WHO ARE CLIMBING THE WALLS?

AN EXPLORATION OF THE SOCIAL WORLD OF INDOOR ROCK CLIMBING

A Thesis

by

JASON HENRY KURTEN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

December 2009

Major Subject: Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences

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	David Scott
Committee Members,	Douglass Shaw
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ABSTRACT

Who Are Climbing the Walls? An Exploration of the Social World of Indoor Rock

Climbing. (December 2009)

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Co-Chairs of Advisory Committee: Dr. C. Scott Shafer
Dr. David Scott

This study is an exploratory look at the social world of indoor rock climbers, specifically, those at Texas A&M University. A specific genre of rock climbing originally created to allow outdoor rock climbers a place to train in the winter, indoor climbing has now found a foothold in areas devoid of any natural rock and has begun to develop a leisure social world of its own providing benefit to the climbers, including social world members. This study explored this social world of indoor rock climbing using a naturalistic model of inquiry and qualitative methodology, specifically Grounded Theory (Spradley, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). This research borrows from the literature on social world theory, serious leisure as well as specialization.

This study confirmed indoor rock climbing to be a form of serious leisure for some participants. Furthermore, it found the social world of indoor rock climbing at Texas A&M provides a deep sense of belonging to some members who were found to coalesce at a mesostructural level into a confederacy of

peers (R. A. Stebbins, 1993). Bouldering was found to be an avenue for social world entry for men but the female experience in social world entry was found to be different. The most prominent finding of the study was that the facility itself provides a place of belonging for social world members, even diverse and different groups which, outside of the social world, may be expected to come into conflict. Lastly, it was found that the social world has the ability to mediate conflict or negative experiences arising from competition and feelings of risk and fear.

This exploratory study is expected to provide a framework for which to conduct further, more in depth studies into phenomena affecting the lives and experiences of indoor rock climbers. Furthermore this study has practical significance in assisting climbing wall managers to better understand the culture that surrounds and utilizes the facilities they operate. A review of the current literature on rock climbing, research questions that guided the study and methodologies, as well as the study results and conclusions are discussed in this paper.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my son Jackson Henry Kurten, a gift from

God whom I will be thrilled to one day share a rope with.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Rock climbing is a popular form of outdoor recreation that has seen many changes in its history. What began with mountaineering, participants striving to reach the top of key mountain peaks around the world, has evolved, in its most recent form, into participants climbing artificial structures housed inside warehouses, university recreation centers, summer camps, workout facilities and even malls and cruise ships. The unique social world that has evolved around the participation of some individuals in the climbing of these indoor structures is the focus of this study.

In reality, how different is indoor rock climbing from outdoor rock climbing? Unfortunately, few studies of indoor rock climbers have been undertaken. At least one study incorporated both indoor and outdoor rock climbers (Rapelje, 2004), but no studies were found that looked expressly at the social world of indoor rock climbing. This paucity of available data is one reason for embarking upon this study. If one looks at anecdotal data from non-climbers and some novice climbers, they would suggest that indoor climbing and outdoor climbing are one in the same, however anecdotal data from experienced climbers reveals the groups are very different.

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This thesis follows the style of *Journal of Leisure Research.*

Indoor climbing began as a gym, a training tool, for outdoor climbers (J. Long, 1994). Reports from some managers indicate that today one can find a population of climbers who only climbs indoors, whose ultimate destination is the indoor facility itself. This is confirmed by the Outdoor Industries Association, whose 2005 study indicates only 39% of people who climb indoors also climb outdoors, while over half of all outdoor climbers also indicate climbing indoors (OIA, 2006). Some indoor climbers seem to have no real desire to transition to the arguably more risky cliffs and mountains outdoors. Is it possible indoor rock climbing has become a sport of its own, an end unto itself which has little connection to the older sport of mountaineering, or to a lesser extent, outdoor rock climbing?

In the past, indoor rock climbing was viewed as a stepping stone to outdoor climbing, a training ground with the intent of turning out more outdoor climbers (J. Long, 1994). Ewert and Hollenhorst (1997) described it as a "threshold adventure recreation experience that may lead to or prepare participants for greater involvement" in wilderness activities (p.22). How do we now reconcile reports from some managers that a portion of indoor climbers have no real desire to climb outdoors and that some see indoor rock climbing walls as their "final destination" for leisure activities? One way to start reconciling these reports with the prior conceptions is to examine the meaning indoor climbing has for the participants as well as the attributes and needs of the participants themselves.

With more and more funding being channeled into public and private indoor rock climbing facilities (NIRSA, 2008), it is important from a managerial standpoint to begin to know this new group of climbers in order to maximize program offerings and facility development. This research project began to explore the social world of indoor rock climbing in terms of serious leisure involvement with a goal of describing the various subgroups of indoor rock climbers. Qualitative methods were used to develop a theory of their participation and the meaning they find in social world membership.

The following questions helped to guide this exploration into the indoor rock climbing social world: Can indoor rock climbing be described in terms of a social world? Does the sport of indoor rock climbing exhibit characteristics of serious leisure?

Definition of Terms

Indoor Climbing Gym: (a.k.a. Indoor Climbing Wall, Climbing Gym) A facility manufactured in order to allow participants to ascend the walls of the facility. Walls may vary in height and in angle of steepness. Facilities were originally built to simulate outdoor climbing.

Indoor Rock Climber: An individual who participates mainly in indoor rock climbing. An alternate definition might be one who self-identifies as this type of climber, regardless of actual participation habits.

Outdoor Rock Climber: An individual who participates predominantly in outdoor rock climbing. An alternate definition might be one who self identifies as this type of climber, regardless of actual participation habits.

Belayer: The partner of a roped climber who actively takes the slack out of the system through the use of a mechanical device and a harness, thus preventing the climber from hitting the ground in the event of a fall. The belayer literally holds the life, if not the well being, of the climber in their hands.

Top Roping: A form of rock climbing (indoor or outdoor) where the rope is pre-hung from anchors at the top of a wall or climb. One end of the rope goes down to the climber, while the other end goes down to the belayer. If a fall occurs, it is generally relatively short and banal except in the event of belayer error.

Lead Climbing: A more advanced form of rock climbing (indoor or outdoor) than top roping, where the climber pulls the rope up behind him/herself as they climb. Periodically, their ascent is protected by the climber clipping the rope into protection points in the wall. In outdoor climbing, these protection points can be placed by the climber (traditional climbing) or permanently installed into the rock (sport climbing). In indoor climbing, the protection points are always permanently installed. The potential for a longer fall is more acute in lead climbing and therefore the perceived risk, if not the actual risk, is also higher.

Free-soloing: Climbing alone and without a rope on faces typically climbed with a rope and a belay partner. In this form of climbing, if a climber falls, there is no protection provided and they generally will impact the ground, most often resulting in death. This type of climbing is practiced only by a small minority of climbers.

Bouldering: A form of climbing (indoor or outdoor) where participants climb, unroped and unharnessed, to short distances above the ground. Indoors the standard height for bouldering is 12-15 feet, although there are some indoor climbing gyms that allow bouldering without ropes up to 25 feet. Upon reaching the top, some indoor climbers drop off onto protective mats while others climb back down. Some indoor facilities allow boulderers to "top-out" or climb on top of the bouldering facility, closely mimicking outdoor bouldering. Outdoors, bouldering generally stays below the 20 foot mark, although the line between bouldering and free-soloing is blurred and under constant debate among the climbing community at large.

Social World: Loosely comprised group "coalescing" around a particular pursuit or belief (Unruh, 1980). Membership in groups is voluntary and individuals may be involved in multiple groups at any point in life; the various groups representing the variety of facets of any individual's life (Unruh, 1980). Unruh describes social worlds to be diffuse and

amorphous units of social organization which provide a common area of interest for participants (Unruh, 1979).

Serious Leisure: The systematic pursuit by a hobbyist, career volunteer or amateur of a leisure pursuit in a way that they "launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience" (R. A. Stebbins, 1999). As the name indicates, serious leisure is typically a more focused pursuit of leisure which represents a more significant part of a participant's life than its counterpart, casual leisure (R. Stebbins, 1997).

Specialization: A developmental process in which people progress to more advanced levels of participation the longer they participate in a leisure activity (Bryan, 1977). Bryan (1977) specifically pointed to a progression in behavior, attitudes and preference during the leisure career of a participant.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I of this study gives a background for the literature and outlines the need and direction for the study along with an introduction and description of important terms. Chapter II further develops the justification for the study via a literature review and contains the study limitations. In order to explore the indoor climbing social world, I drew from existing scholarship on social worlds, specialization and serious leisure. Chapter III focuses on the methodology used

to conduct the study. Chapter IV details study findings and finally, Chapter V addresses the conclusions of the study, implications and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Emergence of Indoor Rock Climbing

Indoor rock climbing is the most recent iteration of an ever growing genre of recreation, evolved from the sport of mountaineering. Practiced for recreation since the early 1700's, mountaineering is the practice of climbing mountains, as the name implies. As the participants in this sport sought out more difficult challenges, they were faced with more challenging avenues of ascent. Rather than simply walking up mountain pathways, mountaineers found themselves seeking to climb sheer rock faces utilizing the natural cliff features as well as man-made hardware to attach to their ropes for protection. It is no wonder Ewert (1994) found mountaineers a population ripe for research into levels of risk aversion in their sport. But individuals striving to climb to the top of a mountain in the cold, adverse alpine conditions, risking life and limb in their pursuit are a far cry from what one might witness in an average climbing gym setting today.

The modern American climbing gyms were first built in the 1980's to provide outdoor climbers a place to recreate and train where natural dangers could be minimized (J. Long, 1994). Gone was the rain and cold. Left behind was loose rock, remote locations and, potentially, some of the actual risk. The perceived risk and therefore some of the "adventure" may have been preserved;

Ewert and Hollenhorst (1997) speculated so when they wrote "one cannot assume that adventure recreationists automatically require a wilderness setting" (p. 26). Climbers and gym managers could control for objective hazards while allowing climbers to focus solely on skill and strength development and potentially feel some of the excitement of outdoor climbing. While this may have been the impetus behind the advent of artificial walls in the 1980's, a side effect was that climbing could now be delivered to areas devoid of natural climbing, thus bringing a new form of recreation to a new population (Attarian, 1989).

In addition to the original mountaineers and outdoor climbers, a very different population was beginning to be seen in climbing gyms. Reports from managers and popular literature reveal a departure from the stereotypical climber of the past (Hyder, 1999; Prager, 2008). Instead, young children, adolescent boys and girls as well as male and female college-age and older adults, were frequent users of climbing gyms (Anderson, 2008; Hyder, 1999; Prager, 2008). As noted above in the OIA figures, some dedicated climbing gym participants find a foray into outdoor climbing to be a rarity. The June 2006 edition of the popular climbing publication, *Rock and Ice* illustrates the point well. It includes a story about what it lists as one of "climbing's fastest growing trends": a climber (in this case 16 year old Meagan Martin from Florida) who lives a significant distance from natural rock (600 miles) and who also climbs at an elite level (she represented the USA in the 2004 Youth Worlds climbing competition in Scotland) (Jackson, 2006). In May of 2009 the inaugural year of

the university level Collegiate Climbing Series came to an end with their National Competition in Austin, Texas. Teams from Florida State and the University of Central Florida came in first and second in the team competitions. Again, topnotch performances by climbers who live in a state devoid of natural rock climbing.

The emergence of university climbing gyms provides ample opportunity for the creation of what is informally known as the "climbing community". Preliminary observations reveal this climbing community bears a striking similarity to what researchers have deemed a leisure social world (Strauss, 1978; Unruh, 1980). Essays and articles in the popular climbing magazines, *Rock and Ice* and *Climbing* support this perspective as well. Some go as far as to relate stories about the variety of personalities and characters native to this community (Griffith, 2004). Hamilton (1979) noted the existence of this same community in the outdoor climbing scene labeling it as a "subculture" (p.286). He observed that climbers all over the country read similar magazines, make similar pilgrimages, and share values, goals and language.

For years, non-academics involved in the indoor climbing industry have recognized the social component of indoor rock climbing. A recent issue of Recreation Management magazine quoted Adam Koberna, the vice president for sales of Entre Prises, an international climbing wall manufacturer, as saying, "There's been a move to a social environment…That's a big part of it, to create a social space-and in that, bouldering is number one" (Anderson, 2008). Koberna

is speaking about a specific form of climbing known as bouldering, where participants climb short distances (usually less than 15 feet) with no rope, being protected only by the foam padding below. The social nature of bouldering Koberna references is one aspect of indoor climbing explored in this study. Bouldering allows many climbers to be near one another when climbing, a potential catalyst for conversation and group forming.

Koberna's mention of bouldering being integral in creating a "social space" is an important evolution in rock climbing facility management. While indoor rock climbing design began with structures designed for roped climbing to heights of well over 30 feet, more and more facilities are being built with an equal emphasis on providing a space for unroped bouldering. If bouldering does indeed foster social development, then it may also facilitate entrance into the potential social world. For this reason, managers need help to better understand the potential ramifications of facility design on the social component of participants' lives. This research will help managers understand some of the phenomena surrounding the experience participants have in indoor rock climbing.

While researchers have studied outdoor rock climbers (A. Ewert, 1985, 1994; A. Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1997; Hamilton, 1979; Kiewa, 2001; Rapelje, 2004; Schuster, 2001) none could be found that have exclusively studied and explored the social world of indoor climbing, arguably the most accessible and widespread of all climbing sub-worlds. Among rock climbers, native terms exist

for describing the different groups under the broad umbrella of the "climbing community", based on favored terrain, style of pursuit, etc. Climbers can be found identifying with one or more of these groups. A quote from a recent interview with a climbing pioneer, Henry Barber, sums up the idea of a variety of rock climbing sub-worlds existing, in non-academic terms:

> Think of it like tribes - there's the Iroquois, the Sioux, the Pawnee, the Cherokee – they're all Native American tribes. It's the same in climbing – you have boulderers, gym climbers, sport climbers, trad climbers, ice climbers, Himalayan climbers. They're all tribes…and there's nothing wrong with that. Let's just make sure all people retain their heritage and that we allow these people to be themselves. This sport has to be different for everybody – it *has* to be (emphasis original). (Synott, 2008)

My research explored the social aspect of gym climbing (indoor climbing). If the "climbing scene" is as important to the success of the sport as some think, then a comprehension of the forces allowing entry into this potential social world, the meaning and depth of belonging, and the integration of social world identity into participants' lives has the potential to have a real monetary impact on providers and managers. Just as managers of wild lands need to understand the demands of outdoor climbers, facility managers must better understand the attributes of indoor climbers.

