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Lifestyle sport, public policy and youth engagement: examining the emergence of parkour

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In this article we consider the development of parkour in the South of England and its use in public policy debates and initiatives around youth, physical activity and risk. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with participants and those involved in the development of parkour in education, sport policy and community-based partnerships, we explore the potential of parkour to engage communities, particularly those traditionally excluded from mainstream sport and physical education provision. We discuss how the perceived success of parkour in these different contexts is related to the culture and ethos of the activity that is more inclusive, anticompetitive and less rule-bound than most traditional sports, and to its ability to provide managed risk-taking. More broadly, the article highlights the emergence of lifestyle sports as tools for policymakers and the potential role these nontraditional, non-institutionalized lifestyle sports can make in terms of encouraging youth engagement, physical health and well-being. Our article therefore contributes to ongoing debates about the (in)ability of traditional sports to meet government targets for sport and physical activity participation.

Keywords: lifestyle sport; parkour; youth policy; risk; youth; subculture

En este artículo estudiamos el desarrollo y la popularidad del 'parkour' en el sur de Inglaterra y su uso en debates públicos sobre juventud, actividad física y prácticas de riesgo. El artículo se basa en una serie de entrevistas en profundidad con participantes y personas involucradas en la introducción del 'parkour' en programas educativos y de deporte a nivel local. Mediante estos métodos se explora el potencial que el 'parkour' tiene para aumentar la participación de aquellos que normalmente se encuentran excluidos de los deportes y las actividades de educación física tradicionales.

En el artículo se apunta que el éxito del 'parkour' radica en los valores y la cultura de dicho deporte, que es mucho más incluyente, anti-competitivo y menos dominado por los códigos de reglas que los deportes tradicionales. Además, el 'parkour' ofrece una sensación de deporte arriesgado que, sin embargo, es fácil de mantener bajo control. De una manera más general, el artículo subraya la importancia creciente que estos deportes identificados con estilos de vida pueden tener como una nueva herramienta en el desarrollo de las políticas públicas de deporte. La naturaleza innovadora y relativamente transgresora de estos deportes puede contribuir al aumento de participación de los más jóvenes en actividades deportivas de este tipo. Con todo ello, nuestro artículo contribuye a un debate abierto sobre las verdaderas posibilidades que los deportes tradicionales tienen para conectar con los jóvenes y, así, contribuir a los objetivos gubernamentales de participación en actividades físicas.

Palabras clave: Deportes como estilo de vida; parkour; riesgo; política de juventud; subcultura

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本文旨在探討跑酷在英國南部的發展，及其如何運用於青少年、身體活動、和風險相關的公共政策辯論與提案。本研究採用質性深入訪談方式，針對在教育、運動政策以及社會協力機構推廣跑酷者進行訪談，以了解跑酷促進社區參與的潛力，尤其是那些被主流運動和體育教學資源忽略的社區。本文認為跑酷運用在不同層面的成功經驗，與跑酷本身的兩個特點息息相關：較傳統運動更具包容力、反競技、和規則較彈性的文化與倫理；以及能夠提供適度的冒險體驗。整體而言本研究指出，生活型態運動已成為政策制定者採用的新興手法，並討論此類非傳統、非規約化的運動促進青少年社會參與以及身心健康的潛力。傳統運動是否能達成政府訂定的運動及身體活動參與目標，本研究為此論辯提供一個參考意見。

關鍵字：生活型態運動、跑酷、風險、青少年政策、次文化

イングランド南部でパークアウトが発展し、それが青少年、身体活動とリスクに関する公共政策の議論とイニシアティブに使われていることについて本稿では考察する。本稿では、パークアウトへの参加者と教育、スポーツ政策、コミュニティをベースとしたパートナーシップの分野でパークアウトの発展に関わる人物への質的な深層インタビューを実施した。その上で、コミュニティ、特に伝統的にスポーツや体育の主流から除外されてきた人々を参画させるためにパークアウトが持つポテンシャルを探ることを目的としている。これらの違う文脈でいかにパークアウトの成功が、多くの伝統的なスポーツよりもより包括的、非競争的で、ルールに縛られないという活動の文化と方針、さらに危険な行為をコントロールする能力を提供することと関係しているかを見なされているかについて論ずる。

より広範には、ライフスタイル スポーツの出現が政策立案者にとってのツールとなり、若者の参画、身体健康、幸福といった点において非伝統的、非制度的ライフスタイル スポーツのもつ可能性について焦点を当て論じる。従って本稿では、スポーツと身体活動への参加の政府の目標を達成するため、伝統的なスポーツの持つ力に関する継続的な議論に貢献する。

キーワード：ライフスタイル スポーツ、パークアウト、リスク、青少年政策、サブカルチャー

Introduction

It is widely recognized that over the past decade sport in the United Kingdom has gained a more prominent profile on political and policy agendas, with the British government – mirroring many other contemporary neo-liberal states (see Green and Houlihan 2006) – positioning sport at the centre of its ‘cross-cutting approach to social policy’ in tackling the linked ‘problems’ of youth obesity, antisocial behaviour and social exclusion (Coalter 2007, p. 116). With the London 2012 Olympic Games looming this attention has intensified, with media and political discourse focused on guaranteeing that the London Games deliver a ‘sporting legacy’, not just in terms of elite success but also in terms of a more physically active nation (DCMS 2008). As the current policy for sport and physical activity – set out in *Game Plan* and *Playing to Win* (DCMS 2002, 2008) – suggests, participation in sport and recreation can lead to improved health, reduce crime levels, generate employment and encourage a more positive attitude to education. Although the validity of these claims and the nature of ‘evidence’ used to assess the multifarious policy interventions have come under sustained criticism (c.f. Coalter 2007, Piggin *et al.* 2009), our focus here is on the contribution of nontraditional and informal ‘lifestyle’ sports in these policy debates and processes.

Informal sports are increasingly central to the physical activity and cultural lifestyles of young people; some commentators argue they are beginning to replace traditional team sports (e.g. Booth and Thorpe 2007, Howell 2008) and challenge the original sporting uses of playgrounds and urban parks (L’Aoustet and Griffet 2001). L’Aoustet and Griffet claim

that in France any observable increase in sport participation can be attributed to non-institutionalized informal sport activities, with surveys showing that 45–60% of the French population now practice informal sports. Similarly, in Germany, Bach (1993) discusses the intensification in demand for informal sport activities, recognizing that a considerable part of ‘sports’ activity is not organized, nor conducted in official clubs, but is spontaneous in nature.

Thus, as academics such as Coalter (2004) have suggested, recognizing the diversity of sport cultures and practices that exist outside of traditional sport provision has become increasingly relevant to policy analysts seeking to demonstrate sport’s contribution to health, citizen engagement and the economy. In Canada, for example, research funded by the Canadian Population Health Initiative (e.g. Tremblay and Willms 2003 cited in Kay 2005) suggests that although participation in organized sport had *some* benefit for obesity prevention in children, the most profound effect came from unorganized sports, activities such as road hockey. The authors reasoned that children ‘playing in the street’ spend more hours on the move than those in sport leagues. In the United Kingdom a study by Gratton (2004) similarly concluded that policy intervention to increase participation needs to be focused on the non-competitive, informal area of sport participation as these are more likely to attract the groups that will provide the highest health benefits from participation (cited in Kay 2005). Yet, as Tomlinson *et al.* (2005) have argued, a fuller understanding is required of the contribution nontraditional, non-institutionalized sports such as ‘lifestyle sports’ can make in terms of various policy objectives (see also Kay 2005). Although there appears to be a growing recognition of the value of these activities evident, for example, in the appointment of extreme sports development officers in some part of the United Kingdom, there remains an absence of critical commentary and integration by either policymakers or academics as to the potential of lifestyle sports to meet policy objectives. Thus in this article we highlight the emergence of lifestyle sport as a tool for policymakers. Our empirical focus is the emergence of the urban-based lifestyle sport parkour, also called *free running* or *art de déplacement*, in the South of England. Despite being a relatively new and unknown activity, initiatives around parkour are burgeoning in the United Kingdom; here we discuss some of the ways in which the activity is being adopted in England to address a range of policy objectives, exploring stakeholders’ motivations for doing so, and the perceived benefits. Given the paucity of research or policy analysis in this area, our article has a deliberately broad focus, exploring the potential of parkour for policy, examining policy processes and offering an analysis of the participants’ and stakeholders’ experiential accounts, which we argue is central to understanding the activity’s potential to address policy objectives.

