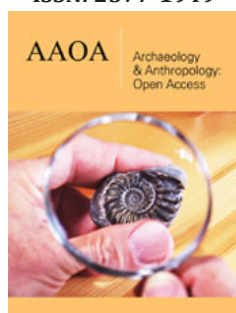


'I Decided to See Myself as Another Sort of Athlete' - Femininities and Athleticism in Autobiographies of Female Extreme Recreational Sports Race Participants

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Abstract

Drawing on an analysis of autobiographical books written by female participants in extreme recreational sports races, this article offers an examination of self-presentations of athlete writers in relation to their serious leisure engagement in this type of sporting events that are often connoted with masculinity. The analysis centres on the authors' constructions of various types of femininities, and how they challenge the subject/object dichotomy of the physical self in their narrations. A result of the examination is that the self-presentations enable negotiations of a position of being marginalized as average and ordinary women, who do extreme recreational sports and deviate from the male sports norm, but also enable experiences of empowerment through the physical activity and racing in the particular settings of extreme sports. This tension in the female racers' self-presentations is analysed in reference to different social conditions that surround womens' participation in extreme sports races.

Keywords: Femininities; Athleticism; Self-presentation; Extreme recreational sports races; Autobiographies; Subject/object

Introduction

Extreme recreational sports races, such as ultra-marathons, obstacle races, swimrun competitions, and up to 24 hour (or more) long races on foot, on skis or by bicycle, in extreme conditions such as darkness and coldness, have become more and more popular among ordinary middle-class adults of industrialized countries in recent years [1-4]. Ordinary men and women have turned physical activity and training into an all-encompassing lifestyle and main focus of their lives, following the description of serious leisure [5], in order to prepare and participate for these races. Historically, a male norm dominate sports and sports are seen as a masculine practice [6-8]. Ethnographies of ordinary women's recreational sporting activities have shown how the gendered power dynamics of sports effect women, who regularly train and exercise [9-11], as they may shape experiences of exclusion [12-14], but recreational sports as leisure may also become the building blocks of other ways to embody femininity than traditional femininities for athletic women [11,15,16]. Extreme recreational sports races accentuate these gendered norms [1,4]. Numerically, the male race participants outrun the female, but the participants are also discursively constituted as hypermasculine [17] or described as 'superhuman males' and 'superhuman females', which was a description on a social media platform of an extreme obstacle course race during the fall of 2022. Against this background, how do female participants in extreme sports races understand themselves, their athlete position, and their participation along gendered norms of sports? To answer this question, I have examined six autobiographies, written by female extreme sports racers about their racing achievements and participation in specific extreme sports races. I specifically study the authors' own presentations and identifications with femininity and athleticism, and the social conditions that emerge in connection to the narrations of self in this context: Which

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gendered experiences of extreme sports racing are depicted in the autobiographies? How do the women present themselves in their autobiographies in relation to social conditions of their gendered embodied position?

Methodologies and Theoretical Perspectives

This study is based on autobiographies of six female extreme recreational sports race participants. The books were found in libraries and online bookstores in Sweden [18-23], and collected during 2019-2020, as part of an empirical material that due to the covid-19 pandemic 2020-2022 became a focal material, for a research project about extreme recreational sports racing as a cultural phenomenon of our time. The autobiographical authors are adult women of 24-55 years of age, and all of them have a middle-class background. Some have a higher education degree, and several have established their own enterprise that are related to sports in the outdoors. Five of the autobiographies are written in English by-English speaking racers that live in western industrialized countries, one is written in Swedish by a Swedish national. All of the autobiographies are directed to women in general, and female recreational athletes in particular, in their aim to inspire other women to participate in recreational sports and different ultra-running, paragliding/hiking, and triathlon races. Based on epistemology and methodology within cultural studies and anthropology, I consider the collected autobiographical material partly as selective presentations of the authors themselves, and partly as a medium of cultural representations and discourses about the time and society in which the authors operate.