One group of recreation providers embracing indoor rock climbing as a program offering is public and private universities (Morford, 1991). A recent survey by the National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) indicated that out of 174 colleges or universities undertaking construction, expansion or renovation projects, 29 of them include climbing facilities (NIRSA, 2008). Since 1994, no fewer than 13 Texas universities have added indoor rock climbing facilities to their list of recreation opportunities for students. This year alone, Texas A&M University spent over $600,000 to renovate and add to their existing Indoor Climbing Facility. In 2001, Taylor, et al. found outdoor pursuits programs had a positive affect on the choice of university and retention of students. In their study, 36% of outdoor recreation participants stated that outdoor pursuits programs were important in choosing a university while 50% of respondents indicated that the programs were important in their choice to continue at the university (Taylor et al., 2001). Further evidence of indoor rock climbing popularity comes from The Outdoor Industry Foundation. Their 2006 report noted artificial wall climbing had 6.7 million participants in 2005; the second highest number in 5 years. This is an increase of 1.6 million participants over 2004 totals (OIA, 2006). With many universities, workout facilities and municipalities investing manpower and money into the development of climbing programs, it is important that managers understand the customer base they are serving. The social world perspective provides a

conceptual framework for understanding characteristics of indoor climbers and the meaning they assign to their participation.

Social Worlds Perspective

Unruh (1979; 1980) formally characterized and developed the concept of a social world perspective in social research to properly integrate several related concepts used to describe similar phenomena. Unruh describes social worlds to be "units of social organization that are diffuse and amorphous" and serve to provide a common area of interest for participants (Unruh, 1979). His research was built on works of early theorists including Shibutani (1955), Strauss (1978) and Irwin (1977). In his works, Unruh (1979; 1980) proposed the following characteristics of social worlds: a lack of a powerful centralized authority structure, a diffuse and amorphous social organization, an internally recognizable constellation of actors, voluntary identification of members and delimitation by in-group communication rather than through formal membership. The idea that members of social worlds find a unique set of norms, beliefs and values associated with them was introduced by Stebbins (1999) and added to his conceptualization of serious leisure. Anecdotal evidence indicates indoor rock climbing to be ripe with opportunity for exploration from this social world perspective as managers report indoor climbers establishing distinct jargon, rules of acceptable behavior and similar conventions of dress.

In addition to the above characteristics, Unruh (1979) proposed 4 types of social involvement existing in and around social worlds: strangers, tourists, regulars and insiders. Strangers serve as juxtaposition for other social world involvement types. While being considered full social world members, their involvement often serves to provide a sense of objectivity to the experiences of other involvement types (Unruh, 1979). Tourists are social world involvement types who are seeking a specific experience from an already established social world (Unruh, 1979). Their involvement can be identified by their curiosity, transient relationships and involvement "insofar as it remains entertaining" (Unruh, 1979). "Regulars" in the social world are individuals for which participation has become habituated (Unruh, 1979). Their participation happens through "thick or thin" due to their familiarity with social world norms and their attachment to the social world (Unruh, 1979). Insiders, the last social involvement type, form their identities through their involvement in a specific social world (Unruh, 1979). They create and design social world experiences for others, helping to decide what is and is not legitimate social world behavior (Unruh, 1979). Because of their deep commitment to the social world, insiders often find themselves recruiting and developing new social world members (Unruh, 1979).

According to Scott and Godbey (1992), the idea of a social world as defined by Shibutani in 1955 is "a culture area in which people and organizations orient their behavior in some identifiable way". Across America, indoor climbers

can be seen congregating in climbing gyms for more than just workouts. There is a social dimension to their time in the gyms. Anecdotal reports from climbing gym managers indicate that some participants congregate at the climbing wall on their "off days" (days the climbers let their bodies rest from working out) in order to socialize with one another. One important aspect of a culture area is that members of this social world share in various cultural elements including: conventions, practices, specialized knowledge, technology, and language (P. M. Hall, 1987; Pearson, 1981). Gibson, et al. (2002) found the social ties experienced in some social worlds create feelings of belongingness, passed on through these conventions, practices and specialized knowledge. These feelings of belongingness and social ties may have the power to influence climbers to participate despite their physical skills or technical skills not progressing in the same way as other climbers. Following in the footsteps of Scott and Godbey (1992), indoor rock climbing will be studied from a social world perspective to try and explore the potential for existence of the indoor climbing social world and to attempt to document the participants' experiences and the purpose of their involvement.

One important attribute identified by Scott and Godbey (1992) was that within a given social world, there exist multiple sub-groups which serve to further differentiate and segment the larger group. Scott and Godbey found within the social world of contract bridge there exist both serious and social groups who, while playing the same card game, had very different functions, methods of

recruitment, stakes, and topics of conversation as well as many other characteristics (Scott & Godbey, 1992). Scott and Godbey quote Strauss (1984) in detailing the subgroup segmentation occurring when the idea emerges from a collective definition that "certain activities are preeminently worth doing and 'we' are doing them" (Scott & Godbey, 1992). These subgroups can serve as individual areas of analysis, which is why indoor rock climbing has been chosen as a sub-set of the larger world of rock climbing for analysis (Brown, 2007; Unruh, 1979). In addition to separating the indoor climbing scene from the larger rock climbing world for analysis, it may be possible to further split the indoor climbing world into sub-groups. As mentioned before, bouldering is a good example of potential segmentation in the world of indoor climbing. This research on indoor rock climbers began to look at whether segmentation exists within this community of indoor rock climbing, and if so, how the potential social world was further split into sub-worlds.

Specialization and Progression

The topic of progression in recreational specialization originated with Hobson Bryan's (1977) research on anglers. Bryan suggested that specialization is a developmental process in which people progress to more advanced levels of participation the longer they participate in the activity (1977). His work specifically pointed to a progression in behavior, attitudes and preferences (Bryan, 1977). Scott and Shafer (2001) suggested progression

could be understood in terms of focusing of behavior, acquisition of skills and knowledge and centrality of the activity to life interest, or commitment. They proposed that these aspects of progression are not always experienced together. Through interviewing a variety of climbers at different stages of social world participation, this study will hopefully shed light on "if" and "how" these dimensions of progression are experienced. It could well be that segmentation among climbers can be represented in terms of the degree to which climbers have progressed over time.

Scott and Shafer (2001) also discussed three career contingencies in a person's life facilitating or hindering the progression of a person towards specialization: support received from other social world members, participant gender and available opportunities and personal resources. With climbing gyms bringing larger groups of climbers into a closer proximity to one another, and with the climbing gyms facilitating more social contact with climbers, it could well be that veteran indoor climbers impact progression among newer climbers. Another impact on progression may be the sense of belongingness created from social world membership. Membership may influence participants to continue in indoor climbing despite a lack of physical skill progression or technical skill progression.

One new and interesting concept introduced in 2005 is the idea of "flatlining" (Kerins & Cronan, 2005). Flatlining is suggested to be an alternate career trajectory to specialization. According to Kerins and Cronan (2005),

flatliners make the conscious decision not to specialize. This leads to various questions. Do some indoor rock climbers experience flatlining as a career trajectory? If so, is the reason for it linked to social world membership in some way? As stated above, does social world membership influence new and different career trajectories, like flatlining?

Serious Leisure

A field of study connected to both the social world perspective and to specialization is serious leisure. The idea of serious leisure derived from Stebbins' (1999) study of a variety of leisure social worlds evolved from his ethnographic studies of barbershop singing, amateur archaeologists, amateur stand-up comedians, and cultural tourists. He defined serious leisure as the systematic pursuit by a hobbyist, career volunteer or amateur of a leisure pursuit in a way that they "launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience" (p. 69).

Serious leisure manifests itself in the lives of participants in six qualities (R. A. Stebbins, 1982). The first is the occasional need to persevere and deal with adversity during their participation. In other words, the participants develop a dedication to the activity because of, to some extent, the hardships they encounter in the activity along the way (R. A. Stebbins, 1982). The ability for participants to find a career in the activity or endeavor is the second quality of serious leisure (R. A. Stebbins, 1982). Each of these careers endures over time

due to commitment and have their own "turning points, stages of achievement and involvement" (R. A. Stebbins, 1982). During this leisure career, participants encounter the need to put forth significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge training or skill, which is the third quality we see (R. A. Stebbins, 1982).

A serious leisure career results in the fourth quality, which is a realization or acquisition of durable benefits or rewards from the pursuit. Stebbins (1982) found eight of these benefits: self actualization, self expression, regeneration, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self image, social interaction and belongingness, lasting physical products of the activity, and self-gratification or fun. The social world of indoor rock climbing has the potential to deliver several durable benefits to its participants.

The last two qualities of serious leisure, participants identifying strongly with their chosen pursuits (e.g. I am a climber) and the development of a "unique ethos" (p. 257) or social world around the pursuit are linked (R. A. Stebbins, 1982). Once participants begin their strong identification, their involvement puts them in proximity of other participants who also identify with the pursuit. Through face to face interaction, as well as through mixed media forms including trade magazines, popular writings, internet websites and chat rooms, etc., these participants "coalesce" (p. 277) into social worlds where they share the experience of the leisure participation (Unruh, 1980).

The adoption of a serious leisure pursuit is a way for people to anchor their identity apart from professional work life (R. A. Stebbins, 1982).   With our post-industrial society's reduction in the number of hours in the work week and routinization of many jobs as well as the increasing age of our population relative to decades ago, Stebbins posits that as post-industrial citizens, we are seeking "personal fulfillment, identity enhancement, self expression and the like" (p. 253) through our leisure time (R. A. Stebbins, 1982).   In this conceptualization, this can only be achieved through serious leisure as opposed to its antithesis, casual leisure. Stebbins (1997) defined casual leisure as being a "relatively short lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it" (p. 18)

Serious leisure was broken up by Stebbins into three types of pursuits: amateurism, hobbyist pursuits and career volunteering (R. A. Stebbins, 1982). Amateurism, as the name indicates, is the pursuit, by an amateur, of a career having a professional counterpart. These amateurs are linked by a variety of ways with their professional counterparts; the professionals add a sense of establishment to the careers of amateurs and in turn the amateurs often provide much needed labor in development of the professional's career, whether it be archaeology or soccer (R. A. Stebbins, 1999).   Career volunteering encompassed in the serious leisure descriptor is volunteering to help targeted people or service which constitutes substantial investments of personal time and effort (R. A. Stebbins, 1999). Obviously this type of volunteering omits much of

the more casual types of volunteering performed by many when they dedicate one time monetary donations or more minimal time investments to an enterprise.

Hobbyist pursuits encompass the largest number of serious leisure participants. This category consists of pursuits for which no professional counterpart exists (but for which a commercial counterpart may exist) and can be classified in one of five categories which are "collectors, makers and tinkerers, activity participants, players of sports and games (where no professional counterpart exists) and enthusiasts in one of the liberal arts" (Stebbins, 1999, p. 70). Some hobbyist pursuits that have been studied from a serious leisure standpoint are fishing (Bryan, 1977), contract bridge (Scott & Godbey, 1992), football game tailgating (Gibson et al., 2002) and shag dancing (Brown, 2007).

Rock climbers, including indoor climbers, seem to fit best into Stebbins' serious leisure category of hobbyist players of sports or games. Stebbins notes that sometimes the time and commitment applied in order for hobbyists to acquire and maintain knowledge and skills leads to unwanted consequences including lack of time with loved ones, feelings of neglect and loss of shared interests (R. A. Stebbins, 1982). The role the social world of indoor rock climbing plays in the lives of its members to forge a community and the potential for feelings of belongingness to take the place of sacrificed closeness with loved ones was another focus of this study.

Summary

The literature bases of serious leisure, social worlds and specialization and progression are closely intertwined and serve to set the stage for this indoor rock climbing social world exploration. The last quality of serious leisure Stebbins (1999) points out in his research, creating a "unique ethos" (p. 71) or social world, is where the social world literature and the serious leisure literature overlap and is what served as a key launch point for this study. These social worlds and their norms, values, performance standards and beliefs have the ability to re-interpret the meaning of the experiences of individual social world participants. Anecdotal data as well as the popular literature from managers indicates the formation of strata of participation at indoor climbing facilities much as the specialization literature describes (Griffith, 2004). It may well be that the upper strata of the spectrum, possibly workers at these facilities, help newer and less specialized participants interpret the meaning of social world involvement serious leisure participation and promote the adoption of social world norms and beliefs. This "unique ethos" (p. 257) Stebbins (1982) describes and the meaning it has for indoor rock climbers is the key area of interest for this project.

Research Questions

The following research questions and sub-questions helped to guide the interview process. This study was an exploratory look at the social world of indoor rock climbing. As such, no hypotheses were tested. Rather, Grounded

Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) was utilized to seek out meaning from the experiences of the informants themselves. The research questions were used to guide the exploration into the key themes and the meaning of experiences of social world participants in indoor rock climbing. Questions about social worlds included, "Can indoor rock climbing be described in terms of a social world?", "If so, what are its characteristics?", "Are there sub-groups of this social world?", "If so, are they similar to other leisure pursuits?", "Why do members of this social world choose to participate?", and "What meaning do they find in their participation?" The serious leisure and specialization / progression literature developed the questions, "Does the sport of indoor rock climbing exhibit characteristics of serious leisure?", "If so, what are they?" "What processes are involved in the unique ethos evolving from serious leisure in indoor rock climbing?", "Is there evidence of career trajectories in indoor rock climbing lying outside the framework of serious leisure?", "Is progression an aspect of serious leisure like it is with specialization?", and "Do participants progress through the activity of indoor rock climbing?" These guiding questions were used to construct an interview guide lending form to the semi-structured interview format. A copy of the full interview guide is included in the Appendix of this document.

Limitations

This study focused on one particular social world; indoor rock climbers at the Indoor Climbing Facility at Texas A&M University. As such, the data gathered provides very detailed insight into the inner workings of that group and the meaning social world participation has for these climbers. Not only are these data gathered from a single geographic location, they also come entirely from college students. As such, the findings represent information about a very specific demographic set within the geographic area. Participants in Recreational Sports Programs are typically college students and rarely if ever include working class or non-academic setting individuals. Therefore, the findings and conclusions of this study may not be entirely generalizeable to other sports or even to other indoor climbing social worlds. Instead, this is an introductory study of a social world largely ignored by leisure researchers, but that is increasing in popularity and in numbers of participation (OIA, 2006). This is a first look at the importance of indoor rock climbing participation and should be followed by further study once key areas for study are identified.

Another study limitation may be my own involvement as a participant observer. It is important to note that several informants of this study were also employed by me as the ICF manager at Texas A&M, opening up the potential for researcher bias and potentially calling into question informant reliability. A counter point to this, is as a social world member, I am already immersed in the experiences. I was approached on more than one occasion to render an opinion

on matters of climbing style and climbing methodology. Those occurrences indicated the level of trust I had built with informants and their perception of me in terms of group dynamic. It was made clear through those experiences that I was not merely a social world observer, but also a social world member; one whose opinion mattered and who was trusted. All informants who were also employees of mine were vetted prior to choosing them. Any employees with major disciplinary action and therefore an uncomfortable professional dynamic with me were not chosen for interviews. Prior to this study, I had climbed on a recreational basis with all employee informants. In a way, the groundwork had been laid for a relationship that was alternate to the typical employee / boss paradigm. All interviews were conducted away from my office and all efforts were taken to de-emphasize the employee / boss paradigm (e.g. work issues were not discussed during interviews).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A naturalistic model of data collection was used to guide this exploratory study into the social world of indoor rock climbing. Multiple authors highlight the strengths of this methodology in exploratory research, specifically when exploring potential social worlds (Bernard, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The complexity of the lived experience of any group requires in-depth analysis. This analysis must take into account the "thoughts, feelings, values and assumptive worlds" (p. 57) felt by the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Marshall and Rossman (1999) argue that research is best undertaken in the natural setting in which the activity occurs; in this case, in order to study indoor climbers, it is necessary for me to immerse myself in the indoor climbing world, much as an anthropologist studying a remote culture must do by living among that culture and observing them and asking them questions (Bernard, 2000). One way of getting at the phenomena in question is to adopt qualitative methods of study, which rely on the participant themselves telling their own story in the experience, leaving the researcher to interpret these stories, extract the meaning from them and detect the larger themes emerging as common among them (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Once these themes emerge and are elucidated, they can be further explored and tested through future research.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), qualitative study is a departure from the typical quantitative methodology dominating past scientific inquiry. Qualitative study embraces the interactionist idea that social interaction is interpreted by each individual actor and that the interpretation of the interaction attaches personal meaning to the activity (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The qualitative researcher, seeks out and attempts to describe the meaning attached to the activity. In this way, the meaning attached to the participation of social world members was explored in this study.

