

**WAIST DEEP IN MUD: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF TOUGH MUDDER**

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## **Abstract**

The Tough Mudder (TM) event is a non-stop, multidiscipline, individual and team endurance obstacle race. This paper examines how TM participants identify with and understand TM and how in turn, it contributes to their self-understanding as risk-takers in sport. It also identifies whether these participants are part of a social group whose preference for such a sport practice is linked to their social location. Qualitative methods (in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews as well as participant observation) were used. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, an embodied culture, assisted in informing my research in order to better understand incorporated schemes of dispositions, perception, and appreciation that oriented participants' practice and gave meaning to it. The analysis of the data exposed disparity amongst perceptions of both study participants' understanding of TM as being all inclusive as well as their self-categorization as recreational athletes. Additionally, a lack of vocalization of the type of risk involved in such events and the reification of reproduced values of pain and injury tolerance emerged as dominant themes.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

In June of 2012, I signed up for my first Tough Mudder (TM) event knowing nothing more about the competition than that it was an endurance obstacle course race and that I was bound to get very dirty participating in it. TM organizers contended that their obstacle course races (OCR), the growing area of endurance sport under which this type of race is now categorized by its participants, would provide an exciting alternative to more mainstream endurance running activities such as marathons. My reason for participating in TM at the time was because one of my close friends, Nick, had begged me to join him. Nick had heard about TM through another friend and thought that I may be a good person to join him, given my background in athletics and running. I thought that this event would be a fun, one-time thing that I could take part in and then share stories my family and friends. After researching the event online, I thought it would be physically challenging and so I spent the next three months preparing myself by working out at the campus gym a few times a week, as well as continuing to go on runs throughout my neighborhood several times a week. What I did not know until after I stumbled across the finish line of the event was that I would acquire and enthusiastically embrace a new identity.

When event day came, I was excited and relished the high energy atmosphere that surrounded me. I remember while on the course that I stopped at the Arctic Enema obstacle and watched participants emerge from the icy bathes. I expected to see their faces have expression of dread, anguish and distress as they popped out of the water. To complete this obstacle, participants must climb up a short ramp to the edge of a huge dumpster. Before them, the dumpster is full of water and 70,000 pounds of ice. Half way across the dumpster is a wooden

board that is placed perpendicular to surface of the water, attached to which are coils of barbed wire. As a result, after jumping into the icy bath before them, participants are forced to completely submerge themselves under the water in order to travel underneath this board. Once on the other side, participants must still muster enough strength to pull themselves out of the dumpster and get themselves to the next obstacle. It was at this moment, as soon as they reappeared from under the paralyzing temperatures of the water, that I expected to their faces to be distraught. Although I could tell that there were moments of stress and discomfort, it seemed to me that the participants' expressions quickly transform from that of distress to exuberance. After being completely submerged in the sub-zero temperatures of the icy waters of the dumpsters, the participants that I had observed emerge not with complaints (although you could hear some moans and groans) but rather, a sense of excitement for what they had just subjected themselves to and what they had endured.

Prior to taking this plunge myself, I had never willingly exposed myself to such temperatures before, yet in the moments leading up to my plunge, the idea of not jumping into the waters before me did not cross my mind. Granted, as I stood on the edge of the huge dumpster, there was a moment of hesitation and a look of worry most certainly adorned my face. No reward other than successfully completing the obstacle at hand is given to participants and one could argue that the risks of jumping into an ice bath greatly outweigh the benefits. Despite all this, Mudder after Mudder jumped into these huge bins filled with freezing water and ice. I myself could not contain the emotions that coursed through me as I frantically tried to escape the freezing clutches of the Arctic Enema obstacle. After finally managing to pull myself out of dumpster, I was overcome with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. It was at this point in my own TM experience when I questioned how people could enjoy this form of torment and

what types of people would choose to participate in an event that asked you to overcome such crazy obstacles.

I entered the event a novice participant who was ready to test his athletic ability and came out a fully involved, engrossed and committed Tough Mudder. My identity now included that of being a TM finisher, including everything that came along with being awarded the orange headband given to finishers of the event once they cross the finish line. This transformation was both uplifting and powerful and made its effect on me quite rapidly. I found myself immersed in the TM atmosphere, enjoying the sense of belonging that it afforded me. I also now find myself questioning the impact of this event on other participants' lives and wondering if other participants were, or are, also engulfed by this event the same way I am.

Now my own personal hobby has become my Master's research topic and I find myself questioning whether my own personal experience at this event is a part of a larger social phenomenon. As part of my sociological imagination (cf., Mills, 1959) and through my own involvement as a TM participant I, was curious to understand if my own observations of TM are part of larger a public sociological phenomenon. While there is some research examining the social and cultural dimensions of adventure racing (including the factors that influence participation in such events), it is limited and, to date, critical socio-cultural literature and contributes to our slowly growing understanding of endurance-style/adventure racing-style alternative sports. It is important to note that the relative novelty of TM (and other similar events) contributes to the variety of labels that had been used to describe and categorize TM by its participants. Such labels included Obstacle Course Racing (OCR), endurance running competitions, distance running events and endurance sport. Whatever the label, the immense growth of participation in TM in such a short timeframe of its existence has gone relatively

unnoticed in the academic community. In only three years of existence, the event has already had more than one million registrants (One Million Mudders, 2013). The immediate growth in popularity of this even begs sociological analysis.

### Focus of Study

This research project examined how participants identified with and understood TM and how, in turn, TM contributed to their sense of self as risk takers in sport. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with TM participants about their lived experiences with and surrounding TM events (including time leading up to competitions, in-race participation, and post-race experiences), this study examined who participates in TM events and why. Furthermore, this study paid close attention to how study participants' social location, particularly their socio-economic status (SES), informed their participation in and understanding of TM. I am aware of the fact that one's social location is in fact composed of many intersecting facets including, but not limited to, ethnicity, sex, gender, dis/ability, sexuality and SES. For the purposes of this study however, study participant involvement and their understanding of TM and World's Toughest Mudder (WTM) was explored with specific attention paid to their SES. Although it is important to be cognizant of other social influences and the intersections between them, the scope of this study was purposefully narrowed and future research in this area would profit by focused intersectional analysis.

In researching the ways in which other participants understood TM as a sporting event and the impact of TM on their lives, this study offers us an opportunity to better understand participation in the growing area of OCR, specifically within TM events, and also to examine how participants understand themselves as risk takers involved in such events. Furthermore, it

allows us to better interrogate the construction of risk within such events as TM, providing us an opportunity to question the authenticity of such risk as understood by the participants.

The key research questions are:

1. Who participates in Tough Mudder and why? Further, how does their social location (SES in particular) inform their participation in and understanding of Tough Mudder?
2. Does Tough Mudder contribute to a participant's sense of self as risk taker? If so, how?

### Chapters to Follow

In Chapter 2, I provided a brief review of the existing related literatures that helped inform my project. I use the word "brief" to describe the review of literature because the theoretical study of some of the major topics I discuss, such as risk, are quite large within the socio-cultural study of sport. As such, I present a small portion of what has been researched within these areas as they related to my project.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the methods employed in this project. The chapter outlines my participant observation and interview based methods of data collection as well as the grounded theory approach I used to code and analyze data in development of concepts and themes. This chapter also addresses the personal challenges and opportunities that emerged during the course of my research. In addition to the research questions that drove this project, this study allowed me to explore my own experiences as a researcher, specifically the methodological difficulties that arose for me as a hard-core TM enthusiast and insider. In struggling to detach myself from TM in order to see it and the study participants with perspective, I struggled to engage in reflexive ethnography whereby the researcher attempts to be aware of the way in which their

involvement with a certain phenomenon under study “influences, acts upon and informs such research” (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228). I attempted to be sensitive to this methodological issue of bias by being aware of the ways in which my own involvement in this particular study influenced and informed the research.

The fourth and fifth chapters present the results and discussion of my project. Chapter 4 introduces and examines the TM and WTM participants who participated in this study. Specifically, this chapter highlights how their social location, and in particular their socioeconomic status (SES) informed their participation in and understanding of TM and WTM. Furthermore, in exploring study participants SES, this chapter in-depth descriptions of their ability to access discretionary income and time – by-products of their professional middle class status – in order to engage in TM and WTM events. Finally, an exploration of study participants’ motivations to take up involvement in TM and WTM and their first experiences in these events is undertaken.

Chapter 5 speaks to how study participants perceived themselves to have been part of a unique community marked by a sense of camaraderie that they shared with other TM and WTM participants. The values that study participants believed to be present within TM and WTM, and whether or not these values constituted TM events to belong to a new alternative physical culture were questioned in this chapter. Next, this chapter explores study participants’ perceived risk of failing or not completing events, as well as their valuing the ability to tolerate fatigue, exhaustion and injury. Finally, this chapter explores the authenticity of the risk in TM.

In Chapter 6, I conclude with a summary of the study’s key findings as well as the strengths and limitations of the project. Finally, I conclude by suggesting future research that may stem from my own work within this project.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Literature

The central aims of this research project were to explore and understand how TM participants identified with and understood TM, as well how it contributed to their sense of self as risk takers in sport. Before outlining the methods of this project, it is necessary to unpack what is currently understood about risk and risk-taking in connection to sport, albeit briefly, and how this itself may contribute to identity construction among sport participants. It is important to acknowledge that the theoretical study of risk, within and outside of the sociocultural study of sport, is large. For this reason, the information presented in the following review is only a very small portion of what has been researched within these areas, and will predominantly be presented in relation to how it pertains to this research project. In addition to an examination of the study of risk and risk-taking in sport, an overview of current knowledge on adventure racing (AR), including extant understanding of how, why and to whom AR may be appealing, is offered. Prior to delving into the review of related literature, however, a brief description of TM is warranted.

### Outlining the Tough Mudder Event

TM was established in 2010 by two British citizens living in New York (Gutman, 2012). It is a non-stop, multidiscipline, mixed-gendered individual and team endurance obstacle race. Participants begin their races in groups of roughly 250; they make their way into the starting area by first climbing over an eight foot wall. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in a TM event, with the average age of participants being 29 (Tough Mudder Facts and Figures, 2013) and are required to pay a registration fee of up to \$200 to compete. TM's growing popularity, now at over one million participants as of May 2, 2013 (One Million

Mudders, 2013), has paralleled that of other adventure type races which have provided alternatives to mainstream sports (Kay & Laberge 2002) such as skydiving (Laurendeau & Brunschot, 2006) and white water rafting (Holyfield, 1999). More than simply providing grounds for athletic competition, TM, like other adventure type races, may provide opportunity in which competitors construct meaningful identities in relation to their existence in social space (Kay & Laberge 2002). The following is the way in which the TM website describes its event in which they speak of becoming part of a larger community:

Tough Mudder is more than an event; it's a way of thinking. It's about pushing yourself to the limits and helping others to do the same. It's not a race, it's a challenge. If we timed you, what would be your motivation to stop and give someone a hand? When you run a Tough Mudder, you'll meet new people and overcome challenges when you get through the course—together. Running a race gets you busted knees and a medal you'll never wear again. At the end of a Tough Mudder, you get an orange headband to proudly wear to work on Monday morning, a pint, bragging rights and membership into Mudder Nation. And it gives you an excuse to get all your friends together and start a tradition (Tough Mudder Events, 2014).

In each TM event, participants must trek through courses that range in length from 16 to 20 kilometers. Courses are filled with upwards of 25 obstacles that appear periodically and unpredictably along the path that the participants have to follow. Obstacles include, but are not limited to: the Arctic Enema which involves complete submergence in ice baths filled with between 70,000 and 80,000 pounds of ice; the Electric Eel which involves crawling on hands and knees under barbed wire through numerous dangling live electrical wires, some carrying as much as 10,000 volts; and Walk the Plank which involves a twenty foot jump off a ledge into freezing

water below. Obstacles are meant to play off human fears such as fire, water and heights and are purposefully designed so as to be very difficult to complete alone. On average, 78% of entrants successfully complete each course (Tough Mudder Facts and Figures, 2013).

In the weeks leading up to the race, participants can inquire about the possible obstacles they are going to face in their upcoming races on the TM website. However (perhaps in an attempt by the organizers to create anticipation or apprehension), some of the obstacles that are to appear within the specific course are withheld and participants are only made aware of these course-specific obstacles as they encounter them during the event. Although several of the same obstacles appear at different races, there are always new ones included, as well as a variety of terrain type at each venue. Such terrains that have appeared at TM events include those of ranches, motocross tracks and ski resorts. This creates unique and surprising experiences for race participants at each individual event. As difficult as these obstacles seem, they often overshadow the strength and endurance needed to overcome the distance between the start and finish line. This may require participants to climb up several ski hills, cross lakes, and what may seem like endless running over unpredictable terrain through forests, across arid land, or through water. The distance running aspect of TM competitions, in my opinion, is undoubtedly what makes the races most difficult. Participants come to quickly realize if they have (or have not) incorporated enough hill training into their preceding workout regimes leading up to competitions.

Originally designed by British Special Forces, the overall course and specific events within TM mimic military-type drills and are meant to test the mental as well as physical strengths of participants (Tough Mudder, 2013). Currently, some proceeds from the TM events support the Wounded Warrior Project, a Florida-based organization that assists U.S. and Canadian soldiers in their transition of returning home from current military conflicts. The

organization attempts to raise awareness and enlist the public's aid for the needs of injured service members and to provide direct programs and services to meet the needs of injured service members. To date TM has raised over \$6 million which has assisted in providing combat stress recovery programs, adaptive sports programs, benefits counseling and employment services for veterans (Wounded Warrior Project, 2013). As noted quite proudly on the TM Website:

Tough Mudder events are hardcore 10-12 mile obstacle courses designed by British Special Forces to test your all around strength, stamina, mental grit and camaraderie.

With the most innovative courses, one million inspiring participants worldwide to date, and more than \$6 million raised for the Wounded Warrior Project, Tough Mudder is the premiere adventure challenge series in the world (Tough Mudder Events, 2013).

While the connections between sport and the military will not be explored specifically in this project, there is an evident connection between TM and the military and it is safe to suggest that the militaristic influences of TM impact, both explicitly and subtly, participants' experiences with the event (see Jensen & Sabo, 1994; Stempel, 2006; Kelly, 2013). In fact, TM organizers acknowledge that the British Special Forces' inspired events are a core reason as to why TM is exciting (and specifically more exciting than marathons):

And the only thing more boring than doing a marathon is watching a marathon. At Tough Mudder, we want to test your al'around mettle [*sic*], not just your ability to run in a straight line, on your own, for hours on end, getting bored out of your mind. Our obstacle courses are designed by British Special Forces to test you in every way and are meant only for truly exceptional all-around people, not for people who have enough time and money to train their knees to run 26 miles. (Tough Mudder, 2013)

TM competitions take place throughout year in various cities in North America, Europe and Australia, and will expand to both Africa and Asia in 2014 (Tough Mudder, 2013). They continue to occur in new cities every year and often cities, that want to host an event, create and sign petitions on the TM website in attempts to do so. For the first two years of TM's existence, the top five percent (5%) of race finishers at each individual competition qualified to compete in the WTM, an annual event held in November. In addition to these top five percent, other participants entered a wild card pool and a few of these participants were chosen to participate in this season-ending race.

In 2013, for the first time, any participant was able to sign up to compete in WTM as described on the TM website.

In previous years, we've asked people to qualify by submitting their times from a Tough Mudder during the season. But the fact is that you're not going to be competing on a normal Tough Mudder course – we're going to be feeding you something even more intense, with more obstacles per mile. So how fast you can run isn't as important – what really matters is how much pain you can push through (Tough Mudder Events, 2014).

WTM is the culminating event of the Tough Mudder calendar and it differs from traditional TM events in race duration and course length, as well as types and quantity of obstacles. WTM competitors have 24 hours to log as many miles around a shorter 8 to 15 kilometer course. The length of a single lap around the course has differed in the three years of the events existence contributing the uncertainty and surprise offered by the TM events. The WTM course incorporates upwards of 30 amped-up obstacles. At the end of 24 hours, individuals and teams (a division included for the first time in 2012) complete the lap that they are on and the winners are whichever participants have completed the most laps of the course.

Unlike other TM events, this event has an aspect of competition with cash prizes for the winners as well as other awards for specific achievements such as number of laps completed.

Participants must simultaneously incorporate sleep, nourishment and first aid accordingly while competing for the 24 hours of the event. WTM is to be understood as an extreme endurance race that will test individuals. A warning on the WTM event page explains that:

Before you consider entering World's Toughest Mudder, you must understand that only those in peak PHYSICAL and MENTAL condition should even think about this. This event will push you beyond your limits and is not for the weak of mind or body. (Tough Mudder Events, 2014)

WTM has been staged in New Jersey the past three years, where competitors must additionally compete with frigid, sub-zero temperatures and frosted landscapes. As a result, almost all participants compete while wearing thick wetsuits in an attempt to stay warm during the event. Participants are required to wear a headlamp in order to continue racing throughout the nighttime portion of the race and mandatorily must have a clip-on safety strobe light at all times. WTM participants are permitted to rest in between laps in a designated area known within the TM community as Tent City. It is in this area which is located near the start and finish lines where participants may take time to rest and warm up as well eat and tend to injuries. Due to the extreme nature of WTM, participants are permitted to have a support crew of one individual who can assist the race participant while in Tent City. At last year's event, the top male participant and team (composed of 4 men) ran for over 160 kilometers. The top female participant was not far behind logging, in over 135 kilometers.

