs of being a climber: The present study investigates the impact of these changes with particular reference to older climbers who have experience of climbing before walls became commonplace and the sport of climbing fragmented into niche activities.

The more fluid and fast-moving climbing world today includes traditional *adventure* climbing (where a climber leads the rope up a route placing protection), *sport* climbing (where a climber can lead or top-rope a route with bolted protection in-situ), climbing *competitions* (predominantly indoor on artificial walls), *bouldering* (climbing indoors and outdoors un-roped on short climbs with mats to cushion any falls), deep-water *soloing* (climbing un-roped on sea cliffs), *scrambling* (a hybrid of walking and climbing up mountain ridges and gullies), and many others. This list is indicative not exhaustive but if there is one development that has accelerated this fragmentation of climbing as practiced by pioneers, it would be artificial indoor walls.

The research presented in this paper is based upon an ethnographic study of a group of middle aged climbers who meet regularly at a climbing wall in a city north of London in the UK. This group is mostly middle aged and contains both men and women who have either found a re-ignition of climbing excitement dormant through their career developing and family raising years, or have become climbers for the first time in

their lives. The research aims to illuminate how the emergence of climbing walls has changed the basis of a climbing identity with its commensurate implications for hospitality and as such it brings out both similarities with and differences from the pioneers of climbing. This under researched generation of climbers is uniquely positioned to connect threads of climbing history in ways that a study which concentrated solely on the present generation of wall trained rock-athletes cannot.

The paper will briefly introduce relevant terminology and details of the group defining this study. A critical review of relevant research and established theoretical ideas follows, which includes a section explaining what climbing is. Then a model of grounded theory proposes different climbing "types". Evidence from the participants will be discussed and conclusions drawn.

The Study

The chosen methodology uses the author's established credentials as a climber (this includes high level qualifications and 40 years of experience as a mountaineer and climber) as a way of getting inside an established informal climbing group. This group of climbers has regular meetings at a climbing wall, usually once a week (Wednesdays), during the day as they are mostly retired or self-employed. Males and females were represented more or less equally although the size and constitution of the group varied from week to week. The climbers were aged between 40 and 70 plus years and a typical meeting would be about a dozen climbers with a core membership of around ten people. As the data show (and will be discussed later), the size of the group varied from week to week because of availability, fitness, and other commitments. All names have been changed to retain anonymity.

The climbing wall is actually an indoor complex that contains a large bouldering area with inbuilt soft landing mats similar to those in an Olympic high jump pit. There is also a range of lead climbing and top-roping walls as well as an area of living-rock which is the closest proximity to real rock by look and texture. The walls are covered in brightly coloured holds which are colour coded to indicate *routes* and which get changed on a regular basis to retain interest among the clientele over time. All climbs are controlled from the ground by *belaying* with a friction device attached to a harness and the climber can choose to use an in-situ rope (which offers complete protection as it is always above each climber) or to *lead* a climb whereby the climber takes the rope up the route so it is level with progress but can be clipped into *carabiners* attached to fixed bolts integral to each colour coordinated line of holds for protection. Lead climbing is more adventurous than top-roping as the climber has the potential to fall as far below the last bolt as has been climbed above it: The bolts are set quite close together.

Each climb is given a *grade*. Outdoors on real rock the climbers making the first ascent name and grade the route. Different countries have different rock grading systems although a guiding principle is that the higher the number or letter, or both, the harder the climb: An American 5.10a might be the same as a British HVS 5a or a French F6b. Indoors the French system is used. Climbers know the system and the first activity of any indoor climbing meeting is a walk round the walls to see what new routes have been constructed by the setters since the last visit, and at what grade. Some climbers in the study group kept a diary of routes ascended above a certain individualised benchmark of, for example F5c. Ascents made via lead climbing carried a higher symbolic status than those top-roped; clean ascents (those made without incurring a fall) were also indicative of a higher achievement alongside the given grade. Much discussion was generated within the group members by the accuracy of the allocated grades as provided by different setters whose grade allocation is likely to reflect

their physical prowess and technical climbing preferences: Such dialogue was the flux in the climbing group's dynamic.

