

Climbing High or Falling Flat?

Representations of Female Rock Climbers in *Climbing Magazine* (1991-2004)

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As with many athletic endeavors, rock climbing and mountaineering are often thought to be unfit for female participation as many believe that women do not possess the requirements of physical strength or mental fortitude to participate in such a demanding and dangerous undertaking. In their book *Women Climbing: 200 years of achievement*, Birkett and Peascod (1989) explained that for women trying to participate in climbing, “the physical and mental difficulties of the climbing itself have proved secondary to the prejudices and problems imposed by society” (p. 13).

The 1980s was a time of marked increase in the number of women climbing and many of these women were leading routes, making all-female ascents of mountains, and pushing beyond the levels of difficulty previously achieved by the pioneers of female rock climbers. Today, women climbers are still pushing into new levels of achievement. In addition, the performance difference between men and women climbers has been steadily decreasing and is considerably less than gender performance differences in more conventional sports, such as basketball, tennis, and track and field events. Although the actual number of people climbing, and the gender breakdown of the climbing community is extremely difficult to obtain, the number of women climbers is higher than ever and their performance levels will certainly continue to progress. A climbing media that reflects this reality is an essential component in the struggle for female climbers to gain greater social acceptance.

There exist a few niche magazines dedicated to reporting on climbing in the United States. *Climbing* magazine started publication in 1970 and is the widest circulating climbing publication in the world (climbing.com). *Climbing* magazine has assumed the role of leader in the rock climbing and mountaineering media. The way that female climbers are represented in *Climbing* magazine is important because other climbing media may potentially follow this leading publication and because *Climbing* magazine reaches the largest audience in the climbing community. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze representations of women rock climbers in *Climbing* magazine and explore the possible effects such representations may have on women rock climbers and the climbing community.

Review of the Related Literature

Sport is a sub-culture within a larger society; therefore, nothing typically occurs in sport that does not occur in the larger culture. Many of the values of the larger culture are evident in sport. The dominant (or elite) group in Western culture is white, able-bodied, heterosexual males, and subordinate groups include ethnic minorities, those with disabilities, homosexuals, and women. This same hierarchy exists in sport and is maintained, just as in the larger culture, through the use of hegemony. The values that are inherent in sport's patriarchy are effectively perpetuated by the media's representation of dominant and subordinate groups. Sport is a social institution that, in its dominant forms, was created by and for men (Messner, 1988). The dominance and perceived superiority of the white, able-bodied male has come to be seen as a universal truth in sport. The media, in all forms, has become one of the largest contributors to this phenomenon.

Important factors exist in the creation and perpetuation of hegemonic patriarchal ideals by the sport media. According to Krane (2001), "Characteristics of hegemonic femininity include

being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate, and gentle. On the other hand, strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and independence are characteristics of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 117). Most of the feminine characteristics listed above are mutually exclusive with being a successful athlete. In his critique of the institution of sport, Messner (1988) addressed the issue of female athletes participating in the historically patriarchal culture of sport: “Increasing female athleticism represents a genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition, and as such represents a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination” (Messner, 1988, p. 197). He also suggested that “the media framing of the female athlete threatens to subvert any counter-hegemonic potential posed by female athletes” (Messner, 1988, p. 197).

There are many ways that the media achieve the subversion to counter-hegemonic ideals that the female athlete represents. One common tactic is to concentrate the content of an article on the female athlete’s private life and role as a mother, wife, and girlfriend (Christopherson, Manning, and McConnell, 2002; Messner, 1988). This type of reporting may be disempowering to the female as athlete and sends the message that women cannot be legitimized based solely on their athletic talents. They must also be legitimized as women in a patriarchal system, one that places value on them as wives, mothers, and objects of stimulation. Similarly, sexualizing the female athlete involves photographing the female athlete outside of her athletic arena, possibly even dressed in sexy or provocative clothing that would not be worn during sport activity (Duncan, 1986, 1990, 1993; Fink and Kensicki, 2002). Commenting on a female athlete’s relative size, her shape, age, and other descriptors, such as her attractiveness or sexiness, is also quite common. In her content analysis of *Climbing* magazine from 1970-1990, Roberts (1992) discovered many examples of this and concluded, “A woman’s appearance is frequently

contrasted with her capabilities as if attractiveness and competitiveness were incompatible” (Roberts, 1992, p.90). Roberts also noted that even though the coverage of women in *Climbing* magazine was progressively more favorable into the mid 1980s, there remained many comments that highlighted what a female was wearing and, with subtle (and some not so subtle) innuendos, rated her physical features. On the contrary, men were rarely portrayed in this way.