## The Existing Gaps Within the Literature

While there is some research examining participation in adventure racing (as one broad category of sport), it is limited. For example, in their work, Kay and Laberge (2002) explore what they term as the corporate habitus in adventure racing, specifically within the context of the Discovery Channel's (now defunct) Eco Challenge. There has been even less scholarly research on obstacle-style adventure races and no critical socio-cultural research on TM specifically to date, despite its growing popularity as an obstacle endurance race. In efforts to address this gap in literature, this research addressed the ways in which participants identified with and understood TM and how, in turn, TM contributed to their sense of self as risk takers in sport. It is valuable at this point in time to turn our attention to a brief exploration of the literature on risk and risk-taking in sport, specifically as it may contribute to identity construction among sport participants. That said, it is important to acknowledge that the theoretical study of risk, within and outside of the sociocultural study of sport, is large and for this reason, the information presented in the following review will be, by necessity, limited. Following the broad discussion of risk and risk-taking in sport, more specific attention will be paid to the existing research on adventure racing.

## Risk, Adventure, and Alternative Physical Cultures

*Adventures have a special quality, one that allows them to be both mysterious and symbolically transformative, they transcend our routine lives so long as they remain spontaneous. (Simmel, 1959, p. 24)*



There is a large body of research on risk from a variety of academic disciplines including, but not limited to, such fields as social psychology, law, actuarial studies, management, cultural

studies and sociology. Given the volume of work on this topic, the manner in which the notion of risk was addressed within this research study deliberately focused on Lyng's concept of "edgework" (1990). Lyng uses the term "edgework" to conceptualize voluntary risk-taking as a negotiation of the boundary between chaos and order (1990). The term can be used within a sociocultural context in relation to sport, specifically adventure racing, and sport broadly. Sport, often involves encountering one's limits both physically and mentally (Laurendeau & Brunshot, 2006). Lyng's (1990) original analysis employs a Marx-Meadian synthesis, suggesting that particular conditions and consequences of post-industrial society create environments that limit individual expression of creativity and spontaneity. It is argued that risk and risk-taking in sport, such as adventure racing, compensates for the lack of control afforded its participants in their routine lives (Frey, 1991; Goffman, 1969). As Kay and Laberge (2002, p. 25) note: "Adventure racing appeals to its participants in part by affording them opportunity to develop core values and identity as well as giving meaning or a supplanted morality that is assumed to have been stripped away in contemporary life."

It has been suggested that within our leisure worlds, adventure has become a form of resistance to the existing dehumanizing constraints of modernization and offers individuals an opportunity to develop competence and skills not afforded in our overly routinized lives (Holyfield, 1999). This has been echoed by Loret who offers that, through the rejection of institutional norms and rules, this new sport culture has prescribed a "morality of pleasure" (1995). As Frey (1991) explains, "sport has the ability to act as a vehicle by which athletes are socialized to risk themselves for a desirable outcome, often, success" (p.137). Sport is able to provide an experience that may not be available in other settings such as work, and it is the uncertainty of outcome, or possibility of failing, that are aspects sought by participants (Frey,

1991). As such, the denial of spontaneous creativity may be reason that participants seek freedom of expression in areas that depend precisely upon risk and skill (Lyng, 1990). This has been understood within socio-cultural studies of sport as a ‘quest for excitement’ (cf., Elias & Dunning, 1986), which in some cases is responded to by individuals through a search for mimetic activities. Elias and Dunning (1986) contend that leisure activities fall into three categories: purely or mainly sociable activities, activities involving motility, and mimetic activities. Mimetic activities provide an invented setting for its participants that imitate situations with a lesser degree of real dangers or risks, but can still elicit excitement through the involvement of controlled “real” danger (Maguire, 1991).

Individual’s perception of risk is based on a variety of cultural and social factors (cf., Douglas, 1985). While, in this current historical moment in time, there seems to be a general sense of risk aversion and a societal desire of reducing threats to individual well-being (cf., Fairlie, 1989; Furedi, 2007), there are many who “actively seek risky experiences that involve the potential for personal injury in order to meet personal thrill-seeking desires” (Lyng, 1990, pp.851-852). Adventure races offer one such outlet for individuals to engage in controlled risky behavior. TM involves participants competing in an athletic endeavor that asks them to voluntarily subject themselves to certain risks. However, it is important to note that such risks are (relatively) trivial in scope and consequence when compared to the types of risks assumed in other alternative or extreme sports and activities. In other words, compared to the uncontrollable and un-calculable risks associated with mountaineering (e.g., summiting Everest), adventure racing is grounded in, what is termed, calculated risks and “manufactured adventure” (Holyfield, 1999). The activities that are part of the TM obstacle course are carefully designed ahead of time, carefully monitored by skilled professionals, including medical clinicians and rescue personnel,

and numerous services and provisions are available to TM participants throughout the event to ensure their health and safety during the competition. Accidents and injuries may, and do, occur at TM events but they pale in comparison to the potential for and actual rate of injury and risk of death associated with, for example, summiting Everest. That said, the appeal of risk-taking seems to be a major factor that lures racers to participate in such events. TM participants voluntarily place themselves within such races that can be characterized as containing elements of risk and may carry symbolic weight within participants' routine lives (Holyfield, 1999). As Bolman and Deal (1991, p. 253) note, "symbols create meaning out of chaos, clarity out of confusion and predictability out of mystery, all contributing to the embodied experience afforded to adventure race participants."

As a form of adventure and endurance race sports, aspects of TM operate in response to and provide alternatives to values often embedded in mainstream sports such as professionalization, commercialization and hyper-quantification (Beal, 1995; Deal & Kennedy, 1999; Loret, 1995; Rinehart, 1998). Specifically, some adventure and endurance race sports reject traditional mainstream sport values, such as measures and rule, in favour of values such as personal sensation and self-actualization (Kay & Laberge, 2002). In the literature, participants of other AR-type events represented a group with a growing disaffection with meritocratic and competitive games that are typically valued in Western sport (Atkinson, 2011). Ray argues that these alternative physical cultures, specifically adventure and risk sports, allow participants to gain a sense of social capital amongst other "similar" individuals (2009). Outdoor, risk-based, alternative physical-culture sports invite participants to develop personal character through their participation (Nash, 1967). As such, alternative and lifestyle sport subcultures have long been associated with the need for participants to test themselves and demonstrate this social character

(Atkinson, 2008). Whether or not TM and WTM event belong to such a described alternative physical culture will be explored in Chapter 5.

Another possibly category under which TM may potentially fit is that of lifestyle sports. These sports are a relatively recent phenomenon that can be understood as “non-mainstream” sporting practices (Wheaton, 2004) whose pleasures are framed by ideas of risk, thrill-seeking and adventure (Fletcher, 2008; Wheaton, 2004). Particular social identities of participants in such sports are constructed within these practices as result of people having to commit significant amounts of time and money for their participation. Kay and Laberge (2002) contend that adventure type races appeal to participants in part by affording them opportunity to develop core values and identity. Furthermore, Dahler-Larsen (1994) argue that these races can provide opportunity for the construction of morality and social values that can act as behavioral guidelines that help integrate individuals into social collectives. These sports promote thrill amongst their participants that may not be found in traditional sports (Caillois, 1967) and afford heightened opportunity for participants to exercise their skill in negotiating a challenge (Lyng, 1990) as well as opportunity to risk their social and emotional selves by demonstrating skill and motivation in a dramatic way before peers and audiences (Goffman, 1967).

It would be unwise to ignore the commercialism of adventure races and the role that this plays in not only the construction of the event, but also how it is perceived and understood by its participants. There are several varieties of adventure races that participants may choose to involve themselves in as different companies compete to provide a desirable and profitable mixture of perceived risk and organization constraint for consumers (Holyfield, 1999). Race participants are said to be primarily concerned with adventure racing practices’ impact on their self-image (Kay & Laberge, 2002). The extent to which adventure races truly involve risk and

whether in fact its participants are, as Goffman suggests, “pseudoadventurers”, must also be considered (1969). Through such types of competition, adventure, in a sense, can be manufactured. The social context in which adventure racing exists is powerful in shaping experiences as potentially paralyzing through the creation of fear and anxiousness. These emotions can be transformed into general sensations of fun and excitement (Holyfield, 1999). Hedonistic consumers, upon entering adventure races, anticipate and are drawn to the competition by the allure of the extraordinary and unusual that in turn, translates to intense pleasure (Arnould & Price 1993, Havlena & Holbrook 1985). According to Simmel (1959), this desire for the extraordinary and unusual is just part of what makes adventure, adventure, and the part of it that makes it so alluring is that it occurs outside the realm of ordinary experience. Since the organizers of such events are so heavily involved in the scripting of narratives and regulating competition, they may play a greater role in the shaping of participants leisure experiences than previously thought (Holyfield, 1999). While this project focusses on better understanding the experiences of TM participants, it is important for researchers to also explore the motivations and actions of adventure race organizers.

### Exploring Adventure Racing Participants

As Giulianotti (2009) suggests, in many Western neo-liberal democracies, adventure races are targeted at specific populations with particular forms of knowledge/expertise, physical capital, and discretionary income. Research investigating other adventure type races, such as Eco Challenge, have found an over-representation of management level corporate agents who describe their workplace environment as “new corporate cultures” (Kay & Laberge, 2002). The type of risk associated with such practice also seems to be more common among younger individuals than among older ones and among males more than females (Lyng, 1990). This trend

is also seen within TM as 76% of participants are male while only 24% female (Tough Mudder Facts and Figures, 2013). Work conducted by Fletcher (2008) has underlined the close ties between particular risk-taking sports, the category under which AR arguably exists, and social stratification, notably the professional middle class cohort.

The increased costs associated with these races including transportation to and from events, registration fees, accommodations as well as equipment required to participate, results in individuals with considerable discretionary income constituting the majority of people who participate in these events. This demographic may include people with well-paying jobs or lower level workers without family responsibilities (Lyng, 1990). The predominance of this social group dominating the participant pool of AR is further supported by Giulianotti who explains that the greater preponderance of higher and middle class participants is attributable to both the financial costs incurred by the participants, and the intensive rationalization and bureaucratization of white collar work (2009). Giulianotti further explains that these types of events are attuned to a professional middle-class habitus marked by self-discipline, competitiveness, asceticism, pursuit of progress and a strong sense of economic security (2009). In turn, the corporate world has seized upon risk taking sports, through team-building exercises and motivational speaking, with the aim of equipping employees to manage and thrive in risky neo-liberal commercial environments (Giulianotti, 2009).

A goal of this research was to understand how AR acted as a symbolic practice and social group signifier for study participants, as well as how it assumed symbolic value in the construction of participants' identities (Kay & Laberge, 2002). In doing so, we drew on the Bourdieusian concept of habitus which represents individuals' embodiment of their class position and their performance of their classed culture including lifestyle, values, dispositions

and expectations of a particular social group (Scott & Marshall, 2005). For Bourdieu, a person's habitus both structures and is structured by their taste in food, fashion, music, dance and sport – including AR. The concept of habitus, as Kay and Laberge suggest, can assist us in exploring who orients themselves towards an activity like TM, and how their “preference for a specific sport practice is linked to their relative position in social space” (2002, p. 18). Bourdieu's investigative approach to sporting activities included the distribution of sport activities by different socioeconomic factors in relation to practice (Bourdieu, 1978). This parallels a goal of the research in understanding how participants' social location, and in particular socio-economic status, informed their identification with and understanding of TM.

This study attempted to examine how TM participants identified with and understood TM and how, in turn, TM contributed to their sense of self as risk takers in sport. Through conversations with TM participants about their lived experiences with and surrounding TM events, study aimed to investigate how participants' social location, and in particular socio-economic status, informed their identification with and understanding of TM. The section to follow will outline the methods for data collection and analysis for this project.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

This chapter outlines the data collection and analysis methods employed for this research project. The central aim of this research project was to explore and understand how TM participants identified with and understood TM, as well how it contributed to their sense of self as risk takers in sport. Through the use of qualitative methods, I explored the lived experiences of TM participants, including time leading up to competitions, in race participation as well as the meanings of risk, and identity they accrued to and acquired from the event. I collected and analyzed two types of materials from the TM community for this project: (1) data from semi-structured interviews and (2) participant observation data from my own participation in TM events. In addition to these two specific methods, I paid close attention to social media related to TM including the official TM website and the WTM Community Facebook group. Each of these sources of data will be addressed in turn. Following this, some of my personal experiences as a researcher will be explored as well as some of the study's strengths and limitations.

#### Semi-Structured Interviews

Primary data collection was through in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews conducted with 7 study participants. Situated between formal and informal interviews, a semi-structured interview “involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and/or special topics...[but] the interviewers are permitted to, in fact expected, to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared... questions” (Berg, 1989, p. 17). The strength of in-depth semi-structured interviews is that there is significant access to the participants' interactions, agency, notions of self and collective identities (Laslett, 1999). Within these semi-structured

interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions that followed a previously created interview guide (Appendix D). During interviews, questions were worded differently depending on the particular interview, yet which still closely followed the interview guide to make sure that essentially the same topics were addressed within the different interviews. Conditions such as the flow of the interview and whether questions were omitted are examples of aspects that changed between the seven interviews. Additionally, whether more appropriate or effective probes, questions and orders of questions were developed based on the responses of the participant during the interview process were all used to determine the ways in which questions were worded for specific interview participants (Berg, 2004). Probes were used to deepen the response to a question and to spark other responses from participants.

By posing open-ended questions to the study participants, I attempted to leave the discussion open for them to respond in ways that they found meaningful, and provided them with the opportunity to direct the dialogue as they saw fit. However, it is important to acknowledge that, within interviews, the interviewer undoubtedly plays a role in guiding the direction of interviews both consciously and unconsciously. The interviewer makes decisions concerning the questions that are asked directly, thus affecting the direction and outcome of the interview and in turn, the nature of the data collected. Through the interviewer's manipulation of the interview, preference is invariably given to particular voices, opinions, and ideas while simultaneously excluding others. In order to limit this effect, the questions asked were reflexive in nature in order to encourage participants to give a greater depth of thought to their responses. The interviews provided a framework in which people could respond in ways that represented their point of view with regards to the development of the field.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 38 to 117 minutes with the average length of the interviews being approximately 60 minutes. Questions were designed to elicit the participants' views and narratives regarding their understanding of, and involvement in TM events; their experiences training for events; their understanding of risk and its association with TM events; and the culture of TM. Conducting semi-structured interviews was an appropriate form of data collection for this research project because the aim of the study was to consider the individuals' accounts of their TM experiences. For this reason, however, the results are not necessarily representative of, or generalizable to, the rest of the TM population.

During the interview process, I used an audio-recorder and made some conceptual notes during and after the interviews. Interviews were then transcribed into computer files, with the supplementary notes added to them. Five interviews were conducted over the phone using my Gmail phone account and two were conducted using Skype, an online interactive video chat program. This was necessary as study participants were in various locations in North America during the time of their interviews.

### Participant Recruitment

Following ethics approval, five self-identified male and two self-identified female TM participants, between the ages of 23 and 31 years, were recruited for interviews using two methods: face-to-face, in person recruitment at two TM events and through recruitment "messages" posted on the official WTM Community Facebook page (Appendix C). Both will be explained in turn.

### *Face-to-Face In-Person Recruitment*

Within this research project in-person recruitment was conducted at two Toronto TM events, one in May of 2013 and again in September of 2013. At the May event, following my own participation in the event and after I had showered and changed out of the clothes that I had worn to participate in the event, I approached individuals who were wearing orange headbands that are given to individuals who have completed TM events. At the September TM event, I also approached and spoke to individuals who similarly were wearing these headbands. Between these two occasions, I approached 15 individuals in a variety of locations surrounding the TM course including the bag drop-off tent, the merchandise tent, the food and beverage garden, and even the washroom area. Upon approaching these TM participants, I introduced myself as a graduate student at York University and explained my research project to them. I then offered them a Study Information Sheet and Recruitment Letter (Appendix A) prior to asking them if they would be interested participating in the study.

Given the focus of this project, only participants who had competed in TM and/or WTM events were recruited for interviews; after approaching potential recruits who were wearing orange headbands I asked them if they had participated in an event. I then instructed individuals who had met the criteria that if they were interested in participating in the study that they follow the direction on the Study Information Sheet and Recruitment Letter and email me. Of the eight individuals I approached at the May TM event, I received an email of interest in participating in the study from seven within a week. Of the seven individuals approached at the September TM event, I received five emails of interest in participating in the study. Of the seven that responded from the May event and the five from the September event, two were randomly selected to become study participants, one from each event. I decided to only select one participant from

each of the Toronto events so as not to limit the study participants to those who have participated at events in a single city. For this reason, I formed a sample of convenience and did not restrict the recruitment criteria to one exclusive event location. To ensure this, a second recruitment method was also utilized.

### *Online Recruitment*

The second of the two methods used to recruit study participants was through recruitment “messages” on the official WTM Community Facebook page (Appendix C). This recruitment was conducted concurrently with the other face-to-face in person recruitment method from May of 2013 to September of 2013. These messages posted in the Facebook group informed potential participants of the study and asked them to email me if they were interested in participating in the study. I received 27 emails of interest during the time of recruitment. Each of these 27 potential study participants was emailed a Study Information Sheet and Recruitment Letter and was asked to respond once again after reading the recruitment sheet if they were still interested in participating in the study. Of the 27 who initially expressed interest in participating in the study, 26 emailed me back after receiving the Study Information Sheet and Recruitment Letter. From these 26 responses, five individuals were randomly selected and interviewed and subsequent study participants were selected until thematic saturation was reached.

This random selection of five individuals to serve as informants from the pool of twenty-six initial respondents to the Facebook group message was conducted to assist in the prevention of researcher bias in the selection of participants. As Preece notes, random sampling also helps to ensure that any unknown influences are distributed evenly within the sample (1994). Furthermore, this random method ensured that a variety of voices were heard exhibiting

characteristics of likeness, contrast, and redundancy in order to gain a wider knowledge of this particular group (Stake, 1994). As contended by Bouma and Atkinson, the random sampling that was used provided credibility in that those who were selected were a representative sample of the larger group of TM participants (1995). In choosing a group of study participants, it was important to incorporate appropriate selection tactics in order to have ensured that the investigator was confident that informants were typical of members of a broader selected society (Hamel, Darfour, & Fortin, 1993).

