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To cite this article: Jennifer L. Clegg & Ted M. Butryn (2012) An existential phenomenological examination of parkour and freerunning, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 4:3, 320-340, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2012.693527](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2012.693527)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2012.693527>



Published online: 21 Jun 2012.



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## An existential phenomenological examination of parkour and freerunning

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*(Received 16 June 2011; final version received 30 August 2011)*

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the embodied experiences of practitioners of parkour and freerunning. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with 11 (9 male and 2 female) intermediate-to-advanced traceurs (parkour practitioners) ranging from 18 to 33 years old. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, which focuses on bodily perspective, was used to uncover and describe the meaning of these experiences. Following lengthy in-depth phenomenological interviews, two dimensions emerged: *bodily experience and interactive experience*. Several supporting themes also emerged, including *play, movement and risk* within the bodily experience dimension, and *community, public and world* within the interactive experience dimension. The findings of this study provide new perspectives of the experiences and meanings associated with participating in parkour and freerunning, and both support and contradict previous academic work on parkour.

**Keywords:** embodiment; lifestyle sports; parkour; phenomenology; risk

### Introduction

Parkour is an emerging lifestyle sport and physical practice that uses urban architecture as a means for purposive action (Wheaton 2004, Edwardes 2007, Thomson 2008). While described simply as the practice of moving through the environment using only your body and your surroundings to propel yourself (Toorock 2005), or the 'art of urban adventure', the objective of parkour is to travel uninhibitedly through urban terrain by running, jumping, vaulting, leaping and climbing over any obstacles encountered in a fluid and efficient manner (Bavinton 2007). Freerunning, based on similar philosophy, is a more competitive, expressive and acrobatic version of parkour (Foucan 2008).

The word 'parkour' is a derivative of the French term *parcours du combattant*, roughly translating to 'military obstacle course', or *parcourir*, which is 'to run through' (Shahani 2008). During the 1980s in suburban Paris, the practice began as a childhood game for David Belle and Sébastien Foucan, who are widely credited with being the founders of the sport. Eventually, David Belle developed the practice much further, incorporating ever-greater challenges and risks within urban settings (Thomson 2008). Recognising the need for more originality, creativity and

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spirituality within the discipline, Foucan (2008) adapted his style of movement into 'freerunning'.

As a sport without formal rules and with many diverse styles, parkour allows great freedom of interpretation. By choosing the path, the movement, speed, obstacles and various techniques needed to negotiate obstacles, Foucan (2008) believes the practice becomes a form of creative expression and a means of finding one's 'way'. Parkour borrows mental and spiritual elements from Eastern philosophies while emphasising flow, harmony and fluidity; merging movement with the environment (Foucan 2008). Nonetheless, it is understood that the more efficient and aesthetic the path and the more difficult and harrowing the terrain, the more elegant the performance is considered by traceurs (Wilkinson 2007). Foucan (2008) suggests that, ultimately, the intention is for the movement to become so instinctive and intuitive that it recedes from one's awareness and can be performed without reflection.

However, the various techniques that define parkour can also be dangerous, dramatic and socially unsettling. As Thomson (2008, p. 250) notes:

What could be more unsafe than moving across, over, between, or under the city's structures with what seems to be a joyous and blatant disregard for their intended use? Parkour, an urban practice of rapid on-foot movement that follows the maxim 'keep moving forward' seems, with its spectacular running and jumping, disconcertingly unsafe.

Indeed, there is significant risk and danger inherent in parkour as the 'spectacular' movement of running, jumping, flipping and vaulting is typically performed on unforgiving concrete architecture. In the continual quest to extend oneself through the physical (and mental) mastery of one's environment, the traceur takes on increasingly difficult and dangerous skills. As such, Saville (2008) contends that parkour allows an enmeshment with fear through which traceurs find new appreciation for the subtle variations of the emotion, contending that the differences 'are crucial to the way we engage in contact with the world' (p. 903).

Bavinton (2007) examined the parkour's key philosophy of turning 'obstacles into opportunities'. The author found that traceurs' ability to reinterpret 'space' and use it in unconventional ways upsets embedded power relations within urban settings. Bavinton revealed traceurs' awareness of the resistant or deviant nature of their unconventional use of urban space, quoting one participant:

Urban environments are designed for one of many uses, but the aim is to restrict, direct, and slow movement. I try to practice in areas that restrict and slow me as much as possible – it appeals to my sense of defiance against all those who designed the environment to restrict and control. (p. 406)

Thus, Bavinton's (2007) work suggested that traceurs' complex negotiation of the physical and social constraints of practicing parkour contributed to their sense of agency as individuals.

Beal's (1995) exploration of skateboarding and social resistance used hegemony theory to frame how skaters 'challenge dominant practices, create alternative practices, and potentially create social change through cultural practices' (p. 265). What is clear from Beal's research is that fighting social forces with resistant behaviour manifests in different forms, to varying degrees: certain skaters' idea of resistance

(rejecting mainstream and adult-run sports) is decidedly different than others (fighting to liberate public space from increasing regulation). Nevertheless, Beal (1995) notes while skaters were not directly transformed by their socially resistant practices, they were empowered by their decision to act in their best interest by creating and sustaining different types of alternative activities. Beal (1995) therefore suggests that while skateboarding acts as both micro and macro forms of social resistance, it was skaters' ability to use a physical activity as a means of 'reclaiming power' – power related to autonomy and the politics of the self – that was most significant.

Similarly, Atkinson's (2009) ethnography of Toronto-based traceurs suggests that parkour is an 'anarcho-environmental' movement that acts as a modern form of social protest. Used as a vehicle for questioning urban spatial boundaries, addressing environmental concerns and disrupting the flow of cities' commercial spaces, parkour is a collective practice that strives to inspire urbanites to see the cityscape from a new perspective. Atkinson also described traceurs' physical experiences of movement as a flowing, 'ascetically rigorous', and anxiety-producing type of athleticism. By pushing one's own limits or boundaries, traceurs' engage in 'edgework' (Lyng 1990) through their exploration of risk and suffering in the sport. Further, Atkinson contended that by focusing on the aesthetics and physicality of movement while communing with the urban environment, traceurs 'pursue a bodily experience that is beyond rational knowledge' (p. 192).

