
Morality in the Mountains: Risk, Responsibility, and Neoliberalism in Newspaper Accounts of Backcountry Rescue

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze Canadian newspaper coverage of recent events in which backcountry adventurers have found themselves in need of assistance from rescue organizations. We interrogate discourses of risk and responsibility, exploring the ways in which the media constructs these backcountry enthusiasts as responsible to and for specific (e.g., family) and generalized (e.g., society) others. These discourses, we argue, produce and reproduce neoliberal notions of risk management, constructing citizens as responsible for managing their “risk profiles.”

Keywords

risk, rescue, responsibility, governmentality, neoliberalism

Proem

In February 2009, a couple skied out of bounds at a Canadian resort and became lost. Their efforts to survive included a makeshift SOS sign in the snow, one that was apparently ignored by those who saw it because it was interpreted as being old and was not initially accompanied by signs of life. The couple survived on granola bars

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and snow until Marie-Josée Fortin succumbed to the cold and extreme conditions. Nine days after he and his wife wandered into the wilderness, Gilles Blackburn was rescued. In the months that followed, Blackburn initiated a lawsuit against both the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and a private rescue group, contending that they had failed in their responsibilities to initiate a search for the couple. The RCMP and the search and rescue teams continue to assign full responsibility to Blackburn and Fortin, as police reports indicate that the couple “deliberately left the main trails and went into the out-of-bound terrain in search of fresh snow” (Ski tragedy holds lessons, 2009, p. A.10).

The Stawamus Chief, a mountain near Squamish, British Columbia, Canada, is popular with local practitioners of BASE jumping, an activity that involves parachuting from fixed objects such as cliffs, bridges, and buildings (Laurendeau, 2011). On July 14, 2010, a BASE jumper was rescued from the mountain by emergency crews after being blown back against the face of the mountain. He sustained a fractured leg from the incident and was later taken to the hospital. Less than a month later, on August 2, 2010, rescuers returned to the cliff after a helicopter spotted a jumper stranded on the cliff face (BASE jumper rescued from B.C. mountain, 2010). Following these technical rescues, Squamish mayor Greg Garner suggested that BASE jumping should be prohibited from the mountain: “the efforts to rescue jumpers are tying up resources and wasting money” (Mayor wants base jumping banned in Squamish, 2010).

Introduction

The situations described above raise a number of questions with respect to risk, responsibility, duty, and liability. In addition, they highlight Donnelly’s (2004) point that the relationship between sport and risk is a complex one characterized by ambivalence and contradiction. Donnelly argues that on one hand, many (even most) sports reward risk-taking behaviour; while on the other hand, there is a discernable level of discomfort with risk taking in sport. What people consider risky, and whether or not they are “troubled by it,” depends to a great extent on the social context in which the risk-taking behaviour takes place (Donnelly, 2004, p.54).

In this article, we take up Giulianotti’s (2009) suggestion that sport scholars put the concept of risk more squarely at the centre of their analyses. We consider the question of how these particular risks are constructed in mass media accounts of rescue operations, and what this tells us about risk, responsibility, and neoliberal governance. In so doing, we interrogate the intersection of risk and responsibility not in terms of how individual participants in “risky” activities make sense of their participation (e.g., Laurendeau 2011, Olstead 2011) but with an eye towards the broader discursive constructions of risk(-taking) and neoliberal citizenship. At its core, our intention is to contribute

to a body of work that “peculiarizes the banalities of political and politicized bodies” (Giardina & Newman, 2011b, p. 182).

Risk (and) Sport

In recent years, a number of researchers have produced insightful analyses of activities popularly known as risk sports (e.g., Atkinson, 2009; Beal & Smith, 2010; Fletcher, 2008; Rinehart, 2005; Thorpe, 2010; Wheaton, 2004). Collectively, this body of work has illuminated important dimensions of this broad sporting arena, including the phenomenology of participation in these kinds of activities (Fletcher, 2008; Laurendeau, 2006, 2011), subcultural authenticity (e.g., Wheaton & Beal, 2003), the dynamic between rationalization and distinction (Beal & Smith 2010), and informal “policing” of participation (Hunt, 1995; Laurendeau & Gibbs Van Brunschot, 2006). Perhaps most centrally, authors working in this area have interrogated the production and negotiation of (sporting) identities, and the ways these activities and the industries built up around them construct (and potentially disrupt) dominant gendered, classed, and raced sporting practices (e.g., Beal, 1996; Kay & Laberge, 2004; Kusz, 2007; Laurendeau, 2004, 2008; Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008; Rinehart, 2005; Robinson, 2008; Stoddart, 2011; Thorpe, 2009; Wheaton, 2000).