My job as the manager of the Texas A&M University Indoor Climbing Facility (ICF) afforded me the ability to integrate into the social world of indoor rock climbing as a participant observer. In this methodology, I became immersed in the social world and I sought to hear, see and begin "to experience reality as the participants do" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I have been an avid rock climber for twelve years and have been involved in both indoor and outdoor climbing in that time. For the past nine years, I have held the manager's position mentioned above. This situation afforded me an opportunity to, as Scott and Godbey wrote, "take advantage of (my) unique biography and life experiences" to collect "inside" information (1990). As both a participant and observer, I was sensitive to the participant point of view and was able to more accurately interpret their interactions in their social world and the meaning of their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Since a naturalistic model of inquiry was used, it is important to keep in mind that research questions (see end of Chapter II) merely served as a point of departure for the exploration. Once initiated, the interviews with indoor climbers began to reveal directions of exploration of their own. These directions were explored through expanding the interview questions and when need be, changing direction for further interviews and analysis. Although few in number, the interviews were expected to reveal a deep level of meaning about the indoor rock climbing experience.

Research Design

Given that the goal of this project was to thoroughly explore the potential social world of indoor rock climbing, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gain detailed information about individuals' experiences in the sport. I recorded the interviews on a digital recording device and saved the files to a computer hard drive. I then transcribed these interviews, verbatim, and read, re-read and analyzed them using constant comparison techniques, in keeping with typical methodology for grounded theory research (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The hope was to explore this community and develop a theory on the involvement of participants grounded in the individual's experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). I conducted the interviews with participants involved in indoor rock climbing at the Student Recreation Center at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas from May of 2009 through August of 2009. Through my

relationships with the local climbing scene, key informants were identified to help further choose subsequent informants and to help verify facts and triangulate data (Spradley, 1979). The initial informants were chosen after observation of them and their involvement at the ICF. These initial informants were used to test interview questions and develop the interview guide used to explore specific themes later in the project. Interviews typically lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. All informants were provided with an information sheet on the project and were asked to sign a consent form before the interview started. Informants were not compensated in any way for their participation. Again, a copy of the interview guide can be found in the Appendix of this document. In all, thirteen college-aged informants were contacted and interviewed for this study, seven males and six females (Table 1). Aside from three small groups, all interviews were performed individually.

Table 1   Characteristics of Informants

Mary	Female	Mary is an employee at the ICF and has been climbing for over three years. Mary was an initial informant.
Skip	Male	Skip is an employee at the ICF and has been climbing for over four years. He prefers climbing indoors and seems to avoid outdoor climbing. Skip was an initial informant.
Ruth	Female	Ruth has been climbing for under two years and is climbing partners with Helen.

Table 1 Continued

Helen	Female	Helen is a graduate student and has been climbing for a year and a half. Her regular climbing partner is Ruth.
June	Female	June is regular climbing partners with Ann and Cedar. They climb as a threesome because it gives them more time to socialize.
Ann	Female	Ann is a new climber who started climbing in order to spend more time with her friends, June and Cedar.
Cedar	Female	Cedar has been climbing for under two years and is a regular climbing partner of both June and Ann.
John	Male	John is an undergraduate upperclassman who has been climbing since he was a young boy. He enjoys the camaraderie and community of climbing.
Paul	Male	Paul is an ICF employee and climbs on a regular basis with Silas. He has been climbing over five years.
Silas	Male	Silas is an ICF employee and climbs on a regular basis with Paul. Silas has been climbing over two years.
Jimmy	Male	Jimmy is an undergraduate climber who is an active member of the local climbing community. Jimmy has climbed since he was ten years old.

Table 1 Continued

| Bart | Male | Bart is an ICF employee and is an active climbing community member. He built a wooden wall at his home that serves as a hub for the climbing community. He has been climbing over six years. |
| Jesse | Male | Jesse is an ICF employee who climbs on a regular basis with Mary and who is an active climbing community member. He has been climbing over 5 years. |

Once major concepts were identified in the interview transcripts, theoretical sampling was used to choose the subsequent informants to interview in order to further explore and elaborate upon the concepts in order to develop the themes and eventually theory grounded in the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Questions and prompts offered to these informants were adjusted as needed to steer the data collection towards the areas where more detail or information was sought. Subsequent informants were chosen based on field observations of their participation at the climbing wall (Spradley, 1979). Their unique experiences and specific types of participation provided variability and richness to the data set and helped to better elaborate the analysis. Exploration of major themes continued until data saturation occurred; that is until no new

major revelations emerged and repetition of similar experiences began to be repeated for major themes. It is in this way that thirteen in-depth interviews could serve to provide enough data to accurately describe the workings of the social world of indoor rock climbing at Texas A&M. All interviews were transcribed and read for correctness. They were then emailed to the participants to verify their accuracy. Some informants were re-contacted and asked to provide further data and clarifications to ideas they originally presented.

The concepts and themes revealed in the data analysis were then grouped and further explored to fully expose the variety of aspects of each concept. These concepts and their illustrations are outlined in Chapter 4 of this study.

Analysis

To facilitate better data management, the transcribed interviews were imported into Microsoft Excel as tab delineated text documents (Meyer & Avery, 2008). Once imported the interviews were read and coded for emerging major concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The concepts helped to guide the remaining analysis serving as launching off points for grouping the data. The units of analysis for the data were individual phrases or blocks of sentences. Each unit was placed in its own row. Columns were used for coding the data. Since a spreadsheet was used, the data could be sorted and grouped again and again for better organization.

Triangulation of Data

As noted by Corbin and Strauss (2008) it is important to take advantage of not only the primary sources of data (interviews) but also alternative sources of data. As a participant observer, I drew on my own observation field notes, popular magazine articles (particularly from *Rock and Ice* and *Climbing* magazines), and to a lesser extent, on line postings from climbing related websites to help triangulate and verify my data. Similar to Scott (1991) these sources provided a way to double check findings for accuracy. Once themes were identified and the meanings ascribed to them by informants were revealed, my personal field observations, statements by industry informants, and popular magazine articles were consulted to verify findings. Field notes were taken while I climbed at the ICF at the Texas A&M Student Recreation Center. Observations occurred through my direct interaction as a climbing partner of some participants. While observing the climbing, I participated in both bouldering and toprope climbing with a variety of partners. When appropriate and inconspicuous, I recorded my field notes on site. Other times, I wrote my field notes once I had retreated away from the facility.

Further triangulation occurred when the raw interview transcripts (free of coding) were passed along for reading to a senior colleague of mine. I then consulted with this colleague who has a background in qualitative methodology to discuss the emerging themes and coding strategies as well as ideas for how best to report the data.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is not without its limitations. Qualitative methodology critics cite bias as inherent in qualitative research. Other experts would refute this argument saying that bias is inherent in all research, to some extent. To achieve the most reliable and sound analysis, qualitative researchers must strive for trustworthiness in their approaches (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Rolfe, 2006). Graenheim and Lundman summarize and describe trustworthiness as being comprised of three aspects: credibility, dependability, and transferability (2004).

Credibility is concerned with the selection of context, participants and approaches to gathering data and then how well the themes describe the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Credibility was achieved in this study by first, interviewing a variety of indoor climbers with a variety of experiences. Next, the interview transcripts were provided to two different senior research colleagues for their reading. They provided input on their perceptions of emerging themes during the early stages of data analysis and then on the final themes used to frame the Results portion of this study.

Dependability is the effect that the passing of time has on data collection methods and analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was maximized in this study, first by concentrating data collection efforts through out the summer of 2009. This allowed for continuity of questions

from informant to informant. Secondly, dependability was ensured, again, by sharing both the interview transcripts and data analysis process with other researchers. They provided valuable feedback and structure to help expose and highlight various themes and concepts for reporting.

The last component of trustworthiness is *transferability* which is "the extent to which the study's findings can be transferred to other settings or groups" (Polit & Hungler, 1999). It is often linked to the idea of external validity or generalizability in quantitative research (Rolfe, 2006) and is really an issue of it being a reader's decision as to whether or not to choose to transfer the findings to other groups (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The findings from this study are presented clearly and with full disclosure of study limitations and the processes in which it was performed. The reader has ample knowledge of how the findings were achieved and is therefore adequately prepared to make an informed decision as to the transferability of findings.

Limitations

To ensure trustworthiness of results and full disclosure of study conditions, it is important to highlight what may be perceived as limitations to the study as well as its advantages. First the limits of the methodology itself should be stated. Using qualitative methodology results in an increased richness of data for a given data set, however since the data all come from one small population and only include a nominal amount of informants, the results are not

generalizeable to a larger population. Again, in addition to being from a single geographic site, these data all originated from college students; therefore they lack a certain demographic richness that could have been found if non-students were interviewed regarding their indoor climbing experiences.

Secondly, the researcher's role must be clearly stated. As the primary researcher for this project, I have been intimately involved in the Texas A&M indoor climbing social world for over twelve years. This role gave me valuable insight into the actors and the social world inner workings. My knowledge of key informants and processes in the social world streamlined the immersion of myself as a researcher into the social world. In addition to being a participant in the social world, I have been the Texas A&M ICF manager for over nine years. Several of the informants for this project are employees of the ICF and are my subordinates. It is important to note that care was taken to de-emphasize this relationship during all interviews. Interviews were conducted as much as possible away from any part of the climbing facility that would remind the informant of my dual role. All informants were asked prior to agreeing to be interviewed if they felt comfortable in the interviewer/interviewee roles. The resulting dynamic was one of a researcher who was well informed of social world processes prior to interviewing and a familiarity and respect reciprocated between the researcher and informant which resulted in efficient and often times more intimate and revealing conversations during interviews. My dual role was

definitely a benefit in terms of the richness of data procured during the interviews.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Setting

Texas A&M University's Indoor Climbing Facility (ICF) is located inside the Student Recreation Center on the University's campus in College Station, Texas. This state university was rated number one by the Princeton Review in 2009 for having the most conservative students in the country. In addition, the same survey rated it number 13 in the country for the most religious students and number 15 for "Alternative Lifestyles not an Alternative". The entire area is nestled in the heart of central Texas and is considered by some to reside within the conservative southern "Bible Belt".

The student body, which boasted a fall 2009 enrollment of 48,787 individuals and the University itself, are the centerpiece of the surrounding twin cities of Bryan and College Station, Texas. Texas A&M is a former military college that only began allowing admission to women and non-military students in the 1960's. A&M is a tradition centered campus that continues to identify with its all-male, all military days. Some traditions surviving from that time are the gold, senior rings purchased by A&M upperclassmen, emblazoned with military insignia as well as the all-male "Yell Leaders" A&M retains to energize the student body at sporting events in lieu more traditional cheerleaders that most colleges and universities have. Today, the Corps of Cadets, the University's

ROTC program, remains active and are deemed the "Keepers of the Tradition" on A&M's campus. Corps members can be seen walking through campus in formal military attire, including handmade riding boots for all seniors. Conservative values and conservative lifestyles are among the traditions that A&M's student body outwardly supports. But as we will see, not all of A&M's students share in this tradition. Many climbers that frequent the ICF in the Student Recreation Center self-identify as being liberal minded. Even those espousing more evangelical Christian beliefs, tend to not identify with the conservative mainstream of Texas A&M; choosing instead to embrace the more comfortable social world found at the ICF. It is these students that may have trouble finding a place at A&M where they truly feel welcome. The data from this study show that the ICF has the propensity to provide a welcoming place for these students.

The University and the surrounding twin cities focus heavily on the sport of college football and traditional student living. Students are encouraged to join organizations and clubs to focus their energies on developing into student leaders. The Division of Student Affairs on campus is a non-academic part of the university professional staff overseeing student organizations, Greek Life, the Corps of Cadets as well as non-academic student leadership programs in an effort to ensure all students find a sense of belonging and permanence within the large and intimidating student body at Texas A&M. Overall, A&M's military and rural agricultural roots (A&M stands for agricultural and mechanical) as well

as its focus on tradition keep A&M rooted in conservative values. Aggies (a moniker A&M students are known by) remain seemingly proud of their reputation around Texas and the nation as a hotbed of conservative student life.

To illustrate the uniquely conservative climate that has evolved at A&M, I point out a story that emerged during the 2008 United States presidential race, which pitted the conservative John McCain against the more liberal Barak Obama. The story was covered not only by local press but received nation wide video coverage on television as well as the internet when CNN picked up the story. The local Texas A&M chapter of the Young Conservatives of Texas, organized an event called "Throw Your Nest Egg Away with Obama". The event was held in an outdoor, public area of campus and passing students were invited to throw eggs at an effigy of Democratic nominee, Barak Obama. This is by no means an isolated incident. In addition to this type of activity, the public areas of campus are often filled with booths recruiting students to join local Christian churches. Frequently, pro-life demonstrators are seen organizing on campus to protest national abortion laws. These examples are not given as a critique of Texas A&M, they are merely given to explain the social tone of the campus in which the indoor climbing social world is immersed.

All Texas A&M students pay $101.92 per semester in Recreation Sports fees in order to access the Student Recreation Center which is open seven days per week for their use. Highlights of this facility include 12 racquetball courts, four full sized basketball courts, a quarter-mile indoor track, diving pool and 50

meter swimming pool. The ICF is the centerpiece of the Student Recreation Center and is often the first thing students and visitors notice when they walk through the doors. This facility was built in 1995 and has since served as the nexus for the climbing community of both the campus and the surrounding cities of Bryan and College Station. The ICF itself has been recently renovated to replace the texture on the wall and to install a smaller climbing facility designed for bouldering only. This boulder wall is located adjacent to the 44 foot high climbing facility. ICF staff members maintain the climbing facility by performing routine maintenance and route setting. Route setting is the practice of periodically changing the pattern of the modular grips or holds bolted onto the walls. These patterns or paths up the walls are called "routes". Each hold is different and each route is unique. The mixture of hold placement and type can result in an infinite number of variations in the quality, difficulty and style of route. The bouldering facility is maintained in a similar fashion, except the native term for a bouldering route is a "problem". Different scales are used to rate the difficulty of routes and bouldering problems; the Yosemite Decimal Scale for routes which runs from 5.5 to 5.13[1] in the Texas A&M facility and the Sherman V

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[1] The Yosemite Decimal Scale (YDS) is a way of quantifying modes of walking and climbing based on difficulty. Walking across flat ground would be considered class 1. Class 2 and 3 would be walking up ever steeper ground. Class 4 is considered scrambling up hill where a person might need to extend a hand to balance him or herself on the steep incline, but upward progress is still made with the legs. Class 5 is considered technical climbing. It is done on walls and cliffs that are so steep that protection via ropes and anchors is needed to keep the climbers safe. This is where the "5" in the YDS scale comes from. The technical climbing scale is further broken down into degrees of difficulty from 5.0 to 5.15. The scale numerically does not make logical sense since a 5.10 is actually more difficult than a 5.9, this is due to modifications made to the scale through time. The grade 5.9 is literally read "Five-Nine" while the grade of 5.11 is literally read "Five-Eleven". Indoors, beginner grades are usually between 5.5 and 5.9.