The self-presentations disclose articulated gendered identifications in a social world of extreme recreational sports races: They highlight the authors' positioning as sports racers that involves experiences of *becoming* and of *passing* as extreme race athletes (cf. [24-26]), in relation to structural and cultural conditions and norms of being women who participate in extreme sports races, often considered a masculine coded practice. The overall theoretical framework is based on a feminist understanding of constructions of gender, and the female position as the deviant Other in relation to the self-evident and intelligible male subject [26-28], which is made central in the research field of recreational sports races through the dominating masculine norm of sports [6,17,29-31]. The autobiographies contain self-presentations that take place in discursive arenas of gendered ideals, expectations, social conditions, and power relations, which are interpreted along the lines of Michel Foucault's [32] understanding of power as performed, productive and decentralized (see Sawicki [33]). Micro level power relations are activated in all social relations, and these are discursively reflected and have repercussions in society at large. Acts of subordination and superiority emerge in the autobiographies, and position certain gendered bodies and subject positions as self-evident and intelligible participants in extreme races-at the same time as other subject positions are seen as deviant. Certain kinds of femininities and masculinities are being performed and placed above others, and men as a group are usually being placed above women on a collective level of

sports [6,12,34]. The gendered hierarchies highlight the structural conditions that surround the female athletes' experiences and possible identifications in the autobiographies. Here, the focus is on the relation between individual subject positionings, and gendered conditions of extreme sports race athletes.

From an intersectional perspective, gender can never be studied in isolation from other categories, such as ethnicity, class, age and sexuality [35-37]. Different power axes interact to maintain social hierarchies, which often position an able-bodied and able-minded, white, heterosexual, middle-aged, middle-class, urban man superior to all other subject positions [38,39], which become placed in reference to this male superiority. Thus, the analysis also centres femininities in its' plural form, as the authors articulate subject positions in reference to different types of femininities. A specific kind of hegemonic femininity is central to the analysis and can be described as a feminine complement to RW Connell's [38] concept of hegemonic masculinity, within the framework of a mandatory heterosexuality and the continuation of a patriarchal order (see for example [40,41]). In short, hegemonic femininity is here understood as a kind of normative femininity, in line with the theoretical thinking of Carrie Paechter [42]. This type of hegemonic gender performance or representation is locally produced and anchored in a specific context, here the extreme sports race context, as the dominant and sought-after ideal version of femininity in the given context.

Hegemonic femininity constitutes a parallel equivalent to hegemonic masculinity in that it is constructed in relation to other femininities, and not as a subordinate other in relation to a certain kind of hegemonic masculinity. In addition, gendered understandings are viewed in light of how the subject/object dichotomy emerge in the analysis and opens up to a more flexible understanding of subjectivity through the lived personal experience [43-45]. Along the lines of a feminist research tradition, the subject/object dualism in the self-presentations convey potential for both individual and structural change in two ways: 1) through narrations of inhabiting sporting bodies against the norm, and 2) through the actual telling of a story about embodied experiences of self [43]. Social conditions and norms may shape the embodied self, but do not reduce it to a determined and stable self. Instead, the narrations reveal instability in their focus on personal experiences that are situational and context-bound, which often may highlight a tension between fixity and change [43]. This theoretical approach takes individual negotiations with social complexities and contradictions into account, which moves the analysis away from an essentialist subject/object dichotomy.

Results

Several themes emerge as central in the authors' autobiographical accounts. They will be discussed and analysed in this section:

- a. Self-presentations of presenting themselves as middle-aged ordinary women not fitting into the extreme race community,

- b. the effects of the self-evident masculine athletic ideal on femininity constructions,
- c. self-presentations as driven subjects that are used to all male communities and activities,
- d. the experience of freedom through extreme athletics, and
- e. identification with other racers through embodied capacity.

Not a proper athlete

An overarching tension in all the autobiographies is the author's self-presentations as ordinary women pursuing something as extraordinary as participating in extreme sports races. Articulations of ordinariness are linked to presenting oneself as not being a proper extreme race athlete, and therefore an underdog in this context: *I felt like an outsider. I didn't belong to these athletes. My old familiar thoughts played like a broken record in my mind. I immediately tried to find women my age, anyone who looked at least fifty, so I wouldn't feel so out of place. Fifty years old and my first 100-mile endurance run. Why did everyone look so young?* [20].

