

# Skills, Lines, and Rocks: The Ethnographic Approach to Rock Climbing and Mountaineering

Hubert Wierciński

*Abstract: In the following article I am concerning the problem of climbers' and mountaineers' spatial practices performed in rocky landscapes. Precisely, using my ethnographic data, and following Edmund Husserl's classic theory of intersubjectivity, I ask how they establish a mutual understanding when engaged in landscapes? Next, inspired by Tim Ingold and his theory of skills lines, I examine how climbers and mountaineers draw, recognize, and make use of lines found in the landscape they skilfully dwell in.*

*Keywords: ethnography, climbing and mountaineering, skills, intersubjectivity, Tim Ingold, Edmund Husserl*

Subjects engaged in spatial operations establish unique relations with landscapes, and to do so – as Tim Ingold (2015; 2016) convincingly relates – they employ skills. These are skills, where ethnographers might look for sense-making practices, knowledge, and body dispositions. Consequently, moving in landscapes, Ingold concludes, is a skilful process of establishing intrasubject relations offering clues to an individual's locations and perceptions. These actions are best observed through practices of movement, which, as Kim Jada Samudra (2008) suggests, emerge from sociocultural backgrounds and are thus open to ethnographic reflections.

The practices I am concerned with are climbing and mountaineering. More precisely, I observe the efforts a human body is driven to make when moving in the vertical plane rather than the horizontal. This change, as Allen Abramson and Robert Fletcher (2007) have demonstrated, forces climbers to establish new spatial and intersubjective relations. Along these vertical trajectories, non-standard,

creative strategies, knowledge and cooperation emerge, remaining in place for new interpretations by forthcoming generations. Consequently, the question posed to me is: although not explicitly taught during specialized training, how do climbers and mountaineers establish intersubjective understanding and skilful cooperation between one another? How, using intersubjective cooperation, do climbers and mountaineers skilfully engage in landscapes? Next, I carefully observe how climbing subjects spot, move in, and experience rocky landscapes along certain lines composing climbing routes. Here, I examine how climbers and mountaineers spot and make use of such lines, and execute their skills and knowledge to confront apparently bare rocks.

Yet, as I have observed, the rocks are never barren, nor are they separated from the human world. Although rocks-and-mountains-oriented anthropological inquiries are rather rare, mountains, as James R. Veteto (2009) has aptly demonstrated, have been of interest to anthropologists and social scientists since the dawn of those disciplines. Yet, it was only in the 1970s that scientists started to significantly expand those interests. Nowadays, studies on mountainous landscapes are better adjusted to the challenges of the modern world and highly efficient in revealing the human impact on mountain ecosystems across the globe. Climbers undoubtedly leave their footprint out there, thus making mountains and rocks the arenas of personal and sociocultural expressions. As Penelope Rossiter (2007) argues, climbing – and rocky landscapes as a result – emerge from interactions established between human agents, technology and the material world. Surely, one should not forget that mountains include a variety of non-human objects/agents, not only rocks, but also plants, animals, weather phenomena – all with an ontological status to which climbers are continuously exposed. Following this trail, Abramson and Fletcher (2007) encapsulated that climbing is a form of a deep “eco-play” between the parties involved – skilled climbers performing moves and applying techniques, and the material landscape offering the space for such activities. Obviously, this play involves more-than-human actors, consequently making climbing a playful exploration and a deep vertical re-creation of the worlds that only seemingly belong exclusively to either the “human” or the “eco” domain. Finally, Jan Dutkiewicz (2015) demonstrated that climbing, along with rocks and climbing routes, emerges from a sense-making interplay between bodies and objects embedded in the local cultural genealogies and social practices. In turn, climbing and rocks are intrinsically local. In my opinion the lines of ascent are unique paths of human thought, perception and skilful engagement. As such, these lines become meaningful landscapes saturated with complex ontologies and epistemologies when the next generations of climbers continue to make their own contributions to the climbing heritages carved in rocks.

## Ethnographic theory and movement in rocks

Rock climbing and mountaineering have their distinctive goals and styles requiring different protective and safety equipment (Bonington 1994). Climbers can choose between traditional or sport climbing. The latter is considered safer since climbers use artificial components (bolts, spits, rings) for better protection. In contrast, those who favour the traditional style, rely on their own self-administered, moveable equipment. Mountaineers must be familiar with a wide range of equipment and be both efficient and proficient in operations often performed in harsh conditions. Consequently, their training levels and regimes often exceed their level of required climbing skills. Mountaineering also has its styles; the most well-known are alpine and siege (expedition) (Soles, Powers 2003). Performed in summer and winter conditions, they prompt mountaineers to master different skills and use even more complex equipment (Soles 2000). In contrast, rock climbers are usually seasonally attached to accessible crags, where they “solve problems” situated at heights of several tens of meters. Mountaineers’ hardships, however, are distributed across high walls and long ascents, thus requiring many, primarily, alpha-numeric systems grading route difficulty. Due to the traditions developed in the researched areas I discuss below, I will refer to Kurtyka’s Scale<sup>1</sup> (KS, also: Cracow Scale) – a combination of Roman and Arabic numerals – for rock climbing, and to the grades developed by the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA) for mountain routes.