Our article is structured as follows: first we outline what lifestyle sports are, offering a brief introduction to parkour. Second, we contextualize lifestyle sport’s expansion both in the United Kingdom and more widely and consider its role in sport policy. Third we describe our empirical research on parkour provision in England and critically examine various policy initiatives using parkour. Our discussion then examines how and why parkour has been embraced in these different policy contexts in sport, art and education. We consider how parkour’s perceived value is related to its cultural values, specifically the opportunity for managed risk-taking, and its alterative ethos or philosophy of physical activity that is more inclusive, participant-driven, anticompetitive and less rule-bound than most traditional sports.

Lifestyle sports

Broadly, lifestyle sports (and other related categorizations including new, whiz, action and extreme sports) refer to a wide range of mostly individualized activities, ranging from

established sports such as climbing, surfing and skateboarding, to new activities such as parkour, wake boarding, B.A.S.E. jumping and kite surfing (see Wheaton 2004). There are numerous comprehensive commentaries on what lifestyle/action/alternative/extreme sports *are*, their histories and ideologies, illustrating how many had – at least in their early phases of development – characteristics that were different to the traditional rule-bound, competitive, regulated, Western ‘achievement’ sport cultures (see Rinehart 2000, Rinehart and Sydor 2003, Wheaton 2004, Booth and Thorpe 2007). While recognizing that each lifestyle sport has its own specificity, history, identity and development pattern, many share a common ethos that remains *distinct* from that of most traditional sports. There is also crossover in the industries that underpin the cultures and participation between lifestyle sports, in some cases attracting seasonal shifts, for example, between surfing and snowboarding, or those who do a range of the activities (Wheaton 2005).

The urban-based lifestyle sport parkour is the empirical focus of this article, which according to its founders is the ‘art of moving fluidly from one part of the environment to another’ (McLean *et al.* 2006, p. 795). The activity originated in the economically deprived Paris suburb or *banlieue* of Lisses in the 1980s (Ortuzar 2009, p. 61). Here David Belle, Sebastien Foucan and friends began training and founded the Yamakasi group, from which most of the parkour-inspired movements have originated (Mould 2009). However, the extent to which it can be characterized as new is debatable and its modern-day founders and subsequent practitioners recognize a genealogy to the military training methods *parcours de combatant*, proposed by the French educational theorist Georges Hebert in 1913 (see Edwardes 2007, Atkinson 2009, Ortuzar 2009).¹

Parkour is practiced predominantly in urban areas using either human-made or naturally occurring obstacles. Although practitioners first learn a set of techniques, such as the *cat leap*, it does not have a set of rules or objectives. Each *tracuer* – the name given to those who practice parkour seriously – moves from A to B under, over and through obstacles including walls, railing and roofs, in the most fluid, efficient way. Parkour does not fit easily into existing categories, being described variously as sport and art, and has forms that intersect with other activities such as dance and gymnastics. It shares some characteristics with other urban lifestyle sports like skateboarding, such as ambivalence to man-on-man (sic) formal competition, an emphasis on self-expression and attitudes to risk, which tend to be carefully calculated and managed rather than taken unnecessarily (Stranger 1999, Wheaton 2004, Oliver 2006, Robinson 2008). Nonetheless, the philosophy and meaning of parkour also differs from other lifestyle sports in important ways. Like many post-subcultural formations (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003), the *discipline*, as practitioners refer to it, has fragmented into different variants such as *free running*, which involves more acrobatic and dance-like manoeuvres, is more commercialized and tends towards stunt-making and mass spectacle (Edwardes 2007, Atkinson and Young 2008, Archer 2010).

Until very recently parkour was a relatively unheard-of activity, but it has spread rapidly among young urban inner-city populations, through informal networks, Internet forums and particularly its virtual presence on sites such as YouTube. The United Kingdom is now considered as a centre for parkour, with London being the base for many of the top teams of traceurs, including a number of French ‘masters’. A spate of media attention has also contributed to its growing cultural presence, such as featuring in the BBC channel ident *Rush Hour* starring founding traceur Danielle Belle, and in films such as *Jump London* (2003) and *Casino Royale* (2006), featuring a chase between Daniel Craig (as James Bond) and Sébastien Foucan. The mainstream media however has tended to depict parkour as a dangerous and even deviant activity, contributing to widespread misinformation, particularly about the degree of risk involved (McLean *et al.* 2006). Indeed, many sport activities

labelled extreme are actually relatively safe (Booth and Thorpe 2007, p. 183). As illustrated in this article, parkour participants vociferously reject the extreme or high-risk label, recognizing the importance of safe and responsible practice. The (multi-disciplinary) academic research emerging on parkour has also emphasized its value suggesting, for example, that it provides a transgressive way of interacting with the (urban) environment, one that challenges and redefines the use and meaning of urban space, urban life and forms of embodiment (Geyh 2006, Bavinton 2007, Daskalaki *et al.* 2008, Saville 2008, Thompson 2008, Atkinson 2009, Archer 2010).

The significance of lifestyle sport for sport policy

Since their emergence in the 1960s, lifestyle sports have experienced unprecedented growth both in participation and in their increased visibility across public and private space, fuelled by wider sociocultural developments. As Booth and Thorpe (2007, p. 9) outlined, extreme sports have ‘diffused around the world at a phenomenal rate and far faster than established sports’ benefiting from ‘a historically unique conjuncture of mass communications, corporate sponsors, entertainment industries, political aspirations of cities, and a growing and affluent youth population’. Surveys across Europe and America, including Sport England’s Active People Survey (2006, 2007), have pointed to the increased popularity of non-institutionalized informal sport activities in general, and lifestyle sport specially. Given the difficulty of capturing participation rates in these informal, outdoor, non-association-based activities (Bach 1993) it is likely that participation rates are growing faster than these surveys suggest. Indeed when measures such as equipment sales (see sources cited in e.g. Booth and Thorpe 2007, Howell 2008), market research surveys (see Tomlinson *et al.* 2005) and media commentaries (e.g. Asthana 2004, Barkham 2006) are included, it is clear that in the twenty-first century many types of lifestyle sports are attracting an ever-increasing body of followers, outpacing the expansion of traditional sports in many Western nations (Rinehart and Sydor 2003, Comer 2004, Wheaton 2004, Jarvie 2006, Booth and Thorpe 2007, Howell 2008, Thorpe 2008). This expansion in participation includes not only the traditional consumer market of teenage boys (Mintel 2003 cited in Tomlinson *et al.* 2005) but older men and, increasingly in a number of activities, women and girls (Wheaton 2009). In practical terms, these sports, which take place in spaces outside of the traditional forms of provision such as schools, clubs and leisure centres, represent avenues for sporting participation and social engagement for men and women across socio-economic groups, including the most socially disadvantaged (see Wheaton 2009) and those who have turned their back on traditional school-based and institutional sport practices.