I was the one who stood out in the wrong way in the pictures at night. I died a bit there and then when I ran after all the others. I really had wanted to fit in for once. [...] I was very uncomfortable. I tried to understand the pace and the kilometre time that I ought to apply [18].

The authors present themselves as not being proper extreme race athletes, which can be connected to an embodied femininity discursively understood as not good enough, less capable than men in extreme sports, and an outsider of the (male) community of extreme race participants [10]. The relational aspects are apparent in the accounts. The authors view their participation in extreme races in relation to their male self-evident counterparts, and the women depict their own capabilities as subordinate to men engaged in extreme racing, in line with the dualistic and hierarchical gender order and the male norm in sports. The women also position themselves as outsiders due to the combination of being engaged in extreme athletics and the social conditions of motherhood: becoming pregnant, being a mom, and after the children have moved out being considered too old to do extreme sports. The life course of normative, heterosexual women, in which motherhood is central, emerges as an important point of reference in the self-presentations [46].

Motherhood also changes other people's view of the authors: 'I was one of the guys until I was almost forty. Then, I had a baby,' Jane Reynolds [19] tells her reader. Motherhood does not seem comparable to extreme sports racing, to be adventurous, to engage in self-discovery and to have 'fun', which all authors point out as central motives for their extreme race participation. The hegemonic cultural views of motherhood are, on the other hand, predominantly connected to women's reproductive function of and for the family. A time-consuming sporting activity in extreme terrain does not fit into the daily task of a proper mother. This is a prominent notion that the authors narrate against or find means to reconcile in their

narration. Molly Sheridan, 50-year-old ultra-runner and a former stay-at-home mom, argues that she can make use of and draw from her abilities as a mother and use these qualities as an ultra-runner: *I am an average mom who did something out of the ordinary because I summoned all the energy I used as a mother, and turned that into running. To run in impossible circumstances, I needed patience, the endless patience a mother needs when raising her kids. I needed mental strength, the strength a mom needs when she has to deal with a child's illness. A mother seldom uses her talents for herself. She gives and gives and gives. She can forget that she is a powerhouse of wisdom and strength* [20].

An additional way to resolve one's extreme race participation with the dominant moral imperative of feminine ethics of care for others [47,48], is to highlight how the extreme racing turns the female athletes, into role models for their children: 'I realized that I had become the most important adult symbol in her life', Sheridan [20] writes about her daughter in her autobiography. The individual (extreme race) actions of the women are here framed by the culturally self-evident understanding of motherhood as acts of caring and doing something for others, and not for the individual self [49]. As role models for their own children, racing becomes morally legitimized and justified, in line with a conventional caring femininity.

Motherhood is, however, not a mere discursive construct to identify with, but also conditions the preparation for and participation in extreme sports races in very concrete ways. Molly Sheridan [20] writes: *As a woman, I felt it was my duty and obligation to nurture and care for my family and to give it my all anytime without ever a thought about myself. My days were completely filled. So, I couldn't figure out how in the world I was going to carve out time for workouts.*

Research on allocated time for exercising along gendered lines confirms that women often exercise and prepare for their sports races when nothing or no one else require anything from them or call for their attention: during lunch time, in the early mornings or late at night when the rest of the family is asleep [50,51]. On the other hand, extreme race participation is often a central part of the participants' lifestyle and made into an integrated part in family and social life [1,52].

Against an ideal

The author's' experiences are told from a marginal position in the extreme race context, which is related to idealized and pre-given ideological understandings of who is considered to be a person suitable for extreme racing [43], as seen in the following accounts: *People were curious to see just what this female looked like, who set records with all-male teams. I wondered if I disappointed the public by not being six feet two inches and 200 pounds and rippling with muscles. I was only five foot eight inches and down to less than 120 pounds from my fighting weight of about 135* [19].

