In the Echoes of Mountains
Embodying Climbing Practice

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University of Newcastle, Australia
The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the social processes that produce more effective risk-takers in the practice of high-risk climbing. In a process of dispositional accumulation, climbers must undergo a change in the way that they perceive and embody vertical space. This extends the concept of ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 1990) into what I call critical necessity, where climbers become ‘committed’ and must continually remain engaged in specific and intense practices in order to return. The attributes of vertical space provide the perfect place to experience ‘social weightlessness’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 14). Those who can enter this space are not screened by arbitrary social requisites but instead by the mountain itself. The distinction of entering this space comes with a genuine threat of injury and death. But the climbing field is protected through an interplay of illusio and a doxic misinterpretation of the shift between the epistemological basis of the field, and the ontological experience of climbing itself.

Dispositions are argued to be developed through more than a simple transferral (Bourdieu, 1984: 170) but instead can be acquired in a variety of ways that must be considered in their empirical context. Along with thirty five interviews, this research is based on eighteen months of multi-site ethnographic fieldwork with climbers engaged in high-risk rock climbing styles and ice, alpine and expeditionary climbing. The concept of habitus has been a guiding concept for this research, as it allows for a careful study of the dispositional attributes of the climbing body. Habitus has been used with a two-fold purpose. It is firstly used as a means of understanding how agents gain skills and orientate themselves to climbing practice. It has secondly been used, through the researchers own development, as a means of gaining greater embodied awareness of the social process required to become a climber.

One of the crucial insights habitus offers is its improvisational and generative components. This is useful for exploring climbing practice, as climbing lacks organisational structures that guide its practitioners with authority – yet climbers maintain regularity. However, habitus is shown to have shortcomings in dealing with accounts of the individual in action because it has been theorised with an insensitivity to the scope of observation and analysis. In order to address this, the concept of the embodied echo is introduced as a means to explore the more radically embodied and experiential components of habitus. Through the use of echoes as an allegory for the construction of dispositions, it is possible to give specific accounts to the processes of dispositional acquisition, mutation and activation. In effect, it functions as a theory of the habitus in motion.