Not many anthropologists, who have found crags to be promising fieldwork environments, have engaged in primary investigations into the socio-historical backgrounds of climbing and mountaineering, whilst also taking a secondary interest in perception and movement in rock-centred surroundings. The history of mountaineering and climbing has been generally investigated as a story of conquest – it fits well into the modernist and colonial discourses which have developed rapidly since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ortner 1997; Lewis 2000). Climbers and mountaineers, however, also have personal motives – the testimonies left by the most famous practitioners are living proof of that (Macfarlane 2003). The epistemological, metaphysical and, ultimately, ontological reasons for climbing must therefore be inherently paradoxical. Climbing teaches its practitioners life lessons and gives life meaning, whilst constantly being obliged to confront modern ideologies and commoditization to remain “authentic” (Heywood 2006; Kiewa 2002; Nitzke 2020). That said, climbing does indeed return to many a sense of attentive wayfaring that is absent in modern point-to-point locomotion (Ingold 2016). Let

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<sup>1</sup> A Polish world-class climber and mountaineer (b. 1947).

me, however, put this issue to one side for a moment and turn my attention to the experiential and kinaesthetic aspects of climbing and mountaineering.

Jan Dutkiewicz (2015) and Matthew Bunn (2016) consider climbing to be a practice with its own distinguished habitus. While Dutkiewicz views climbing as an interplay between bodies and objects emerging from local histories and representations, Bunn concentrates on the notion of risk. Bunn says risk management and strategies enable climbers to play out their performances, turning unknown vertical ascents into controlled spaces of action. As Ian Heywood (1994; 2006) states, however, this would not be possible, were it not for a climber's interpretative skills allowing them to cope with the risks that arise. In contrast, Andre Goodrich (2004) developed his perspective with less attachment to historical representations and social habitus, looking more closely at existential "topokinetic memory" – which allows climbers to generate possibilities *in situ* for upcoming moves.

One thing is clear: climbing and mountaineering belong to the world of the body and movement. Studies on the body are not new to anthropology and social sciences. Researchers have successfully demonstrated that body and bodily practices stem from complex sociocultural backgrounds and historical transformations (Featherstone, et al. 1970). Anthropology has examined how bodies are affected by local agents of power and such global trends as commodification, consumer culture, aesthetics, biopolitics, and many more (Mascia-Lees 2001). Michel Foucault (1982) proved that well by examining bodies as being subject to change and institutional control. Another great Frenchman, Pierre Bourdieu (1991, 1997), demonstrated that bodies are objects and agents, hiding intertwining layers of social, cultural, political, and economic capital, along with habitual dispositions that we can never fully recognise. Bourdieu states the latter can be seized only through practices and when bodies are exposed to certain challenges.

Hence, we are well aware that bodies absorb political discourses and hold social and individual tensions, desires, and needs. Yet, contemporary anthropology – especially the schools under the influence of phenomenological studies – finds bodies to be first and foremost tools of personal expression. The invaluable contribution of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2013) has made researchers treat bodies not as mere biological, physical, or even social units, but as the subjects which structure one's experience within the world.

This line of thought goes even deeper – a body-subject is in a constant move, bursting with creativity and readiness to act. Those vital and dynamic aspects of having a body and being a body-in-the-world are demonstrated in a number of empirical studies, for instance, a classic study delivered by Loïc Wacquant (2004). Wacquant, having infiltrated the Chicago boxing scene, has set a new standard for sports research. His deeply ethnographic observations and personal experience

are a significant contribution to Bourdieu-inspired studies on body and habitus. Wacquant took boxing classes and pushed his body to the limits. Consequently, his study is now considered a milestone for the “carnal sociology”, and an iconic example of how to use the participatory observation method in searching for the very essence of habitus, bodily practices, and their sociocultural genealogies.

Jaida Kim Samudra (2008) – who also researched martial arts (silat) – provides some more hints at how to access similar areas of human activity. Samudra’s strategy of “thick participation” is one of sharing socially meaningful practices and embodied experiences located beyond ordered language. Knowledge, says Samudra, coalesces in a kinaesthetically engaged body, and thus anthropologists should establish a sense of comprehension by employing their own body in the movements. Consequently, movement, as in many other phenomenologically oriented studies, becomes an intersubjective space providing understanding. In this way, however, intersubjectivity can easily become trivialized. Alessandro Duranti (2010), well versed in Edmund Husserl’s writings, has explained this clearly. In Husserl’s mind, intersubjectivity is neither an act of negotiations, nor a condition of shared experiences, but rather an opportunity or pre-condition for communication. Although it is essential to human existence, intersubjectivity does not open up routes to individual experience, but “makes sure that the Other and the Self are perceptually, conceptually and practically coordinated around a particular task” (Duranti 2010: 2). Subjects do not therefore simply reach a common understanding; rather they become ready to exchange their positions (*Platzwechsel*) in order to consider the point of view of the other (Husserl 1989: 177).