A Review of Literature & Climbing in Context

The tensions of choosing to undertake a leisure activity which appears to be dangerous in a contemporary risk-averse world have been well documented and explored in the literature, for example: Beedie (2003), Kiewa (2001a; 2001b; 2002). The duality of the "climbing body" (organic, self-determined, tactile, grounded) set against the "metropolitan body" (inorganic, passive, ocular, groundless) illustrates the fundamental differences between artificial and real climbing (Lewis, 2000). The tension here is one of *control*, at one level epitomised by the negotiation of self in the constraining dimensions of structure set out by leisure more generally (Kiewa, 2002).

Kiewa argues the case for outdoor *adventure* climbing (Kiewa, 2001b, p. 380): "Identity and behaviour were found to be mutually constitutive … climbing has desirable qualities including decisiveness, competence and independence leading to a sense of *control*" [author's italics]. In some respects she is embracing the concept of serious leisure first theorised by Stebbins (1992) because she identifies ideas commonly connected to definitions of serious leisure such as commitment, dedication, a willingness to learn in order to progress, and an immersion in the experience that transcends conventions such as time. In serious leisure one experiences a deeply affecting focus on the activity during which other distractions are diminished, not acknowledged or ignored. If Kiewa is correct in promoting *control* as the essence of the climbing experience, it is reasonable to question whether such a deep and affective experience is possible in an artificial climbing environment.

One important development generated by technical developments in climbing, particularly in regard of risk reduction, has been to create different climbing "types". Whereas previously *real* climbers could distinguish themselves from a *parvenu* because they climbed on real rock and engaged judgement about real risks, today it is harder to make this distinction. The suggestion is that there has therefore been erosion (or blurring) of *structural* boundaries and as a result a commensurate rise in *symbolic* boundaries (Kiewa, 2001a; 2001b; Heywood, 2006), as climbers navigate the social territory of climbing identities. However, contributions to the relevant literature exploring climbing groups/communities have generally been concerned with the ethics (or rules) by which climbers perform their activities (e.g., Heywood, 2006), the lifestyle immersion of climbers (e.g., Rickly-Boyd, 2012), or the relationship and gender issues integral to climbing (e.g., Kiewa, 2001a) without adequately studying either older climbers or the impact of climbing walls as loci for climbers to gather, perform, and construct identities of *climber*. So, although all these existing studies are important in illuminating aspects of the bigger picture of being a climber, this is not a comprehensive overview of climbing today. In particular, there are three significant areas of insight not yet adequately discussed by this literature and these are (1) indoor climbing walls; (2) fluctuations in climbing participation over time determined by an individual's changing responsibilities; and (3) climbing amongst older people.

The idea of control or self-determination remains central to the negotiation of a climbing identity providing this is socially processed and approved. For example, Nunn (1988, p. 194) suggests: "whatever he [sic] could climb, the sign of the true climber was that he went away regularly". Has the "going away" morphed into regular outings to one's local climbing wall? A fundamental tension seems to be the extent to which the seductive attractions of commercial interests in artificial climbing (weather free climbing, in-situ ropes, colour

coded climbs, cafe etc.) have compromised the *adventure* of rock climbing as activity (and perhaps the striving amidst discomfort).

What Is Climbing?

Climbing is both simple and complex at the same time. In so far as climbing is reducible to physical moves up a rock or snow and ice feature, it remains a *simple* activity: It's about moving arms, legs, and torso upwards. The innate skills required include balance, poise, coordination and, at times, the necessary temperament to deal with the mental and emotional engagements evoked by moving towards the "edge" both physically and metaphorically.

However, such simplicity covers multiple layers of *complexity*. First, with the exception of those occasions when it is appropriate to climb solo, climbing is a *social* activity (Kiewa, 2001a). The act of climbing generally involves interdependence with other people. Such a social dimension includes watching climbers, chatting to climbers to extract detailed information about a route that may not be forthcoming from a guidebook, sharing one's own climbing experiences with others, reading about (and being inspired by) the exploits of other climbers in books, magazines, and blogs, and, crucially, having someone to hold and manipulate the ropes when making an ascent. Moreover, the attractions of this adventure sport have a bonding propensity that, magnet-like draws people together thus creating climbing "communities".

Rickly-Boyd (2012) has investigated a range of climbing groups, some of whom have devoted their lives to the activity and literally "live" for climbing and some of whom operate more balanced lifestyles with home and work counter-balancing periods of wild adventure. The range of social engagement is considerable as it covers people who are members of climbing clubs and who meet regularly for both social and actual climbing activities as well as individuals who operate at the cutting edge of climbing and who mostly climb with a known and trusted partner.