Yet, as Tomlinson *et al.* highlighted in 2005, there was an absence of research and policy initiatives in this area.² Since then, an expansion in localized policy initiatives on or using aspects of lifestyle/extreme sports provision is evident, often with a high degree of perceived ‘success’ in terms of engaging the targeted populations. Given the renewed prominence of sport across a range of policy areas under New Labour, this expansion in provision is not surprising. For example, extreme sport development officers have emerged, new facilities have been constructed in areas undergoing regeneration and lifestyle/extreme sports have been the focus for several Active England projects.³ There has also been an attempt by Sport England in the Active People Surveys to widen its vision of ‘sport’ to include many informal and lifestyles sports. Initiatives such as *StreetGames*⁴ suggest that Sport England has begun to recognize the importance of participation outside of traditional clubs. Yet, as we illustrate in this article, locally based initiatives appear to take place without any links or awareness of

similar projects, their problems and strengths. In short, there is an absence of integration or analysis by policymakers and academics.

A further related issue is the lack of ‘evidence’ about participation and performance in most lifestyle sports (c.f. Tomlinson *et al.* 2005). Information about *who* participates – their social demographics – where, when, how often or the reasons why is extremely limited. In the cases of relatively new activities like parkour, ‘evidence’ is almost non-existent. Additionally, there are serious limitations in the survey-based methodologies that have been used to measure participation, making much of the ‘evidence’ policymakers have about the significance and scope of lifestyle sport unreliable. Factors contributing to this include the unregulated, individualistic and often nomadic nature of participation in lifestyle sport; lack of governing bodies and club structures; and failure of even the most-recent mass participation surveys (such as Sport England’s Active People Surveys) to include questions suited to the nomadic, seasonal and weather-dependent nature of lifestyle sports.⁵ These surveys tell us little about the *nature* of people’s engagement. Although some have attempted to differentiate between the regular and occasional participant, this simple dualism is insufficient for understanding the complex ways people engage with and construct identities through participation in and consumption of lifestyle sports (c.f. Tomlinson *et al.* 2005). In contrast, in-depth qualitative academic research about lifestyle sport that has emerged over the past 15 years has illuminated the meanings and experiences of participation. This body of research, often ethnographic in nature, has revealed the wide range of different types of involvement from ‘weekend warriors’ to the very committed ‘hard core’ for whom participation becomes a whole way of life, one that may be sustained from youth to retirement (Wheaton 2004, Robinson 2008). Strong social and emotional bonds develop between these committed participants – often described as subcultural communities or neo-tribal affiliations (Wheaton 2007) – linked by shared attitudes, values and ways of life. Thus, rather than focusing on individual sports, ‘data collection with respect to lifestyle sports needs to focus on the participants; the sports are very much an expression of their identities and lifestyles rather than existing as institutional forms in their own rights’ (Tomlinson *et al.* 2005, p. 4).

Research context and methodology

The empirical research that this article is based on involved a community-focused⁶ project that explored the reactions by stakeholders to plans to build a parkour training area, a purpose-built facility to encourage the development of parkour participation, in Peacehaven, East Sussex. The project was designed to gain a better understanding of the activity, its meaning and social value in support of applications made to construct the facility by the lead partner – REGEN (the Peacehaven and Telscombe Regeneration Partnership). Our research involved interviews with stakeholders involved in this process including the local participants,⁷ parkour training organizations, police, community officers, teachers, sport and art development officers, members of REGEN and local councillors. Mindful of the recommendations from Tomlinson *et al.*’s report (2005), we also documented the various governance structures emerging in this rapidly evolving activity, involving interviews with personnel from key organizations involved with the institutionalization and teaching provision of parkour/free running in England more widely, exploring the institutionalization and regulation processes and seeing how parkour has been used in other social inclusion and regeneration initiatives. The empirical research was conducted between September 2008 and October 2009, consisting of 18 in-depth qualitative interviews, conducted predominantly individually but in two cases, small groups. The interviews were fully transcribed and then

coded thematically. We also used web-based research including parkour chat sites, YouTube and media reports about parkour.

We acknowledge that the small-scale qualitative work we offer here has limited application, particularly in the context of a pervasive ideology of evidenced-based policymaking (Coalter 2007). Our objective is not to examine whether parkour actually benefits young people, nor is it to evaluate the impact (or delivery) of the policy interventions we examine; we do not have – or seek – evidence to suggest that parkour is a ‘solution’ to a complex range of social issues. In contrast, the research we present in this article is situated in a critical tradition that seeks to ‘demythologize sport’ (Houlihan *et al.* 2009, p. 5), broadening our understanding of the boundaries of ‘sport’, through providing small-scale, localized, qualitative case studies that ‘tease out deeper levels of meaning’ and illuminate ‘what sports work for what subjects, in what conditions’ (Coalter 2007, p. 165). Our case studies help to understand these policy initiatives from the perspective of key policy actors and participants; indeed as Green and Houlihan (2006, p. 51) argued, ‘if individual agency is deemed important in aiding the understanding of policymaking, then the “assumptive worlds” (Young 1977, p. 3) of key actors need to be explored’. Like Kay (2009), our emphasis is on the *experiential accounts* of those who believed sport was benefiting young people, focusing on how those closest to this experience – as participants or those who worked with them – felt parkour had contributed to this process. As Kay advised,

The inclusion of individuals’ accounts of their sport experiences is, at the very least a legitimate and important component in assessment of the ‘impact’ of sport; alternatively and more ambitiously, they are a voice without which such work is incomplete. (2009, p. 1180)

We hope that our research also contributes to the continuing conversation between researchers and policymakers both about the nature of ‘evidence’ and the potential that lifestyle sports like parkour can make in terms of ‘sports-based policymaking’.

Parkour and youth policy initiatives

Given the pervasiveness of the media-fuelled belief that parkour encourages dangerous risk-taking, and endorses forms of deviant behaviour, it is perhaps surprising that parkour has also emerged as a focus for public policy. Indeed as one sport development officer we interviewed suggested ‘You know you get the same old analogies, “you are teaching the cat burglars of the future.”’ As Dumas and Laforest (2009, pp. 19–20) argued in the similar context of skateboarding,

Even though public health institutions are engaged in unprecedented efforts to counter the sedentariness of youth, the promotion of lifestyle sport has been and remains tempered by the view of them having high risk of injuries.

Yet numerous youth policy initiatives are emerging around the United Kingdom using the activity of parkour in its various manifestations, including hybrid forms involving gymnastics, dance and other performance arts. Here we examine the range of initiatives we encountered across different policy contexts during our research in South East England. Although they are not necessarily ‘typical’ or representative, they illustrate the variety of different and innovative ways in which parkour is being utilized by policymakers in sport, art and education, and for cross-cutting community initiatives and partnerships drawing on several of these aspects. As Coalter outlines, under New Labour’s broad social inclusion

agenda, sport has been seen to contribute to ‘community renewal’, encompassing ‘improving communities performance in health, crime, employment and education’ (Coalter 2007, p. 116). Thus, although these initiatives can broadly be categorized into sport provision and participation, regeneration projects, social inclusion initiatives and school-based schemes, in most cases provision cuts across and contributes to several of these agendas. In the discussion that follows, we consider how the perceived ‘success’ of parkour in these different contexts is related to the culture of the activity and to its ability to provide managed risk-taking behaviour. We also highlight some of the particular problems presented by the activity of parkour, particularly managing the perception of risk.