### Study Participants

After randomly selecting two of the fifteen potential recruits from the two Toronto TM events and five from the 26 potential recruits from the WTM Facebook Community, it was discovered that participants who were recruited possessed different levels of participation in TM and WTM events. Of the seven study informants, all had participated in at least one TM event throughout North America and the most events that any one participant had completed were thirteen. Four participants had previously competed in the WTM event while the other three had not. All seven participants were either already signed up for, or planning to participate in the 2013 WTM event which had yet to have occurred at the time of the interviews. While the small sample size precludes generalizability of the results, the participants' narratives offer a wide range of experiences to explore.

All interviews, including the process of contacting potential participants, occurred following approval from York University's research ethics board. There were no inducements or compensations for participants and participation was strictly voluntary. I, the principal investigator, had no previous relationships with any of the study participants.

## Participant Observation and Fieldwork

I attended and participated in three TM events during the course of this research project although study participant recruitment was only conducted at the last two. The participant observation and fieldwork took place at all three Toronto TM events: the first in July of 2012, the second in May of 2013, and most recently in September of 2013. These events occurred at the Mount St. Louis Ski Resort just north of Toronto in the Oro Medonte region. On the days of the events, I had the opportunity to run the courses and also to speak and interact with other participants. Additionally, I visited several areas of the event not specific to the course itself including: the baggage drop-off tent, the food and beverage gardens, a space where booths were rented out to various sponsors, and a stage area where bands performed throughout the day. Attendance at these events helped me to experience first-hand exposure into the TM community and become familiarized with the TM subculture.

Through participation in these events myself, I experienced an event day in the life of a TM participant. This included waking up at 5 a.m. to commute to the parking area which for me was a 90 minute drive. Upon parking my vehicle, I had my first interactions with other TM participants while on the shuttle busses from the parking area to the course location. Once arriving at the course location and changing into my event attire, I made my way into the starting area where I had further contact with other TM participants waiting for our starting wave to be released. From there I progressed along the course and completed the obstacles along with fellow participants. Once I completed the course and received my orange headband, I continued to explore the different areas of course location including the food and beverage area where many event finishers congregated. I remained at the event location long after I had finished the course and immersed myself with finishers from different starting heats throughout the day. Immersing

myself in the TM events was an important aspect of the participant observation and fieldwork employed in this research.

My personal experiences and participation in three TM events undoubtedly influenced my own understanding of TM. My participant observation while at these events was used as part of the qualitative materials collected for this project. My personal accounts were what had first inspired me to research TM participants and my participation in, and attendance at, TM events all contributed to my personal observations that I used to supplement my research data. Given my previous and current involvement in TM, my insider status provided me with greater research access and support into the TM community resulting in more dynamic and varied exchanges with other event participants. This insider status will further be explored in a section to follow.

I feel that becoming familiar with the culture of the TM community before constructing the interview guide and conducting interviews was beneficial for my research. This immersion in the TM culture was achieved through the preliminary attendance at events and offered me an opportunity to acquire a first-hand experience of the culture and atmosphere present at events. Exposure to participating organizations is considered important for ensuring rigor of qualitative research (Erlandson *et al*, 1993). This engagement between the investigator and the participants was useful in gaining an adequate understanding of, and establishing a relationship with, both the event and participants under observation. Jorgensen suggests that the best way for a researcher to investigate a phenomenon of interest is to experience it themselves or has he puts it, “become the phenomenon” (1989, p.29). In doing so, and almost contradictorily, participant-observers must ensure they minimize their impact on data being as unobtrusive as possible in the field (Jorgenson 1989; Stewart 1998). I was able to be directly involved in the sociological

phenomenon under investigation while maintaining (I feel) enough distance as to be unobtrusive due in part to the events being as large as they are.

The data gathered from participant observation informed the overall research project, however a conscious decision to highlight participants experiences and voices in chapters four and five was made so that analysis would remain close to the narratives and experiences of study participants.

### Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach informed the analysis of the data collected for this research project. The interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately following completion of the interviews. I personally transcribed each interview to further immerse myself into the materials that I had gathered. As guided by the constant comparative method routinely employed in grounded theory, data in the transcripts were coded into initial, axial and selective codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Different themes that emerged were coded into categories. As Strauss and Corbin suggest (1990), theory was developed through systematic data analysis and constant comparison of the transcribed interviews. Within this research project, this included analyzing and comparing the responses of participants to find emerging themes. Coding better allowed for interpretation of raw data to successive or higher levels of data abstraction (Strauss, 1987). It is important to note however, that qualitative researchers interpret data and develop codes/categories on the basis of their own understanding; researchers should be aware of this point when developing theory (Kenny, 1994). As a TM participant myself, I was cognizant of Kenny's point and remained vigilant to the ways in which my own experiences with TM would

impact my interpretation of the data and construction of codes/categories, which will be further explored later in this chapter.

It is important that themes are constantly related back to the original research questions so that they may inform any emergent theory or theories from the collected data. Although this study is limited in its size, the data from the interviews with my seven study participants were sufficient to achieve thematic saturation. In terms of building theory, I attempted to avoid the pitfalls outlined by Maxwell (1996): “there are two main ways in which qualitative researchers often fail to make good use of theory...the first fails to explicitly apply or develop any analytic abstractions or theoretical framework for the study...the second type has the opposite problem: it imposes theory on the study (p. 36).” Once I engaged in discussions with TM participants and their experiences as risk takers within sport, I was able to apply theoretical discussions to those lived experiences. My initial goal of building theory proved to be ambitious and I am cognizant that this study may not have achieved this. That being said, I still feel confident that I advanced knowledge on this under-researched area with rich descriptions that I was able to glean from the data.

I coded the interview transcripts first by using relevant literature that I had explored to establish some overarching themes that were present. This helped to organize my data into broad categories which I could further dissect. Using my research questions as a guide, I found some emerging themes that I was essentially looking for within the data collected. Additionally, I also looked for alternate themes that would extend beyond my initial categorizations (Boyatzis, 1998; King, 2004; Smith-Maguire, 2008). Specifically, the themes of risk and identity were primarily what I was interested in investigating however, as I delved deeper into the analysis of these

materials, other emerging themes such as pseudoadventure, pain and pleasure, and community became apparent, all which will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

### Ethics Approval and Confidentiality

This research was conducted with the permission of and according to the policies set out under the York University Graduate Student Human Participants Research Protocol and York University Human Participants Research Committee (HPRC). As such this research project complied with required ethics, confidentiality, and informed consent procedures as per York University guidelines. There was minimal risk for study participants involved in this project.

Participants were informed at the onset of the interview; both verbally and through the Informed Consent form (Appendix B), that their participation in this project was completely voluntary and confidential. They were instructed that they may have withdrawn from the study at any time without penalty and that their interview materials would have been destroyed immediately. Because of the nature of the topic and the questions/issues being discussed problems were not anticipated and none were received. Participants were informed of all confidentiality provisions and the nature of the research to the fullest extent possible, only in so far as it did not jeopardize the confidentiality extended to any other study participant. Participants remained anonymous throughout the entirety of the research project. Transcripts were made available to participants, though none wished to view them for the purposes of verifying the interview record. Transcripts and recordings of the interviews were saved on the researcher's personal password-protected computer as well as on a private storage device. These documents were only accessible to the researcher, and available only to his supervisor and himself.

## Ensuring Credibility

As Lincoln and Guba contend, it is critical for qualitative researchers to establish trustworthiness in their work (1985). In order to ensure rigor within my own qualitative research I took steps outlined within the literature concerning maintenance of qualitative research credibility. First and foremost, my participation and attendance at TM events undoubtedly influenced this study. Researchers must find a balance of being immersed enough within their research to observe the social phenomenon while being separate enough to offer a critical analysis (Harrington, 2002). A common criticism of researchers being involved in the phenomenon under study is that they may become so immersed in the phenomenon under scrutiny that their professional judgments become influenced (Shenton, 2004). Part of the trustworthiness of this research comes from acknowledging my awareness of how immersed I was in the phenomenon under investigation. I was, and still am, interested and invested in TM and the struggles I faced in detaching myself as a researcher in an activity in which I enthusiastically participated will be outlined in the limitations section to follow.

I used semi-structured interviews and participant observation to help me to get perspective and to act as a form of triangulation. Two forms of triangulation were used in order to combat the criticisms mentioned above. Firstly, the use of different methods in concert was incorporated to compensate for their individual limitations. As mentioned previously, the primary method of data collection was through semi-structured interviews which were supplemented with participant observation and fieldwork. The use of these two methods countered their individual limitations through exploitation of their respective benefits (Brewer and Hunter, 1989). The second form of triangulation incorporated involved the use of a range of informants that were randomly selected from larger pools of potential recruits. Through this,

individual viewpoints and experiences of participants were substantiated against others. Ultimately, a picture of the attitudes and behaviours of informants under scrutiny was constructed based on the contributions of randomly selected participants (Shenton, 2004).

In addition to triangulation, another step was taken to help ensure that the study's findings were the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of my own as the principal researcher. Peer scrutiny of my project allowed for my supervisor, other academics within the Kinesiology and Health Science department at York University, as well as the other socio-cultural graduate students in the Kinesiology department at York University, to scrutinize and question the confirmability of my work (Shenton, 2004). Miles and Huberman contend that that a key criterion for confirmability is the extent to which the researcher admits their own predispositions (2004). Granted that I initially found difficulty in acknowledging my own biases toward my understanding of the TM event and its participants, this scrutinization offered from outside, impartial individuals benefited the credibility of my work immensely. I presented my preliminary research at a variety of conferences over the duration of the project. Feedback at these presentations was welcomed as these fresh perspectives challenged some key assumptions that I made as the principal investigator. This ensured that my closeness to the project did not inhibit my ability to analyze my findings with detachment.

### Methodological Strengths and Limitation

While there is some research examining participation in adventure racing (as one broad category of sport), it is limited. For example Kay and Laberge (2002) explored the Discovery Channel's (now defunct) Eco Challenge. Others have analyzed other endurance type running

events such as triathlons (Atkinson, 2008), fell-running (Atkinson, 2010a; 2010b), and Ironman events (Bridel, 2010). The more recent area of obstacle course racing however has not gained adequate attention. This study is one of the first to explore the TM event and ways in which its participants understand it, as well as factors that influenced their participation in such events.

The seven participants whose narratives were examined in this study had had various experiences in a variety of different TM and WTM events (for example, they had competed in different events in different cities in North America, as well as different WTM events in different years); thus there was a fair amount of variability within the study sample. In one sense this may have acted as a strength of this research as a variety of perspectives of TM events in a variety of cities were included. On the other hand, this could also be understood as a limitation in that the participants' experiences may have been qualitatively different. Furthermore, the study constituted a small sample size which may be been a limitation. However, the responses offered by the seven participants were enough to reach thematic saturation for this study. The strengths and limitation of this study will be revisited in more depth in Chapter 6.

### Methodological Experience

In this final section I will reflect on my own experiences as a researcher in order to share some unanticipated facets of the research process that I encountered. In doing so, I may be able to shed some light on how this research affected me and how my perspectives consequently shaped the study.

My specific interest in TM emerged two years ago after first participating in an event. For this reason, at numerous points during the study, I found myself closely identifying with the narratives that the study participants offered me. Following my participation in this first event I

found myself completely engulfed by the atmosphere that was present at the event and quickly identified as a fully engrossed TM. In identifying so closely with the TM event an apparent barrier in my methodological experience emerged. This barrier that I experienced as a researcher, although not at first, was my difficulty in remaining neutral in the research process in analyzing TM. In participating in, and training for three TM events, I feel that I have, to some extent, gained an insider status in the world of TM. I thought that my awareness of being an insider with the area under study would easily permit me to exclude bias and partiality towards all aspects of the research that were undertaken. I was apparently mistaken. The potential drawbacks of my own involvement in and enjoyment at and with TM events became apparent early in the data analysis portion of my research. My personal convictions seemed to greatly influence my observations as was brought to my attention by both my supervisor and my peers. This peer scrutiny of my project benefited me by bringing this methodological challenge to light.

As was mentioned previously, the interviewer undoubtedly plays a role in many decisions made in the research process. Specifically, during interviews, I made decisions about the direction of interviews both consciously and unconsciously. Furthermore I made decisions concerning the questions that were asked directly, thus affecting the direction and outcome of the interviews and in turn, the nature of the data that was collected. If I had failed to acknowledge and address my initial submission in TM I would have failed to produce and present neutral and credible findings. Although I found it difficult removing myself from the role of a TM participant and instead assuming the role of a critical researcher, I was able to analyze the data collected from an objective standpoint. In my opinion, this methodological challenge was an important one to encounter as it helped me to hone my skills as a socio-cultural researcher. This

study most definitely benefited from my experience in realizing that as an insider my initial analysis was somewhat biased.

It is crucial for researchers to be cognizant of the methodological choices they make during the research process and to share these choices with readers (Fine, 2003). I feel confident that through the process that I followed, as described previously in this section, that I have been able to produce credible qualitative research. The rigor of my work is supported with the knowledge of other procedures employed in other successful comparable projects, including the methods of data collection as well as those of data analysis.

### Chapters to Follow

To this point it has been explained that the sociocultural literature surrounding the different aspects of TM is incomplete. In addressing these gaps in the literature, this study examined how participants identified with and understood TM and how, in turn, TM contributed to their sense of self as risk takers in sport. Through conversations with TM participants about their lived experiences with and surrounding TM events including time leading up to competitions, in race participation, and post-race experiences, this study investigated who participates in TM events and why. Furthermore, how study participants' social location, particularly their socio-economic status, informed their participation in and understanding of TM was explored. The next two chapters in this thesis will examine these points, and the results.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results & Discussion I

The following chapter introduces and examines the experiences of TM and WTM participants who participated in this study. Specifically, this chapter highlights how their social location, and in particular their socioeconomic status (SES), informs their participation in and understanding of TM and WTM. As noted in Chapter 2, one's social location is composed of many intersecting facets including, but not limited to, ethnicity, sex, gender, dis/ability, sexuality and SES. For the purposes of this study, however, participant involvement and their understanding of TM and WTM will be explored with specific attention to their SES. Although it is important to be cognizant of other social influences, the scope of this study was purposefully narrowed to SES and future research in this area would profit by focused intersectional analysis. In efforts to address one of the project's research questions (who participates in TM and why? Furthermore, how does their social location (SES in particular) inform their participation in and understanding of TM and WTM?), exploration of study participants' SES will include in-depth descriptions of their ability to access discretionary income and time – by-products of their professional middle-class status – in order to engage in TM and WTM events. An exploration of study participants' motivations to take up involvement in TM and WTM and their first experiences in these events is also explored.

#### Factors Contributing to Study Participants' Socio-Economic Locations

The social location of study participants, in particular the stability and privilege associated with their middle- to upper-SES, heavily influenced their participation in and

experiences of TM and WTM. Such finding resonated with other researchers' work exploring risk and sport including studies of individuals engaged in other forms of adventure racing, "lifestyle" sports, endurance and ultra-endurance events, triathlons, etc. (e.g., Atkinson, 2008; Hilliard, 1988; Jones & Carmichael Aitchison, 2007; Wheaton, 2004). A dominant theme emerging from this body of knowledge is that risk-sport participants often belong to the "professional middle class" (cf., Fletcher, 2008) as their SES affords them the discretionary income and discretionary time with which to train for and compete in such events as TM and WTM (cf., Lyng, 1990). Giulianotti (2009) notes that the higher rates of participation of middle-to upper-class participants in these events is directly attributable to the ability of these individuals to bear the (at times, exceptionally high) financial costs associated with these events, with participants having to invest hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars to participate (see also Bourdieu, 1978; Donnelly & Harvey, 2007; Eitzen, 1996). Giulianotti (2009) further suggests that adventure races such as TM and WTM, in many Western neo-liberal democracies, are targeted at individuals immersed in professionalized, bureaucratized and rationalized white-collar work roles as these individuals possess not only substantial financial resources (i.e., discretionary income and leisure time) but also particular form of knowledge, expertise and disposition of preferences that comprise the 'professional middle class' habitus. This echoes Kay and Laberge's (2002) key findings concerning (the now defunct) Discovery Channel's Eco-Challenge, another adventure type race, in which they suggest an emergence of a habitus common to both a new corporate culture and the adventure racing field. They highlight a connection between management-level corporate participants and their preference for this particular sporting practice. Connections between the extant literatures briefly summarized above to the experiences of participants in this study will be offered below.

Seven individuals ranging in age from 23 to 31 years participated in this research study. Two of the study participants self-identified as female while the other five self-identified as male. While the small sample size precludes generalizability of the results, the participants' narratives offer a wide range of experiences to explore. All had participated in at least one TM event throughout North America and the most events that any one participant had completed were 13. Four participants had previously competed in the WTM event while the other three had not. All seven participants were either already signed up for, or planning to participate in the 2013 WTM event which had yet to have occurred at the time of the interviews. Five of the participants explained their participation, or pending participation, in the WTM event as "recreational," while the other two participants positioned themselves as competitive TMs. This meant that for these two participants, their primary interest in WTM was trying to win their respective categories (individual male category and the team category respectively); the individual competing in the team category had had previous success in the 2012 WTM event.

