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Climbing Tales **Gendered Body Narratives and Stories of Strength**

Rachel Dilley

Leeds Metropolitan University

R.Dilley@leedsmet.ac.uk

Abstract:

This paper explores some of the tensions in theories of the body which focus on bodies as culturally produced. Using preliminary findings from interviews conducted with 19 women climbers, the utility and limitations of concepts such as the ‘female apologetic’ and ‘subversive bodily acts’ are discussed. Through consideration of how femininities are embodied and lived in climbing it is concluded that whilst there is much to be gained from current theoretical approaches to the body, the materiality of real lived gendered bodies need to be more fully explored.

Keywords: the body, lifestyle sports, physicality, materiality, alternative femininities



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Within academia, climbing is part of the new emerging field of lifestyle sports, which includes other activities such as windsurfing (Wheaton, 2000), skateboarding (Beal & Weidman, 2003) and extreme ski-ing (Kay & Laberge, 2003). The term lifestyle sport is used because, for the core participants, their lifestyle and their identity are centred on the activity. It is a particularly interesting site in which to explore experiences of the gendered body because people who take part in lifestyle sports often think they are creating alternative spaces and new values (Lewis, 2004; Wheaton, 2004), seeing themselves as adventurous and unconventional. Some researchers have begun to ask whether this unconventionality includes alternative forms of masculinities (Kusz, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Wheaton, 2004). However, alternative *femininities* have been neglected. My research explores whether women embody alternative femininities through their climbing physicalities and how femininity is lived and experienced in climbing.

I am a climber myself and so came to the field as an ‘insider’, already familiar with some aspects of climbing culture. I interviewed 19 women who climb at different levels, including both elite and recreational climbers. They varied in age from 21 to 54 and had been climbing from between 1 and 40 years. All were white middle class heterosexual women. Indeed, climbing participation is dominated by white heterosexual middle class men (BMC, 2003; Allin et al, 2003), which would appear to be the case in other lifestyle sports (Kusz, 2003; Wheaton, 2004). Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper when referring to the research participants.

In feminist theory the body has emerged as a central issue in relation to ideas of femininity and women’s subordination. During the 1970s women began to explore the ways in which their bodies had been exploited, violated, objectified and ultimately controlled; through sexual violence, the medicalization of reproduction, the fashion-beauty complex and constricting notions of female sexuality. This focus on women’s bodies as a source of oppression has largely continued. Susan Bordo (1993) argues that ideas about femininity are increasingly projected, via the media, through standardized visual images of women’s bodies, which, ‘tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expressions, movements and behaviour is required’(pp.169-170). She argues that as a result, femininity has increasingly become a matter of constructing the appropriate presentation of ourselves on the surface of the body.

Whilst I have drawn on Bordo’s work, her analysis has its limitations, as it focuses on the constraints of modern body cultures. This tells us little about women’s active engagement with their bodies, other than as docile feminine body practices. During the 1970s and 1980s

some feminists claimed that the female body could be retrieved from its repressed and objectified position, thus becoming a source of empowerment and a resource for social change (Rich, 1976). This idea however, was underpinned by the notion that women could return to a 'natural' bodily state, it treated the category of women as a universal, essentialised femininity and regarded the body as a natural, static, pre-cultural, pre-social entity (Thornham, 2000).

More recently, sports feminists have suggested that some physically active women may experience their bodies as a source of power, without referring to natural states of being (Scraton, 1992; Hall, 1993; Gilroy, 1997; Choi, 2000). Researchers have considered how the female athlete can both destabilise and reinforce traditional notions of gender. Susan Cahn (1996) asserts that the female athlete causes tension in normative notions of femininity and masculinity by embodying 'the cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity' (p.42). Athletic prowess refers to physical competence and skill, the embodiment of strength and power, and the cultural signifier of this in the form of muscle, all of which have traditionally been associated with masculinity. I will develop these ideas further in relation to the experiences of my research participants; firstly, I consider some of the problems in the 'new' (malestream) sociology of the body.

There has been mounting criticism of this field in the last decade for its concentration on theory, specifically theory that focuses on the body as text, writing out, or diminishing the significance of the body's materiality (Davies, 1997; Evans & Lee, 2002; Shilling 2003; Howson, 2005; Wainwright & Turner, 2006). Representation has been privileged over experience, the focus being on what bodies culturally represent and their symbolic meanings, with little consideration given to how they are lived, or the experiences of the individual (Evans & Lee, 2002). A lot of the more recent feminist theory has also followed this trend.

Whilst theory *is* important, without engaging more fully with empirical research exploring people's everyday embodied experiences, some of its utility is lost. Theory is about trying to understand social worlds, and social worlds are made up of both cultural ideologies *and* lived experiences. The current concentration on theory has resulted in a tendency to talk about bodies as abstract things, rather than actual living people. This approach can not adequately explain the complex relationships between gendered bodies, self, culture and society, because by focusing on cultural representations the interconnections between culture and experience are lost. This is something I only fully began to realise when I started talking to women climbers

about their experiences. I entered the field wanting to explore women's experiences, posing questions about how, if at all, they fit into theoretical frameworks; how ideas about femininity are reproduced; how these ideas may be challenged or disrupted through the body; and ultimately how women's experiences can inform and develop theory. In order to illustrate some of the limitations of theories of the body I will now discuss the stories of some of the women climbers I interviewed.

