

# Living on the Edge: The Appeal of Risk Sports for the Professional Middle Class

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Early sociological research describes risk sports as a form of resistance to structural aspects of highly industrialized societies. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that conventional social forces operating on the demographic group (young, White, professional, middle-class males) from which most athletes originate actually motivate risk sports participation. This study contributes to the literature by seeking to explain risk athletes' characteristic class status, a dynamic largely neglected by previous studies. Drawing on Bourdieu's analysis of the relationship between sport and social class, I suggest that risk sports appeal particularly to members of the professional middle class because of such sports' capacity to simultaneously satisfy and provide a temporary escape from a class habitus demanding continual progress through disciplined labor and deferred gratification.

Les premières études sociologiques décrivent les sports à risque en tant que forme de résistance aux aspects structurels des sociétés hautement industrialisées. Les études plus récentes suggèrent cependant que les forces sociales conventionnelles opérant sur le groupe démographique (jeunes hommes professionnels blancs de la classe moyenne) duquel émerge la plupart des athlètes constituent une motivation à participer aux sports à risque. La présente étude contribue à ces écrits en tentant d'expliquer la classe sociale des athlètes participant aux sports à risque ; une dynamique largement négligée dans les études antérieures. À partir de l'analyse bourdieusienne des relations entre le sport et la classe, je suggère que les sports à risque attirent particulièrement les membres de la classe moyenne professionnelle compte tenu de leur capacité de satisfaire et aussi d'offrir une évasion temporaire d'un habitus de classe qui exige un progrès continu par le biais du travail discipliné et du report constant de la satisfaction.

Alternately called "risk," "high-risk," and "adventure," sports that are seen to present a significant risk of injury or death to their participants have seen a dramatic surge in popularity within many highly industrialized societies since the mid-1960s. Such sports commonly include hang gliding, mountaineering, rock

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climbing, skiing, skydiving, and whitewater paddling, among others. Concurrent with their growth, these sports have received increasing attention from academic researchers seeking to explain this newfound popularity.

Before reviewing the literature on risk sports, which I will do in the following section, I would like to emphasize an important dynamic that this research has largely neglected: most risk athletes claim membership in what is alternately labeled (with minor discrepancies) the “upper” (Ortner, 1998), “professional” (Ehrenreich, 1989), “white collar” (Mills, 1956), “technocratic” (Touraine, 1971) or “knowledge” (Bell, 1973) class (hereafter, “professional middle class,” or PMC for convenience). As all of these descriptors suggest, this class fraction is primarily composed of individuals who perform mental labor in relatively well-paid, white-collar professions such as medicine, teaching, journalism, business administration, and law. Such professions, generally requiring at least an undergraduate college education if not an advanced degree, tend to provide considerable autonomy while demanding substantial self-direction as well. The PMC is commonly distinguished from the lower middle class, also principally comprised of white-collar workers, who may be nearly as well-paid as their PMC counterparts. However, they generally perform functions demanding less formal postgraduate education (e.g., police work, firefighting, nursing, and bookkeeping) that tend to be relatively routinized while still providing a degree of autonomy in comparison with most working-class professions.

What makes this class dynamic particularly intriguing, from a sociological perspective, is that risk sports are generally practiced within highly industrialized societies that have been specifically designed to minimize the hardship and uncertainty that their privileged members, at least, face on a daily basis (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990; Simon, 2002). Yet members of the privileged PMC are increasingly jeopardizing all of the protections such societies provide to risk their very lives in leisure pursuits with little obvious practical benefit. And, as I will show, many claim that it is the social structure itself that compels them to do so. The practice of risk sports thus seems to suggest that, as Lyng (1990, p. 882) observes, “The same society that offers us so much in the way of material ‘quality of life’ also propels many of us to the limits of our mortal existence in search of ourselves and our humanity.”

Is it true that industrial social structure itself provokes some PMC individuals to risk their lives in dangerous sports? Or are the dynamics compelling this sacrifice merely in these individuals’ minds? As Ball (1972) writes, “the ultimate goal of sociological considerations of sport is to develop sociology *through* sport, by drawing upon examinations of sport which contribute more generally to our understanding of the social world beyond the confines of the sporting life” (quoted in Mitchell, 1983, p. 170, emphasis in original). By understanding the class dimensions of risk sports participation, therefore, we may gain greater insight into the nature of social trends within contemporary society in general.

In this study, I apply a Bourdieuan analysis of the relationship between sport and social class to explain PMC dominance in the rise of risk sports since the mid-1960s. Although a Bourdieuan framework has been extensively used to analyze sports in general (see, for example, Clement, 1995; Stempel, 2005; Washington & Karen, 2001; and Wilson, 2002, for overviews), it has been applied much less to the study of risk sports in particular. Kay and Laberge (2002a, 2002b, 2004) have

drawn on Bourdieu to analyze adventure racing (AR) in a number of respects: describing contestations over definitions of legitimate practice conferring symbolic capital within the AR “field” (2002a); correlating the sport’s growth with the emergence of a “new” corporate habitus” encouraging improvisation, flexibility, and risk management (2002b); and observing how struggle over the definition of valued symbolic capital is used to justify the subordination of women within the sport (2004). Simon (2004) attributes the popularity of mountaineering among British professionals in the late nineteenth century, in part, to the sport’s capacity to confer symbolic capital for a class valuing competition and risk taking. Finally, Hoibian (2006) describes the “sociogenesis” of the mountaineering “field” in nineteenth-century France.