However, if one visits some of the popular climbing sites (e.g., the Arapiles in Australia, Yosemite in California, the Verdun Gorge in France, and Malham Cove in England), on any given day there will be vans, tents, and bivouacs in-situ representing the climbers who "live" the climbing lifestyle. Such people have made a conscious decision to opt out of mainstream life and also avoid turning their consuming passion into a wage bearing activity. It is possible to make a living by working in mountains by getting qualifications and instructing climbing, or travelling the world "ticking" famous climbs thereby developing a profile that might gain them commercial sponsorship and thus an income.

Climbing is a complex social activity that, despite the best efforts of the "lifestyle", climbers in the spectrum outlined above can never be completely isolated from the contemporary social world, particularly the need to earn a living, and the position individuals locate requires either an acceptance of this world (work, family, routine etc.) or a rejection of this (living to climb). In both these cases the social world and its norms and values inform the decisions taken by offering a framework of possibilities largely defined by macro social determinants—the need for people to be productive to the benefit of society more generally, to earn a wage, pay taxes, and consume in the broadest sense. Most people reside closest to the conforming and socially acceptable end of the scale but spend much time wishing for escape towards the perceived freedoms of those who have chosen to live "the life".

A second and related aspect of climbing's complexity is climbing tradition and culture. The irrationality of climbing as an activity—the fact that it is dangerous and can lead to serious personal harm and even

death—means that it needs an alternative rationale. Inevitably, this is counter-intuitive and entirely socially constructed. Climbers have created a set of "rules" that have never been written down but which exist to determine the way climbing is conducted (Beedie, 2010). This framework has importance in determining what climbing is and how it both reflects and shapes social activity in contemporary times. Climbers who reflect on their actions (and write them down) and non-climbers who have theoretical ideas to develop and are prepared to discuss these are essentially concerned with the most fundamental academic debate of *structure* (the way society is organised) versus *agency* (the capacity of a person to be independent and act autonomously). Climbing is complex and occupies an ambivalent position within such a duality.

This important process of constantly adjusting the *challenge*—by climbing a harder route, or an easier route with greater restrictions such as choosing to not use a rope (see Tejeda-Flores, 1967)—and thereby retaining the symbolic capital available to any person who is able to ascend a climb represents a cultural adjustment; and this is on-going. Climbing is socially and culturally complex because of this attachment to symbolic capital which needs constant *social* maintenance. Climbing is shaped by inputs from collective tropes and from individual actions: Mainstream information about climbing is like a pendulum that swings across the middle ground celebrating achievement yet simultaneously condemning engagement with risk. It is this tension that is a constant in the social maintenance of defining what climbing is.

There is a third reason why climbing is complex: technology. Climbers off-set risk by using ropes, belay devices, harnesses, carabiners, and other bits of specialised *hardware*. This, in turn, requires technical skills which have to be learnt. The extent to which a person can *use* such equipment, as opposed to simply buying it and clipping it to a harness, is a key determinant of a person's climber status. Climbing helmets offer an illustrative example. Instructors require beginners to wear a helmet. But out on crags, and indeed in some of the spectacular pictures that became front pages for climbing magazines and on-line blogs, there are climbers who do not wear helmets! The function of a helmet is both *physical* (to protect the head) and *social* in so far as to wear or not wear a helmet becomes a personal choice made possible because with climbing experience comes informed judgement, and this extends beyond understanding the physical risks to incorporate other considerations. Conversations with and observations of climbers concerning helmets threw out the following interesting rhetoric: Climbers at the cutting edge of climbing need body and mind in perfect synchronisation and wearing a helmet can adversely affect power to weight ratios and the positioning of the head; not all climbing locations are subjected to objective dangers such as falling rock and helmets are not "cool". Only groups under instruction appear to wear helmets at climbing walls (where the risk of falling rock is non-existent) and it is likely that this helmet-less image is transferred by climbers who start their experience on such an artificial environment if and when they try *real* rock climbing. So, helmet wearing might be indicative of one's elevated status and abilities as a climber or be indicative of a naivety and novice status as an outdoor climber. A helmetless climber might be very good, or not very good at all; but how do we know?