This comment is essential to my research, as climbers and mountaineers, as I will demonstrate, must be constantly ready to exchange their tasks in order to complete their goals. These exchanges can be accomplished, as Husserl teaches, through “empathy” (*Einfühlung*), understood as the primordial and pre-logic experience of participation in the actions and feelings of other people without becoming them (1969: 233). Another essential claim made by Husserl considers “nature” as an “intersubjective reality” in itself (1989: 91). Although the subjects do not share the same understanding of Husserl’s nature, they might make use of it as they are mutually attached to it, and it is a shared condition opening the way for an understanding of individual positions and experiences. Husserl (1931) observes that nature is a practical world, where subjects experience others experiencing similar relationships with their surroundings. Despite differences in perception, subjects – through empathy – assume they operate in a common world explored by their living bodies (*Leib*), their actions identified as being similar to the decisions and choices that the subjective-we would make.

With the above in mind, I started ethnographic research in 2019 in the mountain ranges known to be popular climbing destinations, namely, the Jura Krakowsko-Częstochowska, Sokoliki, and Świętokrzyskie Mountains in Poland, and the Tatras, which straddle the border and extend into Poland and Slovakia. I started with climbing camps and training sessions (of both sports and the traditional type) – three in Jura, three in Sokoliki, and three in the Świętokrzyskie range. Later, I began to follow the hints given by Dutkiewicz (2015) and since 2021 I have been regularly climbing with various partners met during fieldwork or through social media. These research sessions usually lasted a day or two and consisted of intense climbing and open inquiries/discussions about the events of the day or more general topics concerning the rocky landscapes and climbing as such. In the summertime, with Kacper, a mountain rescue climber, I have climbed (in traditional style) Lomnický, Gerlachovský, and Kežmarský Štit, all of them rising high in Slovakia. In four successive winter seasons, I participated in three mountaineering camps in Tatras, and climbed with Kacper (traditional style) Kościelec and some icefalls in Dolina Białej Wody (White Water Walley, Bielovodská Dolina). Altogether, I have completed eighteen independent field studies, the results of which I have summarized in field notes, recordings, and in the form of visual data (photography and short clips).

The majority of conversations and conducted interviews were not recorded, as the recording was either impossible or pointless in the mountainous landscape. Usually, climbers are separated by a certain distance, and communication between them is reduced to simple comments and observations. As a result, I have found observations and participatory techniques to be more efficient means of data collection. At the end of training/climbing days, however, we have had time together in which we could relate and share our experiences. These relaxing moments have proved very informative, although without the contexts of the shared experiences, they could be incomprehensible to outside observers. In a sense, therefore, my “climbing ethnography” is experiential, as it puts experience, sharpened by spatial practices and landscape recognitions, at the very heart of the research. The dominant portion of the collected evidence, however, has emerged explicitly from being with and among the people – what I have learned and experienced has only been accessible through my cooperation and work with others.<sup>2</sup> As a result, on many occasions I have pondered the questions regarding participation and intersubjectivity, both in the field and afterwards. That obviously turned my attention to the methodologies inspired by autoethnography. I have come to the conclusion that this self-reflexive practice goes further than a mere

<sup>2</sup> All names of my informants have been changed.

genre of ethnographic writing. As Carolyn Ellis (2004, 2008) has eloquently put it, autoethnography combines research writing with one's personal experience, political, and social settings, and it also explores the modes of understanding. Consequently, autoethnography should be considered a form of attention that connects the researcher to his or her very personal "culture", yet at the same time being in relation to the "cultures" of people met in the field (Adams et al. 2015). Thus, I do appreciate Laura Ellington's and Carolyn Ellis' observations that autoethnography should be first regarded as:

*response to the alienating effects on both researchers and audiences of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by such research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse* (Ellington, Ellis, 2008: 450).

Indeed, my knowledge and conclusions are the results of mutual trust and deep cooperation between me and the people whom I have met and with whom I have shared the struggle of climbing in various conditions. I have always climbed with partners and not solo, and it has always been a shared journey, where our safety entirely depended on our cooperation. However, these undoubtedly important matters have not, I observe, exhausted all the methodological puzzles I have had to tackle. Let us now though move on and reach for Tim Ingold's studies on perception, skills, and landscape.

Environment, as Ingold says (2016: 101-106), is inhabited by generations of agents, and thus densely tangled with knots and meshwork – loops and nets around which actors produce knowledge, skills, and render their experiences meaningful. Knots and meshwork are place-making – they make interactions between the involved parties possible. Consequently, Ingold's world has a structure composed of multiple traces knitted together in a never-ending process of movement and re-creation (2018; 2016; 2015). Nothing is pre-ordained, nothing – apart from movement – is constant. Life and actions, therefore, are not attached to places, nor are they non-placed: instead, they are place-making and continue to appear as responses to incoming affordances, which are particularly shaped by a subject's embodiment and perception (Ingold 2016: 38–39; Pokropski 2011: 132–134).