Infantilizing of the female athlete is another way the media work to disempower the female athlete (Duncan, 1986; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Kane & Parks, 1992; Theberge, 1991). By describing the female athlete in terms which make them appear child-like, the message is that they are not to be taken too seriously as real athletes (Duncan, 1986). The infantilization usually takes the form of linguistics, such as the use of the word “girl” instead of “woman.”

Duncan (1986, 1988, 1990) used the term “ambivalence” to describe the way the media deny power to female athletes by way of juxtaposing strong images or descriptors with images or descriptors that emphasize traditional femininity. This form of inconsistency in messages is disempowering to the female athlete by taking the focus away from her athletic endeavors and achievements and framing her in such a way that emphasizes traditional femininity. The use of ambivalence is prevalent in much of the literature of women and sport (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Daddario, 1997; Duncan, 1986, 1990; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Schell, 1999). Women who embody the feminine ideal, according to rigid, patriarchal criteria, are often favored in the media, and as a result, enjoy more exposure (Christopherson et al., 2002; Duncan, 1990; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Kane, 1988; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Krane, 2001; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; McGregor, 1989; Pedersen, 2003; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Schell & Rodriguez, 2000; Theberge, 1991; Vincent, 2003). Unfortunately, a double standard exists in the struggle for

female athletes to gain social acceptance and media coverage, because the power ultimately resides in the patriarchal institutions of sport and media.

Valorizing female athletes more for their maintenance of hegemonic femininity than for their athletic talents also serves to perpetuate an ideal of heterosexuality. Identifying the female athlete as heterosexual becomes extremely important in her marketability in a society that holds negative attitudes about homosexuality (Schell & Rodriguez, 2000; Theberge, 1991). Negativity surrounding homosexuality is even stronger in the institution of sport than in the larger culture. According to Messner (1992), masculinity is largely defined through heterosexuality, and because the institution of sport evolved out of a threat to masculinity, homosexuality (whether male or female homosexuality) came to be seen as a challenge.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How are female rock climbers depicted in photographs and the text of feature articles? And, (2) what are the implications of such representations for women climbers and the climbing community?

Method

The sample included 114 issues of *Climbing* magazine published between 1991-2004. Quantitative data were collected on prominent photos and feature articles using standard worksheets from a previous study (Roberts, 1992) that were slightly modified for the purposes of this study. In addition, frequencies were recorded for all of the cover photographs, table of contents photographs, and all photographs appearing in the “Gallery” section for each issue of *Climbing* magazine in the time period studied.

Qualitative data were collected from the narrative content of feature articles about female climbers using the hermeneutic method. The hermeneutic method, based on the works of Paul

Ricoeur (1981), is based upon the understanding that the meaning of text lies not only in what it has to say, but also in the social context from which it written. According to Duncan (1986) “One basic premise of this method is that we understand a written or cultural text by grasping its meanings – often tacit or inarticulated - not its factual particulars” (p.51). This understanding is reinforced and refined through multiple readings of the material to be investigated. Through these multiple readings, patterns in the writing become apparent. These patterns are then coded according to the themes they represent. Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) argued that it is important to look for recurring themes in the text, indicating what is given attention or emphasis and what is neglected. The researcher and her/his own experience and pre-knowledge brings a sensitivity to the material or phenomenon being studied, enabling that person to detect meanings and bring understanding to a deeper level.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Data

Of 421 feature articles analyzed, 13 (3%) were dedicated to women climbers. In the years studied for this paper, the first feature article about a female climber appeared in 1991, without another feature article appearing until 1995 in which two feature articles about female climbers appeared. With regard to photographs, of the 114 issues, 18 (16%) female climbers appeared on the cover page, 16 (14%) were shown in the “Gallery” section, and 14 (12%) appeared on the table of contents page. A photograph of a female climber did not appear on the cover of *Climbing* until 1995, in which female climbers were featured on the cover twice. Two female climbers appeared on the cover in every subsequent year included in the study, with the exception of 1997, 2000, and 2003.

For the most part, the photographs in all sections show female climbers participating in their activity, with clothing that one would likely encounter if she/he were to visit the rock outside, such as climbing tank tops, a sports bra, and shorts or light weight pants. Also, all of the photographs of female climbers on the cover, in the table of contents, and in the Gallery section were of women actively participating in their sport. Of note, a homology of physical appearance existed among the prominent photos of female climbers: Images of young, white, able-bodied women with hair at least shoulder length were the most photographed.