Though a number of the scholars cited above have considered risk-taking in particular “lifestyle sports” (Wheaton, 2004), few have interrogated the systems of expert knowledge upon which many of these activities rely. Our aim in this article, then, is to highlight the ways in which the intersection of risk and responsibility is constructed in newspaper accounts of “risk sport” enthusiasts who have been unable to self-rescue, and have therefore needed (semi-)professional help from rescue operations of various descriptions.

Risk and the (Re)Production of Neoliberal Rationalities

Ulrich Beck’s (e.g., 1992) consideration of the “risk society” serves as a jumping-off point for the current analysis. In what is now an expansive body of work, Beck and others have explored the notion that in modern society, we are fundamentally concerned with risk and hazard. For Beck, one of the fundamental markers of the risk society is that risks (what in earlier times we would have called hazards—see Lupton 1999a) are risks in knowledge. That is to say that we understand, and respond to, the risks of our contemporary world in terms of understandings made available by systems of expert knowledge (see Ali, 2002). This is not, however, to suggest that social actors simply accept the expert knowledges with which they are presented. Rather, they interact with systems of expert knowledge in complex (even contradictory) ways, considering the “advice” of experts, but by no means taking it as the final word (e.g., Tulloch & Lupton, 2002). Our principal aim in the current article, then, is to consider the narrative resources made available to media consumers and hence the conditions upon which risk governmentalities may be fashioned.¹

Numerous sociologists working in a Foucauldian tradition conceptualize risk in ways that articulate with Beck's theorizing, "The self-reflexive, entrepreneurial, risk-adverse subject that has emerged from the forces of risk society as described by Beck is very similar to the self-responsible, entrepreneurial, risk-adverse citizen constructed through the politics of neoliberalism" (Lupton, 2012, p. 4). In addition, though, these scholars have offered a more sustained analysis of the expert knowledges to which Beck refers, and the ways in which those expert knowledges are deployed in the efforts to both regulate bodies and encourage us to self-regulate (see McDermott, 2007).

Systems of expert knowledge are themselves both products and producers of particular political rationalities. The very imperative that we consult these experts with respect to everything ranging from prenatal care (Lupton, 1999b), to diet and exercise (e.g., McDermott, 2007), to consumption practices (Tulloch & Lupton, 2002) points to the individualization of risk and the "responsibilization" (Lupton, 1999a) of individual citizens as they construct their "risk profiles." As Baumann cogently argues:

In our "society of individuals," all the messes into which one can get are assumed to be self-made and all the hot water into which one can fall is proclaimed to have been boiled by the hapless failures [of those] who have fallen into it. For the good and the bad that fill one's life a person has only himself or herself to thank or to blame. (2001, p. 9)

This individualization of risk articulates with neoliberalism, a political and economic rationality that extends the logic of "the market" into institutions and practices that once fell under the auspices of state agents (Montez de Oca, 2012). This "paradigm of deregulated, unfettered capital accumulation" (Newman & Giardina, 2010, p. 1514) celebrates market logic, exacerbates income inequality, and derides "government interference" in the "private" lives of citizens (Newman & Giardina, 2010; Montez de Oca, 2012). For our current purposes, however, it is not the economic rationality of neoliberalism that is central, but its social implications. As Giroux highlights, neoliberalism:

extends and disseminates the logic of the market economy throughout society, shaping not only social relations, institutions, and policies but also desires, values, and identities. . . . Under neoliberal rationality and its pedagogical practices [citizens] navigate the relationship between themselves and others around the calculating logics of competition, individual risks, self-interest, and a winner-take-all survivalist ethic. . . . [Neoliberalism produces] identities, goods, knowledge, modes of communication, affective investments, and many other aspects of social life and the social order. (2008, p. 591)