Climbers write about climbing. Guidebooks are of two categories, *how* to climb manuals and collections of *route* descriptions. Crucially, however, words and pictures are a medium through which the social maintenance of climbing *rules* is transmitted. So, climbing is an individual activity but has a social context and this is why so many climbers feel the urge to communicate their experiences via books, articles, and (more recently) blog-posts. The emotional experience is felt uniquely but expressed gregariously whilst the rocks, crags, and mountains continue to formulate an enigmatic attraction for climbers and tourists and holiday makers

more generally. Real rock climbing has been imitated and commercialised through the modern development of climbing walls.

Climbing Identity

When we choose to take part in an activity such as climbing, we are exercising agency in believing we are taking back control in our lives. Kiewa (2002) suggests traditional climbers believe that *sport* climbers—those that climb with pre-placed bolts to protect the lead climber—have embraced consumerist society. She goes on to suggest anyone can *be* a climber because there are structural determinants of what this means, for example wearing a harness, having climbing hardware, and carrying a rope. However, such a demonstrable identity can now be displayed not only at outdoor climbing locations but at indoor venues too. Therefore, to retain distinction between the different groups which potentially constitute climbing (such as climber, walker, scrambler, adventure tourist, sport climber, boulderer, etc.), climbers have to build *symbolic* boundaries. This is achieved in multiple ways: (1) It is about adopting a climbing vocabulary that is exclusive of those that do not understand climbing argot or climbing numerical grading systems; (2) it is also about where one climbs—here the obvious dividing line is indoor versus outdoor (artificial versus real) but it is more nuanced than that because certain climbing locations are presented as "beginners" crags, possibly because the routes are relatively easy, while others offer predominantly serious extreme climbing; (3) it is about the climbing style adopted so that technical difficulty is only part of the equation when the possibilities exist to climb hard but be safe (sport climbing) and climb hard in the spirit of risk and adventure (traditional or *trad* climbing); (4) it is certainly about the climbing game that one is engaged with so that the application of the rules determines one's status both with regard to how hard a climb is and the other variables such as is it mountain or crag, remote or accessible and is the style of ascent challenging for the ascendants.

The determinants outlined above are fundamental to the establishment and maintenance of the symbolic boundaries which distinguish groups of climbers and therefore contribute to a meaningful explanation of being a climber. Kiewa (2002) develops a more theoretical framework to explain how these climbing boundaries are maintained. In her proposals climbing is idealised and draws close in its principles to the theoretical ideas outlined by Mortlock (1984) concerning stages of adventure. Both writers, arguably, adopt a perspective that climbers immerse themselves in risk based choices for the self-educational possibilities of personal growth. The difference is that Mortlock sees enlightenment and growth as the enduring benefit of taking risk based challenge whilst Kiewa is using her observed behaviours within the rock-climbing communities she undertook her research in to argue for adoptive behaviour as constituent of symbolic boundaries between *real* climbers and *pretend* climbers [author's italics].

Kiewa's adoptive behaviours are: (a) One climbs for oneself, not for self-aggrandisement. This means the challenge, or competition is between climber and rock not climber and climber; (b) one climbs with   humility and works at egalitarianism rather than the construction of hierarchies. This means climbers must respect the insignificance of self in the vastness of the mountain environment and not to aspire to positions of superiority; (c) not to be unduly concerned with the grade one is climbing at. This means that the experience of moving upwards on rock is the essential core experience and this should not be diminished by categorising the experience with a grade (as this is hierarchical); and (d) one climbs with a quiet demeanour fully committed to developing one's skill and competence via an apprenticeship (that is learning from those around one).

Kiewa's argument is that to be a climber one has to eschew the indicators of status, diminish not enhance one's ego, and embrace the challenge of climbing for its own sake isolated from the social and cultural context in which that climbing takes place. However, while these symbolic boundaries are carefully being constructed, the climbing world moves onwards and upwards (metaphorically) so that mainstream definitions and parameters for being a climber become socially defined by a new generation of participants. Eventually, the self-determining liminal positioning of *real* climbers becomes so peripheral that these symbolic boundaries run the risk of becoming socially anachronistic as the structural boundaries (indoor versus outdoor for example) become less structural and more symbolic in themselves. How realistic is such a proposed framework for distinguishing real climbers?

