

SEGMENTATION AND LEGITIMATION IN THE CLIMBING WORLD

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Introduction

As individuals develop interest in an activity and develop their skills in that activity, they are faced with many decisions. Within the social world structure of any given activity there is a myriad of options facing the beginning participant as to how to progress. Numerous factors pull the individual in multiple directions as the different sub-worlds within the larger activity social world compete for the new member or attempt to exclude the new member until membership qualifications have been met.

In leisure research to date, little has been done to explore sources of segmentation within the numerous social worlds of leisure activities. This paper will examine the segmentation of sub-worlds within the larger climbing social world and. The segmentation processes outlined by Strauss (1984) suggest that as social worlds develop, individuals within the social world break off and form new sub-worlds. In addition, little emphasis has been given to the progression process of individuals in an activity over time (Scott & Shafer, 2001). By examining the sub-worlds of climbing, we suggest that there are numerous paths through the sub-worlds in which participants can progress and numerous internal debates which he/she must negotiate.

Data for this study have been taken from popular climbing literature, climbing instruction manuals, magazines, climbing guidebooks, and the first author's insider knowledge of the world.

Conceptual Background

Strauss (1984) outlines six sources of sub-world segmentation: *space* (subworlds grow up around spatial distinctions); *objects* (subworlds grow up around the use of different objects); *technology and skill* (technological revolutions often lead to new sub-worlds); *ideology* (subworlds emerge as people differ in terms of what is believed to be authentic); *intersections* (when two worlds intersect to form a new sub-world); and *recruitment* (new members spur the formation of new sub-worlds). These six forms of segmentation lead to new and different sub-worlds than previously known. Strauss (1984) also states that sub-worlds can develop in three different ways. The first way is to "bud off" (p. 126). This means that when a group believes that their activity is sufficiently different for whatever reason, they bud-off. The second manner is referred to as "splitting off" (p.125). Splitting off is when a segmentation happens and the segmented groups feel competitive or antithetical that they separate from one another. The third manner is when two or more groups intersect with one another.

Strauss (1982) simultaneously described the legitimation processes that accompany the formation of new sub-worlds. Initially, this involves discovery and claiming worth. In this case, climbers doing a new activity realize that others are doing the same thing. According to Strauss, for a subworld to develop, the core activities are believed to be legitimate, fun, or appropriate, aesthetically right, and morally right, The newly formed sub-world then begins to distance or differentiate itself from other sub-worlds in the parent social world. When a new sub-world becomes established they attempt to rewrite the relevant history from their new perspective. This process serves to

reorient the social world towards the new sub-world perspective. When a sub-world stays within the parent social world the sub-world will compete for resources with the other sub-worlds in the larger social world. These competitions are sometimes played out by debating in arenas. As a result of these debates sub-worlds can further segment and even separate completely from the parent social world.

These segmentation processes and the resulting sub-worlds present numerous choices to new climbers. If this beginner progresses through the ranks of the social world and finds his/her home in one of the sub-worlds then it is assumed that he/she will be a member of only the one sub-world. In all likelihood, membership is not relegated to a single sub-world within the social world of climbing. Scott and Shafer (2001) offer a look at progression within the framework of recreation specialization. They noted that researchers sometimes assume progression in a specific activity is “directed toward an ‘authentic’ level of involvement” (p. 325). In regards to a social world as climbing, it is not at all clear how individuals progress through the various sub-worlds and end up in one or more sub-worlds.

The Climbing Social World

The evolution of the Climbing social world has led to numerous and distinct sub-worlds. Figure 1 provides a social map of the modern climbing social world. This figure is hypothetical and based on the first author’s insider knowledge and experience with the social world as well as climbing instruction books which provide a breakdown of the numerous aspects of the sport. Segmentation may occur based on region, age, and various other factors. The figure, however describes the activity segmentations with the climbing social world, primarily in terms of ideology and use of technology. We will present three subworlds by emphasizing the processes by which these subworlds emerged. The first is the emergence of “clean climbing” in the 1970’s, the second is the “sport climbing” revolution of the 1980’s, third is the emergence of “alpine style” mountaineering. The “clean climbing” revolution came about in the early 1970’s when climbers began to notice that the steel pitons they were hammering into cracks in the rock faces for protection were damaging the rock. A group of climbers in Yosemite National Park (the epicenter for climbing progression at the time) climbed a route on Half Dome without placing any pitons. They used removable “chocks” that did not harm to the rock. National Geographic ran a cover story on the climb (Mellor, 2001). This climb and the proceeding movement towards clean climbing segmented the climbing world. Strauss’ sources of segmentation are evident in this situation. The ideology adopted by the new breed of clean climbers was that climbers should harm the rock as little as possible when climbing. They believed so emphatically that they sparked a technological revolution,. The processes of segmentation are also evident in the writings of the day, which espoused the clean climbing ethic.

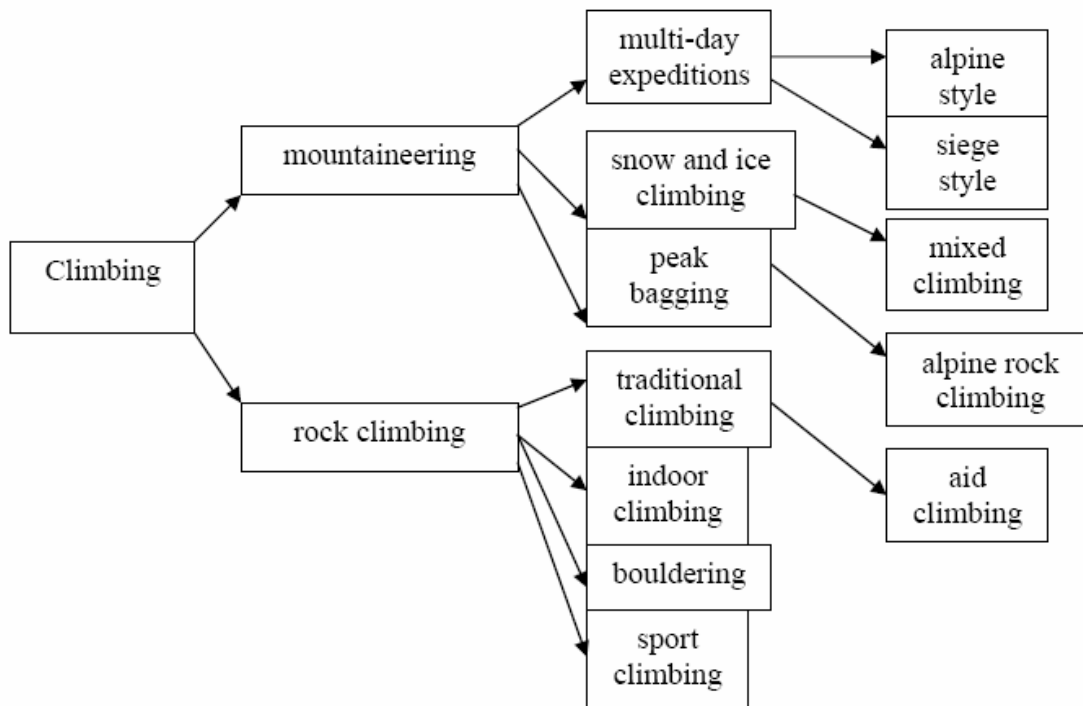


Figure 1: Sub-worlds within the climbing social world.

The “sport climbing” revolution of the 1980’s also showed characteristics of Strauss’ sources of segmentation. Traditionally, especially after the clean climbing revolution, climbers used removable protection as they ascended a rock face. Only occasionally would they place permanent protection in the rock. The most prominent method of permanent protection was drilling holes in the rock and placing bolts with steel loops on the end (called hangers) in the drilled holes. This leaves a quick and easy way to attach carabiners to the rock face and allows a much easier method of protection for the climber. As stated the bolts were only used sparingly. The sport climbing movement emphasized difficulty of the climb as the utmost important quality. Climbers began to “equip” previously unprotectable (clean climbing protection requires a crack in the rock face) rock faces for climbing, pushing the limits of difficulty further than ever before. To an extent, space was a source of this segmentation. The cliffs used for sport climbing were generally separate from more traditional cliffs. Ideology played an important part of the movement as well. Sport climbers valued the gymnastic element and pure difficulty of climbing more than the way or style in which they protected themselves. Alpine style climbing emerged in response to the way in which tall Himalayan (and other) peaks were climbed. In the traditional, or siege style, climbers (with generous help from sherpas) would haul supplies further and further up the mountain establishing safe camps higher and higher until a dash for the summit is made. The “alpine style” is when climbers set out from a base camp (usually on the glacier or moraine at the base of the mountain) and attempt to ascend the mountain in one push, carrying all they need on their backs. Ideology plays heavily into this style. Alpine style climbers believe that their

style is superior to the other. It is more dangerous, as no fixed ropes are left behind to facilitate retreat, and more physically difficult. This segmentation is perhaps the most volatile in the whole of the climbing social world. The writings of alpine style climber Mark Twight (2000) are confrontational, derogatory, and elitist.

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