Almost exclusively men, and most of them had been engaged with [the company] Salomon and mountain running during a long time. I was out of place as a 24-year-old Swedish girl, who had only run

on asphalt and blogged about it. [...] I struggled all that I could to keep up with these fast-running men from all corners of the world. All wore Salomon products in red colours, and of course had Salomon trail shoes on their feet. I wore turquoise running shirts from [label] Craft and the asphalt shoes of asphalt shoes Asics Kayona [18].

Men began to emerge. They had spent the night in tents that were covered in snow. The race start point was in such a remote locale that runners, tough Jeremiah Johnson types, had slept overnight at the start line. They were a wild-looking bunch with dishevelled hair and beards. We were in the midst of Neanderthal ultrarunners, which made me feel even more out of place in my pink parka with braids poking out of the bottom of my white beanie. [...]

One guy asked if I was going to be manning an aid station. When I told him I was a runner, he looked incredulous and asked, "You are running THIS race? Where are you from?" "Vegas, Baby!" I smiled with my arms outstretched. He shook his head and walked away. These men were from Canada, Nova Scotia, and Alaska. I couldn't have felt more out of place. [...] Before I could regain my composure, I noticed that the Neanderthals had started running. Like a tall, thin pink flamingo in a herd of rhinos, I began running with the pack [20].

In these accounts, the idealized version of a proper extreme race athlete seems to be a 'more than male' wild-looking Neanderthal ultra-runner adorned with beard, who sleeps in tents in the middle of the winter at the start line [17]. The authors' own narrations of their small, short, female bodies out of place, not knowing what clothes to wear in the proper colour, and what gear to use in the extreme terrain and weather mark their outside position [53]. The women's articulations of being different, expressed through feeling like a tall, thin pink flamingo in a herd of rhinos are descriptions of self along the lines of conventional femininity within an existing gender ideology that make them and their gendered appearance in the feminized colour pink intelligible [46]. Sports historian Helena Tolvhed [54] has shown that to have a normative petite female body dressed up in an exaggerated feminine manner when doing a very masculine coded sporting activity will not challenge the binary gender order of two opposite, heterosexual sexes that desire one another. The characteristics of the binary gender order are instead upheld, preserved and repeated [26,28].

The depiction of self as being a tall, thin, pink flamingo in a herd of rhinos also draw on an exaggerated expression of a femininity that in its' extreme (going too far, being too much and in your face), could potentially indeed alter the gender order [55]. Exaggerated cultural expressions that differ and disturb status quo can be used to undermine and destabilize the normative order through its' very appearance, which in itself carries subversive potential. The account and picture of hanging a bra, instead of one's country flag, outside of the tent at the base camp of international 160-mile ultramarathon in the Sahara Desert, as depicted by ultra-marathon athlete Holly Zimmermann [23], can also be interpreted as resistance of the gender order and the masculine coding of extreme races. The presence of women with visible female attributes opens up for other extreme race participants beyond the male norm. Simultaneously, the female athletes do not express femininity in a

traditional and conventional manner since their extreme racing is typically not in line with a normative femininity.

Driven subjects

A central theme in the autobiographies is the portrayal of the authors as exceptionally and extraordinarily driven subjects. They position themselves as ordinary women with an extra ordinary drive, which have helped them move from an underdog position in the extreme races to recognized extreme athletes in their own right. This development has been facilitated by previous experiences of other traditionally male domains through their professional lives, such as engineering, global aid, the army, and photojournalism. Ultra-runner Molly Zimmermann is an exception. Throughout her autobiography, labelled *Ultra Marathon Mom* (2018), Zimmermann portrays herself as an ordinary stay-at-home mom. In the rest of the empirical material, articulations of being driven subjects emerge in all areas of the women's lives: the physical achievements in sports, in their professional careers and higher education degrees, in their family life, and during spare time, which for some mean to run 100K for fun during the weekend as a way to train and prepare for races. Extreme sports are articulated with values of passion, desire, and enormous motivation. To have a strong inner drive emerge in statements, such as 'if you believe in yourself, incredible things sometimes happen' [23], 'Your life is what you make it, and the world is what it means to you' [19], 'I live by the motto that things will go my way, and I think it is precisely that belief that will make things go my way' [18], 'I have, and always have had, the most powerful urge to make the best of myself' [21], 'the competition came from within. Something inside me was constantly driving and driving and driving. I had to make the most of it; I had to make the most of me' [21].

The overall discursive message in these quotes resemble neo-liberal and late modern individualism of turning one's life into something grand out of free will and determination (Giddens, 1991). Inner drive is also essential to a contemporary self-centred active late modern white, educated, middle-classed femininity, which postfeminist thought has acknowledged [56,57]. Yet, postmodern femininity, visible in western cultures since the 1980s, is often understood as a young can-do girl, presumed to be boosted with girl power, individual agency and potential to bring about social change [58]. In contrast, the authors in this study are middle aged women-according to Featherstone and Hepworth [59], the age span of midlife is 30-60, which applies to all authors but one. Hence, while being attributed with the same qualifications of empowerment, independency and with potential for self-realization as the postmodern girl [60,61], the female extreme race participants present a hegemonic feminine superwoman ideal in their stories of success and perfection in all areas of life as professionals, mothers, and female extreme athletes. Being middle aged makes them both full of life experience and resourceful enough to narrate their individual achievements thanks to their motivation and own capacity [62,63]. The drive of the women is seen as central to the authors when daring to enter the masculine domain of extreme racing, which together with writing their autobiographies

as encouragement to other women, can be interpreted as silent micro-political acts of feminist emancipation of female athletes [64,65].

Freedom

The individual drive serves as a push towards athletic success for the authors, whereas an important pull factor seems to be the discursive association between extreme sports racing and freedom [2]. The women depict a tension between feeling free through moving the body with self-confidence and ease, and the hampering norms of motherhood and care, which the female athletes literally can escape a couple of hours while preparing for and participating in races. When running, biking or skiing, they are free from the social roles of their ordinary lives and may focus on the actual activity in the present moment. Miranda Kvist [18] (author's translation), who does not have a family of her own, has another take on the matter: *I think the love of running in nature was very much about the unpretentious in it. In the forest it cannot be perfect, and it is very nice. You cannot keep a pace manically when the ground and the hillside change. I cannot hide the fact that it was liberating.*

A cultural critique is made visible in Kvist's view of running outdoors, in connection to being freed from contemporary notions of achievement, perfectionism and professionalization in sports [66]. Professionalized leisure is also apparent in the term *elite amateurs* within recreational sports, which refers to ordinary adults who spend considerable time, money and commitment on their sports to almost the same degree and with the same seriousness as if it were their main occupation (see for example Andreasson et al. [1]). Here, Kvist allies with consumption researcher Carys Egan-Wyer [2], whose research has shown that ultra-running is presented as a free and fun-filled hobby by runners themselves, but in reality, Egan-Wyer shows that the runners' racing contains strong elements of duty, control and discipline based on cultural, social, economic and political ideals and expectations. Empirical quotes like Molly Sheridan's [20] 'I found my life through running. I found pure freedom. [...] I overcame fear and found independence. I found courage, strength, and determination that I never thought I possessed' articulate experiences of freedom, empowerment and agency that emerge and are felt by the women through the embodied practices, *the actual doing*. The athletic practices seem to transform the gendered understandings of self from being externally determined by restrictive norms to understand oneself as 'a lived set of embodied potentialities' that strengthens feelings of self and give mental and physical self-confidence [43] (see also [28, 67]).

Identification as extreme race athletes

'Physically I could do as much (or more) than the men,' Dawn Westrum [22] tells her readers about her race experience, and Chrissie Wellington [21] writes: 'Landmarks can [...] be ticked off as I pass them as a measure of progress. I find male athletes similarly useful.' These examples articulate how the female racers use men and male performances as a benchmark for their individual achievements. In addition, the quotes show that the

actual racing makes the gendered norms of femininity instable and undetermined. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's [68] concept *regulated liberties* might be useful here. He focuses on the temporal opening of emancipation in particular fields when lived embodied practices negotiate, subvert and reformulate the discursive understandings of gendered identities. In this line of thinking, the identity is acted out through the body, *habitus* in Bourdieu's terminology. What we believe is normative and pertinent in a given context, we act out.

In this particular case, the female athletes depict how they match the expectations of the field-the local context of extreme sports races, which run counter to the gendered norms in society at large that tell women to question their physical capacity. In sum, since the experience of freedom is the result of acting upon the right practices of the particular context of extreme racing, the normative gendered regulations of society at large may remain intact outside the racecourse. In any case, the preparation for and participation in extreme sports races may function as a zone freed from limiting gender norms, where an athlete identity may be cultivated [11]. These experiences offer new ways to embody a female identity through corporeal practices of strength and capacity. When the women can show how they physically match other male racers' performance, they also experience a wider range of inclusion within the extreme athletes' community. For extreme race women 'doing is better than speaking' because a female participant needs to show off her competencies, according to Jane Reynolds [19].

She continues: 'I see myself as a woman with any ability that a man has. I also see and accept that I may choose to use my ability with my own signature, my own way, even if it differs from the way a man might choose' [19]. An important factor to consider here is the cultural logics of extreme sports races, which premier other types of competences than mere muscular strength, speed and competition, which characterize normative sports masculinity (see [7,38]). In extreme races, the athletes need to have stamina, mental strength, the ability to cooperate with other racers, the ability to make right decisions in risky and dangerous situations, and to understand and follow complicated rules. In the quote above, Reynolds understands her unique characteristics in line with this broader understanding of extreme recreational sports. The women change the category of athlete into performing 'another sort of athlete' [19], through embodying other types of competencies suitable for extreme sports races, than what is normally associated with the competitive sports. In the autobiographies, the authors highlight the realization of how their athletic achievements suddenly turned them into role models for others (not only for their children as stated previously), which they felt a need to make use of, for instance by writing an autobiography. Through the books, the authors not only narrate their individual experiences of extreme sports racing but also give support to others who wish to train and participate in the races. They give advice, lists, and manuals of what to eat, how to pack, the type of equipment that is needed et cetera. Other ways to add value to the extreme race athlete position are to create other platforms to reach out to women and inspire them, or to work as social entrepreneurs for a greater cause, such as the social rights of refugees or indigenous women.

Implications

In this article, I have shown how female authors of autobiographical books about extreme race participation present themselves as ordinary and average women (and mothers), who feel subordinate and not as capable as male extreme sports racers in the view of the surrounding environment. In the narrations of the autobiographies, the authors become agents that gets to negotiate and reformulate their marginalized and subordinate position in the extreme race context, which they are able to subvert with an exceptional drive and previous experiences of other areas in life that are dominated by a masculine norm. Here, they articulate how the embodied practice of extreme athletics have a liberating and empowering effect before, during and after the race because they can athletically perform as well as their male counterparts. In addition, they exercise the command of capacities that are needed in extreme racing. A cultural implication of acquiring an extreme athlete position seem to be the expectation that come with the recognition that the women gain and seek for their achievements when they understand themselves as role models for other women (or their children). Writing autobiographies can be understood as a platform of self-promotion of being a role model. Through this platform the authors can further establish themselves as extreme sports athletes, but it is also used to guide and recruit others women to the extreme sporting world [69].

Paradoxically, to write an autobiography can be interpreted as both an act of feminism for a more gender equal extreme race participation, and as a prerequisite of womanhood when inhabiting a recognized stance. There seem to be a moral obligation to give back and make something useful of such a position, especially since the engagement is a male coded activity. This makes the endeavour extraordinary [10]. To be a woman in a culturally intelligible way, one cannot simply run 160K for the high pleasure. Again, her deeds need to be of use for others, according to an ethics of care linked to femininity [47,70]. On the other hand, this line of thought follows the current neoliberal societal trend that leisure activities should be viewed as an investment with added value in other areas of life, such as an increased social status in general [2]. The authors' extreme sports achievements have given them a platform, where writing a autobiography is both part of making use of this particular stand, and a way to further establish oneself as an extreme sports athlete [71-80].

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