Parkour and sport development

In the London Borough of Westminster, an area with a mixed socio-economic demographic including several pockets of deprivation, parkour has been adopted and promoted by the Westminster Sports Development Unit since 2005.⁸ The Unit⁹ is one of the most avid and long-standing supporters of parkour in the United Kingdom, and the team are ambitious about their role in the professionalization of parkour (see below). They are involved with expanding knowledge and provision – initially in the gymnasium and then outside in public spaces like parks and playgrounds – through a number of policy initiatives, including *Positive Futures*, their *Schools Sports Partnership* and more widely in conjunction with the *Youth Sports Trust*. The provision in Westminster has expanded rapidly. It coordinates the teaching of parkour over 14 schools across the Borough both in school PE and after school activities, runs three adult classes, a free weekly youth academy and activities during school holidays (interview). The parkour training and coaching they offer is approved via the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance Examination Board, which recognizes parkour for being part of the national curriculum for gymnastics, and over 500 people have been trained through this scheme (interview).

Westminster’s most widely cited parkour initiative is its *Positive Futures* programme. *Positive Futures* is a nationally based sports-based social inclusion programme for young people aged 8–18 years, established in 2002 and funded by the Home Office¹⁰ under the broad remit of crime prevention. It works with wards identified as the most deprived in the United Kingdom, and its broad aims are to improve behaviour, reduce drug misuse¹¹ and increase physical activity. *Positive Futures* was one of the key sport-based policy initiatives launched in the context of New Labour’s broad social inclusion agenda (Coalter 2007) improving health, crime, employment and education performance in targeted communities. Policymakers have hailed parkour in Westminster a success, largely due to the *claims* of a reduction in crime rates: ‘39% in school holidays when the sport unit were running their multi-sport courses and 69% when running solely the parkour courses’.¹² It was highlighted for best practice within the *Positive Futures* report (Positive Futures Team 2007), and as a consequence, other *Positive Futures* projects around the United Kingdom are now delivering parkour (interview). These projects raise interesting, important and not well-understood questions for policymakers about *how* and *why* these changes in behaviours occurred (c.f. Coalter 2007, Nichols 2007), issues we return to later in our discussion.

Reflecting our observations above about pervasive negative public perceptions about parkour, James,¹³ the community sport development officer at Westminster described the difficulties in securing support for parkour, both within his organization and with other bodies:

We know how long it took to get us to this stage, and a lot of that was around the questions of qualifications, insurance . . . you've got your liability, and is this *sport safe*?

For sport development professionals, establishing parkour as a legitimate sporting activity with recognized training and teaching structures was essential. To this end, Westminster Sport Development Unit, in conjunction with Parkour Generations, who deliver the teaching in Westminster and are one of the premier groups of parkour participants/teachers in the United Kingdom (and internationally), are creating a parkour national governing body (NGB) with support from Sport England.

Parkour as art

In contrast to the Westminster Sport Development Unit, provision for parkour in Brighton is based around a theatre company, funded through the arts. The Urban Playground (UPG) team teach and practice parkour under the remit of 'physical theatre'; they initially gained funding for parkour training and to develop a training facility involving a set of movable stages from the *Brighton and Hove Arts Commission* under an initiative called *Making a Difference*. The movable facility has since been used in schools across Brighton, and for a number of public performances. UPG consider the arts 'the most natural' place for parkour, and have used their former training as physical theatre practitioners to create parkour as an 'artistic discipline' (interview). In part this was seen as a pragmatic response to gain funding, with the Arts Council being receptive to new forms of physical performance that animate public spaces. Furthermore, by defining parkour as an artistic practice, UPG felt it helped to circumvent health and safety concerns, which are overly restrictive when labelled as a sport (interview).

Crawley was another locale where parkour initiatives were funded through the arts rather than sports. *Jump Crawley* has been running for over 5 years, with a remit to engage young men with 'some sort of artistic notion of movement and physicality' using parkour (interview, Arts Officer). Mary explained, 'We slipped some contemporary dance in there without anyone noticing; and it was very successful.' Crawley subsequently employed an extreme sport development manager to work on both the construction of a parkour-dedicated training facility and other extreme sport projects, but the fusion with arts has continued through involvement with UPG, and both retain a scepticism towards the sportization and institutionalization of parkour, in particular its competitive and commercialized elements, which were seen as potentially damaging to the ethos and benefits of the activity.

Containment and the emergence of the parkour park

The provision of parkour training areas or parks is a relatively new and uncharted development in the provision for parkour. At the time of writing this article one parkour park had opened in Crawley, West Sussex (Summer 2009), and three others were in various states of planning and building in London (alongside the sports unit headquarters in Westminster and Roehampton University) and Newhaven¹⁴ (near Brighton). There were reports about several other facilities planned around the country, and variants such as the movable box structures used by UPG in Brighton also existed.

The impetus for the Peacehaven Park that was the focus of our research was a group of teenage male traceurs who approached REGEN to help them find a dedicated outdoor space for practising parkour. Their motivation was because they were seen as a nuisance by the (largely elderly) public and police, so they were unable to practice:

INTERVIEWER: Is that a problem – do you get hassled a lot?

Participant 1: Every single day

INTERVIEWER: Who by?

Participant 1: Residents, police, security . . . anyone who wants to.

Participant 2: We are always getting moved on. I have been stopped 3 times in one day by the police. That was my record.

INTERVIEWER: What do the police say?

Participant 1: Basically, you are being antisocial . . . move on.

Participant 2: Yep. Or this is private property.

With support from REGEN and other stakeholders, architectural designs were drawn up for a ‘performance space’ in a local park in Peacehaven, which would incorporate an area for practising parkour. However, these plans were rejected at public consultation in August 2007, largely due to (older) residents’ concerns about noise, and ‘young people hanging around’ (interview). The local police confirmed that when parkour first emerged in the area, they had ‘constant’ phone calls from (predominantly older) residents voicing concerns which included participants’ safety, ‘youths gathering’ and reporting ‘damage to property’ (interview). While recognizing that these youths did fuel these prejudices by, for example, choosing locales such as the street opposite a nursing home to practise, the police and other community officials we interviewed recognized there was little evidence of damage to property or antisocial behaviour:

There were reports of damage being done and youths gathering together and jumping on fences and things like that . . . it wasn’t so much damage – that they were jumping from one side to the other. I think people haven’t really seen it for what they can do, you know, they’ve been seeing it initially as groups of youths hanging round (interview, community police officer).

Subsequently two new venues have been identified in the adjacent council’s jurisdiction, and at the time of writing (early 2010) the council were looking at the project favourably, and substantial monies had been ring-fenced.¹⁵

In both Crawley and Peacehaven, the parks or training areas grew out of the local councils seeing a need to provide physical activity provision, and in the case of Crawley to regenerate an area. Parkour was chosen – in both cases – by local youth as a priority in either public consultation activities and/or following parkour sessions provided by local youth providers. Parkour was the most popular activity at a multi-sport youth festival in Brighton.