Scale for boulder problems which runs from V0 to V8[2] in the Texas A&M facility. Climbers often challenge themselves and mark their improvement by striving for being able to climb, without falling, routes and problems of ever higher grades. This is sometimes referred to as "chasing the numbers". To keep the facility updated and to hold the participants' interest, older routes are stripped from the walls and new routes are set on a regular basis.

Climbers at Texas A&M pay an additional fee of $6 per semester to have climbing facility staff members check their belaying and safety skills. Each semester, between 400 and 500 students pay this additional fee to become registered climbers with between 100 and 200 paying another $40 to have unlimited access to the facility. The balance pay for day passes to use the climbing facility upon each return visit.

Observations at the ICF during this study revealed interactions common to other university climbing walls, as revealed through key informants from other climbing facilities. Climbers would arrive at the ICF either alone or in small groups (two to three) and check in. They would don the necessary gear, shoes and a chalkbag if bouldering and shoes, chalkbag and a harness if climbing on a rope. Participants warm up with stretching or climbing on easy routes or

Moderate grades are 5.10 and 5.11, while advanced are 5.12 and up. Expert level grades generally are expected to begin at the 5.14 mark.

[2] The Sherman V-Scale is a scale used to rate bouldering problems. It begins with the V0 (pronounced "Vee Zero") level which is roughly equivalent to a 5.9 on the YDS. It continues through V16. Beginners rarely complete higher than a V2, which begins the moderate grades. Above V5 is considered advanced while V10 and up is considered expert.

problems, and then continue their session in any number of ways depending on their intent.

Serious Leisure

Based on Stebbins' (1982; 1999) descriptions compared with specific quotes from the informant interviews, it was concluded that indoor rock climbing exhibited all six qualities of serious leisure. These qualities are: perseverance, a leisure career in the pursuit, durable benefits or rewards from the pursuit, the need to put forth significant personal effort, identifying with the pursuit, and the development of a unique ethos or social world around the pursuit (R. A. Stebbins, 1982, 1999). The first five qualities will be briefly covered with examples given from observation notes or interview transcripts. The last quality, unique ethos or social world development, will constitute the main focus of the remainder of the analysis. During the process of interviewing and analysis, this social world and its dynamics emerged as the dominant focus of the study.

Coming Back – The Need to Persevere

The need to persevere through hardship in indoor climbing is best exemplified in the struggles of several participants to "come back" in their climbing ability after experiencing a setback. During my time climbing with and observing climbers I encountered one female climber, Mary, who had taken to strapping on an additional 20 lb. weight vest whenever she climbed.

Last semester I kind of neglected my climbing so by the end of the summer last year…..Well, I considered myself a pretty strong climber and then last semester got in the way so I was climbing like maybe once every other week. So I lost a lot of my endurance and my strength. I wasn't eating very well, so I gained some weight back and everything. And it took a toll on my climbing. And this semester I've been really dedicated and made it a point to not let that happen again and to get stronger. Recently I'd say I've surpassed where I was at the end of the summer last year, but until then I was just trying to get back to where I used to be.

Paul and Silas, a climbing pair, were interviewed together and recalled a similar experience. Paul recalled,

So we've both been kind of out of climbing for a little bit as far as actively climbing. I mean both of us have been climbing on and off, but I got sick last semester, so we're trying to build up our endurance so we've both been putting on a 20 lb. weight vest and doing laps on the back wall. Sometimes down-climbing or staying on for 5 minutes at a time or sometimes just doing laps for 10 minutes at a time.

Helen mentioned in her interview that upon taking up the sport of indoor climbing, her normal climbing partner had to leave the country for fieldwork. Left with no regular partner, she had to persevere to find a new one. Her search led

her to taking advantage of a climber's folder at the ICF where climbers in search of partners could leave their information for one another. She used this tactic to try out new partners until she settled on climbing with Ruth on a regular basis.

In addition to the above examples, during my participant observation time at the ICF, I often climbed with an avid climber in his late 50's. This man was a faculty member at A&M and several years ago had undergone an experimental double hip replacement. Prior to choosing his method of replacement, he consulted with multiple physicians to find the right replacement method that would allow him to continue climbing afterward. He recuperated after the surgery and after extensive rehabilitation efforts was able to continue with an active climbing career. His perseverance through this physical hardship and his coming back is an indication of his participation in this leisure at a serious level.

Leisure Career

While some climbers from the A&M facility had only begun climbing in the past year or two, several had been climbing for longer time periods. Mary recalled starting her climbing career soon after high school:

> I had a pair of climbing shoes my uncle bought me for a graduation
> gift because he's like into outdoor stuff too and he wanted to get
> me something for graduating from high school and he didn't want
> to get me the usual what everyone else was getting me so he took
> me to REI. So I had a pair of shoes when I came here and I guess

it was October 2006 when I took the orientation class. (I) pretty

much started climbing from there. (I) made a bunch of friends and

just kind of progressed.

When asked how long he'll pursue climbing as a hobby, Jimmy replied with the

following:

I'd like to think it's something I'll do forever, but climbing isn't life.

There's other responsibilities, like jobs, getting married, having

kids. But I'll climb as long as I can. That's like…it's definitely one

of my favorite things to do and I'll keep trying to do it as long as I

can.

Durable Self Benefits

The most evident durable benefit the climbers at the A&M facility seem to

derive is a heightened level of physical ability. More subliminal is the feeling of

self-worth climbers seem to have as a result of participation. One day, while

doing field observation, a female climber was overheard talking about the

"weight room guys." The ICF is adjacent to the weight and fitness area of the

Student Recreation Center, so anyone going to the weight room must pass by

the wall. The female climber was comparing her strength to that of weight room

participants and she was overheard saying "they think they're so strong? Try

doing pull ups on these holds instead of that bar they use". She differentiated

her strength procured through climbing as just as legitimate as the strength the

weight room aficionados gain through their weight lifting regimes. In speaking about what climbing did for him as opposed to general outdoor participation, Jimmy said:

> It's made me the climber I am. I wasn't strong before and now I'm strong after. I guess it kind of gave me a love for the sport really that I didn't really have before. I mean I did, I loved being outside, but it gave me a drive, I'd say, to really get good and keep going at it.

Mary made a similar observation about strength development during her bouldering training:

> Even if I'm bouldering at a grade below my level, I still get tired a lot faster because it's really powerful and my muscles start to fatigue in a different way than if I'm sport climbing and getting fatigued. Its basically, like, the workout I get from bouldering feels like the workout I get if I go to the weight room and lift for an hour.

Identifying with the Pursuit – I'm a Climber

Almost everyone interviewed for this study self identified as a "climber". This definition had different specific meanings for each person, but in a broad sense, they all had similarity. For most, being a climber had a commitment component to it. Helen said this about identifying as a climber:

I'd say it's something you do consistently, not something you do once every three months. If you are a rock climber, you go once a week at least, maybe more than that. How frequently you climb is what makes you a rock climber.

John said this about identifying as a climber:

I would definitely consider myself a climber…I don't want to say that the second you get on the wall that you per se become a climber. I think it's a process. It takes time to truly appreciate it. For me it's the dedication that makes the difference. You can have per se "casual climbers" that want to hop on the wall just to see if they can do it. But I more closely identify climbers as people that show the dedication that are there…you know they don't have to buy their own gear….they're continually working at it. I mean it doesn't matter their skill level at all. Like, I think as long as you have that dedication, that is what truly makes you a climber versus not.

For John, this dedication is what identifies someone as a climber. Their dedication is a sign that they are committed in a very real way to the sport of climbing. For him dedication meant that they were continually trying to improve upon their skills and be among others in the sport. This idea of improvement is linked to the next quality of serious leisure, which is that participants often have to put forth significant personal effort.

Significant Personal Effort

John's comments above about the dedication needed to be identified as a climber, is an example of how serious leisure includes the output of significant personal effort by its participants. In addition, the progress that often comes with this dedication or effort ties the serious leisure literature in with Bryan's idea of progression and specialization (Bryan, 1977). This idea of dedication that John has and the acquisition of knowledge, focusing of behavior and the incorporation of the activity as a central life component seem to support the suggestions Scott and Shafer (2001) had for their conceptualization of specialization.

The climbers interviewed were all college students. While this period of life is thought of by some to be a carefree time, several climbers interviewed revealed it to be a time when they focus on their climbing putting forth the significant personal effort Stebbins (1982; 1999) refers to and that is a hallmark of serious leisure as well as specialization (Scott & Shafer, 2001). Mary indicated that to her climbing was certainly worth changing some of her lifestyle habits for:

> My climbing partner and I come up here twice a week for about three hours…so basically if I'm not studying or working on my research, I'm trying to focus on stuff to improve my climbing, whether it's working out or eating healthier.

Jimmy spoke about having the "drive" to be better at climbing:

Well before…..my dad taught me to climb when I was 10 so like we were in Boy Scouts together and we'd go to E-rock all the time. And it was fun but the climbing wasn't the fun part….it was just being outside. And so when I got here and really started to climb, that became the focus. It was climbing instead of being outside. Before I would climb stuff outside and fail at it; fall off, and not want to do it again. And once climbing became the focus, when I fell off I wanted to get it. That's the drive.

Jimmy's description of this "drive" to succeed on a climb is an example of his need to put forth significant personal effort. In observing Jimmy and his partner climb, I noticed they push one another verbally while climbing; shouting encouragement throughout the climb and even teasing when necessary to goad one another into trying harder and harder climbs and to succeed on them. In talking about what he is willing to do to improve in climbing, Jimmy had this to say:

I don't know…..climbing is like my only physical activity now. I mean I bike, but let me put it this way: my drive to exercise now is based solely off my wanting to get better at climbing. Every once in a while I want to go swimming because it's a good off-day workout, or I want to go running because I want to get my cardio up to climb, so like I have these different pursuits, *but they all*

seem to be pointing towards climbing, which is interesting. (Emphasis added)

The Development of a Unique Ethos - The Climbing Community

The last of Stebbins' (1982; 1999) six qualities of serious leisure is the development of a social world around the pursuit. This social world has the ability to manifest itself with varying degrees of impact among the participants. In addition, the communities evolving around pursuits can evolve at a variety of levels. For this study, the local level Texas A&M indoor climbing community was explored. These community members all have coalesced around the ICF in the Student Recreation Center on the Texas A&M campus. For some members, this is their only involvement with the climbing world. For others, they are members both at the local, indoor level and then also with the statewide and nationwide indoor and outdoor levels. The indoor climbing community at A&M seems to be a sub-set of the broader climbing community. This idea will be discussed further in the following section and comprises the bulk of this study.

Indoor Rock Climbing Social World – The Climbing Community

As stated above, the climbing social world, of which A&M's indoor climbing community seems to be a part of, operates on many levels throughout the world. As an example there is a recognized social world built around rock climbing. A key aspect of social worlds is the ability for members to not only

participate in multiple regional levels, but to also participate with varying degrees of involvement at any one level (Unruh, 1979; 1980). At the highest level, it breaches international boundaries. Climbers from all over the world have a connection through their leisure. When a climber from one country comes to another country, they are often recognized as a climber because of the brands of clothing they choose to wear, the gear they carry with them (Climbers often hang their shoes from their book bag or backpack as a way of letting them air out and as an outward sign of their climber identity.) or even the scars left on their hands from clawing their way up the rocks.

Lower than the international level would be the identification among climbing community members at the national level. In America, it is common for climbers from one area to take vacation "road trips" to other areas to sample the rock climbing there. Similar to international crossovers, the climbers from these disparate areas are often recognized because of the same artifacts and signs. Another artifact appears when these climbers drive their vehicles to other places; the stickers placed on the vehicle windows and bumpers. Climbing and outdoor gear manufacturers often give these brightly colored, logo and slogan filled stickers away for free for climbers to put on their vehicles as an outward sign of climber identity.

At both the international and the national levels, climbers seem to striate into their specialty groups within the climbing pursuit. Boulderers separate out from roped climbers. Roped climbers will draw distinctions between traditional

climbers and sport climbers based on what kind of gear and technique is used to protect their ascents. Indoor climbing is often viewed by outdoor climbers as a "lesser pursuit". However observations from the climbing press seem to be signaling an acceptance of indoor climbing on the part of mainstream climbers due to its adaptability to competitive climbing. Many professional level outdoor climbers, the heroes of the sport, also spend time competing indoor and on artificial walls at World Cup climbing events in Europe. Their participation creates a competitive circuit and in turn creates a framework for lower level competitive events at local indoor climbing venues. Despite this mainstream acceptance, it should be noted that it appears some outdoor purists continue to view indoor climbing as not a legitimate activity. It seems that the indoor climbing social world is immune from this opinion, though. The purist view seems to be muted among the indoor rock climbers. They appear to view their experiences as legitimate within their social world. The purist views from a minority of outdoor climbers do not seem to detract from their serious participation, or their social world involvement.

When the broader climbing community condenses down to the local level, we begin to see a formation of tighter groups and more intimate activity transcending the sole activity of climbing. It is at this level that the social world is involved at Texas A&M. Interviews with the thirteen informants in this study revealed the existence of this social world as well as helped to describe it for this study. In areas devoid of climbing, such as Texas A&M, this community often

coalesces around an indoor or artificial climbing facility, much as skateboarders without a skate park will coalesce around concrete embankments, empty swimming pools or public areas with stairs, handrails, etc. On the local level, many times climbers cease to stratify based on their particular climbing hegemonies[3]. All disciplines of climbers socialize together and choose to climb in a variety of disciplines, while still favoring one over another. This seems to include not only exclusively indoor climbers, but outdoor climbers as well. These various groups are illustrated well by the following comment from Silas:

> I think, like Paul said, like there are some people that train in the gym so they can get better and climb outside because that's what they like to do, and this is just a means to an end. For some people it's like, that is their end…to climb in a gym. That's what they want to do. But I think even within that group, there are two groups. People that all they do is climb in a gym but they want to get outside, like they would like to get outside and climb they don't

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[3] Only in areas of large climbing populations do the stratification and separation of disciplines seem to remain. One example is the "Boulder Bolt Wars" which erupted in the rock climbing social world in Boulder, Colorado, a mecca for many US climbers. During the early 1990's climbers from the traditional discipline and the sport discipline were involved in an ever-escalating war of words revolving around the legitimacy of their chosen disciplines. This war of words transitioned from the parking lots of climbing areas to internet chat rooms, to even the letters to the editor pages of the national climbing press. Eventually it escalated into the vandalism of individual's cars and even some physical altercations between rival factions.

have the means, or it's just too far away, or they're too busy. And

then there are some people who just have no desire. They just

don't even care about going outside. Like, "I think climbing in the

gym is fun, I get to do it with my friends, I get to look cool in front of

the girls on the elliptical (Author's Note: the ICF is located in front

of a selection of cardiovascular equipment. Climbers are often

climbing in front of an impromptu audience of people using these

machines.), and I'm good with that." So, you definitely see the

groups emerge.

