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Risk sports – social constraints and cultural imperatives

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The desire to voluntarily undertake risk in sports has been studied and theorized within various academic disciplines. From a meta-sociological point of view, this article identifies two main perspectives in the existing sociological research and theory on risk sports. On the one hand, from the *compensation perspective*, risk-taking in sports is understood as an escape from a constraining modern society. The *adaptation perspective*, on the other hand, considers participation in risk sports as an expression of personal adjustment to cultural imperatives in late modernity. The article analyses and clarifies the socio-philosophical foundations for the relations between actors, society and desire found in these two perspectives. Seemingly, the two perspectives are incompatible. However, in the final part of the article it is argued that a constructivist model of desire, allows for arguments from both perspectives to shed light on voluntary risk-taking in sports.

August 2008 saw one of the most tragic events in mountaineering history. At K2 in the Himalayas, 11 climbers died and many more were seriously injured. In the media storm after the accidents, a question was raised: Why do they do it? Why do they risk attempting an ascent of K2 when they know the terrible injury – and death – statistics? Even though these questions are often raised, so-called risk sports are becoming more popular than ever. Participation in sports activities involving excitement and risk, such as climbing, surfing, BASE jumping and river kayaking, is increasing throughout the Western world.¹

The impetus for participation in risk sports has been studied within several academic fields. Within evolutionary psychology, the propensity for voluntary involvement in risk and danger is often understood as an outcome of personal characteristics.² Risk-taking is seen as a result of an evolutionary process that has led to individual differences in the willingness to become involved in dangerous situations. Another feature of risk sports that has been emphasized within psychology is the experience of flow that engagement in dangerous situations might give.³ Similar to the flow-perspective, other authors have studied voluntary risk-taking in relation to a Kantian understanding of the sublime.⁴ It is argued that risk-taking in sports is a particularly suitable way to achieve intense thrills and elevated experiences. What the above-mentioned conceptions of risk-taking have in common, is a tendency to see risk-taking as a highly individual endeavour. However, risk-taking has also been studied as social phenomena.

Within the social sciences, voluntary risk-taking in sports has been explored from micro-, meso- and macro-levels. Arnegård has shown how processes of socialization influence actors' choice to participate in risk sports.⁵ Further, Donnelly and Young have

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outlined how the values in sport subcultures are learnt.⁶ Several authors have more specifically shown how risk-taking is given value in risk sport cultures, and how actors in such cultures achieve peer recognition for taking risks.⁷ Other topics that have been studied in regard to risk sports within the social sciences are social class and gender. Fletcher has argued that risk-taking in sports is typically practised by members of the professional middle class, whereas Thorpe and Robinson, in several studies, have revealed the link between risk-taking and masculinity.⁸

A common approach within macro-oriented social sciences is to regard participation in risk sports as reactions to certain features of modernity. These approaches are the focus point in this article. From a meta-sociological position, this article identifies and discusses two major strands of thought within the sociological theorizing of voluntary risk-taking and its connection to modernity. The two models will be termed the compensation perspective and the adaptation perspective. Briefly, the compensation perspective considers risk-taking in sports as a reaction to an overly protective and risk-avoidant society. By contrast, the adaptation perspective sees risk-taking as a result of a society with cultural codes where risk-taking is embraced.

In sociological analysis of risk sports, these two perspectives are usually not presented in the same clear-cut fashion as they are in this article. Often, both perspectives are used within the same theoretical framework. The main theoretical tool this article relies on is therefore the construction of ideal types.⁹ Weber's concept of ideal types is usually utilized in order to condense and make a chaotic social reality sensible for sociological analysis. In this article, the ideal typical construction of the concepts compensation perspective and adaptation perspective is used in a similar, but meta-sociological way. By constructing these ideal types, the differences between the two perspectives are condensed to make it easier to see the fundamental contradictions between them regarding their underlying socio-philosophical assumptions about the relationship between actors, society and desires. The two perspectives must therefore be seen as abstract models of two dominant schools of thought within the sociological discourse on risk sport.

First, based on previous macro-oriented research on risk sports, the article outlines the general postulations and key ideas regarding modernity and desire in the two perspectives. Second, a broader understanding of modernity is presented in order to understand the two perspectives' divergent views of modernity. In particular, the work of Peter Wagner is used to comprehend the multidimensionality of modernity.¹⁰ Third, the implicit assumptions about desire are analysed. Here, Nick Crossley's theoretical approach to desire is utilized to underpin the difference between the two perspectives.¹¹ Finally, the article argues that a constructivist understanding of desire could make both perspectives' understanding of modernity's implication for voluntary risk-taking feasible. In accordance with what Furlong and Cartmel call 'the epistemological fallacy of late modernity',¹² it is argued that tensions are created between the ideology of late modernity and structural constraints.