Although parkour training areas such as the one under discussion in Peacehaven has been described as a performance and ‘play space’, as Howell remind us, ‘playgrounds were conceived of as places to contain young people who might otherwise be playing in the street, while simultaneously cultivating in those young people social values that advocates deemed desirable’ (Howell 2008, p. 478). Clearly, the provision of the park could potentially lead to the containment of the activity, with street-based traceurs being marginalized and subject to increasingly stringent legislation as has been observed in skateboarding (see Borden 2001). Misinformation and fear about risk and injury in street skateboarding has led to regulation of the activity and its participants (see Dumas and Laforest 2009), including containing them in skateparks; enforcing rules about appropriate behaviour and protective clothing and limiting street skating through legislation and modifications to the urban furniture (Borden 2001).

Indeed in some locales, urban managers have attempted to regulate parkour using similar techniques to those adopted to deter street skateboarding (see Borden 2001). For example, in the Paris suburbs where parkour originated, the civic authorities built fences on the edge of roofs. However, this failed to limit the activity; on the contrary it provided new obstacles to climb (interview). Thus traceurs were certainly aware of the potential for parks to ‘become a way of containing the discipline’ (interview), which is an ongoing theme in our research:

If it’s called a parkour *park* we’re saying this is where you do parkour. If we call it a parkour *training area* then we are saying we accept that you will do parkour elsewhere. Because one of the big problems with the skateboard parks in the past has been ‘we’ve given you a park and now we’re going to put no skateboarding signs everywhere else’. And it doesn’t work. It doesn’t stop people skateboarding. It just means that every skateboarder necessarily has to adopt a kind of two-fingers up attitude to authority in order to be a skateboarder, which is stupid. (Sport Development Officer)

There was surprisingly little contact between the different groups involved with building the parks (or indeed involved in any initiatives). They all discussed the difficulties in the process, including the design, location, getting support and involvement from local traceurs, safety concerns and the need to consult experienced parkour gurus. Yet projects were being conducted in isolation; indeed the team in Westminster first heard about the Crawley park during our interview. This fragmentation is not surprising when one considers the informal networks that characterize parkour, and the fragmentation of the discipline with a range of different bodies with quite divergent understandings of parkour, who served the community. In the absence of a recognized NGB, or training/teaching association sanctioned by all traceurs, those bodies wanting to build a facility had to rely on local participants to inform their understanding of the process. Various different coaching qualifications offered by insider groups and bodies had proliferated; one interviewee described the situation as an ‘accreditation bandwagon’. Stakeholders discussed that it was hard to assess their legitimacy or credibility. These concerns as well as the ongoing questions about the sport’s safety (see on) were driving the professionalization of parkour:

Because nobody ever asks ‘are we going to do rugby at school,’ oh well ‘that’s dangerous’ you know because, there is the assumption that there is safety standards, which there is. So if we do that for parkour it will just legitimise the sport for other people out there that are risk averse. (interview, Sport Development Officer)

These debates are particularly visible in the PE context where, as the next section explores, there has been an intense and ongoing debate about the role, use and value of parkour in school, initially as extracurricular activities but latterly in the context of the PE curriculum.

Parkour and the PE profession: negotiating discourses of risk and safety

Our objective here is to highlight the importance of school provision in these wider policy debates about parkour risk and responsibility. However to do so, the impact of the new PE curriculum introduced into secondary schools in England in 2009 needs recognition. Although views about this development are mixed, its intention is to shift the emphasis from a focus on *activities* (such as team games) towards *core skills* (such as balance, flight and creativity). Evidently, *some* schools have expanded their provision, including incorporating a range of nontraditional sports such as skateboarding, Ultimate Frisbee, street surfing and parkour:

We have been offering loads of new age activities that are highly successful, that are a great leveller. [...] We are games dominated within our curriculum, and we are very conscious that we believe in the aesthetic activities. We want to keep them ... with the new curriculum we are certainly open to be able to move that forward. (interview, PE teacher)

However parkour has had a contested and contradictory reception within the PE profession, largely due to health and safety fears. A bulletin produced for Association for PE Professionals (afPE) early in 2008 stated 'afPE cannot support an activity that appears to fly in the face of safe practice and acceptable risk on several counts. [...] In short, it is inappropriate, misguided and dangerous' (Glen Beaumont afPE's health and safety officer cited in Cornford 2008). However, the interpretation of these recommendations appeared to be regionally variable, with locales like London having already provided parkour in PE for several years and others like East Sussex County Council banning parkour in curriculum time (interviews). Moreover, a few months later afPE issued a second statement recognizing media-fuelled misperception about parkour and its potential benefits:

afPE believes parkour-related activity has the potential to offer young people an alternative movement experience that is both challenging and fulfilling in both its skill and aesthetic demands. (Beaumont 2008)

The need to establish parameters of acceptable and safe practice was widely recognized by all those interviewed for this project, although they differed in the bodies or organization they believed would be best placed to represent parkour's and children's interests. In this context, a number of attempts to regulate and institutionalize parkour and free running were under discussion, with initiatives from both within (e.g. Parkour Generations) and outside of the discipline (e.g. British Gymnastics).

Discussion: parkour as a tool for youth engagement

The overwhelming attitude of this small group of school teachers, sport/art development officers and community stakeholders was palpable enthusiasm about the potential of parkour, detailing the numerous ways in which they believed it had benefited children. Yet most of these – such as better behaviour, attendance, bringing students from different background together, boosting self-esteem and confidence – mirror the perceived benefits of participation in *all* school sport/PE programmes and policy interventions, which as is widely recognized, are often based on generalized and unsubstantiated 'positive outcomes' (see Coalter 2007, p. 93). Clearly there are numerous and complex sets of cultural, economic, social and psychological influences that may influence individual children's behaviour. However it is worth reflecting on Coalter's (2007) appraisal of the (predominantly) psychological research that attempts to understand the mechanisms that lead to improvements in confidence and self-efficacy in such interventions. He surmises 'for many of the groups likely to benefit most from improved physical self-worth, body image and self-esteem, the traditional competitive, ego-centred, sports might not be effective' instead advocating nontraditional, 'task- and mastery-orientated' activities that seek to develop intrinsic motivation (Calter 2007, p. 102). Parkour certainly proves an apposite example of such an approach.¹⁶

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that although programme advocates, and particularly those who institute such programmes, often sing their praises, the reality is that little is systematically known about the effects of these interventions and whether they

attain stated objectives enough to warrant continuation.¹⁷ Although there is a well-established policy discourse over how risk-based sporting activities contribute to social welfare – from wilderness adventures that carry a therapeutic value, which can lead to personal growth (see Ewert *et al.* 2006) or which tackle antisocial behaviours (Ward Thompson *et al.* 2006); to the health and fitness benefits that accrue from mountain-biking in forest environments (O’Brien and Morris 2009, p. 37) – it is more difficult to discern from the available literature the effectiveness of such interventions. There is a tendency to evaluate programmes under broader sporting interventions that subsume lifestyle sport programmes under a pre-existing condition of policy concern (e.g. to increase participation, overcome access constraints or improve health and tackle obesity). This suggests a ‘mainstreaming’ of sorts – directed towards problems that are often framed by other agendas, rather than those that arise from lifestyle sport communities per se. Yet, as Hall Aitken and Bearhunt (2009) have recommended, in their evaluation of Sport England’s £109 million Active England programme, and we advocate here, there is a further need to understand the identities, communities and experiences of lifestyle sport participants, so that sport policy can be informed with these understandings from the offset.