The 'cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity' (Cahn 1996, p.42), certainly appeared to be embodied by many of the women I interviewed. For example, Claire is self-admittedly obsessed with climbing. She competes in British and international competitions, and is part of the elite climbing scene. She is quite muscular and always has been. A number of top women climbers do not have pronounced muscle definition and tend to be very slim. When Claire got married she wanted to wear a sleeveless wedding dress with straps that would fall slightly off her shoulders but instead she wore a dress that covered her arms because she feels self-conscious about her muscles. She would prefer to have non-muscular arms because she thinks that muscle looks 'less feminine'. She said, 'I suppose self-consciously, aesthetically it doesn't look as nice as just nice narrow shoulders and thin arms'.

It is evident that Claire is experiencing tension in her sense of self because of how she has internalised cultural ideas about the conflict between 'athletic prowess', in the form of muscle, and femininity. In this instance, by covering her muscle, she decides to make the surface presentation of her body conform to what she sees as an acceptable display of femininity. This is a form of what some sports feminists have called the 'female apologetic' (Birrell & Theberge, 1996; Choi, 2000), whereby women who challenge traditional notions of femininity through their participation in sport also apologise for entering a male domain. They apologise by emphasising traditional aspects of their femininity, such as their positions as wives, girlfriends and mothers, or they explicitly sexualise and objectify their bodies. Many sportswomen maintain docile feminine beauty regimes, like wearing make-up and long hair, in order to avoid being labelled butch or lesbian (Choi, 2000). It has been argued that by apologising, the boundaries between men and women's sport are maintained, and any challenge to the gender order is diminished (Birrell & Theberge, 1996). The 'female apologetic' is ultimately a recuperative strategy because as Susan Cahn (1996, p.42) has argued:

The image of women athletes as mannish, failed heterosexuals represents a thinly veiled reference to lesbians in sport ...who have become a powerful yet unarticulated bogeywoman ... which has formed a silent foil for more positive corrective images of women athletes.

To some extent this analysis does explain, in part, how some women who excel in climbing are treated. For example, every time the Basque climber Josune Bereziartu, who is currently the best female sport climber in the world, does a hard climb, comments such as, ‘Josune is leagues ahead of other women... Is she really a woman?’ (Anon, 2005a), and, ‘Josune Bereziartu is a man beast sub mutant human’ (Anon, 2005b) appear on climbing forums.

I showed these comments to Claire, and whilst she had never heard or seen anything like this about herself, strangers do stop her in the street to ask her why she’s got so many muscles and does she work out? Men with larger muscles than her will say, ‘I want muscles as big as Claire’s’. In climbing circles some mean it as a compliment, but these comments are pointing out that there is something different (unfeminine) about a woman with muscle.

Despite these attempts to control women’s physicalities through constricting notions of heterosexual femininity, Claire does not let this, or her self-consciousness about her muscle, stop her trying to excel in her sport. In fact, she recently started doing weights as part of her training schedule. Nor does she uncritically engage with ideas of femininity. She does not judge other muscular women as she does herself. Rather, she thinks they look great and sees them as positive role models who show that you do not have to be ‘stick thin’ to be a good climber.

Furthermore, Claire does not simply ‘apologise’ for her involvement in a traditionally masculine sport. Much of her behaviour could be seen as what K.L. Broad (2001) has called the ‘unapologetic’, in that she claims space in masculine climbing environments outright and without apology. When describing her local bouldering wall she said:

It’s this big featured wall that’s really overhanging and there’s usually lots of men there with their tops off and maybe a hat on as well (laughing)... they’re not necessarily that good but they look the part and they’ve got lots of muscles ... When you’re the only, say there’s 10 men and only 2 women, or only 1 woman ... I know quite a few women who

feel intimidated by that environment. Whereas I never was, I was just like oh whatever, just get out of the way I'm going to have a go, even if I couldn't do it, I'd have a go.

So Claire is also forthright in her opinions, takes up space in male dominated environments and puts her body and her skill on display in an unapologetic way.

In the literature, the apologetic and unapologetic appear as *either/or* positions, so you're either apologetic or unapologetic. However, the complexities, as evidenced in Claire's embodied experiences, cannot be adequately assessed through a dichotomous approach. Patricia Choi (2000) has identified the limitations of such an approach in her discussion of female body builders, and suggests that Judith Butler's work on gender performance can help explain how women negotiate space in sport.