Risk – some conceptual remarks

According to Baker and Simon, there are as many understandings of risk as there are academic disciplines.¹³ The concept of risk can therefore designate various phenomena. A thorough discussion of the concept is not the scope of this article. However, some remarks must be made. As Donnelly points out, risk can be understood as physical risk, economic risk or social risk.¹⁴ We can talk about physical risks, which involve the danger of getting sick, becoming injured or dying. Within the economic world, risks are often understood as

the financial risks that are taken in, for example, day trading. Social risks could be deviancy, whether voluntary or involuntary, in various forms, from being part of outsider groups and subcultures to committing a crime. Actors who take social risks may be in danger of being socially excluded from society at large. This article's main focus is on physical risk. However, as we shall see, the two perspectives analysed here often find the aforementioned forms of risk intermingled in a risk-taking ethos.

There are many different concepts connected to sports that usually contain risk-taking of some sorts. Extreme sport is often used as a concept that designates the full variety of such activities. However, extreme sport is a concept that participants in such sports tend to avoid. It is mostly used in media and marketing. According to Wheaton, lifestyle sports is more in accordance with the participants' own understanding of these activities.¹⁵ Participants see themselves as involved in a lifestyle more than in a specific sport. Nevertheless, in this article, risk sport is used as the generic term. The concept of risk sports is widely used and refers to activities in which participants could get severely hurt or suffer fatal consequences if they make mistakes.¹⁶ Risk sport is used instead of lifestyle sport because it accentuates the crucial role risk-taking plays in these activities. Surely, these sports are often part of lifestyle packages, but the concept risk sport points more directly to voluntary risk-taking which is the phenomena analysed in this article.

The compensation perspective

What I choose to conceptualize as the compensation perspective is a collective term for research and theory, emphasizing that modern society is too concerned with safety and risk avoidance, and thereby constrains actors' behaviour. The compensation perspective considers voluntary risk-taking through sports as a deeply needed compensation for a highly routinized, regulated, boring and 'too safe' life in modernity. Several social constraints inherent in modernity are put forward as forces that push actors toward participation in risk sports. Let us look at a few examples of the compensation perspective.

One strand of thought within the compensation perspective sees daily life within modernity as rationalized and, therefore, to a certain degree disenchanting. Building on Weber's analysis of the expansion of formal rationality and the resulting disenchantment of life, Lyng states that one could look at risk sports as a way of re-enchanting the world.¹⁷ Through his fieldwork among skydivers, he found that skydiving was a way of dealing with the alienation felt in bureaucratized work life. It is argued that in a daily life where most of our actions are regulated by bureaucratic institutions, little is left for deep, personal emotion. Lyng states that actors feel that they are robbed of their individual choices and pushed through life by unidentifiable forces.¹⁸ Lyng argues that leisure time activities, especially activities involving risk and play, can compensate for these social constraints. Risk sports are seen as attempts to escape the constraints of modern, rationalized life and thereby transcend the institutional world of modernity. Lyng further states that 'edgework' is a way of fulfilling unmet needs and that these actions reflect 'the immediate desires and goals of the ego'.¹⁹ Similarly, Holyfield et al. suggest that edgework puts participants in touch with emotions and sensations that are normally absent in modern rationalized life.²⁰ Furthermore, in Milovanovic's view, activities involving risk can be seen as a response to boundaries set up by society.²¹ He sees personal expressions and emotions as contrasts to the rational subject in capitalism. In a somewhat different way, Midol and Broyer see risk sports, or 'whiz' sports as they call them, as a challenge to patriarchal structures.²² They understand these sports as oppositional to mainstream values. Participation in risk sports is seen as liberation from social norms and

codes of conduct. According to Borden, subcultural sports, in his case skateboarding, can be seen as a way of criticizing modernity. As skateboarders seek to 'live life in the present', they also criticize a modernity where deferred gratification is seen as a virtue.²³ Surely, it can be questioned whether skateboarding is a risk sport. However, along the same line of thought, Lewis sees adventure rock climbing (as opposed to sports climbing on bolted routes) as a critique of everyday life.²⁴ For Lewis, adventure climbing represents a leisure arena where risks and uncertainties are embraced and that escapes and withstands rationalizing tendencies in modern society. Adventure climbing must be seen as a way of 'exercising embodied freedom along with the intuition and desire to abide with one's environment . . .'.²⁵ Leisure activities such as adventure climbing are, therefore, following Lewis, not just an escape attempt from life in modernity, but also a way of criticizing modern everyday life.