Thus, here our focus is on *understanding* the aspects of parkour’s *culture, and cultural values* that enabled children, teachers and policymakers to *feel* parkour had contributed to changed attitudes and behaviours. The first and the most prevalent factor was recognition of the unique ethos of parkour, and belief that this philosophy, one that is more inclusive, anticompetitive and less rule-bound than most traditional sports, made the activity appealing to young people who tended not to engage in traditional forms of sport and physical activity. The second was the opportunity it provided for managed risk-taking, particularly in urban contexts. Lastly we offer some of our own observations based on both the culture of parkour and the broader sociopolitical contexts in which it is emerging. Of particular relevance is the recognition of a political shift that has reframed risky, counter-cultural, deviant lifestyles – such as parkour and skateboarding – as instruments of urban development.

The ethos and values of parkour

Parkour has its own unique philosophy or ethos that differs in key ways from both traditional and other lifestyle sports. Indeed traceurs reject the label ‘sport’ fundamentally because they are opposed to formal competitions. Yet paradoxically many aspects are sports-like, including their physically demanding training regimes (see also Atkinson 2009). Devotees are extremely physically fit individuals, who train hard, often around 20 h a week, and tend to adopt what is generally regarded as a ‘healthy lifestyle’, including abstaining from smoking, eating healthily and drinking alcohol in moderation – or not at all (interview). Traceurs see parkour as a non-competitive activity; participants challenge themselves and their level of skill; they do not compete *against* others:

It is a *discipline* that gives us strength, freedom and a deeper understanding of our physical bodies and mental strengths and weaknesses [...] no other discipline I know, offers the same level of freedom that parkour does. There is no dogma, no rules, no guru’s and no competition. Each individual is free to explore and develop within their own interpretation of parkour and the art of movement. (girlparkour website)¹⁸

As one participant explained, effort and attitude, not ability is rewarded. He explained there was ‘no competitiveness’ between traceurs, so a particularly high jump performed by an experienced participant was given the ‘same values’ the ‘same amount of credit and praise’

as a beginner would by ‘being just able to get over a barrier’. Traceurs described their group as ‘non-hierarchical’ and explained the ways in which everyone takes ‘responsibility for training everyone else in what they know’. This inclusivity and sense of responsibility is manifest in many ways, including attitudes to public space and in the ways in which beginners and ‘outsiders’ are embraced and supported, not derided as is often the case in many lifestyle and traditional sports:

I kind of find skate culture and BMX culture, they’re kind of a bit ‘we’re BMX’s, this is our place no one else’s’ . . . parkour’s a bit more, its got a different kind of background and it’s a lot more kind of ‘everywhere is kind of yours’. (participant)

Indeed traceurs have an ‘ethic of care’ for the self (Foucault 1988), other and the environment more broadly (Atkinson 2009); individuals view their relationship to self, others and their environment differently to most other sporting practices (e.g. Bavinton 2007, Atkinson 2009). As one sport development office explained, ‘every technique is underplayed with a philosophy and idea of responsibility: a responsibility about the environment one practices parkour in and the other users of that environment.’

Our interviewees concurred that these values, specifically the non-competitiveness, supportiveness and responsibility, were central to the ability of parkour to engage a wide range of participants:

It goes back to that non competitiveness so it’s around the small achievements you make even though there’s other people in the class that are excelling. [. . .] You know you get some people looking at their environment differently, looking at it through new eyes. (Interview, Sport Development Officer)

Although newcomers took time to understand this ethos, it infused their practice even in formal teaching settings:

Some of those young people that haven’t participated [in parkour] or organised workshops are into the competitive strength aspect. But it’s about highlighting it’s not about competition, it’s not about strength, it’s about working with your own head, and own physicality and dealing with your environment whether it’s the balancing beam or another obstacle. The minute it becomes a competition is the minute you lose out. And that ethos is played out all the time. And you see those young people, and it is the 13 and 14 year-olds taking it on board, trying harder with themselves and not trying to push each other, but they are supporting each other. (Interview, Arts Development Officer)

Parkour’s ability to engage participants who had previously shown little interest in sport, especially team games, was cited by several interviewees; as one sport development officer suggested, ‘You know, the typical emos¹⁹ will be the ones who will go into parkour.’ They argued that as well as being different, parkour was flexible, allowing pupils to be self-directed, bringing in ‘ideas of self expression and self-challenge, so they can set their own standards that they want to achieve’. (Interview, PE teacher)

The main thing that makes it so attractive is it engages the disengaged, so the ones that don’t want to do netball, football, [. . .] they’re the ones that we want to target with this and what we found by using parkour [. . .] we got young people re-engaged in doing physical activity and sport at school. (Interview, Sport Development Officer)

In the school setting, this ability to bring together diverse social groups and networks appeared to translate across context. As the head teacher of one school observed, the friendships developed through parkour had led to ‘the sorts of students who wouldn’t naturally’ mix, ‘working together in normal class-room activity, working together and learning from each other and supporting each other’ (interview, Head teacher).

In Westminster, parkour had been used to target various ‘hard-to-reach’ youth including those on the *Positive Futures* programmes, girls, children with additional educational needs and programmes for children targeted as overweight (interview). It had proved popular with some unexpected groups such as a group of Muslim girls, perceived by policymaker as typically ‘very difficult to engage in physical activity’ (Positive Futures Team 2007, p. 17). As their teacher recounted:

We had a group of (about 15) girls who absolutely loved it . . . and they would always turn up, always. You know, these are kids who are usually quite hard to reach in normal curriculum time but who really enjoyed the internally paced, self-motivated, in my own time, closed skills that were involved, as well as the body conditioning. (Interview, PE teacher)

As illustrated by the popularity of parkour among groups such as these Muslim girls, parkour’s ethic of inclusivity appears to also impact how social difference is marked, which has important implications for parkour’s potential for social inclusion initiatives. Although a discussion of ‘Race’, ethnicity and gender equality discourses and inclusion/exclusion in parkour is beyond our scope here, it is noteworthy that parkour does not have the white imagery and participant base associated with many other lifestyle sports, which as commentators have noted can be a powerful cultural barrier for non-white participants (Wheaton 2009). Indeed, from the outset, traceurs in the French suburbs were a racially diverse group (Ortuzar 2009). Parkour’s growing popularity in many inner-city contexts, and the high media profile of Black traceurs such as Foucan and Belle, suggests it has appeal across ethnic groups.

Our research also revealed some surprising insights about parkour and gender, suggesting that the masculine identities performed by these male participants was less tied to the performances of hegemonic masculinity prevalent in many sports. Rather than heroic displays of strength, speed and power, these young men embraced the aesthetic side of parkour, valuing ‘feminine’ physical skills such as balance and agility, supporting rather than competing with other participants. These values infused policy discourses, such as participant promoters claiming to want a more progressive attitude to women than do many traditional sports, discussing various initiatives to increase female membership. Innovative parkour hybrids such as *Dare-2-Dance* are emerging, which exploit the dance parallels to promote parkour to teenage girls; and conversely, as noted above, others like *Jump Crawley* used parkour to engage young men with aesthetic and creative activity.

Risk and responsibility

In contrast to the media depiction, those who do parkour, or are involved through teaching the activity, reject the extreme or high-risk label recognizing the importance of ‘being safe’. As one advocate explained, ‘it’s always broadcast as big, difficult moves,’ so people do not ‘realise that at a very basic level it’s a safe activity’ (interview, Sport Development Officer). Although videos participants posted on YouTube or websites tend to show the most difficult and spectacular part of performance repertoires, parkour practice involves slow-paced repetition of manoeuvres close to the ground. Many practitioners conceptualize the activity

as a form of art that uses many eastern philosophies requiring discipline (see also Miller and Demoigny 2008). Furthermore, academics examining parkour's injury rates claim that serious traceurs are 'tremendous athletes' (Miller and Demoigny 2008, p. 63), who learn and practice stunts in a controlled environment like a gym; serious injuries are rare, and tend to occur when untrained neophytes attempt dangerous tricks without proper training (Miller and Demoigny 2008).