In terms of education, all seven participants were educated at a post-secondary level (i.e., university or college) and four of the participants had continued on to receive degrees at the graduate level. All seven of the study participants were employed full-time at the time of their interviews. The current occupations of the study participants included a veterinarian, an architectural glass and metal mechanic, a federal civil servant, an electrician, and three engineers. While one could argue that some of these individuals are blue-collar workers while others are white-collar workers, what is important to acknowledge here is that all of these individuals are full-time, well-educated professionals with the resources with which to participate in TM and WTM. Furthermore, and as will be explored in greater detail later in this

chapter, all the study participants – as a function of their professional status – operate within a particular habitus that influences their engagement with TM and WTM.

### How Participants' Socio-Economic Standing Influenced Involvement in TM/WTM

In terms of just dollars and cents, TM is not an inexpensive activity. While, at first glance, one would think that nothing more than enthusiasm, courage, perseverance, a t-shirt, pair of shorts, and a pair of shoes are needed for participation in TM, a more careful examination reveals a variety of costs associated with the event. For example, one must register for TM and the cost of registration is dependent on how far in advance an individual registers and on which day (Saturday or Sunday) one wants to race. If a participant signs up four to five month ahead of the date of the particular event, the cost of registration is \$79 to participate on a Sunday and \$89 to participate on a Saturday. The closer to the actual date of the event that a participant registers, the more expensive it gets. The price can increase to as much as \$185 in the weeks just before a particular event. This cost does not include taxes and other additional fees that further increase the cost of participation. WTM is even more expensive to participate in than a regular TM event and the registration fee starts in excess of \$400 after taxes and other applicable fees. There are equipment costs associated with WTM as well. As WTM takes place over the course of 24 hours and involves more extreme obstacles, mandatory equipment includes a headlamp and strap-on strobe light and wetsuits are strongly recommended by both event organizers and veteran participants. In addition to these items, participants also usually purchase items such as diving gloves, waterproof footwear, and thermal gear in preparation for the extreme temperatures that they may encounter at WTM as the event has taken place in November in New Jersey where

daily average temperature lows are below zero degrees Celsius. Simply put, TM and WTM require money in order to participate.

In conversations with participants, it became clear that they were all very much aware of the large costs of participating in TM and WTM events. All had the ability to allocate money towards their involvement in these events. Several study participants described the financial commitment necessary in order to participate in such events. One study participant in particular acknowledged that they allocated perhaps too large a portion of their income to TM events by noting that: “as far as turning me into an athlete, Tough Mudder just turned me into a crazy obsessed person who spends far more money than they should to race.” Another study participant echoed: “The events are not easy and it’s a huge time commitment as well as a financial commitment.” Despite this awareness amongst study participants that TM events required substantial financial commitment, only two acknowledged that this in turn made the event not equally accessible to everyone from a financial perspective: “Not everyone wants to do these types of events because you risk a lot of money; they’re expensive to participate in.” The second study participant offered additional insight into the financial aspects of TM involvement:

The money aspect of these events is something I need to take into consideration. The fact is that I have to plan it around work and my hours there. I also have to book a hotel and make sure I get there in time for the race. In the end participation revolves around if you have the money to do it or not.

Although all study participants were aware that the TM events require, sometimes excessive, financial commitment, not all were cognizant or vocal of the fact that their participation was predicated upon their ability to apply financial resources towards these events.

On top of registration and equipment costs are the costs associated with transportation to and from TM and WTM events as well as accommodations for a few nights prior to and after the event. Due to the very nature of events, TM and WTM must be held in large, natural settings that require participants to, in most cases, travel (by plane and/or vehicle) some distance in order to attend. Participants also spoke to the issue of the large distances that they travelled in some cases to participate in TM events and one study participant spoke of having to drive for 16 hours from Northern Ontario in order to attend a single event. As noted above, the study participants had participated in anywhere from one to thirteen TM events and many had participated in a variety of different cities in both Canada and the United States.

WTM has been held in New Jersey for the first three years of its existence and, as a result, the majority of participants must travel varying distances in order to attend. Since the event has been able to attract international participants, many individuals must in fact fly to the host city as was the case with most of my study participants. It should be noted too that participants also have to pay parking fees upon arrival at events. In most cases, in order to accommodate the large number of vehicles, parking areas are set up in large fields quite a distance from the actual event. Participants are then transported from the parking area to the events with shuttle buses. Parking in these lots is just another additional fee that participants must pay. This further supports argument that as a result of the costs associated with TM and WTM, participation is much more accessible to certain individuals with discretionary income, as was noted above.

Interestingly, most study participants seemed to have the understanding that these TM events were inclusive and inviting for all people to participate in, despite being aware of the costs associated with participation in these events. This was seen in the quotes from different r

study participants: “Tough Mudder attracts all types of people and is an event anyone can do.” Another participant described TM as: “An event for anyone and everyone.” One participant spoke of trying to convince some coworkers to register for a Tough Mudder event by saying: “You’re going to have a lot of fun and anybody can do an event like this.” Finally, another participant said TM: “Is an event for everyone, ordinary people who need something to be a part of.” The reality of TM and WTM is that from a financial standpoint, this event is not particularly accessible to everyone. This reality is contrary to what seemed to be a common understanding amongst five of the study participants, an understanding that anyone could choose participate in TM if they so desired. It appears that TM has been branded by study participants as an event that is available for anybody to participate in so long as they have the will to. Although the event itself has grown considerably in the three years of its existence, study participants seemed to neglect or disregard that really, only a certain demographic marked by financial stability has financial accessibility to participate.

The event organizers themselves seem to promote the event as one for the masses. Through emails sent out to previous and potential participants, they contend that TM is a quickly growing community. In 2013, specifically, when the total number of registrants exceeded one million (One Million Mudders, 2013), TMs were bombarded with this figure through emails and videos and were encouraged to not only continue participating in events, but also to enlist family and friends to join them on their teams and in TM. When registering for TM events, individuals are encouraged to “recruit” other Mudders to participate in events. Study participants were quite aware of the fact that TM was promoted by event organizers as a quickly growing event and community and seemed to buy into this notion as was seen in the following responses: “It makes me proud to be a part of a million plus people who have gone out and accomplished this.”

Another participant described TM as a “blossoming sport” and commented on how they “cherished being a part of that growth.” Taking both study participants’ commentary and event organizers’ advertisements and descriptions of the TM events into consideration, there is an apparent contradiction.

Having discretionary income is evidently a prerequisite for participation in TM events as exemplified in the comments offered by study participants. This was not the only aspect of their ability to participate in TM events that participants spoke of, especially when discussing involvement in WTM (why WTM specifically will be addressed in the following section). An additional result of the SES of study participants was their possession of discretionary time which they could fill with leisure pursuits of their choosing. It became apparent through their responses that the time needed in order to physically prepare for the WTM event was excessive. Their having discretionary time as a function of their SES further influenced their ability to participate in these events.

It is important to note that in discussing this involvement in events, study participants distinguished between TM and WTM when concerning physical preparation at the time needed to both prepare for and participate in events. Participants explained that for WTM, the amount of time that needed to be dedicated to physical preparation far exceeded that of TM. This was acknowledged by study participants as they recognized the differences between the courses and obstacles at the two events, outlined in the beginning of Chapter 3. One such example of the difference between the events was offered in this study participant response:

World’s Toughest Mudder is a little different than your regular Tough Mudder. What stands out the most is the majority of the obstacles are either beefed up, or they’re replicated multiple times along the course. In an average Tough Mudder, you might have

your Berlin Walls <sup>1</sup> once. At World's you might have it two or three times and they're a whole lot taller. The barbed wire crawls are also much longer at WTM. Overall when you go, you're looking at a beefed up version of what you've done before. And the increased distance you're running goes without saying. There is obviously a lot more preparation that goes into World's Toughest Mudder compared to Tough Mudder.

It was evident amongst the study participants, particularly for participation in the WTM, that their current occupational situations afforded them the opportunity to dedicate considerable amounts of time needed for training. Study participants spoke of this extensive physical training that they used to prepare themselves for the extreme distances they would be running at the WTM event. One study participant described the long distances she ran in training for the WTM event with her husband:

We're up to about 40 to 50 miles of running a week since about two months ago. I've also been doing a lot of pool training, a couple of sessions in the morning and then at night in addition to swimming. In addition to this, we alternate days when we incorporate Insanity [an interval training workout DVD] into training. We always do extra core workouts and extra upper body pull-ups and pushups afterwards.

Another participant that identified himself as a competitive WTM participant who was trying to win his respective team category described his exhaustive training in the following way:

My training consisted of lots of running. To be more specific, I've been training all summer for an Ironman at the end of August, using it as a stepping stone to get me in good shape not just endurance-wise, but from a strength aspect as well. This is obviously very important for World's Toughest Mudder. I'm using that training to propel me into this event. This week I'll be close to 80 miles of running. I'll be doing a double

marathon this weekend just to kind of get the legs juiced up and ready for these longer events. From there, it's just a lot of core strength, weightlifting and just hours and hours of running.

Because training for running such extreme distances was so extensive, it took up large portions of time in lives of study participants. They willingly allowed their training regimes to consume their lives as they felt it was a necessary part of their days.

Participants fit in workouts and training session at every and any spare moment they could find and, in some cases, structured their days around their training. The physical preparation for the WTM event became a very large part of the daily routine of study participants especially in the months leading up to the event. Some participants explained how they woke up early every morning to get some of their training in:

For competing in regular Tough Mudders, I train by regularly waking up every day at 5am. I do a twelve kilometer run before work and then I work all day as an electrician, which is also very physical. We're at different places every day doing things like crawling through trusses, carrying tools, running up and down stairs, crawling under beams and through ceilings. It's a physical job. When I finish for the day and go home, I either do another run or go to the gym. When I prepare for World's Toughest Mudder my training gets a little more serious. I do some more swimming on top of everything else, as well as train in colder conditions in wet suits.

Another participant also spoke of training in the morning before work:

I was doing multiple workouts a day leading up to World's Toughest Mudder. Waking up and doing runs in the morning then going to work. I did workouts after work and then

even something at the end of the day. This could include a short jog with my girlfriend.

Lately I've begun incorporating obstacle specific workouts as well.

Another study participant spoke of the lengths that he went to in training for the WTM event:

I was doing a whole bunch training leading up to the event. I did multiple little workouts a day. Lately, I've been going towards obstacle specific workouts. I've got a buddy who is a huge Tough Mudder enthusiast, and he's got an obstacle course set up in his backyard. We go and run that, and it's grown from like five to ten obstacles, to him currently putting the finishing touches on his 22<sup>nd</sup>. On Sundays we generally do a double lap of his course which is just over six kilometers long.

Through these specific responses as well as other conversations with study participants, it was evident that their current work situations allowed them to dedicate hours of their time and energy leading up to the WTM event to physical preparation. This unrestricted time further attests to TM participants belonging to a professional middle class. Study participants' socio-economic privilege afforded them time in which they could perform crazy feats and willingly and knowingly subject their bodies to physical punishment. Granted that some participants woke up at what may be perceived as unfavorably early hours at which to be awake, what is important is the acknowledgement that study participants had consistent regular work schedules, a resource that influenced their ability to participate in WTM. The benefits of having full time work with routine schedules enabled participants to stick to extensive work out regimes that helped them physically prepare for WTM. This same ability may not be afforded to individuals with varying work shifts/hours or multiple part-time jobs marked with atypical commutes and reduced hours they can dedicate to leisure pursuits of their choosing.

In speaking to study participants about their desires to spend their leisure time both training so extensively for and participating in TM and WTM events, an interesting theme of escaping their unexciting work lives emerged. This notion of using athletic pursuits as a response to the routinization of common life has been explored elsewhere within literature and parallels between this extant work and study participants involvement in TM and WTM will be drawn on in the succeeding section.

### Resisting the Dehumanizing Effects of Modern Society

There was a perception of routine-ness and monotony of work-life among study participants that influenced their participation in and understanding of TM and WTM. The use of athletic endeavors as a response to counter the perception of monotony of individuals' professional lives has been explored in the socio-cultural study of sport and risk. For example, Elias and Dunning (1986) contend that Western societies have evolved into unexciting social environments as a result of producing highly contained and disciplined cultures. They further describe these environments as being emotionally boring as a result of a middle class habitus in which rational and reserved behaviours are promoted. These collective personality structures that endorse socially mannered behaviours allow for high levels of affective control and inner containment further contributing to a collective sense of boredom amongst the professional middle class (Atkinson, 2008). As a consequence of post-industrial societies having created these limiting environments in which individuals reside, their ability to express creativity and spontaneity has been constrained (Lyng, 1990) contributing to what has been described in the literature as the dehumanizing constraints of modernization (Holyfield, 1999). In response to this restriction of self-expression and lack of control afforded individuals in their daily routine lives,

Frey (1991) and Goffman (1969) contend that delving into the uncertainty of sport may provide some compensation or reprieve. In fact, it has been suggested that one of sport's primary roles within complex figurations is to de-routinize the toil and drudgery of restrained, civilized social life (Dunning & Rojeck, 1992; Elias & Dunning, 1986). These understandings of countering the overly-routinized lives of the professional middle class correlate with study participants' understanding of TM and WTM.

All seven of the study participants were employed full time when their interviews took place. As a result of their-full time employment, they explained that their weekly schedules were dominated by their occupations. They explained that they felt the excitement in their lives was restricted during the daily routine of their jobs. They further expressed that they needed some sort of outlet to escape their uninspiring situations while outside of working hours. Participants described their working environments as being "repetitive" and "lacking excitement and this lack of excitement and routines that they experienced in their everyday lives further contributed the dehumanization that they experienced as a result of the modernized working lives that they lived. Participants spoke of venturing outside of these environments through TM and WTM in an attempt to counteract the monotony and boredom or dullness of their working lives:

You get a lot of people that do these events that are like me, that are at work from 9am to 5pm in a suit every day, stuck on a computer, and they need an outlet I guess. I think that's the biggest reason people do these events. It just gives them an opportunity to escape and to get as dirty as possible, and it's just incredible.

Another study participant echoed this notion of escaping their daily routine through involvement in TM:

Because it's there. Because it sounds like something you shouldn't do. Everything about it sounds bad. It sounds like it's going to hurt, it sounds like it's going to be extremely difficult, but because you can't get that in your everyday life. That's what makes people want to do it. That's what makes me want to do it anyways. I just want to escape the everyday routine that it seems everybody goes through.

This boredom was again described by a third study participant:

I enjoy taking risks and the adrenaline rush of pushing myself and living beyond my comfort zone. I hate being bored and doing the same routine every day. I like to switch things up and get a little boost. Do something a little different.

Finally, another participant added:

It's definitely a great change of pace from what I'm used to at work. I really get the chance to do something a little crazy at TM that I don't get very often. I can really let loose at these events and get in the mud.

For participants, there was undoubtedly a quality of adventure involved in the TM and WTM events and this adventure allowed participants to feel as though they could resist and escape the existing dehumanizing constraints of modernization (Holyfield, 1999). TM and WTM provided a venue in which study participants could escape the emotional labour of their reserved and refined social lives.

It was explained by study participants that the sense of adventure that they sought was not regularly available to them in their everyday lives. They continuously reiterated that they were looking for a sense of adventure in their lives and that it was their ability to seek this adventure that partly fostered their desire to participate in TM events. TM and WTM served as an opportunity to escape the urban and structured lives participants lived Monday through

Friday. TM seems to have offered study participants temporary escapes in which they could momentarily quench their thirsts for excitement within organized events. Having only temporary escapes from their weekly work schedules would support their claims of belonging to a category of recreational athletes. However, in this respect, an interesting contradiction arose and study participants' perception of themselves as recreational athletes, despite the evidence suggesting otherwise. This will be explored in the following section.

### A Contradictory Understanding of "Recreation"

Prior to delving into the manner in which study participants understand "recreational" participation in athletic endeavors, a brief exploration of their athletic backgrounds and first involvement in TM and WTM events is warranted. This will perhaps provide some insight into the apparent contradiction of their perceptions of themselves as "recreational" participants and the intensity (almost work-like) of their actual involvement in TM and WTM. Following this brief exploration of their athletics backgrounds, this section will explore study participants' current understanding of their athletic ability and how this in turn influences their understanding of, and participation in, TM and WTM. I contend that their definition of themselves as "recreational" athletes is contradictory to the intensive training they put into preparation for TM and WTM (as already noted earlier in the chapter) and the goals they set for themselves as TM/WTM participants.

Of the seven participants in this study, two grew up playing recreational sports and continued on to participate in cross-country and track and field at the collegiate level in the United States. Another participant competed on the cross-country team while in high school, but did not continue competing in such events during or past their post-secondary education. These

participants no longer participated in their respective sports in part because they did not possess the skill to continue on as professional athletes in their respective disciplines. Although while in college/university in the United States they possessed athletic skill and ability that allowed them to compete at the collegiate level, this is the level at which their participation in competitive sport ended. These participants, who at one point had participated in competitive sport, commented on a void that they felt in their lives since no longer being part of a team now that they were in a part of their lives where employment dominated their weekly schedules. This lack One participant commented that it was the reason that they had initially registered for their first TM event:

I basically wanted to do something that was athletic and involved teamwork. I haven't been able to play team sports since college and I was looking to have that camaraderie with people again. That was kind of why I started looking into Tough Mudder events.

Another study participant similarly commented on missing being involved in sport. TM had given him the opportunity to revisit the athleticism that he believed himself to once possess. A study participant commented on how TM provided him with this opportunity to once again be involved in organized sport:

As an individual I didn't really have anything left in the athletic area of my life and I was kind of not even going to the gym all that much anymore. Tough Mudder gave me something as an individual to do. It got me into the world of obstacle course racing.

Not all study participants shared the same athletic and active background as these two former collegiate athletes. Interestingly, four of the seven had no background in any organized athletics apart from mandatory physical education classes while in high school. Despite this, all were somewhat physically active at the time of the interviews as they all spoke of participating in

running as either a recreational activity or with the intent of using it as a means of maintaining their health and fitness. In their current working lives, participation in competitive athletic endeavors was minimal amongst study participants and even nonexistent for some. All seven of them had initially begun by participating in a regular TM event. Within a year of participating in this first TM event, all seven had either qualified to participate in a WTM event (prior to 2013) by finishing in the top five percent of finishers at their respective TM events or had registered to participate in the 2013 WTM, for which qualifying was no longer necessary for participation. It was intriguing that these participants made such a drastic jump from being minimally involved in athletics, apart from recreational running, to participating in WTM event in which TMs often run distances that far exceed that of marathons.

Of even greater interest and relevance to the contradiction between perception and reality of being a “recreational” TM/WTM participant, is the way in which five of the seven participants described themselves as average, ordinary, and/or recreational athletes: “I’m pretty much your standard average athlete; I don’t particularly excel at any sports I participate more recreationally.” Another participant explained them self as: “average when it comes to my athletic ability.” A third study participant commented: “I’m a pretty ordinary athlete talent wise.” Two study participants specifically used the term “Average Joe” to categorize themselves, common jargon for individuals who perceive themselves to not particularly excel, in this case, athletically: “I would say that this event is for us ordinary people. I wouldn’t say that I felt that intimidated by other participants’ capabilities. I think a lot of people who do Tough Mudder are Average Joes like me.” The second study participant used this term in the following manner when discussing TM and WTM:

These races and events have taught me that it's not a matter of your ability so much as your dedication to training. If you train hard enough and if you put in the work, us average Joes can do these things.

Clearly they categorized themselves as average individuals in terms of their athletic ability. They used these terms “ordinary,” “average,” “recreational,” and “Average Joe” to label themselves. It is through this self-classification as “average” that the contradiction arose as study participants thought that TM and WTM events attracted those marked by “average” athletic ability. However, WTM (and TM to a lesser degree) parallels other ultra-endurance running events such as ultra-marathons in that participants often cover distances that far exceed those of standard 42.2 kilometer marathons. The top male finisher at the 2013 WTM event ran almost four times the distance of a single marathon logging in over 160 kilometers while the top female finisher completed 135 kilometers (World's Toughest Mudder, 2013). These two WTM participants are obviously part of a smaller group of elite level participants. Two of the participants who identified themselves as “competitive” TMs in this study may also belong in this smaller category of participants. These two were entering the WTM event attempting to win their respective categories as mentioned previously. The majority of study participants (five), however, identified themselves as recreational participants. They discussed their goals in terms of number of laps they wanted to run and subsequently distance covered while at the WTM event and all had running goals that were in excess of 50 kilometers; wanting to run over 50 kilometers clearly does not constitute being “recreational.” The irony of participants' beliefs in their belonging to a category of recreational participants, as well as their goal setting of distances that constitute much more than that of recreational running, was an interesting contradiction that emerged. Here is a location where the concept of “recreation” got spun on its head.

It appeared that attending the WTM 2013 event and not planning to attempt to win one of the three respective categories was a marker of identifying oneself as being a recreational participant. Granted that the five study participants did set goals that were far less than the eventual distances run by male, female, and team finishers, these goals were still arguably beyond what a normal understanding of recreational participation in any activity encompasses. Perhaps the reason that study participants categorized themselves as “recreational” was because of their recent transitions from limited participation in organized athletic events to their WTM experiences. TM events seem to have provided these newcomers to organized athletic events with a venue in which they begin to understand themselves as athletes, although currently self-perceived to be at the recreational level. Study participants spoke of never considering themselves to be athletes until they became TMs. One spoke to this directly in the following response: “Tough Mudder has turned me into an athlete because I wasn’t an athlete before. Now my whole life revolves around OCR.” TM has benefited some individuals with an opportunity to be involved in an athletic endeavor that otherwise may not have incorporated athletic competition into their lives and would have perhaps maintained their self-described minimal involvement in such activities.

This transition to participation in athletic events was, as previously mentioned, an attempt to escape the monotony of their work lives. Part of this search for a response to the routineness of weekly working schedules was achieved by participants through the excitement that TM and WTM offered them. This search for some sort of excitement and the effect of achieving such exhilaration in the lives of study participants, specifically within TM and WTM, is deserving of more commentary and is revisited in the following section.

### Involvement in TM/WTM as Quests for Adventure/Excitement

As noted earlier in this chapter, study participants' understanding of TM and WTM, as well as their participation in these events, was informed in part by their professional middle class habitus. In this section, study participants' quests for excitement and adventure as a condition of their highly routine working situations will be explored. Three study participants commented that TM and WTM events were, in part, attractive to them because of their adventurous qualities. One said: "It's like you're on an adventure out there, getting from obstacle to obstacle." Another participant also used the term "adventure" to characterize the TM event: "These events are like adventures I don't get to go on all the time." A third also used the term "adventure" to describe TM events: "These mini adventures can be pretty exciting additions to your weekends." Simmel contends that adventures are characterized by a special quality of mysteriousness that in turn can be symbolically transformative for adventure goers (1959) and, as seen in the quotes above, it appeared that study participants perceived themselves to be adventure goers as a result of their participation in TM and WTM events. Furthermore, there were certain characteristic of this adventure that participants spoke of that contributed to their enjoyment as TM and WTM participants.

The social contexts in which TM and WTM events exist were powerful in shaping their experiences. The creation of fear and anxiousness through participation in events induced potentially overpowering emotions of unrest that were welcomed. These emotions of unrest were transformed into general sensations of fun and excitement for participants (Holyfield, 1999). Hedonistic consumers, upon entering TM and WTM events, anticipated and were drawn to the events by the allure of the extraordinary and unusual that, in turn, translated to the intense pleasure they experienced (Arnould & Price, 1993; Havlena & Holbrook, 1985). Part of the

reason that TM/WTM adventure was so alluring to study participants was because it occurred outside the realm of ordinary experience (Simmel, 1959). TM and WTM were able to provide a reprieve to the constraints on their lives. It provided them with momentary liberations from diffuse conservative, middle-class codes that constrained their affective expressions (Atkinson, 2008).

The desire for uncertainty through participation in adventurous activities has been discussed elsewhere within the literature concerning other endurance-type events such as fell running in the United Kingdom (Atkinson, 2011). Atkinson suggests that many individuals willfully engage in the abandonment of personal control through intense sports-like physicality, and involvement in such abandonment benefits individuals with social capital (Atkinson, 2011). Many parallels can be drawn between this willful abandonment in fell running and TM/WTM, as study participants also invited the surprise and uncertainty that attracted them to events. They were further benefited with a sense of physical pleasure and emotional release that was not attainable for them outside of these events (Atkinson, 2008; Elias & Dunning, 1986; Lyng, 1990; Frey, 1991). This echoed, as was discussed previously, the lack of opportunity to exhibit spontaneity and creativity within their working lives.

Study participants explained that the spontaneous experiences that they faced in TM and WTM transcended their rather mundane and predictable lives. They explained that they felt physically bored and emotionally constrained in their everyday work lives and used TM and WTM in an attempt to seek out adventure that could provide them with excitement. A part of this “quest for excitement” (Elias & Dunning, 1986) involved a desire for the unknown and surprise which was explained in the following participant responses concerning TM and WTM events:

The beauty of it is that you never know what to expect. I'm going into this year's event thinking that it's going to be like last year's event, which is not true, and I know it's not going to be. I know every single obstacle is going to be different to some degree and who knows what the conditions will be like.

Another study participant offered a similar understanding through their experience at the starting gate of the 2012 WTM event:

The fear of the unknown is definitely present at the starting gate. Along with it comes the feeling of excitement and adrenaline. You're surrounded by others who are in the same position as you right at the start and you're all going to be surprised together.

A third further echoed the previous responses:

Fear, excitement, adrenaline. It's the mixture of all kinds of emotions that you're feeling. It's just the excitement of being afraid of the unknown. But, the adrenaline rush is just going through everyone and that is going to help you along the way. Just have to focus and make it over each obstacle as it comes.

Study participants explained that TM and WTM were marked by having adventurous qualities. One such quality was the uncertainty that was associated with such events.

Uncertainties arose when exploring whether this event could truly be understood as an adventurous pursuit. Although participants described TM and WTM events as adventures, they had limited previous experience in activities that could be described as adventurous. Only one described previous involvement in an arguably adventurous activity (skydiving). Others contrarily described their actual lack of participation in exciting and adventurous endeavours.

This was partly noted earlier in this chapter as a sense of the dullness of their current lives.

Again, the reason study participants participated in TM and WTM events was partly as an

attempt to counter the lack of excitement and adventure in their current lives. In questioning what type of adventure study participants were exposed to at TM and WTM events, it is important to consider their limited previous involvement in adventure type activities. Their understanding of and ability to characterize TM and WTM as adventurous activities was restricted. That being said, this does not mean that there was a complete lack of adventure in TM and WTM events.

TM participants are placed onto a course in which some uncertainties evidently exist, specifically concerning the type of obstacles they will encounter while moving forward along the course. Prior to the actual TM event, information regarding the obstacles for each particular course is withheld by event organizers and at every course there are a number of surprise obstacles that participants are presented with throughout the event. This element of surprise is present even more so at WTM events. At these events, participants are left completely in the dark regarding obstacles that will be present on the courses. WTM event organizers do not release any information concerning obstacles that appear along the courses prior to the actual day of the events. In addition to this they do not inform participants on how long a single lap of the course will be (it has fluctuated between five and ten miles in length over the first three WTM events). Every year new obstacles have been included at both TM and WTM events and although events have often been held at the same locations annually in cities that have hosted more than one event, the courses are altered and transformed into something different each time. Having consulted conversations amongst groups of race participants online, there was continuous speculation as to what possible surprises awaited them at upcoming events. A study participant mentioned the last thoughts that went through their head prior to beginning their first WTM event: "I started thinking, what the hell did I get myself into? It was a mixture of all kinds of

things, but mostly the unknown. Not knowing what laid ahead for me.” Another study participant had a similar response saying: “I had a fear of the unknown going into WTM.”

WTM further asks participants to face uncertainty as the details of both course length and obstacles present are completely withheld from participants. Even so, this adventure is understandably quite different from other more familiar and recognizable forms of adventure such as that of summiting Mount Everest. In understanding study participants’ desire to be faced with uncertainty during their quest for adventure, a careful exploration of what type of adventure that was present within TM and WTM events is warranted. The extents to which adventures within TM and WTM events could be considered as genuine or manufactured are explored in the following section.

#### The Type of Adventure Present in TM/WTM

Through this understanding as TM and WTM being used as opportunities to seek adventure as described by study participants, it is wise to question exactly what types of adventure and excitement these events provide. Study participants represented a group of individuals who sought adventure in response to their relatively, self-described, tame lives. This desire to participate in the uncertainty that marks adventurous practices laid beyond their stable and predictable occupational lives; however, the adventure within TM and WTM is grounded in, what is termed “manufactured adventure,” a term Holyfield uses to describe the manner in which commercial organizations construct and provide adventure experiences to consumers (1999). TM and WTM event organizers are very much involved in the scripting of the sense of adventure that study participants experienced at events. The pursuits that they find themselves in at TM and WTM events very much represent what Elias and Dunning (1986) have described as ‘mimetic

activities.’ Mimetic activities provide an invented setting for its participants that imitate real situations with lesser degrees of real danger. Through this, participants are provided with invented settings that simulate actual real dangers providing these adventure seekers, who are unable to access such exploits in their daily lives, an opportunity to experience what they believe to be adventure activities. Goffman has labelled such constructed exploits as “pseudoadventure” (1969).

The organizers of TM and WTM events were heavily involved in shaping the adventure experiences of study participants. They were in control of the design and creation of courses and in choosing the specific location at which events occur. The slogan of the event itself described TM as “the toughest event on the planet” (Tough Mudder, 2013). It is clear that event organizers want their event to be perceived in a certain way by participants. The manner in which the event is presented on the official website shows images and videos of participants struggling to conquer obstacles, tirelessly trekking along the course, up hills, and through mud. The extent to which study participants were in control of directing their own adventure experiences was in fact limited. Event organizers play a large role in the shaping of participants leisure experiences and because they provide such a scripted narrative (Holyfield, 1999), study participants may not be fully aware to the extent or type of adventure that they are truly participating in. This lack of awareness concerning the extent to which TM and WTM event organizers influence participants’ involvement and understanding of their participation in events will be further explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter explored how study participants' participation in and understanding of TM and WTM were influenced by their belonging to a professional middle class. The stability and privilege associated with their middle to upper SES afforded them with the discretionary income and time evidently needed bear the, at time exceptionally, excessive costs and rigorous physical training required. All of the study participants were full-time, well-educated professionals with the resources with which to participate in TM and WTM. Although study participants were aware of the large costs associated with participation in such events, there was an apparent contradiction in their understanding of TM and WTM as being all inclusive and inviting events. From a financial standpoint, these events are not particularly accessible to everyone and in reality, and contrary to what seemed to be a common understanding amongst study participants, not everyone has the luxury of discretionary income and time that evidently facilitate participation in such an event.

While participants' socio-economic privilege afforded them the financial and time resources with which to prepare for and compete in TM and WTM, there was a perception of routine-ness and monotony of work-life among study participants that further influenced their participation in and understanding of TM and WTM. For study participants, TM and WTM were used as a response to counteract the routineness and monotony of their professional lives. Study participants sought a sense of adventure that was not regularly available to them in their everyday lives and this fostered their desire to participate in TM events. The events served as opportunities to escape the urban and structured lives they lived Monday through Friday. TM seems to have offered study participants temporary escapes in which they could momentarily quench their thirsts for excitement and adventure.

Another major theme that was explored in this chapter was study participants' contradictory understanding of themselves as recreational athletes. This self-categorization of being recreational TM participants did not correspond with study participants' goals of running in excess of 50 kilometers while at the WTM event. Wanting to run over 50 kilometers clearly did not constitute being "recreational." The irony of participants' beliefs in their belonging to a category of recreational participants and their goal setting of distances that constituted much more than that of recreational running was an interesting contradiction that emerged within this study. Here was a location where the concept of "recreation" got spun on its head.

Finally, study participants explained that TM and WTM were marked by having adventurous qualities. One such quality was the uncertainty that was associated with such events, however, when exploring study participants' backgrounds, their lack of previous experience in activities that could be described as adventurous evidently limited and constrained their ability to label such an event as such. The adventure within TM and WTM were more accurately described as being grounded in "manufactured adventure" (Holyfield, 1999). TM and WTM event organizers were very much involved in the scripting of the sense of adventure that study participants experienced at events and these experiences in "mimetic activities" (Elias & Dunning, 1986) provided invented settings that simulated real dangers. Thus, study participants were said to be involved in a variety of adventure more accurately labelled as "pseudoadventure" (Goffman, 1969).

The next chapter will further explore how study participants understand TM and WTM events, specifically how they question whether the values present in such events are indicative of a new alternative physical culture. Additionally, a closer attention will be paid to whether and how TM and WTM events influence participants' sense of self as risk takers.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Results and Discussion II**

This chapter explores how study participants perceived themselves to be part of a unique sporting community marked by a sense of camaraderie shared with other TMs and WTM. How study participants perceived the presence of community and camaraderie at these events to differentiate TM and WTM from traditional mainstream sports will be examined. The values that study participants believed to be present within TM and WTM and whether or not these values constituted these events belonging to a new alternative physical culture, will be questioned. In efforts to address the second of this project's two research questions: "Do TM and WTM contribute to study participants' sense of self (identity) as risk takers? And if so, how?" Additional characteristics of TM and WTM that have attracted and influenced study participants involvement in these events will be explored. These include an exploration of the perceived risk of failing at or not completing events as well as the value placed upon the ability to tolerate fatigue, exhaustion and injury. Finally, the notion of pseudoadventure, initially raised in Chapter 4, will be revisited in exploring the authenticity of risk in TM and WTM.

#### **Seeking Adventure Occasionally**

In the previous chapter, it was demonstrated that study participants belonged to a professional middle class marked by a SES that afforded them with discretionary time and income. In addition to this, TM and WTM events offered study participants the opportunity in which to resist the dehumanizing constraints of modern society, specifically their over-routinized and mundane occupational situations. As part of existing in these highly contained and

disciplined work environments, study participants' ability to express creativity and spontaneity was limited. As a result of this, they sought excitement through participation in TM and WTM. They further explained that TM and WTM events were characterized as having adventurous qualities. One such quality was that of mysteriousness and uncertain outcome. Being unaware of several of the details that they would be confronted with at events was part of what attracted study participants to TM and WTM. Study participants inability to access such uncertain outcomes in their everyday working lives drove them to seek these opportunities elsewhere. Although study participants commented on the dehumanizing effect of their occupational situations, and their attempts to counter these limiting constraints, they contrarily also discussed their comfort in their financial stability that was afforded them by their SES.

The search for uncertain outcome by study participants to counter the limiting nature of their occupational lives was restricted to within their participation in TM and WTM events. Beyond these events, the seeking of freedom and desire to escape dehumanizing effects of modern society was not or significantly less, pursued. It was explained by study participants that, elsewhere in their lives, away from TM and WTM, they enjoyed being in control and they achieved this control through such aspects as economic stability and education; their SESs was, in part, what enabled study participants to achieve such stability in their lives. This conversation between enjoying the predictability and stability of their weekday working lives and their quests for excitement on weekends through TM and WTM was present in the following responses. One study participant explained how he was generally risk averse in his everyday life:

I'm an engineer and generally that's very risk aversive [sic]. I like strategy. I like reading a lot of books about military strategy and tactics and learning about how to make tactically superior decisions. By default, all those are generally risk aversive qualities.

You look at your situation, you assess it, you look at your options and you pick the best case. The least risky decision while also anticipating what the worst case could be and developing contingency plans to account for that because life is unexpected.

Another participant clearly explained that in her everyday life, she sought stability and constancy while pursuing chance, uncertainty and excitement in TM:

I'm not a risk taker when it comes to my life. I've taken the solid road through education and in taking a solid job. I like stability, and then I get my craziness from my adrenaline junkie activities like Tough Mudder.

A third study participant further spoke of her apprehension to take certain risks:

I wouldn't go and bet huge amounts of money on anything, I would never take risks in that sense. It's more of these outlets at Tough Mudder events where I can do things like jump of a ledge into water below. That's when I take the opportunity to be a little crazy. You won't find me doing that every day.

Through these three study participants' responses, it was made clear that although they were unsatisfied with the constraining routines of their weekly social existence, they only wished to escape this occasionally through occasional participation in TM and WTM events. Study participants enjoyed the stability that their working lives offered them and although they sought to counter the limiting availability for creativity and spontaneity, it would not be at the expense of the financial security offered them through their current SES. That being said, TM and WTM events seem to be temporary escapes from the dehumanizing effects of their work lives. In this, there are apparent contradictions. The point at which contradictions arose were in study participants' descriptions of their boring and dehumanizing working lives, yet their admission to, and, in fact, wanting to possess these lives. The manner in which they wanted to counter the

limitations of their predictable lives was through brief and intermittent bouts of excitement. Study participants reprovving of their limiting working lives was contradictorily embraced by them as well.

In addition to TM and WTM's ability to have offered study participants temporary release from their constricting working situations, it also offered them an opportunity to be part of a unique community. This perception of being included in a new and unique community was described by all of the study participants and these communities were explained as unique partly due to the perception among study participants that TM and WTM events promoted such a philosophy.

### Community and Camaraderie

For study participants, the philosophy of success in TM and WTM rejects the notion of dominance over others and is predicated upon a spirit of cooperation among TM/WTM participants. Participants learn this unofficial rule from the pre-event pledge that all participants say before beginning the race. Part of this pledge, presented by event organizers, reads that they will put teamwork and camaraderie before their course time and that they will help fellow Mudders complete the course (Tough Mudder, 2013). Bettering opponents on the course was not a means through which participants gained pleasure and enjoyment from the event. Granted that there are awards and prizes for the top male, female and team event participants, study participants routinely acknowledged that there was a much stronger collective gratification present amongst the TM and WTM community as a whole that was gained through a culture of camaraderie present at these events. This sense of community and camaraderie was relished amongst study participants as much as the opportunity to have been waist deep in mud. Some

study participants spoke of sacrificing the speed at which they themselves progressed along the course in order to assist other complete obstacles: “Tough Mudder participants are people who are not afraid to compromise their race positions for the sake of helping each other.” Another participant commented on veteran participants and even past WTM event winners adhering to this sense of camaraderie.

Nobody was at World’s Toughest Mudder with a negative attitude, everyone there was positive. Everyone was there completely willing to help each other out at the expense of their own progress. Even the winner from last year’s event, Pak<sup>2</sup>. I saw him and knew he won the year before and he was still there cheering everybody on, making sure everybody was okay, wishing everybody good luck and helping them through the obstacles. There’s no looking down on anybody. Nobody thinks they’re better than anybody else. Were all the same level, were all going to have a good time and were all going to push ourselves to hopefully our breaking points, but were all going to have a good time doing it.

A third participant offered similar thoughts:

As a human being it’s one of the greatest things about World’s Toughest Mudder is the amount of camaraderie that you have between Mudders. I didn’t see one person not get helped out at that event. The Everest<sup>3</sup> obstacle is obviously a big one. You always see people with their hands down helping the people that can’t get up and I didn’t see one person that didn’t make it up that wall.

Another participant spoke of helping complete strangers while on the course:

It doesn’t matter if you’ve never seen the person in your life, and chances are you might never see them again, but you’re going to give them a hand out on that course. You’re going to give them a hug. You’re going to give them a pat on the back. It’s really high

energy, high spirits. Everybody is excited. Everybody is happy. It's really a good atmosphere.

A fifth study participant further commented on helping other participants on the course:

Everyone is helping everyone at the obstacles of the Tough Mudder events. Everyone sticks their hand out and is like, can I help you? I can push you over this wall or I can pull you up the hill. Everyone is willing to lend a hand.

Finally, a sixth study participant said:

I would say that Tough Mudder is a pretty awesome challenge that makes you want to work together to accomplish tasks that you can't accomplish on your own. I remember my first Tough Mudder I came up to those Berlin Walls and they're twelve feet high and you can't get over them alone, especially if you're only five feet tall. So you work together with people that you don't know and that's awesome. To be able to challenge yourself like that and to work with strangers to accomplish things that you can't by yourself, is a great thing. I think that's what Tough Mudder is all about, it's about that team work and camaraderie. When you look at TM, its camaraderie, its teamwork and the truth about it is that there really is that at the events. When I'm at a regular Tough Mudder event training for World's Toughest Mudder, I am still on that field as a Tough Mudder and I still help people. I'm still waiting and grabbing someone at Everest. I'm still pushing someone over a wall even though I myself may be in a different caliber than most people.

It is apparent that study participants bought into this TM philosophy of putting assisting other participants ahead of their own progress while on the course. That being said, it is important to acknowledge that of the seven study participants none spoke of having negative

experiences at TM and WTM or did not speak of not feeling part of or sharing this sense of community. With such a large number of TM registrants, there must be some who did not share this ethos of camaraderie and this is understandably a limitation of the small sample size used in this research project. However, the data offered remains close to the study participants included in this research and provides a wider range of their experiences.

Furthermore, in discussing this culture of camaraderie and helping other participants on the TM and WTM courses, some study participants spoke of how individuals would be looked down upon by other TMs who stopped to help other participants, if they chose not to consent to this TM value set of assisting fellow participants. Study participants explained that they felt that the greater TM community expected them to comply with the notion of helping other participants along the course. They willfully accepted this notion submitting to the conformity and assimilation of TM and WTM events:

No one dares refuse not to help out others on the course. They would be called out for being selfish. It's really wonderful because you don't see that a lot in society. Altruism and selflessness, it really only comes out in people in special situations. It comes out more and more when people are pushed to their limit, when they're in survival and it's truly necessary to band together.

A second study participant echoed this in the following response:

Tough Mudder has a very positive culture. It's very upbeat. It's very, we can do this together. I mean, it all comes from that team work, that camaraderie. But, like I said it's very positive, I've never been to a Tough Mudder event and not seen people help others. That's just not what Tough Mudder is about.

Study participants continuously spoke of being overcome by the profound sense of community after participating in a TM event. Atkinson articulates the essence of these events as described by participants by explaining that, within these social collectives, there is a “palpable feeling of *communitas*” and that, at these events “mirth mixes with encouragement” (2008, p.104) and the common sense of community is felt strongly amongst participants. Study participants constantly spoke of the feeling of being part of a unique community. “The atmosphere at Tough Mudder events is just incredible. There is really just a profound feeling of community.” A second participant offered that at TM and WTM events:

You’ve got to love team work. You’ve got to go into the event ready to help people and be willing to let other people help you. If you think you’re just going to go there and power through yourself and then you’re going to miss out on what Tough Mudder is all about. You’ve got to go there with the team aspect. You’ve got to go there with a positive attitude you have to be ready to help other people. That’s how you get the most out of it. How you have the most fun is helping people out and letting other people help you out. You’re crawling through mud and being electrocuted you can’t go through that and have fun unless it’s with other people going through the same stuff.

In the eyes of study participants, the sense of community and camaraderie were features that made TM and WTM different than other events. One participant commented:

I would say that Tough Mudder is a pretty unique event and it all goes back to the camaraderie of all the participants. I personally have not experienced that type of camaraderie in any other races, marathons or of the other events that I’ve done. I haven’t found the same type of community amongst the participants.

This notion of community and camaraderie as a characteristic differentiating TM and WTM events from other sporting events was echoed by another study participant:

Being a Tough Mudder means you're part of a group or a community where everyone's out to help everybody accomplish their goals. Whatever everyone else is trying to accomplish, I'm going to help them with that. That's the type of mindset people have. If you get stuck at the walls I'm going to push you over. It's really about coming together almost like a temporary community so everyone can make it through. That's the big thing about Tough Mudder is that everyone that starts that course, finishes together. It's a pretty unique community in that sense.

Finally, another study participant said:

At Tough Mudder you find a sense of common community. Everyone is there to do the same thing, be it just run, or run well. The commonality is still you're there to run, and when you do a Tough Mudder the commonality is, we're going to get out of these obstacles and were going to finish together. You have a community of people together with a common goal and common mindset of getting each other through the course. All the races tend to be like that. I've never seen the community at racing like that anywhere else.

Study participants perceived that the values associated with this sense of community and camaraderie as being unique to TM and WTM events and as operating in response to and providing alternatives from mainstream sports. In fact, it can be argued that these events do reject some traditional mainstream sport values, such as measure and rule, in favour of such values as personal sensation (Kay & Laberge, 2002) and pleasure as framed by ideas of risk, thrill-seeking and adventure (Wheaton, 2004). While study participants contended that TM and

WTM do indeed oppose some of the values present in mainstream sports, it is wise to question if these events do in fact constitute an all together alternative physical culture, as study participants perceived it to. As was mentioned previously, several of the study participants had limited previous experience in organized sport prior to their involvement in TM and WTM events. With this being the case, study participants' ability to compare the values present in TM and WTM to other athletic endeavors was limited. That said, what is important to note here is that participants perceived TM and WTM events to have values, specifically the presence of community and camaraderie amongst participants that were different than those held by other activities. Although study participants perceived the values of TM and WTM to lay outside that of those present in mainstream sports, there are ways in which TM and WTM do in fact reproduce some the negative elements of sport participation. One such aspect is that participants still engage in competitive, rigorous activity that promotes pain and injury tolerance. The manner in which study participants felt included into a community that reproduces dominant narratives of pain and suffering tolerance common in mainstream sports will be explored in the following section.

### Becoming Part of a Community Marked by Tolerance of Pain and Suffering

Few athletes take up sports or games with the intention of suffering physical, emotional and psychological anguish (Atkinson, 2011), however, almost contradictorily “within a mutually identified community of athletes, the ability to withstand and relish in athletic suffering, is embraced as a form of group distinction” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 166; see also Young, 2003). This was evident amongst study participants: their “sense of proclivity for willfully imposed anguish within their athletic pursuits connects them together as a unique social conglomerate, one that

has been described as a pain community” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 166). Elsewhere, these communities that collectively pursue suffering have been described as “neo-traditional communities” in which members amalgamate around shared ideological values through physical practices (Niedzviecki, 2004). Putnam further describes such an ability to withstand and enjoy suffering as a form of social capital which members’ value as a marker of their collective identity (1995). This gathering around the ability to collectively embrace suffering was a marker of the unification of study participants with other TM and WTM participants.

Pain and suffering are arguably unavoidable in the TM event and, to a much greater extent, at WTM. In the WTM event specifically, participants are asked to travel along a course completing multiple laps accumulating dozens of miles travelled with little or no rest. The course is specifically designed to test participants both physically, through the sheer difficulty of both the distance travelled and the obstacles themselves, and mentally, by having participants run nonstop through the night in uncomfortable and strenuous conditions. These laps at WTM event, as described previously, are completed over a 24 hour time period beginning early on a Saturday morning going through the night and ending Sunday morning. The event itself, over the first three years of its existence, has been staged in the month of November in New Jersey where participants have also been confronted with unforgivingly cold weather conditions. The difficulty of this event was acknowledged by study participants in the following responses:

World’s Toughest Mudder will leave you scarred physically, mentally and emotionally. It is a very exhausting event. Last year I was only 30 miles into the race when I had to pull out. It takes a huge toll on your body.

Another study participant offered similar insight into the difficulty of the WTM event:

With World's Toughest Mudder it's a little different than your regular Tough Mudder. What stands out the most is the majority of the obstacles are either beefed up or, or they're replicated a number of times in a single lap. Overall, when you go to World's Toughest Mudder you're looking at a beefed up version of what you've done before at regular Tough Mudder events. This year I heard that there are going to be double the amount of obstacles than there was last year. We're looking at 80 obstacles within a 10 mile split. That's a pretty substantial amount of stuff that you have to overcome just to do one lap. Last year's World's was already really difficult so I don't even want to think about it getting any worse at this year's event.

A third study participant further commented on the difficulty they experienced at the WTM event:

Last year I was going into the World's Toughest Mudder thinking that theoretically I could do five laps, but I would be happy with four. Well when I got there I only did two laps. The cold got to me. I sat in my tent and cried and got out for two more in the morning. I only did four laps, which I thought I'd be happy with but thinking back on it I spent a lot of time in the tent and I'm kind of disappointed that I didn't push through, that I wasn't tough enough for it.

An aspect of this particular community that stood out amongst responses of study participants was the sense of social capital acquired by participants in experiencing pain and being pushed to their limits together. The communal sense of agony shared amongst study participants provided them with a shared meaningful experience with other event participants. This appreciation and ability to relish the suffering and agony endured during these events allowed study participants to further feel a sense of community while at TM and WTM events.

This parallels the feeling of belonging that was discussed in the previous section that was marked by the sense of camaraderie present at events.

Within this pain community, study participants felt that they were able to bond with one another over the sharing and withstanding of athletic suffering. This point was apparent in the following responses: “sharing the pain and misery with others, that’s really cool, that really motivates you to keep going and pushing instead of falling behind or considering quitting.”

Another study participant echoed this notion of sharing the pain and suffering with other event participants:

Just by putting on the event, you know it’s a crazy thing, but it kind of sets itself up to make experiences like that. Misery loves company I guess, so were kind of all in this together and we might as well have fun with it.

Another study participant said:

It’s just fantastic. I remember after World’s Toughest Mudder last year I couldn’t even drink because I was so drained. It feels like you’re in this death race with everybody else and it gives you a sense of camaraderie with those who run it because you know how tough it is; they know how tough it is; it’s kind of like an unspoken thing that everybody kind of knows about but nobody really talks about. What you just went through was completely exhausting but you’ve just shared it with a great group of people.

Sharing this agony experienced at WTM events as a group made study participants come to actually enjoy it. When being out there on the course study participants attempted to push themselves to the point where they inflicted this athletic pain and suffering on themselves. In this sense, study participants included themselves in a community that could arguably be described as masochistic. Study participants seemed to seek this pain and through their

responses, derived some sense of social and emotional stimulation through their suffering while at events. This acceptance of such physical suffering was significant in that there was lack of discussion of pain and injury as being negative aspects of TM and WTM events. Elsewhere, beyond the confines of sport and other athletic endeavors, pain and suffering are generally avoided by individuals. In fact, the study participants previously spoke of enjoying their predictable working lives that were marked by a sense of comfort and stability. It is interesting that as participants in TM and WTM events, they relished and sought out to experience suffering associated with pushing their bodies to their perceived limits, while they clearly avoided such doings in their regular daily lives. Furthermore, this willingness and, arguably, desire for, of study participants to submit themselves to pain and injury contradicts their perceptions of the alternate values present within TM and WTM events acting in opposition to those of mainstream sport. In fact, pain and injury tolerance further reproduce the dominant narratives common in mainstream sport.

This tolerance of the suffering experienced at events was further emphasized in the following responses from study participants:

Physically it sucks. It's cold, it's brutal and I'm going to love it. Despite being in pain and maybe even injured, it's just this great feeling. It's nothing like anything else I've ever done and I'm addicted to it. I'll continue going back year after year.

Another study participant spoke of his acceptance and fondness of the pain involved at WTM:

After last year's event I needed to take about a month off of training completely. I had really bad laceration from chaffing behind both of my knees and I could not walk properly for about two weeks and I couldn't run for about a full month, so I'm hoping to achieve similar results this year.

Another study participant noted:

The event completely floored me in terms of pushing me to the brink of exhaustion. After that I was addicted because that gratifying feeling of finishing a race when you've been pushed to your limit despite being in pain and maybe even injured. It's just this great feeling, incomparable to anything else I've done and I'm addicted to it. I just keep coming back for more.

In the official 2013 WTM event video created by event organizers, a female participant with an Australian accent is pictured in the dead of night with her head lamp and wet suit. She remarks that she "loves the feeling of being completely physically exhausted." The ability to share this physical exhaustion was valued by study participants and acted as a marker of entrance into a social collective denoted by adherence to physical suffering. Both the sense of community and the ability to experience suffering together with other participants offered study participants a sense of belonging. This quote accurately summed up the collective feeling of enjoyment that study participants acquired through subjecting their bodies to the self-described agony they encountered.

Study participants understood themselves belonging to a mutually identified community marked by the ability to withstand and relish in athletic suffering contradicts their beliefs of TM and WTM events opposing traditional mainstream sport values. In saying that, it can be argued that, within TM and WTM, the philosophy of helping rather than dominating other participants differs from more traditional notions of bettering and conquering opponents that are present in other types of sports and athletic events. However, the lack of discussion on the similarities between TM and WTM values and those of traditional mainstream sports speaks to study participants' lack of critical awareness of or reluctance to acknowledge that these events do in

fact reproduce existing dominant narratives of pain and injury tolerance common in mainstream sports. These constructed pain communities that gather around the ability to collectively embrace suffering provided study participants with a sense of social capital. With this adherence to pain and injury, study participants arguably risked their well-being to a certain degree which opposed their perception of TM and WTM belonging to an alternative physical culture that rejects traditional mainstream sport values.

The risks associated with consciously pushing their bodies to their perceived physical limits were not the only ones sought by study participants. Beyond the health risks associated with this submission to athletic pain and suffering study participants spoke of other perceived risks in terms of their performance at events. Specifically, study participants commented on the risk of not being able to finish TM and WTM events and how this risk attracted them, in part, to participate in these events.