To date, however, no study has applied a Bourdieuan analysis to class dynamics within risk sports in general. This is my aim here. After a brief overview of the risk sports literature, I outline a Bourdieuan approach to the study of sport and social class. I then describe the particular habitus characteristic of the PMC and highlight its resonance with the risk sports field. Subsequently, I demonstrate that, in addition to satisfying the demands of PMC habitus, risk sports allow athletes to temporarily escape these demands by facilitating a valued “flow” experience. I finish by discussing the implications of my analysis for understanding modern social life in general and outlining possible directions for future research.

## Research Methods

In my analysis, I weave together several lines of evidence to address the risk sports field as a whole. I contend that risk sports constitute an interconnected social “field” (Bourdieu, 1984) sharing common logic, values, and prescriptions for appropriate practice. As I have noted, a variety of risk sports boast a similar demographic and common historical trajectory. Many athletes practice several risk sports simultaneously and consider them elements of an interconnected lifestyle. A number of my paddler informants, for example, were accomplished rock climbers as well; others practiced mountaineering; and many spent their winter months skiing (Fletcher, 2005). Highlighting the synergy among these various pursuits, one athlete, for instance, claimed that “paddling, for me, is so exciting and fun for the same reason as climbing or telemark skiing.”

There are variations, of course, within specific risk sports fields (for instance, in the environment in which the sport is typically practiced; the type of specialized equipment necessary; the amount of risk entailed; and the quantity of physical exertion required). One informant noted that, in comparison with whitewater paddlers, “Climbers aren’t afraid to suffer.” Yet all risk sports share the central characteristic that participation entails acknowledgment of the “possibility . . . that you may have to die” (Noyce, 1958, p. 12). It is this dynamic that makes risk sports so unique and fascinating. To understand motivation for the practice of any particular risk sport, therefore, the entire constellation must be analyzed.

To accomplish this, I draw first on 18 months of ethnographic research with whitewater paddlers, conducted via multisite fieldwork (Marcus, 1995) in California and Chile between June 2001 and August 2003 (Fletcher, 2005). This research relied primarily on participant observation of a large number of rafting

and kayaking trips, involving informal social interaction with paddlers on and off the water. In addition, I conducted semistructured, tape-recorded interviews, ranging from 1 to 3 hours, with 53 paddlers selected via purposive sampling based on availability and willingness to be interviewed. Of these, 42 were male and 11 female; all self-identified as White (51) or mixed race (2). Ages ranged from 17 to 54 with a mean of 29. All could be classified as PMC based on either their own (29) or parents' (24) education and/or occupation.

To supplement this data, I draw as well on reflexive "auto-ethnography" (e.g., Berger, 2001; Besio & Butz, 2004) of my 12 years of personal experience as an expert whitewater paddler and occasional mountain biker, rock climber, and skier/snowboarder. To generalize beyond the specific group of paddlers with whom I worked, I also draw on a body of scholarly research exploring a variety of risk sports. Most of this work addresses four sports in particular: mountaineering, rock climbing, skydiving, and whitewater paddling. Moreover, I draw on a discursive analysis of popular risk sports literature written by journalists and athletes themselves. Finally, to describe the PMC habitus, I draw on sociological research addressing class dynamics. Although my discussion focuses specifically on risk athletes in a US context because most of my sources (both ethnographic and textual) derive from this region, I believe that the framework I develop has implications for understanding risk sports participation in other highly industrialized societies that could be explored through future research, a theme I develop further in my conclusion.

A final point of conceptual clarification. The risk sports field I analyze here overlaps somewhat with another set of sports described as "new" (Beal, 1995; Humphreys, 1997), "alternative," (Rinehart, 1996; Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003) "lifestyle" (Kay & Laberge, 2002a; Wheaton, 2004a), "whiz" (Midol, 1993; Midol & Broyer, 1995), and "extreme" (Kusz, 2004; Rinehart & Sydnor) that encompasses a wide range of pursuits, from snowboarding and skateboarding to wakeboarding and ultimate disk. While the principle feature uniting these various sports—that they are considered by their practitioners to counter mainstream sport and social values—is similar to the sentiment commonly conveyed by risk athletes, and while this category often includes several of the same risk sports I address here (e.g., rock climbing, skiing), it also contains a variety of sports (e.g., windsurfing, ultimate disk, and, arguably, skateboarding) that are not generally considered to involve substantial danger of death. Thus, in my analysis I have drawn selectively on studies within this alternate typology that address the dangerous sports listed above to retain my specific focus on risk sports.

## Why Risk It?

Most early research explains the appeal of risk sports in terms of the psychology particular to the individuals who practice them. Some, for instance, suggest that risk athletes suffer from psychological pathology such as neurosis or addiction (e.g., Farberow, 1980; Huberman, 1968; Ogilvie, 1973). Others suggest that risk athletes are motivated by unique personality traits, such as "stress seeking" (Balint, 1959; Farley, 1986; Klausner, 1968). Zuckerman's (e.g., 1974, 1979, 2007) well-known "sensation-seeker" model—predicated on the contention that some

individuals are biologically predisposed toward a “need for varied, novel and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences” (1979, p.10)—is probably the most popular explanation of risk sports participation in the literature at present (see e.g., Breivik, 1996; Jack & Ronan, 1998; Shoham, Rose & Kahle, 1998).

Another explanatory framework views risk sports as a “performance” in which athletes act out culturally valued “scripts.” Such scripts include performing a “drama” involving the “buildup and release of tension” (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993), and playing the role of “hero” (Jonas, 1999; Vester, 1987) or “adventurer” (e.g., Gibson, 1996; Vester).

Yet another popular explanation describes risk sports in terms of “goal orientation.” Numerous theorists, for instance, highlight risk sports’ capacity to allow practitioners to transcend the routine of everyday life and achieve experiences described as “novel” or “extraordinary” (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Holyfield, 1999; Rowland, Franken, & Harrison, 1986; Simmel, 1965). In addition, risk sports are often seen to produce a truly “transcendent” state, a sense of “hyperreality” in which athletes become intensely focused in the present moment; their perception of the passage of time is distorted; and they react to circumstances on a visceral level. This experience is alternately described as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1974, 1975, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), “peak experience” (Maslow, 1961), “edgework” (Lyng, 1990; Lyng & Snow, 1986) and “action” (Goffman, 1967).

For all of its many merits, however, the preceding research fails to explain the social dimensions of risk sports participation noted above, as sociologists have pointed out (e.g., Lyng, 1990; Lyng & Snow, 1986). Psychological studies, for instance, cannot explain how it is that one segment of one particular social milieu seems to produce so many more “sensation seekers” than all others combined. Goal-orientation frameworks cannot explain why only a certain social group seems to find the benefits of risk sports particularly motivating. Finally, explanations in terms of a cultural-scripts perspective cannot explain why, within US culture as a whole, such scripts have proven unusually motivating only for a particular demographic.

To redress these shortcomings, a popular line of sociological analysis describes risk sports as a form of escape from or resistance to aspects of mainstream social life with which athletes are dissatisfied. Such dissatisfaction is attributed to the “alienation,” “overdetermination,” “rationalization” or “stress” of normal work and social life (Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999; Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Lyng, 1990, 2004b; Marinho & Bruhns, 2005; Mitchell, 1983; Noyce, 1958; Ortner, 1999; Stranger, 1999; Vester, 1987), or to the “boredom” produced by life in an “unexciting” society (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Ridgeway, 1979; Vester, 1987). This is indeed how risk athletes themselves commonly describe their pursuits. I uncovered this in my own research with whitewater paddlers, and a similar dynamic has been documented in other risk sports, including mountaineering (Ortner, 1999), rock climbing (Roper, 1994), and skydiving (Lyng, 1990; Lyng & Snow, 1986).

Recently, however, a growing line of research suggests that participation in risk sports is in fact motivated by conventional social forces operating on the actors who tend to practice such sports. Some, for instance, note risk sports’

embodiment of “neoliberal” virtues such as individualism, competition, and achievement through risk taking (Kusz, 2004; Simon, 2002, 2004), as well as a postmodern emphasis on aesthetic sensation over rational calculation (Stranger, 1999). Others, noting that risk athletes tend to be young (late teens through midthirties), observe that in modern societies adolescence and early adulthood are typically considered periods suitable for “[a]dventure, experimentation, and the avoidance of strong commitments” (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002, p. 374), after which individuals receive more societal pressure to “settle down” and “get serious” (see also Dallas, 1995; Gibson, 1996; Lyng, 1990; Strauss & Howe, 1991).

Still others have focused on risk athletes’ tendency to be male, suggesting that risk sports embody a model of “hegemonic masculinity” in which toughness, aggression, and bravery are considered cardinal virtues (e.g., Hunt, 1995; Kay & Laberge, 2004; Kusz, 2004; Lyng, 1990, 2004a; Messner, 1990; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Robinson, 2004; Wheaton, 2004b; Young, 1993).<sup>1</sup> Finally, theorists have contended that risk athletes are overwhelmingly White because their sports draw on a narrative of colonial adventure and exploration in which White Europeans form the protagonists (Braun, 2003; Coleman, 2002). Braun (p. 189), for instance, suggests that risk sports are “understood to be the *same* as, or *continuous with*, acts of European exploration set in the past.” Thus, within the risk sports field “the figure of the black or Latina adventurer *has no proper place*” (Braun, p.178, emphasis in original).

## Risk Sport and Social Class

As noted above, one social dimension of risk sports participation that has been relatively neglected in this sociological research is athletes’ characteristic membership within the professional middle class. This class specificity is a dynamic that I encountered in my own research with whitewater paddlers (Fletcher, 2005). The vast majority of my paddler informants originated from PMC backgrounds and/or practiced class-appropriate occupations, as noted above. Most held a four-year college degree (the traditional portal to PMC status), and a large number held graduate degrees as well (including quite a few Ph.D.s). A similar demographic is identified (yet rarely problematized) in many other sources (e.g., Clark & Newcomb, 1977; Lyng, 1990; Mitchell, 1983; Ortner, 1999). Ortner (1999, p. 9), for instance, observes that mountaineering is “a sport of the middle class, generally but not entirely of the well-educated upper-middle class.”

Attempts to account for the class dimensions of risk sports participation thus far have been few and tentative. Mitchell (1983, p. 187), for instance, suggests that most members of the working class “have already abandoned the quest for personal creativity as a capacity beyond them or inevitably denied them and leave it at that.” Lyng (1990, p. 876), by contrast, contends that “the great expense of many of the high-risk sports . . . means that only people with considerable discretionary income can participate.”

Yet while economic resources are undoubtedly important in facilitating risk sports participation, I maintain that this alone cannot account for their class specificity. Many risk athletes—particularly those who practice full-time—live on very little income. This was certainly true of my paddling informants, many of whom



claimed to have voluntarily adopted a low-income lifestyle to maximize free time in which to pursue their sport (Fletcher, 2005). Similarly, Gadd (2006, p. B16) relates:

Climbers of all tribes often take vows of poverty and assume the ascetic lifestyle of a Buddhist monk. A well-known American climber of the 1980's once lived for an entire month on potatoes and canned tuna fish while attempting to climb one of the hardest routes in France. Climbers in Yosemite Valley can occasionally be seen nabbing food from used trays in the cafeteria, a practice known as "scarfing."

In short, economic barriers alone do not appear to account for PMC domination in risk sports participation. This is supported by research concerning the relationship between sports and economic capital generally. Bourdieu (1984, p. 217), for instance, contends that "economic barriers—however great they may be in the case of golf, skiing, sailing, or even riding and tennis—are not sufficient to explain the class distribution of these activities." Recent studies have largely supported this contention (Stempel, 2005; Taks, Renson, & Vanreusel, 1995; White & Wilson, 1999; Wilson, 2002). Thus, Stempel (p. 416) concludes, "Clearly cost barriers and conspicuous consumption alone are not the only principles of distinction operating in the field of sports."

I suggest, following Bourdieu, that as important as income in facilitating risk sports participation is the influence of a particular "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1979, 1984) peculiar to the PMC, to which most risk athletes belong. Bourdieu (1979) describes habitus as a set of embodied attitudes and dispositions inculcated via socialization. In Bourdieu's (1984) framework, a given habitus occurs within the context of a particular social "field" that serves to define valued goals and qualities. These attributes take the form of "symbolic capital" that actors seek to accumulate via appearance and behavior. This symbolic capital may be "cultural" (e.g., personal qualities, formal knowledge, aesthetic tastes, manner of speech), "social" (educational credentials, social titles, occupation), and/or "physical" (appropriate body shape). In addition to signaling one's worth within a particular field, such symbolic capital may also be converted into economic capital through the access it provides to organizations, social networks, and educational institutions.

For Bourdieu, a given field and its associated habitus are structured in large part by the overarching socioeconomic context in which it exists. As Kay and Laberge (2002b, p. 18) describe, "The various social habitus are shaped by living conditions characteristic of the various positions existing in a social space." Central to Bourdieu's analysis, therefore, is the contention that each social class fraction will display its unique field and habitus by which it signals its "distinction" from other class groups. The logic of this field habitus will follow from the class group's particular position within the socioeconomic hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984).

A Bourdieuan framework thus provides a much more nuanced means of describing social class than through socioeconomic indicators alone. For Bourdieu, class status relies not merely on economic capital but on various forms of symbolic capital as well. In this view, it is possible for individuals to retain their class status by holding the proper credentials (social capital) and/or displaying the

appropriate qualities, tastes, and behaviors (cultural capital), even if their economic circumstances at a given time are inconsistent with class membership. Conversely, lacking appropriate cultural capital may result in rejection from a group even if one acquires the requisite economic capital. Thus, as Bourdieu (1984) observes, cultural “distinctions” as much as economic capital define the boundaries of class membership and constitute barriers to mobility.

It is primarily in terms of symbolic capital that most serious risk athletes can be said to occupy the PMC. As noted earlier, they typically originate from PMC families and/or hold class-appropriate educational credentials—both forms of social capital that signal their class status (Bourdieu, 1984). In addition, as I demonstrate below, their sports constitute a display of cultural capital appropriate to PMC status. By virtue of the social and cultural capital they display, therefore, risk athletes are able to retain elements of PMC status even while living on minimal income.

One of the many important means by which class groups define distinction is through their pursuit of particular sports (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991). Sports constitute both forms of cultural capital valued within a given field and a socialization process by which class habitus is inculcated. As with all aspects of a social field, the sports to which members of a particular class group are typically attracted will be influenced by their socioeconomic position, based on “the encounter between one’s particular habitus with [sic] a particular field dynamic” (Kay and Laberge, 2002b, p. 21).

If the PMC seems to be uniquely attracted to risk sports, therefore, this is likely because such sports resonate particularly well with the habitus characteristic of this class fraction. In Bourdieu’s analysis, sports, like any social form, constitute a particular field that defines the activities and qualities conferring symbolic capital. In engaging with a particular sports field, individuals become subject to and assimilate the particular habitus characteristic of the field. Thus, an individual’s success in attaining symbolic capital within a given sports field will depend on his or her ability to adopt the appropriate habitus—and this ability, in turn, will depend in part on the articulation between the sport’s habitus and the individual’s preexisting socialization (Kay & Laberge, 2002b; Zevenbergen, Edwards, & Skinner, 2002).

## The Professional Middle-Class Habitus

The unique field-habitus characteristic of the PMC is shaped by the white-collar, professional employment that largely defines class membership. As Ehrenreich (1989, p. 15) writes, this class fraction’s

only “capital” is knowledge and skill, or at least the credentials imputing skill and knowledge. And unlike real capital, these cannot be hoarded against hard times, preserved beyond the lifetime of an individual, or, of course, bequeathed. The “capital” belonging to the (professional) middle class is far more evanescent than wealth, and must be renewed in each individual through fresh effort and commitment. In this class, no one escapes the requirements of self-discipline and self-directed labor; they are visited, in each generation, upon the young as they were upon the parents.



To maintain PMC status, therefore, an individual must be willing to work diligently for many years without substantial remuneration to attain the advanced education necessary to enter the professional occupations consistent with class status. The particular habitus by which class members are socialized is thus specifically designed to instill this orientation. Ehrenreich (1989, p. 84) observes, for example, “The challenge of [professional] middle-class childraising—almost the entire point of it, in fact—is to inculcate . . . the deferred-gratification pattern.”

In short, PMC habitus appears to emphasize the following qualities: (a) self-reliance; (b) self-discipline; (c) deferral of gratification; (d) a quest for continual progress; (e) self-actualization; (f) willingness to face risk; (g) willingness to persevere through emotional and physical hardship; (h) an orientation toward tastes removed from economic necessity; (i) asceticism; and (j) experiential accumulation. I describe each of these qualities briefly below.

As Ehrenreich (1989) observes, self-discipline, self-reliance, and deferral of gratification are all required to compel one to endure the deprivation necessary to attain long-term success (see also Bourdieu, 1984). For the PMC, this success is defined not through the achievement of any particular goal but rather through the process of goal achievement itself, compelling continual progress from achievement to achievement throughout one’s lifetime. Lareau (2003) thus characterizes the PMC as oriented toward “concerted cultivation,” which Stempel (2005, p. 415) paraphrases as “the disposition to view one’s self as a project to be continuously improved and developed.” Similarly, Lamont (1992) notes a PMC emphasis on “self-actualization,” the imperative to be “fully-engaged” in life by spending one’s time pursuing activities that “improve” oneself.

Attainment of a PMC occupation is typically dependent on the willingness to assume risk as well (Simon, 2004), for one can never be certain that one’s long road through education to employment will ultimately prove fruitful, yet one must undertake the journey regardless. Consonant with the willingness to assume risk is a willingness to endure hardship and suffering. Indeed, it could be argued that such standard entry rituals to PMC employment as medical and graduate school are specifically designed to test one’s willingness to endure suffering in pursuit of future reward.

Bourdieu (1984, p. 6) contends that the general logic governing the type of cultural capital valued by a particular class fraction involves increasing “distance from necessity” as one moves up the socioeconomic ladder.<sup>2</sup> Working class tastes, in other words, will tend toward that which provides the maximum economic benefit relative to cost (for example, a large portion of food at a low price), whereas the upper class will value the opposite, namely, that which only those with the luxury to disdain economic considerations can afford (e.g., a very small portion of expensive, high-quality food such as *foie gras* or caviar). For the PMC, therefore, emulation of upper-class distinction requires the pursuit of cultural capital signaling a similar distance from necessity (Bourdieu, 1984).

Further, PMC habitus is characterized by an orientation toward asceticism. As Bourdieu (1984, p. 254–5) observes, different fragments of the dominant class tend to pursue different strategies for signaling distance from necessity based on their relative funds of cultural and economic capital. For members of the upper class, distinction is maintained through the purchase of exclusive “luxury” that their superior economic capital affords. Lacking similar economic resources, the PMC instead pursues “asceticism,” seeking a “symbolic subversion of the rituals

of bourgeois order by ostentatious poverty” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 220). This ascetic orientation, in terms of which conspicuous consumption of material possessions is viewed as decadent indulgence (Bourdieu, 1984; Ehrenreich, 1989), has led members of the PMC instead to conspicuously consume and display valued experiences that signal their possession of the personal qualities outlined above (MacCannell, 1999).

As Bourdieu (1979, 1984) further observes, within a particular habitus valued qualities are typically “naturalized,” their conditioned character obfuscated so that they appear as innate attributes rather than the products of a deliberate and systematic inculcation. This naturalization serves to enforce class distinctions by justifying the exclusion of individuals deemed to lack the “right stuff” necessary for class membership. Thus, while the PMC qualities described above are actively cultivated in class members, they are often misrecognized as inherent possessions that signal individuals’ “natural” capacity to succeed in terms of class-defined standards.

## The Risk Sports Field

The same personal qualities listed above confer valued cultural capital within the risk sports field. Although, of course, in any sports field there is contestation concerning legitimate practices (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Kay & LaBerge, 2002a), the dominant measure of one’s success within risk sports—as defined by such criteria as recognition by other paddlers, success in paddling competitions, exposure in documentary films and print media, and, perhaps most importantly, corporate sponsorship—is one’s ability to perform the death-defying feats that signal possession of valued personal traits. In whitewater paddling, for example, this involves, first and foremost, undertaking perilous descents of difficult rivers, preferably those in remote wilderness locations requiring self-contained, multiday descents. A similar emphasis can be found in other risk sports: for example, strenuous multiday ascents in rock climbing (Roper, 1994) and mountaineering (Ortner, 1999). Accomplishing such feats displays one’s possession of most of the PMC qualities outlined above: self-discipline; self-reliance; deferral of gratification; asceticism; willingness to face risk and suffering; and pursuit of continual progress.

Risk athletes tend to be fiercely independent and self-reliant, even when working in teams. Whitewater kayakers, for instance, almost always assume individual responsibility for deciding whether to run a given rapids, and this personal freedom is one of the attributes my informants claimed to value most in the sport. One informant stated:

You’re in the middle of a class V rapid or you’re up on a wall somewhere, and there’s nothing anybody can do to pull you through the situation. . . . Once you accomplish it, it’s like, yeah, that was all me, I did that.

Ortner (1999) and Roper (1994) note a similar spirit of independence among Himalayan mountaineers and Yosemite rock climbers, respectively.

By definition, of course, risk sports involve the willingness to assume risk, and athletes’ status is largely predicated upon their ability to take on more risk than their compatriots. Risk sports also commonly involve the willingness to

endure suffering, a quality many of my informants emphasized. As one stated, "For the hard-core mountaineer and the hard-core big-wall climber, there is a direct motivation to push through the suffering and to go get it done." Noyce (1958, p. 12) observes of adventure in general that there is "a certainty, accepted consciously, that you will have to suffer."

Risk sports usually demand asceticism as well (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 219). Athletes commonly travel with minimal gear to facilitate their movement and thus must endure such discomforts as exposure to the elements, uncomfortable sleeping conditions, and meager meals. Kayakers on self-contained, multiday descents, for instance, bring only the gear that they can fit in their boats, usually only a light sleeping bag and minimal dried food. Rock climbers attempting multiday ascents before the invention of sleeping ledges often spent nights shivering in their harnesses (Roper, 1994).

Moreover, risk sports usually demand continual progress. Nearly all of my informants pointed to risk sports' continual "challenge" as one of their principle motivations. One paddler stated:

I remember, when I first got [a popular guide book to California's whitewater], I remember just turning the page, that's what we kept saying, "Let's turn the page, next page." New places, new rivers.

The gold standard in risk sports is, of course, the "first" (first ascent in rock climbing, first descent in kayaking), creating an injunction to continually push the boundaries of what is considered possible. If an established athlete fails to continue claiming firsts, he or she will eventually be superseded by those who do and pass from the ranks of the elite. This is particularly true with respect to corporate sponsorship, an important mark of distinction in many risk sports. As one mountaineer observes, securing sponsorship requires that one "keep upping the ante. . . . It becomes an ever-tightening spiral; eventually, you're not up to the challenge anymore" (quoted in Krakauer, 1997, p. 41).

Finally, with respect to distance from necessity, athletes' very claim to disdain material possessions, and the employment through which these are acquired, could be seen as an attempt to signal their ability to divorce their actions from economic considerations—to the extreme of placing their very lives on the line without thought of practical return. Instead, risk athletes, like the PMC in general, focus on the accumulation of valued experiences that can be displayed as cultural capital. As a prominent whitewater paddler writes, "I may not have much in the way of material possessions, but when I die I will take these experiences . . . with me" (Green, 2001, p. 68).

In addition to engaging in activities that signal their possession of key PMC qualities, risk athletes commonly valorize and pursue a body shape consistent with PMC standards as well: a fit, trim physique with defined yet modest muscles and little body fat (Dornian, 2005; Marinho & Bruhns, 2005; Robinson, 2004). Many of my paddler informants highlighted increased "fitness" as an important benefit of risk sports. This body shape, of course, carries symbolic capital, signaling one's ability to exercise self-discipline and defer gratification by disdaining

culinary overindulgence and forcing oneself to engage in regular exercise (Bourdieu, 1984; Ehrenreich, 1989).

Despite their tendency to explicitly voice rejection of mainstream social values, risk athletes' discourse often inadvertently reveals the importance of these PMC qualities in their practice. Krakauer (1996, p. 150), for instance, writes of his father, displeased by his decision to spend his youth as a climbing bum, "The walrus in fact managed to instill in me a great and burning ambition; it simply found expression in an unintended pursuit. He never understood that the Devil's Thumb [a challenging peak in remote Alaska] was the same as medical school, only different." An extreme kayaker, famous for his death-defying first descents, betrays his class orientation by describing his attraction to "risk. And every worthwhile accomplishment in this world happened because someone was willing to take a risk" (Ashland Mine Productions, 2003).

In short, 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.

In the process, risk sports appear to mediate a central contradiction in PMC social positioning. Despite their desire to emulate the distance from economic necessity enjoyed by their upper-class counterparts, members of the PMC, lacking substantial economic capital that can be transmitted between the generations, must work diligently to maintain class status. They are therefore caught in a bind of sorts. The pursuit of risk sports appears to mediate these opposing pressures, providing an arena far removed from economic concerns in which distance from necessity and other forms of cultural capital appropriate to class status can be pursued and displayed.

More than economic freedom, what PMC habitus does seem to provide is a certain psychological security that allows individuals to temporarily forego the pursuit of economic capital, comfortable in the conviction that their socialized habitus will allow them to reclaim full class status at a later point in time. Many of my full-time paddling informants, for instance, expressed a casual confidence in their ability to assume successful professional careers in the future. Following a period of full-time practice, many risk athletes indeed move on to successful PMC careers. Members of other class groups, lacking a similar habitus, may not feel the same luxury to disdain economic opportunities and indulge in risk sports.

## Beyond Boredom and Anxiety

Yet, I suggest, risk sports' appeal transcends the pursuit of symbolic capital per se, in that they are also valued for their capacity to provide a temporary relief from the anxiety and discontent caused by the very qualities, outlined above, that constitute PMC habitus. As Ehrenreich (1989, p. 15) observes, the PMC

is afraid, like any class below the most securely wealthy, of misfortunes that might lead to its downfall. But in the middle class there is another anxiety: a

fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will.

Thus, “[a]n individual who is not ‘working,’ in this narrow sense of performing a specified routine for a stated time with a set product or result, is almost sure to suffer pervasive feelings of guilt” (Wilson, 1981, p. 283). The imperative to use one’s time efficiently to facilitate continual progress tends to produce a certain restlessness as well. Moreover, a quest for continuous progress contains an inherent critique of the present as inferior to some imagined future when greater prosperity has been achieved, necessitating what Horkheimer and Adorno (1998, p. 51) call “the sacrifice of the present moment to the future.” All of this tends to result in what Rush (1991, p. 230) describes as the “usual American median state of being in which you are in perpetual anxiety about the next thing that’s supposed to transpire in your lifespan, to the point that you can barely enjoy the thing you’ve just done or the plateau you’ve reached.”

Risk sports provide a temporary release from these emotions. As noted earlier, one of the main motivations both athletes and scholars cite for risk sports participation is the attainment of a state of “flow” or “transcendence.” Csikszentmihalyi (1974, p. 58) describes:

Flow refers to the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. It is a kind of feeling after which one nostalgically says: “that was fun” or “that was enjoyable.” . . . We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next in which we are in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future.

Although, as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) tells us, flow can be achieved through virtually any activity with the proper focus, risk sports appear to be particularly efficacious, for the danger they entail forces extraneous thoughts from the mind and compels total concentration on the moment at hand (Bane, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Goffman, 1967; Martin & Priest, 1986; Priest & Bunting, 1993). In addition, the fear risk sports provoke is believed to trigger the sympathetic nervous system, the so-called “fight or flight response” that compels intense focus on an immediate threat (Bane, 1996, p. 24–5).

The state of flow achieved via risk sports appeals particularly to the PMC, it seems, because the experience provides a temporary release from a class habitus compelling a uniquely powerful pull away from the present. As one my informants observed of his motivation for padding:

It allows me to be really present, really in the now. When you’re really in the now, you’re not thinking about your checkbook, or duties or tasks that need to be done. My thoughts are really . . . one, and I like that.

According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 185), attainment of flow requires a level of “optimal stimulation” between the poles of “alienated consciousness” formed by boredom and anxiety. This optimal stimulation is not static, of course, but rather varies from individual to individual, as Zuckerman and colleagues’ “sensation seeker” studies, cited above, clearly demonstrate.

Optimum stimulation may also vary from social group to social group (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978; Zuckerman & Neeb, 1980), based, for instance, on the group's characteristic attitudes and dispositions—in other words, its habitus. The emphasis on material and emotional sacrifice in pursuit of future reward over enjoyment of the present moment characteristic of PMC habitus is clearly the antithesis of the flow experience. Compelling a uniquely intense pressure to withdraw from the present moment, therefore, PMC conditioning appears to necessitate an extraordinary level of optimal stimulation to bring one's focus back to the present.

In sum, risk sports appear to be pursued by the PMC for seemingly paradoxical ends (Lyng, 2004b): On the one hand, they confer valued cultural capital in terms of a PMC habitus; while on the other, they temporarily alleviate the discontent that the imperative to attain this cultural capital engenders.

## Conclusion

Contrary to many risk athletes' (and academic researchers') contention that athletes are driven to pursue risk sports by a need to escape structural aspects of industrial society, I have suggested that it is instead PMC habitus that compels this escape. In other words, I suggest, the constraints to which risk athletes (and other members of the PMC) feel subject exist largely in their own minds (and bodies) rather than in the social structure itself. Although athletes often proclaim themselves members of a disadvantaged group beleaguered by industrial civilization, in reality it is their privileged class position within this civilization that affords them the (psychological and economic) luxury to indulge in risk sports.

In my analysis, I have sought to illuminate the disjuncture between risk athletes' explicit discourse and actual practice. Kay and Laberge (2004) highlight the dissonance between discourse and practice in adventure racing: the official rhetoric proclaims the equality of the genders, whereas actual performance demonstrates a masculine bias in many respects. Similarly, although athletes' discourse often suggests that they engage in risk sports to resist or escape mainstream social values, their actual practice embodies many of the very values that they claim to reject.

This disjuncture might help to explain changing representations of risk sports within the mainstream media. Kusz observes that, before the 1990s, US media sources typically portrayed risk athletes as rebellious delinquents and outlaws. In the 1990s, however, the media began increasingly to reframe risk sports as heroic activities embodying key "American" values, such as "individualism, self-reliance, risk-taking, and progress" (Kusz, 2004, p. 209). In this shift, it seems, many of the same values that have informed risk sports since the 1960s, but that were largely unacknowledged by athletes in the past, are increasingly highlighted and celebrated today. Before the 1990s the mass media appears to have largely reproduced risk athletes' own self-representation as deviant rebels, whereas in the contemporary period it has begun to recognize and highlight the values that have always informed risk sports but that athletes themselves typically downplayed or denied in the past. This process seems to follow a similar trajectory as in many sports fields, which commonly exhibit a "shift whereby sport as an elite practiced reserved for amateurs



became sport as a spectacle produced by professionals for consumption by the masses” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 364)—a process reinforced by neoliberal capitalism’s characteristic tendency to transform practices that originate (at least ostensibly) as counter-cultural critiques into mainstream, marketable commodities (Dunn, 1998; Munt, 1994).

Indeed, in an ironic feedback loop, the same PMC values that were originally smuggled into risk sports are now being transferred back to the business world. This transfer occurs in a variety of forms. First, adventure challenge courses are increasingly employed by corporations to train their employees to deal with the risk and uncertainty characteristic of neoliberal capitalism (Martin, 1994). As Martin (p. 213) explains, “The bodily experience of fear and excitement on the zip line and the pole are meant to serve as models for what workers will feel in unpredictable work situations.” Second, as Kay and Laberge (2006) relate, adventure racing is often explicitly intended by many corporate participants to develop valuable skills that can be transferred back to their work lives. Third, risk sports imagery is increasingly employed to advertise business products and services (Donnelly, 2003). Finally, risk athletes have begun to sell their services as motivational speakers for corporate audiences. A well-known whitewater kayaker, for instance, advertises his speaking services:

Tao’s business is far from ordinary, mistakes can be life threatening and his success is dependant on hard work, astute planning and precision thinking. Similar to the business world, anything less can produce disastrous results. Tao emphasizes that success comes from strong desire, hard work ethics, and setting high expectations. (Berman, 2007)

A more fitting description of the PMC values originally transferred from work to risk sports would be difficult to find.

Although my analysis has assumed similar motivation on the part of risk athletes from the mid-1960s to the present, it is probable that aspects of this motivation have changed during this period, based, for instance, on the type of inter-generational shifts identified by Strauss and Howe (1991; Howe & Strauss 2000). In my study, informants spanning early Gen X through late Millennial/Gen Y cohorts—along with the 1960s (Boomer) athletes discussed in published texts—tended to describe similar motivations with respect to the various PMC habitus dynamics mentioned above, suggesting that these dynamics, at least, have remained relatively consistent from the 1960s to today. After all, habitus by its very nature represents an attempt to limit change, to reproduce (albeit not always effectively) the same conditioning in each generation (Bourdieu, 1979). As Ehrenreich (1989) notes, among the PMC in particular the imperative to replicate class conditioning from generation to generation has long been viewed as especially important.

Yet other differences in generational temperament could be evident. For instance, many of my informants, both Gen Xers and Millennials, highlighted the younger generation’s tendency to emphasize the less intensive, more immediately gratifying aspects of risk sports (i.e., playboating, sport climbing), in comparison

with older paddlers' valuation of more demanding, committed activities (multiday descents, big walls). Informants consistently pointed to the influence of recent media and technology in "desensitizing" Millennials to experiences earlier generations found highly stimulating. As one Gen-Xer observed of his younger counterparts, "It's more difficult to 'wow' 'em." Because my study did not investigate generational dynamics directly, however, discussion of these dynamics remains largely anecdotal. A detailed study of intergenerational differences in motivation among risk athletes would thus be an interesting direction for further research.

Another important gap in my analysis concerns the practice of risk sports by a minority of non-PMC athletes. Bourdieu contends that "class fractions not only engage in different sports but even when they engage in the same one, they often attach different intrinsic or extrinsic meaning to it" (Washington & Karen, 2001, p. 190). Thus, it is probable that the relatively few lower-middle-, working-, and upper-class individuals who practice risk sports do so in terms of different fields and habitus than their PMC counterparts. My analysis, having focused on the meaning of risk sports for the PMC majority, however, is unable to comment on this possibility, which would be another interesting focus of future research.

A further research opportunity concerns the reasons why particular individuals are attracted to risk sports, for not all (or even most) members of the PMC participate in such sports. One way to approach this question might be to combine class analysis with Zuckerman's sensation-seeker framework to explore individual differences in PMC sports preference. Another would be to conduct life history analysis with PMC risk athletes to explore the developmental patterns that might lead specific individuals to pursue risk sports in particular.

A final limitation of my study, noted earlier, concerns its specific focus on the experience of US risk athletes. Thus, it cannot speak directly to the experience of the numerous athletes who originate from other societies. There are, of course, important commonalities among risk athletes from different contexts, who comprise fairly cohesive global communities (Fletcher, 2005). The relatively few risk athletes from Western European (and industrialized South American) contexts whom I encountered in my ethnographic research—as well as in published texts—tended to describe similar motivations as my US based informants. Further, researchers have identified commonalities in class habitus and motivation across highly industrialized societies; Lamont (1992), for instance, finds substantial similarity in cultural orientation within the upper-middle classes in France and the US.

On the other hand, Lamont (1992) also identifies substantial differences between French and US upper-middle-class perspectives, shaped by overarching cultural and structural differences between the two societies. Such disparities are likely to differentially shape the motivation and experience of risk athletes as well. Another productive direction for future research, then, would be to test the extent to which the habitus dynamics I have identified herein operate in motivating risk athletes from other contexts, and to explore other factors shaping risk athletes' motivations given the diverse historical, cultural, social, and economic conditions that different societies evidence.

## Notes

1. Although individual-level analysts have sought to account for several of these social dynamics, suggesting, for instance, that those genetically disposed to sensation seeking tend to be predominantly young men (see, for example, Ball, Farnhill, & Wangeman, 1984; Farley, 1986; Zuckerman, Buchsbaum, & Murphy, 1980; Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978; Zuckerman & Neeb, 1980), sociologists have contended that the social dimensions of risk sports participation demand explanation in terms of societal-level processes.
2. Acknowledgments to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this important dynamic.

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