Climbing grades matter for lots of reasons, not the least of which is the technical and objective difficulty of a new ascent is meaningless without a reference point. Grades are indicative of the level of challenge and, are an important mechanism for one to insert oneself into climbing history and therefore feel a part of something bigger than the individual climber. For many climbers grades are the *raison d'etre* of their involvement in the sport and they measure their progression (or, as we get older, our rate of deterioration) in relation to such criteria. For such people, news that a friend or acquaintance has climbed a certain route is quickly disseminated and to recognise the names and locations of such routes in casual conversation is a clear indicator of one's inclusion in the climbing community.

Lastly, in relation to Kiewa's list is a reference to personality in "quiet demeanour". Introspection rather than sociability is a choice, but, as in all walks of life, personality is variable and climbing has its fair share of introverts and extroverts. Clearly it is possible to be a climber and be a successful author, or business person, or make progress as a "rock star" and many other potential possibilities in the world of climbing and still be considered a climber. To argue otherwise, as it appears Kiewa does in this particular paper (2002), is to ignore the reality of the social dimension of being a climber. The *traditional* climber is under siege from all directions and fighting a rear-guard action that will eventually only exist in the history of climbing.

This rear-guard action is being fought, and is arguably being lost, because there are powerful forces aligned to progression, not the least of which are those attached to growth in hospitality and tourism. More generally, it is through the processes of applied science, rationality, and control that the modern world moves forward, and climbing is being swept up into this momentum. Today's reality is harder climbs are being made, an advance in standards that has been achieved at least partly through the application of technical developments (sticky soled climbing shoes for example) and the application of sport science training methodologies (including sport psychology). Moreover, there has been an emergence of a small cadre of professional climbers. Paradoxically, this has only been possible because of the business and commercial interests that support this elite through sponsorship. Finally, the successful application of symbolic capital to climbing achievements has created a whole industry of sport and leisure participation in outdoor adventure activities. The growth of adventure tourism (Beedie, 2003) shows clear connectivity between many of these developments and the accumulation of capital assets, even if these are symbolic. There has been a process of democratisation in access to outdoor adventure activities and the more people that are involved in these forms of active leisure, the more they need to be provided for or "guided" into buying kit, hiring equipment, which places to visit and which climbs to attempt. Such movement of people to wild places for temporary catharsis in the great outdoors brings with it the urbanisation frameworks (hotels, bunk-houses, car parks, sign-posts, engineered paths, radio antennae for smart phone connectivity etc.) that have already been discussed.

A Grounded Theory Model of Climbing Types
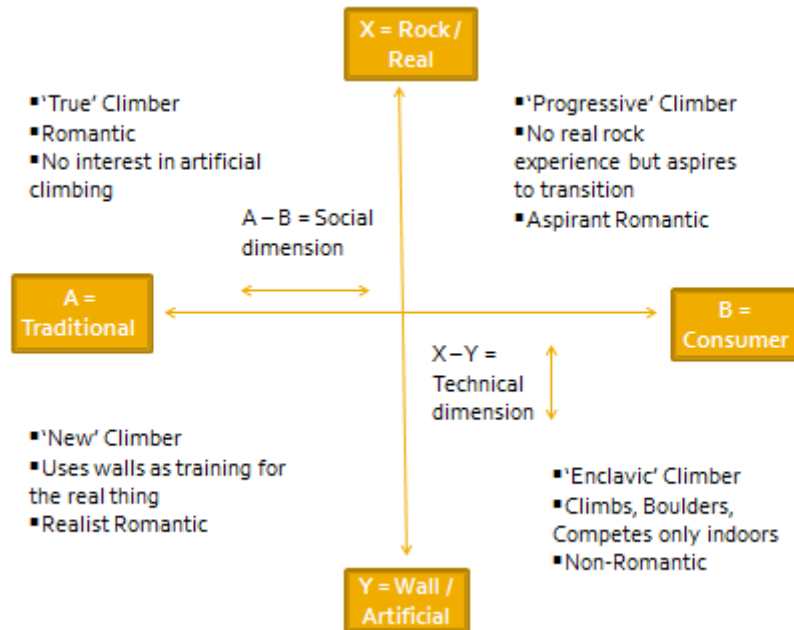
This model uses two axes (social and technical) to promote a typology of climbing identity. The four different types—*true*, *progressive*, *new*, and *enclavic*—provide a framework for the analysis of data from the present study. The *new* category is of particular interest because this represents older climbers who started climbing before walls were ubiquitous and engage pragmatically without the aloofness of the *true* climber.