Butler's concept of 'subversive bodily acts' (1990) suggests that the bodily display of identifiably feminine and masculine characteristics can subvert traditional essentialist notions about the naturalness of gender and the body. Whilst sexuality is the focus of Butler's work, it can also be used to consider physicality. This approach acknowledges that we perform gender in a multiplicity of ways, some of which can be fluid, changeable and contradictory.

Another story from one of my research participants demonstrates how the idea of subversive bodily acts can more fully explain some women's experiences. Linda is a climber in her 40s who was brought up in a climbing family and has climbed for most of her life. Whilst she is not an elite climber, her lifestyle is centred on climbing. She told me that 20 years ago the body culture in climbing was quite prescriptive and confining, she explained:

In those days there was a lot of pressure to be one of the lads and lose your own femininity ... you had to look really tough, you had to wear baggy old trousers and jumpers and you couldn't be seen to be the least bit interested in how you look or people would not take you seriously ... I did go through a phase where I deliberately rebelled against that and I did actually go to the crag in a denim jacket and dangley earrings and bright coloured trousers and things. I think I used to get a kick out of turning up at the crag and people thinking oh that's just some dolly-bird hanging on to a group of climbers, and then going out and leading a route and really surprising them.

At the time Linda was leading E1, which is still at least one grade above the average climbers' ability today.

If the female apologetic was applied to this story it wouldn't make much sense. Whilst Linda is emphasising her femininity through her appearance, she is in no way apologising for her presence in the male dominated climbing environment. Instead, she is playfully and self-consciously being rebellious and subversive, in the context of a climbing culture where displays of femininity were prohibited. This could more appropriately be considered a subversive bodily act, as Linda is combining feminine body markers with displays of physical strength, skill and competence, traditionally associated with masculinity.

Butler's work has some limitations however, which are highlighted when thinking about the practicalities of material gendered bodies and how they affect physicality and experience. Butler theorises the body, sex and gender as socially constructed, so has little to say about material bodies. This was an issue that was raised by Zoë, another of my research participants. Zoë is an elite climber whose life is dedicated to climbing. She talked about the impact of the physical changes the male and female junior British team go through when they reach puberty, particularly in relation to the greater muscle strength developed by the boys, and the increase in the girls' body weight, without the same muscle gain. For me, this discussion with Zoë was a kind of a revelation because until then I had been thinking about men and women's climbing physicalities *only* in terms of a gendered discourse, which sets limits on women's abilities and bodies, and undermines women's achievements. I had forgotten about material bodies and the interconnections between material bodies and gendered discourse. An example of these interconnections can be seen in how routes and different styles of climbing are valued and judged. Zoe explained:

Because men are sort of the physically stronger sex, the emphasis on which routes are sort of valid and which routes aren't, is always on the ones that are more powerful... It makes me angry. I look at ... the people that are doing the routes and they're not actually that good climbers ... All they do is they get a hold and pull on it, and get the next hold and pull on it, because that's what the route dictates, but that to me isn't being a good climber.

Evidently, there is a gendered discourse here which undermines many women's skill and ability, *and* there are also real gendered bodies that affect women's experiences of climbing. Strength and power routes are valued because that is what it is *thought* men can do, but in terms of the materiality of some women's bodies, if they want to get strong and climb at the top level, most women will have to work harder than most men to get there, yet this hard work is rarely acknowledged. The gendered discourse about what is hard and what is not interconnects with the materiality of specific gendered bodies.

There are real *material* bodies that are lived and there are *cultural* bodies that are created (Evans and Lee, 2002). The two are interconnected and both affect experience as they exist in the same physical space of an individual human being. The current concentration of research on cultural bodies, representation and theory cannot fully explain this. However, theories can be critically engaged with and used productively in order to help think about embodied gendered experience, but it is important to acknowledge their limitations. As Alexandra Howson (2005) has recognised, there are many feminist sociologists conducting empirical research on the body which engage and critique theory, particularly within disability studies and the sociology of medicine and I would add feminist sports studies. However, in many respects this is a one-way dialogue as some of the most influential theorists do not engage with the insights gained from empirical research.

From the preliminary findings of my research I would suggest that within climbing alternative femininities are being lived. There are differences in climbing culture with regards to women's active engagement with their bodies, bodies that are both constraining and enabling. Bodies that are not simply docile as Bordo (1993) has suggested. What this paper aims to demonstrate is the importance of narrative approaches when exploring and examining the complexities of women's embodiment. The women I spoke to experienced themselves as physically competent beings and gained great enjoyment from their physical engagement with the natural environment. For most, the desire to be strong and skilled climbers overrode the uneasiness they felt about the conflict between their athletic prowess and femininity. However, it seems that climbing femininities are still being constructed as distinctly and innately different to climbing masculinities. There is still a binary at work which positions women's climbing achievements as lesser than men's. As with wider society, there is a power struggle over gendered discourse and meanings, in which gendered bodies are centrally located. Nevertheless,

women climbers are actively engaging with this discourse, negotiating gender boundaries and living femininity in a multiplicity of ways.

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