The proliferation of media surrounding parkour<sup>1</sup> (i.e. as featured in numerous documentaries, music videos, television advertisements and movies), a significant Internet presence and a growing interest in lifestyle sports (Wheaton 2004) are important factors contributing to the recent popularity and expansion of the practice (Saville 2008). Along with greater participation, however, it is increasingly evident that freerunning, in particular, is evolving into a more commercialised sporting enterprise. Confirmation that the phenomenon has made substantial inroads as an alternative, competitive sport is demonstrated by the sanctioning of international events and competitions such as the Art of Motion in Austria and the Barclaycard Freerun World Championships in London, and the opening of full-time parkour and freerunning training academies (Ensign 2009). Despite the growth of the sport over the last decade, parkour has received relatively little attention from scholars (Bavinton 2007, Saville 2008, Atkinson 2009, Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011). While this small but growing body of research has revealed numerous insights about the sport, less is known about traceurs'<sup>2</sup> subjective experiences. Following Atkinson (2009), we suggest that investigating traceurs' experience from a bodily perspective will shed light on the complex subjectivities of the athletes who practice parkour.

Existential phenomenology provides a unique framework for examining human experience in the world, focusing on the tension and 'interpenetration' between one's body, life's experiences and meaning (Carmen 2008). Comprising mutually dependent philosophies, existential phenomenology is a research method that focuses on identifying a particular experience, giving a full and rich account of it and incorporating it into a 'life-text' (von Eckartsberg 1998). More specifically, Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007) point to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) philosophy of 'embodied consciousness' and the body *being-in-the-world* as offering a robust mechanism through which to capture a particular kind of sporting experience. For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology 'tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations that the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may be able to

provide' (as quoted in Carmen 2008, p. 36). In other words, the body holds vast amounts of meaning and knowledge through our 'felt' sensations. Two important ideas that Merleau-Ponty put forth lend themselves specifically to athletic/sport investigations: one is that perception, proprioception and embodiment are constitutive elements of the experience of *being-in-the-world* and two, that intentionality, the notion of directed consciousness and 'aboutness' of attitudes, is vital in understanding these experiences (Carmen 2008). Surprisingly, however, while phenomenological methods offer invaluable opportunities to learn about athletes' experiences (Kerry and Armour 2000), they have rarely been applied to sports studies (Pronger 1990, Rail 1990, Smith 1992, Wessinger 1994, Dale 2000, Berry *et al.* 2010), and have yet to be used to examine parkour or other lifestyle sports.

Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to explore the lived, embodied experiences of traceurs. Understanding the lived experiences of traceurs should provide a valuable perspective for researchers who study lifestyle or risk sports and the meanings and significance associated with these types of activities. We also hope to illustrate the many aspects of parkour that deviate from other comparable lifestyle sport experiences. Finally, we highlight the ways that parkour contributes to the literature on sport as a contested practice of cultural space, public life and urban community.

## Method

### *Participants*

Consistent with the phenomenological approach, participants were selected based on their ability to provide in-depth, detailed and relevant information about their experiences of parkour (Dale 2000). A purposeful sample of 11 men and women (9 male and 2 female) were recruited who: (1) were between the ages of 18–32 years and living in the San Francisco Bay area, (2) identified themselves as an intermediate-to-advanced traceur/traceuse with a minimum of three-year experience and (3) self-identified as being willing and able to articulate his or her experiences within the context of a phenomenological interview. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years ( $M=25$ ) and self-identified as Caucasian (5), Asian (4), Mexican-American (1) and African-American (1). Because men and women experience urban sports differently (Atencio *et al.* 2009), this study recruited both male and female participants for a more diverse set of reflections on the subject. Experienced practitioners were chosen based on the rationale that more committed and active traceurs draw from a broader experience set. Lastly, traceurs in this study had a variety of career backgrounds: a few were students, some had technology careers, two worked within the sport/exercise industry, one traceur was professional and another worked a variety of jobs to finance training with elite traceurs in London.

Participants were recruited via email. Email addresses were obtained through the San Francisco parkour (sfparkour.com) website 'bio' pages. After potential participants were identified, the researcher sent out preliminary instructions to each, along with a research summary guide. Moustakas (1994) suggested that the best descriptions are provided when participants have time to think about the situations they are asked to describe. The summary guide served to fully prepare the participant for the subject matter, research process and structure of the interview. Participants were then contacted to confirm a commitment to participate in the study and to determine a convenient time and location to conduct the interview.

Prior to the interviewing process, the primary researcher participated in an in-depth bracketing interview with a colleague with expertise in qualitative research (Dale 2000). The bracketing interview developed from Husserl's methodology of 'phenomenological reduction' or 'epoche' helps bring researchers' assumptions and biases about the subject into awareness (Shertock 1998). It is only after suspending or bracketing preconceptions, von Eckartsberg (1998) pointed out, that the natural attitude of the researcher gives way to a more disciplined 'phenomenological attitude' from which he or she can grasp the essential structures of the phenomenon as they appear (p. 6). Although both authors approached this research as lifelong runners, the bracketing interview involved the primary researcher being interviewed about her thoughts on parkour, and her own gymnastics, running and lifestyle sport (surfing and snowboarding) experiences.

### ***Data collection***

Phenomenological interviews were conducted by the primary researcher to obtain first-person accounts of participants' experiences in parkour. The digitally recorded interviews lasted between 60 and 140 min, and yielded approximately 180 pages of single-spaced text. This study obtained IRB approval, and all participation was voluntary and the content of the interviews was kept confidential.

The researcher used phenomenological interviewing techniques as described by Dale (1996, 2000). This technique consists of an unstructured interviewing format, during which the participant discusses at length his or her experiences with only occasional guidance or probing from the researcher (Dale 1996). The researcher allowed the participant to become the 'expert' while reflecting on meanings, sensations and feelings which may yield richer, more vital type descriptors that are necessary for phenomenological research (Dale 1996). Further, the researcher approached the phenomenological interview with a spirit of collaboration (Shertock 1998) and provided interviewees a receptive, non-judgemental presence.

The interviews began with brief social conversation. Following this opening, the researcher asked the participant to take a few moments to focus on the experience of doing parkour, moments of particular awareness and impact and the many details of the experience. After a few minutes, the researcher asked the participant to: 'Please describe the overall experience of parkour or freerunning, focusing on bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts and meanings, as well as how risk is felt within these experiences, using as much detail as possible'. A broad interview guide (Moustakas 1994) was utilised in order to facilitate dialogue if participants needed guidance or were not able to tap into the experience without sufficient depth and description. Please see Appendix A for the interview guide, including commonly used follow-up probes. Aside from the notion of risk, which was included due to its central role in previous work on parkour, the interview guide was otherwise open and non-directed.

### ***Data analysis***

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis for this study was a five-step process utilising two well-established procedures, including Dale's (2000) phenomenological method and the thematic analysis process demonstrated by Cote *et al.* (1993). First, the entire transcript was read several times to get a sense of

the meaning and experience as a whole (Dale 2000). Second, as an additional step recommended by Sparkes (1998), ongoing peer reviews conducted by a colleague with expertise in qualitative helped establish objectivity throughout the data analysis phase. During the initial meetings, the primary researcher discussed interpretations of the transcripts (i.e. perceived meanings of certain phrases or statements regarding inflection and emotion). This process established 'emerging meanings' or raw data themes (Dale 2000) from large, loosely bound categories of text (Coté *et al.* 1993). Third, after overlapping and repetitive statements were removed, emerging meanings or 'meaning units' were coded or tagged (Coté *et al.* 1993). Tagging is a process that removes pertinent portions of data from their original context and then organises and categorises them. Following Coté *et al.* (1993), in subsequent peer reviews, the researchers discussed and agreed upon (thematic) terms that best described that particular data in order to prevent potential bias. Fourth, these tagged categories were then studied and clustered into higher order themes. Finally, the higher order themes were organised into meaningful dimensions (Dale 1996, 2000).

### ***Establishing validity***

The validity of a qualitative study is a key criterion on which it is evaluated (Sparkes 1998). In the current study, the primary researcher used four important procedures to establish validity. First, the results and discussion sections of this investigation have been presented in expressive, rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the phenomenon using the participant's voice. Dale (1996) states that within phenomenological research, a first person, evocative description of the phenomenon is an essential basis in judging a study's validity. Kerry and Amour (2000, p. 5) elaborate: 'In phenomenological reduction, the task is that of describing, in textual language, what is seen and how it is experienced, the fundamental relationship between phenomenon and self'. Second, in addition to closely following phenomenological methods (Dale 2000), the researcher chose a specific strand of phenomenology to guide this investigation (Allen-Collinson 2009). Third, the researcher participated in ongoing peer reviews (mentioned previously), which contributed to interpretive accuracy, objectivity and validity throughout the data analysis process (Sparkes 1998). Finally, after the data analysis phase, a member check was used as a final validation technique (Merriam 2002). Each participant individually member-checked his or her transcript; six participants gave feedback and/or clarification. That information was then studied, recorded in a written case report and incorporated into the final draft of this project (Dale 2000).

### **Results**

Analysis of the phenomenological interview data produced a total of 37 raw data themes, illustrated in Figure 1. The raw data themes were then subsequently organised into six higher order themes, then into two general dimensions (Dale 2000). The two general dimensions, *bodily experience* and *interactive experience*, including the six supporting higher order themes, will be discussed in the following section. In an attempt to provide vivid descriptions of this particular sporting experience,

<u>Raw data themes</u>	<u>Higher order themes</u>	<u>General dimensions</u>
creative outlet sense of play/fun element of surprise/spontaneity exploration/adventure feeling childlike learning how to learn age issues	Play	
individual (bodily) experiences feeling flow feeling flight feeling momentum feels like a video game falling	Movement	Bodily experience
managing risk adrenaline rush pushing limits/boundaries taking risks managing fear	Risk	
training with others connecting/community philosophy/politics inspired by/inspiring others social comparison gendered perspective accessibility/inclusiveness age issues	Community	
practicing in public public perception social responsibility 'we're not skateboarders' appropriation of public space dealing with authorities banning parkour	Public	Interactive experience
interacting with environment relationship with environment environmental responsibility greater awareness 'parkour' vision	World	

Figure 1. Raw data themes and resulting higher dimensions; general dimensions.

illustrative excerpts from the athletes' interviews are provided, as are connections to previous research, when appropriate.

### ***Bodily experience***

Participants described the sensations of doing parkour or freerunning from a subjective, first-person perspective. Three major themes emerged from participants' descriptions of bodily sensations: *play* (general description), *movement* (specific description) and *risk*.



### **Play**

*Play* alludes to the highly unstructured nature of parkour, which allows traceurs to interpret and define their sport in truly personal terms. The feeling of play was evidenced generally, as well as through participants' discussions of 'fun'. Ten of 11 participants described the practice as being a creative outlet, an extension of the playground or a certain discipline infused with a sense of adventure and exploration. As a relatively unknown sport, one participant said that,

It was, whatever you wanted it to be. It was such a new sport that there was so much room for innovation. Nothing had been, like, closed off yet; the boundaries hadn't been set. And so, we just started to play. (James, P2, 1)<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, participants related their feelings of playing to a **sense of youth and a carefree approach to being:**

It is the one thing – parkour, freerunning – not fighting, or martial arts, it is *that one thing* that returns me back to my childhood. It keeps me connected with ... myself. That childlike innocence of running effortlessly, you know, through playgrounds, on jungle gyms, in hallways, darting out of the reach of my mother's hand of discipline. That is what it returns to me. So that's what I hold on to. (Nick, P8, 28)

A fundamental element of play is having fun. For these participants, the sense of having fun while practicing, training or performing parkour was universal. Eric, the one professional that participated in this study, said, 'If we're running the course, I'm not doing it just to beat the course, I'm doing it to have fun with it. And the second you stop having fun with it, then, there's really no point' (Eric, P22, 30). Similarly, for James, fun was an essential part of the experience:

If I just want to go play, I can play better than most people on this planet. And have more fun because I'm more exhilarated because more of my body is aware of what I'm doing and how I'm doing it ... And for me, it's all about getting back to that state of mind and body where the world is all about finding *as much fun* as you can before you have to close your eyes and go to sleep. (James, P6, 35)

Play is also defined by **creative, unstructured learning** (Brown and Vaughn 2009). Traceurs, for the most part, must teach themselves new physical skills. One participant described this process as 'learning how to learn', a challenging yet rewarding experience for many of the athletes who have more traditional sports backgrounds. Five participants described learning within a collaborative environment as a fun and positive experience. Expanding on this, Anson explained his own learning process in parkour:

It's fun because you start looking at things differently. It's hard to teach yourself how to do [these moves]. And, it's *really* hard to tell someone else how their body works. But we give each other suggestions and we try to tweak our bodies in different ways to get that extra little push that we need. And it's extremely exhilarating when you finally figure something out. (Anson, P2, 4)

### **Movement**

*Movement* is the second theme of the *bodily experience* dimension. Action- and motion-related descriptions of the participants' corporeal experience yielded

detailed, step-by-step accounts of a particular training session, a ‘run’ or a ‘jam’. These descriptions consisted of different types of climbs, wall runs, jumps and for one participant, a 9-h run through London at night, covering approximately 26 miles. The three main sensations that emerged which described movement were *flow*, *flight* and *momentum*.

Nine of the 11 participants described their bodily experiences of parkour and freerunning as feeling like *flow* or as a flowing, continuous movement. The concept of ‘flow’, as defined by Csikszentmihali (1990), was also described by six participants as the feeling they get from performing well in a training session or run, using phrases such as ‘effortless’, ‘light’, ‘fast’ and ‘unstoppable’. James described his experience of flow as follows:

It’s like the embodiment of water. When you can flow across a terrain, and know that each individual obstacle that comes up is going to be easily tackled. And maybe not even easily, but tackled and then continued. It’s the most incredible feeling, because you feel light on your feet, you feel light and able to accomplish anything. What it comes down to is that no matter where you go, no matter where you run, no matter how tired you get, if another obstacle comes up, you’re going to be able to get over it. And that’s just the most liberating feeling of ... accomplishment. (James, P6, 21)

On a similar note, seven of the 11 participants described the perception of *flight*. One participant interpreted flight as two different sensations: the feeling of flying and escaping, saying:

I really like the flight instinct – I like the flight part as far as being in the air, and kind of flying in a sense. But I also like being able to get away quickly. And that’s what really captured me. (Michelle, P2, 20)

For others, like Ian, *flight* describes the feeling of being airborne while doing a move called a ‘roof gap’:

The cement ledge that I put my foot on right before the jump ... that’s the scariest part. That last step when you actually leave the ground. Like even though this is the ground suspended, three storeys up, you still have the sense that this is still earth. But as soon as you leave that ledge on the roof, it’s just ... you’re leaving earth, that’s all I can say. You feel weightless, and you have no time to think about anything but at the same time you feel weightless, like you could stay up there all day. It’s so scary ... but it’s so freeing and liberating at the same time. (Ian, P14, 9)

Another essential component of parkour is generating and sustaining forward *momentum* during runs or sequences. Seven of the 11 participants noted the sensation of momentum or speed while practicing. Michelle stated:

It kind of wakes you up inside knowing that you can be that fast. You know it’s not going to slow you down when you actually have to go over an obstacle. So, it’s almost like running through it as if the things aren’t there. And that’s ... very matrix-y like. It’s weird. (Michelle, P2, 17)

### **Risk**

The experience of *risk* is the third theme of the *bodily experience* dimension. As Atkinson (2009) noted, risk is an inherent element of parkour and participants in

this study described a broad spectrum of risk-taking behaviour throughout their experiences – from risk-avoidance or minimisation to accepting, and even seeking danger. For Nick, taking greater risk enhanced his feelings of reward:

The risk when you do these things, is ... it makes it so much more worthwhile when you complete them. If there is no risk, there is no sense of true accomplishment. Because you know that you didn't sacrifice, you didn't do anything except what you normally would do. (Nick P6, 28)

However, all 11 participants described a common theme underlying their relationship with risk. Their behaviours are infrequently reckless; rather, they tend to respect, measure and manage the risks that are an intrinsic part of the sport. For traceurs like Eric, who feel the responsibility of maintaining his career, fear of injury served as a governor of his actions:

You are kind of pushing your limits and your boundaries. You're trying to do it as controlled as possible, but you're definitely always kind of towing that line and pushing yourself further as your skills grow. But to me, the risks just weren't worth it. I can't be out of work for a long period of time. I don't want to be incapacitated. I definitely don't want to do some serious damage to my body. I've been lucky that I've escaped all that so far. (Eric, P10, 3)

Other participants use phrases like 'liberating', 'freeing', 'exhilarating' and 'exciting' to describe the sensory arousal and positive affect they experience from taking risks. For Nick, risk, while an essential aspect of living his life, remains intimidating:

I don't do anything without the notion or hint of risk. It's why I live ... I mean I only have one life ... But I'm not sure I'm really drawn to risk as much as I'm drawn to excitement and new experiences. I think that's what really drives me. And in all honesty, I wish there was less risk, you know, I would probably do much more if there was less risk. (Nick, P5, 17)

In short, the experience of risk in parkour, for many traceurs, was viewed as a proactive engagement with fear and uncertainty as both a physical and psychological growth process.

### ***Interactive experience***

Apart from experiences directly related to the experience of one's own body in motion, parkour is a highly social and *interactive experience*. In fact, engaging with others and experiencing one's surroundings (both people and objects) were essential elements of all participants' descriptions. Traceurs rarely train alone. Most often, participants train within a small group on a regular basis (2–4 times weekly), and then convene for a 'jam' with a larger regional group (30+ people) on a monthly basis. They generally train outdoors, usually in an obstacle-dense, public and urban environment. The data reflecting participants' interactive experience was organised into the following three themes: *community*, *public* and *world*.

#### ***Interactive: community***

*Community* is the first theme of participants' *interactive experience*. All participants identified the importance of training with others and making friends within

the local community. Descriptions of these social experiences covered interpersonal, motivational and philosophical elements, each of which will be briefly discussed below.

Eight of the 11 participants felt the interpersonal sense of connection and community among traceurs was a significant part of why they participate in the sport. Anson explained that ‘I’ve never been really good with people, and it was an immediate connection. You have this shared common ground – so it was really easy to mingle’ (Anson, P4, 27). Further, the unstructured, egalitarian nature of the sport lends itself to a more collaborative, supportive and nonjudgemental group dynamic. One participant described the rewarding sense of community he feels, both locally and globally:

The community as a whole is, apart from like the love of movement, is probably the biggest reason why I stay in it. There have been *many times* where I have realised that. It’s so welcoming, everybody’s always happy – you get a couple of people that don’t see it the same way – but for the most part, you know, the majority, they are all really nice. But within the larger community, one thing that I’ve realized more and more is that you can literally, connect anywhere in the world and have a friend. (Eric, P11, 21)

Further, traceurs rely on their interactions with community members for motivation to keep training, learning and progressing. Nick explained:

I like the discipline. It motivates me to want to get out more. And that’s probably one of the most important factors for anyone who trains. I’m poorly motivated ... So it’s nice having a support group. I even feel that my success as a better traceur and park-our practitioner depends on them [the group]. (Nick, P2, 10)

Additionally, traceurs are often reluctant to train alone because the group offers a form of protection from adverse public reaction:

I have no motivation going out and training by myself. I do it from time to time but it’s kind of awkward because people [observers] aren’t use to what’s going on yet. And, it’s not as fun, obviously. And it draws a little more attention when you’re by yourself. If you’re with a group of people, it just looks like we’re all working out. But if it’s just me, people are more like, ‘who’s that crazy guy?’ but if there are other crazy people with me, then it’s fine (laughs). (Zach, 4, 11)

Finally, the philosophical views of the sport were an important aspect of traceurs’ community experience. All 11 participants mentioned the many differing, and at times conflicting, definitions of the sport, the philosophical approaches related to how it should be practiced, and the benefits and liabilities of its potential commercialisation. One participant explained his general view:

A big part of what we do, at least in the American scene, is we always kind of want to rationalise what we’re doing. We want to make this big philosophy and bigger picture about why what we’re doing is important. And I recognise that there’s a little bit of ridiculousness in it. (Seth, P13, 2)

Similarly, Nicole described her challenging experience transitioning from one group’s philosophical approach to another:

[The way I was trained] there wasn't a lot of personal opinion about what movement was called, or what parkour or freerunning were defined as, and so when I came here and hooked up with some of the practitioners here and I felt some of that tension, it really turned me off, to be honest with you. (Nicole, P5, 10)

Many participants also discussed the commercialisation of the sport as a point of philosophical contention within the parkour community. One participant noted,

I don't want it to become a whole movement. I don't want it to be a whole ideology. I don't want it to be sold as a 'package' thing ... Here's your parkour 'lifestyle'. I've always kind of enjoyed that it's not as well known. (Zach P13, 9)

Therefore, because parkour is, in fact, an emerging, interactive and highly interpretive practice, traceurs' experiences were considerably affected by differing philosophical beliefs within their immediate group, and to a lesser degree, within regional and national parkour communities.

### ***Interactive: public***

Practicing in *public* is the second major theme of participants' *interactive experience*. Participants described interactions with pedestrians, encounters with security guards, police officers and the public at-large over concerns of self-destruction, boundary negotiation and the use of public and private space. For example, one participant described his reaction to others interjecting their opinions or feigned concern while he practices,

You get really indignant when someone tells you that you don't know what you're doing, or when someone tells you that you could get hurt. While that may be true, why is that an issue? (laughs) Why is that your problem? (Anson, P11, 26)

That said, traceurs nevertheless understood that, as representatives of a new sport, as frustrating as it may be, they should also manage their public image:

Nobody likes a freerunner except another freerunner. What we do, I mean, it scares people. It makes you think, well, why is this person running? Are they trying to rob someone, or are they trying to get away? So I've had to stop on just about every single run that I've ever been on and talk to concerned or angry people. (James, P8, 36)

Traceurs in this study, then, were aware that their and their group's initial impression on others is often based on negative stereotypes. One participant pointed out, 'Anytime you see a group of like, five or more teenaged boys, most people have this ... certain reaction, like they must be up to no good' (Chris, P13, 7).

Furthermore, participants overwhelmingly believed that their ongoing battle for use of public space must be one that is waged in a civil and peaceful manner, effectively disassociating themselves from the more anti-authoritarian urban sport of skateboarding (Beal 1995). One participant discussed the fine line between 'exercising' and doing parkour in sensitive areas:

So whenever we deal with security, we're always very respectful and we leave. But inside, I'm pissed off because I'm thinking, ok, you are going to kick me out of 'private' property? That's what they always say - it's 'private property'. So what if I'm

on a jog, I have my sweatband on, I have my Gatorade, I'm jogging through there? You're not going to say anything. But as *soon* as I do anything that's like, risky, like if I'm running and I jump over something, it's like, 'oh no, you can't do that here'. (Zach, P4, 46)

Training in public spaces also promoted feelings of self-consciousness for a significant number of traceurs (evident in Zach's previous quote regarding group training and motivation). In addition to their concern about security guards and public reaction, traceurs were also especially self-aware while learning new skills or attempting high-risk moves with onlookers present.

### ***Interactive: world***

The third and final theme of participants' *interactive experience* involved their interconnectedness with the *world* around them. Nine of the 11 participants discussed their experiencing the world (both natural and built) in new ways. Having a greater awareness of one's body, environment and the immediate moment, was a common sensation for participants in this study. One traceur stated:

You feel alive. A lot of people describe it that way. You're feeling sunshine, you're smelling the fresh air, you're smelling the trees and the earth. And you know, you're not putting yourself above it, looking down. You're in it. You're interacting with it. And you're not interacting with it in a way that's destructive. You're becoming a part of it and experiencing it that way. It kind of ... gives you energy. You pull the energy from the earth and the environment and from the other people around you feel invigorated by it. (Seth, P8, 37)

Eight of the 11 participants also described having a special, new acuity within their urban landscape called 'parkour vision'. A known term within the sport, it is the perceived ability of traceurs to see the world around them differently. Similar to what Borden (2001) referred to as 'skateboarder's eye', both traceurs and skaters develop this heightened visual 'sense' which allows them to view architecture as a creative and interactive enterprise. As one traceur noted, 'You don't look at the world as buildings, stairs, trees, fences, grass. You look at it as: wall run, back flip, kong, roll, whatever, and it makes the world seem more interesting' (Eric, P4, 3). Further, because it is mostly an urban sport, traceurs develop a keen awareness of the city landscape and a new appreciation for particular materials within that environment. For example, Chris explained his unique relationship with concrete:

When I encounter certain types of concrete I definitely feel ... this sense of excitement, giddiness. I'm very comfortable with it. I can commune with it in a way that non-traceurs can't really. And it's just a result of being, mostly, well, you're interacting with it, it's almost like you trust it. You really have to know it, interact with it, know exactly all its borders, know it inside and out, have a spatial-awareness of it, be familiar enough with it to know if you can slip or not, how high it is, how hard it is, and if you crash down on it, how much it hurts. Some concrete is harder than others – granite's the worst. Some kinds of concrete, for some reason, it just doesn't feel that bad when you crash on it. (Chris, P7, 33)

Indeed, traceurs' utilisation of, and contact with, diverse elements within the urban and natural environment provided new perspectives of architecture, city space and nature, and thus a greater sense of connection to the world around them.

## Discussion

Eleven traceurs described their experiences of parkour in open-ended phenomenological interviews. The overall structure that emerged consists of two dimensions (*bodily experience* and *interactive experience*) and six supporting themes (*play, movement, risk, interactive-community, interactive-public, and interactive-world*). While some of the themes that emerged from this study support previous research on parkour (Bavinton 2007, Saville 2008, Atkinson 2009, Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011), and other lifestyle sports experiences (Wheaton 2004), this phenomenological analysis of parkour has uncovered significant new details regarding the varied aspects, social elements and physical sensations of the practice. It has also revealed a broad structure of the experience and provided a delineation of the major themes not found in previous research. Further, the findings suggest several implications for future investigations.

### *Play*

Lifestyle sports and activities are characterised by what Wheaton calls a ‘participatory ideology’ that promotes fun, involvement, ‘flow’, risk and self-actualisation along with other intrinsic rewards (2004, p. 11). Although these elements were consistent with traceurs’ experiences of parkour, participants overwhelmingly used the word ‘play’ to describe their bodily experience. Given the unstructured and play-based ethos of parkour, this description may seem somewhat predictable. In fact, the elements of play in parkour are perhaps so straightforward that this area has been overlooked in previous research. While play is generally regarded as a natural, necessary and beneficial for all ages (Brown and Vaughn 2009), certain societal standards dictate acceptable forms of play for adults (i.e. structured, established sports and conformance to societally acceptable uses of public space). Parkour, representing an embodiment of play borne from playgrounds and obstacle courses, does not always fit these standards. Traceurs discussed the societal judgement and scrutiny they sometimes feel ‘playing’ as adults. As one participant said,

As adults no one like to call it ‘playing’ because that’s like, childish, juvenile, all those words ... It’s embarrassing to get caught by security or police doing something that the world may think you should’ve outgrown, 10 or 15 years ago. (Chris, P11, 27)

Thus, while acknowledging the importance of play and the meaning of parkour in their lives, traceurs nevertheless felt, at times, as judged by others regarding their age and what constitutes ‘appropriate’ adult behaviour.

### *Movement*

‘Flow’, ‘flight’ and ‘momentum’ were terms that emerged from participants’ descriptions of the feelings of movement in parkour. While both Atkinson (2009) and Wheaton (2004) highlight the concept ‘flow’ as part of the physical experience of participating in parkour and other lifestyle sports, similarly, the sensations of ‘flow’ and ‘momentum’ were frequently mentioned by this study’s traceurs within the broader theme of ‘movement’. ‘Flow’, in particular, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is a state of optimal experiencing, involving total absorption in a task or activity. Flow activities, especially those that emphasise a challenging, forward and

fluid movement such as parkour can ‘provide a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into new reality’ (1990, p. 74). While parkour philosophy does encourage flowing-type movement, traceurs in this study further described achieving flow states, or ‘being in the zone’, although they did not imply that they felt this on a ‘quasi-regular’ basis, in contrast to Atkinson’s (2009) findings. Instead, participants emphasised appreciating the everyday pleasure of being able to move a certain way, whether or not it was an optimal or flow experience.

Further, while the sensation of ‘flight’ may be experienced in broad spectrum of lifestyle sports, ‘flight’ in parkour can also mean ‘escape’. Importantly, for many traceurs, the underlying purpose and meaning of parkour is to have a useful and efficient body. Thus parkour’s ‘be strong to be useful’ philosophy differentiates it from other lifestyle sports in important ways. While Atkinson (2009) found that traceurs’ embrace much of the philosophy and practice as a form of social critique, the traceurs in this study were more concerned about parkour being functional, such as learning to traverse the natural and urban environment, and being able to escape or flee dangerous situations.

### **Risk**

Risk-taking behaviour is characteristic of many lifestyle sports, including parkour (Wheaton 2004, Saville 2008, Atkinson 2009). Nonetheless, in contrast to much of the media attention and spectacle surrounding some of the sport’s more dangerous moves, traceurs in this study universally rejected that it is a ‘high-risk’ activity. Traceurs learn a progression of skills over the course of months and years to slowly build the strength and technique to perform the riskier, more challenging jumps. They often using a checklist of preparations before performing high-risk moves, including looking for dust, condensation or other elements that may cause them to slip while landing or gripping a wall, checking the stability of obstacles, etc. to reduce the possibility of injury. This finding is consistent with recent research on parkour and public policy in the UK, which contends that the practice provides an opportunity for young people to ‘experience risk and adventure in a relatively safe way’ (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011, p. 124). Furthermore, they recognised the benefits of accepting and engaging with their fear as part of their everyday training. This observation is compatible with Saville’s (2008) insights about how fear is ‘played with’ and embraced by traceurs in surprising ways.

In general, we found that traceurs’ management of fear and risk was a focused, ongoing and substantial aspect of their practice that proactively and effectively reduced unnecessary risk-taking and overall injury rates. As such, it was interesting that traceurs’ appreciation and management of risk was still evident. Declarations of awe towards others’ risk-taking were numerous: ‘You can not *believe* what [moves] some guys are throwing now’ (James, P5, 12). The practice of distinguishing risk-takers, however, is common throughout lifestyle sports. In urban skateboarding, for example, Atencio *et al.* (2009) assert that risk is used as the ‘primary social mechanism’ through which skaters gained legitimacy or authenticity (p. 10). While participating in urban or ‘street’ sports may imply that one must have a certain physical and mental toughness, an ability to endure pain, and the willingness to be harassed by security guards and police, it is also necessary to prove one’s skills and risk-taking abilities to be considered legitimate. We found that this dynamic exists, however subtly, amongst this group of Bay area traceurs. Yet many traceurs asserted that the inauthentic or ‘poser’ status



belonged to those who attempted risk moves without being properly prepared, as well as those who only practice risk moves without developing efficient, fluid, balanced and graceful movement, which is central to the practice of parkour.

### *Interactive-community*

In addition to traceurs' bodily experience, the other significant dimension of this study was their interactive experience. As found in investigations of many other lifestyle sports, parkour exemplifies individualistic attitudes and practices, yet thrives on well developed and closely knit local and regional *communities*. In fact, the subcultural communities that exist within many lifestyle sports have been a significant focus of recent sociological research (e.g. Beal 1995, 1996, Wheaton 2004, Atkinson and Young 2008).

In this study, three significant elements emerged from traceurs' descriptions of their interactive experiences training within the parkour community: interpersonal, motivational and philosophical. First, traceurs' interpersonal connections formed within the broader, local communities are meaningful to them; sometimes described as a 'brotherhood' or an 'extended family'. Often, a smaller 'core' group will form within the local community, which generally consists of highly dedicated traceurs who train together daily. However, while they appreciate the diverse yet like-minded 'core' group for social and emotional reasons, traceurs also rely heavily on each other for motivation, learning and progression within their practice. There is a palpable spirit of collaboration and inclusion that sets parkour apart from other sub-cultural communities such as skateboarding (Atencio *et al.* 2009), which has increasingly 'aligned itself with a "street" and anti-social attitude' (p. 6). Indeed, traceurs revealed that parkour's non-hierarchical and accessible group dynamic was highly appealing and unique in comparison with other traditional or lifestyle sports.

Exploring this theme further, the results of this study were largely consistent with Gilchrist and Wheaton's (2011) description of the open-minded and inclusive nature of parkour as one that encourages and supports newcomers, beginners, 'outsiders' and women (p. 122), and is structured less by 'hegemonic masculinity' than is prevalent in other sports (p. 123). The two female traceurs that participated in this study supported and expanded on this notion. In fact, one traceur said that she was actively recruited to practice with members of one parkour community. This directly contrasts with what Atencio *et al.* (2009) found regarding the hierarchical gender relations and the marginalisation of females in urban or 'street' skateboarding. Yet, even as the women of this study claimed that the groups were welcoming and unthreatening to them, the female traceurs nevertheless felt the need to 'step it up'. As one participant said, 'When I'm training with group of guys, I like to go a little harder just so that when other girls come out they don't put them on the sidelines or something' (Michelle, P7, 4). Michelle's sentiment of feeling motivated to 'prove herself' within an essentially male domain was comparable to some female skaters' experiences. Also consistent with Atencio *et al.* (2009), we found that while the female traceurs in this study practiced primarily with men, they enjoyed and benefited from training with other women.

Lastly, the philosophical aspect of traceurs' experience revealed differing opinions on issues relating to commercialisation and competition, and more significantly, how parkour should be defined and practiced within the community. Most participants opposed commercialisation of the sport, which is generally consistent with

views of other traceurs (Atkinson 2009) and lifestyle sport participants (Wheaton 2004). Further, without a market for gear or equipment, traceurs believe that parkour may avoid the undesirable fate of being 'branded' as many other lifestyle sports have been. Traceurs acknowledged that while freerunning competition will continue to develop and proliferate, they generally had no interest in performing or competing. Overall, having a similar training philosophy emerged as the critical factor in maintaining the cohesion of the local, 'core' groups, rather than a shared view regarding the larger ideological positions of the sport.

### *Interactive-public*

As an urban-based practice, traceurs' interaction with the *public* (pedestrians, spectators and security guards) was the second theme that emerged in this study which described the interactive experience of parkour. Traceurs talked at length about 'being watched' and feeling self-consciously aware while training in the public eye, which supports Rinehart's (2000) observation that the 'presentation of the self to others' is an important part of the lifestyle sport experience. Most traceurs believed that being observed by others (including fellow traceurs) was both motivating and distracting to their practice: 'I like it when people watch ... but I'm also uncomfortable with the thought of getting hurt in front of somebody or a group of people ... or doing something just generally badly, or wrong' (Chris, P1, 8).