### Negotiating Personal Physical Boundaries

In discussing risks associated with participation in TM and WTM events, a theme that emerged was the potential risk of not being able to complete and potentially fail an event. This possibility of failing while participating in TM and WTM events was a characteristic that further attracted study participants to be involved in such events and influenced their identity as risk takers as it contributed to the feeling of the uncertainty desired by study participants. Those who seek uncertain outcome or the possibility of failure can be understood as limit seekers (Fromm, 1973) and study participants could arguably be described as such. It is understood within the literature that such limit seekers are deeply frustrated by the highly circumscribed societies of late-modern life, so much so that they feel compelled to disrupt their socially dominated and limited self in ways that may appear to others as masochistic (Fromm, 1973). These are evidently

characteristics of the way study participants have described themselves. The denial of spontaneous creativity may be reason that participants sought freedom of expression in areas that depended precisely upon risk and skill (Lyng, 1990). This paralleled many themes previously discussed in Chapter 4 and further supports the labelling of participation in TM and WTM event as “quests for excitement” (cf., Elias & Dunning, 1986). Venturing outside of what are considered to be socially accepted forms of physical activity was a common theme amongst participant responses. Perhaps in response to this denial of spontaneous creativity, and as a result of this quest for excitement, study participants wanted to involve themselves in an event that seemed difficult, an endeavor they were unsure that they could complete.

There are several reasons why individuals decided to participate in TM and WTM events and one that was common amongst all study participants was the possibility of not being able to complete events. The events without question can be extremely difficult, especially when considering what is required of participants at the WTM event. Here participants have to advance around a course as many times as they can within a 24-hour time limit while completing obstacles that are larger and more difficult than at regular TM events. Study participants offered that as a result of both the larger obstacles and the extreme distances they would run, there was a perception that failing was a possibility at events. This risk of failure was a common theme amongst participants’ responses in which they described uncertainty at events. Study participants further discussed how they invited this risk of failure and how it was a characteristic that attracted them to events:

The big thing is the possibility and risk of not finishing and failing and the disappointment that comes along with that. It can really haunt you if you don’t jump right

back on the horse so to say. As disappointing as it would be to fail, it's a big reason why I'm attracted to this event.

Another participant noted:

When I go to World's Toughest Mudder I go because for me, I know it's something I will have a hard time completing it and I want that struggle. I look at it as something that's almost taunting me saying you can't do this, you can't accomplish this.

Failing in the WTM event can take many forms. It may include not being able to complete certain obstacles or being unable to attain predetermined personal goals of a certain number of laps or distance to run. However, the manner in which participants mostly spoke of failure at events was through the inability to remain on the course for the full 24 hours. This fear of failing to remain out on the WTM course for the full 24 hours was consistent amongst study participants, even those who had yet to participate in a WTM event at the time of their interview (and would be participating at WTM for the first time in 2013). Study participants shared that the ability to continue as event participants for the full 24 hours represented, to them, a marker of success. Much more than completing a certain number of laps, participants were concerned with the difficulty that would be involved in remaining out on the course for the entire event. This difficulty was described in this quote by a study participant:

I expect it to be difficult and that people are going to start dropping out pretty quickly as the temperatures go down and night fall sets in. I think though they will use all kinds of tactics to get us to quit and I think it's going to be cold. It might be windy, you never know what the temperature is going to be, but I know it's going to be hard.

This fear of failing contributed to why participants enjoyed and chose to participate in WTM. One participant reflected on the belief of not being able to complete the WTM.

I think it tested me. It tested my determination the most I guess. I have never before gone into a race and thought that I wouldn't be able to finish. When I was going into World's Toughest Mudder I started getting really nervous. It really made me realize how determined I was to finish this race. It was a really great feeling.

Another study participant further spoke of the difficulty in completing the event and shared his extreme disappointment in not being able to do so at the 2012 WTM event that they participated in. They had to drop out after only (!) 30 miles due to an injury:

At some point in time after I crawled out of the water, I ruptured my posterior tibial tendon which is the tendon that runs along the inside of your leg from your calf, runs around the ball of your ankle, runs towards the ball of your foot and ends up near your pinky toe. That ruptured and I had gotten back to my tent after lap three. Once I warmed it up just a little bit I kind of knew that there was something wrong with it. It started to feel funny when I got to the first aid tent and when I warmed it up I felt a sharp firing pain in my ankle. My ankle eventually locked up to where I couldn't actually move it and I couldn't actually walk. I ended up medical-ing [*sic*] out, told the guys that I was injured, couldn't keep going, and I had to drop out. It was pretty devastating. It's not one of those things that I couldn't keep going physically. I was fine aside from the injury. It wasn't that I was too fatigued or tired, that I wasn't fueled up right, that I didn't have enough water, or that my nutrition plan was off. It was that a tendon that I had pretty much no control over snapped, and it ended the whole thing for me and I was really disappointed in only completing 30 miles out there.

The fear and shame associated with failing at events contributed to study participants' exhilaration of conquest as well as the collective anxiety that was produced when participants

pushed themselves to their limits (Atkinson, 2008). Study participants desire to remain on the WTM course for the full duration of the event relates to their desire to negotiate their physical boundaries. The term “edgework” conceptualizes this voluntary risk-taking described by study participants as being used to negotiate boundaries between order and chaos (Lyng, 1990). Study participants arguably attempted to take physical risks by wanting to subject themselves to the possible physical threats associated with remaining active on the WTM course for the full 24 hours. Within a sociocultural context, and in relation to TM and WTM, participants engaged in edgework as they attempted to meet and push past their physical limits (Laurendeau & Brunschot, 2006). Again, and as noted in Chapter 4, although there are understandably some risks involved through participation in TM and WTM, the extent to which risk and the types of risks involved in these event, as well as study participants point of reference on risk and sport, needs to be questioned. The concepts of pseudoadventure and the authenticity of risk in TM and WTM will be revisited in the following section.

### Questioning the Authenticity and Types of Risk in TM and WTM Events

While, in this current historical moment in time, there seems to be general sense of risk aversion and a societal desire to reduce threats to individual well-being (Fairlie, 1989; Furedi, 2007), study participants actively sought risky experiences involving potential for personal injury (Lyng, 1990). This quest for excitement at the expense of self-described physical pain and suffering was undertaken in order to meet their personal thrill seeking desires.

TM and WTM participants represented a group of individuals who sought adventure in order to participate in risky behaviours as a response to their relatively tame lives. Of course, this desire to participate in such behaviours laid beyond the stability offered in their occupational

lives as was mentioned previously. TM and WTM events offered one such outlet for individuals to engage in risky behaviours although the type or risk involved could more accurately be described as calculated risks. While the Tough Mudder events are not normally as potentially physically perilous as other extreme sports, like base jumping, participants did articulate a sense of ‘stress seeking’ (Klausner, 1968) and ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 1990) as motivation for their participation. Study participants noted the notion of desiring stress seeking through involvement in risky behavior in the following responses:

Being a risk taker is somebody who will do things out of their comfort zone for the purpose of just saying that they did those things. I mean, I didn’t risk my health in a 24 hour race to win money; I risked it because I wanted to see how laps I could do. So, I think, take away all the incentives and I think people are still there to put themselves through that.

Another study participant also discussed risk taking at TM events including the Electroshock Therapy Obstacle discussed in Chapter 1:

I think what it means to be a risk taker is someone who is willing to look at something that they know could end badly. I could black out if I go through this field of electrical wires, it’s a very real possibility, especially after what you’ve been through on the course, or in the case of WTM when you’ve been through multiple times, and you’ve forgotten what lap your on and you still look at this tangle of electrical wires and you still go through it. That to me is taking risks. I see something that I know could end badly and I tell myself, if I do this it could end in a very bad way. Even though this is the case I’m still willing to do it because what I want is on the other side of it. And what I want is to get through this obstacle so I can get onto the next one.

Study participants were arguably involved in events that they perceived to require them to voluntarily subject themselves to certain risks. However, it is important to note that such risks were relatively trivial in scope and consequence when compared to the types of risks assumed in other alternative or extreme sports and activities. In other words, compared to the uncontrollable and un-calculable risks associated with, for example summiting Everest, TM and WTM are grounded in, what is termed, calculated risks and 'manufactured adventure' (Holyfield, 1999). Event organizers are clearly heavily involved in the manufacturing of both risk and adventure present at TM and WTM events, one such way is through the construction of obstacles. The obstacles at TM and WTM events are influenced by the British Special forces and are meant to play off human fears such as fire, water and heights. These obstacles resemble real dangers that may be present in an outdoor setting, yet were regularly unavailable to study participants in their everyday lives.

TM and WTM courses are purposefully designed to provide participants with an invented setting that simulate real risks and dangers providing adventure seekers, who are unable to access such risks and dangers in their daily lives, an opportunity to pursue what they believe to be their edges or limits. The extent to which and type of risk that study participants encountered at TM and WTM events, must be considered. Participants, as previously described, encounter calculated risks that are constructed by a team of event organizers. Through event organizers scripting of narratives, TM and WTM events arguably fall into a category of mimetic activities that provided invented setting for study participants (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Although some risks and dangers are involved in such activities, these invented setting more accurately provided study participants with opportunity to seek risky behaviours with a lesser degree of risk and danger. TM and WTM event however, were still able to elicit excitement for study participants

despite these risks being manufactured. The risks associated with TM and WTM courses thus could more accurately be described as controlled “real” risks and dangers (Maguire, 1991).

Study participants did not speak to the extent of the presence of the types or risks associated with their participation in TM and WTM events. Since the organizers of these events were so heavily involved in the scripting of narratives and regulating events, it was evident that they also played a role in shaping participants’ identities as risks takers. This is not to say that study participants did not subject themselves to obvious physical and health risks associated with running such extreme distances at the WTM event, and encountering obstacles at both TM and WTM events. The reality is that event organizers would not design courses to be perilously dangerous for their participants. Instead a more accurate description of these constructed exploits would be that of pseudoadventure (Goffman, 1969) which was also discussed at the end of the previous chapter. The risk taking involved in such events provided opportunities to study participants to elicit excitement through measured and regulated dangers while limiting the extent to which they were actually subjected to perilous dangers.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter further explored how study participants understood their involvement in TM and WTM events firstly by further exploring their desires for uncertain outcome. Although study participants did seek to counteract the limiting nature of their occupational lives this was restricted to only when participating in TM and WTM events. Beyond these events in their daily lives they enjoyed the stability and constancy afforded them by their SESs. In this there is an apparent contradiction through study participants’ descriptions of their boring and dehumanizing working lives, yet their admission to, and in fact want to, possess these lives. Although study

participants acknowledged that they wanted to escape their self-described mundane working lives they contrarily also desired these predictable and limiting existences. In this, it is apparent that TM and WTM were only temporary escapes for study participants.

The next theme that was explored was study participants perceptions of being included in a unique community marked by a sense of camaraderie shared with other participants. The philosophy of helping instead of bettering opponents, sometimes at the sacrifice of their own progression along the course, was believed by study participants to be a value that characterized TM as an alternative physical culture. In this respect it could be argued that these events do hold some values that oppose those of other mainstream sports, as this notion of helping opponents throughout participation in an event is perhaps distinctive when compared to other mainstream sports that require participants to dominate their competitors.

A point, however, that was not discussed amongst study participants was the fact that TM and WTM that do in fact reproduce some the negative elements of sport participation. One such aspect was that participants still engaged in competitive, rigorous activity that promoted pain and injury tolerance. This clearly reproduced dominant narratives of pain and suffering tolerance common in mainstream sports. In fact, participants invited this pain and suffering in almost a masochistic way and gained social capital from being included in what was described as a pain community. The communal sense of agony shared amongst study participants in these pain communities provided them with shared meaningful experiences. The appreciation and ability to relish the suffering and agony endured during these events allowed study participants to further feel a sense of community while at TM and WTM events.

Finally, an examination of the extent to which TM and WTM events influenced study participants identity as risk takers was conducted. Study participants were arguably involved in

events that they perceived to require them to voluntarily subject themselves to certain risks. However it was explained that such risks were relatively trivial in scope and consequence when compared to the types of risks assumed in other alternative or extreme sports and activities. Furthermore event organizers were deemed to be heavily involved in the manufacturing of both risk and adventure present at TM and WTM events and thus were also involved in shaping participants' identities as risks takers. TM and WTM courses provided participants with invented setting that simulated real risks and dangers providing study participants with opportunity to pursue their risk seeking desires not regularly available to them.

The next chapter will summarize the key results of the study, outline the strengths and weaknesses of this project and offer suggestions on further research.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion

The purpose of this research project was to examine how participants of TM and WTM identified with and understood this event. Particularly, it addressed how their SES influenced their understanding of and participation in TM and WTM. Additionally, this study sought to investigate how, in turn, TM contributed to participants' sense of self as risk takers in sport. Through conversations with study participants about their lived experiences with and surrounding TM and WTM events including, time leading up to competitions, in race participation, and post-race experiences, this study investigated who participates in TM events and why. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. Who participates in Tough Mudder and why? Further, how does their social location (SES in particular) inform their participation in and understanding of Tough Mudder?
2. Does Tough Mudder contribute to a participant's sense of self (identity) as a risk taker? If so, how?

During the course of interviews with the seven individuals who participated in this study, many dominant themes emerged as they reflected upon and shared their experiences as participants in TM and WTM events.

### Summary of Research Themes

Study participants' belonged to a professional middle class marked by economic stability and their professional work roles influenced their ability to participate in TM and WTM events from a financial standpoint. Their socio-economic privilege placed them in a position in which they could dedicate both disposable income and leisure time to pursue (both train for and

compete in) such activities such as TM and WTM. This was a contradiction in the study as study participants understood TM and WTM as being all-inclusive and inviting events despite their recognition of the large costs associated with participation in such events.

Study participants instead, perceived these events to be accessible to anyone who wished to participate in them. As a result of the, at times, excessive costs it was apparent how participation in these events was limited, or much more accessible, to a certain group of individuals, those whose SES afforded them the discretionary income and discretionary time with which to train for and compete in such events (Giulianotti, 2009).

Study participants' understanding of TM and WTM was further influenced by their belonging to a "professional middle class" habitus. This particular habitus was marked by particular forms of knowledge, expertise, and disposition of preferences that were influenced by participants' immersion in professionalized, bureaucratized and rationalized white collar work roles (Giulianotti, 2009). This echoed Kay and Laberge's (2002) key findings in which they suggested an emergence of a habitus common to both a new corporate culture and the adventure racing field. Granted that the event they examined (Eco-Challenge) was a much more extensive event with a smaller group of participants, the event also consisted of participants who were afforded with certain socio-economic privilege, paralleling that of this study's participants.

While participants' socio-economic privilege afforded them the financial and time resources with which to prepare for and participate in TM and WTM, there was a perception of routine-ness and monotony of work-life among study participants that further influenced their participation in, and understanding of, TM and WTM. Elias and Dunning (1986) contended that Western societies have evolved into unexciting social environments as a result of producing highly contained and discipline cultures, that study participants perceived to be immersed in.

Study participant's used TM and WTM as a way to counter their self-described mundane, rational and reserved lives. This use of an endurance running event in response to the routineness and monotony of individuals' professional lives parallels Atkinson's exploration of triathlons in which he contended that these events offered an opportunity to counter boredom amongst the professional middle class (2008), a class which this study's participants belonged to. The uncertainty and excitement present at TM and WTM events was an aspect that participants sought and which opposed the constraining (Lyng, 1990) and dehumanizing (Holyfield, 1999) environments they resided in. These 'escapes' however were explained to be temporary ones in which participants momentarily quench their thirsts for excitement and adventure. Although study participants did seek to counter the limiting nature of their occupational lives, this was restricted only to when participating in TM and WTM events. Beyond these events and in their daily lives they enjoyed the stability and constancy afforded them by their socio-economic privilege. In this there was an apparent contradiction through study participants' descriptions of their boring and dehumanizing working lives, yet their admission to, and comfort in possessing these lives.

What is important to take away from this is that although all study participants were aware that TM and WTM events involved a certain level of financial and time commitment, not all were cognizant or vocal to the fact that their participation was predicated upon their ability to apply their resources towards these events. As a result of this TM and WTM events, although perceived by study participants to be and promoted by event organizers, as all inclusive events, were actually more accessible to individuals with a particular social location. TM and WTM seem to offer this cohort of individuals an opportunity to be involved in organized physical activity. It seems as though this opportunity provided by TM and WTM events is perceived by

study participants to offer them an opportunity to counter their self-described disciplined cultures that they find themselves immersed in. However, with only occasional participation in events, only a few times a year at most, does this constitute changing and combating these limiting environments? More accurately, study participants are merely temporarily escaping the perceived confines of their current social locations. That being said, this limited diversion seems to be offering them an appropriate amount of excitement and adventure that they desire. If this is in fact the case then study participants, rather than opposing the unexciting environments of Western societies, are using TM and WTM as a distraction to temporarily satiate and satisfy their perceived needs for excitement.

Another major theme that emerged was study participants' contradictory understanding of themselves as "recreational" athletes. This self-categorization of being recreational athletes did not correspond with their goals of running in excess of 50 kilometers while at the WTM event. It is difficult to conceive wanting to run over 50 kilometers as "recreational!" The irony of participants' beliefs in their belonging to a category of "recreational" participants, and their goal setting of distances that constituted much more than that of recreational running was an interesting contradiction that emerged. Here was a location where the concept of "recreation" got spun on its head. In Chapter 4, it was explained that most study participants had limited prior involvement in organized athletic endeavors and could perhaps be considered recreational in this sense, however TM events, and more specifically, WTM asks participants to push themselves to their perceived physical limits. With the number of registrants now exceeding one million (One Million Mudders, 2013) it makes sense to understand how and why these previously less active individuals are now arguably choosing to run such extreme distances. TM and WTM participants may constitute a new variety of athletes as this, arguably, dramatic shift in lifestyle amongst

study participants may be distinctive amongst such large communities as seen in TM and WTM. To this end, a shift in the academic literature towards a broader exploration of the social importance of such a drastic shift, as seen in this relatively modern take on endurance running events, is warranted.

In addition to the disparity in study participants understanding of themselves as “recreational” athletes, their characterization of the TM and WTM event itself was also at times contradictory. Study participants’ perception of TM and WTM events as being adventurous endeavours despite having limited previous experiences in activities that could be described as adventurous was a point of interest. Although the event does evidently involve some adventurous qualities, participants’ limited previous involvement in such types of activities constrained their ability to label TM and WTM events as such. The adventure within TM and WTM were more accurately described as being grounded in “manufactured adventure” (Holyfield, 1999). TM and WTM event organizers were very much involved in the scripting of the sense of adventure that study participants experienced at events and these “mimetic activities” (Elias & Dunning, 1986) provided invented settings that simulated real dangers. Study participants, while at TM and WTM events, were involved in a variety of adventure more accurately labelled as “pseudoadventure” (Goffman, 1969). In Chapter 5 it was explained that at TM and WTM events study participants perceived themselves to have been involved in endeavors that required them to voluntarily subject themselves to certain risks. However, such risks were relatively trivial in scope and consequence when compared to the types of risks assumed in other alternative or extreme sports and activities. Furthermore, event organizers were deemed to be heavily involved in the manufacturing of both risk and adventure present at TM and WTM events and thus were also involved in shaping participants’ identities as risks takers. Individuals’ perception of risk is

based on a variety of cultural and social factors (cf., Douglas, 1985), yet there was a lack of commentary within interviews on event organizers involvement in the influencing of study participants risk experiences. This speaks to participants' lack of acknowledgement of an important influence on their understanding of the types of risks associated with participation in TM and WTM events.

It seems as though study participants wanted to involve themselves in adventurous and risky endeavours that they were not accustomed to in their everyday lives through involvement in TM and WTM. Were these risks that they were exposed to through their participation the types or risk that they had set out to encounter? It is apparent that event organizers informed study participants' understanding of the risks involved in TM and WTM and that there was little comment from study participants concerning this. To what extent did organizers actually inform and regulate the perceived risks that participants were involved in? Despite this, it did appear that study participants were content with the type and amount of adventure and risk provided for them through their participation in these events. Through the organization of TM and WTM events, organizers essentially decided what suitable risks to be taken by participants were. In doing so, these manufactured adventures are providing a guise for participants by offering them controlled risky settings in which they perceive their desires for risk-taking are being met. It appears that study participants pursuits to escape the dehumanization of current Western society through participation in TM and WTM events are in fact further contributing the scripting of what entails risky behaviour. TM and WTM thus offer temporary perceived escapes from limiting and controlled environments while masking a control held over the decision of what entails risk by those who offer the opportunities.

The final theme that emerged in this study concerned the perception amongst study participants that TM and WTM existed as an alternative physical culture whose values opposed those of other mainstream sports. Study participants explained their perceptions of being included in a unique community marked by a sense of camaraderie that they shared with other TM and WTM participants. The philosophy of helping instead of bettering opponents, sometimes at the sacrifice of their own progression along the course, was perceived by study participants to be a value that characterized TM and WTM as an alternative physical culture. In this respect, it could be argued that these events did hold some values that opposed those of other sports. This notion of helping opponents throughout participation in an event was unique when compared to other mainstream sports that more generally require participants to dominate their competitors.

A point, however, that was not discussed amongst study participants was the fact that TM and WTM do, in fact, reproduce some the negative elements of sport participation that exist. In this current historical moment in time there seems to be a general sense of risk aversion (cf., Fairlie, 1989; Furedi, 2007), yet study participants clearly desired to expose themselves to “personal injury in order to meet their personal thrill-seeking desires” (Lyng, 1990, p.851-852). At TM, and more specifically at WTM, study participants engaged in exhausting and rigorous activity that promoted pain and injury tolerance. This clearly reproduced dominant narratives of pain and suffering tolerance common in mainstream sports. In fact, study participants invited this pain and suffering in an almost masochistic way and gained social capital from being included in what was labelled as “pain communities” (Atkinson, 2008). The communal sense of agony shared amongst study participants in these pain communities provided them with shared meaningful experiences. TM and WTM are understandably a contemporary take on endurance running events that seem to appeal to a group not previously involved in competitive running.

Although it is good that TM and WTM offer these previously uninvolved individuals the opportunity to be physically active, these participants are being exposed to negative aspects of sport participation.

Pain and sport have been well researched by many sport scholars in the sociology of sport literature (Roderick, 2006; Young, 2004). The body of literature as a whole has revealed the problematic tenets of sport which promote ideals of sacrifice and pushing bodily limits. Victory and domination over opponents have been values that have accompanied these ideals, yet were arguably absent within TM and WTM. The absence of these tenets, were explained to be aspects of TM/WTM that were valued by study participants. In this an issue arose as study participants were not previously involved in competitive athletic endeavours, partly as a result of their dissatisfaction with their perceptions of the values present in main stream sports. They were now able to participate in an event in which these values were absent, yet which still promoted the notion of injury and pain tolerance. Athletes' ability to play with an injury produces athletic capital and as such, pain and injury have become normalized as an expected part of peoples' sporting experiences. The reification of these reproduced values of pain tolerance is problematic and more attention must be given to the analysis of these new athletic endeavours that participants claim to belong to a new physical culture.

### Future Research Directions

The study participants who were recruited all had positive experiences at TM and WTM. Individuals who did not feel part of the shared sense of community explained previously were not present within this study. This was clearly a limitation of the study; however, the results that were presented remained close to the participants' that were included and explicitly reflected

their experiences in TM. Future research could include other key persons in the TM scene including participants who had negative experiences, family of participants, as well as event organizers. Furthermore, although this study was one of the first of its kind to look at TM and WTM events, geography was not a central consideration in this study. All study participants lived in Canada and the United States and were English speaking. Furthermore, they had only participated in TM and WTM events in North America. Since TM and WTM are international events, future research would profit from dedicated examination of the ways in which participation in these events is influenced by being in or outside of Canada and the United States.

While this project focused on better understanding the experiences of TM participants, it is important for researchers to explore the motivations of adventure and obstacle course race organizers which may serve as a promising potential for a future research area. The TM event was still a rather contemporary event at the time of this study and throughout the time period in which this study took place, other such obstacle course races emerged within the race community. Comparative studies between TM and other obstacle course races may provide interesting findings and further explain how participants understand these events and furthermore what influences participation in such events. Additionally, within this study, only two participants had participated in both marathons and TM events. Future research could further investigate the differences and/or similarities between involvement in a variety of endurance type running events through inclusion of more individuals who have participated both in TM and other endurance running events such as marathons, triathlons and/or Ironman events.

Finally this project did not investigate the relationships between other facets of participants' social locations. One's social location is composed of many intersecting facets including, but not limited to, ethnicity, sex, gender, dis/ability, sexuality and SES. For the

purposes of this study, however, participant involvement and their understanding of TM and WTM was explored with specific attention to their SES. Although it is important to be cognizant of other social influences, the scope of this study was purposefully narrowed to SES and future research in this area would profit by focused intersectional analysis.

### Concluding Points

This research study initially sought to examine participants' experiences and perceptions of involvement in TM and WTM events, as well as how these events influenced their sense of self as risk takers in sport. The data gathered went beyond this focus and additionally explored some interestingly contradictory views of the participants concerning their understanding of themselves as "recreational" athletes, as well as the ways in which TM and WTM did and did not belong to an alternative physical culture. These views were connected to the main research questions, in that they pointed to the influence of broader cultural perceptions of sport participation, specifically in this modern take on endurance running. These unintended themes that arose shed light on the ways in which cultural and social factors influenced participants' perceptions of risk.

In this thesis, I hope to have demonstrated some social and cultural implications that influence participation in TM and WTM events. In doing so, this thesis has contributed to the limited body of knowledge and analysis of TM and WTM specifically. This original study could perhaps be used as a spring board to further examine both other varieties of obstacle course races and the broader category of endurance running events. In addition to exploring a rather untouched event within the existing literature, this thesis also further supports and extends existing literature surrounding what has been socio-culturally examined concerning the

connection between risk and sport involvement. The TM and WTM event have offered me an opportunity to explore socio-cultural implications of a relatively new group of participants present within a community marked by individuals who relish the opportunity to, at some point, be waist deep in mud.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Berlin Walls are obstacles that appear at both TM and WTM events. The following description of them is offered on the TM website: “The most hellish hurdles you’ll ever overcome. Teamwork is key for this obstacle. Climb a set of 3 meter wooden walls that our Course Designers have strategically placed for when you’re at your weakest points during the event. Some Mudders<sup>SM</sup> will be strong enough to make it over Berlin Walls alone, but most will need a boost from a fellow Mudder, whether it’s a teammate or someone else. There’s never been a better time to make friends with a stranger. Obstacle Stat: 80% of participants require teamwork to get over Berlin Walls” (Tough Mudder, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Junyong Pak was the winner in the male participant category of the first two World’s Toughest Mudder Events in 2012 and 2013 (Tough Mudder, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Everest is an obstacle that has appears at all TM and WTM events. The following description is offered on the TM website: “Conquering Everest takes major grit and teamwork. Sprint up this quarter-pipe obstacle and enlist the help of other Mudders<sup>SM</sup> to pull you over the beastly summit. Everest is coated in mud and grease, a combo that might send you right back from where you came. Suck it up and keep climbing. The view from the top is worth it” (Tough Mudder, 2013).

## Appendix A

### **Study Information Sheet and Recruitment Letter (on department letterhead)**

**Project Title:** “Waist Deep in Mud: A Socio-Cultural Investigation of Tough Mudder”

**Principal Investigator:** Mr. John Vlahos (York University)

**Supervising Professor:** Dr. Parissa Safai (York University)

Dear member of the Tough Mudder (TM) community,

This project explores how TM participants identify with and understand TM and how, in turn, TM contributes to their sense of self as risk takers in sport.

I hope to interview TM participants who have competed in or are registered to compete in the Toronto and/or World’s Tough Mudder events.

Your experience with TM makes your contribution and involvement invaluable, and I would greatly appreciate your consideration of participation in this project.

Your participation would involve one in-person interview scheduled at your convenience and lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, with the possibility of a telephone or Skype interview should the need arise. The interview is **completely confidential**. Any material used in publication resulting from this study will have identifying characteristics omitted or paraphrased to maintain your **anonymity**. Should the need arise, there may be follow-up correspondence by telephone or email to discuss specific themes, clarify issues, or discuss new findings.

The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. You can stop the interview at any point in time or decline to answer any specific questions **without consequence**. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher, the School of Kinesiology and Health Science, or York University. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, all data collected as a result of your participation will be immediately destroyed.

All research materials (notes, tapes, transcripts) will be kept under lock-and key and data collected will be accessible only to the research staff. You can review your transcript at any point in time during the study. Within two years of the conclusion of this project, unless you request otherwise, all interview materials will be destroyed. There is no financial compensation for research participants: however, you may request a copy of the final report. The study has **minimal risks** and the decision to participate or not is **completely voluntary**.

While there is some research examining the characteristics of social factors that influence participation in adventure racing (as one broad category of sport), it is limited. There has been little scholarly research on obstacle-style adventure races and no critical socio-cultural research on TM specifically to date, despite its growing popularity as an obstacle endurance race. Your involvement will contribute to the better comprehension of how TM participants understand the event and how it contributes to the creation of their constructed identity. This study offers you

the opportunity to share your experiences of TM which in turn may help the future development of such events.

If you would like more information or are interested in participating, please contact John Vlahos by email at [jvlahos@yorku.ca](mailto:jvlahos@yorku.ca). Thank you in advance for considering my request.

Sincerely,

John Vlahos  
York University

## Appendix B

### **Informed Consent Form** (on department letterhead)

**Project Title:** “Waist Deep in Mud: A Qualitative Analysis of Tough Mudder”

**Principal Investigator:** Mr. John Vlahos (York University)

**Supervising Professor:** Dr. Parissa Safai (York University)

This Informed Consent Form, in conjunction with the Study Information Sheet, should give you a basic idea of the research project and what your participation will involve. A copy of both the Informed Consent Form and Study Information Sheet will be left for your records and reference. If you have further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Mr. John Vlahos by email at [jvlahos@yorku.ca](mailto:jvlahos@yorku.ca), or Parissa Safai, PhD by email at [psafai@yorku.ca](mailto:psafai@yorku.ca) or by phone at 416-736-2100 ext. 23040.

#### **Purpose of the Research:**

The purpose of this research is to explore how TM participants identify with and understand TM and how, in turn, TM contributes to their sense of self as risk takers in sport.

#### **What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:**

You are invited to participate in one in-depth interview. The interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience, with the possibility of a telephone or Skype interview should the need arise. Should the need arise, there may be follow-up correspondence by telephone or email to discuss specific themes, clarify issues, or discuss new findings.

#### **Risks and-or Compensation:**

We do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. There is no financial compensation for research participants: however, you may request a copy of the final report.

#### **Voluntary Participation:**

The decision to participate or not is **completely voluntary** and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of your relationship with York University now, or in future.

#### **Withdrawal from the Study:**

You can stop the interview at any point in time or decline to answer any specific questions **without consequence**. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or York University. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, all data collected as a result of your participation will be destroyed.

**Confidentiality:**

The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed, but the name of the participants will not be recorded. Any material used in publications resulting from this study will have identifying characteristics omitted or paraphrased to maintain your **anonymity**. **Confidentiality** will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

All interview materials and data will be kept under lock-and-key accessible only to the researcher. You can review your transcript at any point in time during the study, and within two years of the conclusion of this project, unless you request otherwise, all interview materials will be destroyed.

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to take part as a volunteer in this project. I understand the data will be kept in strict confidentiality by the researcher. I give permission to be interviewed and to be recorded on tape. I understand that I can view a copy of my transcripts at any time during the study, and that all interview materials and data will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. I understand that within two years of the conclusion of this project, unless I otherwise request, all interview materials will be destroyed. I understand that the research may be published, but that my name will not be associated with the research project. I understand that I have the right to refrain from answering any questions posed and that I can terminate the interview at any time at my discretion. Likewise, I am aware that I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I am fully aware that this study will not have any bearing on admission or any requirements for prospective students. It is in no way meant to coerce or pressure participants, particularly prospective university students, into attending or being associated with York University in any way.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions that I see fit and all have been answered to my satisfaction. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicated my consent.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### **Online Recruitment Letter**

Hello Fellow Tough Mudders/World's Toughest Mudders!

I'm conducting research on Tough Mudder (TM) participants as part of my Master's Degree at York University in Toronto, Canada. Specifically, I want to know how participants IDENTIFY with and UNDERSTAND the TM events and, in turn, how these events have contributed to their sense of selves as RISK TAKERS in sport. Are we another breed of individuals? Why would we ever subject ourselves to these types of races? If you have similar questions and are interested in my research then please message me on Facebook, or email me at [jvlahos@yorku.ca](mailto:jvlahos@yorku.ca).

Sincerely,

John Vlahos  
TM Toronto 2012/1013  
WTM 2013

## Appendix D

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

**1. Tell me a little bit about who you are.**

Probes: Where are you from? What are your interests? What is your background in fitness/athletics? Tell me about your current employment/education situation.

**2. Tell me about your motivation(s) for participating in TM.**

Probes: Which event did you compete in? Why? What attracted you to this event? What do you hope to accomplish at the event? How did you think this event will affect you physically/mentally/emotionally? Tell me about what you expected the event to be like prior to actually participating. Prior to competing, did you consider yourself to be the type of person to participate in such an event?

**3. What were the months leading up to your first event like?**

Probes: How did you have to prepare yourself mentally/emotionally/physically? Could you fully prepare yourself? Did you have a realistic idea of what you were getting into?

**4. What did it feel like being in the starting block waiting for the race to begin?**

Probes: Can you describe the atmosphere surrounding you at that point? Talk to me about the people in that starting gate with you. How were you feeling before the race? What was going through your head leading up to the start?

**5. Explain to me in your own words, exactly what TM is.**

Probes: Why do you think someone would participate in this event? Why do you think someone would choose this event over another? What does TM offer its participants? What makes TM a unique event? Tell me about what the event is able to help its participants accomplish. Tell me about if and how TM changed you both as an individual and as an athlete.

**6. Tell me about whether you consider yourself to be a risk-taker or not.**

What types of risks are associated with the course? How does the term risk fit in your vocabulary?

**7. Tell me about a memorable experience you had at TM.**

Probes: What made this experience memorable to you? Would you have been able to experience what you did outside of the TM environment/atmosphere?

**8. Talk to me a little bit about the culture that was created at the TM event.**

Probes: What was the atmosphere like on the course? Did you act like yourself on the day of the competition? If not, how did you act differently? Why? What was brought out in you? Tell me about how your day at the event was similar or different to other athletic gatherings or events.

**9. What was the actual experience of participating in the event like?**

Probes: How did the event test you? Tell me about the physical nature of the course and what it was like travelling along it. Did you incur any injuries throughout the day? Did anything

unexpected happen along the course? Tell me about a particularly challenging obstacle you remember encountering.

**10. What does being a Tough Mudder mean to you?**

Probes: Do you identify yourself as a TM? Why or why not? Do you have plans moving forward with TM? Why or Why not?

**11. Do you have any questions for me?**

Thank you for your time. As a fellow TM I enjoyed hearing your stories and think they will contribute greatly to me research.