James Gibson (1979), concerned with studies on ecology and perception, considers something's affordances to be things "hiding" within it. Additionally, he allows for subjects taking (or refraining from taking) actions dependent on their states and activities. For instance, "stand-on-able, (...) walk-on-able, run-on-able" (Gibson 1979: 127) ground allows a subject to move either as a biped or quadruped. However, as Ingold rightly says, for Gibson, objects have no



metaphysical depth: they constitute neither a boundary between mental and material states, nor between reason and sensory experiences, nor between the subject's consciousness and the object. Indeed, affordances create possibilities and keep a subject in motion. As my research has demonstrated, however, there is no single experience of "the ground": the sense of ground, such as rocky surfaces, emerges in an interactive process employing a subject's perception, senses, knowledge, skills, personal embodiment, weather conditions, rock type, etc. Consequently, climbers and mountaineers, aided by their personal and social capital, actively recognize affordances and skilfully create opportunities. As a result, I am closer to Andre Goodrich's (2004: 30) use of this term: environments, says Goodrich, stimulate actions that consequently can be related to culturally grounded activities. Therefore, climbers – skillful dwellers – inhabit spaces of possibilities and affordances, but to reach them, they must employ skills and knowledge inherited from previous generations, accumulated in climbing habitus, as Dutkiewicz and Bunn would argue, or extracted from Goodrich's "topokinetic memory".

Three more of Ingold's terms would benefit from further clarification here – i.e., dwelling, skills, and taskscape. Dwelling subjects are actively engaged in the spaces they occupy. Dwellers, by using their skills and performing tasks, coproduce spaces and make landscapes meaningful. Consequently, dwelling establishes a sense of awareness of the landscape; an awareness emerging at the intersection of creativity and perception, exposed to a subject's socially and historically accumulated knowledge of a place (Ingold 1993: 152). Thus, perceiving landscapes ultimately means being engaged in an act of remembering, and acting in an environment saturated with pasts, flows, and relationships established between human and non-human agents.

I consider rocky landscapes, although often inaccessible, to be scattered with memories and affordances, making them open to dwelling. To achieve this, climbers and mountaineers make use of the skills they have already mastered, or that they are ready to acquire. As a result, skills are the practices enabling subjects to navigate their way through, operate in, and co-create particular environments (Ingold 1993). Thanks to their skills, subjects are ready to pursue tasks that make up a taskscape, i.e., an assemblage of interrelated tasks carried out by competent subjects. Thus, a taskscape, corresponding well with Husserl's practical "nature", is a social framework for shared temporal human activities (Ingold 2018). While completing tasks, people – in cooperation with others – engage in the process of skilful line-drawing, combining the drawn lines with other traces and meaningful points. Hence, we are back to the knots and meshworks, underlining their critical importance to ethnographic investigations.



## Intersubjectivity, lines, and *Platzwechsel*

Climbers work with and through skills. Yet, their work requires mutual understanding. As I have heard from my instructors, the latter, strikingly, belonged to the same collection of skills as climbing and equipment techniques. This collection quite clearly corresponded with the concept of *habitus* – in line with the ideas of Dutkiewicz and Bunn. Both climbing and mountaineering, therefore, were described many times by my informants, as kinds of spatial practices, where shared experiences speak louder than a simple efficiency of movement. Consequently, climbing and mountaineering are, indeed, practices of skilful intersubjectivity. Before developing this further, let me introduce a sample from my fieldwork:

*Goyarski's Crack (V + KS) is quite a challenge. I get cold, and I am feeling really bad. I'm climbing with Magda – she is sharp, decisive, and skilful. Quickly I've gained some altitude (some demanding sections, yet good holds) only to come to a halt in a narrow and unpleasant chimney of certain width, where I loudly curse my rather pitiful position. I've tried jamming my legs, yet I feel unstable. Finally, I've got out and above the difficulty and reached a section of good holds leading to a shelf. I've rigged up a good stance. Now it is Magda's turn. I hear her coming, yet she is not as fast as I expect. She reaches me sweating and says: well, that was tricky, I see your point now (note 7, Aug. 2021).*

Although it would be tempting to say that we have shared the same experience of the ascent, I am far from being able to come to such a conclusion. First, Magda climbs differently relying on her calmness and good spatial awareness, while I prefer more energetic and sustained moves. This difference determined our approaches to lines taken: Magda favours a line bordering on the straight (something considered to be 'state of the art'), while I like meandering moves. Second, our bodies differ; I am tall and slim, while Magda's body is more compact, which sometimes gives her advantages. Equally, however, Magda's body sometimes limits her in situations when my body is not unduly troubled. Goyarski's Crack – a classic ascent in Sokoliki – is a route composed of cracks, chimneys, and slabs. At some points, I observed how Magda's body was struggling greatly to find a position, whereas at other times she impressed me with her ease in overcoming difficulties. Our embodiment was, therefore, certainly different, and, returning to Gibson (1979) and Ingold (2016), I should reiterate that body conditions determine the affordances that subjects are able to spot and make use of. Thus, although on the same line, we used it in slightly different ways and produced different sets

of knowledge and experiences. Our later conversations offered ample proof of this. Generally, we used different holds and steps to pass through some sections. Additionally, we identified different “cruxes” – the most difficult points of the ascent. Nevertheless, we could understand each other and were able to relate the other’s descriptions to our own views on the climb.