Ethnographic Findings and Discussion

The following extracts from extensive notes of dialogue and observations are a representative selection of the data collected over a two-year period with the author attending these informal meetings of the Wednesday group at least once a month in this period. The bracketed category within the commentary is indicative of the fit or other wise of the model above.

• Ged: "I am not really a climber, this is just one of many activities I do. I do a lot of mountain biking and, with a few friends, will typically do long stretches of the Ridgeway. I'm cycling about four times a week" [*enclavic*];

• Tina: "Have I told you about my recent near death sailing experience? Well, I was at sea crewing for my brother in his catamaran … We turned turtle and were in the sea for at least half an hour getting untangled from ropes" [difficult to categorise but *progressive* in so far as she is connected to ideas of adventure];

• Tony: "Ah, there you are, we must sort out arrangements for this skiing trip; we are going to drive out so we can take our own skis—are you planning to fly or drive" [as above, a multi-adventure activist, thus *progressive*];

• The author wearing an ATRA Sogndal T-shirt was asked: "Was Norway good? Did you see the Northern Lights?" [Discussions of clothing were common but not indicative of a climbing type. There are lots of observations about what various people were wearing to climb in—mostly long trousers for older men and leggings for the women; minimum flesh is displayed by these older people (unlike younger climbers) perhaps because of body awareness or just as a response to feeling cold];

- George: "You do realise Ben, that if you had a yellow belt with those green trousers and red T-shirt you would look like a set of traffic lights" [as above, a humorous observation showing that clothing worn is being noticed and commented upon];

- Joe in his new Sportiva rock shoes: "… bought here today, and they are killing my feet but because they are leather I am hoping they might stretch to be more comfortable" [Joe subsequently disappeared for months only to re-appear recently to chat and boulder—he is still recovering from a broken collar bone sustained after a fall from his bike]…

    … To which Nick said: "You are in good company because Ernie came off his bike yesterday and ended up in A & E with suspected broken ribs" [health, physical functions and body awareness are recurrent themes of conversations in the group];

- Ben: "Bodies, like cars, wear out over time" [Ben is a *new* climber returning after a long break and finding his body cannot perform to the standards of his youth];

- Gordon was "buzzing" from a clean auto-belay ascent of the white 6c: "I will enter that in my log book". When I asked if he was working towards a qualification he said: "No, I just like to keep a record of my climbs" [*new*];

- Gordon did not start climbing until his mid-40s; went climbing with his son-in-law: "Quite hard stuff; I'm the one always calling for a tight rope" [*new*, Gordon climbed when he was younger and then stopped before being more recently taken out onto real rock by friends and family];

- Ben always notes a new lead straight into his book, especially as his target is 72 unseen leads at 6a or above in his 72nd year [Ben is a *new* climber who, having kept a climbing diary in his youth, has transferred this practice to the indoor environment];

- As a general observation, over several hours of a climbing session there is not necessarily a huge amount of climbing done, but a lot of standing around chatting and watching. The reasons are likely to include: (1) short term physical fatigue and a need the rest; (2) curiosity about what others are climbing, and how they are climbing—this can be information gathering for one's own potential attempt and support for the climber; (3) yardstick of self-assessment—how good are they; how good am I? (4) a scan of what are people wearing, especially climbing shoes and their effectiveness as climbing aids;

- Jane: "Adventure climbing is where it's at" and "I have a poster above my desk that says 'I'd rather be climbing'" [Jane is *progressive*. She has only been climbing since her family grew up and left home—yet she has absorbed the "rules" (e.g., sport/adventure) and dragged her neighbour Pete into coming along too—they always climb as a pair];

- Jane is pragmatic on cost [a *true* climber abhors the very idea of paying to go climbing]: "Compared to a gym—and I used to belong to one of those—this is really good value for money. I have an open access payment scheme and have worked out that this is between £3-4 per session, and it would have been less if I hadn't gone on holiday for two weeks last month";

- On comfort and habituation: Ben, said: "I think my lunch is ready—you OK for this afternoon?" Hannah on the lunch break: "I am not hungry but I'm doing this eating to fit in; I'm new, needs must" [Routine is important for this group for whom being comfortable in both the physical and social sense is important: Conversations over coffee and cake from the in-house café were periods of sharing (aspirations, achievements, and route details for example) deemed important for collegiate validation];