Notably, the traceurs interviewed were concerned with the public perception of parkour due to frequent comparisons with urban skateboarding. In fact, they described being hyperaware of their actions reflecting on the entire parkour community, and that respectful interaction with onlookers and security guards was essential to the reputation of the sport as a peaceful and responsible practice. Nevertheless, traceurs still engaged in subtle resistant-type behaviour such as choosing to practice, at times, in highly 'sensitive' (i.e. secure) areas, like the downtown San Francisco business district, that provided them with certain types of structures or architecture. This echoes Beal's (1995) analysis of skaterboarders, who felt empowered by their autonomy, non-conformity and ability to create alternative physical activities within urban spaces. Traceurs' attitudes were less consistent with Atkinson's (2009) research, which found that parkour was used as form of social protest and/or critique regarding urban environments and public city space. While appropriating public space is a fundamental aspect of the practice, intentionality must be considered. Although traceurs in the present study may have 'acted' as a social critique merely through their engagement with architecture and city space, we believe their focus was not to use parkour as a tool to make a larger societal statement or protest within urban spaces.

### *Interactive-world*

The third and final theme of interactive experience was *world*. Traceurs expressed feeling connected to and 'oneness' with their environment, similar to practitioners of other lifestyle sports such as climbing, surfing and snowboarding (Midol and Broyer 1995). Yet as an urban practice, traceurs described a connection to man-made, city surfaces and objects, including concrete, stucco, granite, rain gutters, rails, walls, roofs and scaffolding. Typically, traceurs practiced in spaces such as the bunkers under the Golden Gate Bridge, the Oakland Museum, downtown San Francisco parks and urban areas, as well as the UC Santa Cruz and Berkeley campuses. Philo-

sophically, parkour differs from other lifestyle sports by not using any type of gear or equipment. In doing so, traceurs experience a wide spectrum of natural and urban obstacles and environments with their bodies; direct contact with the world is the point. Traceurs, for this reason, address environmental concerns (see Atkinson 2009) as a part of their practice. Indeed, a national campaign called 'Leave No Trace' (started by American Parkour, or APK) is practiced regularly by San Francisco-based traceurs as an ongoing effort to clean up and sustain the city spaces they use for their practice. Parkour is thus strikingly distinct as an urban sport that is equally or more concerned with numerous realms of moral and ethical responsibility than typical 'environmentally conscious' non-urban lifestyle sports.

## **Conclusion**

By examining parkour and freerunning from a phenomenological perspective, we believe we have illustrated, in great detail, the unique qualities of this sporting experience and revealed perspectives and information which were not apparent from prior research. In this study certain dimensions emerged, from which we were able to establish and illustrate a common structure of the experience and to then delineate and explore the supporting themes for greater meaning and significance.

Despite this study's yielding insights into traceurs' lived experiences, there were limitations to this investigation. In particular, data that related to traceurs' discussion of psychosocial benefits from participating in parkour were not used, as these were categorised as affective outcomes rather than a direct experience. Further, this study investigated only one regional group of traceurs, who may hold similar views, understandings and practices of the sport. In addition, this investigation was limited due to the reliance on single interview sessions. Although the interviews were lengthy for the most part, and participants were asked to provide any additional feedback they had during the member check process, any conclusions drawn from this study must be tempered somewhat. Finally, while women's experiences of parkour were touched upon within this investigation, it is an area that holds significant potential for future research, particularly within the context of urban lifestyle sports.

Reflecting on these limitations and the findings outlined above, we have a few suggestions for further research. First, the most obvious area of future research involves the relationship between parkour and risk. In addition, we suggest that different qualitative approaches might be used to investigate social psychological phenomena among parkour participants. If single interviews are used, we recommend using a focus group approach, so that traceurs have the opportunity to pose questions to one another and directly engage in a rich dialogue with other participants and that individual stories can be analysed in relation to other members of their cohort. Finally, because few female participants were included in this study, and following the body of literature on female participation in other 'alternative' sporting spaces (e.g. Beal 1996, Thorpe 2006, 2008, Atencio *et al.* 2009), we recommend a line of research directed at the experiences of female parkour participants.

## **Acknowledgement**

This study was made possible by funding from the David M. Furst Sport Studies Scholarship. We would like to thank the traceurs whose time, dedication and participation made this research possible.

## Notes

1. The word 'parkour' was used throughout this paper to describe both parkour and free-running, except when distinctions between the two were made.
2. Although the word 'traceuse' can be used for female traceurs, for the purposes of this study, 'traceur' was used to describe both male and female practitioners.
3. Locations of direct quotes from the participants' transcripts are referenced using the following format: participant name (pseudonym), page number (P), line number (in which the quote begins).

## Notes on contributors

Jennifer L. Clegg recently completed her MA degree in sport psychology at San José State University, where she studied parkour and freerunning. This paper was part of her thesis, which also included a more in-depth of the experience of risk among parkour and freerunning participants.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Phenomenological interview guide**

1. The overarching question the interview session was: 'Can you describe the overall experience of practicing parkour or freerunning, focusing on the sensations, thoughts, emotions and meanings that are significant to you, as well as how the element of risk is "felt" within these experiences?' Follow-up probes were contingent upon the participants' responses, and generally included one or more of the following:

- (a) How have these experiences affected you?
- (b) What was that like?
- (c) What thoughts stood out for you?
- (d) What physical sensations stood out for you?
- (e) What emotions were you aware of at the time?
- (f) What is it like to practice in a public/social space?
- (g) What is it like to practice in a public space with people watching you?
- (h) Can you tell me more about ...?
- (i) What else do you remember about that experience?
- (j) How did that feel?
- (k) How did that affect you? ... How did that affect you long term?
- (l) Have you shared all that is significant with reference to the experience?