Risk discourses intervene in public life and regulate everyday activities of the citizenry through constructing them as responsible for managing their own risk

profiles (Castel, 1991). As Laurendeau and Adams note, risk discourses “set the stage for the policing [and self-policing] of individuals who occupy subject positions or engage in behaviours that mark them as ‘at risk’” (2010, p. 437). From this perspective, systems of expert knowledge play a key role in this process, as these systems serve to remind us what to do and what not to do as we manage our (risky) selves. Moreover, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim suggest, these are not simply reminders of what we *should* do, but of what we *owe* to those for/to whom we are responsible:

Responsibility is presented as meaning greater autonomy. . . . Already in that formulation there was a double meaning that pointed to a reverse side: anyone who did not take responsibility counted as irresponsible; any dereliction counted as “guilt.” . . . So many levels of responsibility, so much potential guilt. So much fuel for reproach and self-reproach, for social and moral pressure. (2002, p. 146)

In this understanding of risk, the discourses upon which we draw serve to both make risks and our negotiation of them intelligible and to construct and police us as political subjects.

Binkley suggests that there is an opportunity to make meaningful contributions to what he calls lifestyle studies:

if the mediated lifestyle of the consumer in the marketplace is one of aestheticization, fragmentation, and ephemerality, the complimentary pole to this practice stems from those nonmarket mediators² . . . who infuse lifestyle with rational techniques and imperatives, and thereby project a new configuration of subjectivity and social power (2007, p. 117).

In particular a consideration of neoliberal strategies of governance may elucidate the ways in which “modern” subjects are “guided” in their lifestyle choices as they are “encouraged to approach . . . challenges alone, as solitary ‘enterprises,’ and to refuse any collectivist traditions previously fostered by the state” (Binkley 2007, p. 117). It is from this perspective that we take up discourses of risk surrounding backcountry adventurers who need rescue assistance. In so doing, we explore the ways in which risk, blame, and responsibility are constructed, and hence the kinds of subjectivities made intelligible to and about citizens who put themselves “in harm’s way.”

Analytic Strategy

Neoliberalism, “as a seductive mode of public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2008, p. 591), is produced and reproduced in innumerable texts, practices, and institutional arenas; our aim in this article is to highlight just one of these. We concur with Driedger who suggests that “the way in which the mass media cover particular news events can

provide risk researchers with important cues for how the public may understand a risk issue” (2007, p. 776). This is so not because newspaper stories tell people what to think about a particular topic, but because they contribute to discourses that construct “particular desires within the imaginary, producing significant material and political effects” (Helstein, 2003, p. 290).

Using the *Canadian Newsstand* database, we examined a total of 31 Canadian newspaper articles of recreationists and the various sports in which they take part, covering a 2-year period (June 1, 2008–August 20, 2010). We began searching very broadly for articles that discuss search and rescue efforts associated with risk sport participation, using such combinations of terms as (Rescue*/Responsibility/Risk*), (Rescue*/Danger/Sports), and (Rescue/Risk/Responsibility). Based on the results of these preliminary searches, we then undertook a more specific search for the current analysis using the following terms: (Risk/BASE jumping), (Rescue/Risk*/BASE jumping), (Rescue/Skydiving), (Rescue*/Rock climbing), (Risk/Snowmobiling), and (Snowmobiling/Rescue). Although all risk-taking sports and their enthusiasts were included in this study, coverage of snowmobiling accidents accounted for a majority of stories.³ However, it should be noted that a few snowmobiling incidents gained extensive coverage within the specified time frame because of the magnitude of the accidents. This does not negate the importance of these stories. Rather, it suggests a promising avenue of further investigation exploring salient differences between the kinds of activities we consider here.⁴ For the purposes of the current analysis, however, we consider stories about the activities together. It is also noteworthy that this search resulted in a total of only 31 newspaper stories. Like Johnson, Chambers, Paghuram, and Ticknell, (2004, p. 177), we suggest that “we can learn a lot about cultural repertoires from analysing small textual units” (also see Chawansky & Francombe, 2011). Moreover, we might infer from the relatively small number of articles that the ideas that they produce and reproduce are so “commonsense” as to generate little controversy and, hence, little (public) discussion.⁵

Conceptualizing the media as implicated in the process of “creating and recreating narratives that can be linked to dominant ideas, or ideologies, that circulate in wider society” (Cooky, Wachs, Messner & Dworkin, 2010, p. 139), we interrogated the articles in our sample, understanding them as both produced within, productive of, and reproducing ideological understandings of risk, responsibility, and liability. Media framings of issues do more than (re)present particular events, activities, and subjects. They (re)produce “identity categories [that] serve as optics that both enable and constrain a sense of morality related to conduct of self and others” (McDonald, 2006, p. 515). Borrowing from Giardina and Newman, our aim here is to interrogate the “intersecting vectors of power, knowledge, and identity” in these media accounts (2011a, p. 524; also see Birrell and McDonald, 2000).