The A&M indoor climbing community exists at the local level. Even so,

community members were members of not only the local social world but the

larger state and national social worlds as well. Social World theory begins to

help guide the exploration of the experiences of these climbers. Most of the

social world insiders (Unruh, 1979; 1980) such as Mary, Paul, Silas, John, and

Jimmy traveled to other areas to climb both indoor and outdoor (including

Colorado, Tennessee, Mexico and Utah) and therefore feel integrated into both

the local social world and the larger, national social world. These insiders were

not only members of the indoor climbing social world, but also members of the

outdoor climbing social world and fit well into experiencing what Stebbins

referred to as serious leisure (R. A. Stebbins, 1982; 1999). The tourists and

most regulars, like Ann, Cedar, June, Ruth and Helen, it seems were content to

be members of the local indoor climbing social world only, contentedly climbing

indoors at the Student Recreation Center. I say "most regulars" because there were some regulars that while not being integrated as insiders in the community, still found themselves occasionally breaking out of the local scene to climb either at other climbing gyms back home or to go outdoor climbing in other areas. The majority of the regulars, like the tourists, focused their climbing activities at the ICF and were differentiated by their types of experiences and their level of participation. These tourists and regulars continued to use the same jargon, wear the same clothes, display the same company logo stickers on their water bottles and vehicles and read the same magazines as outdoor climbing social world members and the larger, national climbing social world, however their activity was fixated at the local level. It is important to note that while they did exhibit these same behaviors, they did not seem to do so quite to the extent that some insiders did.

On the local level, the communities become more intimate. It is at this level that the community has the ability to evolve, for some members, into more than just a leisure social world. For many insiders, the community develops into what I will refer to as a *confederacy*. The distinction between a community and confederacy will be elaborated on in a later section. For now it will suffice to say that the level of buy-in exhibited by confederacy members was much higher than that of community members. Confederacy members seemed to have more social capital invested in the social world and exhibited different levels and types of involvement.

As stated above, one key aspect of social worlds is the ability for members to participate with varying degrees of involvement at any one level (Unruh, 1979; 1980). In this study, I encountered climbers involved at a variety of levels. Some, like Helen, a local, indoor community member, felt like they were part of the community; however they just chose not to be as immersed in the community as some others. When asked about whether or not she was a community member, Helen responded:

> Somewhat….I don't talk to a ton of people. But I recognize them and assume they recognize me too. I'm not really a social person; I just keep to myself unless someone talks to me. I don't really care.

Jimmy, who was an avid A&M indoor climbing community member and an outdoor community member, provided an alternate view of community membership with this response about his community involvement:

> I feel like I got into it because I started climbing with everyone who forms it now. I think if you have a real love for climbing and you do it a lot and you want to get better you are going to make friends and that's how you get into the community.

Within the broad category of the indoor climbing social world or community, I now examine several main sub-themes revealed during analysis. These include: pathways of entry for community members, the distinction between community and confederacy, the role of community in bringing together

disparate groups and the ability of community to act as a mediator of experience to preserve community strength and membership. Each theme is explored in the following sections with quotes from informants and details of personal observations.

Finding Their Way In – Pathways for Community Entry

Climbing community members found a variety of pathways for socialization into the community. During analysis, two particular socialization pathways emerged in the data that are worth elaborating on. The role of bouldering as an entry point to the Texas A&M indoor climbing community seemed to be an important experience to many informants. Bouldering is a traditionally low cost way to get started climbing. Typically climbers need only climbing shoes and chalk to do so, however this is not always the case. Observations indicate that the maintenance and operation of a climbing facility can affect even the equipment needs of a new climber. During this study, a new bouldering facility was added to the Student Recreation Center. Many new climbers were observed climbing on it without the need for shoes or chalk. Instead, these tourists to the climbing social world climbed up the wall in their athletic shoes and used no chalk. In addition to being easy to access, based on many informant and popular press accounts, bouldering is a climbing discipline lending itself well to socialization. By bouldering, climbers can learn movement

and technique while socializing with others and avoid having to establish trust in others to hold the rope for them.

Observations revealed groups of individuals (mostly male) who would take turns bouldering up and then dropping back down onto protective pads. The individuals would socialize while sitting to the side waiting for their turn to climb. The discussions often included not only climbing topics such as shoe choice, nuances of specific boulder problems, etc. but also transcended into discussions about their particular courses of study, professors they liked and disliked, and pop culture subjects like music and movies. Interestingly, it was rare to find the broad community discussing religion or politics. When this was observed, it was seen predominantly among community insiders and even then it was done in smaller, more intimate groups and it was kept to a minimum. The community building potential of bouldering is expressed in the following quotes from informants who found a start in climbing, via the discipline of bouldering:

> When I first got to A&M I was also predominately more into bouldering. I think it might have been because of the community aspect to it and because I didn't quite have the endurance built up to do all the tall walls here at A&M. But now I've progressed more to toproping and sport climbing. (Skip)

> With bouldering there tends to be a large group of people right there, they tend to be right next to you the whole time, like

cheering you on throughout the whole thing. Whereas with toproping it tends to be you up on the wall and a belayer. (Skip)

Part of it was because I didn't know anybody. It was when I was a freshman. I didn't know many partners. And all the friends I met were boulderers like Bart, Ace and Larry, their friends who used to climb. That's all we would do. It was like we had bouldering partners I guess. So that's pretty much it. I didn't rope at all freshman year. That's why I got strong so fast, too. It was definitely lack of partners I would say. (Jimmy)

One interesting point is that among the six female informants, only Mary indicated that she got her start in climbing via bouldering:

When I was mainly bouldering I felt like there was much more community in it, you know, a bunch of boulderers hanging out sitting around a wall, climbing stuff versus with sport climbing you are with one or two partners and you are just getting on long stuff (roped climbing). It takes a while and there is not as much like chatting and hanging out. The social aspect is different.

Females' experiences in indoor rock climbing may be different than those of male climbers, particularly in their chosen pathways of entry into the social world. Female informants seemed to view bouldering as a physically intimidating pursuit or alternately as something inherently male:

I think a lot of things are easier for males, because they have more upper body strength. It's a fact of life that is never going to change. Some of it I see people do and I'm like "that would be cool, but there's no way to pull myself up like that. It would take…..I don't know if I could ever do it. (Helen)

The only thing that intimidates me is climbing the front wall or the bouldering thing, and I think this might be why I haven't attempted bouldering either. And it's because everyone hangs out by the staff desk you know and they just sit there and watch you. (Ruth)

But I also have kind of picked up that when I'm here, that little set of boys is always bouldering. I've never seen them toprope, not to say that they don't. I've just never seen them. They're kind of like the bouldering crowd or something. (Cedar)

The designated bouldering portion of the climbing facility prior to renovation was adjacent to the check in desk which is in full view of all the staff members. It offered very little in the way of privacy which seemed to be an issue for some female informants. This observation highlights the propensity for facility design to affect the experiences of participants in different ways. The female participants in this study tended to view bouldering as a more advanced type of climbing. Instead of using it as a point of entry into the community, they tended to choose coming in to toprope, although this was not done alone. Most females chose to come in with a partner or two to begin toprope climbing

together sometimes this partner was a romantic partner. In a way, they brought a community with them rather than suffer the intimidation of beginning their climbing experience alone:

> And I think when you start, you'll usually start with toproping and not bouldering. So usually you'll come with somebody. So, to walk up by yourself and be like "Hi, I'm here" (in a whiney voice), would be kind of weird. (June)
>
> I think it would be intimidating just walking up to the wall one day by yourself and being like "I just want to do this" (Cedar)

One interesting note confirming the suspicions above regarding female climber's adverse reaction to bouldering, specifically when in view of the climbing wall desk and ICF staff, is in regards to the facility modifications occurring during the summer of 2009. As mentioned before, the facility has been recently modified and expanded with a separate wall dedicated to bouldering only. This separate bouldering wall is located down the hall from the main wall and is not directly under observation from ICF staff. Since it was opened in July of 2009, more female bouldering participation has been observed. Observations of groups of three to six females bouldering together were made on multiple occasions. It seems as though the placement of the bouldering facility in an area not under the scrutiny of perceived insiders or experts (like the ICF staff) is important for fostering an atmosphere that is favorable for female users to enter the climbing social world through the

discipline of bouldering. In addition, it also seems the A&M female climbing population feels more comfortable and less threatened when climbing together with other females as opposed to being forced to climb with large groups of males.

Finding a Home - Community and Confederacy

The major theme explored in the next several sections of this chapter is the function the Texas A&M indoor climbing social world serves in creating a home for its members. As mentioned above, the A&M student body has an imposing student population of 48,787. As the departments within the Division of Student Affairs strive to provide opportunities for more intimate and close interaction between these students, the ICF seems to be doing this for many of A&M's climbers. In areas devoid of real rock, like College Station, Texas, climbing community members seem to view the ICF as a sanctuary from the oppressive and mundane existence of life in an area without real rock to climb. In addition, the ICF is also a sanctuary from the conservative world many climbers find themselves immersed in at A&M. The ICF appears to represent the nexus of a culture area that is less conservative than the rest of Texas A&M. Community members seem to cling to one another and do their best to openly recruit new membership.

These social world members find satisfaction in their pursuit and find validation in the interactions they have with their climbing peers. Much as the

Henry Barber quote from Chapter II pointed out, A&M climbing community members view one another as a "tribe"; a people among whom they find belonging (Synott, 2008).   John spoke about identifying another climber on campus and what that means to him:

> I've seen a guy wearing Patagonia climbing pants riding a bike on campus and I'm like "Awww dude". I didn't have an opportunity to talk to him, but I immediately identified, "Oh that guy climbs"…. it's like you have a respect for this person because they do the same things you do. You understand how exciting it is and just how much it can mean to you potentially and just what dedication a lot of these people have.

It seems the ICF and the Department of Recreational Sports, as a Division of Student Affairs department, is meeting the challenge shared by all Division Departments: providing a place of belonging for individuals within the larger, more intimidating social world of Texas A&M as a whole.

Climbers at A&M openly describe their social world as a community. For some members, this community has the meaning one would expect. Even Ann, who had climbed a short time, recognized the community's existence when asked whether she thought it was really there:

> I definitely do and I've only been climbing like three weeks. They'll watch you do a route and then you go and watch them and they'll talk to you like "Oh, this is what he is doing…" There's definitely a

community…at the rock wall and then away from the Rec (Student

Recreation Center). You recognize people.

From observations, the community at the ICF seems very welcoming. Many established members (often ICF staff) were observed going out of their way to introduce themselves to new climbers and to sometimes help pair them with partners or introduce them to other boulderers. Cedar talked about her experience "arriving in the community":

When you finally make it there….I don't know if it would be "in-crowd" "out-crowd" type thing, but all of a sudden it's like "we want to encourage you, and help you". And it's not intimidating like you think it would be. Most of the guys are like "hey try this" like really positive. And if you fall, its like "Oh, whatever, you can try again". And it's the little stuff, like the little side conversations you have with people whether it be about rock climbing or not about rock climbing. It's very welcoming, I guess is the word.

Similarly, June recollected experiencing the welcoming community feel first hand:

I feel like there is a great sense of excitement for new climbers. Not just with the people that work there. I know when I started they were like "Awesome, you ought to keep coming." And after my first time, they were like "didn't you just love it?" And I was like "Well yeah, my arms hurt really bad, but it was really fun!" So I

think that helps a lot, helping people get really excited about it. Especially when you talk about the intimidation factor. If I had come and people were just like "Oh hey" and whatever and afterwards didn't ask me anything about it, I probably would have had a totally different outtake on it.

The community draw takes on a different meaning for those members who are *most established in the community*. These "insiders" as Unruh (1979; 1980) referred to them are very cognizant of their role and both the duty and the influence they have on the community. In addition, they seem to have a greater investment and deeper involvement in the community. For these insiders, the social bond formed within this social world is better described as a *confederacy*. The individuals reaching this level of involvement coalesce together as a group in ways that go beyond the bonds of the leisure social world.

Tourists or regulars in the social world seem to be involved at a level that allows them to set their social world involvement aside once they are done climbing for the day. For instance, Ruth and Helen who climb together on a regular basis only socialize at a minimal level outside of climbing. Their social interaction consists mainly of the time they spend at the ICF. They were both brought together out of necessity: they both needed a regular climbing partner in order to enjoy roped climbing.

The confederates describe a different level of experience among one another than community members as a whole. The elevated level of

involvement is what leads to my describing them as a confederacy. This deep involvement is due to the serious leisure level in which they are involved in climbing. For these confederates, climbing is what they spend most of their leisure time pursuing both at the ICF and outdoors. They not only climb together, but they often live with one another, they travel together, and they often are romantically linked. Mary, a confederacy member noted the following when asked about dating:

> I feel like for me…someone I'm going to be involved with has to be involved with the sport because it takes up so much of my time I guess it's like killing two birds with one stone. But I mean, I'm really busy with school and (other things), so that doesn't leave me with much time and my free time, so if I'm going to be dating someone, it has to be a climber, or I'm going to have to sacrifice time for one of those and I don't really want to do that, especially climbing.

These confederates set themselves apart as a group from the normal climbing social world members. Its not that they refuse to socialize with the other members, in fact, they recognize their role in the recruitment and instruction of new members. Although they interact with the variety of social world members, they reserved a more intimate level of interaction for their fellow confederates. Daily these insiders were observed making arrangements to meet

later away from the ICF and hang out socially. Jimmy described this group and how it coalesces away from the ICF:

> Here? Well most of my friends are climbers and we hang out together a lot. And Bart has his climbing wall. And while we don't have anywhere to climb now, we go to Bart's wall and climb and all the climbers get together. We hang out, we see movies together. We've basically turned into a big group of friends through climbing. We go on trips together. The Wall is like the base camp and trips get planned off of that, like you roll up and are like "Hey do you want to go to Reimer's this weekend?" It's just like a big group of friends. I don't know how else to describe it, you know?

In a similar way, Bart spoke about the importance of the confederacy to his leisure involvement. For him, it was not only about the climbing. Like Jimmy, the people at the ICF are Bart's friends:

> I would go up to the Wall because there were guys or gals I wanted to hang out with and I knew they would be up there. And it was always the older people too, anybody with more experience, any of the stronger climbers. That's who I was excited about seeing or going up there for and who was drawing me back up there each time.

Bart's wall referred to by Jimmy, above, is a home-made wooden wall constructed in the backyard of Bart's home. This wall is a climbing community

gathering area outside of the Student Recreation Center ICF. During a portion of the time these data were gathered, the ICF was closed for repairs. Bart's wall became a hub for involvement for the confederacy, in lieu of the ICF. After organized climbing competitions at the ICF, Bart's house is often the place the community retreats to in order to let their hair down.