Parkour was widely seen as providing an opportunity, particularly for urban-based young people to experience risk and adventure in a relatively safe way. As recent government reports have highlighted, and the media have widely pursued (e.g. Asthana 2008), there is a widespread belief that young people have limited opportunities to challenge themselves, and are living increasingly 'bubble-wrapped' lives. For commentators like Furedi (2006), the media's fixation on risk is symptomatic of broader social process; that in modernity, risk management becomes a powerful form of discursive control (Furedi 1997).

Despite the concerns vociferously expressed by afPE (noted above), other public bodies like *The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents* publicly endorsed the sport. Its safety education adviser, Dr. Jenny McWhirter, said: 'Anything that encourages young people to be active and try new challenges in a supervised environment will help them learn to manage risk. Free running is like any other activity in that it tests their limits. It is better they learn it in schools than on the streets' (cited in Johnson and Wroe 2009). Our interviewees also saw parkour as a way to reintroduce some sort of risk into sport and play, to give young people in urban settings a sense of challenge and adventure, and to enable them to learn to use risk safely so they understand how to challenge themselves:

Parkour does offer an element of danger and an element of challenge. This is a good thing if managed sensibly and students take decisions [...] [They] embrace the level of risk they are happy with, and become stronger people as a result. (Interview, PE teacher)

You can take whatever risk you want but then you've got that real 'I can. I can do this' ... And I think that's something they take into other area of their lives, that positive attitude. (Interview, Head teacher)

Despite such endorsements of the benefits, the contradictory discourses of danger and risk infused many of our interviews. Managing the risk, including aspects such as providing liability and insurance cover, was one of the central concerns for policymakers across all areas of provision.

Social context

Our own observations of the activity also provided some possible explanations for parkour's perceived value for targeting various hard-to-reach communities. Parkour provides few of the economic and cultural barriers participants face in many traditional sports. The costs are minimal; there is no fee for facilities or coaching; the clothing requirement and style are just trainers.²⁰ It can be conducted alone or with friends, anywhere, at any time, without rules or restrictions: 'they can climb on things and run around things and just be physically active in their communities and on their doorsteps again' (interview). Knowledge of the activity is gained online or through joining other participants in meetings or *Jams*, and gatekeepers recognize the importance of being welcoming and inclusive. The image of the activity is not especially 'sporty' and has an edgy urban feel, which may appeal to those attracted to other popular aspects of youth culture such as street dance. The informal but extremely strong networks that developed amongst the traceurs in our research certainly developed in

Putham's (2000) terms 'bonding capital', that is, 'networks based on strong social ties between similar people – people "like us" – with relations, reciprocity and trust based on ties of familiarity and closeness', which can lead to the development of social capital (Coalter 2007, p. 59, Kay 2005).

Active citizens

In the East Sussex case study it was also evident that through their involvement in lobbying for a parkour training area, these teenage traceurs had been involved with forms of civic engagement. Having instigated the process, they then helped in the planning, community lobbying and even building the parkour park. Their resourcefulness, maturity, self-direction and creativity positioned them in the eyes of leisure providers and community stake holders as 'good citizens'. This shift from urban-based lifestyle sport participants being perceived as deviant to good active citizens appear to be a more widespread and significant trend in the urban politics of lifestyle sport. Until quite recently skateboarders were excluded from public spaces and marginalized in decision-making processes (see e.g. Jones and Graves 2000, L'Aoustet and Griffet 2001, Stratford 2002, Howell 2005, Chiu 2009, Vivoni 2009). However these negative public perceptions of skateboarders have been challenged, highlighting their social benefits (Dumas and Laforest 2009); illustrating, for example, that successful skate parks can become an important social space in which young people – not just skaters – can gather, socialize and take responsibility to preserve and protect the park and wider locale, fostering a sense of 'responsibility, ownership and control' among the users (Jones and Graves 2000, p. 137). As Howell (2005) suggests, skateboarding is being reconfigured as an instrument of development. He describes an explosion in provision for skate parks in North America over the past decade, suggesting that the motivation for 'urban managers' (meaning the plethora of people involved in commercial and state-funded leisure provision) to provide new facilities is linked to the characteristic behaviour of skateboarders, which includes 'refraining from bringing liability cases for injuries', informally policing the neighbourhoods surrounding the parks, and showing creativity, 'personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and entrepreneurship' values that are desired personal characteristics of young citizens in neo-liberal societies (Howell 2008, p. 477).²¹ Although Howell's research is focused on the North American city, these political processes and ideologies have wider resonance in other neo-liberal contexts such as that of the United Kingdom, helping to understand this shift in the motivation and behaviour of commercial and state-funded leisure providers of lifestyle sports.

Although the reasons given by those involved with the Peacehaven parkour park were often quite vague and even contradictory, they too viewed the 'parkour lads' as 'good' and engaged young citizens, not deviant youth in need of discipline and containment. Parkour was credited by teachers, community workers and indeed some participants as having developed the confidence and maturity of the boys involved; in one case it was attributed to completely changing the attitudes and behaviour of a pupil on the verge of being expelled from school. As a member of the REGEN team commented, through the activity these teenagers learnt to think and behave in more 'creative' and 'productive' ways:

They approached problems in a different way, it wasn't just A to B a bit of lateral thinking, a different way of looking at problems which was really interesting. I just thought, it's absolutely amazing, it's outside and it's one of those things you've got to train to do and it's inexpensive and if it can help at school it takes credit. (Interview, REGEN member)

One of the teenage boys told us ‘I used to be really unconfident before I did parkour . . . I think once you do parkour, it definitely changes you.’ Like the skateboarders discussed in Howell’s (2008) research, their maturity, resourcefulness, self-direction, disciplined approach and creativity positioned them, in the eyes of these leisure providers as ‘good citizens’.

Conclusions

In this article we have described policy interventions using parkour that cut across different policy agendas including social inclusion, antisocial behaviour and increasing physical activity. We have explored the benefits of parkour from the perspective of those running the projects in sport, the arts and education, providing managed risk-taking and engaging a wide range of traditionally hard-to-reach groups. Our objective was not to ‘measure’ improvements, nor evaluate these policy interventions and the politics that underpin them, but given the paucity of research in this area, to firstly highlight their existence, and secondly, begin to understand how the culture of parkour has contributed to changed attitudes and behaviours in these contexts.

Although this project is just a starting point for understanding the relationship between lifestyle sports, parkour and sport policy, some interesting issues are raised in terms of the wider agenda proposed in Tomlinson *et al.*’s report (2005). To summarize, first are problems in the evidence base underpinning our understanding of the significance of lifestyle sports, that the positivistic drive for simplistically conceived participation data has limited understanding. Parkour illustrates how lifestyle sports can, in specific circumstances, contribute to physical health, well-being, community and civic engagement, appealing to groups of male and female participants not engaged by traditional sporting activities, and particularly team games. We have raised some implications for our understanding of how social capital is developed through sport participation, and the potential role of (post)subcultural communities (Wheaton 2007) such as parkour. It is also apparent that policy initiatives, such as the ones we have discussed, need to be driven from the community level (Kay 2005), with an understanding of the meaning given to participation, and ensuring that the participants continue to determine the form and circumstances of the activity. In these contexts, seemingly individualistic deviant activities can, in the right circumstances, lead to wider community engagement and civic responsibility. The fluid and ever-evolving nature of parkour allows it to be redefined to fit different policy agendas across the arts and sport, and indeed to propose ‘alternative’ and seemingly more inclusive forms of ‘physical culture’ (Atkinson 2009). Yet, there is a need for evaluation of these policy interventions, particularly from the perspectives of participants, to understand the mechanisms leading to the claimed outcomes and recognize the specificity of the circumstances leading to changes in people’s behaviour (c.f. Coalter 2007).