All of the newspaper articles were first coded independently by each researcher. Codes that emerged in these initial stages included (1) recreators(s) as reckless; (2) recreators(s) as responsible for injur(y/ies) and/or death; and (3) family member(s)

experiencing unnecessary grief and/or loss. We then discussed the articles and our coding schemes with a particular eye towards our “theoretical presuppositions concerning the cultural and social worlds to which the texts belong” (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2011, p. 530).

Rational Techniques and Imperatives

In the newspaper accounts we considered, outdoor enthusiasts were most often portrayed as reckless and considered narcissistic and responsible for their own death and/or injuries (e.g., Davison, 2010; Seskus, 2010; When a sport gets too extreme, 2010). Articles generally focused on the avoidable dangers behind such risk-taking sports, the ignored warning signs, and the decisions of recreationists to go into remote areas and participate in perilous activities (Mickleburgh, 2009; Pynn, 2010; Ski tragedy holds lessons, 2009).

In the two sections that follow, we consider the ways in which participants in outdoor recreation activities are characterized and constructed as blameworthy in these incidents, and discourses of expert knowledge and the ways in which media accounts (re)produce notions of individual risk management as a cultural imperative.

Blaming the Victim

On Sunday, January 11, 2009, two snowmobilers were buried in two separate avalanches in the backcountry of British Columbia (e.g., Cheney, 2009; Two separate avalanches kill snowmobiler, trap another, 2009). Although all accounts of both incidents provide basic facts about where the avalanches occurred, approximately what time, and the efforts of RCMP and emergency workers, little information is provided as to the victims’ identities and the specific activities in which they were engaged. Nevertheless, these articles construct the recreators as at fault. For example, Cheney (2009) notes that one of the avalanche areas “is popular for ‘high marking,’ where riders power their sleds up steep, snow-covered mountain walls, then turn downhill as they begin running out of speed” (Cheney, 2009, p. S.1). The invocation of “high-marking” hints at this potentially dangerous activity as the likely cause of the accident, despite no mention in the article of whether or not the riders were engaged in this activity. Because avalanches have occurred in incidents where riders were riding irresponsibly or taking unnecessary risks, it becomes a trademark of the sport in general—constructing the risks as avoidable (and, consequently, victims as negligent and/or irresponsible).

Our cultural practice of attaching blame is illustrated by reporters’ practices of stigmatizing individuals that take part in “extraordinary risks.” Douglas (1992, p. 16) asserts that there are several central questions used in contemporary western societies to understand (and limit) risk, beginning with “Whose fault?” Versions of these questions are adopted by journalists when they report on recreationists and the tragedies that take place in remote areas of the backcountry, so that the “inherent

risks” of these activities can be driven home to readers. This constructs these risks as entirely manageable through good decision making, and, more importantly, emphasizes our individual responsibilities *to* make good decisions. The cultural imperative to negotiate our risk profiles is (re)constructed through these narratives, locating not only “risk” recreators, but all consumers of these mediated accounts, within neoliberal discourses of risk management. The mediation of risks, hazards, and deaths associated with such sports may or may not dissuade particular individuals from taking part in these activities (we must recall Donnelly’s point about our cultural fascination with risk). More broadly, though, they construct “victims” as blameworthy and remind readers of *their* responsibilities as neoliberal citizens. More than simply cautionary tales, though, these narratives also produce and reproduce fertile ground from which those who *do* “take their responsibilities seriously” might fashion positions of moral superiority.