Jimmy described the way a group of confederates reacts in mixed, social situations. According to him, if left to their own devices, their talk often turns to climbing:

> Sometimes we'll be hanging out with lots of people, and people who don't climb and they'll hear us talking and they'll stare at us and be like "What are you talking about?" And we'll be saying all these funny words to them and making all these motions (pretending to pantomime a climb).

When I asked him to elaborate, he replied:

> Dude, we're sitting there and we have nothing else to talk about. So, we're like "Let's talk about a project we're working on." And someone else comes in and wants to know the beta[4] so we'll start describing it in really detailed, like "man, you go to this sloper[5] with

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[4] Beta is a native term for a detailed description of the individual movement sequence that it takes to ascend a particular route. Climbers can often memorize exact hold locations and hand, foot and body positions for entire routes that are over 40 ft. tall.

[5] A sloper is a description of a category of handhold. It has no positive edges to hang onto so the entire open hand is placed on the hold to create friction between the skin and the hold. It is much like palming a basketball.

the right hand. And it's not very good, but you can crimp[6] on top of it." I guess like visualizing everything. Not really getting worked up, but we all get it stuck in our heads, and we're like visualizing the routes as someone talks. Like "Yeah, I can see that work."

I questioned him about the non-climbers' reactions and he finished with:

They're amused. I guess they are amused at how we can talk about climbing so much and like get so excited about it. So they're like "What the heck?" And we're like making the moves with our hands and like, "Yeah you got to get a high foot." And doing that kind of stuff and throwing out like "slopers" and "crimps" and "gastons" and all these crazy words they don't even know about. They're not judging us, they are just really amused at what we're doing. And they're like "what are you guys saying?" They don't know... And they're kind of like "OK" a little weirded out about how we can be so excited about something.

This series of quotes really captures the ethos in which Jimmy and his friends were involved and the closeness of the confederacy they were joined in. They coalesced together to legitimize what they were doing as something that is good. These confederates seemed to embrace their uniqueness apart from the non-climbing world around them. They saw themselves as different and apart from that world and this seemed to draw them together even closer as a confederacy.

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[6] A crimp is a small edge that can be as thin as a credit card in some cases. Only the minimal amounts of the fingertips are used to hold onto crimps.

They viewed their actions as being authentic and apart from the non-climbing world. This heightened level of support led them to focus their daily lives around one another in the confederacy that developed.

In relating a story about the community, Silas highlighted the depth of belonging some confederates felt. He spoke about "Louann" who dated an ICF worker and fellow confederate, "Dale". For Louann, being a community member was less about climbing and more about social ties:

> (Louann) would like go up and check in (at the ICF desk) and you'd be like "Are you climbing?" and she was like "No, I'm just going to hang out for a bit". And she would just go and hang out because her boyfriend, Dale, worked at the Wall and she would go to see him. I mean, she would climb, but we talked about this, her main purpose was the social aspect and she just kind of climbed on the side because her boyfriend did it and her friends did it. And she enjoyed it; it just wasn't her primary focus.

John spoke about his respect for other community members: "You do have this close knit feeling. And I think a lot of that carries over into climbing. It's almost like you have a respect for somebody that has as much enthusiasm about it as you do."

For John, his closeness and his bond in the community came from knowing the commitment others have for indoor climbing. John also spoke

about the nature of being a confederate in terms of the duty they have for maintaining safety and judging acceptable behavior:

> I caught one of the guys who had just started climbing…he tied his knot completely wrong…not completely but he missed one loop on the eight, but you have to have the responsibility to go over and check on these people getting into it. It's everybody's responsibility to watch out for other people's safety.

Bart and Jesse spoke about their interactions with less experienced climbers. As confederates, they viewed their role as that of a mentor to the less experienced tourists, like Ann or even some regulars. When asked about why they help these members they had this to say:

> Jesse: To help them get success.
>
> Bart: Yeah, I'd like to see them do well.
>
> Jesse: If they enjoy it then that's the sport growing and the community too.
>
> Bart: I don't want them to go at it and do it and try and fail and try and fail. I want them to succeed.
>
> Jesse: And if you are standing there watching, you just kind of feel like an ass if you don't help. At least I do.

An interesting note about community strength and the positive interactions within the community at A&M is that these same kinds of interactions were not necessarily confirmed by other professionals in the indoor

climbing industry. A conversation about the interaction between insiders and regulars at a popular climbing gym in Boulder, Colorado revealed a much different scenario. The informant, when told about the A&M community's gregariousness and encouraging nature responded that the Colorado gym was quite different. In fact, often times, insiders and regulars would routinely participate in a practice that is considered bad form at the A&M ICF. Climbers of all levels of experience share the common desire to climb increasingly difficult climbs. When a climber has a particularly difficult route they are trying to accomplish, that route is referred to as their "project". It may take a climber multiple visits and very specific strength or technique training to build up to accomplishing their project by climbing it without falling. When they finally achieve this goal, the emotional release is often audible. Climbers will frequently scream or yell in celebratory excitement when they finally "get their project". In the A&M climbing community it is considered very poor taste when physically stronger climbers, especially insiders, warm up by climbing a fellow climber's project. When this is done, it is a humiliating experience for the weaker, less experienced climber and it tends to cheapen the amount of time and energy they've spent in improving upon their skill base. The informant from Colorado revealed that in one specific Colorado gym, insiders would often rudely cut in front of weaker climbers in order to warm up by climbing their project in front of them, an act of aggressiveness demoralizing for the inexperienced climbers. This and other stories like it fall in sharp contrast to the descriptions by Texas

A&M indoor climbing community informants. It may very well be that gregarious and welcoming climbing scenes like the one seen at A&M are a rarity. It may also be that the indoor climbing community at the ICF is not always as welcoming as informants seemed to report. One example of non-gregarious behavior was self-reported by an informant. Jimmy said the following regarding doing his part to bring new climbers into the social world at the ICF:

> I don't know, I always try to get my friends to climb but part of me doesn't really want them to climb. Just because it's a lot of pressure on you when you're bringing someone to climb for the first time. You have to make sure they're doing everything. They have to take belay classes and pay money, then you have to make sure that they have a good time. I do a really bad job about that. But, I really want to see new climbers come in. I was talking to (my climbing partner) earlier about how there's really not very many new freshmen that we see climbing. Not many new freshmen getting good. I don't like that fact – it doesn't excite me. I want to see people super good, so honestly I do an awful job fostering climbing. That's pretty much what I do. I say I want my friends to climb, but deep down I really don't. I don't really know what that is. I'm always like, yeah, you should come climb. And I know they're going to be like, "No". And I kind of drop it after that.

The A&M indoor climbing scene at the ICF is welcoming enough, that seemingly disparate groups readily find common ground to be able to recreate together there. This major theme is the focus in the following section.

Disparate Groups - Outdoorsy Christians and Liberal Climbers

Texas A&M, being such a large university, attracts a diversity of belief systems, cultural backgrounds and interests in its student body. University administration realizes that making each one of the more than 48,000 students feel welcome and helping them find a home or a place they "belong" is important to student retention and student academic performance. Towards that end, a variety of student organizations, non-academic programs and facilities are supported and sponsored by the Division of Student Affairs, in an attempt to aid students in their search for belonging.

As a facility within the Recreational Sports Department, a subset of the Division of Student Affairs, the ICF seems to have become that home for a variety of disparate groups of people. As these data will show, some of these groups are ones that in other places may not socialize together to a great extent, if at all.

Rock climbing itself is often perceived as a diverse culture area by its participants. Climbing is more popular in Europe and abroad, so it is not uncommon to see students who come to A&M from other countries, drop in and climb. In fact, as a participant, I encountered this first hand. When I first began

climbing at A&M, my partner was from Birmingham, England. In addition, in the recent past, students from France, Poland, Germany, Spain, India and the Middle East have found their way into the climbing community at Texas A&M. It is important to note that many students from other countries as well as more politically liberal students from the US often seem to be uncomfortable in the larger A&M community. This includes some climbers at the ICF. The abundance of conservatism, both religious and political can be stifling and anathema to some students. It seems that amidst A&M's conservative, rural tradition, the ICF has become a refuge of sorts for a variety of individuals, both liberal and conservative. The climbing community has become a safe place for not only the marginalized liberal students but also for the conservative students to come together, find common ground and enjoy leisure time together.

There seems to be a difference between how community participants and confederacy participants interact with one another at the ICF. For community members, the ICF provides a sense of common ground on which these very different groups can set aside their differences and come together to find a sense of belonging. The ICF is a safe place for all involved, provided that, in conversation, topics that would illicit controversy or disagreement are avoided in favor of talking about the commonality that they share; their love for climbing.

Interview data illustrate these points. Ruth's observation is particularly appropriate for illustrating the diverse nature of climbing and the social world it promotes:

But also with the culture, it's something that's different than any other sport that you would be a part of. I feel like its more culturally aware, because people from all over climb. It's not an organized sport (that) people from the United States have mandated in their public school system. It's something that people from all walks of life do, but they all have a common bond. It's like a social network, but you can be a part of as much as you want or as little as you want.

For confederacy members, however, the closeness goes one step further. The confederacy that forms seems to provide a platform for them to not only find belonging, but to also discuss their differences openly and encourage debate among one another without the risk of jeopardizing their friendships. For these individuals, it seems the closeness they feel with one another due to their confederacy involvement allows for them to safely explore their differences, without the fear of judgment or ridicule. Paul spoke about discussing his differences with another confederate, Amy:

Part of it is I don't like some of the same things that they don't like and we come to different conclusions than them, but we have that common ground. And even though we're not going to come to the same conclusions, we can still be civil about it. Like, "Amy" and I have very different views. But like when I worked on shift with her, we really enjoyed sharing each other's views and like why we view

> what. And she's way more liberal than I am. I don't know…that
>
> appeals to me.

According to some informants, there exists a stereotype that many student Christian community members are often rock climbers:

> I'm very involved with Christian organizations on campus and it
>
> has that stigma of, "A&M Christian is a rock climber"….they have
>
> their Nalgene and their North Face backpack. You know? Like that
>
> whole thing? And I was like, "I'm not going to be the stereotype.
>
> I'm not going to be the stereotype!" So I just kind of blew it off for
>
> the longest time. You know? Then I was like, whatever, I'm going
>
> to try it. So I tried it and it was fun and now I'm like, who cares
>
> about stereotypes anyway? (Ruth)

When presented with this stereotype, a group of three informants that climb together on a regular basis (June, Ann and Cedar) had this to say:

> Interviewer: One of my informants was talking about this and she
>
> said, "There's a stereotype that Christian Aggies rock climb"…
>
> Ann: It's totally a subculture…
>
> June: And have your Timbuk2 bag and your Nalgene (as she pulls
>
> these artifacts from under the table) and you Frisbee….
>
> Interviewer: Do you guys feel like that's legitimate? Like that
>
> stereotype exists?

Ann: The stereotype exists and I'd venture to say that it's pretty accurate.

Interviewer: You said subculture.

Ann: I think its totally a Christian subculture within the Bible Belt, especially in College Station where its like….the culture is automatically assumed to be Christianity, where the question is not "Are you a Christian?, it's "What church do you go to?" I know people who we go to church with…a lot of them are very outdoorsy.

Cedar: All the people I go to church with ride their bike to church, play Ultimate whenever they get a chance, and most of them probably rock climb.

Paul had this to say about the draw of climbing to the Christian sub-world:

And maybe this is a part of the appeal to Christian climbers, because it's different and we're called to be different in Christianity than the rest of the world and I like that climbing was different; like, not everybody else did it. It was a way that I could stick to my beliefs and also have a cool challenge.

It makes sense that in a conservative and religious area such as College Station, a large portion of participants in *any* pursuit would be Christian. However, the comments from informants indicate that this group of "outdoorsy Christians" is much more than a simple statistic. It is a sub-world of the indoor

climbing social world at Texas A&M that is worthy of documentation, study and comparison to other sub-worlds. They described the sub-world as being "outdoorsy": they often worked at summer camps, participated in outdoor sports like biking and climbing and seemed to believe they had a care for the environment. But in addition, some of the Christians mentioned that they also found some beliefs that they did not share with the more "liberal" sub-group of climbers. It should be noted that although being Christian does not mandate that one have a conservative political or social bend, the Christians interviewed for this study considered themselves more conservative than the "liberal" climbers with whom they compared themselves.

Another prominent sub-world of indoor rock climbing found to exist is the "liberal" climber. This sub-world shares some similarities with the outdoorsy Christian sub-world, but in other ways provides a great counter to them. The interactions between the two groups sets up a situation potentially ripe for conflict. When I asked participants to describe most climbers or the stereotypical climber, many responses indicated the existence of a more free-spirited, liberal (both social and political) archetype. Mary observed that "here at A&M, it seems like there is more of a politically liberal concentration of people at the climbing wall versus other areas and other activities on campus." John went on to describe his typical climber stereotype:

> I don't know I guess in some ways you could call it more liberal people I think in a certain way. At least just like they're more apt to

having tattoos….sometimes you'll see guys with dreads and what not. I don't want to call it a culture….but there definitely are visual cues…In general I think they are a lot more laid back than most people. I mean yeah, they have their goals and ambitions and what not. Especially guys that have gotten onto real rock…..there's something about that. It's just the environment, being in such a wide open space, no walls, its just you and nature and you're in a whole new world or mindset.

Data from observations bears this description out as well. Even among social world strangers, there exists an archetypal idea of climbers as "liberals". This descriptor refers to an ethic that according to observations seems to be embraced by many climbers, including some at A&M; mainly those who are members of both the indoor as well as outdoor climbing social worlds. This ethic seems to support a preservation of wild spaces and the environment, a penchant for living simply and an embracing of visceral climbing experiences. Even some members of Recreational Sports professional staff (all social world strangers) at A&M were observed recognizing the stereotyping of climbers, referring to the climbing wall participants and staff members in jest as the "granola munchers". The archetype of liberal climber was found to be supported in marketing and articles in the popular climbing literature as well. An article in the December 2003 issue of *Climbing* magazine begins with the following line, "A purist climber is one who lives with the rock, cares for it, and abides in a

hippie-zen like state" (Marr, 2003). The same issue features an editorial calling for a renewed push by climbers to help clean up and manage wild areas in an effort to protect them for future use (Achey, 2003).

As John mentions in his quote above, the liberal climber archetype is an indication of indoor climbing's roots in outdoor climbing. This is confirmed through regular references in the climbing press to the more liberal, counterculture genesis of modern rock climbing (John Long, 1999; 2006). Indeed, much of outdoor climbing's golden age was spent by many Beat Generation climbers escaping the trappings of the modern world by retreating to the big walls of Yosemite Valley in California.

When confronted with the disparate nature of these two types of people, outdoorsy conservative Christian climbers and liberal climbers, informants were quick to point out the similarities in the groups as well as the ability of climbing to mediate their interactions, preventing any conflict between these two seemingly disparate groups. The climbing they were doing together and their love of the sport gave them a common ground from which to build relationships. Paul had this to say about the way common ground can be found between the outdoorsy Christian climbers and the liberal climbers:

> This is one of the reasons that I love climbing and I love the people in the climbing society. Those that are typically in that liberal part of the wing of the climbing society…they, yea we disagree in a few big areas, but we agree when it comes to even some semantics. I

guess climbing in general is almost like a part of society that is anti-society. They don't like the way things go down in government and they highly value the environment and things like this, *I do as well*. It says in first John (quoting the Bible), "Do not love the world or anything of this world if you love this world, the love of the father's not in you". A lot of these climbers use climbing to escape the world because they hate the day in and day out crap that the world brings in.

When I asked Paul a set of follow up questions about conversations between himself and Amy, a fellow confederate who is a devout atheist, Paul felt that in order for those conversations to be comfortable for both parties, he had to make it clear to Amy that she was not a "project" of his. When asked to clarify, he said this meant that Amy had to know from him that he was not out to convert her to Christianity. He simply wanted to be able to discuss topics interesting to them both. Paul attributed his friendship with Amy and their involvement with one another as confederates as a reason for them being able to discuss and explore their differences.

When asked why the seemingly disparate groups of liberal climbers and outdoorsy Christians don't evoke more conflict, being in such close proximity and given that climbing is such a social activity, Bart and Jesse had this to say:

Bart: I think on paper they would definitely conflict.

Interviewer: Why don't they conflict?

Jesse: I think it's because they have climbing in common. When you are climbing, you talk about climbing. You're not going to debate big topics when you are at the climbing wall.

Bart: It's definitely a bigger tying…..I think it makes the groups more cohesive than a lot of other sports I've played or encountered.

Interviewer: Really?

Jesse: Yeah, I think it's because in other sports you have your team, but other than that, you are not trying to be buddy-buddy with everyone else. Then in climbing, it's more of an individual thing so you can talk and be friends with everyone.

Jesse believed the individual nature of climbing competitiveness and the love of the sport are what allow everyone to remain close. This competitiveness will be discussed in the section on mediation in the climbing community.

For these people the indoor climbing community is important and worthy of preservation. As stated before, this community is a home for its members. It is one place at this massive university they can relax and be among people they know, trust and share their leisure with. It seems to provide a place in the world for these people who would be otherwise lost in A&M's massive student body. The climbing community is a home for them, in which despite their differences, they have their love for community as well as climbing in common. They seem to forge an appreciation for one another and their differences, accepting one

another despite some differences that would seem staggering on paper. I personally witnessed individuals of dramatically different religious, political and social backgrounds climbing with one another. And not just climbing, but communing with one another and supporting each other's goals.

Mediating Experience in the Social World

The Texas A&M climbing community seems to act in a couple of ways that preserve community membership and unity. These actions seem to mediate the members' experiences to either keep them from acting in certain ways that would jeopardize harmony in the community or they help to manage fears of community members, thereby keeping them participating.

Competition

There exists a competitive circuit in collegiate indoor rock climbing. Individuals compete on their own to climb as many high point routes during a limited time period (four to five hours). At the end of the time period, the individuals turn in their top five scores for a total score. Totals for the top three scoring individuals on each team are added to create the schools' team score. In this way, even team members are placed into direct competition with one another. Not every climber at the ICF is involved in this formal competition; however several informants I spoke with had dabbled in them. Overall, their experiences were mixed, although repeatedly informants brought up the fact that

they either were not competitive people or that they normally were, but did not like the formal competition when it was between community members.

Friendly competition happens in an informal way many days around the ICF. The typical fashion in which this occurs is one partner climbs a route and then, without discussion, the other partner feels as though they should be able to do the route as well so they try it to. The formal competition circuit, though, seemed to not sit well with some community members. Some community members seemed to have hard times coping with the conflicted feelings of wanting to win and having to see a fellow confederate fail. During an observation at the ICF, I heard Dale relating a story about feeling horrible that during a competition at another university he had secretly hoped that Bart would fail on a route, making it easier for him (Dale) to win the competition. Likewise, Skip had this to say about his rejecting formal competition:

> No, I don't really compete as much anymore. I haven't at all this season. Last season I went to two competitions of the six. They are kind of fun to go to now, but like, I'm just not in a competitive mindset anymore. It tends to bring out the worst in people, I've noticed. Like your friends who are there with you, you are kind of hoping they are going to fall on this next move because you're trying to get that route for points stuff like that. So I feel it kind of takes a little bit away from it.

Skip actually felt discomfort attempting to reconcile his hardcore competitiveness with his positive relationships with other community members. In Skip's case, these are better described as confederates. The relationships built were too valuable for him to jeopardize them through competition with them. So, instead, he began to focus less on the competition.

Many informants in this study brought up competition as a driving force for why they climb. When I probed deeper I often found that the informants were not interested in team competition, but instead were more interested in competition with themselves or within their small climbing partnerships. They were not interested in having a team's success depend on their performance:

> I'm not a very competitive person, and that's why I think I enjoy rock climbing because you can be as competitive as you want. It's not something where if you're not as competitive as your teammate they view you as the weakest link. It's like I can do this as a leisure activity if I want to or I can have the competitive edge. (Ruth)

When asked about competition between them, Paul and Silas had this to say:

> Paul: I'll say that (Silas) shook his head to say no, like there's not any competition between us, I would say that's the case as well. But like say he did a route and did it really well and I was planning on doing the same route. It's going to be motivation for me if he

did it well; like I'm not going to allow him to do it and me not flash it as well. So, like yeah, I'm going to say there is competition. There's motivation in other people achieving. I don't want to not be able to do something someone else can do.

Silas: I would call it motivation not climbing (competition). It's kind of a fine line to draw but…like he said, if he's doing a route or if I see him progressing faster than me, that will motivate me to progress faster, but not for the sake of beating him. It is motivation to see him and if you wanted to call it competition, yeah I am competing with him, but not for the sake of "emerging victorious" or to be able to say I'm better than him.

For Paul and Silas, their compatibility seemed to rely on their competition. For them as well as for Jimmy and even June and Cedar, they all wanted to be able to work on making progress on routes, together, as a team. To do this, both parties needed to be of similar physical ability, sometimes requiring one to improve. In addition, it requires both parties remaining amiable towards one another. To achieve this, it seems they reject hardcore competition, where a "winner" and a "loser" are established, in favor of competitive motivation of one another. The end result of which is the preservation of the friendship and the climbing team.

Beyond the climbing partners, in the larger, local social world, the community ties these informants experience temper the hardcore competition

that may evolve in other sports. Unlike climbing, sports such as baseball and football are designed around competition. But with climbing, this is not the case and with this climbing social world, the confederacy bonds are more important than the satisfaction emerging from competition. They are so important that the social world members are willing to withdraw from competition entirely in order to preserve the community. When Skip was asked about no longer climbing competitively, he stated that he now plays racquetball to get his competitive fix. For him and others like him, their community harmony is worthy of being preserved.

Risk and Fear

At A&M the community ties seem to also provide contingencies for dealing with fear and risk in the sport. Cedar mentioned the following in her interview:

And, my friend Bill will only boulder…because he's afraid of heights.

Skip and Jimmy also limited some climbing practices due to perceived risk and fear:

I don't like to lead climb I guess…..I'm not going to lie, it kind of scares me. I learned to climb at Texas Rock Gym and they have like the 22…24 foot walls there. I was about ¾ way up and was holding onto a pinch at about a 45 degree angle and I was pulling out to get a clip and right when my hand got to the clip with the full

length of rope pulled out, my other hand slipped off, so I fell and I didn't go all the way to the ground, but on my way down I landed on the shoulder of my instructor… So I've always had a little bit of a mental block because of that. (Skip)

Lately, I've been scared of leading. Yeah, like I went out to Reimer's and led some stuff and it was cool, but the trip before I was out on "Yertle the Turtle" (the name of a specific route) and was making a clip and got super sketched out. This awful feeling in my stomach….I was like "Take me down." I don't know, I felt super strong, had good feet and was pulling up and just felt awful. And I just didn't want to lead; and actually I've never led in the gym before. (Jimmy)

In all these cases, there was no judgment made in the community regarding these people's fear. The variety of disciplines within the sport (bouldering, toproping and leading) makes it accessible regardless of limitations. Some individuals such as Cedar's friends, Bill or Skip, choose not to do certain types of climbing. On the other hand, the confederacy Jimmy has with his climbing partners influences him to want to get over his fear of leading. He wants so badly to be a group member that he has begun training in coping mechanisms to manage the fear:

I hope I'm getting back into the lead climbing phase, because before I got sketched out, I was all about lead climbing so I

definitely went through a phase. I don't think there really is any trigger…weird, it just happened. I didn't take a huge fall or anything. I don't know what it was. It's my weakness I think, so I want to work on it to get better. So, I hung a carabiner above my bed and I clip at night. I practice my clipping. It's getting a little better.

Ann is a climber who regularly climbs with June and Cedar. Her social world involvement probably is best described as that of a tourist. She had an interesting experience in learning to trust the rope to hold her after she fell on a route for the first time. What initially was a scary experience for her has been transformed in the re-telling. Having the encouragement of her social world community begins to reinterpret her experience as a positive one instead of scary or negative. This is an example of the community serving to mediate and interpret experience for members:

> Ann: I never thought it was dangerous. I guess I never thought it was high risk because they did it so often, that if they were comfortable with it and other people do it so often that it couldn't be that dangerous. But the first time I got up really high and I looked down and realized how high I was, I definitely freaked out and got scared (everyone laughs). I just stayed there for like 5 minutes…
>
> June: (laughing) It was one of the funniest things I've ever seen at the rock wall!

Ann: (laughing) They were just like "Lean back!" And I just…..

June: (laughing) She wouldn't lean back!

Cedar: (laughing) She just slid down the wall like she had hit a window and just slid down!

Ann: But when I was climbing up there I never thought I was going to be scared or never thought I was totally going to have vertigo. But once I got up there and looked down, I was like "Ohhhhhh". But now I feel like there is very little risk involved. I feel like it's very safe.

The reaction of laughter and camaraderie from her immediate group of climbing partners helped Ann to redefine her fear. Now, only a few weeks after the incident, Ann is able to look back on the experience and laugh. She, in fact, feels safe. In a similar way, June recalled her first experience climbing at the ICF and the importance of community in helping to re-interpret her experience and encouraging her to come back:

And after my first time, they were like "didn't you just love it?" And I was like "Well yeah, my arms hurt really bad, but it was really fun!" So I think that helps a lot, helping people get really excited about it. Especially when you talk about the intimidation factor. If I had come and people were just like "Oh hey" and whatever and afterwards didn't ask me anything about it, I probably would have

had a totally different outtake on it. I would have been like, yeah

its fun but the whole experience wasn't that great.

The climbing community at A&M seems to play a vital role in helping its

members cope with fear by redefining it and when necessary accept them for

their particular participation choice while withholding judgment. This seems to

be a mechanism in place to keep the community strong and not fragmented.

In both cases above, management of competitiveness and management

of risk and fear, the social world of indoor rock climbing has a mediating affect.

This mediating affect serves to reinterpret experience and set forth limits of

acceptable behaviors preserving the community feel. Instead of making the

community more elitist and exclusive, both these examples help to make the

community more inclusive and comfortable for members. This mediating affect

serves to preserve for these individuals the home that is the A&M indoor

climbing community. The following section will analyze the findings of this

chapter in the context of the current literature.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to gain a better understanding of the social world of indoor rock climbing at Texas A&M University. Strauss and Corbin (2008) asserted that Grounded Theory methodology is appropriate for exploratory studies. As such, I utilized semi-structured interviews and participant observation to explore the relatively unexplored social world of indoor rock climbing. The findings of this study relative to the literature will be discussed in this chapter.

Serious Leisure and Social World Participation

The involvement of some indoor rock climbers appears to satisfy the six qualities of serious leisure proposed by Stebbins (1982; 1999). Specifically, this study focused on the ability of serious leisure pursuits to develop a "unique ethos" (p.257) or social world around them (R. A. Stebbins, 1982, 1999). The social world of indoor rock climbing at Texas A&M University was found to be an inclusive community of individuals coalesced around the ICF in the Student Recreation Center. The ICF served as the "geographic center" (p. 284) as well as a communication center for the social world (Unruh, 1980). It is important to note from the outset that indoor rock climbing appears to be a bona fide social world unto itself. Some of its members do participate in the related social world of outdoor rock climbing, but many do not appear to do so. Some of the

informants interviewed climbed solely indoors. For them, their destination was the ICF. In addition, several of the insiders and confederate informants indicated the existence of groups of climbers who only climbed indoors. This is an important point: that indoor climbing seems to have an existence apart from outdoor climbing. It could well be that the environments of climbing gyms like the ICF attract some different types of individuals than outdoor crags. Only further research comparing the two will be able to really compare these worlds. For now, the OIA figures from 2005 proving that a majority of indoor climbers only climb indoors, as well as the data from this study will have to serve as proof for the existence of this specific indoor climbing social world.

Within this social world, however, not all members were participating in indoor climbing as a form of serious leisure. The previously mentioned confederates all exhibited signs of serious leisure participation: they identified themselves as "climbers", they overcame significant challenges and found a need to persevere, they put forth significant effort in developing their physical abilities, developing technique and in researching new routes and learning about new areas (R. A. Stebbins, 1982, 1999). But apart from these confederates, the social world at the ICF was also made up of regulars who were involved social world members (but not at the confederate level) and tourists who were just beginning to explore the pursuit of indoor rock climbing. These tourists seemed to be interested in climbing because it created a diversion from their normal lives at A&M. It was novel and interesting and afforded them the time necessary to

be with friends to socialize, very closely in line with the reasons for involvement listed by Unruh (1980). While they participated, they did not exhibit the same qualities of serious leisure mentioned above.

The confederates, individuals described by Unruh (1980) as "insiders", were truly committed to indoor rock climbing. Confirming Unruh's (1980) findings regarding their roles, several discussions with informants revealed the confederates to be working to recruit new members and interpret experiences for existing members in order to ensure continued participation. The confederates played a large role in maintaining open receptivity of new members. June and Cedar both recalled the welcoming atmosphere when they started climbing. June cites the confederates' receptivity in being instrumental in her returning to climb again. She said that due to the intimidation of the physical climbing wall, she probably would not have returned after her first time had it not been for the encouragement of the confederates.

These confederates and sometimes regulars would educate those around them on climbing movement, climbing jargon, etc. establishing a repertoire for authentic action (Strauss, 1978). This authentic action is the outward signs used by social world members to establish, that they are indeed authentic climbers. At the ICF, one observation of an example of this authentic action was the teaching of regulars by confederates to "daisy chain" the climbing ropes. This is when the ropes the climbers use are braided with a simple, yet specific knot after use. It keeps the ropes off the ground, preserving their useful life. Tourist

climbers do not know how to do this, so the staff members (often confederates) do this for them. Teaching the regulars to do it for themselves is a sign that to an extent they have been accepted into the community and are considered a "climber". In addition to this, an informal linguistics lesson was often observed as confederates defined and described for tourists and regulars the never-ending stream of climber jargon. They patiently provided definition and proper usage of words such as beta, crimp, sloper, jug, gaston, jam, and run-out. This jargon usage by regulars was another sign that marked them as being authentic in their action and in belonging to the climbing community.

In addition to establishing authentic action, the confederates and regulars served to interpret experiences for tourists, specifically concerning fear or anticipation. Through explanation of the rope and belay systems, through the re-telling and re-framing of the accounts of tourist climbers falling or being frightened, and by instantly providing positive feedback to apprehensive new climbers, confederates actually were able to have a positive affect on the socialization of new climbers into the social world (Strauss, 1978).

In writing about the contributions that serious leisure makes to the community, Stebbins (1999) proposed that serious leisure (via social worlds), "can contribute significantly to communal and even societal integration" (p.74). This idea was confirmed in an exciting way during this study when it was revealed that vastly different political and social belief structures were quite at home with one another at the ICF. One example of this interaction was when

conservative "Outdoorsy Christians" were found to climb with, talk with and in some cases be confederates with, the arguably more stereotypical "Liberal" Climber.   It should be noted that these two sub-groups do not provide an adequate description of the entire climbing community.   Certainly there exist other sub-groups that were not explored or mentioned in this study.   The Liberal Climbers and the Outdoorsy Christians were simply two groups that were revealed during data analysis and that provided an example of the power of the social world to bring disparate groups together.   This is in no way a statement claiming that all Christians are conservative, certainly some may be very liberal in some ways.

In this study, the activity of indoor rock climbing at the ICF brought together these disparate groups and the social world around this pursuit seemed to give them common ground to share.   This geographic climbing community center provided a place of belonging for the small group of climbers.   As Dunning indicates in his introduction to *Sport Matters* (1999), the sport of indoor rock climbing has given these climbers a sense of belonging and provided them with a source of "I" and "we-feelings" (p. 6).   It provided them with a place to bond free from their otherwise isolated existence at A&M (Dunning, 1999).   It is an area seemingly free from the overtly conservative climate found at Texas A&M as well.   Members of both groups talked about the comfort found in the community of climbers.   One Christian informant spoke about the similarities in beliefs he felt he shared with the liberal arm of the indoor climbing world.   Indoor

climbing at Texas A&M, it seems, has the ability to provide a safe and comfortable respite from the large conservative world of Texas A&M. It brings together disparate groups and provides a context for them to bond.

The tendency to not talk about controversial issues among the mixed community is another example of social boundaries established by insiders to help protect the community functioning (Strauss, 1978). It was only among confederacy members that examples of open sharing of potentially controversial topics were found. In one case two confederates, an evangelical Christian and an openly liberal, atheist confederate, routinely discussed their beliefs on politics and religion. They both reported looking forward to their talks and reported no animosity towards one another. They sought out one another's company and through trust and curiosity in each other's beliefs decided to share with one another. One idea not explored in this study but that should be considered for future research is whether or not the social world itself, over time, has the ability to change or shape some individual members' beliefs. In other words, do some individuals arrive in the social world, with say a conservative view and over time develop more of a liberal view? This was mentioned briefly in a past conversation with one informant in this study and would be an interesting topic for future inquiry.

The ability of social worlds to bring together these types of disparate groups is an important finding of this study. The potential for consensus building, cooperation and positive communication through leisure social world

participation is exciting. In the post-modern world we now live in, Stebbins (1999) asserts that many search for meaning and identity not in their jobs, but in their leisure lives. This observation combined with the diverse nature of college and university campuses, bringing together people from many walks of life to study and live together in one geographic area, results in a potential for diverse groups seeking out leisure experiences with one another. Social worlds like the one at the ICF have the ability to mediate the interactions between these diverse groups to allow for meaningful, positive experiences and the development for individual linkages between members. This mediation seems to prevent significant disagreements that would otherwise jeopardize community harmony. This provides a basis for communication that could lead to deeper understanding of one another's differences and positive interactions between diverse groups, something of increasing importance in today's global society.

This confederacy, as I have termed it, seems to be an example of a "small group", one of five mesostructural features of serious leisure noted by Stebbins (1993). Mesostructures were defined by Stebbins as being an intermediate field of action between the individual level and the community level. The confederacy, while sharing many attributes with the local indoor climbing social world, also has more specific attributes of its own. The fact that it has multiple members places it above the individual level and soundly into the "intermediate" realm.

What differentiates the confederacy from the larger, local indoor climbing social world or climbing community is the closeness shared among its members. These members do not only climb indoors with one another. There were many examples of members living together in groups off campus from A&M as well as traveling together on road trips to outdoor climbing areas. These trips were cited by confederates to be instrumental in developing the closeness they felt with one another. Among some confederacy members, romantic interests developed. For these confederacy members, climbing and social world membership took on a separate meaning from the regulars and tourists; a deeper meaning. For confederates, climbing participation had become habitualized. It was not only the physical act of climbing that brought them back, time and again, but also their interactions with other climbers. They wanted to see and socialize with the individuals that had become such an integral part of their lives.

The function of social worlds like the climbing community and especially mesostructural small groups like the climbing confederacy at Texas A&M should not be underestimated in their capacity to promote communication and trust among disparate groups and to provide distinct bonding opportunities for members (Dunning, 1999).

Practical Implications for Managers

In addition to contributing to the body of knowledge on social worlds and serious leisure, this study is expected to also benefit managers of university and

college climbing facilities and recreational sports programs. Recreational sports programs on university and college campuses in America were established to provide fitness and recreational opportunities for students (Blumenthal, 2009). Through time, this role expanded to include the expectation that these same recreational sports programs provide complete wellness opportunities and also a community for students to find belonging (Blumenthal, 2009). A comprehensive study conducted by the National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (2003) found that participation in a college and university recreational sports program is correlated with overall student success and satisfaction (p. 9). Of the twelve major benefits listed by the students in this study, a feeling of community, improving interaction with diverse sets of people and being an important part of social life were listed (NIRSA, 2003). Similarly, in his qualitative study, Hall (2006) found a major theme of "sense of community" emerged when querying students on the importance of recreational sports in their college experience. Sub-themes that emerged were "friendships", "physically active" and "exposure to a diverse group of people" (D. A. Hall, 2006).

The current study on the Texas A&M ICF social world indicates similar findings. Similar to Hall (2006), Texas A&M climbers were found to be drawn to the ICF by the disparate and diverse community that provided a home for them apart from the normal conservative experience on A&M's campus. The climbers referred directly to being community members and members of the even more close-knit mesostructural confederacy (R. A. Stebbins, 1993). This study found

the physical structure of an indoor climbing facility has very real community building potential. Managers and recreational sports directors should not underestimate the ability of facilities to provide a place of refuge and enjoyment for a group of individuals who bond together in a leisure social world.

Historically, recreational sports facilities were recognized for the physical health benefits they provided. Now, research is showing that these same facilities can offer additional benefit to students in terms of wellness opportunities. These opportunities include the provision of a sense of community for students. Providing them a place of belonging and promoting friendships may contribute to the propensity for recreational sports programs to positively impact student life through increasing retention and improving overall academic performance (D. A. Hall, 2006).

Knowing this, climbing facilities can no longer be designed only for the physical act of climbing. Managers and designers should give thought to the ramifications of facility design on the quality of participant experience. Female climbers in this study were found to be intimidated by the overhanging bouldering wall. In addition they cited its proximity to the staff desk and therefore direct observation by the staff as being a factor in increasing their intimidation levels and causing a sense of reluctance for them. Bouldering was found to provide a gateway for community entrance for many climbers. If bouldering is a key activity for community entrance, then it seems a key factor in creating a diverse community of users is to first design and operating a

bouldering area not under direct scrutiny of insiders and that feels and looks welcoming to a diverse group of participants. It makes sense that managers need to continue to look for ways they can design and operate their facilities to promote a sense of community for their participants.

Some informants in this study were staff members at the ICF. These staff members were social world insiders and also were found to be confederacy members (Unruh, 1979; 1980). These confederates, through their direct interaction with social world tourists and regulars, helped to interpret and mediate experiences for them. They played an instrumental role in the socialization of new members and in promoting a sense of accessibility and receptivity in the social world (Strauss, 1978; Unruh, 1979). Other climbing facilities were confirmed by informants and industry key informants to not feel as welcoming and not promote as strong a sense of receptivity as the ICF at Texas A&M. This highlights just how crucial it is for staff members of climbing facilities to not only be social world insiders, but to take that role seriously as it pertains to community building and social world creation. This seems to be an important factor for retaining users and, in the university setting, for providing an environment that promotes feelings of belonging and inclusiveness for students.

These community feelings, socialization opportunities and feelings of belonging to a diverse group are three of the twelve key benefits to participation found by NIRSA (2003). Their study also reminds us that ultimately, participation and feeling a part of a recreational sports community has the very

real benefits of increased student wellness as well as increasing both student retention and student academic performance (NIRSA, 2003). This study indicates that the ICF at the Student Recreation Center at Texas A&M is answering the call from Student Affairs to promote student wellness by ensuring students find a sense of belonging and permanence within the large and intimidating student body at Texas A&M.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The data from this study was gathered from interviews with thirteen informants in addition to my own observations at the ICF and with a few key industry informants. In addition, all informants came from one climbing facility and do not represent a sample from all Texas climbers, much less all American climbers. As such, the ability for the conclusions to be generalizeable to the larger indoor climbing community is questionable. My own role of ICF manager could have led to researcher bias, although it can be argued this role also allowed for greater trust between myself and informants and greater integration into the social world being studied. Six of the 13 informants were employees of mine at the ICF. It could be argued this relationship led to questions of data reliability. This existing relationship could have led them to say what they thought I wanted to hear in an effort to garner my approval as a supervisor. This critique is well-taken, although it can be counter argued that my closeness to the informants led to a better sense of trust between myself as a researcher and

them as an informant. Since they knew me not only as a supervisor but also as a fellow climber, they were more comfortable revealing intimate details of their experiences to me. They knew I understood the position they were coming from, because I myself had been there as well. Ultimately the decision to take advantage of my role as participant observer was deemed acceptable when weighed against the potential for researcher bias.

The study's purpose was to explore the relatively unexplored social world of indoor rock climbing. This being achieved, it should now be followed up with larger studies from a variety of indoor and artificial climbing facilities around the nation. Future studies may focus more heavily on themes identified in this study to see how they bear out under closer scrutiny using a larger and more diverse population of informants and respondents. Some themes that may be interesting to see explored further would be the differences in the male and female experiences in indoor climbing, the functioning of other indoor climbing communities, mesostructural small groups like the confederacy identified at Texas A&M and the impact they have on the functioning of social worlds, as well as the effects social worlds have on influencing belief systems of individual members over time. Lastly, while mentioned in this study, the role that confederacy and social world leaders have in facilitating community needs further detailed exploration in addition to whether or not different groups coalesce around the same facility at different times or on different days.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Research Questions:

Questions should explore 3 areas: Social Worlds, Serious Leisure, & Progression.

Can Indoor Climbing be described as a social world? If so, what are its characteristics and sub-groups?

Is progression a part of serious leisure, like specialization (progress in terms of focusing of behavior, acquisition of knowledge & skill, and centrality of climbing to life interest or commitment)?

Is there evidence of career trajectories in indoor rock climbing that may lie outside the framework of serious leisure? Does flat-lining occur?

Interview Questions:

Tell me about your experience with rock climbing. I want to hear it in your words. If I have more specific questions later, I'll ask.

Prompt Questions:

- How did you get started rock climbing?

- Why did you start?

- Who did you start with? Do you still climb with those people? Why not?

- Are you a climber? What does it mean to be a climber?

- Do you climb indoors or outdoors? Which do you like more?

- Who taught you to climb?

- Have you had any mentors during your climbing career?

- What are your goals with climbing? Do you have any? Are you meeting them? Why or why not?

- What kinds of climbing do you do?

- How much of your free time do you spend climbing?

- Do you play any other sports or participate in other leisure activities? With who? The same people you climb with?

I've had someone tell me that they see people up there that only boulder. Is that true? Tell me about what types of climbing are there?

What draws you to indoor climbing?

How big a part of your life is climbing?

- How long will you climb?

- Do you see yourself participating in climbing next year?

- How about 3 years? Etc.

- Do you buy climbing gear?

- How do you decide what kind of gear to buy?

- Do you buy climbing clothing?

- Do you consume any climbing related media (movies, videos, magazines, do you subscribe)? Which ones? With whom?

- Do you use the internet to get information about rock climbing? What websites do you go to?

Tell me about the different types of indoor climbers you encounter? Can you see different types? What are they?

- Why did you choose your partner?

- Do you compete now? Have you ever competed?

- What do you enjoy most about climbing?

- What do you enjoy the least? What kind of climber would you consider yourself? Boulderer, Trad, Sport?

- How has your climbing progressed?

- Have you increased your grade level of climbing?

- Tell me about your technical skills in climbing.

- Have you ever felt your climbing was hindered in any way?

- Tell me about your gender as it relates to climbing.

- What does your family think about your climbing?

- What does your girlfriend / boyfriend / partner think about it?

- Compare your climbing today from when you started? Is your experience the same now as then?

- What was your view of climbing before you were a climber? How about now? Has it changed? Why?

- Do you have the same expectations from climbing now as you did when you started?

- Have you ever gotten hurt while climbing? What did that do to you?

- Have you flatlined? Why do you stay with it if you aren't getting physically stronger? Is there something else that keeps you in?

I had some of my other informants talk about the fact that they feel like there is a community in the rock climbing world and even up here they feel like there is a community aspect to it. Is that something that you can confirm? Do you feel the same way?

Describe that world for me.

Let me give you a scenario: You are walking across campus one day and you spot someone you suspect is a climber. How do you know?

I've talked to a handful of people and there are some differing opinions on what it takes to be a climber. At what point when people come and use the Wall would you consider them a climber?.........Would you consider yourself a climber?

I've had some folks talk about lead climbing being a "headgame". Is it for you? What does that mean? Does it scare you? Do you like that?

Tell me about that….the risk associated with it. Are there limits for you? Is there like a line there that there are certain kinds of climbing that you won't do?

I had someone tell me that when they saw someone at the wall doing something incorrectly, they felt compelled to correct it. Do you do that?

How has your climbing experience changed since you became a climbing wall employee?

- How has it affected your abilities?

- Do you act differently when you climb at work than when you climb recreationally?

- Has your perspective on safety changed because of your job?

- What else has it changed?

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
Who are climbing the walls?: An exploration of the social world of indoor rock climbing

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research study about indoor rock climbers and their leisure choices. The purpose of this study is to explore the leisure careers of indoor climbers and their progression in the sport of indoor rock climbing. You were selected to be a possible participant because someone of your experience level in the sport is needed for representation in the study.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a voice recorded interview session with an investigator. After the interview you will be offered a chance to review the transcript of the interview for content accuracy. In addition, you may be asked follow up questions via phone or in person to obtain additional information or to clear up any unclear points. This study will take no more than 45 minutes to one hour for the initial interview and then less than 30 minutes for the subsequent contacts.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?
The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, results from the study will help climbing facility staff and administrators to manage the climbers in their facilities. Additionally, the study will add to the academic knowledge base on social worlds and leisure pursuits. Specifically, it may add detail to studies of the leisure careers of participants.

Do I have to participate?
No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
This study is confidential, and the records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Jason Kurten and Dr. Scott Shafer will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Jason Kurten and Dr. Scott Shafer will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for 5 years and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Jason Kurten at jkurten@tamu.edu or 979.862.1999] or 979.220.6289.

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Signature
Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

_____   I agree to be audio recorded.
_____   I do not want to be audio recorded.

Signature of Participant: _____

Printed Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Printed Name: _____ **Date:** _____

VITA

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