The research also supports Tomlinson *et al.*’s (2005) contention about the need to understand the governance structures of lifestyle sports, and indeed the (impact of) the contradictory role of NGBs in lifestyle sport and informal sport more widely. In this context Sport England’s emphasis on funding through NGBs, which have been tasked with, and funded to promote and increase participation in their sports, presents particular difficulties for developing and promoting lifestyle sport provision. Parkour’s fluidity does not easily fit the rigid boundaries imposed by many organizational structures involved in the policy-making process²²; to understand and develop the place of non-competitive and aesthetic-style sporting activities in policy development, evidently requires work across agencies’ (in sport, the arts, physical activity, education and health) traditional boundaries. The discourse

of risk and how it is managed by policymakers and stakeholders in the context of parkour is a central issue, one that is infused with pervasive disciplinary discourses serving to produce normative 'healthy' (McDermott 2007) self-responsible and productive neo-liberal citizens. Although participants remain resistant to having regulations imposed on them, most acknowledged the need for training and teaching to be regulated. However, akin to many other risky lifestyle sports including mountaineering and surfing, subcultural codes, rather than imposed sport rules, are seen to ensure the safety of participants (Tomlinson *et al.* 2005, Beedie 2007). Although lifestyle sports such as parkour clearly provide numerous challenges for traditional sport-based policymaking, it is also an untapped potential that policymakers can no longer afford to ignore.

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Notes

1. All lifestyle sports contain debates and conflicts over 'authentic' histories that define an 'essence' to the activity. In parkour too there are debates and contested claims about the 'real' and 'authentic' histories. These debates frame popular perceptions and misperceptions over the development of the activity, where it is common to talk of divergence in style or splits between two (or more) participative ideologies. A caricatured discussion of splits is present in media commentary on parkour between it and free running, rooted in supposedly contrasting visions of its 'founders' David Belle and Sebastien Foucan, through also the degrees to which parkour is 'selling out' to a more commercialized version (free running). Practitioners we spoke to were concerned about academic 'misreadings' of parkour based on misinformation through mediated histories is histories.
2. Their report develops an agenda for research, suggesting ways in which lifestyle sports can be brought into the policy arena in England. Key areas include examining the potential for new and different forms of engagement and new ways in which governance structures – and governing bodies – could work with Sport England and other agencies (Tomlinson *et al.* 2005, p. 5).
3. For example, Active X, Great Yarmouth's kite-project and CREST Cornwall, Rural and Extreme Sport. Available from: <http://www.aelz.org/files/documents/Using%20water%20based%20activities.pdf>
4. Available from: <http://www.streetgames.org/drupal-5.0/index.php>
5. In evaluating the various survey data available, Tomlinson *et al.* claimed 'These are limited in terms of scope and data reliability, with little trend consistency' (2005, p. 2). To illustrate the extent of this problem, consider the various data sources on UK surfing participation. According to the British Surfing Association, the sport's NGB, there are 500,000 regular surfers in the United Kingdom (2006). They also claimed that it is a fast-growing activity with membership up to 400% in the past 5 years (cited in Barkham 2006). However according to the Sport England's Active People Survey, the number of adults (over 16) who take part at least once a month is only 58,439, a 10-fold difference. Moreover the survey did not show a large increase in the year-on-year data (from 2005–2006 to 2007–2008). In contrast another national survey focusing on water sport participation, the Watersport and Leisure Participation survey (2007), suggested there were 606,802 surfers in the United Kingdom. Such variation in the survey data on lifestyle sport participation is typical.
6. The research was funded by the *Brighton and Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange* (BSCKE) programme. Our community partners were the *Peacehaven and Telescombe Regeneration Partnership* (REGEN) who were trying to raise money for the parkour training area.

7. The parkour participants were all teenage males between the ages of 15 and 18, either at school or college, however the group they practiced with included older men up to their mid-20s. They were all white and appeared to come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The practitioners involved with teaching and training were all men in their 20s and 30s. As outlined above, there is no survey data available to help understand who is the 'typical' parkour participant; however based on the view of those involved in training, and other qualitative research (e.g. Atkinson 2009), the activity increasingly attracts both teenage and older men, across a range of social backgrounds and ethnicities. The male-dominated nature of parkour, and involvement of women, is discussed below.
8. Sport development is a widely used but contested term that 'can mean the development of sport for sport's sake and equally the use of sport and physical activity opportunities for the development of society – sport as a social instrument' (<http://www.sportdevelopment.info/>). In the United Kingdom, most local councils have sport development units. They are usually responsible for coordinating the local provision (and budget) for sport and active leisure provision in that locale, including sports to schools, youth/community centres, parks, clubs and various sport centres/complexes and open spaces.
9. Available from: <http://www.westminster.gov.uk/services/leisureandculture/active/westminster-sports-unit/> [Accessed 10 February 2011]. A documentary film about parkour in Westminster titled *Jump Westminster* is available on YouTube. Available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvP_HfVa2Rs.
10. In partnership initially between Home Office Drugs Strategy Directorate, Sport England, the Youth Justice Board and the Football Foundation. It initially targeted 10–19 year olds. See www.positivefuturesresearch.co.uk.
11. Nichols explores the complex problem of crime programme evaluation and develops a theoretical model of how and why such programmes might make a difference, which would be useful for exploring the efficacy of parkour in this context.
12. These figures were given during interviews with personnel from/involvement with Westminster sports development unit, and are also cited in a range of newspaper reports, for example Johnson and Wroe (2009).
13. Although the locations and names of programmes are given in full detail, the names of individuals involved are changed for reasons of anonymity.
14. The situation is ever-changing (see footnote 13).
15. During writing this article several developments occurred. The Telescombe site was rejected, and in February 2010 the parkour park was moved to Newhaven, which opened in the summer of 2010.
16. In understanding the benefits of such activities, policymakers could benefit from a fuller engagement with this social psychological literature. Additionally, there are many interesting and potentially useful points of convergence with the literature on physical literacy, which advocate a more holistic understanding of embodiment, including in the physical education sphere (see Whitehead 2010).
17. This makes them particularly precarious as the resourcing for these programmes is highly dependent on key agents on the ground and government priorities, both of which are susceptible to change over time.
18. <http://www.girlparkour.com/page25.htm> [Accessed 10 Nov 2009].
19. Emo is a term that is used to refer to a type of teenage subculture in the United Kingdom – children who dress in a particular way, who have (or affect) an emotional, sensitive, shy, introverted or angst-ridden personality and are considered not sporty.
20. Moreover, traceurs said that the cheaper trainers in a brand range tended to be better for parkour.
21. Indeed, as several analyses of action/extreme/lifestyle sport have suggested, the current expansion of lifestyle sport provision is related to the growing ethos of neo-liberalism within North American societies (as well as Australasian and European societies) (see Kusz 2004, Howell 2005, 2008, Heywood 2007a,b, Banks 2008).
22. In Canada, for example, parkour does not easily fit into sport policy at all as Sport Canada's operationalization of 'sport' requires some form of competition.

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