Another understanding that can be framed within the compensation perspective is delivered by Møller.²⁶ He sees the welfare state's extended forms of social security as oppressive, as they leave everyday life without room where fear can be experienced. He says, 'Extreme sports in other words function as mental health activities for dealing with the problems created by the welfare state – namely that in reality it makes fear homeless'.²⁷

The central argument in these examples is that society constrains human actions and affections in different ways. Norbert Elias' understanding of the civilizing of affections throughout modernity can serve as a theoretical example of the main thought within the compensation perspective. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias argues that throughout modernity, affections have been increasingly suppressed by social norms and codes of conduct.²⁸ Following Elias, this leads to disciplinisation of human drives and desires, creating an unrelenting tension between spontaneous inner drives and socially demanded drive-control. According to Elias and Dunning, one of the few arenas where it is legitimate to show excitement today is through leisure activities such as sports.²⁹ In sports, it is argued, social norms are temporarily dissolved, thereby allowing inner personal affections to surface. This means that sports offer a temporarily relief from the social constraints of modernity. The quest for excitement in sports can therefore be seen as modern imitations of the 'raw' desire that existed in earlier societies where conduct was not as regulated and constrained. Elias's understanding can be read from a Freudian standpoint in which our basic desires and drives are seen as conflicting with the normative demands of society. Sport activities can therefore be seen as representing a 'safety valve' where the social constraints normally controlling actors' behaviour are temporarily relieved.

The compensation perspective exists in different versions. Still, scholars within this line of thought have a common tendency to see human nature as suppressed by the social world. Risk sports are explained as outbursts of desire or as a means of breaking with modernity's inherent constraints. This understanding reflects the romantic ideal that sees society as laying bonds on people and restricting their true nature. Risk sports are seen as balancing the tension between the actor's inner, 'true,' nature and the external constraints that are placed on each individual.

The adaptation perspective

Whereas compensation theory sees risk-taking as a way of escaping modernity, adaptation theory sees the same phenomenon as a way of behaving according to cultural imperatives in late modernity. Following Arnegård,³⁰ participation in risk sports is a social indicator that concurs with late modernity's individuality and expressivity. Similarly, Palmer states that societal changes have led more people to become adventure seekers.³¹ According to her,

once marginalized activities such as risk sports are now fully incorporated in the public domain. To be a risk sport participant therefore becomes a lifestyle marker and a proof of 'ones ability to cut it in a dangerous and uncertain world'.³² Kusz holds that mainstream media's endorsement of extreme sports must be seen as a symbol of American ideals where individualism, self-reliance and risk-taking are centre staged. These ideas are, as we shall see, not particularly American, but can be seen as typical for central ideas in later phases of modernity.³³ In an analysis of rock climbing, Beedie sees the sport as an expression of the valuation of individual freedom in modernity.³⁴ Within the same line of thought, Crosset and Beal state that risk sports should not be seen as exceeding the values in modernity, but rather as activities that celebrate values inherent in late modernity, such as individualism and individual achievement.³⁵ As Goffman points out, it is not accountants and clerks that are admired in our society. Rather, people have a high regard for those who display individual achievements and courage, such as sports car racers, detectives and cowboys.³⁶ Within the adaptation model's understanding, the ethos of risk sports corresponds to the cultural code of late modernity. It is viewed as an extension of modernity rather than transcending that reality. In their analysis of rock climbing, Abramson and Fletcher state that '... the latter-day expansion of rock-climbing is more credibly viewed as a physical and symbolic extension of the efforts to garner value from promised human futures – by absorbing risk, pain and self-reliance in the immediate here and now – than as a rebellious “dropping out” of the same social present'.³⁷ Within the adaptation perspective, then, the risk taker personifies values in (late) modernity, such as individualism, authenticity, creativity, spontaneity, anti-conventionalism, flexibility, self-realization and the search for an interesting and exciting life. The adaptation perspective holds that cultural imperatives make actors gravitate toward participation in risk sports. Two main interconnected forces are recognized within this perspective: individualization and embracement of risk.

Risk sports and individualization

The increasing focus on flexibility and the reduction of the state's power coincide with the growth and wealth of the youth culture after the Second World War. As a result of the rise of youth subcultures, deviancy and anti-conventionalism became a way of living. The move toward anti-conventionalism is described by Schulze in *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (The Experience Society).³⁸ He states that after the Second World War, scarcity stopped being the general principle structuring actors' lives. Instead, seeking experiences of various kinds became the guiding principle of action. Through empirical analysis, Schulze identified three ideal typical approaches (*schema*) in the pursuit of experiences: a high-culture orientation (*Hochkulturschema*), a 'folksy' orientation (*Trivialschema*), and finally, an action orientation (*Spannungsschema*). Historically, the first two orientations have their roots in the earlier phases of modernity. The action orientation is, by contrast, relatively new. According to Schulze, it has its origins in the rock and youth culture of the 1950s. The guiding principle for action within this orientation is the pursuit of excitement in various forms. The life philosophy within this orientation is anti-conventionalism, anti-authoritarianism, counter-culture and individual freedom. Fighting the routinized life and structures of organized modernity becomes a way of life for people within this orientation. Schulze states that within this orientation, paradoxically, anti-conventionalism becomes a convention.³⁹ Even though Schulze writes nothing about risk sports, the action orientation he describes represents a good description of the ethos of these sports.

As many have argued, individuality and individualism are hallmarks of the later phases of modernity.⁴⁰ It is argued that in traditional societies and earlier phases of modernity,

identity, work and status were strictly connected to social background. In late modernity, however, the actors themselves must choose which life they want to live. The individualization thesis has been widely criticized, as empirical evidence reveals that social background is still a key factor in most of the choices actors make.⁴¹ Giddens' and Beck's theses are seen as too unspecific. Instead of understanding individualization as something that actually takes place, that actors perform free and autonomous choices, one can rather look at individualism as a cultural norm.⁴² Individualism has become a powerful ideology that results in actors *wanting* to act and behave like autonomous individuals. Even if actors' lives remain socially structured, these structures are not perceived as such by the individual.⁴³ The subjectively perceived break from social bonds and the ideology of individualism give rise to the emerging importance of lifestyle. Despite the fact that lifestyle choices are not random, lifestyles become an arena to display individuality and identity. As Featherstone puts it: 'The new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle'.⁴⁴ Actors display their 'individuality' through lifestyle choices. Choosing to engage in risk sports is a signal of who one is. Although the participants themselves tend to see risk sports as rebellious and individual activities, the adaptation model analyses risk sports as manifestations of late modern values, embracing individualism, creativity, testing of limits and boundaries and anti-conventionalism.

The ideology of individualism can be seen as the main value from which other values, such as anti-conventionalism, follow. This can be linked to what Taylor calls 'the ethics of authenticity'.⁴⁵ The moral code of authenticity states that actors' true, inner selves cannot be found by following external demands and rules. Choosing to participate in traditional sports then is not seen as 'authentic' representation of the 'true', 'inner,' or self, since these activities have been practised for generations and are thus seen as conventionalized. Risk sports, however, hold an aura that is more in line with the moral code of individualism and authenticity. Since a number of risk sports are relatively new, they are usually activities that are not handed down to participants by their parents and engaging in them can be seen as an individual choice. Risk sports are also often seen as subcultures and are linked to the counter-cultural movement, which further links participation in these activities to anti-conventionalism, self-commandment and individualism. Risk sport participants can thus be seen as representatives for the norms of subjectivity and authenticity in late modernity.

Embracing risk

Another feature of modernity that is held within the adaptation model's understanding of risk sports is the embracement of risk within broader society. Following Simon, loyalty and stability were replaced by risk-taking and competition during the 1990s.⁴⁶ Instead of seeing our culture as obsessed with safety, Simon argues that since the 1980s, we have started to embrace risk. According to Simon, the embracement of risk in late modernity parallels the way risk was viewed in Victorian Britain, when individual responsibility prevailed over public concerns for insurance and safety for the labour force. The era also saw the blooming of mountaineering as an activity for the professional classes who, by climbing mountains, showed that they were willing to take the same, or even greater, risks than the labour force had to take in their work. As mentioned, the individual understanding of risk in this period was replaced by institutional efforts to reallocate risk. In the neo-liberal economy of today, risk is again considered an individual responsibility. Simon argues that in financial economics, risk is cultivated because profit is seen as a direct

outcome of risk.⁴⁷ In late modernity, it is argued, people must show that they handle risk on an individual level. As Sennet has outlined, the neo-liberalist economy demands that workers be highly flexible.⁴⁸ This implies that actors face increasing levels of risk because they must adapt to an ever-changing work sphere. Being able to handle risks on an individual level is, to an increasing degree, what institutions expect of people.⁴⁹ Whereas the twentieth century's welfare states and social security systems spread the risk, these institutions are today being broken down. In this new era of individual risk handling, the skills developed within risk sports are, according to Lyng, in demand within various institutions.⁵⁰ More importantly, being a risk sport participant signifies that one handles and adapts to a neo-liberal modernity. According to Simon, risk sports have become a way of creating subjectivity that meets the new standards of risk management: '...these activities produce a series of compelling images that tend to valorise precisely those attributes of subjects most valorised by advanced liberalism'.⁵¹

Within the adaptation perspective, it is mainly individualization as a cultural norm and a newly developed embracement of risk that is emphasized and used to explain participation in risk sports. Involvement in such activities is thereby seen as acting in accordance with cultural imperatives of late modernity.

Modernity – liberty and discipline

Clearly, the compensation model and the adaptation model interpret modernity in two completely different ways. The compensation perspective understands participation in risk sports as breaking with the values of modernity, whereas the adaptation perspective sees the same phenomena as following the values of modernity. How is it possible that some scholars state that modernity implies conventionalization, collectivism, rationality and safety obsession, while others emphasize de-conventionalization, individualism and embracement of risk?

Modernity is unquestionably a highly complex concept that has been interpreted in diverging ways. Within the compensation perspective, modernity is mainly understood in line with the classical sociologists' critique of this era. Marx's understanding of alienation and exploitation and Weber's focus on the expansion of formal rationality, the 'iron cage' and the following loss of meaning, can be seen as indicative of the compensation perspective's perception of modernity. Within this view, modernity renders humans unable to express some of their characteristics. Risk sport, it is argued, is a way to break with these constraints and live a more colourful, exciting life. By contrast, the adaptation perspective's outlook on modernity is rooted in scholars such as Beck's and Giddens' understanding of (reflexive/late) modernity where individualisation and the breakdown of structural constraints are focused upon. Individual life-projects thereby become a reflexive venture where people actively have to choose how to display themselves. Risk sports, it is argued within the adaptation perspective, has become a particularly sought-after signal of who one is.

Of course, both the classical sociologists and authors such as Beck and Giddens, are aware of the complexity of modernity. Weber, for instance, saw several advantages of modernity compared with previous modes of social organization. However, it was the problems raised by modernity that mostly characterised the work of the classical sociologists. Giddens and Beck, although mostly focusing on modernity as a process of liberation from social bonds such as class, also hold that this process in itself is constraining as people are constantly demanded to make choices and be responsible for the choices made. A scholar that has made the complexity of modernity central to his

theorizing is Peter Wagner. Because he is not necessarily well known, a short review of his ideas has to be made in order to let them shed light on the two perspectives analysed in this article.

According to Wagner's historical sociology, modernity contends the ambiguity of liberty and discipline.⁵² A discourse on liberation goes hand in hand with a discourse on disciplination. Inherent in modernity are both the belief in and struggle for individual autonomy and the institutional disciplination of individuals. These two ideas have, according to Wagner, coexisted in the history of modernity. In some phases of modernity, discipline has been accentuated; in others, personal autonomy and liberty.

Within the compensation perspective, the disciplinarian side of modernity has been emphasized. According to Wagner, a key element in the rise of the welfare states in the late nineteenth century was the rationalization and collectivization of risk. In the early nineteenth century, the dangers that confronted workers were to be handled on an individual level. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, social policy changed. Wagner states that the basic idea of social policy became socialization of risk.⁵³ The key idea of risk policies was to decrease the level of risk by implementing collective forms of risk avoidance. Welfare policies sought to create a risk-free society based on calculability and formal rationality. This represented a move away from the individualistic reasoning that dominated earlier phases of modernity.⁵⁴ The development of political technologies of risk management, such as the welfare state, can be seen as the background for what some of the scholars within the compensation model see as creating a too-safe society in which the basic human need for excitement is discarded. Participation in risk sports is seen as an escape attempt from a society where risk is highly socialized, and as an attempt to manage risk on an individual level.

Within the adaptation perspective, the liberty side of modernity is emphasized. Following Wagner, the structures and institutions of a highly organized modernity began to fade in the 1950s and 1960s. Wagner sees this era as a time of de-conventionalization and pluralization of practices which entailed an expansion of individualism. Viewed as counter-cultures, risk sports might be seen as a showcase for an emerging way of thinking in modernity.

Wagner's central thesis is that liberty and discipline coexist as central values in modernity. However, even though they coexist, some periods of modernity seem to accentuate liberty, and some discipline. This helps to explain the utterly different ways the compensation perspective and the adaptation perspective understand the societal impetus for participation in risk sports. Wagner's understanding on modernity suggests that both perspectives might be right in their understanding of modernity. Nevertheless, both perspectives must also be seen as limited, as they each reflect upon only one of modernity's sides.

Risk sports and desire

Aside from the differences between the two models' understanding of modernity, there are also profound differences regarding how they understand the forces, drives or desires that lead people to participate in risk sports.

A key argument in the compensation model is that society constrains individual actors' behaviour and that participation in risk sports can be seen as an escape attempt from these constraints. This means that the motivation or desire for engaging in sports stems from human needs that society does not usually allow people to express. As these needs are not suppressible, sports become an arena where needs can be displayed. The driving forces

behind participation in sports are understood as a deeply human and 'natural' entity. Society, by contrast, is regarded as a somewhat superficial construction that suppresses human beings' original nature. Translated to the theme of risk sports, this means that the desire or 'urge' to partake stems from deep human needs. In a society that is considered too safe and too regulated, risk sports are seen as an arena where people can express who they really are and what they really need.

The adaptation perspective's understanding of risk sports as a way of self-fashioning in late modernity opposes the compensation model's view. The understanding of why people participate in risk sports within the adaptation model is seen as connected to societal values that have increasingly developed over the last 30 years or so. Instead of seeing societal norms and actors' affections as polarities, they are seen as connected to each other. The need for arousal or the desire to participate in these activities is not seen as a result of 'deep' human needs, but as an outcome of cultural imperatives. The underlying statement concerning the development of desire within the adaptation model is that, in a society that requires people to live exciting lives, actors develop a socially constructed 'need' for excitement.

The differences between the two perspectives' understanding of desire can be seen as an outcome of different epistemologies. The compensation perspective leans toward a naturalist epistemology in which human desire is more or less constant. The adaptation perspective, however, relies on a constructivist epistemology in which desire is seen as fluctuating. In understanding the growing interest in risk sports, the adaptation model seems to have more explanatory value than the compensation model. If desire is seen as reflecting constant human needs, it is hard to explain why participation in these activities is increasing. Regarding the connection between desire and need, Turner states: 'This distinction is difficult to maintain, because what we perceive as needs are in fact thoroughly penetrated and constituted by culture.'⁵⁵ Turner's view is in line with the arguments put forward by many analysts within the Western Marxist tradition, who argue that what are perceived as needs can often be seen as social products.⁵⁶ With a postmodern twist, Baudrillard makes the same argument when he states that consumption objects do not respond to human needs; rather, actors desire objects because of their signification value.⁵⁷

In the eyes of Western Marxists, the only true need is the need for non-alienated human practices. This assumption rests upon an essentialist ontological claim about human nature that is hard to sustain. Whereas Western Marxism first and foremost looks at the constructedness of needs in connection to consumption, Crossley gives an account of the development of desire that goes beyond the consumption focus.⁵⁸ Building on Bourdieu's work, Crossley explicates how desire is developed on a group level. In *The Social Body*, Crossley states that it is necessary to move away from an understanding of desire as an autonomous, antisocial drive.⁵⁹ Instead of claiming that desire rests on ontological human drives and needs disconnected from time and space, he sees desire as socially constructed. He states that desire must not be understood as emerging outside the social: 'Human desires are invested in the games which comprise the social world, they drive us into society'.⁶⁰ Following Crossley, desire develops because of, not despite of, the actors' being part of society. Desire is part of a socialization process where actors learn what has value. According to Crossley, desire is connected to internalization of a field's specific values and transformation of investments undertaken in the game. Following Bourdieu, there are just as many forms of libido as there are fields; the fields direct libido.⁶¹ The satisfaction involved stems from having an audience that knows the rules of the game and the symbolic capital that is marketable within the field, and thereby can recognize

achievements. Building on Bourdieu's concept of field and the German social theorist Axel Honneth's understanding of recognition, Crossley states that desire is desire for recognition. What is desired is relative to the field and the forms of capital within it. The desired actions or objects must not be seen as autonomous facts about the world. The desired object is arbitrary. It is neither a piece of art nor an action's inherent value that develops desire, but the actions' or objects' symbolic value in a field. Nevertheless, for the actors in the field, the values in the field do not appear to be random. Rather, to them the values are taken for granted. By 'forgetting' that symbolic capital in a field is arbitrary, it appears to be 'natural' and remains unquestioned by the actors. Furthermore, the actors can get recognition for possessing the values created in the field and thereby develop desire toward the field-specific values. Following Crossley's argument, the desire to undertake risky sports activities must be seen as part of a process whereby actors are socialized into a culture, or a field, in which taking risks entails symbolic capital.

Crossley's argument is basically that desire is socially produced on a community or meso- level. It is within fields that people get their ideas about what is worth striving for. This means that people within risk sport cultures develop their own hierarchy of values and that these hierarchies determine the participants' desire structure. However, this does not explain the growing interest in risk sports as such. People can very well develop field-specific values on a small scale, without necessarily pointing to a social trend. Throughout modernity people have embraced risk within small fields, as within the climbing community. The question then is whether Crossley's model of desire development can adhere to macro-level explanations. Recognition inside a field does not necessarily mean recognition outside the field. Nevertheless, as argued by theorists within the adaptation model, some of the values within risk sport fields are today recognized within the broader society. Merits in different risk sports are given value outside the field. To some degree, the symbolic capital gathered in risk sports can be translated into other forms of capital. One example is when mountaineers earn money by giving 'motivational talks' for businessmen and women. Another example which shows that these values are widespread is the use of risk sports in commercials for everything from cars to shavers. This shows that risk sports have an 'aura' that is appreciated and marketable within present-day society. It can be argued that in late modernity, the context of understanding of risk sports has broadened, as the ethos of risk sports is recognized within broader society. Arnegård argues that taking risks is one way of getting acknowledged within risk sport groups.⁶² Following the adaptation perspective's argument, one can rather say that in the cultural environment of the present, it is easier to get recognized for these kinds of activities, even outside the group. Taking risks in sports is recognized as valuable by far more people than just the hard-core elite members within a risk sport field. As such, Crossley's model of desire development transgresses the meso-level. As the values of risk sports concur with central cultural values in late modernity, ever more people are drawn to such activities. Risk sports, then, can be a way of getting recognition in society, and since recognition, following Crossley, is the basis of desire, an increasing number of actors will develop a desire structure that makes participation in risk sports a possible alternative. This might, at least partially, explain the increasing participation in risk sports from a macro-sociological perspective.

The double pressure toward participation in risk sports

We have seen that the compensation model and the adaptation model interpret modernity and desire development in two very different ways. One way of understanding the

different interpretations is to say that the two models highlight different epochs of modernity; the compensation model focuses on an earlier, more organized form of modernity, whereas the adaptation model draws attention to a later, more liberal epoch. Another interpretation could be that they emphasize different sides of modernity that coexist: the compensation model emphasizing what Wagner would call the discipline side of modernity and the adaptation model emphasizing the liberty side of the same period.⁶³ This means that, on the one hand, we have a disciplinarian side of modernity telling people to 'be rational, be safe, behave!' On the other hand, the libertarian side of modernity says: 'be crazy, take chances, be yourself!' Besides the diverging understanding of modernity, there are also, as I have shown, differences in the two perspectives' perception of desire. Within the compensation perspective, desire tends to be seen as a more or less constant feature of human beings, while the adaptation perspective sees desire as fluctuating and dependent upon societal changes.

Instead of seeing the two models as incompatible, they could rather complement each other. As long as we see the desire to participate in risk sports as socially developed and not a human need, both perspectives can be right, and the combination of the two models may help explain the growing interest in these activities. Even though a large proportion of citizens in late modernity can be said to be occupied with self-realization through various forms of experience seeking, and that in different ways society expects people to live exciting lives, this does not necessarily mean that actors live their daily lives in such a way. Actors' daily lives often remain highly structured and constrained. This parallels what Furlong and Cartmel called the epistemological fallacy of late modernity.⁶⁴ Their argument is that in late modernity, actors are supposed to act as autonomous individuals; actors even think of themselves as liberated from traditional structures that constrain individual choices. However, as Furlong and Cartmel argue, actors, in fact, still make choices according to old structures. To a large extent, social class is still an important determinant for actors' choice of education, work and leisure interests. The same point can be made about the desire to participate in risk sports. At an ideological level, actors are supposed to live exciting lives, and they develop a desire structure that concurs with these norms. Still, actors often find themselves entrenched in institutional and constraining settings, as proposed by the compensatory model. The cultural norms and the actors' real situation in their daily lives can thereby be seen as opposing each other. People live with the cultural imperatives of the liberty side of modernity, but at the same time, they are regulated by the structural demands of a disciplinarian modernity. This can create tensions between the ideals of late modernity and the daily lives actors live. Risk sports and other leisure activities can thus be a way of balancing the incorporated cultural norms and the constraining, factual settings of everyday life. Thus, one way to explain the increasing participation in risk sports is to combine the compensation model with the adaptation model. Participation in risk sports might be seen as a reaction to an overly rational, protective, and overly regulated society. However, existing simultaneously with this disciplinarian society is a society that demands that the actors break away from regulations. This implies that the reaction toward over-regulation is not a result of human drives or needs, but rather a consequence of cultural norms that instate desires to act individually and embrace risk. On the one hand, actors live their lives in constraining settings; on the other hand, their desire structure is formed within the cultural norms of late modernity. Risk sports present a solution to this dilemma because they allow actors to temporarily step out of the constraining settings of daily life and into a realm that is more in line with the self-fulfilling demands of libertarian modernity. The social constraints and cultural imperatives can be seen as a structural framework that creates *double pressure*

towards participation in activities such as risk sports. The cultural imperatives emphasized by the adaptation perspective pull actors toward participation in activities such as risk sports. When actors incorporate these cultural imperatives into their desire structure, they are pushed away from the social constraints described by the compensation perspective and towards living exciting lives. This double pressure means that there are forces that both pull and push actors toward risk sports.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this article has been to outline two major trends in sociological research on voluntary risk-taking in sports and thereby contribute to the understanding of the complexity of existing theories. It has been argued that within the compensation perspective, a disciplinarian modernity and an understanding of desire as 'natural' are used to explain why actors choose to participate in risk sports. The adaptation perspective, by contrast, emphasizes a more libertarian form of modernity and desire as socially constructed as explanation factors for the same phenomena. By maintaining that desire is socially constructed, it has been argued that both perspectives' view on modernity can be utilized within the same theoretical framework to understand the growing interest in risk sports. The disciplinarian, constraining modernity can be seen as existing simultaneously and interacting with a libertarian modernity in which risk-taking is encouraged. The cultural codes of libertarian modernity can be seen as instating desires towards risk-taking. At the same time, these desires can be seen as conflicting with the constraints of everyday life. Participation in risk sports, then, can be seen as an attempt to strike a balance between the social constraints of everyday life and the cultural imperatives in late modernity.

Notes

- ¹ Arnegård, *Upplevelsar och lärande i äventysport och skola*; Creyer, Ross, and Evers, 'Risky Recreation'; Palmer, 'Death, Danger and the Selling of Risk'; Puchan, 'Living "Extreme"'; Rinehart and Sydnor, 'Proem'; Stranger, 'The Aesthetics of Risk'; Wheaton, 'Introduction – Mapping the Lifestyle Sport-Scape'.
- ² For example, Zuckerman, *Sensation Seeking*.
- ³ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.
- ⁴ For example, Celsi, 'Trancendent Benefits'; Ilundáin-Aguruzza, 'Kant Goes Skydiving'; Mæland, 'Basehopping'.
- ⁵ Arnegård, *Upplevelsar och lärande i äventysport och skola*.
- ⁶ Donnelly and Young, 'The Construction and Confirmation of Identity'.
- ⁷ Atencio, Beal, and Wilson, 'The Distinction of Risk'; Hunt, 'Divers Accounts of Normal Risk'; Thorpe, 'Embodied Boarders', 'Psychology of Extreme Sports'.
- ⁸ Fletcher, 'Living on the edge'; Robinson 'Taking Risks', *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport*; Thorpe, 'Bourdieu, Feminism and Female Physical Culture'.
- ⁹ Weber, *Economy and Society*.
- ¹⁰ Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity*.
- ¹¹ Crossley, *The Social Body*.
- ¹² Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*.
- ¹³ Baker and Simon, 'Embracing Risk'.
- ¹⁴ Donnelly, 'Sport and Risk Culture'.
- ¹⁵ Wheaton, 'Introduction'.
- ¹⁶ Breivik, 'Risikoaferd og jakten på spenning'.
- ¹⁷ Lyng, 'Sociology at the Edge'.
- ¹⁸ Lyng, 'Edgework', 870.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 878.
- ²⁰ Holyfield, 'Adventure Without Risk is Like Disneyland'.

- 21 Milovanovic, 'Edgework'.
- 22 Midol and Broyer, 'Toward an Anthropological Analysis of New Sport Cultures'.
- 23 Borden, *Skateboarding*.
- 24 Lewis, 'Sustainable Adventure'.
- 25 Ibid., 89
- 26 Møller, 'Walking the Edge'.
- 27 Ibid., 190.
- 28 Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.
- 29 Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*.
- 30 Arnegård, *Upplevelsar och lärande i äventysport och skola*.
- 31 Palmer, 'Death, Danger and the Selling of Risk'.
- 32 Ibid., 67.
- 33 Kusz, 'Extreme America'.
- 34 Beedie, 'Legislators and Interpreters'.
- 35 Crosset and Beal, 'The Use of "Subculture"'.
- 36 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 266.
- 37 Abramson and Fletcher, 'Recreating the Vertical'
- 38 Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*.
- 39 Ibid., 156.
- 40 For example, Beck, *Risiko og frihet*; Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity, Modernitet og Selvidentitet*.
- 41 For example, Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*; Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*; Kränge and Øya, *Den nye moderniteten*.
- 42 That does not mean that everybody embraces individualism as a cultural norm. One of the important findings of Schulze (*Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*) is that individualism is, counter to Giddens's and Beck's understanding, not something that everybody adheres to. He finds that individualism is important to actors within the action and high-culture orientation, but not within the folksy orientation.
- 43 Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*.
- 44 Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 86.
- 45 Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.
- 46 Simon, 'Taking Risks'.
- 47 Ibid., 179.
- 48 Sennet, *Det fleksible mennesket*.
- 49 Simon, 'Edgework and Insurance in Risk Societies'.
- 50 Lyng, 'Sociology at the Edge'.
- 51 Simon, 'Taking Risks', 180.
- 52 Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity*.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Ibid., 98.
- 55 Turner, *The Body and Society*, 57.
- 56 For example, Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*; Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*.
- 57 Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*.
- 58 Crossley, *The Social Body*.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid., 7.
- 61 Bourdieu, *Symbolisk makt*, 135.
- 62 Arnegård, *Upplevelsar och lärande i äventysport och skola*.
- 63 Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity*.
- 64 Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*.

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