The process described above is not limited to blaming the victim for his or her own injuries or death. For example, on March 16, 2010, a writer for the *Edmonton Journal* vilified snowmobilers, asserting that “there is something supremely narcissistic about risking your life in a game of Russian roulette that can devastate families, cost governments, communities and insurance companies millions, put others into harm’s way, depress tourism—all in the name of thrill-seeking” (When a sport gets too extreme, 2010, p. A.14). This condemning attitude not only defines riders and recreationists alike as being vain and inconsiderate but also labels them as the reason why families experience unnecessary grief and loss. The author goes on to state:

society has a right and responsibility to protect all of us from irresponsible behaviour. Frankly, we are tired of witnessing extreme sledders who fail to heed crystal-clear danger warnings blather on about their “passion” in beating nature’s odds. It’s about time the most egregious among them and their facilitators were called to account. (When a sport gets too extreme, 2010, p. A.14)

Snowmobile riders ostensibly represent a threat, as they lack self-regulation, having no regard for boundaries or limits. They are also often constructed as unintelligent and/or negligent, being unable to understand “crystal clear danger warnings” and believe themselves able to “beat nature’s odds.” Instead, media accounts situate individual “recklessness” within broader discourses of recreators’ responsibilities to particular (e.g., family) and general (society more broadly) others. This kind of narrative, we suggest, points towards “new configurations of collective individualization . . . and ethics of the neoliberal self” (Bass, Giardina & Newman, 2012, p. 303).

When reporting on the injuries and deaths that occurred as a result of an avalanche outside of Revelstoke on March 13, 2010, Karin Wilson (2010), a journalist for *Kelowna Capital News*, constructed responsibility for the tragedy in the following way:

I didn't know anyone involved, but it seemed to me a *senseless* and *reckless* situation that had so many costs attached—trauma for the grieving families left behind, serious injuries for those caught in the wake and their subsequent road to recovery, as well as fear among those who watched it all happen and the time, effort and energy on the part of the rescuers (Wilson, 2010, p. C.4, emphasis added).

As in the example cited above, Wilson (2010) presents outdoor enthusiasts as a threat and danger. In this analysis, snowmobilers cause unnecessary grief to families, injuries to innocent bystanders, fear among viewers at home, and, ultimately, unnecessary work for rescue and emergency workers. In turn, recreationists are to blame for the risky circumstances they encounter and the wake of “danger,” fear, and grief they produce as a result. In the news stories considered here, this translates into a questioning of the right to rescue assistance in a state organized around the principle of public security.

Because newspaper articles, and the media more generally, tend to pay particular attention to disasters and tragedies, these circumstances become treated as either omens or punishments. Douglas (1992) argues that risks linked to legitimating moral principles in a particular culture often receive the most attention. Because danger (a negative outcome) ostensibly indicates poor choices and actions of the affected individuals, risk discourses operate to identify, explain, and attach responsibility to, particular “risky” undertakings. Because every accident, death, and misfortune is found to be chargeable to another, a new system of blaming has become adopted under the title of risk reduction (Douglas, 1992). That is, misfortunes are now analyzed by looking back at certain individuals, communities, or social groups, and determining who could have caused it. This “forensic theory of danger” (Douglas, 1992) is evident in the newspaper articles under consideration here in that danger is explained through the use of moral and political frames which, ultimately, rely on identifying responsibility.

Responsibility and Expert Knowledge

Let us return to the February 2009 tragedy introduced to begin this article. Fortin and Blackburn became lost in the backcountry of British Columbia after reportedly “skiing out of bounds at the Kicking Horse Mountain Resort near Golden” (Lost skiers more scared by prowling wolves than cold, 2009; Mickleburgh, 2009; Skiers blamed for rescue flaws, 2009; Ski tragedy holds lessons, 2009). Journalists’ reporting stigmatized the couple as “adrenalin junkies” (Ski tragedy holds lessons, 2009, p. A.10), asserting that “[a]ny injury or damages suffered by Mr. Blackburn and his children were caused in ‘whole or in part by the negligence of Gilles Blackburn and/or the deceased’” (Mickleburgh, 2009, p. A.4). In other words, the “deliberate” and “reckless” behaviour of Blackburn and Fortin makes them not only responsible for their injuries and/or death, but the grief that their family will experience as well. Kevin Brooker, a reporter for the *Calgary Herald*, even went

as far as to hint at possible charges of foul play because of “the couple’s failure to take the most evident route out of trouble: backtracking to the very chairlift that delivered them there in the first place” (Brooker, 2010, p. A.12). Although the versions of what took place on that mountain—between when the Montreal couple got lost and when the rescue helicopter was finally flagged down—differ from one newspaper account to the next, what appears in all renditions is this sense of responsibility. The “risks” of the backcountry are most often presented by the media as being completely “avoidable” (had the couple “only” heeded expert knowledge such as boundary warnings and “proper” protocol in the event of becoming lost).

After three people were confirmed dead on Saturday March 13, 2010, as a result of an avalanche at Boulder Mountain in British Columbia, it was expert knowledge that permeated accounts of the tragedy. Reporters and readers responding to articles written about the avalanche were all quick to note that the “inherent danger” of snowmobiling as a sport, that the event being held at the time was unsanctioned, and, in particular, that the high avalanche risks were known (Make daredevils pick up expenses for costly rescues, 2010; Miller, 2010; Pynn, 2010). The CBC News (Avalanche kills 3, 2010; B.C. avalanche, 2010) also labelled the Big Iron Shootout, taking place beside Boulder Mountain at the time of the avalanche, as having been a “problem for years,” asserting that the Canadian Avalanche Centre (CAC) had issued an extreme avalanche warning for the area, but that the risk of avalanches is often underestimated by the snowmobiling community. The *Vancouver Sun* (Pynn, 2010) and the *Calgary Herald* (Miller, 2010; Seskus, 2010) likewise relied on expert knowledges when reporting on the disaster, claiming that “[e]very agency that knew anything about the conditions of the snowpack had issued warnings” (Miller, 2010, p. A.13) and that the “[p]eople that went into that area ignored that warning” (Pynn, 2010, p. A.4).

On one hand, the invocation of experts (such as the CAC) provides some context for the tragedy that forms the subject of a particular story. On the other hand, it (potentially) distorts the decision making of organizers and backcountry enthusiasts, implicitly constructing a binary between the (rational) decision to solicit expert information and follow the advice of experts like the CAC, and the (irrational) decision to do otherwise. Moreover, doing otherwise of course includes participants soliciting this information, taking it seriously, and making a decision based on both CAC warnings and their own stores of knowledge of the conditions, the area, and their safety practices (Tulloch & Lupton, 2002).

Diverse networks of institutions, interactive actors, knowledges, and practices can be understood as governing risk, while particular subgroups of the population, such as outdoor enthusiasts or “thrill seekers,” are identified as high risk or at risk. By focusing articles on the avoidable dangers of snowmobiling, the ignored avalanche warnings at Boulder Mountain, and the alleged lack of “brains or sound planning” (Make daredevils pick up expenses for costly rescues, 2010, p. A.6) of participants, risk is problematized and, ultimately, rendered governable and calculable. Those participating in such risk-taking activities are also often portrayed

as requiring particular intervention, as one reporter from the *Star—Phoenix* (March 16, 2010) asserts that events like the Big Iron Shootout are a “cause for concern”: “not only for those willing to risk life and limb for the thrill of driving a screaming snow machine up the side of a dangerous mountain, but also for their families and taxpayers who end up picking up the tab for the search and—if lucky—rescue” (Make daredevils pick up expenses for costly rescues, 2010, p. A.6). Risk, therefore, can be understood, in Foucauldian terms, as a moral technology, as it is calculated in late modernity in an attempt to master time, subjectivity, and discipline the future (Foucault, 1991; Lupton, 1999).

The importance of expert knowledges in constructing the (im)morality of risks is illustrated in the portrayal of extreme sports by journalists and the media more generally. Because recreationists are regarded as “adrenaline junkies” (Ski tragedy holds lessons, 2009, p. A.10) or “hapless enthusiasts” (Kibble, 2010, p. 1) and believed to pose risks to themselves and others, they ultimately become prime targets for (governmental) intervention. Expert knowledges can therefore be understood as being “pivotal to governmentality,” as they provide the “norms” against which neoliberal citizens are to compare themselves, and the advice they are to consult in “better” regulating themselves and their risk profiles (Foucault, 1991). Risk, in this sense, is a sociocultural phenomenon and governmentality acts to implement control and social regulation. Newspaper accounts of backcountry rescue operations mobilize appeals to expert knowledge in order to illustrate the “failures” of these individuals to self-govern.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Past work on the individualization of responsibility has tended to focus on health risks such as smoking or physical inactivity and management strategies such as exercise and diet. We submit, however, that we can also think of managing risk profiles in terms of managing the “voluntary” risks to which we expose ourselves. We have argued in this article that newspaper accounts both construct risk/risks and portray backcountry adventurers in particular ways. We suggest that these accounts have discursive effects that serve to reinforce neoliberal strategies of governance. These discourses construct (particular) risks and the management thereof as individual in nature, (re)producing the logic of the individualization of risk more generally. This is not to suggest that the risks of backcountry “extreme” sports are structural in the ways that sociologists understand the risks of living near a “superfund” site to be (e.g., Hunter, 2000). Rather, our point is that the effects of these media accounts extend well beyond the communities and recreationists included in the stories.