Another factor determining the experience of a climb is a “day disposition” – the undefined mental-physical condition shaping a climbers’ temporal capabilities. Achieving success in climbing, unlike any other activity known to me, relies heavily on such mental-physical dispositions. Strikingly, many of my climbing partners signalled the same feeling, reporting that such dispositions were prone to frequent and unexpected shifts. The most dramatic examples of this were to be observed during the moments of a climb itself, when a climber was simply unable – or was able for that matter – to complete a route beyond the level of their expectations. Dominik, one of my partners, who had failed to complete a route seemingly within his grasp, summarized this as follows: “*Climbing is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get*”.

Let me now return to Goyarski’s Crack. The last pitch was mine to lead, although the cold had rendered my day disposition somewhat lackluster. The final section was demanding, and our instructor encouraged us to traverse an exposed overhang resembling a mushroom. I had reached this point yet was unable to pass it. Then, a conversation (later described in my fieldnotes) with the instructor began:

*Inst: I’ve had many students worse than you, and many of them passed this point. Go and have another try!*

*Me: I don’t feel good enough. I’ve got no power left and my mental focus is rather poor today.*

*Inst: So, what would you do at such a moment in the mountains? You can’t just say, ‘I can’t’!*

*Me: I’d ask my partner to take the lead. It’s what people do, isn’t it?*

*Inst: Sometimes, yes. Luckily, she’s a doctor and she might understand you better (note 7, Sokoliki, Aug. 2021).*

The instructor literally yelled at me, yet I managed to rig a stance and brought Magda up to me. She was unable to pass the mushroom either but reached safety at the top of the route. Once again, at the very end, she understood my position – the way had been harsh for her too, although in a different manner.

How then, under such conditions, might the sense of intersubjectivity between the involved parties be established? Were I to subscribe to the ideas of Samudra,

then, the answer would be: through movement. Climbing and mountaineering are indeed purely kinaesthetic, and thus, Samudra's claims align, to some extent at least, with my studies. The experience and knowledge climbers and mountaineers have and exchange are precisely located in, and originate from, their moving bodies. I faced a similar problem Samudra (2008) encountered in her studies on *silat*: we were both trying to outline phenomena exclusively originating from the body being in-the-world. In the end, however, it was impossible to capture the sense of paralyzing fear in words or describe the joy of movements. Consequently, ethnography conducted in such non-discursive areas must, as Samudra concludes, originate from the body (Samudra 2008: 666–668). There is, however, a methodological catch here – how are we to understand and communicate such data? Samudra stays close to translations, whilst not following Clifford's Geertz "thick description" to the letter. Instead, she reaches for Michel de Certeau's "tactics" and the concept of "somatization" (Samudra 2008: 668–678).

A good clue might also come from a body of literature dedicated to the already mentioned intersubjectivity. The term has a very distinctive position in contemporary anthropology. Its clear increase in influence on anthropological theory – as Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop (2011) have demonstrated – should be identified with the rapid influx of phenomenologically-oriented studies to anthropology that has been taking place in the last few decades. In the 1970s, the schools under the influence of Lévi-Straussian structuralism, or the ones dominated by language-and-symbol-oriented interpretations, already began to fail to successfully address methodological problems and the shifting arenas of anthropological interests. Consequently, some researchers have turned to intersubjectivity – first in the studies on body-and-mind experiences (Pagis 2010), sociality (Schütz 1967), and communication (Fabian 2014). Since then, many other issues – ranging from knowledge and understanding to social life, meanings, practices, and cultural production – have been in the orbit of interest of researchers exploring the enigma of intersubjectivity (Katz, Csordas 2003). Years of research have resulted in Michael Jackson (1998) advocating for intersubjectivity being not merely a mode of attention and theoretical orientation, but rather an element essential in establishing relationships between domains of social and cultural worlds, along with human and non-human agents. In other words, intersubjectivity is at the very bottom of sociality, materiality, and culture itself. To a degree, this approach corresponds with my observations. Yet, the anthropological perspective on intersubjectivity often stands in contrast with its original philosophical source (Duranti 2010). As I do appreciate anthropological contributions to this subject matter, I still prefer Husserl's simpler perspective employing *Platzwechsel* and empathy.