Thematic Analysis

In our textual analysis of the 13 feature articles, the foreground against which the narrative was present is the fact that rock climbing is a male dominated sport with emphasis on physicality and personality ideals that are typically associated with maleness, such as strength, power, virility, and risk-taking. Thus, the narrative throughout the feature articles included descriptors that worked to “normalize” or position the female climber as a “real” woman despite her participation in such a masculine sport. Three “normalizing” themes emerged: (a) emphasizing the women’s heterosexuality as wife, mother, or girlfriend, (b) highlighting their physical appearances, and (c) infantilizing the female rock climber.

Climber as a heterosexual, wife and mother.

Eight out of the 13 feature articles mentioned the climbers’ romantic relationships with men or raising their children thus emphasizing their heterosexuality. The feature article about Lydia Bradey, an extremely talented mountaineer from New Zealand, focused on one expedition from her long and successful career. Bradey’s heterosexuality is made clear through references to past relationships. The reader is given the impression that Bradey was physically attractive, a heart breaker, and that she was susceptible to relationship drama. Her attractiveness is made

evident in the following passage: “Her large-boned physique suited the pack-hauling of alpinism, but her country-girl looks were charming enough to land her occasional modeling work”

(*Climbing*, ed. 150, p. 185). After establishing that Bradey was an attractive woman, the author explained her dating style, “and she left broken hearts in every place. Invariably, the men in her past say it was Bradey who controlled relationships. ‘I used to drop boyfriends like books,’ she admits, preferring to escape relationships at the first sign of decline – as her parents had” (*Climbing*, ed. 150, p. 185).

One feature article about Alison Hargreaves, one of the most talented and accomplished mountaineers of her time, also mentions her heterosexuality through casual reference to boyfriends of her past. “Asked further about her nature, Hargreaves said candidly, ‘I’m obsessive. If I want something, I go to any lengths to get it. I was like that with boyfriends in school. Scheming and devious’” (*Climbing*, ed. 156, p. 83). In this same article, we are again reminded of the relationships in Hargreaves’ life, “I’ve always felt climbing was incredibly self-indulgent. At the end of the day, it’s only me that gets the pleasure out of it, not the kids, not the husband. I get the ego boost” (*Climbing*, ed. 156, p. 83).

The article about Hargreaves was especially unique because the amount of attention given to her domestic roles of mother and wife. The article was written as a tribute to her career and as an account of the events leading up to her death; however, much of the emphasis was on her children and the battles she fought as a result of her role conflict. For example, on the fourth page of the article, it is made clear that on her fateful expedition, “Alison was crying off and on. She couldn’t let herself go home and do what she wanted to do” (*Climbing*, ed. 156, p. 178).

Later, the author turns directly to writing about Hargreaves as a mother:

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If you're discussing Alison Hargreaves, you have to click in to her having children, because children are so consuming, with women usually the primary caretakers. "When the time came, I wanted to have children," she recalled. "When I'd actually had a baby, something inside me had been fulfilled, almost like nature waiting to have this baby. Then my body settled down, and I settled down mentally, and my stamina got much better." She felt, she said, that motherhood had made her a much more stable person, less likely to panic (*Climbing*, ed. 156, p. 178).

There are also more overt examples of conflict as it relates to Hargreaves' role as a mother while succeeding as a mountaineer. As an opening to the conclusion of the article, the author writes, "Alison Hargreaves was a complicated woman, with ambition and single-mindedness mixed with team spirit, courage, and maternal devotion" (*Climbing*, ed. 156, p. 80).

Much of the article on Beth Rodden focused on her upcoming wedding to Tommy Caldwell: "The wedding is only two weeks away and it seems weird not to be there planning and decorating with my mom. I know this is a great opportunity for us to be together and bond, and I feel bad for not being there. Talking about nails, mascara, table assignments, rice or mashed potatoes, is far from my mind" (*Climbing*, ed. 225, p. 46). This passage was written by Rodden, as *Climbing* magazine had asked her to keep a journal of her life in the weeks leading up to her wedding. Above the strong image in the photograph showing Rodden in mid-climb is a quote from Rodden: "My body is so sore it hurts to laugh and walk, and my fingers are so swollen my engagement ring won't fit past my first knuckle." (*Climbing*, ed. 225, p. 44). While this is a direct quote from Rodden, the editors at *Climbing* magazine chose to present it in bold lettering

above the photograph of Rodden leading a difficult route on El Capitan. In the next day's journal entry (June 6, 2003), Rodden writes about how her role on this project has now changed into one of supporting her fiancé's efforts to finish the route:

Knowing that I can devote all my energy to supporting my husband has been a load off my mind. My dad's toast at the wedding used climbing as a metaphor for a strong and lasting relationship. The rope binding you together, being each other's anchors, taking turns to lead and follow. Well, now is my time to follow, but at least behind great style." (*Climbing*, ed. 225, p. 78).

In an article about Sue McDivitt (*Climbing*, ed. 157), the reader is reminded on several occasions that although McDivitt may be a strong and independent woman who is a solid member of the Yosemite Search and Rescue team and one of the only women guiding clients up El Capitan, she is also a "cheerful homemaker" (*Climbing*, ed. 157, p. 96). The author frames McDivitt within a domestic context from the beginning of the article: "'Honey, dinner's ready.' Sue's husband, Dan, gets off the couch and saunters over to the kitchen, fills his plate, and returns to the couch. The old-fashioned domesticity stands in stark contrast to the unfinished house and the cheerful homemaker's muscular arms" (*Climbing*, ed. 157, pp. 95-96).

In a passage about McDivitt's independence as a rock climber, the author again used a domestic analogy: "On Zenyatta, Dan was below with the binocs, but he doesn't call all the shots, such as when he tells Sue what he wants for dinner, and she responds with, 'Sure honey,' and keeps on cooking whatever the hell she wants. And it's not always so different on the wall" (*Climbing*, ed. 157, p. 99). The article's theme became just as much about McDivitt performing femininity as about her climbing career. The reader perhaps could be left with the notion that McDivitt's femininity was in need of validation.

Once again, McDivitt's domesticity is not only highlighted, it is the only subject of the following passage: "The scene at the McDivitt household is (almost) as wholesome as Bob Dole must pray for at night. The first morning of my week-long summer visit to their home, I found myself spying to see if Sue cut the crusts off Wonder-bread sandwiches and sliced them diagonally when she made Dan's lunch. She didn't, and she used wheat bread – the image of Mrs. Cleaver slowly began to fade" (*Climbing*, ed. 157, p. 96).

Climber's physical appearance.

A common practice of the media is to emphasize the female athlete's physical size and appearance, especially in terms of how her appearance measures up to patriarchal standards of beauty and attractiveness, which is white, long haired, petite, lean and well toned but not too muscular, tanned, with fine facial features. In the sport of climbing, most elite climbers are small people because of the physical requirements to climb at such a high difficulty level. These attributes are prominently highlighted in the physical descriptors of female climbers. Many times, the climber's attractiveness is also noted through the descriptors. Robyn Erbesfield's physical characteristics are not just described, the quality of her appearance is also noted: "Erbesfield is bird-boned and pert-faced, with a sweetly curved chin and resplendent coloring – silky olive skin, silver-blonde hair, green eyes with curly mascaraed lashes. She is what guys call, with fervor, "cute", except that the strength of her nature makes that trifling adjective pale" (*Climbing*, ed. 124, p. 68).

Later in the article, Lynn Hill is introduced; who is another extremely talented, high profile competition climber. The author draws many parallels between Erbesfield and Hill as accomplished climbers and explains that there are many similarities in the two women's appearances: "Radiantly blonde and well-known as top performers, they are highly visible on

the circuit” (*Climbing*, ed. 124, p. 70). In writing more about Erbesfield and Hill, the author once again establishes body size: “They are even of identical body dimensions (both 5’1” and about 95 pounds)” (*Climbing*, ed. 124, p.70). The reader is left with an image of Ebersfield (and her best friend, Lynn Hill) as “cute” (p. 124), “radiantly blond” (p. 70), and strong but petite.

In the article about Sue McDivitt, the following was mentioned along with other descriptors about her appearance: “Still a little uncomfortable with the interview, she smiled, as usual, revealing a perfect set of clean, white teeth” (*Climbing*, ed. 157, p. 97). Later in the same article, the reader was made aware of not only her relative size but of her exact body dimensions, “At 5 feet, no inches and 103 pounds soaking wet, it’s hard to imagine Sue hauling hundred pound loads up El Capitan, but she’s done it 20 times” (*Climbing*, ed. 157, p. 96).

The reader was again informed of the female climber’s exact body dimensions in the article about Alison Hargreaves: “She was 5’4” and 130 pounds; she shared her weight, unlike many women, with no embarrassment” (*Climbing*, ed. 156, p. 82). The final example of commenting on a female climber’s size is from an article written about a mountaineer, not a rock climber. Mountaineers tend to have a stockier physique than rock climbers because they are usually required to carry a heavy pack with them for their activity. There were two other articles in the study that focused on women who were predominantly mountaineers; and the women’s physical descriptors are similar: “With a Chinese Malaysian father and a New Zealander mother, Wong blended well with the exotic surroundings – except for her strong mountaineering physique.” (*Climbing*, ed. 182, p. 89). Here, Wong’s “strong mountaineering physique” is in contrast to her otherwise exotic (sexy) looks. This theme occurs again in the article about Lydia Bradey: “Her large-boned physique suited the pack-hauling of alpinism, but her country-girl looks were charming enough to land her occasional modeling work. (*Climbing*, ed. 150, p. 185).

Infantilizing the female climber.

On many occasions, the physical descriptors of the female climbers suggested that the women were younger than their years. One way that *Climbing* magazine infantilized female climbers was by describing them as looking like the girl next door: “Davis, 27, looks much like the girl next door, 5-foot-6 and small boned, with wavy brown hair past her shoulders” (*Climbing*, ed. 191, p. 68); “Emily [Harrington] has broad shoulders for her small size, and strong climber’s hands. Her blonde hair is pulled into a ponytail and her face is clean and open. She is the perfect girl next door” (*Climbing*, ed. 228, p. 65). At the time of the publication, Harrington was a senior in high school, while Davis was a 27 year-old woman.

“Sue’s wavy, long brown hair was pulled in a loose ponytail and a few strands blew around her face as we sat in El Cap Meadow. Her light complexion, blushing cheeks, and questioning green eyes made her look childlike, but the barely visible crow’s feet around her eyes exposed her 34 years and added to her friendly demeanor” (*Climbing*, ed. 157, p. 97). “Tori is small and blonde. Her blue-green eyes are dramatically outlined with eyeliner and mascara; she is wearing very tight, white jeans, and her shirt, sandals, fingernails, and toenails are all a matching color of pink” (*Climbing*, ed. 228, p. 67). In the article about 23 year-old Beth Rodden, the editor writes in the introduction that, “Despite such celebrity status, she’s [Rodden] retained a disarming down-to-earth, country-girl attitude about it all” (*Climbing*, ed. 225, p. 40).

In the article about Amy Bechtel, the climber from Wyoming who disappeared while out for a run, the author notes: “Ask around about Amy and you will invariably hear: sweet and quiet. Pleasant. Stoic. Even – heartbreakingly – innocent” (*Climbing*, ed. 173, p. 82). Later in the same article about Bechtel, her husband is quoted as saying: “You can’t imagine how important it is to have her in the house, even if she’s not making any noise. It’s the stupid things. I’m in the

kitchen getting a glass of water and she wants some, she'll say, 'Me.' Like a three-year-old. It just cracks me up" (*Climbing*, ed. 173, p. 133). Amy Bechtel was 25 years old at the time of publication.

Conclusion & Implications

In answering the research questions that drove analysis of the photographs and articles in 114 issues of *Climbing* magazine, we found three major themes that describe the depiction of female rock climbers. By (a) emphasizing the women's heterosexuality as wife, mother, or girlfriend, (b) highlighting their physical appearances, and (c) infantilizing the female rock climber, the female climbers were "pulled back" into hegemonic patriarchal ideals of proper feminine behavior. The rogue, masculine climber was (re)positioned as sweet, nurturing, feminine and domestic. In addition, the few female climbers who were visually presented in photographs matched the hegemonic ideal of feminine physical beauty that including long hair, toned, able-bodied, and White. The findings in this study are similar to those found in prior research on media representations of women athletes (Duncan, 1986, 1990, 1993; Krane, 2001; Messner, 1988; Pedersen, 2003; Schell, 1999) that suggested such representations trivialize and devalue their athletic accomplishments while reinforcing hegemonic masculinity.

We also suggest that the paucity of coverage given to women climbers in the magazine has implications for women climbers and the climbing community. As this popular medium provides an avenue to promote climbing as sport and recreation, the lack of female role models does little to encourage women to consider climbing as an acceptable athletic endeavor. Male climbers also may be reluctant to encourage female participation or may even question their abilities as being "real" athletes. Finally, the homology of images that were shown erases diverse images of other types of women who may consider climbing. As *Climbing* magazine is the

leading publication in this niche market, they seemingly do little to encourage female participation in rock climbing or to challenge stereotypical notions of female athleticism.

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