Two principal issues remain unexplored in this analysis and are worthy of future investigation. First, as Sefia (2010) and Schoch and Ohl (2011) have recently argued, it is imperative that we explore not only media texts themselves, but the processes by which those texts come to be made available for mass consumption. Second, and perhaps more pertinent to our analysis, work that explores the ways

in which audiences engage with these texts is of paramount importance (Millington & Wilson, 2010). Our suggestion that these accounts both construct backcountry adventurers in particular ways and morally regulate us as neoliberal (and risky) citizens does not, of course, illuminate whether and how readers take up these discursive constructions, nor the bodily practices in which they engage.

A consideration of how individuals (backcountry recreators and others) consume these texts is particularly important in light of the point that individuals do not simply or uncritically accept the framing of a particular (risk) issue, whether that framing is a media account or a claim by a recognized expert. We aim, then, for the analysis that we have presented above to serve as a jumping-off point for a more explicit consideration of the ways in which accounts of these extraordinary risks (Simon 2003) shape the subjectivities of those who consume them, and, perhaps, shape discourses about our (societal) responsibilities towards those who take them up. In certain respects, then, we envision our contribution as an invitation to further dialogue about identity and subjectivity in sport and physical culture (e.g., Helstein, 2007; King & McDonald, 2007).

As Binkley (2007, p. 117) notes, the “aestheticization of everyday life . . . is in equal part the ephemeralization of everyday life through its deep saturation in consumer cultures, but also its rationalization as lifestyles are increasingly made the object of advice and instruction.” It is our contention in this article that both the consumer culture to which Binkley refers here, and—our focus in this article—the advice and instruction he highlights are to be found in the pages of newspaper accounts such as those we have considered here. As scholars consider (new and old) media, and their relationship to sport and physical culture, then, they (we) might delve further into the “competing tendencies” (Binkley, 2007) underpinning contemporary (sporting) lifestyle practices. This seems particularly promising in investigations of sociocultural constructions of risk, as this might allow scholars to further interrogate the ambivalence often expressed towards and about risk-taking activities (Donnelly, 2004).

Our aim in this article has been to encourage sociologists of sport to take (more) seriously Binkley’s admonition to consider “the ways in which the seduction of consumer lifestyles and the exhortations of governmental rationality take place simultaneously” (Binkley, 2007, p. 120). In our studies of physical cultural configurations and practices, there are numerous contradictions that might be meaningfully plumbed drawing on this approach. The tensions between individuality/individualism and collective responsibility highlighted in the current analysis is but one of these opportunities we imagine for sport scholars. This tension was evident even as we thought through our arguments and received comments from various readers. One of these readers, for example, noted: “. . . if [skiers] are ignoring the signs, are they not ‘to blame’”? Our point in this article is not to let the recreationists featured in the newspaper accounts “off the hook” by suggesting that they are *not* to blame. Rather, we have interrogated our *need* to locate and mediate blame in particular ways, arguing that it reproduces a political rationality that frames our

“troubles” (whether related to recreation, health, or economic prosperity, for example) as individual in nature. This individualization of risk and responsibility, we suggest, lets much bigger “fish” off the hook with respect to issues that affect all of us.

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Notes

1. Our thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to this point.
2. Here, our conceptualization differs slightly from Binkley’s. Binkley’s “nonmarket mediators” include “service sector professionals in communications, media, and sales but also therapeutic specialists and social workers, designers, stylists, and other groups whose numbers have been growing since the 1960s” (Binkley, 2007, p. 117). On this much we agree. To call them nonmarket mediators, however, neglects the point that in “neoliberal times,” market logic extends far beyond “the market” itself (Giroux, 2008).
3. In descending order of frequency, articles also dealt with (1) skiing and/or snowboarding; (2) skydiving and/or BASE jumping; (3) multiple outdoor activities; (4) climbing; and (5) kitesurfing.
4. We speculate, for example, that a different consumption ethic is implicated in snowmobiling than in backcountry skiing.
5. Our thanks to Michelle Helstein for drawing our attention to this point.

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