As I have earlier discussed, Husserl's (1931; 1969; 1989) intersubjectivity is a pre-condition and a possibility for understanding things that happen within a natural space, which is itself intersubjective. Consequently, intersubjectivity is a readiness to take another's position without becoming them, at a moment when a subject identifies actions as possibly their own. Certainly, climbing is a practice pushing subjects to skilfully pursue actions they recognize as potentially their own. This is possible because, as Dutkiewicz (2015) and Bunn (2016) have demonstrated, climbing is habitual. Its habitus – comprised of skills and values shared across generations – is a source of these potentially recognized actions, although not only: climbing habitus, as I have learned in the field, teaches reactions to certain situations. A fitting example is what happened to us in Goyarski's Crack, where we had to exchange our positions in order to complete the route "in style" – i.e., without falling off or ending up hanging on the rope. Because both of us had been ready to exchange our positions, either in the leading position, or in some other way, we climbed together, and together, although, in a different way, we progressed along the line leading us through a complex granite space. Our line, a knowledgeable and experiential trajectory leading through a certain environment, as Ingold (2016) says, led us through a true Husserl landscape of readiness, empathy, and recognition underlying the very essence of understanding. Executing skills in space, therefore, is rarely the task of a single subject. Practicing skills push subjects into cooperation and socialization situations. If this condition is met, subjects, intertwined by empathy, skilfully recognize their roles and identities in relation to positions and perspectives brought forth by the others involved. Husserl's perspective on intersubjectivity, therefore, is a pre-condition for complex social behaviours.

### The skills of lines

Ingold (2016; 2015) says lines are – in general – paths of growth along which knowledge of the world, skills, and experiences are born; later they are passed on by people in their stories and expressed in the testimonies they leave behind (Ingold 2016: 3–4). Husserl's thoughts add to this: experience of the lines and heritages left in landscapes arise when subjects are intersubjectively intertwined by empathy and are ready to adopt the other's position. Intersubjectivity then opens up a broader perspective – one I understand as a social experience. But – again back to Ingold (2016) – lines are never static, nor are they ever straight. I would also add to this that every human being draws their own lines of action, leaving both material and non-material testimonies behind. Consequently, I believe lines appear as an unfolding, when bringing a subjective sensation of moving ahead,

or a folding, when one feels moving backwards or being halted. Drawing and following lines must therefore be, all at once, skilful, social, and experiential. How then should I look for lines in rocky landscapes?

First, single climbing routes contain many lines. They are drawn as lines in topographic material, expressed by climbers in their stories with the help of geometric terms, and valued, when clear and straight, or complained about when circuitous. This is Dominik, replying to a question about a perfect route:

*You know – it goes straight, as it has once been shaped by nature. When you start meandering, well, then it is like you were about to cheat nature. That is why people value direttissimas* (note 2, Sokoliki, Oct. 2020).

Lines might be physically represented by ropes hanging from crags; they may be sought by climbers carefully trying to divine line-like features within rocks. Yet, I consider three field examples to be especially informative when considering the problem of skilful folding and unfolding lines. These are Krzysztof's (one of my instructors) spectacular ski down Hińczowa Pass in the dark; Kacper losing and then finding our way to the top of Kežmarský Štit; and an extreme winter weather event forcing me and fellow mountaineers to withdraw from our climb.

In March 2020, six of us, receiving tuition on the basics of winter mountaineering from Krzysztof, wet and tired after a long day, warmly welcomed being sent back to the nearby Morskie Oko lodge. The day, however, was not over for Krzysztof, despite the sun having already descended below the ridges. Earlier, in the lodge, we had met Andrzej Bargiel, the first man to ski down from the top of K2. He had just skied down from Hińczowa Pass, squeezed between the Cubryna and Grand Mięguszowiecki peaks at an altitude of 2,323 meters – a ride considered to be highly demanding. Krzysztof's destination now became this pass. He had a lone thousand-meter ascent in deep snow to overcome, before skiing back in the darkness down steep slopes and through precarious couloirs. In the lodge, through binoculars, we followed Krzysztof's ascent up the wall. My field notes are full of comments expressing our shared excitement and concerns. After all, we all possessed the same disturbing knowledge of avalanches and knew the risks of falling and how easily a life might end. Krzysztof reached the pass and a moment later the glare from his headlamp lit up a circle of snow in front of him. There was something otherworldly in observing the bright point of light, a human being alone in a hostile landscape, careering down in a headlong rush, leaving behind a gentle trace of light, almost immediately disappearing into the dark wall in front of us. He was moving in zig-zags, left to right, right to left, skilfully unfolding the line of his own achievement. He must have known that

he was being watched from the lodge. As I learned, this was a kind of unwritten custom, examples of which I later observed numerous times. The show had drawn in almost everyone staying at that moment in the lodge. After quarter of an hour, Krzysztof had safely reached the frozen surface of Morskie Oko lake. The audience stood still in amazement. “*Why don’t we buy him a cup of tea and a piece of apple cake? Surely he deserves it*” – Anna, a fellow mountaineer, said, breaking the deeply meaningful silence.