• It becomes clear that some started "early" in their youth and then stopped for a variety of reasons others came to climbing in middle age (for Pete it has been less than one year but already he has said: "I was a 4a top-rope climber when I first started but am now a 5b or even 5c leader") but have absorbed values and explored a range of indoor and outdoor experiences (Jane on leading 6a at the Ratho centre indicating that, on a recent business trip to Edinburgh she sought out a climbing wall so she could practise her skills at a different indoor location). These stories and shared reflections become reference points to determine the extent to which they are a climber. Clearly they want to finish "late" by keeping going as long as they can and this becomes achievable because they offer a mutual support system and they are realistic about what and how they climb. Extensive notes about the common threads within this group can be summarised as:

(1) Participants are mostly risk averse and cautious about pushing boundaries;

(2) They defer to instructor/experts, e.g., Tony: "Rachel [an employee of the climbing complex] keeps an eye on our belaying and sorts out who we should climb with";

(3) They understand that climbing walls are only a means to an end of *rock* climbing, even if this is bolted sports climbs in Dorset, Spain, France, or Greece;

(4) They understand their limitations (physical strength, elasticity, mobility), e.g., Tony: "I am just coming back after a hernia op so am taking it steady";

(5) They are openly sharing and collegiate—mutual respect even though there is a hierarchy of positions based exclusively on what *grade a person can lead in good style.*

(6) They can take advantage of technology—boots, harnesses, smooth belay devices, latest ropes; chalk and "invisible chalk", belay glasses (with angled lenses so that a belayer can watch both the climber and the operation of ropes through the friction device); and, for trips away, the newest *Rockfax* guide-books [Such books are often shared and discussed by the *new* and the *progressive* climbers].

The collegiate sharing works in several ways: There is a demonstration or statement of what each has achieved and an ensuing fascination of whether others can also complete the climb. The act of repeating a route climbed by another group member is both a statement of equality in terms of climbing achievement and an act of social inclusion due to the shared experience. The individual then has a collective sense of identity and a social "position" depending upon climbs completed.

• The climbers are emotionally involved in the challenge. Nick: "How was that climb for you Anthea?" Anthea: "Fuck, fuck, fuck! Hard!" Nick: "Don't you mean fiddlesticks?" Anthea: "No, I meant fuck!";

• Nick: "I was part of the Luton climbing group which met regularly on the Stopsley wall and we did go away on trips when we could to the Peaks and Lake District. Then they pulled the wall down and now some of us come here to keep the pattern going. I have climbed with this Wednesday group for over a year now";

• Ben: "I am lucky to have been able to climb since I was 18, but not so often when the children came along. Luckily my wife climbs so it's easier to keep it going; now I have this annual membership I come three times a week" [*new*];

• Jim: Failed on an orange 6a+ and then defended himself by saying he had (in his climbing days?) led *Jelly Roll* E2 on Cloggy—thus name dropping climbing argot for Clogwyn Du'r- Arddu, a historically important climbing cliff on Snowdon in North Wales, to retain credibility in the group [*new*].

Conclusion

Using the evidence discussed above it can be argued that the model of climbing types has some usefulness

but is not comprehensive in its capacity to address climbing identity today. Being in control is clearly important to the members of this group but the suggestion that this is only available to *true* climbers (who by definition do not climb indoors and therefore are not represented within the study group discussed here) is not supported by the evidence. The components of being a climber evidenced through this study include:

(1) Good climbing style, including ease & effortlessness over tricky moves;

(2) Capacity to manage the ropes whether coiling, running, belaying, or leading;

(3) Capacity to talk about one's personal climbing achievements, but only when appropriate such as when one is asked.

The people in this study are clearly climbers, few of whom were evidently *enclavic*, that is only climbing on indoor walls. It is suggested that the adoptive behaviours that account for the generation and accumulation of the symbolic capital which is the *raison d'etre* of climbing are not the exclusive preserve of *real* climbers. Indeed, with the emergence of climbing walls as convenient alternative venues to learn and practice the dark arts of climbing, *real* climbers are being forced to fight a rear-guard action of damage limitation against the latest generation of climbers who will undoubtedly redefine the sport in their own image, a process that will be accelerated when climbing becomes an Olympic sport at Tokyo 2021. Nothing lasts forever, but people will always climb: The infrastructure available to facilitate climbing today is shaping the participation practices of the older generation of climbers as much as those taking up the sport now.

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