Following this memorable event, I have been encouraged to collect some other examples of unfolding, and folding, lines in mountains. Although now winter, I have been reflecting on some satisfying summer climbing in Slovakia. Krzysztof gave me the nudge: “Well, why don’t you try “Prawy Puškáš”<sup>3</sup> on the southern wall of Kežmarský Štit? Have a go, the line there is evident” – he said. Sometime later, together with Kacper, my partner in mountaineering, I did so. While buying tickets for the cable car in Tatranská Lomnica, I was surprised to meet Krzysztof again – another for my collection of unexpected encounters with climbers already known to me. How then should I consider rocks and mountains if not as Ingold’s knots *par excellence*, where subjects and agents constantly meet, exchange experiences and knowledge, before leading their lines somewhere further (Ingold 2015; 2016)?

Our climb through “Prawy Puškáš” started well. We quickly passed through some easy sections and reached Biały Kociołek (White Cauldron), where three different routes diverged. It was essential to find our line, yet Kacper, who was up ahead, could not spot it. The clock was running, and we found ourselves stuck in – it appeared – a quite obvious place. The map suggested we move left, yet in that direction we only found rocks seemingly not matching the description of the expected pitch. To the right we spotted the line of a neighbouring route, relatively easy, yet leading through brittle rocks we had no intention of trying. Nothing matched the map, and the line that had been unfolding so well just moments before had vanished. After almost two hours of fretful searching, we reached a conclusion: let’s go straight and see where the block covered in lichen takes us. After passing some moderately demanding slabs, locating a rusty hook and finally installing ourselves into a chimney-like corner, we felt we had been lucky: our line was once again unfolding welcomingly in front of us. That said, we had to move fast – none of us was entertaining thoughts of spending a night out there. After passing some demanding and long sections, I felt tired and frustrated. I had lost my concentration, while my mind-body was unduly occupied with the distraction of the hours of effort awaiting us. Just as I began to feel

<sup>3</sup> V UIAA

almost complete indifference to the route itself, the line once again began to fold.

I had been taught about such moments, yet I had never previously experienced them. Surprisingly, I realized that a mental and physical crisis consumes all the joy of the moves, blinding me to the climb experience. The landscape, moments before admired, became burdensome and repulsive. I had the sensation of my memory and body having stopped recording events. And then we reached a slippery dihedral chimney, offering no single crack for placing the protection of any kind. I started climbing, almost intuitively and automatically, just as I had been once taught to do in chimneys. Meters had passed, and Kacper was very enthusiastic about my moves. *"Wow, I hadn't considered this option. How classic!"*, he observed. And, suddenly, once again, I was spotting holds and footholds, slowly creating a meaningful and readable line, along which I could execute moves I had at my disposal, hidden somewhere in topokinetic memory, or tucked away in climbing habitus. Surprisingly, I found this theoretical discussion going on in my head, although back then the conclusion simply did not matter. That said, with the difficulties behind me, I felt relief like never before.

Finally, a sun-filled Tatra morning in March 2021 welcomed us before the start of technical training, with a later climb up Świnica Peak. The air was calm and clean; the surrounding peaks appeared accessible. The evident and abundant lines in the landscape, now mainly in the form of foot-worn paths leading up to the walls, invited us to move and act. While looking for a suitable place to start the training, we had a conversation praising the abundance of possibilities awaiting us in Hala Gąsienicowa – part of the Gąsienicowa Valley known for its beauty and host of winter routes and trails. The following hours were rather uneventful – we had been learning the proper use of our ice axes during a fall, and how we should conduct ourselves in the event of an avalanche. But such apparently standard actions (repeated at every training camp) have a deeper meaning. In fact, all such skills allow mountaineers to cope with the lines of a danger that can unfold rapidly. Usually, there are four ice axe techniques presented, all helping to stop a body rapidly gaining speed when rushing down a slope. Each technique responds to the position of a falling body; namely, head down/head up, belly up/belly down etc. Each technique brings a skilful response to an immediate danger. As the fall line unfolds rapidly, the response cutting off its momentum must be instant.

Anti-avalanche training works in a similar way. First, in the event of spotting an avalanche or, worse still, finding ourselves in an avalanche, we are taught to remember as many distinguishing points as possible; these might help us to recreate the line of a fall and subsequently locate ourselves and our companions. Somewhat incredibly, I had a conversation with the instructor, who had been



swept up twice by avalanches; and twice he had dug himself out by himself, before immediately commencing rescue actions. Next, we were instructed how to make use of radio signals from and to the avalanche detectors we should always have. The signals point to the direction of a fellow climber who might be lying under snow. Following them correctly, however, requires certain skills in helping to spot and plot a correct line across the chaotic landscape of an avalanche field. The very avalanche itself, although not a living being – as Ingold would like – is a collection of chaotic and rapidly unfolding lines erasing the landscape, its reference points and trails. Usually, these lines unfold in a downwards direction, yet, as the instructors demonstrated to us, there are certain landscape features that direct avalanches upwards. Careful observation and skilful recognition of such places is highly important. Generally, adepts in winter mountaineering are taught to skilfully draw and carefully unfold the lines of their movement in order to avoid danger. We were exposed to certain land configurations that we should avoid – namely gorges, slopes to be traversed, and specific colours – along with those we should favour, such as ridges or clear rocks. We were also alerted to certain weather features, such as wind qualities and directions, types of snow cover, sun and temperature conditions, all helping us to assess and deal with potential risks. Winter mountaineering is, therefore, the complex art of finding and unfolding lines of life, whilst avoiding or folding those bringing death. Grzegorz, one of my instructors, encapsulated this well:

*If you survive your first winter season, then, well, you show promise. Remember, you should do winter mountaineering not to struggle to survive, but to live your life to the full (note 6, Tatras, March 2021).*

We were surprised how fast we were given a chance to put these words to the test. While in high mountain terrain, although still close to the Murowaniec Lodge, the weather suddenly broke. A roaring wind completely cut communication between members of our group, and heavy snowfall disrupted visibility. We could literally feel the breakdown overcoming us and pushing us to the ground. It was my second time in the winter Tatras when I literally could not stand. The nearby slopes were shifting from time to time – these were still small – yet informative – snow slides, pushed forth by the sheer force of the wind. Immediately we commenced our retreat; there were no other lines to unfold that day, other than the one leading to the safety of the lodge. The following day the conditions were equally bad. A heavy night of snowfall had pushed avalanches down the slopes, making any reasonable mountaineering impossible. The course, and all the lines leading to the peaks, were regrettably cancelled.

## Conclusions

The skills mastered by individual subjects do exist, yet they do not warrant my attention here. The skills I am concerned with emerge through a nexus of social acts of recognition and cooperation. This makes them fundamentally intersubjective. Husserl is indeed right when he thinks of intersubjectivity as a fundamental human condition turning both other human subjects and their actions into recognizable, meaningful and, ultimately, accessible phenomena emerging from common natural spaces. Consequently, intersubjectivity is more than mere understanding and experience sharing with others. Coming back to ethnography, I do appreciate Michael Jackson's (1998) conclusions, as he – clearly under phenomenological influences – also considers intersubjectivity to be fundamental to the process of establishing relationships – but not only between social and living human agents. In turn, intersubjectivity applied to Jackson's existential, and thus “more Merleau-Ponty”, anthropology, recognises even abstract relationships as modalities of interpersonal life; it incorporates ancestors and spirits and collective representations, and it concerns material things, thus turning the worlds – and for anthropologists as well – into existential conditions par excellence. And there are others who follow Jackson's thoughts – just to mention Duranti (2010) or Albert Piette playing with Heidegger's legacy (2014) as well as with human consciousness of existing in time and modalities of our presence. Yet, Piette does not ignore non-human presences and examines the variety of their ontological statuses (2015, 2016).

Undoability, the “intersubjectivity project”, although long debated and questioned on many occasions, still plays a major role in establishing anthropological knowledge. For this reason, I do appreciate Johannes Fabian's statement:

*We had to think about epistemology, the conditions of possibility of producing knowledge. This was the context in which anthropologists took recourse to the notion of intersubjectivity* (2014: 201).

I feel comfortable in such conditions as, at least to some extent, the weight of the long discussion in the field of anthropology about the discrepancy between theory and lived reality, as well as that about abstractions such as “society”, “culture”, or “nature”, seems to be removed from my shoulders there. There is no culture without nature, nor is there an abstract society without lived reality. Instead, both anthropologists and the subjects they work with, entangled and intertwined in common actions on common ground – such as climbing or mountaineering – have at their disposal a world of skills, affordances, choices and endless

possibilities. This is the world of participation, creation, and knowledgeable experiences making an endless process of exploration possible.

Intersubjectivity and skills working in tandem are both operational within anthropology as well as in high mountains. As my study has revealed, landscapes, even inaccessible ones such as crags and mountains, are filled with living bodies in motion – in Husserl’s nomenclature *Lieb* – leaving behind their own heritages and skilfully exploring the heritages left by previous generations who have already set foot there. These heritages have their pioneers, names and stories already told, and waiting to be told; they might be embroidered with material artefacts, like rusty hooks, white traces left by chalk-coated hands, or by some other readable feasibilities, like loops or bolts left for the future safety of others. Together, the heritages mark personal countless achievements and reveal logics of movement; they lead to points to be explored and creatively reused by those who are there now, and by those who will be there in the future. Consequently, climbing brings back the essence of Jackson’s intersubjectivity, embracing non-human objects, spirits, and long-dead souls. A highly intersubjective rocky space crisscrossed upwards and longways by lines, together with the knowledge and possibilities on offer, establishes among climbers not only a shared understanding of certain actions and sensations, but a real readiness to assume another’s position in order to contribute to the already sizeable heritage etched into the rocks. Even in a single section of rock, the sheer number of routes and their intertwining branches constitute a vivid testimony to the diversity of human experiences, along with a multiplicity of logics of movement. And yet there are no straight ascents. The essence of climbing lies in its twists and turns, and consequently manifests itself in many forms of truly multisensory and open experiences – experiences as diverse and rich as the vertical worlds of rocks might themselves be.

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**Hubert Wierciński**

hubert.wiercinski@uw.edu.pl

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9535-4180>

University of Warsaw

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology