The Real Issue is Flying, not Death.
Dealing with Risk in the Subculture of Italian Gliding

Andrea Carocci

UCL

PhD in Social Anthropology

I, Andrea Carocci, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis aims to rethink subcultural theory by applying it to an unusual age bracket. It proposes to chart forms of reflexivity in risk perception among the practitioners of a dangerous sport, and adopts as its empirical point of departure the subculture of middle class, middle-aged glider pilots in the Italian village of Bilonia. Exploring the world of gliding, it describes ethnographically the local situations in two gliding clubs, Bilonia, where the main fieldwork took place, and Piti, where a second shorter period of participant-observation was conducted. Adopting a comparative perspective, these local realities are contrasted amongst themselves and with the wider subculture of gliding in Italy. The thesis argues that, despite the prevalence of a single dominant subculture, gliding is practised in different ways in different places, especially with regard to risk perception and management. However, these are affected in all locations by the peculiar characteristic of the subculture, the average age of the glider pilots, which rules out the extreme behaviours of younger practitioners and goes against the tenets of some explanations of voluntary risk taking.

In the first three chapters a theoretical framework is developed based upon advances in sports anthropology, subcultural theory and social scientific theories of risk. In the empirical chapters that follow, gliding is variously introduced as an experience involving a precise script, as a local reality tinged with peculiarities that set it apart from the wider reality of the sport in the national arena. The last three chapters discuss key points of the theoretical approach adopted and the findings they led to, in particular the implications for the study of sport subcultures. The empirical data presented suggest the existence of a middle-aged sport subculture, something that has not often been encountered in the literature on the subject. It is shown how risk perception follows a precise pattern which is shaped by the cultural norm of the gliding subculture – in its turn affected by the average age of the members.

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Note to the reader

I have changed most of the names of towns, villages and associations mentioned. I have changed names of people in most cases, out of concern that they might be embarrassed by what I had written or quoted.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1   Why this piece of research

This is a qualitative piece of research on gliding in sailplanes in Central Italy or, more precisely, on the gliding section of one of the country's main aero clubs, the Aeroclub di Sirto based in the village of Bilonia. My aim is to examine and account for the cultural form taken by the gliding scene of the people living in the town of Sirto or in the villages that surround that town.

I visited Bilonia airport the first time in 1990, to start the gliding course I had enrolled in a few days before. The person who came to meet me at the main gate was Sebastiano, a man in his mid-thirties who had completed his gliding course and got his licence some months earlier. Without saying much, he handed me the pass that allowed me access to the airport. He was the first member I met of the group I am analysing in this thesis, and I now view him almost as a symbol of the theoretical issues around which my anthropological approach to the world of gliding revolves. As a matter of fact, two years later, in 1992, Sebastiano – together with another older and more experienced pilot (Marco) – died in a gliding accident. For me his death represented a kind of introduction into a hidden world of social behaviours, motivations, and values that characterise the practice of a dangerous sport.

As should be clear after this premise, the main reason that pushed me towards the subject of gliding in Central Italy was my involvement in the activity for over seventeen years. I took up gliding in 1990, following a short stint with microlights, because I was fascinated by the world of flying, with its historical, social and psychological implications, but also because at the same time I was in awe of the hazard that it implied and the overwhelming fulfilment that one could derive from it. During all these years I was to discover that I wasn't alone in my motivations. While a good number of pilots view flying as a natural activity, which they needn't worry about, a lot share my fascinations and fears and think of flying as something out of the ordinary. Probably, this is because gliding is a

sport today mainly practised by adults. Grown-ups "[…] know enough to be afraid. The implied corollary is that maturity is bound up with the anticipation of consequence, and thus with fear […] the normative (adult) accommodation to the threat of mortality" (Kay and Laberge 2003, p. 384).

This is an ethnography focused on gliding in sailplanes, on its organisation, on the social and cultural life that stems from it, on the debates that it can prompt, on the ideas of heroism that sometimes are to be found in the attitudes of the practitioners. I dwell mainly on the relationship between the 'experience' of gliding and the various cultural and social forms that surround the activity. Since this kind of flying arouses strong emotions, I try to pin down these emotions and show how they can modify the way the activity itself is socially perceived and practised.

1.2   Research issues

The aim of this survey is twofold. On one hand I provide ethnographic data on a universe little known to social scientists. On the other, I deal with the theoretical explanations of the social regulation of human behaviour when faced with risk, and with the possibility of also applying the existing body of theory on subculture to a group of middle-aged people.

I adopt four main theoretical perspectives: the methodological issue of autobiography in anthropology (viz. the implications of conducting research at home); the theory of sport subcultures; the studies on risk perception; the theoretical paradigms on motivations for voluntary risk-taking. Contrary to most studies on dangerous sports (Lyng 2005), the latter won't be my main focus, although it could deserve an analysis in its own right.

My set of research issues is constituted by social life, emotions, values and motivations of the members of the gliding section of the Aeroclub di Sirto[1] which, since 1968 has been based at the airfield of Bilonia, a village 25 kilometres east of Sirto. This is one of the not very numerous centres in Italy where it is possible to practice sailplane flying, one of the few located in the

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[1] The Aeroclub di Sirto, to which the gliding section of Bilonia belongs, is divided into four sections: powered flight (by far the most successful), microlight, parachuting, and gliding (the least successful).

central regions, but in spite of this it is still representative of the state of glider flying in the country. Like most of the other centres it relies on the structures of a pre-existing airport and uses mainly gliders and tow planes that are leased from Aeroclub d'Italia, a public organisation whose task is to promote recreational flying and aviation culture, and which lives off funding provided by the state. And yet, sailplane flying in Italy is subsidized to a far lesser extent than elsewhere in Europe (ex. Germany, France and Poland) where the sport enjoys considerably more popularity (for example, there are 1700 glider pilots in Italy compared to 32,000 in Germany) and where public funding is for the most part directed at younger pilots, contributing to a continual generational turnover and a much wider aviation culture, as well as rates of volunteer participation that are unheard of in Italy.

During the years of my fieldwork (2001-2005), the number of members in the club fluctuated, with a distinct tendency towards decline. At the beginning there were around 120 members – including instructors and staff. In the year 2006 (immediately after the end of my fieldwork), after a big group of members had left the year before to start to a new gliding club, there were only 49 people, all but one of them men, most aged 35 or more (the oldest was 82). Among these people 20 also held a private pilot's licence and flew mainly single engine planes from the airport of Sirto, so that for them gliding was a sideline activity. Five of these, although regular members of the association, were never to be seen around at the airport and never flew in a sailplane.

Student pilots don't enter into this account, since they are not formally club members. They frequent the premises of the airport, take flying lessons and engage in a good deal of discussion of flying-related topics while waiting their turn to take off, but they are not full members, neither officially (a new member of the club has to pay the association fees only when s/he has got her/his gliding licence) nor socially, in that they rarely mix with the older members. During the five years of my fieldwork, the club's gliding school has been through much turmoil – it has been closed twice, each time for several months, due to the club's difficult financial situation and the need to comply with changes in the regulations – there have been periods when there were no students at all, but also times when they were plentiful. In particular, at the end of the period under analysis there was an unprecedented number of new students. Eighteen people

enrolled in the courses and were taking flying lessons on a regular basis, and – for a few months (April-June 2005) – around 30 students of a technical high school specialised in aeronautics were enrolled *en masse* - through an agreement between the school and the gliding club - in order to learn to fly[2].

All persons considered in this study are white Caucasians. In fact, Italy's brief and unhappy colonial adventure under fascism has left no trace in society, and of the nearly four million immigrants residing in the country today, most have come from other places in Europe, and only a minority are Africans or Asians. The presence of a large immigrant population is a recent phenomenon and immigrants are, in effect, excluded from the more privileged classes. A relatively expensive sport like gliding imposes drastic forms of socio-economic exclusion and, as a result, the Italy of aviation sports is still a racially homogeneous Italy. Just as in other sports, sailplane flying is a "vehicle to reiterate racial differences, boundaries, hierarchies and identities" (King, Leonard and Kusz 2007, p.6). It is the reflection of projects of social exclusion based on nationalism and which are not alien to the country's recent political landscape, where such forms of nationalism react to fears that have arisen by recent waves of immigration. It is moreover a crude and visceral form of racism, a far cry from the 'veiled racism' present in the U.S. sports scene (King, Leonard and Kusz 2007).

The fact that I had been gliding in this community for many years gave me a diachronic perspective of the changing social life of the club, the social tensions between different groups, the shifting of power between groups representing different 'ideologies' of flying. I was able to witness some changes taking place, and how the popularity of gliding in Bilonia was declining, as was the club's membership. This decline is partly due to the increasing success of other types of recreational flying (such as paragliding and microlights) that attract practitioners away from gliding, it is partly the result of the intrinsic costs and difficulties of gliding as a general practice, but partly it is also a precise episode in the life of the Club as a whole, which went bankrupt in 2004, and was put under compulsory administration while struggling to continue its activity by

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[2] Student pilots are the main source of income for the gliding section of the club since, besides paying the tow fees and the rental of the sailplane for each flight as the regular members do, they pay their instructor 60 euro per hour (2005 fees). Since instructors (save under special circumstances) work for free on a voluntary basis this represents a net profit for the club.

reducing what it offered (i.e. fewer sailplanes and tug aeroplanes available for the gliding section) and increasing its fees. Besides these material problems, some members of the gliding section of the aero club perceived this decline as stemming from a wrong attitude of excessive caution which had been encouraged by some senior core pilots. According to them, the Club's members should not take as a benchmark the flying practices within their own small community, but should strive to perform at the same level of the stronger clubs. In 2005, to free themselves from these constraints, these pilots broke away from the club and founded a new one in a different location a few kilometres away from Bilonia.

From January 2001 to December 2005, I did a qualitative study of the 'meanings and pleasures' of this clearly defined group of people (Wheaton 2000). It was a long period of fieldwork to which I was able to add details that came out of my own personal involvement in the activity both before and after. I try to show how the practitioners use their activity to forge subcultural identities; and, since my research deals mainly with middle-aged people (contrary to most studies on sport subcultures), this gives me the possibility of testing the applicability of the existing theory to this age group. Moreover, I explore the transformation of core elements typical of the middle-aged and middle-class – such as mid-life depression – thanks to gliding (Wacquant 1992).

My focus is on the way the activity is practised: on the organisation of the community inside the club, on the manner of flying, on the attitude towards the inevitable hazards it involves, on the informal talk about flying or on the more structured debates on how flying should be conducted, on fears and un-confessed ideas of heroism. The world of gliding which I am studying is not composed of air but of people. My attention has been directed to the way these people interacted and influenced each other, to the narrative embedded in social relations produced by the gliding club. My analysis is focused mainly on the transformation of the gliding experience into observable social behaviours and words, and then into a nexus of manifest cultural facts.

In conducting my research I aimed at verifying the following two hypotheses:

i) The way of dealing with a dangerous activity is influenced by social relations. Glider pilots in their perception and management of

risk are not autonomous. The way of assessing risks connected to the activity and the correct approach to dealing with these risks does not depend on the isolated individual. It is rather the fruit of an attitude that characterises the entire milieu in which the pilot operates.

ii) Glider pilots, although mostly middle-aged, nevertheless form a specific subculture. I try to examine how a subculture composed of middle-aged people works. How the analytical categories drawn from the subcultural studies, which were developed mainly to study young groupings, could be adapted to the dominant discourses of this older community. I explore the formation of values inside this subculture, the way it can be seen as a new value system and how status and hierarchies are shaped and confirmed.

From these hypotheses I derived a series of dimensions that needed to be considered: the possibility of death and the perception of risk inside a subculture; how gliding belongs to those activities which in contemporary modernity are devised in order to construct an identity; tensions between the small group I studied (defined as a 'idioculture' or a 'groupculture') and the larger community of glider pilots in Italy (the subculture as a whole); the diachronic changes taking place inside the Club.

My first hypothesis stresses that the experience of gliding is affected by the social reality in which it takes place. In Bilonia the local gliding subculture is characterised by a peculiar feeling – a sense of frustration for lagging behind the other clubs by following a strict rule of caution that averts risks but prevents great performances. I highlight this attitude, the reasons why it has arisen, what its cultural implications are. I contrast it with what happens in other places, where the members of the gliding subculture practice their activity at a higher level, accepting the challenges and dangers associated with competition and performance, putting the perception of danger on the back burner. This stress on self-fulfilment rather than on safety is forced upon the pilots by the cultural way in which the activity is framed. It would be very difficult to start practising long distance flights alone in a club community in which the frame of mind of most of the members, who put safety first, is against it. In order to achieve good

performances the pilot needs to belong to a social group oriented towards this type of flying[3].

Contrary to the prevailing opinion in studies on voluntary risk taking (Le Breton 1995; Lyng 1990; 2005), middle-aged glider pilots react socially to risk and in a way markedly different from that of the youngsters described in these studies (Le Breton 1995; 2004; Midol and Broyer 1995). In particular, although Steve Lyng's theory of edgework – as he calls the brinkmanship that characterises dangerous sports – gives us a path-breaking explanation for voluntary risk taking, which in his study of skydiving was described as a process that offers the practitioner the opportunity to move from her/his everyday constraints towards a spontaneous realisation of her/his self, during the course of this thesis I try to modify one of Lyng's main observations, which I think doesn't apply to all dangerous activities, or at least to a sport with the characteristics of the gliding (i.e. being less the result of a short burst of intense feeling – such as skydiving studied by Lyng – but more a prolonged exposure to danger). Lyng holds that "When the 'me' is obliterated by fear or the demands of immediate survival, action is no longer constrained by social forces, and the individual is left with a sense of self-determination. […] Behaviour in edgework appears to the individual as an innate response arising from sources deep within the individual, untouched by socialising influences" (Lyng 1990, p. 879). My view is that social forces are still at work, because they give shape to the 'frame of mind' of the pilot. The behaviour of the pilot, whether conscious or not, is also affected by social forces interiorised as *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) which determine how the demands of an extremely challenging situation are met.

The second hypothesis highlights how, in the understanding of risk management as a cultural product, the particular age bracket of the glider pilots I study has a deep influence. The middle-agedness of my subjects differentiates my position from another important theory about voluntary risk taking developed by French sociologist David Le Breton (1995) and which turned on the social reality of adolescents or young men. It was based on the assumption that young

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[3] This is true not only for cultural reasons, but also for practical ones. When engaged in a long distance flight, the pilot can never rule out the possibility of having to land away from the airport in a field. Therefore, he has to make prior arrangements for a retrieving team to come and get him and a trailer for his sailplane. Neither of these are easily found in clubs where the attitude in favour of high performance is not widely shared.

people need to find meaning and identity at any cost, even if this means putting life itself at risk, a possibility which is arguably very rare in middle-aged people.

In this thesis, the average age of the subjects studied thus appears important for two reasons: because it highlights how little the study of sporting subcultures has hitherto dealt with middle-aged practitioners, pointing out the need to hone the theory to their characteristics, and because it means that the more extreme theories on voluntary risk taking (derived from studies on young people) don't necessarily apply to this group.

1.3 Methodological anticipations

I gathered my data through participant observation at the airport of Bilonia. Moreover, I accomplished an analysis of the wider national community of the glider pilots through the written material available on an electronic mailing list which I monitored for six years (January 2001 – December 2006). A short fieldwork in Piti, a different airport which is the home of the Italian national soaring club, where glider pilots of the best reputation can be found, was useful for obtaining data of the same contrasting quality as those from the written sources. The myth of flying as a referential background of the subculture with all its implications of heroism was studied in books and magazines.

Participant observation seemed the only possible methodological choice, the only opportunity for first-hand verification in an environment which provides only in a very limited form its own written documents. Since my research deals with feelings transformed into a cultural phenomenon, participant observation lent me depth and insight. Through my participant observation I was in a position to describe in detail the social life inside the club, how it is affected by different ideas about what flying for fun is and by different perceptions of attitude in the face of risk, fear, safety, tensions. All these are feelings and real problems that contribute to shaping most of the cultural environment of the small community I examine.

It has been noted that "The insights, vocabularies and questions that may be afforded by prior personal participation in one form or another of sport or dance may provide the impetus for initiating nuanced ethnographic projects and

pursuing innovative lines of analysis. Once launched, investigations such as these fall subject to the usual practices of ethnographic enquiry" (Dyck, Archetti 2003, p. 13). Naturally, in this study the lines of analysis adopted are inevitably influenced by the personal identity of whoever is conducting the research, in other words, my being a white, male heterosexual belonging to the same age group (middle age) and social class (middle class) as the persons studied. Being a core member of the subculture I study, and thinking that my involvement in gliding represents a valuable research instrument, I decided to overtly position my researcher self as an intrinsic part of my fieldwork. For this reason, this thesis includes personal narratives of fieldwork (Coffey 1999). In the text I position myself as an active pilot, a member of the subculture who is totally involved in its activities and concerns.

In order to produce a set of findings from autobiographical data that make sense to others I engaged in data analysis early on and regularly. This enabled the generation of initial concepts, propositions and themes, progressively leading to the 'saturation' of the data (Coffey 1999), that is to the point at which no further themes were generated when more data were included in the analysis and the process could be considered completed. In addition, interpretation was started from the initial stages, since this seemed the best way to make sense of the field material and observations gleaned over several years (Lithman 2000).

I have been observing the gliding activity by the glider pilots and my own flying and I listened to the various communications among pilots on the field and remarked on how they frame their experience in cultural forms circulating in the gliding club. I compared the social world that was depicted in the members' discourses with the social reality I was observing (Thornton 1995). Discourses, conduct and demeanour of the core members made very clear most of the implicit internal regulations of the club that they had progressively internalised (Waquant 1992). One of my tasks was to notice the way the members of the club managed the impression of themselves on others, aiming to promote an idealised version of themselves (Waaler Loland 2000).

I didn't encounter difficulties in starting my fieldwork, since my role as an active and quite competent pilot had already gained me full access to the 'core' participants. This represented an important first step in a research set in which those individuals whose level of commitment is low are only partially

recognised as members of the subculture by more committed members (Butts 2001; Donnelly 1981; Donnelly 2006; Wheaton 2000). Indeed, my insider status was enhanced by my research as I intensified my attendance at the airfield (Hodkinson 2002). I went to Bilonia almost every weekend and often also one afternoon during the week. I spent more time there in order to observe more and chat with people, and I started taking field notes on a regular basis, transforming my observations and my oral sources into written files.

As has been said, my main focus took me away from the 'experience' of gliding. The actual experience of gliding, and its subjective meanings, formed an important backdrop to the stage on which I was conducting my research, although it could have represented a further possibility of analysis (Bourdieu 1988; de Garis 1999; Stranger 1999; Wacquant 1992). These authors (and my own first-hand experience seems to confirm their findings) suggest that when studying sports by means of participant observation there is a level of researchable experience below the level of cultural representation. Moving from Bourdieu, Wacquant (1992) argues about the possibility of conducting a 'sociology of the senses' as he calls it. The embodied experience of glider pilots, like that of the practitioners of other sports, leads to knowledge which is tacit rather than explicit; the almost spiritual feeling of gliding seems to be unconscious. The only way a scholar can access this type of tacit knowledge is through active participation (Butts 2001; Wacquant 1992). " […] to become a boxer is to appropriate through progressive impregnation a set of bodily and mental dispositions that are so intimately interwoven that they erase the distinction between the physical and the spiritual, between what pertains to athletic 'talent' and what belongs to moral capacities and will" (Wacquant 1992, p. 224). Besides, the experience of gliding entails a sense of personal satisfaction of belonging to a special group, a feeling that the participants think cannot be understood by non-glider pilots (Butts 2001; Mitchell 1983; Roussel and Griffet 2000; Thomson 1977; Tiihonen 1994).

1.4   Overview of chapters

Chapter 2 presents the body of theory on which the thesis is based. This is made up of the anthropology of sport, the notion of sport subculture, and the social theory on risk. The anthropology of sport represents a recent specialisation of the discipline that, since it is based on participant observation, provides detailed information on local meanings of the sport practice to which it addresses its attention. The idea of sporting subcultures derives from the tradition of subcultural studies. After retracing their development, I deal with their specific traits and the way they can be used to frame social practices in sport settings like gliding. The final section on the theory of risk perception follows Mary Douglas' studies (1985; 1986; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982) – in which risk is understood as a cultural construct that supports consolidated attitudes – and the sociology of voluntary risk taking in sport, that uses risk as a dimension to understand the meaning sport assumes for the practitioners.

Chapter 3 expounds on issues of method, discussing the problem of conducting research at home and the implications of autobiography in anthropology. It shows how, when transforming a personal involvement into the object of academic investigation, I had to negotiate not entry into a new setting, but the degree of separation needed for conducting critical analysis. My role as a partly covert complete participant is analysed in its implications. The research design is laid out, debating the choice to conduct fieldwork in two different locations, the use of written documents and the decision not to resort to interviews.

Chapter 4 describes the main fieldwork site and the activity of gliding which takes place there. The airport of Bilonia is introduced as well as the actors. The gliding experience is explained as a carefully staged performance divided into precise phases. The career of the pilot, as he progresses through different stages, is illustrated.

Chapter 5 presents in detail the living reality of Bilonia and the main concerns of the Italian gliding community. By introducing exemplary characters, reporting their discourses about gliding, describing episodes and situations, gliding is understood as a reality of strong emotions. The triangulation of data

from different places and different sources reveals differences in attitudes and priorities between the wider gliding subculture and the local one. Frustration and anxiety are pointed out as recurring themes recognisable in Bilonia.

Chapter 6 highlights dynamic processes in the gliding subculture showing how sport subcultures are by no means static entities. Exposing these processes was made possible by an exceptionally long fieldwork. I show how the arrival of new members in Bilonia – although they belonged to the same age bracket of the old ones – brought about new ways of understanding the activity and resulted in the departure of many pilots who created a new gliding association.

Chapter 7, the first of three focussing on analytical issues, identifies the sport subcultural features of the Italian gliding community, at the same time discussing how existing theory fits to a different age bracket. In fact, the data presented in the empirical chapters suggest the reality of a middle-aged subculture. This isn't characterised by the oppositional features often highlighted in youth sport subcultures, although other common subcultural traits, like the paramount importance of commitment in creating identity and status, are confirmed.

Chapter 8 addresses the issue of risk perception and management. Following the cultural model introduced by Mary Douglas it holds that subcultural belonging determines precise risk consciousness. It points out how the literature has ignored the important issue of reflexivity in understanding risk in those activities based on voluntary risk taking. Pilots can go beyond the rationalisations that are their most common reactions when confronted with fatal accidents, and reveal a new awareness of the real causes behind these accidents: a complacency which influences perceptions and creates a false sense of security.

Chapter 9 accounts for pilots' motivations in order to provide a full rounded view on gliding, adopting a kind of analysis popular in the literature on dangerous sports. The chapter charts early psychoanalytical and sociological interpretations and the two interpretations adopted by the most recent literature, Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow (1990; 2000) and Lyng's concept of edgework (1990; 2005). In the last section, I introduce a personal interpretation I devised in my Master dissertation (1997) based on the notion of heroism, showing how it could be used to account for motivations of newcomers and 'wannabes'.

The appendix sketches a history of gliding and the technical aspects of the activity. It describes gliders and the way they fly. It discusses the transformations that have affected the way of soaring over the years, and it deals with safety devices recently introduced in sailplanes and how the world of gliding was slow to adopt them.

Chapter 2

Background Theory for an Anthropology of Sport

2.1   Introduction

This thesis is an anthropological study of a specific sport, and the analytical tools it uses to deal with the material gathered are drawn from the study of sports subcultures and the cultural analysis of risk. Although criticised in their early version for their myopia towards certain aspects of the sport reality, subcultural studies have made it possible to develop a body of theory which is employed by most authors for dealing with sports. Extensive writings now exist on the use of the concept of subculture in ethnographic works on sport (Donnelly 1981; 1985; 1988; Donnelly 2006; Crosset and Beal 1997; Wheaton 1997; 2000; 2004; 2007). These writings show how the theoretical framework used in subcultural studies can aid in acquiring a good understanding of the behaviours and values of members of sports communities.

This chapter provides an introduction to the anthropology of sport, a sketch of how the discipline arose and the resources it offers in researching a specific sporting activity. It traces the history of subcultural studies and introduces sporting subcultures. It also looks at certain social theories of risk, relevant to the study of dangerous sports and extreme play.

2.2   The anthropology of sport

Flying in sailplanes is a peculiar type of sport. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1988) defined it as a 'cybernetic sport', since it is mainly based on the control of a sophisticated machine rather than on physical skills – that it to say, that it is quite different from games, like soccer, football, baseball and the like, which have been studied more intensively by anthropologists. Nevertheless,

gliding – especially since it involves competitions and records – is both a sport and a leisure activity, and the present research, conducted mainly through participant observation and by comparing different attitudes in different communities, belongs to the anthropology of sport. From my findings gliding also emerges necessarily as an outdoor activity close to others already explored by anthropologists or sociologists. In this thesis, therefore, I make use of the theoretical perspectives offered by studies on a wide range of different outdoor and indoor sport activities. These include: hang-gliding (Brannigan and McDougall 1983); surfing (Butts 2001; Farmer 1992; Stranger 1999); windsurfing (Wheaton 1997; 2000); skateboarding (Beal 1996); snowboarding (Anderson 1999); boxing (Coates 1999; Wacquant 1992); aerobics (Sassatelli 2000; Waaler Loland 2000); wrestling (de Garis 1999); cycling (Albert 1997; 1999; Williams 1989); whiz sports (Midol 1993; Midol and Broyer 1995); swimming (Nixon 1986); tennis (Muir 1991); rock climbing (Kiwa 2002; Mitchell 1983; Williams and Donnelly 1985); American football (Sands 1999b); shuffleboard (Snyder 1989); lawn bowling (Heuser 2005); wheelchair racing (Williams and Taylor 1994), and ocean cruising (Jennings 1999; Macbeth 1992; 2000).

2.2.2   *Remarks on the history of a young discipline*

Although, where it exists, sport can be regarded as an important expression of cultural life, it is only recently that anthropologists have chosen it for a field of inquiry. Probably "the primacy of sport respectability in sociology rather than in anthropology is [due to] the fact that sport is more likely to be a major element in the social systems that sociologists study than those treated by anthropologists" (Blanchard and Chesta 1985, p. 292).

Quite probably, the anthropology of sport started in the United States at the end of the Nineteenth century with E.B. Tylor. Tylor realised that sport could provide anthropologists with important clues about the nature of prehistoric cultural contacts between geographically distant groups of people. One of the rare examples in contemporary anthropology in which the importance of sport is taken into account in analysing a society was Raymond Firth's 1930 description

of competitive dart matches in Tikopia. Held on occasion of special ceremonies, these contests of dart (*Tika*) throwing opposed two teams that mirrored the traditional opposition between the two districts of the island (Faea and Ravenga). In that study, Firth suggested how sport could be a fruitful topic for study by anthropologists.

The first impetus towards considering sport as a serious object for study by anthropologists was provided by the creation, in 1974, of the Anthropological Association for the Study of Play (TAASP, later known as TASP). Two of the Association's most influential members, Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Taylor Cheska, published in 1985 *The Anthropology of Sport,* the first-ever text on the subject, and this paved the way for subsequent studies. Although from those years studies on sport based on traditional ethnography and written by anthropologists began appearing alongside works by sociologists (especially in the Nineties and in the first years of the New Millennium; see for example Alter 2000; Dyck 2000: Sands 1999b), they nevertheless remained few and far between, and the anthropology of sport never really become an established subfield of the discipline.

2.2.3   *The advantages of the anthropological method*

"Ethnographic accounts of games and athletic contests offer rich evidence of the myriad ways in which persons, both as individuals and as members of groups, utilise involvement in sport to organise comprehensible lives out of the increasingly fragmented and contradictory elements of contemporary existence" (Dyck 2000, p. 32).

The advantages of using participant observation have been defined as an 'intensive personal immersion' that yields experience and insights that lie beyond the reach of other research approaches. Through it, what is sought is a comprehensive description and, perhaps, an experience of a social setting, the acquisition of which uses not only intellectual, but also the physical and emotional resources of the anthropologist (Okeley 1992). Besides the method, the focus of the anthropologist is also somehow different from other students of sports. Thus, from an anthropological perspective the exact length, breadth and

width of a field in which a particular game is played (being it soccer, cricket or Kabaddi) is usually irrelevant. Rules *per se* are also usually less interesting than what they mean to others. Thus, "What is most significant is the question of why, how and for whom the stipulation of these measurements, rules and subdivisions has become an important end in and of itself" (Alter 2000, p. 100).

An ethnographic inquiry can record the subtlety of situated sports: "even in a sport played within a single city, varying sets of regulations may be adopted by different leagues and levels of competition" (Dyck 2000, p. 21). This is what happens in gliding, and I focus on this variation in Chapter 5. Moreover, while it may be logistically convenient to limit one's examination of a sport to a single level of organisation, to do so uncritically would be to overlook salient interconnections between them (Dyck 2000). Even a common sport can be performed or played in a variety of ways, and the styles of play frequently vary from one setting to another. As has been shown by Moore (2000), even soccer, often considered to be the most widespread sport in the world, can be interpreted and experienced in local communities according to traditions which imply different styles of play. The strength of an anthropological approach resides in its ability to emphasise these local meanings, "the range of cultural complexities that are woven into the local organisation and understandings of the sport" (Moore 2000, p. 119).[4]

2.3   From subcultural studies to sport subcultures

The study of sport subcultures did not develop in a vacuum. It arose from the classical sociological and cultural studies on subcultures which date back to a body of theory developed over a period of more than fifty years – between the 1920s and 1970s, first by the researchers associated with what was called the Chicago School of Sociology and later by researchers of Birmingham

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[4] Some anthropological studies have shed light on aspects of certain sports that might deserve an examination in their own right – including gliding. These are the implications of the non-verbal dimension and embodied nature of sport analysed by de Garis (1999), Howes (1991), Dyck and Archetti (2000).

University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)[5] who viewed popular culture as a site of struggle and resistance. These theories were of paramount importance in opening up a new field of study and introducing a new series of concepts with which to frame the social groups they scrutinised. They are widely adopted in the anthropological study of sport.

2.3.2   The Chicago School of Sociology

The Chicago School studied subcultures constituted by young urban deviant groups who shared sets of values in opposition to those held by society. These values were chosen because they were more fitted to the creation of a positive status from the disadvantaged social situation of these subjects. They opposed the dominant norms, excluded themselves from society in independent groups and valued the status bestowed on members according to new collectively established norms of conduct. Being labelled as deviants by the rest of society gave these young people distinctiveness and authenticity and was part of the construction of their identity.

At the Chicago School emphasis was given to the ethnographic method with the aim of investigating patterns of behaviour linked to strongly held beliefs, norms and values differing from those of the mainstream adult society. The very first research agenda for this new course of studies is found in the work by Robert E. Park *The City. Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behaviour in the Urban Environment* (1925). Here are the first suggestions of participant observation as the most valuable method to study the way of life of the inhabitants of the city and the first doubts cast on the assumption of a homogeneous urban culture. Park (who had studied in Berlin where he had been

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[5] It has been shown how the idea of subcultures, if not the name itself, is far older than is usually acknowledged and depends on a particular 'gaze' developed in the urban chronicles of Nineteenth century newspapers (Tolson 1990, in Gelder and Thornton 1997). "[S]ubcultures are not an effect of the new consumer society, nor are they a symbolic response to the post-war restructuring of working class communities. […] it is possible to trace the public visibility of subcultures to the formation of a particular kind of perspective, a 'sociological gaze', which begins to emerge in the 1830s and 1840s. In the post-war period, youth subcultures may have re-emerged in their distinctive modern forms; but the condition and criteria for their recognition seem to have a much more extended history" (Tolson 1990, in Gelder and Thornton 1997, pp. 302-303).

inspired by Simmel's lectures) aimed "to define a point of view and to indicate a program for the study of urban life: its physical organisation, its occupations, and its culture." (Park 1967, p. 3).

Although not named as such, subcultural studies began to develop in these works. Along this path of urban investigation there followed various other studies expounding the issues that lie at the core of the development of the concept. In 1943 William F. Whyte published his influential study of an underprivileged population of immigrants – *Street Corner Society. The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* – which was to become a classical example of this type of empirical and analytical work.

In 1947, the sociologist Milton Gordon published a paper titled *The Concept of a Sub-Culture and its Application.* Introducing the concept, he stated: "It is the thesis of this paper that a great deal could be gained by a more extensive use of the concept of sub-culture – a concept used here to refer to a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but *forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual*" (in Gelder and Thornton 1997, p. 41). In this paper, Gordon pointed out a facet of subcultural investigation that is of great relevance for my work and which has been more generally pointed out by the sociology of sport (Snyder 1989): "A distinction [that] must, of course, be made between separate sub-cultures and separates units of the same sub-culture" (Gordon in Gelder and Thornton 1997, p. 42). In my ethnography I expound the importance granted to the localisation of a subculture in different sub-units (see Chapter 5).

A few years later Albert Cohen drafted a general theory of subcultures. In his book *Delinquent Boys. The Culture of the Gang* (1955), that drew on his investigation into the delinquent male gangs of the 1950s, he set the agenda for subsequent research, positing the idea of collective problem solving as one of the cornerstones of subcultural theory (Gelder and Thornton 1997). In Cohen's words: "The emergence of these 'group standards' of this shared frame of reference, is the emergence of a new subculture. It is cultural because each actor's participation in this system or norms is influenced by his perception of the same norms in other actors. It is subcultural because the norms are shared

only among those actors who stand somehow to profit from them and who find in one another a sympathetic moral climate within which these norms may come to fruition and persist" (Cohen 1955, p. 65). Interacting with his peers the actor finds social rewards for his way of life. Together the members fight the hostility of outsiders, which is one of the outcomes of the 'solution' that the subculture provides to their problems. Their non-conformity with the expectations of the outsiders becomes a positive criterion of status within the subcultural group.

A step forward in defining the conceptual category of subculture is provided by John Irwin's 'subcultural relativism'. In *Notes on the Status of the Concept of Subculture* (1970) the American sociologist set out to re-examine the notion of subculture. If Gordon defined it as a subset of cultural patterns carried by a population 'segment', Irwin pointed out how a person can simultaneously, or at different times, identify with more than one social reality. People were becoming aware of the existence of many subcultures that manifested themselves in variant lifestyles or social worlds. "The widespread use of the metaphor 'scene' reflects this trend[6]. American people are becoming aware of the subcultural variation of their society and are experiencing subcultural relativism" (Irwin 1970, in Gelder and Thornton 1997, p. 69). People often perceive themselves as actors in scenes, so that life is becoming like the stage of a theatre. Each single scene has a precise location and is transitory, and this instability mirrors an equal instability in the actors themselves, since commitment to a particular scene is 'potentially tentative and variable'. The bottom line is that the life and the interactions of ordinary modern men and women have to be seen as subject to a new subcultural pluralism and relativism. This introduction of the idea of pluralism of choices leads contemporary subcultural studies closer to their present concerns[7]. Within this domain, the gliding subculture can be seen and analysed as just one subculture among others.

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[6] For example, in the expressions: 'Make the scene'; 'That's not my scene'.
[7] There are so many choices available today that street-style expert Ted Polhemus (1994) defines the post-modern stylistic subcultures as representing a 'supermarket of styles'.

2.3.3   The Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

The Birmingham School's cultural studies dealt mainly with young working class men in United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s and with their symbolic resistance to hegemonic values and their quest for authenticity. This approach of cultural studies was based on a neo-Marxist theory and critique of capitalist ideology. Its take was that youth formed subcultures, such as mods, teddy boys, skins, bikers, punks and the like, based on styles to which they accorded subversive meanings, in order to rework their position inside a hegemonic culture to which, for social and economic reasons, they were relegated to the margins. These groups appropriated some of the mainstream's goods or manufactures but reworked their cultural meaning inside a new subcultural context. They created their own style which was a kind of a parody of the consumer society in which they lived (Hebdige 1977). It seems as though the latent functions of subculture were "to express and resolve, albeit 'magically', the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture. […] Mods, parkas, skinheads, crombies all represent, in their different ways, an attempt to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in [the working-class culture they belonged to], and to combine these with elements selected from other class factions, symbolising one or other of the options confronting it" (Phil Cohen 1972, in Gelder and Thornton 1997, p. 94).

In the opening chapter of a recent edition of John Clarke's book *Resistance through Rituals* (2005 [1975]), a theoretical overview by the author and editors (Clarke et al., *Subcultures, Cultures and Class*) pointed out the links between subcultures, the parent cultures and the issue of class struggle. The authors stressed how subcultures exist within the culture of the class from which they spring. Through their activities, ways of dressing, life-styles they shape a different cultural response to the problems faced by members of the working class, although their struggle is vain and cannot protect them from the conditions that determine the life of the socio-economic class to which they belong. To understand the implications of this struggle youth subcultures ought to be seen "[…] in the dialectic between a 'hegemonic' dominant culture and the subordinate working-class 'parent' culture, of which youth is a fraction" (Clarke

et al. 2005, p. 13). 'Hegemony' was a term introduced by Antonio Gramsci in order to describe how the ruling class is able not only to force the subordinate class to conform to its interests, but also to exert a social authority. It is a form of imposition – based mainly on control of media and education – used to frame alternatives and to shape consent, so that the power and legitimacy of the dominant classes appear natural and normal. The role of hegemony is to ensure that each social class is continually reproduced in its existing dominant-or-subordinate form. "The dominant culture represents itself as the culture. It tries to define and contain all others cultures within its inclusive range. Its views of the world, unless challenged, will stand as the most natural, all-embracing, universal culture. Other cultural configurations will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign – its hegemony." (ibidem, p. 12). Inside these relations, subcultures are a means of addressing as a group some of the problems that plague the life of youths of working class origin, but their effort is blunt. They provide a solution pitched only at the symbolic level and thus fated to fail. "They solve, but in an imaginary way, problems that at the concrete material level remain unresolved" (Clarke 2005, pp. 47-48). For example, at the beginning of the 1960s, the mods responded to their lack of educational and economic opportunities, to the prospect of lives destined to be as dull as their parents' by spending what little disposable income had trickled down to them to embrace a style which they saw as cool and modern. Drawing their inspiration from Italian and French fashion they delighted in consumerism and relished the chance to pose as dandies.

2.3.4   New conceptualisations of an old notion

Both the Chicago School and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies have been widely criticised for their excessively simplistic opposition of subculture and hegemonic culture. Moreover, they were accused of neglecting the elements of diversity inside the groups they studied, the instability

of these groups and the position and role of marginal members[8]. All the young people involved in a subculture were treated as a whole: diversity, variety of reaction and motivations, and the views of young people themselves were not taken into account (Hodkinson 2002). According to Sarah Thornton, "[…] the Birmingham tradition frequently positioned subcultures as transparent niches in an opaque world as if subcultural life spoke an unmediated truth. They were insufficiently critical of subcultural ideologies, first, because their attention was concentrated on the task of puncturing and contesting dominant ideology and, second, because their theories agreed with the anti-mass media discourses of youth music cultures" (1995, p. 119). Traditional subcultural theory misjudged the role of media and commerce. Thornton (1995) pointed out the active role of mass media in shaping and helping the club culture she studied to develop. She criticises early studies, especially Hebdige's, who in his early works considered the interest of mass media in a subculture as the forerunner of its demise. Rather, media and the cultural industry are effective in shaping many subcultures from their beginning.

In an attempt to critically re-conceptualise the notion of subculture in a post-modern framework and find a new paradigm for its study (Muggleton 2000), Andy Bennett holds that in some cases when the issue of social class is absent, as in the case of youth, style and musical taste, when there are collective associations built around musical or stylistic preferences, this very fluidity should rule out the existence of a real subculture. In these instances "[…] an alternative theoretical framework needs to be developed which allows for the pluralistic and shifting sensibilities of style that have increasingly characterised youth 'culture' since the post-Second World War period" (Bennett 1999, p. 599). The one he proposes draws upon Maffesoli's concept of 'tribes'. These are " […] groups distinguished by their members' shared lifestyles and tastes […] they are not tribes in the traditional anthropological sense, for they don't have the fixity and longevity of tribes" (R. Shields, p. x, in Maffesoli 1996). Bennett points out that "[…] Those groupings which have traditionally been theorised as coherent subcultures are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships" (Bennett 1999, p. 600). The

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[8] As will become clear in the following chapters, all these proved to be important issues in the study of the subculture of Italian gliding.

forms of association in which young people become involved are not rigidly bound, they don't form a real subculture, but rather have a more fluid, 'neo-tribal' character. If in the 1970s Irwin's concept of 'scenes' – recently taken up by Kahn-Harris (2000) in his study of the various semi-autonomous local manifestations of the extreme metal musical genre – was meant to signify the fluidity and relativism of subcultural life, here the issue is its reality itself. These concepts are meant to offer an alternative to traditional subcultural theory and suggest replacements for the term itself, but, at the same time, they "[…] create a problem in itself. This is especially the case since, apart from a common avoidance of traditional subcultural theory, few of the theorists clearly explain how their preferred term differs from the other proposals in the offing. […] The imprecise way in which subculture has sometimes been used is certainly a cause for concern, but the current enthusiasm for coining more and more alternatives seems liable only to further complicate things" (Hodkinson 2002, p. 23). In the case of the middle-aged sport subculture of gliding the ephemeral multi-affiliations referred to in postmodern theory have to be ruled out. Glider pilots' commitment is characterised by a deep level of continuity. The members of the subculture don't move from one scene to the next as the popular music fans and don't work out their distinction at the 'supermarket of styles' (Polhemus 1994). Their commitment entails continuity and substance (Hodkinson 2002). Changes do indeed occur but not often, and affiliations are quite stable.

2.3.5   *Sport subcultures*

Today people can draw their identities from different sources, some of which have acquired this role only recently. Among these are sport, leisure lifestyles, and consumption practices (Giddens 1991; Miller 1987; Moorehouse 1991; Williams and Taylor 1994; Sassatelli 2000; Wheaton 2000). The adoption of a subcultural identity by an individual's commitment to a sport or to a special leisure activity, to its practices and signs, is a way of asserting cultural identity, of acquiring a sense of belonging to a community with its own values and rules. For this reason subcultural studies have acquired a growing importance in the social sciences' analysis of sport. Groupings of sport practitioners – as well as

people who coalesce around a sport identification – form sociologically circumscribed communities that display a meaningful alternative value system and can be considered subcultures in their own right (Midol 1993; Wheaton 2004). Their study implies analysing issues they share with most subcultures, be they deviant gangs or street styles.

In line with the tradition of subcultural studies, early studies of sport subcultures, especially if they were devoted to youth subcultures, tended to underline links of these groups with deviance (Donnelly 1981; Brannigan and McDougall 1983; Moorhouse 1991). Later studies emphasized an opposition between the young sport practitioners and the adult world (Midol and Broyer 1995). This opposition between subculture and the mainstream culture is confined to the youngest practitioners and becomes blurred if the members of the subculture are mainly mature people, more likely to have already settled in a steady social position (Bennet 2006; McDonald-Walker 2000). The subcultural universe represents for them either an integral part of their lives or a new dimension added at a later time to their identities.

Although the term 'subculture' has slipped into everyday usage, where its exact meaning is not considered to be problematic, some definition when applying it to sport still seems necessary. Among the scholars of sport subcultures Peter Donnelly's definition of 'subculture' is paramount, since it influenced much of subsequent research: 1) an identifiable group within a culture or across cultures; 2) composed of smaller groups or individuals; 3) whose members are similar in values, norms, beliefs, that are somewhat different from the culture in which they exist; 4) and which dominate their lifestyle and allocation of resources; 5) subcultures are formed around activities that have scope and potential; 6) and are actively created and maintained by their members (Donnelly 1985, pp. 561-562). Besides, pinning down the main elements that define sport subcultures – their distinctiveness, the peculiarity of values and beliefs people adopt inside them, the intensity with which the practitioners devote themselves to the goals of the subculture – this definition has the added advantage of pointing out (in point 2) that much of the ethnographic work on sport subcultures is actually carried out on sub-units of these subcultures: on a particular team, in a precise club, in a certain location. In order to underline that ethnographic research is carried out on a sub-unit of a sport subculture, it may be

useful to give it a different name. This has already been done by Eldon Snyder (1986), who, following Gary Alan Fine (1979), adopted the term 'idioculture' or alternatively 'groupculture'9. "The social values that are reflected in the subculture of sport are also present in a team context; however, the behaviour of the team members may not be an exact replica of the sport subculture or the larger society" (Snyder and Preitzer 19893, p. 55). With regard to the case in point, idioculture refers to the specific gliding club based in Bilonia where I conducted my main fieldwork, from which certain extrapolations may be made to the larger gliding subculture, but – as shown by the development of my argument – which is far from identical to it.

Donnelly pointed out two other important theoretical features. The first appears in point 6 of the above definition. It stresses that subcultures are based on *achieved* characteristics and are groups to which people tend consciously to attain membership, whereas cultures are *ascribed* (race, ethnicity, sex, age). "Such achieved subcultures tend to be quite distinct with boundaries that are relatively easily determined and cultural characteristics that are readily apparent. They are characterised by the fact that members generally seek membership, and learn the meanings and ways of a particular subculture" (Donnelly 1985, p. 561). In sport settings, as well in all the other circumstances where subcultures are formed, the consistency of each subculture is "[…] enforced by means of equally consistent systems of subcultural rewards and penalties" (Hodkinson 2002, p. 30). The rewards are that the members of a subculture relish the fact that they "share membership in the same small guild […] They enjoy the sentiment that they are different from other people" (Waquant 1992, p. 239). The other important contribution by Donnelly (Donnelly 1981; Wheaton 2000; 2007a) is his description of the way in which different levels of membership are formed inside sport subcultures. Different levels of commitment create a ranking of the various practitioners from the peripheral members to the core ones. Gaining status depends on unquestioningly adopting the goals of the subculture and showing unrestrained commitment to it. Members whose rank is at the top of the

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9 Idio is derived from the Greek word *idios* meaning *own.* Fine justified the introduction of the new term idioculture in order to avoid using the expression 'group culture' previously adopted in the literature with a different meaning. The word 'groupculture' suggested by Snyder ten years later seems to doge the pitfall of a previous different usage.

subculture dictate its priorities in beliefs and values. They represent the hegemonic group inside it.

Following the approach of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, subcultural social practices in a sport setting were often analysed with the help of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Young 1993). This notion helps to detail the way in which the practitioners confront the dominant culture of their chosen practice in the production of their sporting activity. This is done by finding some "organising agents of hegemony" (Williams 1989, p. 318), people who could represent a benchmark ideal with which to compare the activity of the members. In the bicycle club studied by Williams these were the professional cyclists. In my case, they are the pilots who take part in gliding competitions. These are the ones for whom flying seems to be free from the constraints that plague the activity for the bulk of the practitioners: money, time, family, fear, lack of experience. Seen from a distance, apparently these pilots orient their gliding activity only to the pursuit of performance. During summer they take part in the competitions held in Italy or in other European countries. During winter, they can afford expensive trips to remote areas of the globe in pursuit of new records (in recent years Patagonia seems to be the place of choice).

Most of the members of the gliding subculture are unable to satisfactorily reproduce the practices of the top pilots: these are perceived as desirable but never completely attainable due to the constraints imposed on the activity, such as money, work and family. "Indeed, it is more likely that the subcultural versions which are reproduced as 'normal' will contain aspects that are similar and different in varying degrees to those of the hegemonic order" (Williams 1989, p. 330). What the members of the subculture try to find in this way is a subcultural definition of what is to be considered normal practice. In my main field site of Bilonia, cross-country flying, as opposed to local flying, is seen as the common sense ideal of the dominant order inside the gliding community. Social practices are naturalised by hegemony, they are made to appear commonsensical and legitimate so that it is very difficult for an individual to step back and start to think critically about them (Young 1993).

Recently the need for a revised agenda for the study of sport subcultures has been taken up by Michele Donnelly (2006) and, more extensively, Belinda

Wheaton (2007a)[10]. M. Donnelly pointed out a shortcoming of the existent research on extreme sport subcultures: its concentrating only on the core participants, neglecting marginal members such as newcomers and aspiring members. She calls on researchers to stop relying on ethnographic studies of core members and to find ways to include such marginalised participants who have been ignored by core members and researchers alike. Wheaton argued that researchers had to hone their arguments in the light of postmodern debates such as those I mentioned in the previous section about the fragmentation of youth styles and affiliations. She stresses the importance of assessing whether "[…] sports communities have the clearly maintained boundaries and identities implicated in early studies […] How are these boundaries shifting and redrawn through contests over taste and status?" (Wheaton 2007a, p. 294). In Wheaton's view, while sport subcultural groups have some shared values, the experiences of participants are not homogeneous or fixed. She critiques models such as P. Donnelly's (1981) characterisation of horizontal stratification of an achieved subculture from "core member" to "outsider", as evoking a static mode of identity that does not recognise the multiple ways in which difference or "otherness" is marked and measured and how identities are continually made or remade. Wheaton also points out how in recent studies the Gramscian-semiotic approach seems less commonplace and how lately research is "[…] informed by ethnographic and qualitative methodologies, leading to the emergence of new methodological, theoretical, and substantive concerns" (Wheaton 2007a, p. 292).

The usefulness of the notion of sport subculture seems reinforced by ethnographic studies that don't acknowledge the concept but nonetheless show how its main tenets should be at the foundations of social research into sport. Linda Heuser (2005) conceptualises a sport practice that seems to have all the attributes of a sport subculture. She employs different terms that stress the division in stages emphasised by Donnelly (1981). Describing a community of women lawn bowlers studied with the qualitative methods of participant observation, she resorts to the concept of 'career' to explain their involvement in the activity. Although she adopts the same term used by Donnelly, she uses it as an autonomous notion, outside the framework of an organizing theory. "Based

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[10] Her paper was published in August 2007, when most of this thesis had already been written. For this reason this study doesn't follow most of its suggestions.

on the scholarship of Hughes (1937), Hall (1948), Goffman (1961), Becker (1963), Stebbins (1970), Blankenship (1973), Prus (1984)[11] and others, career has become a widely accepted theoretical construct in explaining social phenomena" (Heuser 2005, p. 46). The notion of career helps Heuser to account for the stages into which the women's involvement in the sport is articulated, from their introduction to the activity, to their becoming social players, then serious players, sometimes involved organizationally in bowls, until their eventual retirement. However, the concept has also been widely criticised for being a kind of variable hybrid that, in spite of the considerable body of research, theory and speculation surrounding it, lacks coherence and any organising principles (Collin and Young 1986).

2.4   Social theory on risk

Sociology and anthropology have produced studies in which risk is the object of thorough analysis (Frey 1991; Le Breton 1995; Albert 1999; Lyng 2005). In the case of leisure activities and sport, it is through the dimension of risk that scholars are able to gain an understanding of what the activity means to participants. Risk is intrinsically connected to gliding in sailplanes. A sport like gliding represents a challenge to the earthbound nature of man, and may be seen as an attempt to recuperate the physical risks which have been lost from in our existence. As will be shown in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, the study of risk can be used as a tool in order to render the experience of particular individuals intelligible – the gliding community in Bilonia – as it is shaped by the social group to which they belong (Sperber 1985).

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[11] Hughes, E.C. 1937, *Institutional Office and the Person,* "American Journal of Sociology", vol. 43, pp. 404-413; Hall, O. 1948, *The Stages of a Medical Career,* "American Journal of Sociology", vol. 53, pp. 327-336; Becker, H.S. 1963, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance,* New York: Free Press; Stebbins, R.A. 1970, *Career: the Subjective Approach,* "The Sociological Quarterly", vol. 11, pp. 32-49; Blankenship, R.L. 1973, *Organizational Careers: an Interactionist Perspective,* "The Sociological Quarterly", vol. 14, pp. 88-98; Prus, R. 1984, *Career Contingencies: Examining Patterns of Involvement,* in Theberge and Donnelly 1984, pp. 297-317, see Bibliography.

2.4.2   Risk perception

Dangerous sport activities are most prevalent in those societies that can provide their members with social and economic security and stability (Le Breton 1995). Moreover, those involved in these activities will probably more often be well educated individuals, with good jobs from the middle and upper classes (Mitchell 1983). According to Mitchell – who describes a social milieu (i.e. rock-climbing) which in the meantime has undergone substantial changes, and has had to learn to protect its ethos from a process of McDonaldization (Hardy 2002) – there is a social category composed of well educated people like scientists, engineers, technicians and the like who have in common the failed aspiration to a creative job. "These persons in particular experience a considerable schism between their academic preparation and actual work experience. Their training consists of learning broad theoretical principles, but that knowledge is often put to use in narrow, pragmatic circumstances" (Mitchell 1983, p. 188). They are disappointed and frustrated and so more prone than others to look for emotion and fulfilment in a leisure activity. They hunt for stressful situations because stress gives them a meaningful appeal. To Mary Douglas this interpretation appears to be based on a flawed model of personality according to which people need a given amount of risk in their lives for their well being. She questions the notion that those employed in steady or placid occupations will seek out dangerous leisure activities, such as skydiving or hang gliding, and suggests that the opposite case seems more plausible, that individuals in risky occupations probably seek reinforcement in their leisure choices pursuing leisure time risk. She goes on to stress the desirability of focussing on the social influence rather eliminating it, given the practical impossibility of testing for the innate personality element. "When uncertainty is at a very high level and everyone is taking big risks, the cultural norms will encourage more risk seeking." (Douglas 1985, p. 75).

Mary Douglas maintains that the focus of analysis must be moved away from physical danger, because in itself it doesn't offer insights of anthropological relevance. According to Douglas "The focus ought not to be on the danger but on the institutions if we are interested in public perception. The

functional approach of anthropology insists that the expectation of dangers tend to be institutionalised so that it stabilises and generally supports the local regime, whatever it may be" (Douglas 1985, p. 54). In her brilliant essay *How Institutions Think* (1986) she explains how in every society people think by relying on the institutions of their culture since these determine systems of beliefs and morality. Institutions are defined as the 'automatic pilot' of thought, on which every person relies every time an important decision is to be taken. This 'automatic pilot' is at work in the various gliding clubs and gliding communities. These gliding locations can be held to be institutions in their own right (see Chapter 5).

In her analysis on risk perception in the social sciences, Mary Douglas describes culture as a coding principle by which hazards are recognised and which provides individuals with established norms of due carefulness. Thus, a daring mountaineer will draw attention to how s/he refused to budge in bad weather and an Olympic skier will boast of the care s/he takes of her/his equipment. Both denying that they take risks, assert that they avoid silly risks. People live in "[...] a world constructed from their own concepts. These include the concept of what is hazardous" (Douglas 1985, p. 26). My ethnographic data show how this happens in the subculture of gliding. Comparing data drawn from three different sources – my main fieldwork in Bilonia, the second shorter fieldwork in Piti and the e-mails of the electronic mailing list of the Italian glider pilots – I was able to assess different ways in perceiving the inherent hazards of soaring in different locations, i.e. different gliding clubs. Also within the same sport subculture, what pilots say about the dangers of their sport, and their actual way of flying, reveal different ways of understanding danger.

Risk perception has also been analysed from a psychological point of view. Recent studies, while criticising the cultural theory on risk because it doesn't account for how people come to adopt a particular cultural perspective, nevertheless agree on many points with the cultural approach. Following Douglas, Breakwell pointed out how "[…] risk judgments only have meaning because they exist within a social frame of meaning construction" (2007, p. 74). "Cultural biases prioritise the risks to which a group will attend. These differences between groups cannot be explained in terms of individual cognitive processes or by the technical assessment of risk levels" (ibidem, p. 73). In an

edited book Paul Slovic (2000) highlighted how, in the face of hazards, the anxiety-reducing desire for certainty breeds overconfidence. He pointed out how people faced with natural hazards (i.e. living in a flood valley or in an earthquake zone) often consider their environment absolutely safe. Previous accidents are attributed to freak combinations of circumstances, unlikely to occur again. About risk perception there is a fallibility of judgement. In his psychological research on this subject, Slovic sought to discover what people mean when they say that something is or is not 'risky', what are the factors that underlie these perceptions. "Cognitive limitations, coupled with the anxieties generated by facing life as a gamble, cause uncertainty to be denied, risk to be distorted and statements of fact to be believed with unwarranted confidence." Besides, "Perceived risk is influenced (and sometimes biased) by the imaginability and memorability of the hazard. People may, therefore, not have valid perceptions even for familiar risks" (Slovic 2000, p. 119). Again, anxieties cause "risks to be misjudged (sometimes overestimated and sometimes underestimated) and judgements of fact to be held with unwarranted confidence." (Slovic 2000, p. 222).

2.4.3   A new ethic

In their study of gambling, Abt and Smith (1983) realised that the practice allows the taking of decisions and other forms of individual initiative that are no longer permissible in the industrial bureaucracies in which most people live. Normal individuals can aspire to self-esteem and independence of action only by practising one form or other of gambling (putting their money at stake, their prestige or their lives as in a dangerous sport). These activities can be seen as "[…] the ultimate form of consumption, as they represent money buying experience. A kind of Protestant leisure ethic has replaced the conventional Protestant work ethic" (Manning 1983, p. 14). The new ethic is no longer a constraint to earning and accumulating, rather it has become a search for pleasure which is at the same time a means of acquiring identity and a higher moral status (Moorhouse 1991; Sassatelli 2000; Wheaton 2000; 2004).

Midol and Broyer (1995), in a paper on the 'whiz' sports in France (sports that are also variously termed 'alternative', based on a 'lifestyle',

'extreme'; see Wheaton 2004), found a connection between the change in the moral attitude of practitioners with the changing social composition inside the group they were studying. They describe the opposition between an older generation, made up mainly of coaches, who behave according to a traditional work ethic (although softened by their Catholicism), and a younger generation free from such constraints, whose aim was to enjoy the here-and-now. The coaches of these young skiers were from a generation that lived according to shared sexual taboos and internalised values of work. The younger skiers instead belonged to the generation of the sexual liberation. They applied the same defence mechanism to death that the coaches applied to sex: they 'removed' the danger associated with their activity by freeing themselves from the restriction based on safety.

Younger practitioners wanted more playful practices; they only wanted fun which should be experienced in the here-and-now. They set off a small process of social change by adopting a transgressive behaviour and thereby creating new values. They stopped practising the hard training sessions devised for them by their coaches; they ceased obeying all the rules of their sport's federation; they started to enjoy a freer way of skiing in which the main goal was the thrill of a dizzying experience[12]. For them risk equated freedom.

"Skiers freed themselves from the guilt complex linked to Christianity in order to invent another culture removed from guilt. This new generation replaced the morality of guilt (born of the original sin) by a pleasure-seeking in the present moment, a search of the thrills experienced by athletes as they go ever faster and higher" (Midol and Broyer 1995, p. 207). They wanted to feel at one with the scenery of the snowfield, feeling the harmony of skiing. They wanted to experience that psychological situation that Csikszentmihalyi called 'flow' (see next paragraph).

The moral legitimacy of dangerous leisure activities – so far ignored in the studies in which different dimensions, such as the psychological, sociological, linked to consumption practices were explored – has been discussed by Steve Olivier (2006) in a paper that weighed the potential negative costs of participations. "An argument against risk taking sports might be that participants

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[12] Similar findings also in Le Breton 1995, Sassatelli 2000 and Wheaton 2004.

not only have a utilitarian obligation to desist, but also a duty to (at least) significant others and society to curtail their activities. […] costs may include the emotional burden associated with bereavement of loved ones, more tangible costs such as loss of fiscal contributions towards a family's upkeep, and the cost of rescue and retrieval operations" (Olivier 2006, p. 100). Although it is true that, in pursuing a dangerous sport, practitioners are sometimes led to dodge family duties and ignore all the potential dangers for themselves and others, Olivier endorses the individual's freedom to make decisions, and rejects arguments in favour of paternalistic interference and control by a silent majority. Everybody should be allowed to be in control of her/his own life deciding which actions s/he wants to pursue "In order to treat people as autonomous beings, it could be held that to show respect requires that we leave them alone, even to the point of allowing them to choose activities that might be harmful" (ibidem, p. 102). If the activities of extreme sport participants can be seen as "what has been termed selfish, secular humanism" (ibidem, p. 106), Olivier contends "that freedom is the basis for morality" (ibidem, p. 106), and he argues "that, in many cases, the actual benefits of participation in dangerous sports outweigh the potential negative costs, and that we have the right to engage in dangerous leisure activities that provide meaningful personal experiences" (ibidem, p. 106). In paragraph *8.2* I point out how in most cases also pilots' spouses, life partners and close relatives share this notion. They understand the satisfaction the pilot experiences, her/his sense of agency and of achieving a personal goal and therefore they don't hinder the pilots' desire to practice a dangerous sport.

2.4.4   Voluntary risk taking

The importance in post-modernity of risky activities – such as surfing, rock climbing, gliding, and the like – in which the individual loses himself in transcendence of the self, being in turn supported by a community that provides a framework of strong values, has been described in detail (Donnelly 1981; 1985; McDonald-Walker 2000; Wheaton 2000, 2004). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of 'flow' which provides a psychological explanation for their allure, has been adopted for their analysis by various authors (Mitchell

1983; Midol 1993; Stranger 1999). The notion of flow was developed by Csikszentmihalyi in the 1970s. Remarking how the relationship between challenges and skills is one of the fundamental characteristics of a number of enjoyable activities he set out to apply it to account for some surprising behaviours. Csikszentmihalyi identified a typology of activities to which people can devote time and effort because they gain a peculiar state of experience from it, one not accessible in 'everyday life'. These activities are pursued for their intrinsic rewards that appear to overshadow extrinsic ones. Certain people are willing to risk their lives, for example climbing rocks, for no apparent reason, and they are willing to give up material rewards for the elusive experience consisting in performing enjoyable acts. "The underlying similarity that cuts across these autotelic activities, regardless of their formal differences, is that they all give participants a sense of discovery, exploration, problem solution – in other words, a feeling of novelty and challenge" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 30).

The scholar has named this kind of experience *flow*, adopting a word frequently used by his informants themselves. The state of flow is felt when opportunities for action are in balance with the actor's skills. "In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. The experience is a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment […]" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 36). The achievement of a sought after goal (i.e. for a rock-climber reaching the top of a route, or for a glider pilot completing a 300 km circuit), although important to mark one's performance, doesn't provide satisfaction in itself. What really matters is an experience of flow, that is to say an experience into which the opposite feelings of worry and boredom don't have place. When this happens, the actor feels the merging of his actions and his awareness. "A person in flow has no dualistic perspective: he is aware of his actions but not of the awareness itself" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 38).

A second characteristic of flow experiences makes possible this merging of action and awareness; in the flow states the actor's attention is all focused on a narrow stimulus field. Thanks to this, he feels in control of the environment in which action takes place. "Perhaps the most salient element of the flow state is a sense of control over the environment" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 191). Flow

activities have clear and simple rules that allow people who perform in them to get lost in them and temporarily forget their identity and their problems creating the conditions for living an extremely rewarding process.

A concept that has much in common with the notion of flow is that of *edgework*. In 1990, S. Lyng published a paper, titled *Edgework. A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking,* whose theoretical premises were born out of the remark of the scarcity of research on voluntary risk-taking behaviour. If in this effort he was not alone (see Short 1984), he was for his goal to direct attention "[…] to an even more puzzling issue – the problem of what makes risk taking *necessary* for the well-being of some people" (Lyng 1990, p. 852). Lyng noticed how the previous attempts – like Csikszentmihalyi's – to explain such behaviour could not be considered thorough sociological explanations, since they did not ground the psychological factors as socially constituted and the subjects as acting in a historically specific social environment.

Attempting to overcome these shortcomings, Lyng tries to find a sociological explanation at the contextual micro-level in opposition to the dominant psychological and sociological ones at the macro-level. He does so studying the complex subculture of skydiving in a skydiving centre where he conducted a thoroughgoing ethnography. The concept of edgework was born in 1990 from this experience. The term is borrowed from the journalist Hunter S. Thompson, an advocate of the 'full immersion' participation in 'dangerous' activities who also inspired other scholars (i.e. Sands 1999b). Edgework is based on thrill seeking, on placing oneself in threatening situations over which the actor has high degrees of control. Activities such as skydiving, in which the threat of death or injury is ever present – although often the participant tends to minimise it –, that involve the use of specific individual abilities, and the development and use of particular skills can be classified as edgework.

Lyng defines as an interesting irony in the edgework experience the fact that success in negotiating the edge is, to a large extent, determined by chance, although the actors believe instead that their skills only account for the outcome. "In one sense this perception is accurate since one's ability to control fear, focus attention, and so forth is crucial to whether or not one can successfully negotiate the edge. […] In any case, edgework is one of the few experiences in modern life

where 'success' (survival) can be unambiguously attributed to individual skill" (Lyng 1990, p. 873). According to Lyng, the individual who voluntary takes risks experiences feelings of self-determination and self-actualisation; s/he lives one of the few opportunities to move from her/his everyday constraints towards a spontaneous realisation of her/his self.

Another type of interpretation of voluntary risk taking has been provided by the French sociologist David Le Breton (1995; 2004). According to this author, in traditional societies the physical certainties which permit survival are very scarce and people compensate for their lack by creating strong symbolic certainties: about the help granted by gods, about the truth of traditional behaviour, about the strength of the social ties of their family, of their tribe. On the contrary, in our society physical certainties abound, and life is comparatively easy. Material needs are quite simply answered for. This implies that people are free to choose the life that they prefer, but thanks to this post-modern abundance of possibilities they have lost the sense of who they are. They feel a lack of guidance in their lives since the limits to what is possible to choose are absent. "Risk-taking is not to be confused in any way with a desire to die. It is not a clumsy form of suicide, but a roundabout means of ensuring that one's life has a value and pushing back the fear of personal insignificance. It is a private rite of construing a meaning" (Le Breton 2004, p. 3).

The limits to people's behaviour are very scarce and this extreme freedom of action is sometimes perceived, especially by younger people, as frightening. From here there arises the need to create symbolic borders. As societies, in order to give themselves an identity, create food taboos (Douglas 1996); or as a society of consumers such as ours, uses goods to establish borders of symbolic meaning, to become markers of rational categories (Douglas and Isherwood 1979), so the individual explores her/his (bio)physical limits that are seen as the only possible source of identity.

"In modernity, the confusion of the reference points, the discontinuity in meaning and in the value of existence, lead any actor to the personal production of his own identity, by means of a cultural 'bricolage' in which social influences depend mainly on the fashion of the moment" (Le Breton 1995, p. 14 my tr.). Sports such as gliding, hang gliding, parachuting, surfing, give the individual a feeling of dizziness and at the same provides him with the possibility to

physically control the situation by relying on one's personal resources. The individual finds her/himself able to overcome strong contrary forces, and this restores her/his confidence and overcomes the feeling s/he has of being lost which has been caused by the social field.

Le Breton goes further, pushing his analysis to the point where he discovers "a symbolic contract established with death" which makes existence psychologically bearable. Each time s/he performs her/his activity, the practitioner is conscious that one possible outcome might be death. This frightens her/him, it is a dizzying possibility, the most extreme of all. But, at the same time, it represents a reality in which human behaviour is once again experienced as something serious, in which the cultural subtleties of contemporary society are exchanged for a strong fact, easily understandable, and for this very reason a fact more capable than others of restoring the individual sense of personal identity. The practitioner "[…] is entering a symbolic exchange with death: I will risk my life, but if I come out of this alive, I expect death to give me in exchange a feeling of omnipotence and exaltation which was missing from my life. I accept the risk of paying with my life for this moment of omnipotence, which will at last give me the feeling that I exist" (Le Breton 2004, pp. 9-10).

2.5   Conclusion

In this chapter I examined the three main bodies of theory on which the analysis developed throughout this thesis is grounded. I first dealt with the anthropology of sport based on participant observation, meant as the thoroughfare to gather data and understand practices and meaning of sports. In the following chapter I expound how, within the scope of the discipline, I have adopted a particular type of fieldwork practice, judged fitted to the purpose of my study.

Subcultural studies were then introduced, with a sketch of their history from classical sociological works of the first half of the Twentieth century which showed how their analytical suggestions have been widely adopted to assess and understand sport practices. In Chapter 7 I shall resort to subcultural theory in

order to interpret my data. I will show how in the study of sports like gliding this concept can be tuned to the analysis of small communities (such as a team or a gliding club, as in my case). Besides, I will contend how this thesis represents an early study on a middle-aged subculture.

The third theoretical issue examined was the social theory on risk, with particular regard to hazards in the sport setting and to voluntary risk taking. In Chapters 5 and 8, grounding my analysis on these studies, I dwell on the social management of risk, showing in particular how glider pilots collectively represent the possibility of death.

Chapter 3

Ethnography and Method

3.1   Introduction

Having occupied an unambiguous position as a long-term participant in the gliding groupculture based in Bilonia, when I decided to study this experience and its associated meanings I followed the next logical step of transforming myself into a participant-observer. In the first paragraph I review the literature dealing with this transformation, highlighting the ethical considerations this brings about. The method of intensive participation often adopted for the study of sport practices is discussed in paragraphs *3.3* and *3.4*. In the latter I also describe in detail fieldwork design, the usefulness of including in the picture the experiences of the few women pilots, the use of written sources besides participant observation and the reasons behind a second short fieldwork at a different gliding site. The issues that arose when I was analysing my data and giving shape to the final text are finally presented in the last two paragraphs.

3.2   Methodological remarks on subjectivity

This ethnographic study of gliding is based upon my involvement in the activity for over seventeen years. One of the main reasons that inclined me to analyse gliding and not just practice it was the need to come to terms with a state of anxiety I experience every time I pilot a sailplane. Besides, there was my being ill at ease with the social life at the airport, which appeared to me limited in its values and scopes. As a matter of fact, it should be clear that my focusing on the dangers of flying and how they are converted into a series of social attitudes derives, first and foremost, from a personal bias. A bias that may have influenced all my analysis and of which I am well aware. By the same token, the

focus on the subcultural character of the gliding community may have been prompted – besides the reading of the extensive literature on the topic – by my unease with some of the social implications linked to its subcultural groupings. Therefore, writing this thesis I had to write about what I would have rather not written about, revealing fears and social difficulties I would rather have kept hidden. Thus, my own piece of research confirms that, when the researcher is dealing with data that has been produced about his own experience, touching sensitive areas, data generation could become problematic (Tenni, Smyth and Boucher 2003).

On the other hand, the self is a resource for making sense of others. "Fieldwork is situated between autobiography and anthropology. It connects an important personal experience with a general field of knowledge" (Hastrup, in Okeley and Callaway 1992, p. 117). The advocates of an 'anthropology of emotions' stress this point even further. They maintain that the ethnographer's emotional response to fieldwork can be the main road for developing an interpretative approach to culture. "[…] there might be a more general and systematic attempt to examine the observer's anxieties that Devereux sees as the 'basic and characteristic data of behavioural science [and as] more valid and more productive of insight than any other type of datum'" (Lutz and White 1986, p. 430). According to Crick, if much of what is called "method" has characteristics of a "reaction formation" designed to protect the investigator from anxiety in the face of social phenomena, then a most important kind of ethnographic data is clearly what transpires inside the researcher. "We require that our selves become objects for scrutiny in the same way that our research has rendered objects those other selves with whom we have interacted in the field" (Crick in Okeley and Callaway 1992, p. 175). The existence itself of someone who observes, and the related and unavoidable anxieties, are cause of distortions that are logically, not only technically, unavoidable. So every method in the behavioural sciences must take into account these emotional perturbations in perception and interpretation. They represent the most characteristic and significant data of the research, in that the subjectivity inherent in every observation ought to be transformed into the main road towards an authentic objectivity. According to George Devereux, the concept of objectivity must be defined as 'what is really possible' and not as a compulsion to the perfection of a

'must be'. Because the distortions that come from subjectivity, when excluded from the conscience – when they are psychological defences that pretend to be 'methodology'– become the source of unaccountable mistakes (Devereux 1986).

Besides, we must be aware that the explanatory system which characterises scientific knowledge as such implies a shift from the empirical individuals directly accessible to ordinary intuition to constructed individuals (whether a person or an institution) which exist only in the network of relations elaborated by scientific study (Bourdieu 1990). The gliding club I describe in these pages is no exception. For this reason, the knowledge acquired in a field to which the researcher already belongs must abide by an epistemological awareness. "In choosing to study the social world in which we are involved, we are obliged to confront, in dramatised form as it were, a certain number of fundamental epistemological problems, all related to the question of the difference between practical knowledge and scholarly knowledge, and particularly to the special difficulties involved first in breaking with inside experience and then in reconstituting the knowledge which has been obtained by means of this break" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 1). Excessive proximity can represent an obstacle to scientific knowledge as excessive remoteness does. The researcher is faced with the hard task of reconciling the knowledge s/he has acquired thanks to her/his role of insider with everything s/he doesn't wish to know as long as s/he remains an insider, but that her/his study unveils. S/he has to cope with the difficult task of sustaining a relation of proximity broken and restored, which requires hard work done on her/himself.

These are the methodological premises of the kind of ethnological research that I propose. They reflect "a growing tendency among fieldworkers to recognise and reveal, rather than to deny or conceal, the part that personal interests, preferences, and experiences play in the formulation of fieldwork plans" (Georges and Jones 1980, p. 33). They suggest that an anthropologist shouldn't escape or negate her/himself. In studying others s/he should be using her/himself to this purpose, but at the same time going beyond the mere study of her/his self. The risk to be avoided is that of constructing others in one's own image, at the same time dodging the bias usually to be met in social anthropology, that is the use of general categories which exclude the self. Thus the "[…] self-driven view may be less exciting theoretically, but may be closer

to our experience" (Cohen 1992, p. 235). From this, it follows that the only reliable option that the anthropologists have is to incorporate their selves into the research, taking their cue from them.

Whenever the researcher decides to study through fieldwork individuals with whom s/he regularly interacts, such as members of the same leisure activity, s/he operates as what has been termed an 'unknown observer' (Georges and Jones 1980, p. 48). This process of the transformation of personal involvement into a research project has been described as "becoming a critical insider" and requires the adoption of a peculiar analytical technique "continually taking mental steps back so as to observe, compare, contrast and question as well as to experience" (Hodkinson 2002, p. 5 and p. 6). Being myself an insider presented some risks of not being able to perceive things as a researcher with the freshness of view that only the outsider can have. There was the risk of taking things for granted that an outsider would notice as particular and important (Waaler Loland 2000). On the other hand if, as an old practitioner turned researcher, I imposed unwanted categories upon my data, hopefully these were imposed as a glider pilot, a full fledged member of the community. Therefore, those categories are in any case a reflection of that same community (McDonald-Walker 2000).

3.3 Issues about method

As an active pilot I adopted a partially covert 'complete participant' role, based on my established position within the group, and my familiarity with the main setting. At the beginning, when I was writing my project – one year before starting my fieldwork – I mentioned openly to some of the pilots more close to me, that I was planning to transform gliding into a subject of study. I did so in order to test their reactions, to assess how far I could push the subject without jeopardising my being a full member of the community. They showed a perfunctory interest in my enterprise, some were curious about it, but in the following weeks nobody mentioned the subject again, as though it had not been taken too seriously. When I started my fieldwork, I decided not to boast about my project among the fellow members of the club. I spoke openly about what I was doing only to my informants. Two of them mentioned my project to other

pilots, but I never 'officially' informed all the members of Bilonia of the project. The rare times that somebody (prompted by my questions or by my informants) showed interest and asked questions I would offer the explanations required. During the five years of my fieldwork this happened with 10-12 people, but only four or five were curious enough to ask for details. My analytical interpretations of the subcultural nature of the gliding community and of the shared lack of reflexivity in understanding risk were discussed with three key informants.

Not advertising my project inside the community clearly brought about ethical considerations, already encountered by other authors, in that I was partially concealing my true intentions from the group (Wheaton 1997). However, it has been remarked that often "[…] fieldworkers are selective when they describe themselves and their interests to those they have chosen to study" (Georges and Jones 1980, p. 57). As we have seen, this holds true especially when observations and analysis pivot on the social reality to which the researcher himself belongs.

The type of ethnography I have adopted has been widely used in the study of sport. It has also been described as 'intensive participation' (Sands 1999b). It differs from the traditional method of participant observation in that the researcher belongs to the population under analysis and takes part in all the aspects of their interaction. S/he stays in the field for a lengthy period of time so that s/he is able to gain control over its social fluctuations. Most of the time the anthropologist studies a sport that s/he actively practices. In two of his books, Robert Sands dwells on black sprinters and on American football because in two different periods of his life he was active as a sprinter and as a football player. In some cases the scholar blends her/his desire to devote her/himself to a particular game with her/his desire to conduct qualitative research. Sometimes, as in my case, s/he sticks with the sport s/he is familiar with.

Bringing to the academic investigation previous experience and an ongoing personal involvement, the problem is not that of negotiating entry to the activity and forming relationships in the field. Rather it is that of obtaining the degree of separation needed for conducting critical analysis of situations one knows in personal terms (Dyck and Archetti 2003). In direct contrast to the negotiations and interpretations advocated by interpretative anthropology, the voice of the researcher coincides with the voice of the native. "My experience is

not a metaphor of the experience of others. In a way, I have crossed the final bridge that spans the chasm of researcher and those studied" (Sands 1999b, p.15). Researcher and natives belong to the same cognitive world and share an identical worldview, so that the former "[…] being a participating member of that group, becomes, in essence, an informant who can use experience to validate or 'check out' the experiences provided by the other members of that group. In this case, the researcher represents an added dimension of validation not available to traditional participant observation" (Sands 1999b, p. 31). My own fieldwork dictates many instances of this sharing and checking out of experiences. The enthusiasms arising from flying in a glider mentioned particularly in Chapter 9 are also my enthusiasms. When I perceive that a pilot has a fear of flying I can assess her/his fear through the scale of my own. In Chapter 8, I state a social regulation of risk also because I can recall many occasions in which my practice has been influenced by the social environment. I often was among the ones who ran an inordinate amount of risk just after discussing safety-related matters with my informants. Like them, I was also under the 'spell' of the activity as a social practice normatively dictating just what is hazardous and what is not. The subcultural values of the gliding community I share and adopt, judging others and myself as a glider pilot and member of the community. I too relished the endless discussions about gliding, sharing with the fellow members the appropriate jargon of the subculture.

3.3.2   Doing research at home

For a middle-class anthropologist to study a sport s/he practices is equal to conducting a research in her/his own home with all the associated problems. The bright side is that this automatically turns the anthropologist into a key informant; besides this, the fact of being involved 'first hand' leads the scholar to 'think hard' about how the sport s/he is experiencing is tied into society (Lithman 2000). S/he can exercise the methodological techniques of her/his trade, linking behaviour to cultural constructs and presenting the data in terms of meaningful native categories (Weiss 2000). The down side is that s/he develops her/his anthropological discourse according to an already established version of

reality, an intellectual setting that could influence her/his way of perceiving and classifying (Dyck 2000).

The researcher can reach a deeper comprehension of her/his social situation which, at the same time, is the object of her/his analysis. In a revealing example of research at home, studying the social structure of the British police – in whose ranks he had worked for several years – the police officer Malcom Young, transformed into social analyst, found that the analytic curiosity that had been the stimulant for his research had brought him for the first time to understand "the deep structures that generated the intensity of actions I had once merely lived with" (Young 1991, p. 393). This is an outcome already outlined by social researchers. At the dawning of the subcultural studies inside the Chicago School of Sociology, Whyte in his *Street Corner Society* (1943) pointed out how writing his book had been valuable to him largely in what it had taught him about himself and his world (Georges and Jones 1980). Young makes some remarks about this type of research – hinged on the interests and life of the scholar. "It can be quite painful, for the insider is studying his own social navel, with the potential always present that he will recognise [his analysis] to be only one of a number of arbitrary possibilities" (Young 1991, p. 9). Moreover, the researcher can also discover that many aspects of her/his life are flawed. Young, for example, had to admit to himself that many practices of the British police – hence of his present job – were "built on the flimsiest of moral precepts" (ibidem). My own piece of research brought me and my key informants to have to acknowledge the startling reality that gliding – although an exciting dangerous sport intertwined with the powerful myth of the aviator – shares most of its appeal with apparently far less enthralling leisure activities, such as shuffleboard and lawn bowling, which, for their practitioners, are equally engrossing.

3.4 Fieldwork design

In the previous paragraphs I have shown how my social research is deeply linked with my personal biography, by where I live and by my current interests and activities. I now approach the issue of its being 'objective' as well as 'subjective', in terms of its more traditional or orthodox ethnographic practice.

The research design was quite straightforward. Having been involved in the activity for such a long time, also before the formal phase of my fieldwork began, I had well in mind some recurrent themes – such as the responses to the hazards that the activity poses, or the way the practitioners have to feel as being apart from wider society. These themes I found mirrored in the relevant literature on the anthropology and sociology of sport. The research issues of the social regulation of risk and of the subcultural character of the gliding community were, thus, born out of these readings. Thus, thanks to this analytic reflection, I was able to transform long-standing impressions and ideas, and vaguely foreshadowed problems, into researchable hypotheses that were to guide my inquiries in the field. At this stage, some issues, such as that of the practitioners' motivations, which when planning the research had seemed to be pivotal, were found to be less promising and already covered by the existing literature. They were, therefore, subject to a marginal analysis (see Chapter 9).

Studying an activity that belongs to my life, data collection and analysis were not clearly divided into different phases of the research process. Once I had selected potentially relevant themes – such as the attitudes towards risk and the subcultural nature of the community – I decided to combine an in-depth study of one location (Bilonia airport) with a more cursory analysis of another location (Piti airport). In this second place, based on my previous experience, I knew that gliding and matters related to flying were conducted differently.

In both these clubs, I adopted the 'complete participant' role (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Young 1991) based on 'intensive participation' (Sands 1999b) or, at least, as much as each of these sites allowed. The nature itself of my object of study dictated the kind of fieldwork I have been conducting. The gliding section of the Aeroclub di Sirto has its base at Bilonia airport, an Air Force premise that is open to civilian pilots only at certain hours. That is why I gathered my data a few hours at a time, a couple of times a week for a long period; from January 2001 to December 2005 during the formal part of my research, but as a matter of fact, for much longer, both before and afterwards. The only occasion in which I spent all my time with 'my tribe' was during the week long intensive courses at Piti attended by a group of pilots (8-10) from the

Aeroclub di Sirto (see paragraph *4.6*)[13]. 'Complete participation' was sometimes toned down by my personal difficulties in completely merging with my group. For the purposes of my research that could have been an advantage, since the ethnographer must resist the tendency to feel too much at home in the field. S/he needs not surrender all her/his wits to it, since the work of analysis is produced in the very distance created by this being apart (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

As I said, since I was already an insider I didn't have the problems of access fieldworkers usually meet, although, as it happens in more traditional ethnographic settings, I too was caught up in the web of social relationships, of friendships and enmities, that somehow influenced the people I could get in contact with and prevented a further study in a new location. When the Aeroclub di Sirto split, at the beginning of 2005 (see Chapter 6), I was perceived as siding with the group that remained, so that extending my analysis to the new location, as I had done with Piti, proved very difficult. I was able to make only a few cursory visits, and therefore I didn't include the new break-away group into my fieldwork[14], although, from an analytical point of view, that could had been very interesting, allowing a further possibility of 'triangulation', as the process of checking data from different sources, different places or different phases of the fieldwork is called (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

During the fieldwork I observed what the glider pilots did, and listened to what they said. I engaged them in informal conversations, and when possible, steered the discourse to topics that might expose their beliefs and feelings and their way of perceiving their own behaviour and that of the other people. Those with whom I got along better were selected as privileged informants so that, although at the beginning of my fieldwork I already knew everybody, and although during the entire time I continued observing the behaviour of every member, I solicited comments and more detailed information from few informants only. In spite of the fact that interviewing can be an important source of data, and that there are some advantages in combining participant observation with interviews, since the data from each can be used to illuminate those of the

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[13] There is the custom among Bilonia based glider pilots every year to book all the places available in one of these courses, so as to spend the week together.

[14] Another reason behind this decision was that the period of my fieldwork was almost over.

others (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), I decided not to resort to it. I believe that numerous conversations with various informants could provide the same set of data. I had lengthy conversations with my main informant, who being one of the oldest members of the community (he has been enrolled in the Bilonia club for over twenty years and also flies regularly in Piti and in the new community in Cappo) is an insider with great knowledge and sensibilities, and has no qualms about discussing them. In the course of our conversations he has proved to be rather sharp and consistent in his descriptions and his comments were very helpful to honing my argument. I also had very fruitful conversations with the new entrants (Donnelly 2006), pupils who attended the gliding course, or pilots who had just obtained their license, with two female pilots and with the woman secretary of the club (see paragraph *3.4.2*), and some old fellows who had joined the newly formed gliding club of Cappo before or after the separation.

These discussions involved 35-40 pilots. Some of them took the form of lengthy conversations, others lasted only a few minutes but were repeated several times, sometimes months apart, until I was convinced I had a good grasp of the views of the interviewee. These spontaneous conversations, during which I always kept in mind my research agenda, gave me new perspectives on the two main analytical issues of my thesis – risk perception, and values of a middle-aged subculture. Together with the second cursory fieldwork done in Piti and the wealth of written documents of the electronic mailing list, they provided the necessary triangulation for my analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

My actual fieldwork didn't end in the usual way, with the ethnographer leaving the field. When I started writing up the thesis I gave up taking field notes and went back to being an ordinary member of the gliding club, which for a long period had been the object of more structured analysis. But this didn't mean I stopped my observations, though I carried them on in a more relaxed way.

3.4.2   Female informants

Studying the experiences of women who have ventured into male-dominated fields can sometimes be enlightening (Laberge 1995). Women can point out facets of the activity that might otherwise remain hidden. In the world

of flying, right from the start, the myth of the war pilot as portrayed by popular culture was cast into doubt by the presence of numerous women pilots who performed the same daring stunts with the same competence (Carocci 1997). According to Mary Cadogan (1992) who has comprehensively studied the lives of many women pilots, in the accounts of their flying careers, the link with the world of feelings was more overtly stated than was generally the case for their male counterparts. By the same token, the negative aspects of flying were more readily acknowledged by women. For example, one woman pilot in her autobiography (Linda Rhodes-Moorhouse, *Kaleidoscope,* 1960) comments that her love for being in the air never quite matched the total joy which both her husband and her son found in flying. She adds: "besides […] moments of intense pleasure there were hideous ones of fear and apprehension" (quoted in Cadogan 1992, p. 262). Doubts and fears are generally more easily acknowledged by women pilots, whether they fly power airplanes or gliders

A successful woman sailplane pilot, Wendy Durham, from her double vantage point of view of being a person who is at the same time deeply involved in the activity and who belongs to the gender minority of the practitioners, enables us to perceive 'from inside' some relevant issues. In an autobiographical article (Durham 1997), she described the change of her attitudes towards gliding over the years due to the arising of feelings of anxiety and fear which in the end convinced her to abandon flying. She described a gradual erosion of confidence that led her to the point of no longer enjoying her favourite leisure activity. She discussed the way in which women are less confident than men. "This basic fact of life is exacerbated in gliding by the inherent danger of the sport, and by the fact that even if Mr Average should begin to doubt of himself, or his skill, he would rather bale out without a parachute at 3000ft than admit it to his peers – leaving Ms Average feeling even more inadequate than nature dictated" (Durham 1997, p. 18).

In contrast with the usefulness of some of their accounts, women are not usually written into ethnographies on sport subcultures (Free and Hughson 2003). Although many sport settings often create forms of idealised masculinity that relegate women to the margins (Anderson 1999), these are not often challenged in the studies where the meaning of female participation goes unnoticed (Wheaton 2007a). The scholars look only at core members (Donnelly

2006) and "[…] select a masculine criterion of commitment that necessarily 'marginalises' the subcultural participation of females" (Muggleton 2000, p. 153). The available ethnographic literature about women's participation in sport shows comparable levels of commitment in women and motivation for involvement very similar to that of men (Heuser 2005), especially in later stages of life, when the need to construct one's gender within a sporting practice is less evident (Anderson 1999).

3.4.3   *Written sources*

Like most anthropologists who conduct research at home, I dealt with literate people who produced written documents, mainly e-mails (and some articles in the bimonthly magazine *Volo a Vela* [*Gliding*]. These being far less in number and covering the same topics were discarded in due course). Written documents proved to be a valuable resource in pointing out 'sensitizing concepts', suggesting ways in which my subjects organized and understood their experiences. In this way they helped me gain a clearer grasp of particular issues which I had already identified and they suggested new lines of enquiry – especially about different ways of reacting to fatal accidents and the different mental attitude of competition pilots – which I subsequently tested through my conversations with the informants (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). I used them to pin down the mainstream values for gliding with which the club under scrutiny is confronted and which constitute a model in the process of differentiating the subculture and constructing its distinctive identity (Albert 1999; Moorehouse 1991; Wheaton 2000). As I said, these were mainly constituted by an electronic mailing list to which a substantial number (more than 300) of the Italian practitioners (in 2006, the total number of gliding licences in Italy was 1742[15]) subscribe. All the relevant issues to the discipline find space on this list. The members of the subculture talk about accidents, safety, performances, technical aspects of flying and organisational problems. During the last years, a high number of accidents, and particularly severe

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[15] Source: Aeroclub d'Italia.

problems in managing the organisational aspects of the activity prompted debate. From these debates the picture of the gliding community in Italy emerges in detail. It is relatively easy to distinguish in it characteristics shared by all practitioners from characteristics which mark higher status practitioners. And, more importantly, the electronic mailing list provided me with a much-needed touchstone to compare the community I was studying.

3.4.4 *Fieldwork at a different site*

Participant observation in a different location helped me towards the same goal and a better understanding and explanation of my hypothesis, by providing a different picture of gliding in Italy, which, although it is framed by the same subcultural values, focuses on different cultural attitudes and perceptions.

For this second fieldwork I chose the airport of Piti, a small town that lies in a large valley located 70 kilometres North-East of Sirto. Its airport hosts two gliding clubs, plus a gliding section of the Italian Air Force: the local club, bigger than average considering the size of the town, and the ACVV (Aeroclub Centrale di Volo a Vela), the Italian national soaring club, which organises residential courses on a regular basis to train pilots for cross-country flights and for competition. I took part in two residential courses, each lasting one week, and I took up flying every now and then in this airport[16]. Every summer important national and international competitions are held in Piti; in 1985 it hosted the International Gliding Championship (held every other year) and was also supposed to hold it in 2003[17]. Piti again hosted the world championship in August 2008. This wealth of gliding activities on just one airfield is mainly due to its incomparable soaring conditions. The valley in which it is located is surrounded on two sides (East and West) by high chains of mountains, and on the other two sides (North and South) it is enclosed by high hills; thanks to this geographical peculiarity it benefits from a continental climate which is not

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[16] This fieldwork lasted 45 days over a period of three years (2003-2005).

[17] The event was eventually moved to Laszlo in Poland, due to administrative and organisational problems. The ACVV went bankrupt and was thereafter put under compulsory administration in 2002.

affected by the relative vicinity of the sea. Moreover, it is endowed with a high level of insulation that characterises this latitude of the hemisphere (and which is responsible for the thermal activity which produces lift) and by the ample possibilities of ridge soaring offered by the mountains[18].

The pilots who go flying in Piti come from all over Italy and from abroad and practice their activity with a totally different frame of mind. Training and spurring to maximum performance is the ACVV's main goal. In the training stages the pilots are always reminded of safety issues and procedures during briefings at the beginning and at the end of the flying day. On the other hand, everybody is expected to engage in long distance flights which, when done over mountainous terrain as in Piti, are intrinsically and potentially dangerous.

3.5   Data recording

For five years I regularly took notes of my field observations and conversations. In my car before driving home I usually scribbled down significant sentences heard or observations which I reduced to key words. At home I enlarged upon these first notes transforming them into a coherent text, privileging as far as possible concreteness and abundance of detail. Thanks to my long previous experience in the field and the background literature I read, I had already settled upon the analytical ideas that would guide my research. Thus, from the very beginning of my note taking I was able to select the significant content to be recorded in the notes, assigning the data to already known analytic categories. During the formal phase of my research there was little need to re-focus my ideas since the main topics of enquiry had already been identified.

Although I was already familiar with the technical vocabulary adopted by the Italian gliding community in talking about their practice, I had some difficulties translating into English the informal jargon sometimes used in conversations and in the e-mails. Reading the final text I have the impression that, unfortunately, most of its lively forcefulness has been lost. For example,

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[18] Bilonia, the site of my main fieldwork, is not so endowed. It has mountains only on its East side (which implies that ridge soaring is possible only if the wind is blowing from West). Besides, its closeness to the Mediterranean, means that its thermal activity is shortened by the breezes that in the afternoon blow from the sea towards the mountains.

when (p. 117) I quote a pilot saying "Why do you want to fly on such a windy day?", the anodyne translation in the original sounded "Ma che vi salta in testa di volare in un giorno come questo, con tutto il vento che c'è!" (literally "What jumps on your head …").

3.6   Subjectivity in the final text

It has been noted that the way of writing and of creating the final text also depends on the selective interests of the ethnographer, since "what is taken to be experience is a function of the observer's interest" (Clandinin and Connelly 1998, p. 156), and any translation of the field experience includes a personal interpretation. As explained by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, "There is no object that does not imply a viewpoint, even if it is an object produced with the intention of abolishing one's viewpoint (that is, one's bias), the intention of overcoming the partial perspective that is associated with holding a position within the space being studied. But our very operations of research, by obliging us to articulate and formalise the implicit criteria of ordinary experience, have the effect of rendering possible the logical verification of their own premises" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 6). But, despite this verification, the scholar – whether he realises it or not – can't help injecting subjective matters into her/his account (Young 1991). It seems to be very important to recognise that ethnographers construct their own accounts of the social world, and that their writing doesn't simply mirror reality.

A corollary of this is that the researcher and the subjects s/he studies will see the product of the research in different ways. Therefore, conflicting interpretations cannot be ruled out (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The presentation of the findings of a fieldwork in a written form is aimed at the academic purposes of the research and could sound unfair and biased to the native eyes, in this case people of the same social background of the researcher, with whom – as is my case – there may be a long lasting link of shared interests and even friendship. The scholar directs her/his attention towards privileged themes, selected according to her/his tastes and personal inclination, but also, as we have seen, to her/his fears and psychological defences (Devereux 1967). The

reality s/he describes as emerging during fieldwork is biased from a personal standpoint. Later, when this reality takes shape during the act of writing another kind of bias is again added. "What we write is the meaning of action and speech, not the actions and speeches themselves as events. And meaning is positioned, just as discourse is addressed. […] textualisation implies an interpretative authority which excludes dialogue (Clifford 1983)" (Hastrup 1992, pp. 124-125). "For the informants, anthropologists' accounts of the home society may be regarded as partial, obvious, repeating what is known, but also as idiosyncratic and trivial; he/she has merely authored another version. For fellow scholars, on the other hand, the conventional basis of the analytical framework is made transparent; writing is revealed to be a device" (Strathern 1986, p. 27).

The risk of the fieldwork data becoming selectively sifted by memory is in my case attenuated by my personal involvement in the subject of my research not being broken off. If the meanings I am looking for are biased by my personal equation – as they certainly are – my findings are prevented from becoming selectively edited by memory by my constant relation with the field also during the final stages of writing up the text. This can help me to remain aware of possible mistakes and a lack of subtlety in the presentation of my material (Kenna 1992).

However, the bias of the researcher can also be part of a different assumption. It can be envisaged in terms of greater understanding. "As author the anthropologist may cast people's experiences into a different light in an illuminating way: people will know more about themselves" (Strathern 1986, p. 27). Describing my research to my main informant, I was able to remark how interested he was by my framing the risk that we glider pilots run as socially determined; how the single pilot adjusts her/his practice to the unwritten rules of the different environments s/he is in. The notion of subculture and its corollary of identity, meanings and values that reshape the pilots' perception of their activity, determining a shift in their priorities, also aroused his interest.

3.7   Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the theoretical implications of doing research in an environment which the researcher already frequents as an ordinary practitioner. Being involved in the gliding scene in Central Italy for many years implied the transformation from an ordinary member to critical participant observation. As is often the case, my role as researcher was partially concealed from my subjects, in that they found it difficult to accept my new role, and in order not to jeopardise my continuing engagement in the gliding community. The body of literature connected with doing research in sport settings and at home is discussed for its implication in my research. Fieldwork design is presented in detail.

The following chapter provides the reader with a description of the setting in which my main fieldwork was carried out.

Chapter 4

The Gliding Experience in Bilonia

4.1   Introduction

In this chapter, adopting the framework devised by Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) for their study on skydiving, I introduce the airport of Bilonia, the people who make it a living reality and their activities that revolve around gliding. It is a little world with its own rules that for a long time has been the setting for my main leisure activity. I begin by describing the physical setting, the landscape around the airport, the airport, with its runways and hangars, the tiny office of the gliding section of the Aeroclub di Sirto, the sailplanes and the tug aeroplanes.

I then introduce the various actors. These are the glider pilots, the tug pilots, and the manager for the day activities on field, the instructors, and also a secretary, families, tourists. I continue describing gliding as a performance divided into different stages, also making use of comments I gathered first hand by the participants themselves. I carry on my account explaining the successive phases of a pilot's development, i.e. from pupil who attends a gliding course to experienced pilot. In the last section I consider the marginal role of other activities practised in Bilonia besides flying: dinners, parties, meetings.

4.2   The airport

The Air Force base of Bilonia[19], with its airport, is located on the vast plain of Lazio that stretches from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the first ridges of the Apennine. This plain and these mountains constitute the setting for local flying of the gliding section of the Aeroclub di Sirto.

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[19] The village of Bilonia was founded in 1935-37, in a typical fascist style, to host the people who worked in the nearby airport and their families.

Just two kilometres east of the airport raises a first hill named Monte Sterrano, 600 meters high. After two-three kilometres, Monte Sterrano, whose orientation is west-east, merges with the first ridge of the Apennines. The *Antiappennino Laziale* has a north-south orientation and it is here that some of the range's main peaks are to be found in Monte Mirro (1050 metres) and Monte Zeppo (1250 metres). To the north, the ridge turns east for a few kilometres before resuming its original orientation. Its northernmost mountain is Monte Serotto (1300 metres) which lies 20 kilometres from the airport. Towards the south the chain is interrupted by the wide Anolo river valley (the Anolo is main affluent of the Torento, the river that crosses Sirto), which measures six kilometres across. It then runs for about 15 kilometres, as far as the village of Pilastro (an ancient Roman town) having in the middle the tiny village of Giorro perched on top of its main peak (Monte Giorro, 1300 metres). Starting from Monte Sterrano a lower ridge of hills (main peak Monte Rapo, 500 metres) rises behind the small town of Tessara and with just a short interruption stretches all the way to the southern ridge.

To gain access to the military base civil pilots and visitors first have to obtain a permit at the main entrance. The sailplane pilot members of the Aeroclub di Sirto have a permanent pass entitling them to entry after they deposit their ID and vehicle papers at the check-point; other pilots and guests must first obtain a temporary permit signed by one of the permanent club members. This often means having to wait at the check-point until their host comes to sign their permit. A long alley flanked by tall pine trees leads from the gate to the field where the two runways and the civil hangar are located[20]. The main runway, 1500 meters long, 25 meters wide, oriented exactly north-south, is in tarmac; the second one, which intersects the first slanting 40 degrees on its right (40-220), is in grass. It is 800 meters long and 50 meters wide. Opposite the beginning of the runways is a large meadow on which the tug plane and the sailplanes are parked before and between the flights, and where for a short period there used to be a temporary control tower. The main control tower, and one that is no longer in use, are located at the centre of the airport. At the end of the meadow, at some distance from the hangar and the runways, there is a small-prefabricated shack (a

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[20] The larger military hangars which the civil pilots don't have access to, are located far away from the runways.

kind of container); this is the 'office'. It is used by the secretary of the gliding club and contains a tiny room for informal meetings or for the people to cram into when it rains. These premises[21] constitute the main stage on which acts the community under analysis (Goffman 1969; 1990). This is where the main actions, apart the flying itself, take place, here the conversations and comments unfold that punctuate any typical day of activity.

All the gliders on the airfield belong to the Aeroclub di Sirto or the Aeroclub d'Italia which leases them to its Sirto branch. In the Air Force compound privately owned sailplanes are not admitted[22]. The number of sailplanes and tug planes available varies according to the periods; due to lack of funds and some accidents, in the period 2001-2005 it reached an unprecedented low. There was only one tug (most years there were two, at the end of the 1990s there were three) because the second one was destroyed in an accident at the end of 2004[23] and there are between eight and ten sailplanes (depending on the year – from 2000 until the end of my fieldwork their number decreased); only some of these may be flown since the others, due to the reduced number of members, are not insured. For a couple of years the club's motor glider lay disassembled inside the hangar until it was sold in order to raise money.

4.3   The actors

On a typical day, on the above premises it is possible to find people that belong to the scene where they perform different roles. Most prominent among them is the member of the club that manages the flying activity. Every day has its manager: he is either an old instructor now retired, an active instructor, or a member of the board of the club in charge of gliding affairs. He is the one who

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[21] The gliding club has no facilities or lavatories of any sort on the premises of the airfield. Although it has been hosted on the military base for almost 30 years, the premises continue to be conceived of as if they were a temporary accommodation. Pilots usually go behind the hangar to pee.

[22] In those cases in which one happens to land in Bilonia it is confiscated for having violated a military space and then not allowed to take off again. The owner must take it apart and haul it away on a trailer.

[23] In any case it had been put on sale to raise funds for the purpose of recovering after bankruptcy. The accident resulted in the airplane being written off but only minor injuries for the pilot.

goes through the paper work necessary in order to begin the flying (the club, besides being inside a military base, operates inside a towered airport), who can grant the authorisations for the beginning of the flying activity, who can wave off pilots short of training or ask them to undergo a 'check'[24] and sees to it that everything is running as it should.

The tug pilots take turns so that one of them is always available; at weekends two or three of them alternate shifts between the morning and afternoon. Some of them are also sailplane pilots themselves, but all perform their task willingly since this offers them the opportunity to fly and build up a considerable experience in take offs and landings almost for free[25]. For some of them this is a way of maintaining their private pilot licence on a budget. Although it has not always been so, during the five years of my fieldwork most of the tug pilots were people over sixty or seventy years old; two of them were eighty. Until 2005 the tug pilot in charge of managing the group (scheduling turns and providing substitutions) was a woman (Maria, one of the few women glider pilots) who jokingly referred to her group as 'my geriatric ward'. Their age gives rise to concerns about their safety in performing their duty (see Chapter 7).

In the small shack that houses the office, a secretary (a middle-aged woman named Antonietta) notes down the times of all the take-offs and landings, and calculates – according to the type of sailplane, altitude of release from the tug and duration of the flight – how much to charge. She also collects the money. Antonietta is the only person on the field remunerated for her work which is a real – although unskilled – job. As a side line, she earns some extra money by catering for the members of the club, providing coffee, beverages and snacks. Having done this job for many years, she knows most of the community's secrets. She is not a member of the subculture, but acts as a gate keeper, giving information to people that come for the first time, aspiring pilots or tourists.

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[24] According to the club rules, every pilot who has been inactive for more than 45 days (in the past this was 30 days) has to ask his permission; the manager may ask the pilot to undergo a test with an instructor if he thinks it necessary.

[25] Traditionally in most gliding clubs around the world the tug pilot is a vocational pilot who pays nothing for his flights when on duty in the tug. This was also the case in Bilonia till 2003 when among much squabbling over how to make ends meet, tug pilots were also asked to pay a small fee (two euro per flight).

During the hours of flying activity on the field there are almost always one or two instructors[26]. Over the years the total number of instructors has varied greatly, in part depending on people available reaching the retirement age or on the quarrels inside the club which led some to quit or others to join from other clubs[27]. They enjoy a different status from that of the regular pilots. In the eyes of the pupils or of outsiders who happen to come to the airport their status is very high. They are the ones who know their trade, the experienced and trustworthy airmen for whom flying holds no secrets, benevolent fathers figures whose advice is much sought after and heeded. On the other hand the experienced pilots judge them with different parameters; the instructors' expertise in the basic skills of flying or even in performing basic acrobatics doesn't necessarily mean that they are 'real' gliding pilots proficient at cross-country flying or qualified to enter a competition. Each instructor is judged on the basis of her/his real performances and is regarded with the faint suspicion that with all her/his teaching activity s/he is reducing the amount of time and energy that s/he could devote to improving her/his performances. The full-fledged members of the community with less experience are in between these two extremes in their appreciation of the instructors.

The number of pilots present on the field depends on the day (working days or holidays), on the season, on the weather, on the time of day and on whether most of them are in the air. On working days the airport is open to the non-military pilots only in the afternoon: during winter there may be just a couple of experienced pilots and two or three students. These numbers can double in summer months when there are really good soaring days that attract as many pilots as the number of gliders can accommodate. At weekends, in the morning there might be more students than pilots since the soaring conditions develop quite late in the morning, whereas in the early morning there is less thermal activity and the flight is less bumpy, making the understanding of the use of the various commands of the craft easier. As the morning advances the

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[26] Due to the above-mentioned difficulties of the club, for long stretches of time in the years 2003-2005 the school interrupted its activities. During that period an instructor on the field was not always to be found.

[27] At the peak of the row between factions inside the club the then chief instructor was ousted for one year from his role and from membership in the club on alleged misbehaviour contrary to the economic interests of the club.

pilots begin to arrive in order to secure their favourite sailplane[28]. This is the time when most of the conversations on general topics are to be heard, since people are not yet under the exciting effect of the flight and the wait, especially in the summer months, can be quite long. During summer there are more pilots than places available on the sailplanes, so a lot of people spend their time on the field talking while waiting for their turn.

From time to time visitors will make an appearance on the airport stage. They are moved by curiosity – mostly people enthusiastic about flying – wanting to enjoy the opportunity to watch the gliders take off and land, friends and companions brought out by some of the pilots and people that want to get their feet wet trying a first flight in a glider. They offer the pilots the opportunity to make a short flight paid for by someone else, besides the opportunity to show off their skill, to promote themselves as experts in an activity the mainstream considers arduous and compelling. For this reason they are highly valued by the majority of the pilots, although most experts generally shun them since they don't consider the opportunity for a short and unchallenging flight to be worth its while.

Sometimes, during the weekends, a few pilots though not many, bring their families with them to the airfield. The ladies usually sit on benches located behind the office, in the shade of some trees; they read or chat and have plenty of time to get bored; the children play on the meadow. At lunchtime they have a picnic. However, after the club split these kind of social occasions have almost disappeared.

4.4   Performance

Every morning, before the flying day begins, the sailplanes have to undergo the daily inspection – to make sure that everything is in airworthy condition – and then be signed off by an authorised official (either the person who is manager for the day or a mechanic of the Aeroclub di Sirto). Besides,

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[28] Sailplanes are rented to the members of the club on a first come first serve basis; in the office there is a register to be signed for this purpose.

before her/his flight every pilot is required to carefully inspect her/his sailplane, and if everything is in order, to sign the craft logbook[29]. When the sailplanes have been inspected in the hangar, one by one they are pushed through the meadow close to the beginning of the runway, so as to have them ready for lining up behind the tug before takeoff.

The instruction flights take place one at a time. Only after one instruction flight has landed another takes off. They occur in a low-performance two-seater sailplane (ASK 13). The pilots on the field who already hold their licence, often following the advice of the more experienced among them – who can tell when the conditions are just right for takeoff – wait for the right thermal conditions to develop. When the moment arrives, there is the tendency for them to take off one after the other. As we will see, this is for practical reasons as well as psychological ones. Late comers may join in subsequently if a glider is still available or they have to wait for one to land.

Take off is one of the most dangerous parts of the flight. The glider is connected to the tug by a rope whose strength has been specially regulated to allow it to snap in case of a strong jerk caused by an abnormal flight path. If one of the two craft linked together runs into sudden serious difficulties, and if its pilot doesn't react instantaneously to free her/himself, the stress on the rope breaks it automatically[30]. This intrinsic weakness of the rope, coupled with normal wear and tear, could possibly lead to unwanted breaks after takeoff. The glider pilot could suddenly find her/himself inadvertently severed from the tug. With no thrust of her/his own the only option would be to land straight away. If the pilot has already reached an altitude of at least 50 meters s/he can reverse her/his direction and go back to land on the runway. But if the glider is lower than that the pilot's only option is to land straight ahead or turn just a little on one side. The pilot may not have enough runway left to stop and so be forced to land in a field outside the airport fence. This is a scary option that has often led to serious accidents. A pilot, especially one with little experience, is always

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[29] Since there is no room in the cockpit for the bulky logbook, these are kept on a shelf in the hangar.

[30] Or at least it should. A fatal accident occurred near Milan in March 2007, while this thesis was being written up. It was due to a failed seizure. The glider pilot thinking that he was free from the cable, after having pulled the release knob pulled up lifting the tug tail and causing it to hit the ground.

tempted to go back; in order to do so s/he hurries her/his actions and attempts the turn at far too low a speed, thus risking to stall and spin to the ground, also with serious consequences[31]. This is one of the main worries before taking off. The less a pilot has flown in the recent past the more s/he is prone to this risk. The danger could come in the first seconds of a flight when the pilot has not yet had the time to again 'feel' how the glider handles and to react properly to it. Conversely, a risk of complacency arises at the end of the flight when, especially after a long and satisfactory one, the pilot feels her/himself at one with her/his sailplane and over-confident of her/his skills.

In order to take off the pilot needs the help of other members of the club to push the sailplane onto the runway, connect the tug rope to the glider and finally to hold the wings in a level position[32]. Although the pilot will fly alone, or with a companion, her/his take off is a social activity, often accompanied by talking and various jokes:

"You said you were going to bring this glider back to me in a quarter of an hour, didn't you?"; "What are you taking off for? To see if you can land before the tug? To donate your tug fee to the club?" A former instructor: "Man, be careful not to make an out-landing, I'm having guests for dinner this evening", "Ok, see you later in Celano" (implying: I'm going to push my limits, and it's likely that I won't be in a position to return to the airport, but I'll be forced to land in Celano instead).

The first stage of the flight takes place behind the tug. Following the tug is quite difficult and can prove challenging even for experienced pilots – especially if there is turbulence:

It was so bumpy that it scared the shit out of me!

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[31] In these circumstances the pilot usually fails to recognise that during the lapse of time between when the rope breaks and her/his recovering action the glider's speed has decreased significantly to just above the stall speed.

[32] Sailplanes have only one main wheel at the centre of the fuselage so that the tip of one wing rests on the ground.

In this situation sincerely admitting one's fear is not considered to be demeaning. Once the glider has arrived at the desired altitude[33] the pilot pulls the yellow knob that activates the release mechanism, breaks away from the tug, and starts to gain altitude on her/his own (see below). Afterwards s/he transforms this altitude into a glide path in the desired direction. In a local flight this always involves being in a position to glide back to the airfield. During the summer soaring season this means not going further away than 35 kilometres; during the winter, when the possibilities to gain altitude in the absence of a strong wind are less, this distance must be no more than half this figure. Also in local flights pilots have the tendency to boast of covering distances far greater than what they really attained. Being at the farthest limits of the local valley can prove quite unnerving especially in a mountainous setting that doesn't always allow visual contact with the airport. Describing one of the first times he went over the first ridge of mountains, a pilot openly remarked to me:

> When I realised where I was, my legs stiffened and stayed that way until I
> could see the airport again.

The landing, being recognised as one of the most dangerous parts of any flight, can cause quite a lot of stress, especially in presence of strong winds, turbulence and wind shear[34]. Since wind and turbulence decrease at the end of the afternoon there could be the temptation to wait in the air for milder conditions to develop. Once I was flying in the second seat of a two-seater. The flight was at an end and we had finished our circuit. The next logical step would have been to go down to land, but the pilot told me candidly:

> Now we wait here for the wind to settle down.

It was the only time I heard so frank a statement, although it was uttered by a pilot known to everybody for his lack of daring.

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[33] This usually varies between 1500 and 3000 ft and it depends on when and where the pilot finds lift.

[34] In Bilonia landing a glider can prove more difficult than in other places. In fact, the tarmac runway normally in use doesn't allow the main wheel to slide on its surface in those cases in which the cross wind factor hasn't been totally compensated by the pilot's actions. This can lead to cater-wheel at the moment of touching down.

The most satisfying part of a flight is soaring and especially soaring cross-country. Leaving the valley for other airports is both challenging and rewarding. Experienced pilots regard this as the only real flying and turn their noses up at local soaring. Soaring cross-country is done by using the 'safety cone' technique: the higher the altitude, the greater the distance of the glide[35]. Progressing from one airport to the next involves imagining series of reversed cones whose tips are located at the airports and whose bases enlarge skywards; the height at which two cones intersect marks the safety height from which a glide can be attempted. From Bilonia the flight can progress north-east towards the airports of Piti (50 kilometres), Foligno (in Umbria, 100 kilometres), Perugia (130 kilometres), theoretically going on across Tuscany; to the east, towards L'Aquila (in Abruzzo, 70 kilometres) and towards south-east to Celano (a private strip, 60 kilometres). Besides airports, small private strips and large fields already used for landing into can also be considered possible origins of safety cones, thus enlarging the areas in which it is possible to soar without trouble. The risk is to be caught by down-draft in an unexpected position being unable to glide to the next airport or to go back to the previous one. In this case, the only option is often a field landing, once again, a frightening prospect. On the one hand, there are objective difficulties: the surroundings are either mountainous with the few available flat spots littered with rocks, or a hilly countryside covered with vineyards and olive groves. Besides, various areas are densely inhabited: there are roads, houses and electric and telephone wires. The suitable landing places are few and far between[36]. On the other hand, there is also a subjective obstacle which must be overcome: namely, that particular social attitude to risk developed by the local flying in Bilonia that prevents any serious attempt to face this challenging possibility (I expound this point in Chapter 5).

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[35] The width of the cones is determined by the performance of the sailplane, the strength and direction of the wind, the position of the mountains in relation to the flight path.

[36] This is a peculiarity of this area. Most places, both in Italy and in other countries, where gliding is popular don't offer the same degree of difficulty.

4.5   The progression of the pilot

Each pilot goes through a series of stages that mark her/his development. Most of them are characterised by rites of passage of some sort (Brannigan and McDougall 1983). However, the official position one occupies does not always correspond exactly with her/his rank inside the community.

At the beginning the individual is a pupil who attends a gliding course. This is probably one of the stages in which the spell of the new activity and its world is most strongly felt. The first lessons put the pupil in contact with new sensations, new feelings, and with the glamour of flying. They can be both extremely rewarding and extremely frustrating. There usually isn't a middle ground. Says one pupil pilot:

> I was used to the usual lesson that lasts no more than fifteen minutes. But once during a lesson that lasted almost an hour, the instructor showed me how to fly near the mountain side. I could feel the air moving under me … it wasn't still … it was full of bumps, and I could see on the vario and the altimeter that we were constantly going up. That was the real flying! I was scared by all that movement under me, it was really the first time that I could feel the air moving, but I was entering a new world, it was new and beautiful. Till the next lesson I could forget all those frustrations about my inability to stay behind the tug and to get the knack of the landing.

The first solo flight constitutes the first rite of passage. According to the Italian regulations, this can be accomplished only after a minimum of eight hours (that is, after around thirty missions) of flight with an instructor; sometimes, especially in the case of the older pupils, many more. Going solo in an aeroplane for the first time is one of the most compelling moments in a person's life. I remember not being able to swallow for the entire flight for lack of saliva. And afterwards the bliss and the excitement reached an absolute high that lasted for several hours making it difficult to fall asleep that night. After having soloed[37] the pupil continues her/his training, alternating flights with an instructor with

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[37] Unlike other countries, in Italy there is no particular ritual to celebrate a pilot who has just soloed. Usually s/he buys some cakes and a bottle of *spumante* for a toast which is attended by people who happen to be on the field at the time. Old hands complain that 'in their days' things were different and people threw real parties, roasting sausages and offering red wine.

flights alone. During some of the solo flights s/he is likely to experience the first real frightening situations of her/his progression as a pilot. During her/his first and maybe second solo flight the weather conditions are probably ideal (s/he wouldn't be allowed out otherwise) and it is likely that the instructor will follow her/him over the radio. But thereafter s/he is on her/his own to face her/his first challenges. There may be some turbulence behind the tug, or some rough air during the procedure for landing; or some unexpected air traffic which delays her/his landing or compels her/him to alter hers/his usual soothing habit. Every unexpected event can be perceived as danger.

At the end of this progression, after the pilot has completed the required five hours of solo flights, another important rite of passage follows for the novice: the exam for the licence[38]. Sometimes due to the ill functioning of the administration and a chronic shortage of examiners the tests may be postponed for months, thus frustrating the natural desire of the pupils to become full-fledged pilots.

During this stage of her/his development the pilot is capable of taking off, flying under normal conditions and landing on her/his own. Probably s/he can also be able to exploit some thermal energy to prolong the flights. At this stage, not very proficient, and perhaps unlicensed, the neophyte pilot cannot fly far away from the airfield. However, for a while the bliss derived from this limited activity is enough to maintain her/his motivations to fly. However, after a few months (or even a few years), things may change and the novice pilot finds her/himself in the common and embarrassing position of being unable to make further progress on her/his own, in many cases losing motivation. In fact, there is general acknowledgement of the fact that there needs to be a 'second period training course' which exists in other countries, for example in France. In Italy, such second training courses are organised privately only by some clubs and doesn't have formal recognition. The only official forms of training in this stage of the pilot's development are the intensive courses organised by the ACVV (Aeroclub Centrale di Volo a Vela) of Piti. But since they usually last only a single week they are not enough to be considered a real training. It is at this

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[38] In Italy, like in most countries (but not in the UK), the gliding licence is comparable to the private pilot's license and is issued by the same authority the ENAC (Ente Nazionale Aviazione Civile).

stage, when pilots are marking time technically, that many leave the sport. Leavers tend to be frustrated and discouraged and usually don't think themselves adequately encouraged and supported by former teachers and senior members. The only way out seems to be two-man flying, i.e., asking an experienced pilot to join the flight. In Bilonia, there are some experienced fliers who make themselves available to this end. In fact, in exchange for the help, the less experienced pilot pays the entire fee. Sometimes quite stable couples are formed, the same pupil and trainer going together most of the time. The experienced pilot relieves the novice of most of her/his anxieties since s/he is always there, like the teacher once was, to take over if things are not as smooth as one would like them to be. Besides, and most importantly, s/he can show the young pilot how to improve her/his skills, how to recognise and exploit the various sources of energy, what to do and what not to do. S/he usually leads the pupil through her/his first cross-country flights; s/he shows her/him what is really possible to accomplish with a sailplane and with trust in one's resources. Some people never manage to wean themselves from this comfortable position; they almost never fly alone again. On the other hand, for some pilots this is a way to continue to improve and perfect their soaring skills.

The moment when the pilot is able to reproduce by herself or himself the kinds of flights s/he executed in the company of their mentor is when s/he begins to be accepted as a full-fledged member of the community. Her/his status rises markedly. Old pilots recognise her/him and cheer her/him when s/he arrives at the airport. S/he is included in the discussions of the 'community elders'.

Gradually the pilot begins to make her/his first cross-country flights that involve the risk of being forced to land in a different airport or on a field. The first time that this happens the status of the pilot increases; actually some think that the first out-landing is a kind of rite of passage that immediately changes the pilot's status who has proved that s/he is willing to dare to push her/his limits.

Definitely, at the top of the hierarchy of Bilonia are the few pilots who have taken part in competitions, even if these were very low level ones. As far as I know, there were only four of them[39]. In most cases they maintained only a

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[39] I use the past tense here since three of them left the club after the partition and the fourth died in a gliding accident.

very loose relationship with their old club. Most of their flying was, in fact, done in Piti. All of them owned one or more shares in a jointly owned glider. When every now and then they returned to Bilonia they were always invited to fly in a two-seater glider by another pilot who wanted to profit from their skill.

4.6   Activities besides flying

When people come together to practice a certain leisure activity or sport they create a social world that can give rise to a number of other social activities not directly linked with the purposes that brought them together. As a sideline, people may organise a social calendar, attend meetings, have dinners, throw parties, or organise trips together. In some instances these activities play a central role or are even functional to the activities that hold the group together. This is what happens in clubbing (Jackson 2004; Polhemus 1994), in some stylistic subcultures such as the Goths (Hodkinson 2002), or in grown-up punks (Bennett 2006), and also in some sports (Bricknell 1999; Heuser 2005; Sands 1999b; Snyder 1986).

In the period examined (2001-2005), in the gliding community of Bilonia these kind of activities were only of marginal importance. There were some regular meetings of the members of the Aeroclub di Sirto, to which the gliding section of Bilonia belongs, and there were the meetings of the gliding section alone. Both were usually hold at the Aeroporto di Sirto, in the outskirts of the town, where the Aeroclub has its headquarters. They were usually held twice a year and, except in the case of special circumstances – such as the need to discuss a particularly sharp hike in enrolment fees – only a minority of members attended.

As I mentioned, during weekends in the past it was quite common for members and their families to picnic at the airport in the tiny grove of trees that used to be behind the office (it was cut down by the Air Force at the end of 2005 for unknown reasons). There was a brick barbecue structure where sausages were roasted, and people brought cooked dishes from home, like cold pasta or rice. But in 2001, when I began my formal fieldwork, this picnicking had already stopped. The only lunch was provided by Antonietta, the secretary, who would

sell sandwiches and snacks for those who wanted a quick bite. On the contrary, in the new community of Cappo, which formed after the gliding section split (see Chapter 6), this activity of having lunch together seems to be popular. A shack besides the office accommodates a basic kitchen where the wife of one of the oldest members sometimes cooks pasta.

Before the division, usually at Christmas time, members used to organise a dinner. Pilots attended it, often coming with their partners. It was a good occasion to chat and tell jokes, but again it is a habit that has died out with the declining membership. However, the new young members seem to want to revive this practice. Recently a female member invited a large number of pilots over to her place for a pizza.

The only occasions, besides personal friendships, in which the pilots do anything together besides flying or managing their flying, are during the intensive all-day courses held at the ACVV (Aeroclub Centrale di Volo a Vela) in Piti. During the week in which the course takes place the pilots live together in small shacks inside the airport premises, in small rooms for two. In the morning they go by car to a coffee shop to have breakfast together. After the day's gliding is over, they shower in the communal bathrooms and then head together to a restaurant for supper.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I adopted the framework elaborated by Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) in order to introduce the reader to the activity of gliding in Bilonia, how it is organised, what it involves from the practical point of view.

In my treatment of the issue I deliberately chose not to talk about the people and their concerns. The next chapter will add flesh-and-blood individuality to my sources, colouring in this technical description with feelings: fears, hopes, enthusiasms – in short, the reality of a dangerous leisure activity as it is experienced by its practitioners.

Chapter 5

Wider Subculture, Local Reality

5.1   Introduction

In the previous chapter I described the gliding experience in Bilonia as a matter of fact. Here I try to convey a 'living' reality formed mainly by emotions, relations between people, conversations. I also show how this lived local reality appears to be quite different from that which characterises the national gliding arena. In the latter, concerns about soaring performances and competitions are rife, and anxieties and fears rarely enter the picture, whereas in Bilonia these anxieties and fears are plentiful, and only a faint echo of the debates that enliven the national arena is detectable. In Bilonia people practice gliding, but the way they do so is somehow different and marked by several traits.

Firstly, the theoretical and heuristic value of accounts and anecdotes from which this chapter mainly draws is briefly discussed. Afterwards, gliding is examined at the level of the wider subculture, through an analysis of the practitioners' main concerns that emerge from the e-mails sent to the electronic mailing list of the Italian community. In the subsequent sections, I offer a presentation of gliding at the local level. I introduce some pilots because they embody exemplary behavioural traits; and these are the same characters that are subsequently described in action or whose comments on gliding are reported. I then report the most representative emotions expressed by pilots during my fieldwork. These reported emotions relate to many aspects of gliding, especially the anxieties before takeoff, in moving out of the valley, at the prospect of out-landing, and particular feelings of loneliness and fear. I describe the main occurrences of some typical days of flight and theirs emotions: mainly negative emotions, since the pleasures of flying, the elation it can convey will be examined in Chapter 9.

Finally, I report some of what pilots say about gliding, how in their conversations they give life to recurrent themes, and how together they elaborate

a precise way of representing their activity to themselves and to the outside world.

5.2   Accounts and anecdotes by the glider pilots

The introduction of the main characters and the recording of what pilots said during my fieldwork about their activity were accomplished within the framework of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. This is a theory that seems suited to the subcultural dimension prevalent in Bilonia. It has been noticed how "[…] in the interaction that occurs between actors in the subculture, impression management plays a significant role" (Donnelly and Young 1988, p. 228). According to Goffman (1990 [1959]) social interaction, through which people constantly re-shape their identities, could be seen as the stage on which a theatrical performance is acted. People are like thespians and convey their identities to others through performances. Their verbal and non verbal actions are tuned to give the 'right impression' through a mechanism Goffman called 'impression management'. "I assume that when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation" (Goffman 1990, p. 26). Every person acts out a role according to the impression that s/he wants to make on the others. As the member progresses in her/his involvement into the subculture, the composition of her/his audience changes as well. The 'others' can shift from the general audience, which is the benchmark of the new members, to an inside audience composed of the fellow members (Donnelly and Young 1988).

In their performance people distinguish between two different settings, 'front stage', in which the actions are intended for the audience and the 'back stage', which describes all those situations in which the audience is not supposed to be there and the actors feel free to be themselves. "A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman 1990, p. 114). "Since the vital secrets of a show are visible backstage and since performers behave out of character while there, it is natural to expect that the passage from the front region to the back region will be kept closed to

members of the audience or that the entire back region will be kept hidden from them. This is a widely practised technique of impression management" (ibidem, p. 116).

Backstage performances in gliding, such as showing anxiety before takeoff or at the prospect of flying alone, revealing doubts about one's skill to complete a particular cross-country course or to cope with turbulence and strong wind, can be intruded by someone like the anthropologist not meant to see them. Participant observation can reveal sets of discrepancies between what the gliding subculture projects as ideal and actual reality, 'ideal versus real' culture patterns (Klein 1986). This 'playing roles' in order to convey to others a good impression could also be understood in terms of a 'collective defence mechanisms' "[…] allowing everyone, with the complicity of everyone else, to disguise truths known to all" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 19). In Bilonia, pilots tend to keep hidden the unpleasant truth that, but for few exceptions, they don't dare to accomplish cross-country flights on a regular basis, but they would rather limit their activity to a course always within gliding distance to the airport.

Paul Spencer highlights how the manipulation of reality to create an effect through "[…] personal anecdotes, told and elaborated before an audience, [could be considered] as a form of structured autobiography" (Spencer 1992, p. 50). An autobiography built on such contrivances can render a realistic picture of the ethos of the social reality it depicts. It represents a self-portrayal which provides an ideal type, riddled with subcultural clichés, which represents at the same time a truth of the teller's ideals as a distortion of biographical and historical detail (Spencer 1992). Accounts of this kind are useful to highlight the main tenets of a particular cultural reality. In Bilonia these take the form of the much repeated assertions by glider pilots that they shun local flying in favour of cross-country soaring. At the same time they open up "[…] the disquieting question of the extent to which all our Goffmanesque presentations of ourselves – even to ourselves – contain an element of autobiographical distortion, giving coherence and meaning to our being" (Spencer 1992, p. 53).

5.3   The subculture of Italian gliding and its main concerns

In this paragraph I deal with the way in which gliding is described at the national level in the quite popular electronic mailing list of Italian gliding. This is done to draw a broad picture of the activity and its normative order, since the Italian gliding community is mirrored as a whole in the messages presented, which sketch its main traits (on the role of subcultural media in giving shape to the normative order and subsuming the main traits of a sport subculture, see Thornton 1995; Wheaton and Beal 2003; Wheaton 2007a). This backdrop will enable me to pin down the peculiarity of the local reality I described in the previous chapter and which I shall analyse in depth in the following paragraphs, highlighting the numerous points in which it differs from the wider picture.

Around 300 people[40] are signed up to the mailing list, although the majority don't actively participate. The pilots are from all the regions in which gliding is practised in the country – all the northern regions, most of the Central ones but, apart from tiny exceptions, none of the Southern ones. In South Italy gliding clubs are non-existent, probably because in the 1950s and 1960s, when most Italian gliding clubs were created, those regions were economically backwards and, after their relative economic development, pilots opted for other, more popular types of free flying (i.e. hang-gliding, paragliding). I followed the mailing list for six years (January 2001- December 2006) during which time I was able to notice a clearly perceptible 'saturation' of themes, the main ones being repeated over and over.

5.3.2   Competitions

One of the main concerns of the pilots appears to be that of competitions. This prevalence of topics linked to competitions is not surprising. 300 out of around 1200 active sailplane pilots in Italy compete; that is to say one in four, a much larger proportion than that in other countries where gliding is more

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[40] For reasons of privacy, the list of all the people enrolled is not disclosed by its administrator. I estimated this figure from some e-mails.

successful, but where the number of those involved in competitions is around 5%. By the term competition I mean both competitions *per se* and a form of on line contest, the CID (Campionato Italiano di Distanza) which provides the scores useful for rating the Italian pilots[41].

Competitions *per se* are divided into several (usually between 5 and 10) days of contest[42]. At the beginning of each day the day's task is disclosed by organizers. Depending on the weather conditions expected, this consists in the assignment of a set course of anything between 250 and 600km, rounding various checkpoints on the way. The gliders will be lined up in grid order and will be launched as quickly as possible using a fleet of tug planes. Twenty minutes after the last glider has been launched, the contest is declared open and the pilots can start on the task crossing the starting line, each of them choosing the moment s/he judges will provide the best weather conditions. The competition task consists of completing the course in the fastest possible time. Points are awarded for each day's flying and accumulated throughout the competition. In each class, the pilot with most points at the end is declared winner. Data loggers carried on board each glider – which use GPS fixes to map the route taken – give proof that a pilot actually completed the competition course by rounding the various turn points in the correct order[43].

Most of the mailing list contributors agree that, while gliding has a positive image among the general audience – probably due to its being

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[41] Italian pilots are divided into two categories: classified and unclassified. The former consists of a scoring list (the so called 'algorithm') edited every year by the FIVV (Federazione Italiana Volo a Vela) in which all the 'National pilots' are listed; those who will represent Italy in the international contests are chosen from among the first 16. There are two ways to get into the 'algorithm': either by taking part in a race 'Promozione' (competition held every year and reserved for unclassified pilots) and obtaining at least 80% of the highest ranking score; or by taking part in the CID (Campionato Italiano di Distanza) and scoring more than 1750 points (that is to say, performing two flights of 500 km) and being at the same time in one of the first 5 positions. Points in the algorithm are calculated through a weighted sum of the 3 best results in the last 3 years.

[42] Traditionally there were three classes in which sailplanes were divided during the contests: standard class (15 meters wing span with water ballast allowed but no flaps); race class (same wing span, flaps allowed); free class (no limits of any sort – usually the wing span is 25 meters or over). Two classes were recently added: the 18 meters sailplane (basically a race class craft with an increase in wing span) and the club class which includes older types of sailplanes that, according to precise rules, are deemed too old to be fit to compete in their original class.

[43] Until the early 1990s – before the introduction of GPS – sailplanes were equipped with two small cameras fixed to the canopy. At each turning point the pilot had to snap two photos showing the tip of one wing and the turning point (in order to avoid confusion, these are chosen among the starkest elements of the landscape – such as castles, industrial plants, football pitches). Two shots in rapid succession were required to reduce the risk of wrongly framing the required landmark.

environmentally friendly and its romantic aura – glider races lack appeal. They last several days and take place far away in the sky where nobody can see the gliders. People wonder how to fix this problem. Someone suggested putting cameras on board (like in F1 racing cars) and to have the sailplanes compete on a short track, and that they should start all at the same time[44].

An indirect form of competition, useful for assessing pilots' skills, is the OLC (On Line Contest), a German site in which pilots from all over the world are invited to send the records of their flights in a standardised format, so that informal comparisons can be made, and everybody interested can analyse the other pilots' flights which have been made available (see paragraph *7.4*).

The debate on these contests is lively and is often a source of friction between those who practice competitions and those who don't. Several messages dwell on the issue of the high training value of competitions, while others cast doubts on the hazards they imply. A pilot explains:

> Through competitions […] the less experienced pilot has the opportunity to fly with the big fish and evaluate their tactical decisions and the way of flying (8.2.2002).

Defending the races, another pilot affirms:

> Some time ago I was among those sceptical about competitions and their influence on safety … but of the last 5 deaths only Giulia died during a competition (6.13.2005).

A seasoned pilot advises a young one who had asked what was needed to enter that world:

> How to get ready for competition? […] I think that in competition what is more important than technique is the knowledge that everybody has of himself, of the way in which he reacts to frustration, of how, at the right moment, he must accept that he is wrong and change his strategy, but

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[44] In January 2006 a new contest of this type was held in New Zealand for the first time; called Grand Prix, it aimed at a better visibility for the audience which was able to follow the progression of the race live on their computers.

without losing faith in himself … […]. Try NEVER to get scared; fear is no fun. [This point is repeated three times throughout the letter…] To win you have to want it, really want it! But you should NEVER run unnecessary risks! (2.10.2004).

Those pilots who don't practice competition complain of the numerous good days lost because some contest or other has prevented them taking off. A pilot from Piti (where most of the Italian gliding competitions takes place) writes:

Dear friends, what would you think if your gliding field were seized during the two best months of the year just to allow the 70 pilots fond of competition to have fun? Well, that's exactly what is going to happen this summer against the interest of the majority of gliding pilots who like this sport only for its own sake and the pleasure of flying (2.5.2004).

Another one:

In Piti, during the last few years it has been objectively very difficult to fly with the glider (at least for the 'humans' like myself who don't own a private sailplane and have to rely on the ones of the club). […] We must recognise that during the period when competitions take place all the other activities are slowed down by 70, 80% … just try asking at the club office where all the flights are logged! (2.6.2004).

A big fish is quick to react to these complaints:

I made a list of all those who usually take off before the beginning of the day's contest [here follows a list of the names] [45] there are plenty of them. […] I noticed that most of the grumbling comes from those pilots who don't have enough experience to be able to stay airborne at the beginning of the day, in weak conditions. They are stressed by the fear of a

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[45] During a contest day those pilots who aren't taking part in the contest may either to take off before the contestants or afterwards, in which case their flight will be quite short.

forced landing in the midst of the contestants, and the prospect of being insulted as though they had taken a motorway the wrong way (2.7.2004).

Somehow linked to the theme of competitions is that of the equipment. Electronic devices fill today's latest generation cockpits. Most are deemed compulsory for competitions. Black boxes log the flights and are used to determine the final results. Handheld personal computers attached to the dashboard process GPS data, providing the pilot with much sought after bits of information about navigation, wind strength and direction, the best speed to fly for each phase of the flight, the best glide path, turning points, etc. What is lost is the romantic aura of the 'stupid and simple', of the flying 'by the seat of your pants', which is something only a few regret loudly:

Of course, in 1992 people started talking about loggers, but everybody still used only the old snap shot camera, and only big champions had GPS. Today without a logger and dashboard personal computer you'd better just fly the usual small pattern around the airfield (9.16.2003). Old chaps like me agree that when we were going around with a map and compass, there were more of us and fewer of us died … (9.23.2003).

Another facet of competitions is the pursuit of new world-records. The cutting edge technology incorporated into the newest sailplanes, either aerodynamic improvements or electronic equipment, and the improvements in the knowledge of the big wind waves several hundred kilometres long over various regions (Andes, New Zealand) resulted in some breakthroughs[46] which are variously commented upon. Particularly discussed are the issues concerning the ethics of their registration with the FAI (Federation Aeronatique Internationale). Speaking about an outstanding 2400 km long flight he accomplished in Patagonia two months earlier together with a French pilot more experienced in wave soaring than himself, a prominent Italian pilot points out:

Besides rules, I would like to say that there should be a certain sporting ethic. I don't think it right to ascribe a record to a person who

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[46] Among the others, the World record over a course of 1000 Km at an overage of 203 Km/h.

wasn't the real author of it. [And in case of a solo pilot] it should be verified if the flight was done without outside help, aside from the usual information received over the radio (2.12.2005).

5.3.3   Shortcomings

Gliding seems to arouse strong positive emotions but also to involve collectively felt difficulties. Notwithstanding the shared interest for competition, quite often the list brings up issues relating to the opposite extreme of gliding – its costs which put it out of reach of most people, and its intrinsic difficulties which cause a very high rate of newly licensed pilots to abandon the activity.

To many people high costs appear to be more the result of an Italian attitude rather than the activity *per se*:

I think this is an Italian flaw. This summer a lot of us were in Fayence[47] … well, how many plastic sailplanes[48] did the local school use? […] There was an ASK21 … in ten days maybe it had done 2 flights (8.10.2004).

Several e-mails go on in the same line:

A lot of club members boast about being pilots, and the lower the number of pilots the more prestigious the license is considered to be. […] The difficulties are not only Italian. Of course, the Germans have the big advantage of a gliding culture with a wide circulation for historical reasons, but they keep it up because they are unpretentious. The number of practitioners means they can spread out the costs[49]; we shouldn't brag about practicing a sport for the happy few and, at the same time, complain that it costs so much! […] I am convinced that it isn't the high costs that make our sport an élite activity practised only by a few hundred fans. Maybe causes ought to be looked for in an excessively closed environment,

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[47] Fayence is one of the most popular gliding venues in France.
[48] 'Plastic sailplanes' refers to modern , high performances fiber-glass gliders versus older and cheaper 'wood and fabric' ones.
[49] In Germany there are 32,000 glider pilots; in Italy 1742 (2006).

in the few efforts to advertise it (is it possible that 90% of Italians don't know what gliding or a sailplane are?) and, last but not least, in the fact (for us unbelievable…) that for a lot of people it doesn't sound so engaging and, besides, it's scary as hell! (11.19.2002).

You're right. Our gliding is mainly managed by pilots who aim only for performance, forgetting that there are, or rather, there might also be pilots interested in a type of flying which is an end in itself and done cheaply (11.19.2002).

In Germany voluntary service is at the foundation of gliding. Volunteer services means cleaning hangars and offices, performing the ordinary maintenance on the sailplanes, helping in rigging and de-rigging, and so on. This way the club doesn't need overhead costs for personnel: compared with some Italian clubs this is real saving […] (11.20.2002).

When I went to Germany two years ago to buy my glider I had the opportunity to visit some German gliding clubs. The immediate feeling I had was that of simple folks, with great skill, who fly at low cost and encourage gliding among young people, bringing them up to the highest level mainly using cheap sailplanes. This is how new champions can emerge, also among people who don't have unlimited resources at their disposal! (10.6.2004).

Musing about high costs and falling number of practitioners, a member of the board of the Italian Gliding Association[50], very active on the mail list, remarks:

For a long time now, it has been clear that a real demand for cheap flying doesn't exist. And that for technical reasons, a new glider at low cost cannot exist. Building a LS-8[51] costs only a little more than building a 'flying lemon'. […] More likely, young people try first with the paraglider and they arrive at the glider only when they have seen one a few times dashing away at high speed while they were confined to the same

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[50] FIVV- Federazione Italiana Volo a Vela
[51] The LS-8 is a German built state of the art standard class glider.

mountain. Today, more than half of the new glider pilots who don't leave after the license are already experts in free flying. They have had the opportunity to cut their teeth in a similar sport, they are proficient at it and well aware of the costs to be expected […] Also in Germany, in the last ten years the number of practitioners has gone down by 25% (8.20.2002).

5.3.4   Training and generational change

Possible solutions to solve these cost problems and the ones associated with early abandonment from the sport prompt debates about the so-called 'second period instruction', about the 'Progetto Giovani' and about the 'Club class' contests. Second period instruction refers to the teaching of the soaring skills needed to enable a newly licensed pilot to acquire cross-country proficiency. All the pilots who contribute to the electronic mailing list agree on the point: that the only serious and worthwhile way of practising gliding is cross-country soaring. To them, the short flight done in a radius of gliding distance from the starting airport isn't real gliding. In other countries (very quoted is for example the case of France) the second period course has been institutionalised, whereas in Italy it is done in each club in a different, sometime haphazard, way.

I remember asking a big fish in my club, a pilot with an outstanding experience, what I could do to go ahead. His answer wasn't at all encouraging: 'Nobody taught the Beatles how to play'. If somebody is not a Mozart of gliding what can he do? Resign himself to scraping around the airfield all day? Soon he'll be fed up and quit. That's right: *così fan tutti* [they all do the same][52], or almost everybody. Ok, but in this case he can sign up for an intensive course in Piti. Yes, fine, but after that week? […] But how come we can't institutionalise this 'second period'? […] Its only and specific task would be to help the newly licensed to progress in a sensitive stage of their flying career. […] I guess that the rate of abandonment in our sport would drop significantly (11.7.2003).

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[52] Mozart's opera is titled *Così fan tutte* [f.]

If we go on in believing in 'Self-made Pilots', well in that case, we also have to accept all the accidents that result from it (11.10.2003).

Recalling the first stages of his gliding experience, a pilot remarks:

[…] Taking your airborne ass a long way from home when you're all by yourself requires an amount of determination and courage and not everybody always has that at hand. … If instead … somebody can bring him along just some km away from the field, where he never would go alone […] Remember, the newbie pilot needs really very little to have fun and learn (10.11.2003).

Gliding being so expensive and in view of the total lack of sponsorship available for young pilots in Italy, it is no surprise that the number of young people practising it is very small. 'Progetto Giovani' [53] is the first attempt to find a way to form a new breed of pilots – aged 25 or less. Again, the emphasis is on competition – creating a junior national team (which in Italy has been nonexistent for many years) [54], and to take over the places that the older generation is going to make available. Its main organiser, a former gliding champion, writing from the airfield of Husbands Bosworth (UK), where the Junior World Gliding Competition 2005 was taking place, affirms:

When we say that we would have problems entering two pilots at the World Championship, which we are going to host, they stare at us almost in disbelief. From this point of view we feel almost as if we were a kind of gliding Third World. We are discounting some years of wasted time in taking intelligent decisions like those of the Club Class[55] and the Progetto Giovani (8.21.2005).

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[53] In other instances the same project is called 'Progetto Futuro'.

[54] In Germany, where gliding is actively promoted and sponsored, there are 600 junior pilots (and almost 1000 gliding clubs), and in the 9 Länder a Junior Championship is held through which the participants to the National Junior Championship are selected. In the United Kingdom every year the Junior Championship attracts 60 pilots and others have to be turned away. In the Czech Republic there are around 200 junior pilots and they also organise a Junior Championship.

[55] Gliders that fit in this class are more than ten years old (in some instances, even thirty years old), therefore their price is quite low.

Close somehow to the training of the new generation of pilots is the problem of the future of gliding, over which some contributions to the list brood.

> Statistically out of ten pilots who get their license three go ahead while seven quit. Why is that so? (11.9.2003)

asks a moody poster. According to that same person the problem lies in a chronic lack of efforts to spread information about gliding and the unfavourable environment that the newly licensed pilots encounter in their clubs.

> What is paramount is the environment of the club, its social fabric, the availability of everybody to pass on their experience to the less experienced. Unfortunately, these are things which are either present or they are not, they are built up during the years, thanks to the openness and the desire to communicate of everybody (11.9.2003).

The microlight sailplanes, which appeared on the market in the last years, give some hope. They present the big advantage of freeing gliding from most of the red tape that entangles it; but after the first enthusiasm people discovered that they are far too expensive (and maybe also fragile) compared to the available club class second hand gliders.

5.4   Exemplary characters

In the following paragraphs I present the local reality in Bilonia, describing a series of facts which occurred during the five years of my fieldwork as a means to outline the typical situations of that milieu. I begin by introducing the actors in these situations, some of the main characters of the community I studied, those with whom I spent most of my fieldwork time. The people selected are those later presented in action and they embody the socio-economic reality, but also the attitudes and values of the community, so that somehow the sum of their profiles can reveal the heart of this little social world. Some of these are merely exemplary characters, each representing one or more typical features

of the reality under scrutiny; others besides being characters in their own right, are also precious informants. With them I shared experiences, but also conversations, sometimes chatting away the time between flights, other times trying to grasp their understanding of flying and of the related risks. Some of them proved to be very flexible and helpful; others were always stuck in their position, closed to any hint on my part to evaluate their relationship with gliding. To my eyes, some of the people I regularly met in Bilonia started to appear as the embodiment of clearly defined moral traits and attitudes towards flying and towards the community's aspirations and frustrations. If I reflect on certain traits of the Bilonia society, I cannot help thinking of some members as actors performing a certain role on the stage of my observations.

Tristano is my main informant but also a friend. Two years older than I (he was born in 1953), he started gliding over twenty years ago and is very committed to the activity, maybe also due to his personal situation. A few years ago he separated from his wife. He lives with his only child, a daughter in her late teens. After the separation he didn't have particular demanding family duties to hinder him, the daughter being almost independent, and at the same time he craved for an activity which could absorb him, filling the voids in his life. He has always been very frank in admitting failures in his sentimental and professional life. As will be shown in Chapter 7, gliding serves this purpose for many pilots. Always very committed, due to these life changes and to the changes in the membership of the club he is now one of its core members and is recognised as such by the majority of people attending Bilonia airport. His flying skills have improved dramatically during the last years. He also flies in Piti, where he has a share (although a peculiar one, since he actually doesn't own a share but only a right to fly) in a syndicate that owns an old sailplane (one of the oldest, since it was built in 1969). Tristano is a precious informant because, besides gliding in Bilonia, he has experiences of a different way of practising gliding in a different place. Besides, being a scholar (he is lecturer of Greek literature at the Università di Cagliari) he has a good understanding of the kind of information I need. He furnishes me not only with raw data, but he is able to assess their relevance; with him I can discuss theoretical matters as well. As a member of the tribe he represents the relevance of commitment.

Matteo is the co-founder of the gliding section of the Aeroclub di Sirto based in Bilonia. Born in 1931, in his youth he was a military pilot; afterwards, after failing to become a civil pilot, worked as a technician; he is now retired. He is a former gliding instructor; he is in charge of the maintenance of the sailplanes of the club on which he performs small and big repairs. He is one of the two persons in charge of the daily inspections of the sailplanes, which he performs with earnest dedication. He embodies both the historical past of the club and its most traditional position. Rigorous with himself and the others, shy and reserved, naturally inclined to thrift, he can often be heard muttering against the new attitude in Bilonia. His political leftist sympathies and his traditional views incline him to see the club as a means to popularise a basic kind of flying, cheap and without sophistication, open to everybody. He likes the flying for the fun of it; gliding at its simplest, without the need to push himself to the limits in order to obtain good soaring performances. He cannot understand the drive new generations of pilots have for the cutting edge sailplanes or for a cockpit full of electronic gadgets. With all his stressing the importance of being thrifty, popular and cautious, he has been accused of hindering the club's development. The lack of new sailplanes capable of good performances and of the equipment needed to perform cross-country flights fails to attract more differently minded people.

Fausto, in his late fifties, appears to be always grumpy. Frustrated by his job as a office employee he still resents being forced to discontinue his university studies. He is always ready to mutter or complain about this or that; nothing seems to go as it should. When asked to engage himself in the managing of the gliding section of the club, for example by running for the post of gliding representative on the board, he declined all offers. In 2005, when a large number of pilots left the club (see Chapter 6) he was among the first to go and never set foot in Bilonia again. A skilled pilot with over thirty years of experience, besides his grumpy attitude which was sometimes quite annoying, in my eyes he always embodied the lack of challenges collectively experienced in Bilonia. He gave the reason why he never took up gliding in Piti as a lack of money to acquire a share in a sailplane. Always ready to tease those pilots whose difficulties were greater than his, bragging about his performances, or, rather "the hours in my logbook", nevertheless he never dared to take his flying into an open arena beyond the shielded and protected reality of Bilonia. He felt like an eagle and teased most of

his fellow club members because they were chickens, but he dared not fly where the 'eagles' fly. In the case of Italian gliding in Central Italy that place is Piti.

Maurizio, in his fifties, is a successful and wealthy building contractor. He is talkative and friendly and when he caught the gliding 'bug' he contributed to transforming the social atmosphere of Bilonia, filling it with his jokes, inquiries and comments. For a few years gliding became the activity around which all his free time revolved until at a certain point, with the same enthusiasm he had previously devoted to gliding, he took up kite-surfing. Although one of the co-founders of the new airstrip of Cappo, where most people went after the division of the club, due to this new passion his commitment to the gliding subculture is faltering. For his readiness to talk, he proved to be one of the best informants. Daring and skilled as he is, nevertheless he described many situations in which he was frightened by gliding. Although owning a state of the art sailplane (a German built Ventus with retractable engine) he rarely flies it, and almost never in Piti, nor has he ever tried to take part in competitions.

Norberto, by some nicknamed 'Penna bianca' (White feather) because of his old fashioned long white pony tail, is in his early sixties, with the past of a playboy. During his life he never settled into a precise profession; divorced with a grown up daughter, years ago he left Sirto to go to live in a village in the Apennines. After having flown hang-gliders for many years he started flying in sailplanes fascinated by their aerobatics possibilities. He took aerobatics courses and acted as judge in a World gliding aerobatics championship. Driven by his passion, he started flying in Piti and took part in some minor competitions. With plenty of spare time for gliding, not well off enough to own his own sailplane, he started helping the manager and instructor of the gliding courses in Piti. For some years, he represented one of the main links between Piti and Bilonia and the two different attitudes to gliding that they embody. He admires the performances of the 'real pilots' who fly in Piti, and for a while belonged to their bunch, but, at the same time, for all his advocating zest and performance, he seems cautious and afraid.

Vasco, in his early forties, an IT technician with a degree in physics, is in and out of work, a fact which he blames on globalisation and the outsourcing to cheaper countries of jobs that require his kind of expertise. Although he has had his gliding license for over ten years, he never managed to become proficient at

soaring. The lack of determination that he describes when speaking about his work problems he also shows in gliding. He is one of the pilots in who the consciousness of the possible hazards of flying brings about a reflexivity on risk that has a paralysing effect. He almost never dares anything and his cautions make him the object of teasing remarks by the other pilots.

Lino, in his late fifties, with a gliding license obtained twenty-five years ago, embodies carefulness itself. At the same time, he is one of the most dedicated pilots. Recently retired, well off, with a grown up daughter and no stable partner, he has plenty of time for flying. He owns shares in two different sailplanes (now both in Cappo) which he flies regularly. Fussy about any small detail, his almost perfect technical skill in piloting is not matched by his performances at soaring.

Leonardo is in his mid-forties; self employed in the computer hardware business, he is one of the few pilots in Bilonia to show a penchant for motor gliders. Although he is a competent pilot, he never dared to undertake long soaring flights in sailplanes. He bought instead a share in a syndicate of an old motor glider based in Piti.

Livio, a technician in his early fifties, embodies a strong change in attitude determined by a change in location. He got his gliding licence when he was very young accumulating in the course of the time more than 1000 hours of activity. Nevertheless, for the almost twenty years he was based in Bilonia he never attempted real cross-country soaring. He attributes this to his being terrified at the possibility of an out-landing. By chance, he had the opportunity to fly for a few days in Piti in a informal course organised by one of the leading local pilots (Omero) who helped him out of this impasse. He showed him how it is possible to perform long cross-country flights with a modicum risk of not being able to get back to the original airport, and how a well planned out-landing is not really that dangerous. Fascinated by this possibility he left Bilonia and his cautious approach to gliding behind him; he bought a share in a syndicated sailplane. For the last years (more or less from the beginning of my fieldwork) he has been flying only in Piti where he has been able to gain a reputation for his consistent performances at cross-country soaring.

Gabriele is a Catholic monk in his mid-forties. From his father he inherited a passion for airplanes and flying which he was able to fulfil when

senior enough in his order not to have to ask his superiors permission to enrol in a gliding course. Skilled and daring he represents one of the few pilots that stretch the cautious approach to soaring prevalent in Bilonia to its limits. Although he is prevented by his ecclesiastic position from acquiring a stake in a syndicated glider and flying in Piti, a place where his aspiration at soaring proficiency could be better fulfilled, he was nonetheless able to avoid the cultural attitude to risk prevalent in Bilonia (i.e. Gabriele is not cautious like most of the other pilots in Bilonia). He formally submits to the local rules, at the same time showing independence in his flying practice not easily to be found in other pilots in the same environment (see the episode mentioned at p. 105).

Valentino is in his late forties - early fifties. He is a self employed widower (his wife died during my fieldwork) with one son, and he spends most of the afternoons at the airport. Extremely proficient, with an enormous soaring experience, he has nonetheless flown almost exclusively in Bilonia where for many years he has been available to fly in the back seat with less experienced pilots. He is probably the only pilot proficient in cross-country soaring who has accumulated most his expertise in Bilonia.

Silvio, an entrepreneur in his early sixties, is an exception; he stands outside the main group of players in Bilonia. He divides his gliding activity between Bilonia and Piti and is one of the few pilots from the group under analysis to practice competitions. Besides, together with Maurizio, he is the co-founder of the new airstrip of Cappo and, thus, one of the main agents of the division the club went through. Before the split his soaring proficiency and his involvement in competitions made him Bilonia's most admired member. For over two decades, Silvio was one of the few pilots able to balance their Bilonia membership with an involvement in the national gliding arena. He represented an otherwise missing link between a local reality and a wider world, both belonging to the same sport subculture but very different as to practices and attitudes.

The last character I introduce is Antonietta, the secretary of the club, and one of my main informants. She was not a pilot herself, but spent most of her working life with glider pilots, taking part in their activities and conversations, encouraging or consoling those in need of help. She had access to insider knowledge while maintaining the point of view of the outsider. Antonietta was in

her early sixties, the unmarried daughter of a former employee in the Air Force premises; she was soft spoken and witty. She was the only person in the subculture – including the pilots' spouses, partners and close relatives – to object on moral grounds to the risk glider pilots run. She complained that grown-up people have responsibilities towards their families they shouldn't forget. She couldn't understand why pilots devote so much effort to such a hazardous pursuit. When she suddenly passed away after a short illness, not long after the end of my fieldwork, she was sorely missed by all the pilots who felt they had lost of one of their community's reference points.

5.5   A place for strong emotions

Maurizio waits on the ground for Tristano and I in the Grob acro[56] to land. As usual, he wants to fly in that particular sailplane. When we land he gets ready to take-off smoking a cigarette till the moment comes to close the canopy. Although he is considered skilled and experienced, he is clearly nervous. With him is Lino. Maurizio almost never flies alone. Some people think that, whenever he is alone, he gets bored after a short while. That is why in these instances he often doesn't stay airborne for more than an hour. I suspect that this 'boredom' could be read as uneasiness on the part of a pilot who otherwise – notable exception – doesn't feel ashamed to confess his fears. 'Boredom' is also an 'excuse' invented by his companions to shield him, one of the core members, from any hint of being a coward. His companion in this particular flight, on the contrary, has constructed his persona by doing his best to hide his fears. These, in the course of the years, have started to show through, and are sometimes the reason for sharp comments others make behind his back; but his unfaltering commitment allows him to be fully accepted and even appreciated.

This same day, with Tristano and Norberto I speak about the fear that most pilots in Bilonia usually have of soaring far away from the field. Norberto, the most experienced among us and the one with the closest links with the 'superior' world of Piti, knows that even pilots reputed for their daring have this fear. One such pilot, Guido, told him that in these situations he feels his legs stiff

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[56] This is the club sailplane with the best performances among the two-seaters.

with fear while piloting (5.9.2004). This episode leads to one of the above referred themes – that of fear and anxiety.

5.5.2   Fear and anxiety

Sometimes, fear is admitted offhand in a conversational tone, if the opportunity arises. One day, at the airfield the club runs out of gasoline for the tug. Unable to fly, waiting for a van that will deliver two barrels of oil[57], we chat. A pilot who got his gliding licence recently, but who holds a private pilot licence and who works for the civil aviation authority – thus placing himself above the usual amateur level – spends his time waiting to get through this delay by sewing the ripped fabric of a lead ballast case. In response to my pulling his leg, he ejaculates:

> Finally I found my vocation, no more flying stress! (4.22.2005).

The underlying idea seems to be that this is a sharable feeling that the other people present can emphatically understand.

Again, Maurizio, while waiting near the airstrip chatting with his friends, declares:

> For a couple of years now, whenever there is strong turbulence, and
> the flight commands don't seem to respond to the pilot, it scares the hell
> out of me (6.2.2004).

I can't help noticing that the frank admission is shielded behind the bulk of an experience that stands firmly against any doubt that such a show of weakness might evoke. A similar way of admitting to be scared without the need to question one's own skills is shown by Fausto who states that in the morning, when he was flying alone in our valley, it was very turbulent. Omero (maybe the most senior and respected pilot in central Italy, who regularly flies from Piti),

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[57] The gasoline needed for the tug planes must be transported in barrels from the civil airport of Sirto, since the pumps at Bilonia airport are for military aeroplanes only.

who was also flying – he goes on – agreed with him over the radio on this. Of course, this implies that Fausto was perfectly able to face such a situation that scared all the rest of us on the ground. He boasts about this fact, but behind its facade I can perceive that he is ill at ease (3.21.2005).

If admitting fear is difficult most of the time, even for people with an established standing, it seems much more difficult for the beginners. I give a ride home to one of the new pupils. He started gliding two months ago and has so far a total of 4 hours and half. That same day Tristano and I have done a flight of over 5 hours: he is astonished. When I question him, he tells me that gliding doesn't scare him; the only time he "almost felt scared" was when he was asked to perform a half turn of a spin (7.2.2005).

When I drive with my brother-in-law to the airport for his first flight in a glider he admits he is afraid; instead – I notice about myself – that I am relieved at the opportunity of not flying alone, of not feeling compelled to go cross-country. Scared, my brother-in-law gets sick after a few minutes. But I savour every aspect of this short flight. To me it represents flying without the challenge of performance, and at the same time of being able to project my fear on another person. Besides, there is the pleasure that comes from introducing a family member to a world which is very important for me (5.2.2004). For similar reasons, almost two years later, I find myself envying the rich members of the new airstrip of Cappo who bought a syndicated two-seater Duodiscus[58]. With it, they bought the possibility of making wonderful flights sharing and diluting the resulting stress (1.26.2005).

Projecting one's own worries on other people, putting oneself in their shoes is another way how anxieties about gliding show through in the Bilonia community. After I have landed, a group of newly licensed pilots ask me if there is turbulence near the ground which could impede their landings. Maurizio overhears this and severely berates them:

Why do you want to fly on such a windy day? You'll get plenty of chances to land with a strong wind! (4.4.2004).

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[58] The Duodiscus is a state of the art two-seater sailplane. Its 20 meters wing span allows it glides of 45 km for every 1000 meters of altitude.

He means, that in any case, they'll have to face lots of unfavourable days when landing in poor conditions will be inevitable, and so there is no need for them to go looking for bad conditions. Landing in windy conditions is a scary experience during the first stages of a pilot's career; much better to postpone it until the pilot is fully fledged, and even then it is something to be dreaded.

Alberto, tug pilot at weekends and on his way to obtaining a commercial license, is cautious but at the same time totally devoted to flying. He told me how the previous Sunday the engine of his plane suddenly went dead when he was returning to base during the landing circuit:

I shit my pants I was so scared! (5-9-2004).

He joked about a tear he happened to have in his trousers:

It helps to dispose of the shit (5.9.2004).

The danger was real and recognised as such by everybody listening so that it was not shameful to declare and even joke about one's fears. Referring jokingly to one's fears as 'shitting your pants' is an expression passengers sometimes adopt the first time they fly in a glider. Not being actively involved in gliding means that their identity is not at stake and allows them to declare their doubts in advance, in order to justify their possible misbehaviour once airborne. There is a collectively recognised set of situations that one can be justified as fearing. But other situations do not qualify, so expression of fear is inappropriate.

Most often anxieties don't manifest themselves in speech but directly in the way people act. One of the most common examples of this is when a pilot gives up a cross-country flight that s/he judges too hazardous for her/his skills or because of the weather conditions. Very often the pilot will try to conceal her/his true intentions from the others in order not to be challenged with the evidence that s/he has chickened out.

Tristano tells me that the day before he managed to fly as far as Mount Velino, 60 km from the airport, although the ceiling was only 1500 meters and

overall gliding conditions were poor[59]. He was in radio contact with Norberto. But at a certain point he realised that Norberto had given up and turned back. Actually, he had tried to sneak away unnoticed, since announcing his intention to turn back could have been read as a defeat (8.22.2005).

Stress and fear can have a positive side. They can be sought after by some pilots, maybe in an effort to improve themselves. One day I spoke for the first time to Salvo, a man in his mid-thirties, whose name I didn't know yet. I had noticed him for a few months as one of the new licensed pilots in Bilonia, who was one of the most active and committed. That day he had already completed a first flight which had been quite unsuccessful since he didn't manage to make it last long, and now he was waiting for his second one of the day. He smoked too much and was clearly nervous. He surprised and puzzled me by saying that he liked flying because of its 'adrenalinic' nature, it being grounded on building up psychological tension. Since compared to him I perceived myself as an old expert, I tried to convince him to take off later, when conditions would be improved and it would be easier to stay airborne (6.12.2004).

5.5.3   Frustrations

In Bilonia, like everywhere else, there are some pilots who seem to have a 'natural' talent for gliding – but they are few, since sooner or later, they tend to leave the club to go to Piti – and there are others less talented, who in some instances, seem totally unfit for the sport. Besides, there are some professional commercial or Air Force pilots whose standing is quite apart. For them flying is a staple activity, it belongs to theirs lives, and when practised for fun, is totally relaxing.

For example, I had the opportunity to share a flight with Urbano, former Alitalia captain of Boeing 747 and gliding instructor, a life spent with the aeroplanes. Surprising me, when we were back on the ground after an unsatisfactory flight he gave vent to his frustrations.

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[59] Such ceiling is considered low due to the nature of the terrain, with ranges of mountains from 1000 to 1600 meters.

Today – he said – we could have gone towards those cumulus clouds over Carsoli[60,] if only we had known of a field where landing is possible. The only two reliable fields are too far off our usual course (9.15.2005).

He went on saying that in Bilonia there are two kinds of problems that prevent serious cross-country flying: when you attempt it you are always alone, there isn't a group of people flying all together at the same time like in Piti or in the more crowded clubs in northern Italy. There isn't the stimulus and support that comes from hearing over the radio what the other gliders are doing, where they are going, how they are performing. There is a lack of information, since there aren't any other sailplanes in the air that mark where the reliable thermals are, and the pilot has no information whatever about the reliability of the day's energy sources. In Bilonia a weather forecast for the purposes of soaring doesn't exist [61] (as is the case in Piti and in other big clubs) and there isn't the possibility of gathering tips from more skilled and trustworthy pilots flying at that moment in the same area. Thus, the pilot is left alone to take all the decisions. Besides, the terrain is such that there is a lack of reliable fields where to land if things go wrong and if one is not in the position to go back to the airport.

It struck me how even a professional pilot of great experience could feel the same frustration like the other members of Bilonia – of loneliness and fright at the idea of going cross-country. He showed me how the shared attitude found in Bilonia, far from having only a psychological dimension is rooted in a socially constructed reality (Douglas 1986, 1996; Tulloch and Lupton 2005).

If these feelings towards an out-landing are also shared by a former airline pilot, it comes as no surprise that the out-landing represented a kind of rite of passage, able to transform socially and psychologically those who experience it. Tristano, who made his first ever out-landing in the summer 2005, after twenty years of gliding, described to me how it affected his flying behaviour. For instance, the Sunday after the event, he went along as a co-pilot with Leonardo, who in that period was short of practice. Low above the ground and far away

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[60] This is a village fifteen kilometres away from the point where we turned back.

[61] The airport Weather Forecast Office, although staffed by friendly and helpful people, doesn't aim its reports at soaring.

from the field Tristano suggested darting towards a cumulus cloud further ahead, thinking that it marked a reliable thermal. It didn't and they found that the way back to the airport was difficult to negotiate due to their insufficient altitude. All the while Tristano took all the decisions and did all the piloting while Leonardo sat quiet. For both, it proved to be a stressful experience. In talking to me about it, Tristano remarked how this experience would teach him to slow down with the self-reliance he had acquired with the out-landing he made the previous week. Norberto, the experienced pilot who came to fetch him in the field after his out-landing, had warned him:

> Now be careful, don't go thinking that you're omnipotent! (9.16.2005).

It is a notorious fact that after their first out-landing some pilots feel excessively self-reliant and after that run unnecessary risks.

5.5.4   Avoiding risk

As Mary Douglas points out, considering certain behaviours as risky can be the result of public moral judgements. "The well-advertised risk generally turns out to be connected with legitimating moral principles" (Douglas 1986, p. 60). The perception of out-landings in Bilonia can easily be seen as falling into this category. It doesn't represent a risk *per se*, but it goes against the ostensible purpose of a club whose main aim is to popularise flying. In the eyes of the traditionally minded of the club, it adds an avoidable organisational difficulty, linking as it does gliding with performances and races: all aspects that belong to another social world, a different culture of gliding. Especially after the division of the club (see next chapter), being cautious (i.e. avoiding all unnecessary risks) and thrifty (i.e. contributing towards rescuing the club from its economic slump) became expressions of moral principles that were to inform the practice of gliding in the club.

Often, in clubs like Bilonia – born to cater for the needs of people who wanted to fly for fun, but who in most cases lacked previous experience – stress

and fear are the results of a chronic lack of training. This is normal in the beginners, but often also characterises people who have been involved in gliding for many years. In part, the reason for this depends on the high costs. Pilots stop practising during winter in order to save money that will allow them to fly more during the summer gliding season. But this is true only in part. Many amateur pilots are happy to find excuses not to fly, because flying scares them although they seldom admit this to others[62]. Again, exceptions abound. For example, after six months of winter interruption, Gabriele started flying again solo in the club's best single seat sailplane (a DG 300), dodging the mandatory check with an instructor. He stated that he was only scared of turbulence, which in this period of the year can be very severe. The same day, I fly with Tristano and I am deadly scared at the possibility of a landing in a field, especially when he shows me from above the small fields near the villages of Nerola and Montelibretti, known as sites where landing is possible (5.1.2004).

Actually, my own experience is full of such examples. One day I have an appointment with Tristano to fly together. When I arrive at the airport, the low ceiling and a risk of overcast conditions convince us to give up. Tristano is more convinced then I of this renunciation, since he comes to the airport more often than I do, is more committed and has fewer family obligations that prevent him from flying. There would be the DG 300 available, but a mixture of fear and the poor weather conditions prevent me from dragging it out of the hangar. However, when two other pilots who have arrived in the meantime take off in the sailplane that Tristano and I have vacated, I feel frustrated (4.18.2004).

At the onset of the soaring season, at the beginning of a flight I felt scared and the way I piloted the sailplane was particularly awkward, which gave me doubts about my skill. After one hour I decided to land, having already done two full circles of the valley and not being able to get out (besides the stress there was a low ceiling) (4.4.2004). Another time, when I returned to the airport after my summer holiday, and after more than a month and half from my last flight, I found the turbulence during the air tow and in the first stages of the flight quite severe and scary and was annoyed by it. Besides, it made it psychologically difficult to get back in tune with gliding. I felt totally unsound

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[62] That this phenomenon characterises also other clubs is shown in Chapter 7.

and not self-reliant. I had lost the habit that makes one complacent about flying which becomes an activity taken for granted. On the contrary Tristano, who had flown a lot during this summer, was self confident and had acquired a quicker rhythm in taking the decisions (9.4.2004).

These shortcomings notwithstanding, I can consider myself an 'average Bilonia pilot' (and that's probably why I am still flying in Bilonia after more than seventeen years). There are pilots far more cautious then myself. One good example is Dario the member of the club's board in charge of gliding. One day I was surprised to learn that he needed to check with the instructor: six months had elapsed since his last solo flight. At the intensive course in Piti planned for next summer he was intending to stay only for the last three days, which short period would allow him always to fly with an instructor. His case is extreme, although a similar one has been already mentioned in the literature of dangerous sports (Brannigan and McDougall 1983). One wonders, if his performances were so low and his insecurities so high, why did he ask to have an official position as a glider pilot? (5.21.2005).

5.6   Discourses about gliding

Discourses about gliding are a recurrent feature of clubs like Bilonia, where besides actual flying a lot of 'hangar flying' goes on. These talks surround the flying itself and are used to build the social view for the 'right' type of flying. They prescribe the right type of glider the pilot should prefer, and the right type of people fit to perform the activity. They are one of the ways in which the normative order of the subculture is built and confirmed (Williams 1989). Sometimes they can have a philosophical hue, such as when they dwell on the links between life and gliding.

The issue of the 'right' sailplane is a strongly felt one. In a small gliding club like Bilonia, at the margin of mainstream gliding activity in Italy, two-seater sailplanes are flown more often than single seat ones. They represent the bulk of the club's fleet; they offer the opportunity to share the cost of the flight, to take advantage of the support and advice of a more skilled pilot (for the novices) or to fly for free (for the experienced). When one arrives late at the airport they are

more likely to be already near the runway ready to take off when most often the single-seats are still in the hangar. Besides all this, they offer a safety valve to avoiding the building up of excessive anxieties to those pilots, quite numerous, who are prone to such worries. At the same time, two-seater sailplanes are considered to be inadequate on most occasions. They are too slow when entering a turn, thereby making it harder to centre a thermal; they are slow in accelerating; they are less sensitive to the air movements, thus hampering the quick location of thermals. Very often, when commenting on their own flights or those of other pilots', people cannot resist the temptation to say something like:

> Had I had a single seat I wouldn't have experienced such difficulties in staying airborne!
> Today, only a single seat would have allowed us to soar cross-country! The thermals were so narrow that with the two-seater there was no way to move.
> Of course, with a single seat it would have been an entirely different story!

All pilots agree that on a difficult winter day – when nobody performs well – with single-seat glider things would have been better and it would have been easier to exploit the weak thermals of the day. The single-seat glider performs better and should be the 'real' pilot's preferred choice. It is an implicit critique of the way the club is run, according preference to simpler types of sailplanes, and it implies a faint frustration for having adapted oneself to the unpretentious kind of flying offered.

I experienced the other side of the coin with regard to beliefs about the right way of gliding when I accepted an invitation by a former member of Bilonia to fly in a motor glider – abhorred by the gliding purists[63]. The next day, I tried to convey my elation to the people I found in Bilonia, only to be met by kind smiles of condescension. One (Roberto) admitted that:

> Yes, it is fun, but only for a couple of times (2.12. 2006).

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[63] This motor glider is based in the airport of Piti.

Discourses about gliding can have a more general span, becoming a way of linking gliding with life. When for the first time I spoke with Valentino about the death of his wife – she was 47 and had died of cancer a few months earlier – he said that it has shown him all the uncertainties that surround our life. Going ahead in his reasoning, he arrived at a comparison between human life and gliding – since both are unpredictable in their results. Gliding is a short synopsis of the human condition, with its bright moments, down sides, fears, uncertainties and risks. Tristano, to whom I referred this conversation, was sceptical on intellectual grounds. He deemed it simplistic and naive (5.21.2004).

Two months later, at the bar for Air Force personnel, waiting for the soaring conditions to develop, Valentino delved again into his idea of the gliding flight as a metaphor for life. What matters is not a lack of flaws in piloting, but looking around in order to acquire as many details as possible of the sky and evaluate our possibilities on the base of what we know. As in life, the pilot must take some risks to obtain her/his rewards. This happens when s/he flies far away in order to catch a distant cloud or a whiff of condensation – of which s/he has had only a temporary glimpse – in order to gain altitude and be able to proceed toward a distant goal. Sometimes it happens that s/he is in tune with the atmosphere and the flight is smooth, without surprises; other times everything seems to go wrong, and the pilot is late in catching the opportunities that life offers at the right moment (7.18.2004).

Auto-mythologies (using the term loosely) also are quite frequent in the gliding community. In listening to them, it is important to pay attention to what people say about their experiences, as well as to "the *way* they say them" (Wieschiolek 2003, p. 119). Shifting the focus from content to attitude often reveals the attempt to construct a precise persona. Sometimes, pilots tune their verbal behaviour to give their audience the 'right impression' (see paragraph *5.2*). Being a 'pilot' fulfils a male desire for a 'macho' persona that attracts some. For example, Lino presents himself as a skilled pilot, one who is always ready to fly. In his tales of life before becoming a pilot, he was a rock climber and he climbed very challenging mountains in the Alps. He is fit for such sports such as rock climbing and gliding to which he has devoted most of his adult life.

There is also another type of the 'macho attitude' displayed by some. Fausto is such an example. Waiting for his turn to fly in the tiny office he berates

one of the two mechanics in charge of the ordinary maintenance on the club's sailplanes because the best sailplane (the DG300) is still grounded. The cause is that it still has to undergo the mandatory maintenance inspection carried out every 100 hours of flight (7.18.2004). On one occasion he takes off late in the afternoon. Over the radio he openly criticises the tug pilot who doesn't bring him where he wants to release. Well aware, though, that a lot of people are listening on that frequency, he points out that he is perfectly able to overcome the deficiencies of the tug pilot going alone where he wants to go, using his skill in soaring (5.9.2004).

Bilonia, its social life and the way in which gliding is done represent a cosy and secure environment, and often members of the club feel the pressure that comes when the need to confront different situations arises. This pressure is often mirrored in their discourses. When some pilots of Bilonia face the usual summer soaring course at Piti they try to find excuses in advance for failing to make strong performances, which shows their uneasiness. For example, Lino states:

> This year I won't come. I'll organise a course for myself at Cappo (5.9.2005).

In this way, besides avoiding measuring himself he can boast of being among the cofounders of the new gliding club of Cappo. Luca declares that he takes part every year in the Piti courses because he likes the atmosphere that surrounds the flying camp, from breakfast with everybody at the café, to dine in a different restaurant every evening, having fun together with his mates. Performances are not among his priorities: he wants to make it clear that the others must not expect brilliant cross-country flights from him.

When I tell Tristano of my fantasy to leave Bilonia to go to fly in Piti in a syndicated glider, his answer is a deeply-felt description of how difficult is to fly there. How stressing and boring it is to be forced to wait besides one's glider in line on the airstrip for the time to take off ("You can't even go for a pee!" he laments). How stressing the landings could be due to the thick air traffic in the approach and landing pattern. Once you have landed you run the risk of being left in the centre of the airstrip, when nobody comes to help you push your glider

away. And besides, you can't tell anybody of your difficulties because you run the risk of being labelled "inadequate" and, thus, dangerous. The Piti described in his words is the Piti seen by a pilot who belongs to the comfortable environment in Bilonia. He managed to upgrade himself to Piti but the pain of the process is often noticeable in what he says (1.15.2005).

5.7 Trickling down of new techniques

Norberto tells me with pride about his first competition and how he managed to come in third. In particular he describes to me in detail a flight he made on a borrowed glider[64]. He is very proud of it, and describes the flying technique he adopted on that particular occasion, flying straight near the ground over a ridge at more than 170 km/h, never stopping to turn in a thermal. It is a technique which has recently been adopted by the pilots during competitions (see Appendix); it has trickled down[65] to the intensive courses in Piti and from there it has reached Bilonia where it is adopted by only a few pilots after having been diluted according to the local rule (9.9.2004). This trickling down of new flying techniques from the international gliding arena to Bilonia via Piti is quite commonplace. It represents the way in which a detached local community updates itself, keeping in touch with the external world. Some characters, such as Norberto or Silvio, who belong to both the worlds, are the vehicles of such exchanges. Aware of their potentiality as messengers of a new lore, whenever possible I fly with them. A few days earlier when Norberto arrived at the airport I proposed that we share a flight. He showed bravery and a straightforward way of piloting that yielded good results. But his roughness caused me nausea. During all the flight he repeated over and over:

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[64] Flying without water ballast, he finished the day at 121 km/h, a very good performance considering the old type of glider (LS4).

[65] Thornstein Veblen - in his classical work on the leisure class (1970 [1899]) - uses this verb to describe the way in which a particular fashion, adopted by the wealthiest classes in order to establish a distinction, sooner or later 'trickles down' and is adopted by the middle classes too. This forces the upper class to find a new means of distinction in a never-ending process of conspicuous consumption.

Andrea, you must fly more often; you must fly more often! (3-28-2004).

Norberto judges Tristano – who, by the way, also belongs to the Piti entourage, but on a lower level, in which competitions don't play a part – and me on the same level. Good handling of the glider but low in training we both aren't used to managing and exploiting all the energy available as pilots do when in competition. He has just shown to Tristano how to lose altitude in order to fly the glider near the terrain over the ridge at high speed. Norberto's judgement doesn't reflect our respective positions inside Bilonia's inner hierarchy. Here Tristano has a clearly higher standing than myself. Seen from the outside, this perspective is flattened by the adoption of a different measure from which judgements are formed. Norberto's is a boasting of a changed mental attitude which comes from belonging to the world of the gliding competitions.

The trickling down of a new way of flying is visible also from a different perspective – from below. Also the less proficient pilots, when they have the opportunity to wet their feet in the Piti environment, come back to Bilonia temporarily transformed. They understand that outside their small social community a different approach exists, a different way of doing the flights which obtains far better results. In July I meet Vasco who is just through his flying camp in Piti. There – I was told behind his back – everybody pulled his leg because of his mistakes, his lies and his excessively cautious approach to flying. We share a flight in a two-seater and I can immediately notice how the effects of his intensive course in Piti are on display. He encourages me to fly low over the ground to catch a distant thermal; when he is doing the piloting he flies aggressively quick and low over the mountains. But on other occasions during the same flight he is uncertain and scared. I show him a path of cumulus clouds over Monti Ruffi, but he doesn't trust himself to go there (7.10.2004).

5.8   Conclusion

In this chapter my focus has been on the gliding activity in Bilonia and specifically on some facets that distinguish it from the overall picture of the

Italian gliding portrayed through the e-mails to the electronic mailing list of the gliding community. The local reality has been presented through the introduction of its main actors, through accounts of particular events that show these characters in action. There are peculiar kinds of behaviours and recurrent discourses: the shying away from performance and confrontation; the presence of 'roosters in the poultry-pen'; the way in which sometimes a persona is constructed. The upshot is that realities such as these are the threads that weave the social fabric of the place, making it something separate and distinct from the greater picture. We have seen how this has its main concerns in issues such as competitions, soaring performances, bad results compared to the gliding scenes of other European countries.

Bilonia's peculiarities, of course, don't rule out the existence of other places with similar characteristics. In this sense, the local reality under analysis could be seen as a specimen of other similar local realities secluded from the mainstream way of practising gliding and, maybe, in this lies its relevance.

In the next chapter, the way in which some of the frustrations experienced by pilots in Bilonia coalesced in bringing about a partition in the club will be shown. During my fieldwork most of the pilots left to give life to a new gliding community on a privately owned airstrip (Cappo) a few kilometres south of Bilonia.

Chapter 6

Divisions inside the Club

6.1 Introduction

During the seventeen years that I have been a member of the club, the gliding community of Bilonia has gone through a series of social changes which became more marked over time. In the early months of 2005, during the last phase of my fieldwork, the club finally split. A sizeable number of members founded a new community that was located in a purpose-built airstrip, known as Cappo, some ten kilometres south of the airport of Bilonia. In the following pages I sketch the various passages that led to this division, linking it to the available body of theory on such changes, and highlighting the social and moral implications this brought about.

The chapter first offers a review of the relevant literature on changes inside sport subcultures. It then describes the arrival in Bilonia of two groups of new student pilots linked by strong bonds of comradeship. It examines how the influx of these new members gave rise to new meanings, new ways of understanding gliding that culminated first in the birth of two new associations among pilots and then in a split of the club itself. The mood in Bilonia after the division is finally described in the last section.

6.2 Sport subculture dynamics

There is an influential body of theoretical work concerned with the process of sport subculture formation (Crosset and Beal 1997; Donnelly 1981; 1985; Donnelly and Young 1988; Theberge 1995; Wheaton 2000), although what happens to a particular sport subculture localised in a particular place (viz. an idioculture) over the years is still to be properly investigated. Sport subculture dynamics have been analysed in various studies. However, more prolonged

fieldwork might well be able to reveal contradictions and changes taking place over time, uncovering changing patterns of social behaviour that would otherwise pass unnoticed.

Midol (1993) and Midol and Broyer (1995) observed the conflict that arises between an old generation and a new generation of practitioners inside the same sport subculture. Nixon (1986) highlighted the way well entrenched social rules can be broken in the course of time by a loss of consensus about the social code and the build up of pressure to reconstruct it when the regular participants are supplanted by new and less committed ones. Mitchell's study of American climbers (1983) helped to understand why some unrest in a climbing club by some of the more experienced members is to be expected. He found that after completing their training course only few mountaineers continue climbing in club-sponsored activities. Thus, these clubs maintain their social stability because they cater mainly for novices who from the start accept to abide by their rules. Augustini and Trabal (1999), in their analysis of French boxing, found a similar trend. Besides a core group of old members the subculture was composed mainly of newcomers, since the majority of dropouts were concentrated in the first two years of participation in the sport. The old members then assimilated the few who survived this initial difficult period.

Guy (1995), who conducted his fieldwork at an urban club of trap shooting – a sport based on shooting small disks launched into the air by a special machine – has examined the way new members can jeopardise a sport club. The old experts were the bearers of the history of the club; they were fiercely dedicated to it and were held together by a strong sense of community. They saw the inflow of people of lower social standing inside their once elite sport community, and the consequent democratisation, as a threat.

In his study of club tennis, Muir (1991) exposed the ways practised by members to maintain social boundaries inside the club according to categories in which members played each other. A temporal and spatial segregation was practised. Top players went to the club on different days than the others and kept together in just one court.

The most recent literature on subculture in general (thus, mostly youth and style subcultures) has pointed out the importance of taking into account the changes a group goes through caused by the shifting composition of their

members and by changes in generation (Bennet 1999; 2006; Hodkinson 2002). Klein (1986) had adopted an approach of this type (although less focused on the change of generation) to the sociology of sport in his 4-year study of bodybuilders. He was thus able to reveal a fundamental set of discrepancies between what the subculture projected as ideal and what actually went on.

A particularly long stint of fieldwork is able to expose changes taking place inside a sports subculture that at first sight seems stable. In the course of this thesis I have already described the different nuances in practices and values in different gliding idiocultures and shown how the gliding community of Bilonia represents only one idioculture and not the Italian subculture of gliding in its totality. I now turn my attention to modifications caused by the passing of time, thus adopting a longitudinal approach.

Within the gliding subculture the new pilots find an environment suited to their needs for socialisation among people whom they consider theirs peers (Butts 2001). Through their leisure activity they can create 'collective identities' (Wheaton 2000) that they try to defend against all behaviours felt to be different and therefore threatening to this new subcultural reality planned together. People who have been involved in the subculture for a long time consider the other members of the subculture that share the same values and goals a valuable audience (Donnelly and Young 1988). Those members who don't fit into this shared image of the distinctive subculture, who don't adhere to its value system – fundamental in the process of identity formation – tend to be rejected. Divisions inside a particular group belonging to a bigger subculture can be set into motion by such a mechanism. Those same people, who when they joined the subculture were accepted and well integrated into it, can start to diverge in behaviours and priorities. Since the roles of the members of the subculture should not be thought of as static, but as constantly undergoing changes due to a variety of processes (Donnelly and Young 1988), not the least of which is their upgrading from marginal newcomers to well established members (Donnelly 2006). "Studies of lifestyle sport have illustrated that although sports subcultural groups have some shared values, participants experiences are not homogenous, nor are their identity fixed" (Wheaton 2007a, p. 294). The boundaries of the sport communities are "shifting and redrawn through contests over taste and status" (ibidem).

During my fieldwork I noticed that members with high levels of commitment – which placed them firmly inside the boundaries of the subculture (Donnelly 1981; 1985) – could have significantly different ways of understanding their involvement in gliding (Brannigan and McDougall 1983). This progressively gave rise to the formation, within the same idioculture, of two separate groups following different value systems and, thus, creating two parallel hierarchies. At stake was not commitment – recognised by everyone according to the same standard – but priorities and values. Pilots belonging to the two different groups agreed on the role of commitment in judging the various members; but at issue was the 'meaning' accorded to performance and dedication. Commitment was as essential as ever to subcultural status (Wheaton 2000). But less clear was how it was to be judged. Was it to be commitment to better one's performances in soaring cross-country, or commitment to be in the front line in the various chores of the club life? Was it to be soaring skill or dedication to the everyday life of the club?

6.3   Transformation of the club

Already in the early 1990s a small group of pilots had quit the club giving way to a small transformation in its composition and purposes. These pilots were united by their passion for acrobatics that a particular gliding instructor had begun teaching at Bilonia, when first one, and then two acrobatic certified trainer sailplanes became available. This instructor (who later went on to win the first Italian championship of glider acrobatics and to represent Italy at the World championships) was very popular and the appeal acrobatics exercised over many people was great. The old guard – notwithstanding the fact that some of them could sometimes be seen from the ground performing stunts on their own – was hostile. In particular it was feared that an intensive acrobatic activity could damage the sailplanes adding too much stress to their normal wear and tear. After a couple of years of friction the chief acrobatic instructor and the members closest to him[66] left to give birth, near the village of Torre Alfina,

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[66] I don't remember their exact number; they should have been five or six.

seventy kilometres north of Sirto, to a purposely designed acrobatic section of the Aeroclub di Viterbo. Those who could not follow this group, but nonetheless were charmed by the possibility of practising acrobatics, felt annoyed and could often be heard complaining against 'those' who had forced its practice out of Bilonia. These people were accused of being short sighted, since they had been unable to recognise the economic potentiality of acrobatics, which was said could lure many new pilots into the club.

Usually new members join the gliding club by enrolling in the regularly held gliding courses in order to acquire their license and become full-fledged members. These courses are loosely organised. I am calling them 'courses' only because the same faces can be seen around at certain hours when one or more instructors are available to give flying lessons. But more than courses they are constituted by a series of lessons the pupils take in sequence in order to learn how to pilot a sailplane. However, sometimes the group of pupils which attends the lessons more or less on the same days forms a bond that allows them to consider themselves as a group. I think it is possible to recognise in a group of this kind some of the elements of *communitas* which Victor Turner showed were brought into action during the intermediate phase of the rite characterised by *liminality* and anti-structure. *Communitas* erases external status and puts all the members on the same level allowing them an intimacy seldom found in other moments of life. Freed from the structured bonds of normal social life, people show a fluidity that allows them to recombine cultural and social elements in a creative way altering the normal pattern. Attending a piloting course unites pilots coming from different walks of life, lets them become, in the separate space and time of the airport, a *communitas* which can affect the social reality which surrounds it (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Turner 1967).

In particular, a few years after I obtained my license, two of the courses formed two groups, each with a different moral attitude that influenced its perception of gliding. In the first one, which I will call the 'change-oriented' group, the two most influential characters were Maurizio and Tommaso. Both belong to the socio-economic elite and are very well off. Maurizio is a contractor and owns, together with his brothers, a big firm with contracts all over Italy and abroad; whilst Tommaso is a successful dentist with a big clientele. Both showed a dedication to gliding seldom found among pupils basically spending their

entire weekends at the airport. Besides this, thanks to their wealth they could afford to take more than one lesson per day. Their progress was very rapid and they were soon recognised by the older members as belonging to the community, recognition seldom awarded so quickly. Maybe this early recognition was prompted also by their high status outside the community and by their ease in social relations, both being socially sparkling and witty. Very soon they both became the hub around which the social life of the club revolved, or rather, the social life of that part of the club which was dissatisfied with the traditionally minded people who had the most influence in the running of the gliding section. Mainly Matteo as the oldest and 'historical' member, but also Flavio, then director of the gliding school and sitting on the board of the powerful Aeroclub d'Italia to which all the others are federated[67]. Their complaints were that the club favoured teaching new pupils but did nothing to train 'real pilots' capable of performing cross-country flights. It fostered caution not satisfaction; according to this attitude it sponsored the acquisition or leasing of low performance two-seater sailplanes, useful for training new students, instead of state of the art new single-seats best suited for soaring.

The old guard found new support from another group of pilots who were to attend the gliding course a short time later, the 'tradition oriented' group. Those who belonged to this group soon formed a link of friendships among themselves and with some older 'traditional' members who were held in high esteem for their representing the history of the club and traditional moral values of the guild of the pilots. Again, the main examples of this trend were Matteo and Flavio. Flavio, being their teacher, also benefited from the positive transfer usual in the student pilot-instructor relationship (see paragraph *4.3*). The main characters were Tonino, a middle-aged agronomist who often arrived to the airport accompanied by his family. This delighted the old generation who remembered the old days when this was usual, and at lunchtime big groups of adults and children had a good time together around the barbecue. A close friend of Tonino was Paolo, owner of a small IT firm which he established by himself. He shared with Tonino a deep dedication to gliding; he used his entrepreneurial skills to promote gliding by creating the first website about gliding in Sirto. The

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[67] A role in the board of the Aeroclub d'Italia matters also because it is the authority that buys the new sailplanes to be leased to the local clubs.

financial recovery of the gliding section of the club after the bankruptcy was due in part to the big influx of new pupils who learned about Bilonia as a possible place to attend a gliding course from his website. Alberto, who is a physicist at the Italian aerospace agency, belongs to this group together with his fiancée Paola, whom he met at the airport during the gliding course. Their dedication to the club and to its old values of participation in social activities and in a friendly sharing of the chores of club life was unparalleled. They were always at hand when it came to helping in small repairs to the craft or to the premises. They too developed an extremely strong bond with Matteo who seemed to embody the values that they were seeking in flying. The interesting point is that both Alberto and Paola had clear difficulties in flying despite their dedication. They both seemed scared by it: Alberto flew most of the time only under the supervision of an elder pilot, Paola never alone. This was often cause for scorn by one of the old members, Fausto, who had found support from the 'change oriented' group. In Fausto's view Paola as a neophyte, who never flew alone, lacked the legitimacy to take part in managing the club. He affirmed:

> The log-book only shows who has a right to speak and who should be quiet
> and listen to the advice of those who know more than her! (6.11.2001)

This was a way to silence her because she wasn't a 'real' pilot with plenty of flight time registered in her log-book. As is made plain by the literature, inside a sports subculture commitment equates to 'just doing it' (Wheaton 2000). In the case of Bilonia, this meant soaring as much as possible.

To the traditionalist group also belonged 'padre' Gabriele, the Catholic monk; his commitment endeared him to most members and his sociability and the bond of friendship he created with the fellow members of his course made him a well-established participant of the 'tradition oriented' group.

The two groups described above stirred the waters of the social life in Bilonia. Each brought about a radicalisation of certain positions whose germs were already there. While one side grumbled about the present day attitude, which it compared to the sense of common purpose that had infused the group in bygone days, the other complained how slowly the gliding section was

embracing a contemporary attitude and how it limited its activity to training new members while neglecting the needs of the more seasoned.

6.4   New meanings and new associations

Subcultures have been described as a new symbolic universe into which the practitioners gradually enter, with its specific language and codes and as a 'true universe of meaning' (Roussel and Griffet 2000). These new meanings also pertain to the sphere of morality. In some sports the world that the subculture creates comes to be permeated with a unifying moral purpose no longer readily available in the wider society (Mitchell 1983). This clarity of moral pursuits is often what practitioners crave and don't want to give up (Sassatelli 2000). The second group of people I have described – the 'tradition oriented' – was affected by feelings of belonging of this kind. In Bilonia, they had found a new universe of meaning linked to a glorious past (see paragraph *9.5*) and characterised by rules that responded to their need for moral integrity. They wanted to abide by these norms, that in some cases became like a creed which didn't admit other interpretations. On one occasion that well exemplifies this attitude, Tonino was criticised by various people from the change-oriented group for being a stickler for the rules, because – although experienced and trustworthy – he asked to have a check with an instructor, since it had been more than two months that he had last flown. Club rules require a mandatory check with the instructor after 45 days from the last flight, although the older pilots often interpret this norm in a flexible way. Tonino declared:

> Rules are the same for everybody and everybody has to comply with them (1-11-2004).

Meanwhile, Erri, a pilot who hadn't flown for over three months, was informally asking Tristano to fly with him, a solution often adopted and tolerated. Tristano represented the opportunity for Erri to fly after a long time

with an old friend, someone with whom he had long ago attended the flying course[68].

Instead, the 'change-oriented' group I described, who gave the first impulse to the row inside the club moved from totally different moral premises. Although (this is always to be remembered) they were not at all young, but they belonged to the same generation of the traditionally minded (roughly between 35 and 55), they showed themselves ill at ease with the established norms. Like the young skiers studied by Midol (1993) and Midol and Broyer (1995), they wanted to have it all at once. They wanted to have fun, to enjoy themselves performing something daring, out of the ordinary, challenging. The above-mentioned *communitas* was something that was creating a strong bond between them – a bond that they relished. They didn't want to continue a great and noble tradition. This was maybe in the background of the motivation for some of them, but it wasn't at the core of their bond. This group formed an alliance with some members of the old generation: the grumblers and dissatisfied, and those who were proficient in gliding who already gravitated outside Bilonia.

Even before the break-up both groups had created independent associations. First were the 'traditionally minded' who for a period were forced to it by their minority position inside the club. As a matter of fact, during the years 2002-2004 the change oriented group had formed strong ties with the board of the Aeroclub di Sirto and its chairman. Thanks to their position of strength they were able, first to oust the director of the school – the already mentioned Flavio – and afterward to have him expelled from the club on the grounds of alleged misbehaviour against the economic interests of the club. Being denied positions of control inside the club, and at the same time wanting to formalise their bond and create a vehicle to foster their keenness for gliding, the traditionally minded reacted by founding their own association (Associazione Volovelistica Sirto). Its main purposes were to promote cultural events and lectures on gliding, and create the opportunity to practice independent gliding in private sailplanes in Piti without the two clubs which are already based there. When it appeared possible that the Aeroclub di Sirto would go bankrupt, and at

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[68] As a matter of fact, the most open minded in the tradition-oriented group was Gabriele, the monk.

the same time the project for the new airstrip was becoming reality, the "change-oriented" group was also led to form an association (Associazione Volo a Vela Sirto Club) that would have allowed it to buy and operate sailplanes.

Things were precipitated when the Italian parliament passed a new law to regulate the Aeroclub d'Italia, to which all the local clubs are accountable, and by the risk of bankruptcy of the Aeroclub di Sirto at the end of 2004, due to poor management in the previous years. The new bill passed in parliament, among other things, allowed the presence in the same area (*comune*) of more than one aero club.

To face its economic difficulties, the board of the Aeroclub di Sirto adopted an emergency policy. This was the selling off some of the aeroplanes and gliders and the one-off measure of increasing the enrolment fee from 450 euro to 1600 euro (1400 for the members who had already paid a 1000 euro instalment six months before).

The traditionally minded were very worried. One morning (9.8.2004) at the airfield I found Matteo, Flavio and Paolo weeping for the death of the club. Flavio was reminding the others that it wouldn't be the first time in Italy that a gliding club hadn't recovered from bankruptcy: in the past years clubs in Forlì and Varese had been forced to close down for this very reason. Everybody complained that the chairman of the club had not disclosed a detailed plan for financial recovery. He had simply asked us a one-off payment to salvage the present situation and had not suggested a structural strategy.

In order to put the gliders and tug on sale, the chairman of the board had all the planes evaluated, although only some were said to be on sale. In the case of the gliding section it was decided to get rid of one of the two remaining tug planes[69], the motor glider (whose engine's allotted running time had expired long ago leading to its forced grounding) [70], the oldest single-seat glider[71], and one of the two-seaters[72]. This offered the opportunity to those who wanted to leave to buy a small fleet on a budget; to this they could add the various cutting edge gliders that some of the members already owned. The 'second' association made one offer for all the gliders and the tug plane, the most expensive piece. Lino,

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[69] Both Robin 400 built in the early Eighties; it was valued 48,000 euro.
[70] A Super Dimona ten years old; valued 15,000 euro.
[71] A Libelle of the early 1970s valued 8000 euro.
[72] A Twin Astir with retractable gear built in 1978; valued 15,000 euro.

one of the leading members of this association, hinted to me that the group which was going to open the new airstrip was planning to acquire some of the gliders belonging to Bilonia. He displayed the kind of enthusiasm of the conspirator who sees his ambitions fulfilled (6.2.2004).

Unfortunately, a few days before the deal was to be sealed with a proper contract, the tug was written off in a serious accident. This left the Aeroclub di Sirto without much needed money. Flavio and his cronies of the Associazione Volovelistica Sirto went to its rescue, offering to buy all the rest of the fleet (the part of it that wasn't officially on sale) in order to give the club the money it needed to redress its budget, offering all the while to leave the gliders to be used for free. During the meeting (11.19.2004) in which the chairman announced that Flavio and his friends had bought the three gliders, people protested about the crookedness of the deal.

6.5   After the split

The first time I called on the new community once it had been established in its new airfield of Cappo was a Saturday (4.4.2005). After a flight together in Bilonia, Tristano proposed to go there in order to meet old friends. They were old members of our group who we now had less opportunity to meet regularly. In the parking lot there was a fleet of beautiful cars; on the ground and in the air there were a great quantity of aeroplanes coming and going, expensive microlights of the last generation. A helicopter made a low passage over the airstrip. When we arrived a Stemme 10, one really posh motor glider, was taking off. The atmosphere was full of idle small talk and various outsiders were coming to say hello to the owners of the airstrip and the regular pilots. Lino was happy to show off a place that he had contributed to create. It was the opposite of the small community composed only of glider pilots that I expected to find. I wondered why these people who were so socially minded wanted to isolate themselves out there. It was a place *à la mode* where wealthy people with spare time and nowhere else to go on a Saturday afternoon came together with swanky cars, aeroplanes and beautiful women. It was the world depicted in the pages of *Aviazione Sportiva* [Sport Aviation] a glossy niche magazine about modern

microlights and the milieu that surrounds them. To my traditionalist eyes, at least, the scene was unpleasant. It seemed to pollute the untainted moral beauty of sailplane flying. Bilonia remained the only place for the simple straight forward people, those who cherished above all the pleasure of soaring while disdaining its potentially glamorous accessories.

In Bilonia, a few Sundays before I had met Matteo – the person who best epitomises the old guard – after a long time. When I arrived quite early we were alone on the field and we went for a coffee. He was shocked at finding himself already 74 years old. He told me about his project to collect war memories of old pilots, former friends. But he was regretful because, he said, he had waited too long and in the meantime they were all dying around him. About the present state of the gliding section of the club he was full of sadness. He and Omero, another pilot who was later to leave for Piti, had founded it in 1968. They had only one sailplane then, an Italian built Canguro borrowed from the Air Force.

In all these years there has never been such a bad time (2.28.2005)

was his disconsolate comment to the fact that in 2005 only 17 people enrolled in the gliding section of the Aeroclub di Sirto. (Plus a more or less equivalent number of pilots who continue to glide there despite not being formally enrolled in the club) [73]. In 2004, the members had been 70.

It is very difficult for me to quantify exactly how many members had left Bilonia for the new gliding community. This is mainly due to two factors: first the troubles of the original club – and the resulting strong increase in its association fees – had led many pilots to loosen their ties with Bilonia anyway. The second reason is that the division took place just few months before the end of my long fieldwork, and that because of time constraints and personal reasons I also decided not to take up participant observation in that location (see paragraph *3.4*).

In the beginning the split of the club created a strange situation. For the better part of a cold January morning (1.15.2005) soon after it occurred, I (aged

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[73] That implied that they paid each single flight 40% more than the regular member. Considering that that year enrolment fees were exceptionally high, this solution appealed to all those who didn't fly very often and who didn't feel compelled to enrol anyhow on moral grounds in order to support the ailing club.

almost fifty) was the youngest person at the airport. Then two forty year-olds showed up. All the pilots were of average experience: there weren't any young people without experience since the flying school had been closed for almost a year, and the most skilled had departed to form the new informal club at their new airstrip. Most of them had made a point of not returning to Bilonia. It was a sort of revenge, getting even after what they had perceived as years of oppression, lack of freedom to behave according to their feelings. Their status was that of proficient glider pilots who never wanted their wings to be clipped again; they were free, independent men. Like the 'corner boys' studied by Whyte in 1943 (see paragraph *2.3.2*) when compared to their age counterparts of middle-class extraction, the two groups had different standards of behaviour and didn't understand each other.

In November 2005, a new group of students began to take gliding lessons, lowering the average age of the pilots of Bilonia and increasing its number of members. The following year (2006) the Aeroclub di Sirto consolidated a deal with a technical high school in Sirto whereby most of its students began to attend a gliding course in Bilonia. For a few months, this significantly brought down the average age of the pilots at the airfield.

6.6   Final remarks

In the first paragraph I introduced the body of theory concerned with the dynamic processes sport subcultures go through during the years. These studies underlie how subcultures – in their localisation within a specific idioculture – are not static entities, but are subjected to changes determined by the influx of new members, sometimes belonging to a different age group, by shifting priorities of the oldest members, by the progressive transformation of newcomers into full fledged participants whose values may be at odds with those of the old guard. In the course of the chapter the transformations Bilonia went through during the five years of my fieldwork are presented in detail. I identify the polarisation of the members of the club in two contrasting groups, one defined as the 'traditionally minded', the other of the 'change-oriented'. This latter was born after the arrival of new members who found it difficult to integrate completely

with the values fostered by the idioculture, values that better suited the needs of the first group. This polarisation led to a division of the club, with a majority of its members leaving it after having created a new association and a private airstrip.

My findings confirm those of the literature, except for the question of generational change. In the case of Bilonia the new members of both new groups belonged to the same age group (middle-age) of the established members[74]. The change in values wasn't determined by a generational change.

The prevalence of middle-aged persons both among the old and new members, the fact that an age gap, when there was one (as had happened in the 1990's and again in 2006-2007, when I was writing this thesis), wasn't conducive to a new way of thinking about the gliding activity, will be expounded in Chapter 7 as one of the main characteristics of the Italian subculture of gliding.

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[74] However, to the old guard belonged also aged people.

Chapter 7

A Middle-Aged Subculture

7.1   Introduction

The demographic reality of an ageing population is leading sports scientists to pay increasing attention to physical activity among the middle-aged and the elderly. They have, thus, found the relevance of a sports identity in an ageing population, which like younger groups, can find meaning in life by involvement in a sport in such a way that their identity becomes primarily sustained by their sporting role. They have noticed how in middle-age "[…] some roles may be strengthened to compensate for disengagement from other roles: for example, upon retirement from work one might invest more time and energy in leisure pursuits" (Snyder and Spreitzer 1989, pp. 116-117).

The gliding subculture can be seen as belonging to a new cultural way of viewing middle-age. In our society middle-age has undergone a process of social reconstruction, in an attempt to establish distance between the 'middle years' (currently ranging from mid-30s through to the late 60s) and extreme old-age and death. "The distance is hopefully achieved through the redefinition of 'middle-age' as 'mid-life' which is increasingly portrayed from the 1920s onwards as an extendible phase of vigorous and self-fulfilling life" (Bond, Coleman and Peace 1993, p. 326). Middle-age thus becomes a time of opportunity and self-development. This is even more so now that the large post-war 'baby-boom' group is dominating this age bracket, taking with itself different values and priorities and incomes and resources seldom available to previous generations. The baby-boomers are shifting the balance of power towards the elderly. At a time in which they have attained middle-age, this now no longer seems to represent the beginning of decline, but the lived experience of an extended youthfulness, which implies that participation in leisure activities and sport can continue, and even increase, also in these years (Tomlinson et al. 2005; Wheaton 2007a).

In this chapter, I first acknowledge the new conceptual reality of a middle-aged subculture; then I show how it is at work in the gliding community of Bilonia. The following sections are devoted to the analysis of some characteristics of the subculture of gliding that particularly affect their members' behaviours, beliefs, and values.

7.2   A new dimension in subcultural studies

Middle-age has been defined as "[…] the time when we first become conscious of the visible signs of the ageing process and the ravages which time has worked" (Hepworth and Featherstone 1982, p. 1). However, the process of growing old and its analysis is complicated by the fact that ageing is of two different kinds: biological and social. In the literature on ageing, anthropological studies relate the issue in comparative perspective, with reference to the various cultures, highlighting how participant observation, comparative research and cross-cultural examination show that the way ageing is perceived is culturally constructed. Ageing is a condition mediated by systems of perception. "Each society has age norms defining a 'social clock' which regulates acceptable age-linked behaviour" (Spencer 1990, p. 131).

In the last two decades, in dealing with western modernity, the social sciences have displayed an increasing interest in the study of middle-age and ageing resulting in the publication of a wide range of academic books and journals. Among the various issues they point out are the changes taking place in the structure of social networks and family forms of these age groups. In particular, changes are occurring in family structure, which often determine that people in these groups (and especially the elderly) live alone and that they may be "[…] not only lonely but 'shaken' by the extent of their loneliness" (Bond, Coleman and Peace 1993, p. 8). "The emergence of the 'empty nest syndrome', when grown-up children have left home and the time and purchasing power of the middle-aged couple increases, can also be seen as having opened up a new market ripe for commercial exploitation" (Hepworth and Featherstone 1982, p. 15). "These are also the years in which the problem of what to do with the additional free time begins to emerge" (ibidem, p. 16). It is the time of the 'mid-

life crisis', an expression that refers to changes individuals in affluent Western societies experience in this phase of their life, which often manifests itself as disenchantment with life and depression for not having achieved any goals. "The term 'mid-life crisis' was coined by Elliot Jaques in 1965 in his influential article *Death and the Mid-Life Crisis*" (ibidem, p. 42). This crisis applies mainly to middle class people who live in developed countries. In their paper *Sociological Perspectives on the Life Cycle* Bernice Neugarten and Nancy Datan (1973, in Hepworth and Featherstone 1982) pointed out how working class people had no illusions about middle-age. For them, after the responsibilities of early adulthood, it represented an inescapable and accepted period of decline. People belonging to the middle classes in this phase of their lives can aspire to new identities; for them it represents a period of reassessment that can lead to new forms of self-actualisation.

The loneliness that people with grown-up children experience especially – but not only – after retirement suggests the importance of social contacts besides those of the family, often at this point in life transformed in what has been defined as an 'intimacy at a distance'. "Contacts with other than family members are likely to be relatively more important nowadays – especially contacts between peer groups, people of the same age and position in life who also often share similar interests" (Bond, Coleman and Peace 1993, p. 9). In an early subcultural perspective on ageing, Arnold M. Rose in 1965[75] "postulates that subcultures tend to form when members of any group in society, such as elderly people, interact with each other significantly more than they do with other people in society. The development of a subculture would be encouraged by elderly people having a positive affinity for each other and their exclusion from interactions to any great extent with other groups in society" (Bond, Coleman and Peace 1993, p. 37).

When scholars first began to delve into the phenomenon, subcultures were thought mainly to regard juveniles. The notion of subculture was a convenient way to describe the more unconventional aspects of youth culture. Subcultures exhibited a structure different enough from their parent culture and

[75] Rose, A.M. (1965), "The subculture of aging: a framework for research in social gerontology", in Rose, A.M., Peterson, W.A. (eds.), *Older People and Their Social World*, Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co., pp. 3-16.

they took shape around distinctive activities and concerns of the group (Clarke et al. 2005). In the studies of the Chicago School of Sociology they were mainly deviant; later the analysis developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies saw them as forms of resistance and stylistic expression. But the persons that composed them were invariably young people and their age accounted for many of their behaviours and choices. In this chapter I show how, despite the fact that up until recently the prevailing trend among studies has been to ignore the existence of elderly subcultures, they do exist and not in the field of sport alone. These subcultures share many but not all of the characteristics with the juvenile ones. They too imply the adoption of a different set of values and priorities, and an inner organisation based on hierarchies apart from those of the broader culture. But their contribution to the identity of the members is shallower, and they do not imply strong stylistic choices, although the adoption of a particular lifestyle may be the result of an involvement that dates back to an earlier time in life.

7.2.2   *A different age bracket*

A book by Samantha Holland on alternative femininities faced with ageing takes an in-depth look at adult women who continue to be 'alternative' and to behave according to the stylistic choices of a youth subculture. Holland remarks how general definitions of subcultures remain too youth-oriented and how feminist criticism has argued that the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' classical subcultural analysis tended to ignore the role played by the female members. These studies were equally flawed in being based on "the unchallenged assumption that subcultures involved only teenagers" (Holland 2004, p. 23). Instead, subcultures are generally formed by a kaleidoscope of several age groups, so that the gap in theory with older subcultural participation seems no longer justified. This also holds true for sporting subcultures, where participants belong to different generations. "The Sea Vets windsurfing movement in the United Kingdom, which includes male and female windsurfers into their 70s, or the increasing visibility of so-called silver surfers, are apposite examples" (Wheaton 2007a, p. 290).

Andy Bennett (2006) redressed the lack of attention paid to older fans of popular music, by studying the significance of punk rock for older fans. He found how the visual-shock tactics of the subculture's young members give way in older members to a more reflexive understanding of punk as an identity that must be negotiated in the context of everyday life. That for older members of a subculture experiences and the way of assessing them change over the years has also been remarked by P. Jackson (2004) in a study about clubbing. Membership in the subculture represents "[…] a set of beliefs and practices that have become so ingrained in the individual that they do not need to be dramatically reconfirmed through the more strikingly visual displays of commitment engaged in by younger punks." (Bennett 2006, p. 226). This is a remark that can easily be applied to the sport subcultures (see, for example, Wheaton 2004). My fieldwork in the gliding world confirms how for the glider pilot this also holds true. Here, mature pilots take for granted their skill whereas the younger pilots always feel the need to prove to themselves and to others their competence as a pilot, since their identity is not yet that of a full fledged pilot. This is not the only parallel between the world of gliding and other elder subcultural worlds. In his paper, Bennett highlights another difference between older music fans and their younger counterparts. Due to family and work commitments, an active involvement in a local scene is no longer possible, and their opportunities to meet with other members of the community are often confined to annual festivals or get-togethers. Glider pilots as well, are prevented by their own commitments as mature adults from spending much time with fellow members of the subculture, apart from the weekends. The only opportunity of doing so is represented by the week-long intensive gliding courses held in Piti which are the only time during the year when they can live together. Numerous glider pilots take advantage of this opportunity. Every year a group of core members books all the available places of one of these courses (usually in the last week of June) in order for as many members of the club as possible to attend and enjoy it together.

Among the few recent studies in which the social reality of a sport subculture is linked with adult members is a paper by Richard Giulianotti (2005) on Scottish football supporters. Based on Simmel's theories (Simmel 1997), it explores the Tartan Army subculture, that numerous group of supporters that

follows the Scottish national team whenever it goes abroad for a match. The issue of age is not directly addressed, but it is clear that the author is describing support spanning two generations.

The issue has thoroughly been dealt with in a paper by Eldon E. Snyder, entitled *The Social World of Shuffleboard* (1986), which is an early study on an elderly subculture composed mostly of retired old people. Based on data collected over a period of several years, the study examines most aspects of the shuffleboard subculture (i.e., normative patterns, values, argot). Shuffleboard (more exactly *deck shuffleboard*) is a game where players (two or four) push weighted discs by means of a cue down an elongated court with the purpose of positioning them within a marked scoring diagram. The object of the game is to score, to prevent opponents from scoring, or both. Due to the low physical effort it requires, it is very popular among the elderly in retirement homes. Although to outsiders this sounds hardly possible, shuffling is said to have a meaningful and even central part in the daily lives of its practitioners, at least for those who are more involved, since the intensity of involvement varies widely.

The participation in the social world of shuffleboard follows a general pattern: it begins at retirement, when a couple moves to a retirement village where shuffleboard courts are available and both husband and wife start playing it. Members follow a precise path in the shuffleboard social world, mainly defined by the distinction between social players (sometimes called 'fun players') and serious players (i.e. those who play in tournaments). As in the case of core members of other sport subcultures, the social lives of serious players are primarily with other players, and much of their conversation is related to shuffleboard. As one player noted: "Our best friends are shufflers, we are closer to them than our own relatives" (Snyder 1986, p. 244). Shuffleboard tends to replace the satisfactions people received from their occupations prior to retirement. It often becomes an 'engulfing' interest that provides personal fulfilment and identity. Being worlds apart from gliding – since it doesn't imply challenging oneself in a very dangerous pursuit – shuffleboard nevertheless seems to answer the same needs and to acquire the same role that gliding has for most of its senior members. This somehow goes against the understood tenets of most theory about sport subculture: that adventure, strong emotions, risk or the

desire to defy an established order – i.e. skaters, snowboarders, lifestyle sports practitioners – are the main bonding forces.

Personal fulfilment is also highlighted in another contribution to the body of literature on elderly participation in sport subcultures. Linda Heuser's ethnography of women lawn bowlers (2005) describes the various stages of involvement in the activity – which is however never acknowledged within the notion of subculture (for a discussion of this issue, see section *2.3.5*) – as a kind of 'career' in five stages: introduction into the sport; getting hooked on bowls; becoming social players; then serious players engaged in various levels of competitions, and, finally, temporarily retired players. Within this career, women's involvement alternates in intensity "[…] based on the situational contingencies that made greater levels of commitment more or less possible" (Heuser 2005, p. 49).

Another age bracket is also represented by the subculture of 'ocean cruisers', people who adopt a lifestyle based on living on sail yachts for extended periods of time cruising long distances from their port of departure. "At any one time, there are between 500 and 2000 people in the world who can be classed as long-term cruising sailors. Coming from all walks of life and from many different countries they range in age from babies to retirees in their seventies. Not surprisingly, they come predominantly from the western, affluent countries and tend to have a high level of education" (Macbeth 2000, p. 25).

The two Australian authors who studied this group of people (Macbeth 1992; 2000; Jennings 1999) found that gender, age, family lifecycle and income enabled them to afford and enter the subculture. The average age of the cruisers examined by Macbeth (1985, in Jennings 1999) was 43 years; most just left a successful career that gave them the economic possibility to move into this different kind of life. The data by Jennings confirm the socio-economic background and reveal an even older age bracket. She studied 42 women and 54 men: the women ranged between 33 and 62 years (mode in the 45-54 age group); the men between 20 and 77 (but with the mode in the 55-64 group).

Both authors define cruisers as a subculture. "As a subculture, cruisers have their own mores, language, values and avenues for access" (Jennings 1999, p. 64). However, both authors down play the implications of subcultural commitment, the term being more a useful definition rather than a useful

analytical instrument. "Sometimes a communal lifestyle of a short-term nature eventuates when cruisers are in port or at mooring and fortune brings kindred souls together. However, in the main cruisers do not demonstrate communal lifestyle living patterns" (ibidem). Cruiser adopt this way of living for the satisfaction and self actualisation they derive from it. Seeking adventure, they experience strong feelings of agency that come from taking charge of their lives, and being in control of their own destinies.

7.3   Middle-age and gliding

At the annual meeting of the members of the club, held inside the hangar at the airport, a view of the audience reveals only grey and white heads, just a few young people and only one woman (3.7.2005). The previous year at the same meeting I had counted only two young people and two women out of the 50/60 people attending the event (11.19.2004). The members of the gliding section of Bilonia cannot avoid noticing this fact, which for some is unsettling. For example, Urbano, before a flight we are going to share in a two-seater sailplane, complains to me about what he defines as "the geriatric age of the members of Bilonia". He remarks how our tug pilot, Ettore, is 81 and according to him "no longer able to tug gliders"; Urbano himself is 69, "an age at which once people died", he remarks (9.15.2005). I have already mentioned the woman pilot in charge of managing the tug pilots and how she jokingly refers to her pilots as "My geriatric ward!" She herself is in her early seventies.[76]

This prevalence of middle-aged or elderly people has been variable over time. In some periods – i.e. those during which the gliding school was either closed or flagging, and immediately after the club split in two – it has been more marked. In others, thanks to the influx of new pupils – whose age is usually lower than that of the average pilot – the phenomenon was less noticeable[77].

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[76] In 2005 she left the gliding community giving up flying. Her decision – as core member and very experienced pilot – is almost unique. The different attitude of female glider pilots in this regard might deserve research in its own right.

[77] Due to fluctuations in the number of members at the time of my fieldwork (see Chapters 5 and 6) which I didn't record in detail, I am not in a position to calculate a precise average. Student pilots and newly licensed pilots apart, all the members were over 35 years old. The number of retired people (age ranging from 57 to over 80) has always been conspicuous.

Middle-aged and elderly members of the subculture may either be pilots who started gliding in their youth and have remained involved ever since, or people who started gliding later in life. The first are usually more competent – although this is only a rule of thumb, since some of the late entrants can become very expert too. Both groups follow a similar pattern of social involvement, so that generally when family and work commitments loosen with age (i.e. when children, if any, become independent, or after retirement) their presence at the airport becomes more regular, the likelihood of their belonging to the core members higher. They may volunteer for some club chores – like driving the van to go fetch the gasoline for the tug plane, representing the gliding section at the club board meetings, taking care of some maintenance tasks, being available to accompany less experienced pilots in the back seat – becoming involved not only in flying but in all those activities apart from flying itself. They are the only members who go to the airport (around an hour's drive from town) also those days they don't want or don't expect to fly – only in order to spend some hours with the other members.

For some people, involvement in gliding can fill a void in their lives: lack of commitments after retirement, widowhood or separation from a partner, loneliness, lack of friends, lack of children. Gliding seems the cure for every ill. In the eyes of the subculture, a drab life can be redeemed by a satisfactory flight. I once eavesdropped on a conversation between two pilots who were also colleagues at work. We were pushing the sailplanes in the hangar at the end of the day. One of the two had arrived at the airport late, after work, when the first one had already taken off. They were commenting on their flights, one a long cross-country flight, the other a short hop: take off, a few thermals around the airport and a landing. But both appeared happy about their flights and totally fulfilled. The first one asked about the other's day at work. The answer was: "Don't mention it! It was horrible as usual!"

Most of the core members of Bilonia gliding club belong to an age bracket that spans from forty to sixty-five (and, in some cases, over). They all belong to the middle class although they come from different walks of life. Silvio and Maurizio are successful contractors. Cristiano, Luca, Filippo and

Paolo are small businessmen. Tommaso and Ivano are dentists, a professional category always well represented in flying clubs. Achille, Lino, Erri and Aldo are senior employees in the State and in banks. Gianni is a retired surgeon. Alberto, Tristano, Saverio are university lecturers and researchers. Paola is a teacher. Fausto, Livio, Erri, Flavio, Primo, Dario, Silvano are white-collar workers. Lillo is a blue-collar worker in a printing company. Marco runs a body repair shop. Guido is a plumber. Matteo, Ettore, Nando, Simone, Maria, Flavio, Ivo are all retired clerks and technicians. Vittorio, Cesare, Mauro, Urbano are airline pilots – the first two active, the other two retired. Norberto and Valentino have no steady jobs; the former lives renting out the premises of a village bar and a small flat, the latter – after various experiences in the real estate business – has recently been running a small residence. Vasco earns his living with short term contracts and his flying activity reflects the irregularity of his income. Gabriele is a Catholic monk.

For some of these members, subcultural life blends strongly with their private lives. Gianni, widowed and retired, some years ago married the secretary of the Aeroclub of Piti. Alberto and Paola (for some years one of the club's few female members) met during their gliding course and soon formed a couple. By contrast, Guido, totally caught up in his passion for gliding, failed to fulfil his family commitments and in the end was left by his wife. Tommaso and Erri both started their gliding with their partners, although the latter's commitment to gliding had always been quite superficial. Nando first involved his son and later his partner in gliding.

Valentino, one of the most competent pilots, has always had plenty of time for flying. When his wife died, with his only child already independent, he began coming to the airfield more frequently. For years he has been the expert pilot who is most available to guide less experienced pilots from the back seat in their first cross-country flights. After a couple of years he began a relationship with a new partner and this life event brought about a dramatic drop in the time he devoted to gliding.

Some pilots do their very best to combine flying with family. Erri flies at long intervals. In a half serious tone, he explains how his wife and he have agreed on a system of 'bonuses' whereby he must first earn from the family his right to go to the airport. But – if his business commitments allow – every year

he is entitled by the family to a week off to attend the intensive gliding courses in Piti. Primo is the sole breadwinner of a one income family with three children. Although he is very committed, he has always flown only once a month totalling every year only the minimum amount of time required to maintain the licence. When in 2005 there was a sharp increase in the association fees he quit, giving priority to his family.

7.3.2   The issue of language

As in other adult subcultures described in the literature, the gliding subculture is not oppositional in its relationship to the hegemonic culture, nor does it tend to develop into a peculiar lifestyle. Mature people are integrated in society and tend not to develop visible ways of drawing attention to their separate position, such as bodily style and dress. The issue of language is different, but for other reasons. Thus, the jargon of the subculture exists and is a functional product of its existence, since it blends with insider lore. There are nuances in describing clouds, winds, thermals, mountains and technical aspects of gliding and sailplanes. These are all aspects extremely relevant to the activity for which a specialised language seems inescapable. About clouds, pilots are able to describe in detail their shapes, colours, life cycle (if the cloud is a new one, or if it is old and about to disappear), and their strength – the expected lift they can generate, which is often related to shape and colour. About winds what is important is their direction, but also their origin, their rotation with height, and their intensity. About thermals the jargon of the subculture goes in great detail to account for their origin (which particular place 'triggers' the thermal), consistence and uniformity (if it is 'broken' or provides a regular strength), the value of its strength, which is measured in meters per second, life span, cycle. About mountains the jargon highlights their shape and the way ridges 'work' – that is to say, if they provide adequate up currents – possibly creating a 'Venturi effect'[78]. Besides, the various phases of each single flight can be explained in

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[78] The effect is named after an 18th century Italian physicist. It is based on the Bernoulli's principle explaining the behavior of fluid flow through a pipe with a constriction in it. The fluid increases its speed through the constriction while its pressure decreases determining a gain in

such details that elude the layman listener: the glide between thermals, the kind of energies exploited in each phase of the flight in order to gain altitude, the type of soaring day, its reliability or its inconsistency. Pilots' lore enables them to make a nuanced description of everything that surrounds their activity in a language that sounds totally alien to the layman, and that the pilots themselves learn to master properly only after several years of involvement in the subculture. However, even though this technical jargon does contribute to subcultural difference, it does not indicate oppositionality to the mainstream culture.

7.4   Subcultural commitment

Georg Simmel identifies with great clarity the relevance which activities that arouse strong emotions can have in the lives of their members. About adventure he remarks: "Certainly, it is only one segment of existence among others, but it belongs to those forms which, beyond the mere share they have in life and beyond all the accidental nature of their individual contents, have the mysterious power to make us feel for a moment the whole sum of life as their fulfilment and their vehicle, existing only for their realisation" (1911, p. 9). In sports such as gliding, which, because of the abundance of emotions involved and because of the separateness from the rest of the life of the pilot can be classified as 'adventure', this overturning of priorities is often clearly perceptible. The subculture becomes a fundamental reference world for the individual who can sacrifice most of her/his life to the trivial pursuit in which it is rooted.

The individual who belongs to the gliding subculture spends some of her/his time (usually one day a week) with the fellow members of the subculture, caught up in relationships that differ from those of her/his usual life. Inside this new world s/he has to negotiate her/his subcultural identity. Her/his accomplishments, as well as her/his misdeeds, are known by the other members and contribute to increasing or to losing her/his status (Wheaton 2000). Some

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kinetic energy. A mountain ridge can present a shape that causes this effect which increases the speed of the up-drafts exploited by gliders in order to gain height.

members spend in the subculture all their spare time and even some of the time they should be devoting to their family and job. In the small community of Bilonia, there are at least six persons who fall into this category: Silvio, Guido, Simone, Tommaso, Maurizio, Valentino and Tristano.

Through these relationships the member of the subculture develops her/his image as a practitioner, since the opinion of the others is needed to gauge one's own position and progress. Besides the already mentioned impression-management techniques (see paragraph *5.2*), "Actual performance […] is the first and most obvious means of achieving reputation" (Mitchell 1983, p. 83). As in the subculture of hang-gliding, "the criteria that one is judged by are not only visible, but well defined [...] Thus, as a hang-glider progresses within the sport he is able to judge others' perceptions of him, as he perceived others at that particular point" (Brannigan and McDougall 1983). Moreover, some subcultures, such as gliding, have at their disposal rating systems that in some instances afford objective comparisons. For those pilots who practice competitions – but in Bilonia they were only two, Silvio and Gianni, and both were actively involved in the founding of the new association of Cappo that brought about the division of the club – there are final results; for the rest there are other established means of rating and comparing performances. These are the badges that, at the international level, are awarded to the pilots for standard recognised accomplishments[79], the On Line Contest (OLC)[80], the flight data stored into specially devised loggers (Colibrì, Cambridge, etc.) or simple GPS tracks that can be uploaded into programs (the best known is called See You[81]) designed to

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[79] The Silver badge is awarded to the pilot who has accomplished a cross-country flight of 50 km and a height gain of 1000 meters; the Gold badge is awarded for a cross-country flight of 300 km and a height gain of 3000 meters; the three Diamond badges are for a flight of 500 km, a height gain of 5000 meters and a flight of 750 Km.

[80] The On Line Contest (OLC) is an internet site where pilots upload their flights. Its goal is a timely scoring of cross-country flights, and to allow an easy and up-to-date comparison of decentralised cross-country flights. The increase of the number of cross-country flights is another goal of the OLC. Documentation of the flights is achieved with GPS based flight recording in IGC format.

[81] SeeYou is software for the desktop and laptop personal computer. Its functions before the flight allow the pilot to plan tasks, manage waypoint lists and upload all this to the pocket personal computer device on the sailplane dashboard. After the flight, it allows the downloading of flights from GPS devices, see the flights on maps, explore their details and relive it in 3D view.

analyse the flight, watch it in motion on the personal computer screen and compare more flights.

According to most authors, commitment to the activity is the essential element in establishing subcultural status, identity, and authenticity (Abt and Smith 1983; Brannigan and McDougall 1983; Butts 2001; Donnelly 1981; 1985; Donnelly and Young 1988; Farmer 1992; Guy 1995; Hodkinson 2002; Roussel and Griffet 2000; Sassatelli 2000; Theberge 1995; Wheaton 2000). Membership in every subculture is shifting. There is a nucleus composed of the 'old members' who form its backbone and a majority of other people who are less involved and are more likely to quit the activity altogether sooner or later (Waquant 1992). The core members of the subculture are those people who spend more time than the other members practising their chosen activity, who are more proficient in performing it, who are not put off by the most difficult situations (e.g. rough weather in the case of gliding). In some cases – such as at the beginning of their career or during the courses held in Piti – the pilots of the gliding subculture seem to be bound by a kind of comradeship at whose core lies the need to be able to share increasingly virile emotions with the group, approaching the state of the fighter pilots during a war (Bourke 1999).

As we have seen in the previous paragraph, the lives of middle-aged core members are so intertwined with the subcultural activity that, when flying is not possible, they choose to spend their time in related activities shunned by less involved members. For example, one day when the tug plane was out of order and gliding was consequently impossible, some members of Bilonia (Tristano, Norberto, Erri) went for a trip to a village more than 100 km away (Pescasseroli) looking for fields suitable for out-landing. They spent most of the day driving. They sent me and other members of our club an SMS to encourage us to join them in this collective celebration of the group (2.7.2005). On many occasions, when flying has been disrupted in Bilonia, some pilots meet in Piti to spend a day chatting with their fellow members about gliding and often complaining about what is wrong with the club.

On one occasion, in August 2004, when I returned home from my summer holidays, I rang Tristano on his mobile. He was dining in a restaurant in Piti in the company of other pilots. He was so taken by his conversations about flying that he failed to ask me about my vacations or anything else. Instead he

told me that the previous day he and another pilot had flown to Pescasseroli from Bilonia, enthusiastically adding all of the details. Being similarly attached to the subcultural nexus, but at the same time a member with other interests and priorities besides flying, I experienced real feelings of inadequacy (30.8.2004).

Another time some pilots had reproached me for not having enrolled in the intensive cross-country course in Piti along with the majority of older pilots belonging to the club in Bilonia. My stepping back was seen as a small act of treason (6.6.2004).

Thanks to their commitment, some people gain their high rank, a kind of symbolic recognition, on the field and enjoy a higher status among their peers. By the same token, those individuals whose level of commitment are low or happen to be newcomers aren't completely recognised as belonging to the subculture by the core members (Donnelly and Young 1988; Donnelly 2006; Klein 1986; Wheaton 2000). When I started visiting the airport of Bilonia in order to attend the gliding course and obtain my licence, I noticed at once how the older members didn't acknowledge my presence. They often didn't even say 'hi' to me when we met. Or those who did never remembered my name. They were difficult to engage in conversation and if cornered tried to get away as soon as possible. At the time I remarked on this kind of ostracism and I thought it to be freak behaviour. I can recall how happy I was the first times that I noticed signs of acceptance. Remembering these initial difficulties, and how painful they had been for me, once I became an old member I made a mental note to behave properly to the new members. But this proved to be not so easy. Whenever hanging around in Bilonia, talking or attending to the various menial chores of the club together with my peers, I might say hi to some newcomer, but just out of politeness, not because of a real interest in meeting a new member of the club; a person whose conversation about gliding (the main topic of conversation at the airport) was obviously full of platitudes and naivety. Every time my attention was drawn to a new member (because after all he was not so new, having been involved in gliding for, say, more than one year, or because we happened to share some activity) I was surprised to notice a strong imbalance between what we knew of each other. I often couldn't remember his[82] name, whereas s/he not

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[82] Not 'her': since women are so few they have the advantage of being taken in earlier than men.

only knew mine, but also knew a surprising amount about my flying activity or even my private life.

In their effort to merge with the core members, new entrants and peripheral members of the subculture are given away by their insufficient lore of technical matters. Once I was helped to take off by a group of new pupils at their first lessons. When I landed two hours later they asked me about my flight. They were astonished to hear that I had reached an altitude of 1800 meters. Two of them asked me a lot of technical questions that showed their total ignorance. They lacked the jargon of the subculture, just as I had lacked it when I was beginning to fly. They couldn't recognise what made a successful flight – that the real issue is how far the pilot has been able to go and at what speed, not how long he stayed airborne or the height he reached. They couldn't grasp basic notions such as the understanding of the various sources of energy and of what is required to exploit them. They didn't understand that the velocity at which the glider travels and the amount of energy it can use are not related issues. At the same time, they were full of curiosity which showed that they were not totally ignorant about flying: the speeds of travel, the safety cones, the way the wind rotates at increasing altitudes. On the same occasion, two old members (Lino and Gino) took advantage of the situation to boast about their cross-country skills in front of this naïve audience, staging a theatrical performance (Goffman 1990) about their flights, their length, and their store of technical knowledge of the matter (4.30.2005).

Hardships encountered by the club can be the source of bitter rows, but they can also lead to a strong feeling of fellowship, reinforcing the bonds of the subculture. When at the beginning of 2005 I and another member were paying the association fee which that year had been increased fourfold in order to save the club from bankruptcy, a third member (Luca) who happened to be there teasingly remarked: "What would the club do without the two of you!".

Step by step commitment wins the recognition of all the elders of the subculture, reinforcing the individual's subcultural identity and providing strong gratification. Tristano was proud to tell me that Rocco (reputedly one of the best pilots in Piti) had told him that last summer he had followed most of his flights over the gliding radio frequency. This implied that the gliding champion thought Tristano's flights worth listening to, since they had developed over distances

long enough to allow him to consider them 'real' cross-country soaring; and they had meant overcoming difficult moments in which the pilot was very low over the ground in weak soaring conditions and had to make technically informed guesses on his way out.

The mutual recognition as fellow members of the same guild often takes place over the radio, when airborne. In Italy all sailplanes must be equipped with a radio set that, when flying, must always be tuned to the frequency allotted to gliding (123.375 Mhz) if the flight takes place in Piti and in the neighbouring areas (these form a bigger zone, named by the Italian civil aviation authority R23, in which powered aircraft are alerted of a greater then usual presence of gliders) or to the frequency assigned for any other particular zone. Over the frequency there is a constant exchange of information, usually about the technicalities of soaring. Sometimes, however, there are brief exchanges of a different nature: greetings between pilots who started their flights from different airports, pieces of news about other pilots, and a mutual acknowledgement of one another's presence. A sudden "Hi, I'm just below your right wing!" means both "Watch out! I'm very close", but also, when the voice reveals the identity of a particular pilot, "Hi, you're a glider pilot like me; in enjoying this moment together, we are both special". On the other hand, the radio can be a powerful means of exclusion. When a group of pilots, who are all in the air at the same time, are accomplishing cross-country flights of comparable length, they tend to ignore other pilots on the same frequency who are engaged in less challenging tasks. If one of the latter tries to get in – asking for information or advice – the others may be slow to answer her/his enquiry, often give incomplete information and tend to show a certain disregard. The less experienced pilots may feel very frustrated and let down by this, by the fact that they have to continue their flight on their own with no psychological support from the group. This feeling can at times lead some pilots to abandon an otherwise well-meaning attempt to improve their skills in soaring cross-country. If experienced pilots tend to be unresponsive when less experienced ones cut in on their radio communications, the latter, in trying to obtain practical and psychological support, are often too inquisitive, over-use the radio to draw attention to aspects of their flights that don't interest the others. The only situation in which the group of the experts may heed the appeal of the novice cross-country pilot is when her/his attempt is judged be

brave one, reflecting a strong desire to improve her/himself. In these cases the old hands can be supportive and encourage the less experienced in their endeavours. The radio can thus become the medium in which distinctions are created and confirmed (see paragraph *7.6*).

7.4.2   Moral implications

In more than one instance I noticed how the tug pilot may reward a particularly committed pilot by declaring to the secretary in the office a release height inferior to the real one, in this way saving the sailplane pilot some money. This is an award which is surreptitiously granted to a committed member of the group. It is also an amoral form of solidarity among fellow members, since the tug fees are expensive due to the high costs of fuel and maintenance of the tug plane, and allowing somebody to pay less implies spreading the costs to all the members of the club. In this type of subcultural behaviour it is possible to recognise some of the behaviours identified by the American scholar Edward C. Banfield (1958) in his social analysis based on fieldwork conducted in southern Italy after the Second World War. Banfield drew attention to an attitude peculiar to that area: the prominence given to family interests over public spirit, and treated it as a characteristic of the prevailing culture in those regions. Individuals try to maximise the immediate material advantages of their nuclear family, taking for granted that everybody else behaves the same way. This 'amoral familism' – as it was labelled – is not community oriented since the individual shuns co-operation with others if s/he cannot see an immediate personal advantage. As we have seen, a subculture, because of the bonds it creates, can sometimes be likened to a family. In this way, in the right environment (i.e. an Italian setting – although a country richer and more civilised than the one originally studied by Banfield) it can sometimes give rise to this type of phenomenon.

However, besides the specificity of the Italian case, it has been noticed (Bredemeier and Shields 1986, in Messner 1990) that subcultures produce a so called 'contextual morality', a way of thinking and perceiving matters that frees the participants from the usual responsibilities of moral choices. They abide by

the rules of the subculture and they sometimes may fail to notice how these rules clash with those of the society at large. "Living in conformity to the sport ethic is likely to set one apart as a 'real athlete', but it creates a clear-cut vulnerability to several kinds of deviant behaviour" (Hughes and Coakley 1991, p. 307). In some instances, members of a subculture may even fail to realise that their behaviour is dangerous, both physically and from a legal point of view. They have internalised the rules of the game and use those alone as a benchmark of the moral rightness of their actions (Hughes and Coakley 1991). Examples of these forms of misbehaviour are those instances in which the pilot, having smoked a cigarette in the glider (which is *per se* strictly forbidden) flicks the burning butt through the window. Or when he empties the bottle in which he urinated during a long winter flight in the air, trusting that speed and temperature will disperse the content (but not giving the matter a second thought).

In her essay *How Institutions Think* (1986) Mary Douglas remarks on one of the shortcomings of her object of analysis: institutions have the 'pathetic megalomania' of the personal computer whose whole vision of the world is its own programme. That also holds true for subcultural values. Like institutions, subcultures offer their members a limited repertoire of thought and behaviour. Once caught in their web, people's way of thinking, values, norms, identities must conform to their rules, rules that can often be perceived as megalomaniac and unable to account for the needs (be they of a practical or of a moral nature) of the outside world. In the accounts of the members, this becomes blurred and unimportant.

7.4.3   Concerns

The subculture cannot combine with the rest of the life of its middle-aged members – who are ingrained in old habits, work and family commitments (Bennet 2006) – and it is quick to leave behind those participants who no longer belong to it. One day while I was in the office of the club, a former member – whom I knew only by sight – rang Antonietta, the secretary of the club. He wanted to know who was at the airport since he would have liked to drop in to say hello to his old friends; being very ill (multiple sclerosis) he had given up

flying a few years ago. When half an hour later he arrived, walking on crutches, there were few people around and after the first greetings and a few questions asked and answered it seemed clear that there wasn't much else to be said. He was no longer willing to engage in detailed conversation about the subtleties of gliding, an activity that for him represented the past; on the other hand, there wasn't much in common apart from this shared interest. I felt sorry for him, since his disappointment and frustration were clearly perceptible (4.18.2004).

Although gliding is not a physically demanding sport, being potentially very dangerous, it does require a compulsory level of fitness. The license must be renewed on a regular basis, and as part of the renewal process glider pilots are required to pass a medical examination. Minor ailments (i.e., a broken arm) can lead to a forced temporary retirement, during which social ties with the other members can still be maintained (Heuser 2005); on the other hand, serious medical problems (i.e. heart diseases, sight problems, movement impairments) can lead to a definite abandon of the activity which implies cutting most social ties with the group.

Examples abound of this inability to include in the picture also that part of life which lies outside the subculture's main concerns. In August 2005, I phone Tristano after my summer holiday as I had done the previous year. He tells me that he has got a new girlfriend (he split from his wife two years ago and has been alone ever since); although this is an important piece of news, few details are given. He is not interested in my holidays either. Instead he describes his flights to me in great detail although, as he recognises, they were nothing special. He had the opportunity to fly twice with Rocco, the Piti local champion, "during the flight he is always concentrated; he speaks only about the flight" (8.22.2005).

In the eyes of its middle-aged members the values of the subculture are paramount and all concerns not related to them are considered a nuisance and become sometimes the object of loud complaints. For example, after the Christmas holidays 2004, an old member of the club (Silvio) spoke with a tone of smugness about a dinner party organised by his wife during which he had felt deeply bored. By his tone it was clear that he took it for granted that his audience could well understand his boredom. Along the same lines was Erri's remark about his wife's attachment to the new house they bought and had just moved

into, and her proposal to do without help and clean up the place on their own. He gave vent to his irritation generalising about 'wives who don't understand theirs husbands' needs'. He remarked about his need to fly: "Although once upon a time she was herself a glider pilot, we started together and she knows well the rewards that I get from gliding".

7.5   Equipment and identity

In those activities based on the use of a technical implement (i.e. surfboard, bike, motorbike, sailplane), the subcultural definition of identity inside the group is also mediated through technological fetishism. Some studies have pointed out that investment in the gear of the trade may provide a generally trustworthy measure of the moral commitment of the member to the activity (Waquant 1992). It has been noted how in cycling a state-of-the art bicycle confers status. "In short, there is a primacy given to the sufficiency of technology to racing success, when it is merely a necessary condition, as the emphasis is reproduced as fetish" (Williams 1989, p. 316). Equipment may also be used as a badge of distinction as among the rock climbing community (Donnelly 1985), in which well worn paraphernalia is meant to signify the past adventures of its owner. In some subcultures, however, equipment may be valued in a different way: excessive primacy given to it implies that the practitioner is not a full-fledged member of the community (Wheaton 2000).

In gliding, equipment equates first and foremost with the purchase of a glider, or of a share in a syndicate of a glider. For those middle-aged pilots already fully committed to the activity, and who already own their own glider, it involves the purchase of expensive new instrumentation to add to that already available on their dashboard. Buying a glider can prove a big step forward for the pilot, since it is an ostensible badge of belonging. It upholds the moral commitment with an economic one and can lead to big changes. In particular, the members of Bilonia are not allowed to keep privately owned sailplanes in the civilian hangar on the Air Force premises. This means locating the new glider either in Piti or in Cappo. This second option has been available only from the year 2005 and appears to be quite popular due to Cappo's closeness to Sirto, and

to the social composition of the association, where most pilots who had previously belonged to Bilonia transferred bringing along with them a strong subcultural bond. Another favourite option is to keep the sailplane in Cappo, moving it to Piti when needed, i.e. during the summer competition season or in order to attend the annual week of intensive practice. In its turn, this change in base implies experiencing a different cultural environment, a different way of appreciating and practising gliding. For the newly fledged pilot this is a big challenge. People with little experience, once they crossed this bridge were able to improve their cross-country flying performances in a way they never dreamt of before. With the new glider comes all the equipment needed to go cross-country: the trailer to fetch it in case of out-landing, a car fitted with the appropriate towing hook, a web of social relationships available (although sometimes with some difficulties) to form the retrieving team when one is needed.

Sometimes the pilot, in her/his desire to commit her/himself to the subculture, bites off more than s/he can chew. Quite frequent are those instances of people buying a share in a syndicate for a sailplane in which they almost never fly. Or in which they fly but with performances which are far less brilliant than those of their fellows, showing that their choice was more the result of a desire to belong than of a real need to acquire an instrument that matched their skills. In such instances the new glider becomes a fetishist recognition of the moral value of gliding, of a desire to better oneself without having the nerve to sustain this desire. I myself was offered a share that belonged to a person whose identity was kept secret (but was easy to guess due to the small number of people among whom he was hiding) in an affectionate attempt to shield him from criticism. This pilot had bought it two years before as a token of his good intentions. But he had never flown his sailplane and was now willing to get rid of it, since this property was becoming the physical proof of his failure. In another instance, a pilot bought a fifty per cent share in a sailplane together with a fellow member of Bilonia who was very determined in his attitude to flying and in his intention to take part in competitions. Often when I was in Piti I saw him looking after his glider. He almost pampered it, taking care of minute details. But I never saw him flying it; and numerous people I questioned about it confirmed my impression.

This pilot had transformed the glider into a fetish that embodied his desire to become proficient in soaring, to be accepted as a peer by highly valued others.

I have noticed a general tendency among the other pilots to 'protect' this kind of pilot. Almost everybody is aware of their shortcomings, but everybody understands their desire and appreciates their efforts and their commitment. If their nerve is faltering, their moral commitment to the subcultural values is sturdy and paves the way to their full acceptance.

7.6   Subcultural capital

In Bilonia there is a loose dress code; everybody can go dressed the way they do in their daily lives. Middle-aged and elderly pilots of different walks of life display in their attire their socio-economic standing and nobody seems to care. The few youngsters dress like most of their peers, without any noticeable difference in style. The almost mandatory single exception to this slackness in attitude towards dressing is the prohibition to wear flying suits. Flying suits are tolerated only on the gliding instructors. If a pilot wears one, he easily becomes the target of jokes and malicious comments. These tend to underline how her/his attire, showing a desire to be a 'top gun', is inappropriate since it is not matched by real skill and experience in soaring. In fact, within the subculture important elements in the identity formation and in the establishment of status hierarchies are almost invisible to the layman. The latter is more prone to regard as important marks of distinction signs of little or no value, like the way of dressing, or the way of speaking, using the jargon of the subculture (Mitchell 1983; Wheaton 2000). The layman fails to appreciate the relevance of less visible characteristics, such as 'insider knowledge', an alternative value system, the so-called 'subcultural capital' of each practitioner (Wheaton 2000).

The key concepts of Pierre Bourdieu's studies on the sociology of sport[83] are those of 'sport field' (Defrance 1995) and cultural capital (Thornton 1995). As every other field, sport is characterised by a specialised activity area hinged on a specific issue. All agents having a stake in this issue and, sharing the

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[83] But also his studies on the 'artistic field', especially *Distinction* (1984).

passion for its central object, belong to this field. The field is autonomous to the concerns of social and political life, and the hierarchies created inside it are equally separate. However, it can be shown that the field is not completely autonomous and is subject to intersections between different social variables, such as class and social position outside its borders (Jensen 2006). Bourdieu reminds us that "[…] the space of sports is not a self-contained universe. It is inserted into a universe of practices and of consumption that are themselves structured and constituted in a system" (Bourdeiu 1988, p. 155). Hierarchies external to the field, such as those related to social and economic power, have an impact in matters internal to it (Defrance 1995). This phenomenon can be seen in the economic resources that allow the acquisition of the best equipment, which in sports such as gliding can be really very expensive (see Appendix), or in pressure exercised upon the members calling into play values that don't belong to the subculture. A member, directly or indirectly, can ask for privileged treatment because of her/his social or economic standing outside the sport field. As has been observed, "A good deal of the dynamics of a field is induced through a struggle between internal and external hierarchical principles" (Defrance 1995, p. 127). During my fieldwork, there was once some friction between one of the instructors and myself. One day, the instructor arrived at the airport and announced at once that an 'Ingegnere' (*Engineer* – in Italian the title is a mark of social distinction) with little time at his disposal because of his important position was coming for a test flight they had agreed on. Besides being a big shot, this person was also a bulky man so that he needed the best-performing two-seater sailplane, which happens to be also the largest one, the only big enough to accommodate him. According to the rules of the club, founded on the principle of first come first serve, I was the next pilot on the list to fly on that glider. As shown by this episode, it sometimes can happen that some members expect to bypass the rules of the club on the basis of a status possessed outside the community (3.21.2005). On another occasion a sport physician of renown, regular host on various television talk shows, arrived late at the airport, landing there with his Cessna. This chap behaved as though he was entitled to skip the queue to use the club's glider. Ostensibly, he declared that he wanted to go first because he meant to take a friend up with him for an

introductory flight, but at issue there seemed to be a right acquired by his social standing.

Bourdieu's notions (1984) of cultural capital and taste have been adapted by Sarah Thornton (1995) to the study of subcultures, making it possible to explain the creation of internal hierarchies of participation, knowledge and taste (Wheaton 2000). This author notes how contemporary cultures are riddled by the dynamics of distinction, and that whereas those of mainstream culture have been extensively studied, those of popular culture have not, although they are important means by which people jockey for social power. Studying the youth cultures of the 1980s and 1990s that revolved around the dance clubs in Britain, she drew attention to the cultural logic of the distinctions upon which authenticity and hierarchies are set. She coined the term 'subcultural capital' and tried to cast light on the social logic of the subculture adopted by the youths she studied. She found that, also inside subcultures, cultural capital, (subcultural capital), can be either 'objectified' or 'embodied'. Objectified, in my case, in state-of-the-art instrumentation displayed in the cockpit of the sailplane or in the owning of a certain number of silver, gold or diamond 'badges' that testify to past accomplishments[84]. Embodied in the use (and not over-use) of the correct flying terminology, in uttering the right comments upon other people's flights, in behaving in accordance with a self-reliance that comes from the knowledge of one's past accomplishments. The notion of subcultural capital, however, has been criticised for not taking sufficiently into account "that […] people who take part in a subculture are situated not only in it but also in a wider social world. Hence grasping the relation between subcultural position and overall social position is necessary for an adequate analysis of subcultures" (Jensen 2006, p. 262).

Thornton also analysed the way the media contribute to establishing canons of distinction of the subculture. She found that "although negative reporting is disparaged, it is subject to anticipation, even aspiration" (Thornton 1995, p. 135). This applies aptly to gliding, since newspaper articles about gliding accidents are overtly disparaged by the pilots for the incompetence generally shown by the journalists who wrote them. At the same time, pilots

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[84] See note 79.

relish reading them and commenting upon them, since these reports contribute to the authentication of the gliding community as something different, special, set apart from the rest of society and for this reason of great value. Brannigan and McDougall have noticed the same process in the hang-gliding subculture, since "the hang-glider [pilot] discovers a new high-risk status attributed by those outside the subculture and perpetuated by the media" (1983, p. 41).

The dynamic of distinction contributes to creating the subcultural identity of the glider pilots and in establishing the appropriate hierarchies according to which they judge themselves. It shows up in many different instances of intercourse and it is highly valued. One day I arrived at the airport finding only the club's best performing single seat glider on the ground. Although I had previously decided that, given my insufficient training during the previous two months, I would fly in a two-seater I changed my mind at once. Getting out of my car I headed for the runway, where the glider stood, surrounded by a group of old pilots. I asked them to help me line up the glider and perform all the routine operations of taking off. Once in the air, I found an interesting situation of thermo-wave[85], and the flight lasted more than either I or the people on the ground had expected. In the evening one of the most experienced pilots (Simone) called me over the radio, jokingly nicknaming me "banzai Oscar Bravo[86]": in this sentence he publicly acknowledged my belonging to the core members of Bilonia, the ones most committed, who fly until the last light of the day allows it. I was really thrilled since I had rediscovered the joy of flying and belonging to the gliding community, which I had not experienced for a while (10.16.2004).

In section *7.4* I mentioned how a dynamic of distinction is at work in determining the flow of information exchange during the flight over the radio. Only pilots of a certain standing are allowed to take part or are heeded. Attempts to make contact by the less experienced are not encouraged. The way flights are commented upon when the day is over is another good example of how subcultural hierarchies work. Pilots get together to comment on their deeds according to their relative positions (which in turn are a reflection of their

[85] This sometimes happens when a mass of air is pushed by the wind against a wall of clouds previously created by the thermal activity. In some cases the incoming air can rise against the flanks of the clouds as if they were mountains. See Appendix.

[86] In Italy gliders are identified by five letters that are spelled according to the aeronautical alphabet. When there isn't a possibility of confusion only the last two letters are read out loud. This particular sailplane was I-**OB.

accomplishments). Strong pilots go into minutiae about their flights, describing performances and decisions taken during each stage of the flight in relation to terrain and soaring conditions. Their discourses are very difficult to follow for novices who lack the first hand experience and lore to be able to fully appreciate them. Everybody is interested in hearing the reports of the most expert pilots, whereas people listen to the novices with just the minimum attention required in order not to be rude, but without showing any real interest. Novices usually band together to describe their flights to each other and tend to be excluded by the experts who accept them only as a passive audience.

7.7   Conclusion

In this chapter, the key point of the middle-agedness of the gliding subculture has been examined. I pointed out how, so far, only few studies have dealt with adult subcultures, although these subcultures exist and deserve scrutiny. The general lack of attention paid by subcultural theory to older practitioners has been addressed by only some authors, both in the field of popular music (Bennett 2006) and in that of sport practices (Heuser 2005; Jennings 1999; Snyder 1986).

For this age group the possibility exists for individuals to find meaning in life through an all encompassing involvement in a particular area of activity such as sport practice. Commitment to their chosen leisure activity has a central role in the daily lives of the members of the various subcultures. It helps them to reinforce their identity and to achieve a new sense of authenticity (Sassatelli 2000; Theberge 1995; Wheaton 2000). In the case of middle-aged practitioners, it enables them to establish a new subcultural status, much needed in a phase in life of disengagement from other forms of social distinction (Snyder 1989). Bourdieu's notions (1984) of cultural capital and taste have been adapted by Sarah Thornton (1995) to the study of subcultures, making it possible to account for the creation of internal hierarchies of participation, knowledge and taste that have proved useful also for understanding social worlds based on sport (Wheaton 2000).

This chapter has led into a consideration of what are the essential characteristics of a middle-aged subculture when contrasted with a youth subculture. It appears to be as culturally engrossing and enveloping, but at the same time, it is not oppositional or rejectionist in relationship to the hegemonic culture. Hence, it tends not to develop separate bodily style and dress. Since the practice on which it is based is deeply ingrained in the habits and identity of the older practitioners, this long-term commitment implies a different perception of what it means to be a member of the subculture (Bennett 2006). For the glider pilot this means an ingrained identity of pilot whereas the younger pilot feels always the need to prove her/his skills to herself/himself and to others.

The next chapter will elucidate another peculiar feature of the gliding subculture: an attitude towards risk, which is tuned by different institutions, and assumes different hues in different locations. It will be pointed out the capacity to attain a form of reflexivity that casts light on the real causes of accidents and leads some pilots to see them as the result of a wrong mindset.

Chapter 8

Risk Perception and Management

8.1 Introduction

From the previous chapters we can see how the community of glider pilots in Italy has all the characteristics of a sporting subculture and that this subculture combines different features according to the average age of its members and where it is practiced. This situation has significant implications in the analysis of risk perception and management. While flying sailplanes is not normally considered an extreme sport, insofar it has a long history and had time to develop a solid aeronautic grounding, it remains nonetheless a very dangerous activity. Due to mountainous terrain, acute organizational difficulties and a lack of flying discipline, it is even more dangerous in Italy. According to statistics which appeared in the specialised magazine *Volo a Vela* (2007, iss. 302), during the past ten years there have been 30 deaths out of a flying population which has varied from between 1500 and 2200 (these variations being more the result of changes in the counting method used by the organization which provided the data, *Aeroclub d'Italia*, than any changes in the actual numbers of pilots). In 2006 there were 1742 sailplane pilots in Italy[87]. In order to compare these figures with data from other countries the magazine looked at the number of annual fatalities for every 1000 active pilots (the total number of takeoffs or hours flown were not available in every case). In Italy the average annual fatality rate obtained was 2.1 (equivalent to 21 deaths per thousand over ten years); in Switzerland this was 1.4; in Austria 0.7; in France 0.45. In some countries like Norway and Finland no fatalities were recorded at all. Other countries managed to bring about substantial reductions to their fatality rates. For example, in ten years Sweden halved its average annual fatality rate to 0.15, the same level as in the Czech Republic. In Europe the average annual fatality rate is 0.4. So flying

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[87] It should be remembered that of these about 1200 were really active, that is they flew more than the minimum of 4 hours per year required to keep their license from expiring.

sailplanes in Italy is more dangerous than elsewhere and practitioners of the sport are well aware of this[88].

My findings, which are set out in this chapter, show how risk perceptions follow a precise pattern which is shaped by the cultural norm of the gliding subculture and by the specific hues it takes inside a specific location. Adopting a comparative perspective, I examine my data on Bilonia and data from Piti in the light of data from the Italian gliding subculture as a whole.

The chapter opens with an exposition of the theoretical framework used to evaluate risk perception in sailplane flying. Here I shall be referring to the notion of cultural processes introduced in the pioneering studies of Mary Douglas on risk analysis. According to this notion, the perception of danger is viewed not only as being subjective but also as being determined by culture and by the 'institutions' to which an individual belongs. Moreover, in sporting activities the presence of risk assumes for practitioners a particular importance, inasmuch as it confers meaning and value to the activity itself. By way of concluding the chapter's theoretical premise, I shall examine the two most commonly adopted attitudes in the face of unavoidable and mortal risk: professional caution (Le Breton 1995; Ortner 1999) and rationalisation and denial (Wolfe 1979; Mitchell 1983; Douglas 1985; Lyng 1990; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Lois 2005).

In the following paragraphs I juxtapose data obtained from various years of participant observation in Bilonia and Piti (two communities whose differences are highlighted) and written documents constituted by the e-mails sent to the Italian glider pilots' electronic mailing list over a long period (2001-2006). In these sections I let the participants speak for themselves by reporting a selection of their comments and judgments on the risks they run in practicing their sport. I devote particular attention to comments which were made in response to fatal accidents.

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[88] As a term of comparison, the number of people killed in road accidents doesn't show such a stark difference between Italy and the other countries. In Italy, 6226 people were killed in 1997 on the road; 5625 in 2004. In France 7989 in 1997 and 5232 in 2004. In Switzerland 587 in 1997 and 510 in 2004. In Austria 1105 in 1997 and 878 in 2004. In Sweden 541 in 1997 and 480 in 2004 (Source: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, data on line at http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog. 2004 was chosen because it is the last year for which data are available for all countries considered). Although the death toll appears to be more marked in some countries, all show a trend to improve and roughly comparable ratios.

The cultural phenomenon of the tendency by individual pilots to deny risk, even in the light of incontrovertible evidence, even if this denial is still accompanied by fear and uncertainty, is what characterises the entire subculture and the locations which were examined. Pilots resort to various types of rationalisation while denying the possibility that one day they could be victims of a serious accident. The mechanism generally adopted is to blame the victim of the accident. The extremes to which this manner of thinking can lead are examined when I analyse reactions at a local and national level to a long series of fatal accidents.

8.2   A cultural approach to risk

There is a growing body of sociological and anthropological research which shows the existence of a logic of risk that is shared inside certain socio-cultural settings, thus acknowledging the localised nature of the assessment of risk and the usefulness of avoiding sweeping generalisations on the way people in post-modern society respond to it (Tulloch and Lupton 2003). This chapter addresses the issue of how in the gliding community acculturation into a particular social location affects risk understandings. Following a model that appears increasingly popular, it holds that subcultural belonging determines precise risk consciousness, but also that there are noticeable differences between different localisations in the same subculture. A comparative perspective is advocated by these studies and it is precisely the one I adopt here. "This approach acknowledges that understandings about risk, and therefore the ways in which risk is dealt with and experienced in everyday life, are inevitably developed via membership of cultures and subcultures as well as through personal experience. Risk knowledge, therefore, is historical and local. What might be perceived to be 'risky' in one era at a certain locale may no longer be viewed so in a later era, or in a different place" (Tulloch and Lupton 2003, p. 1). Such approaches to risk are in contrast to the post-modern analysis of risk (Beck 1992) which is based on a macro-sociological approach that looks at the individual as an undifferentiated member of society.

Thus, recent research asserts the importance of group membership in structuring responses to risk, acknowledging the role of culture and the fact that it offers more fluid ways of viewing risk. It is a cultural approach that in anthropology has been developed by Mary Douglas. "For Douglas, notions of risk are shared within cultures or communities rather than being the products of individual knowledge and perception. […] People respond to risk via frameworks of understanding that are acculturated and therefore shared with others within the same cultural context, but not necessarily those outside this context" (Tulloch and Lupton 2003, p. 6). According to this line of thinking, risk judgements are never the product of the isolated individual, but are shaped by shared understandings, by concerns developed within a group.

Once a group or institution defines rules of safety and attitudes towards risk people are rarely able to think outside these parameters (Breakwell 2007). They adopt a 'closed rationality', a type of thinking described in anthropological studies. In his analysis of African traditional thought, Robin Horton (1993) quotes Evans-Pritchard's work on Azande witchcraft beliefs: "They [the Zande] reason excellently in the idiom of their beliefs, but they cannot reason outside, or against their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to express their thoughts" (Whitchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande, 1937, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 338, in Horton 1993, p. 222). The web of the oracle beliefs is the only world the Zande knows, "It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong" (ibidem). In a sport subculture the practitioners are caught in a similar web that precludes alternative ways of viewing risk.

Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993), in their paper on skydivers, found that the practitioners of dangerous sports follow three different patterns (that they call 'themes') that inform their beliefs about risk. According to the first, they seek controllable risk contexts where their skill and proficiency can be challenged. "They seek self-efficacy and authentication through controlled action, not random chance. Non-controllable risk, or randomness, is avoided when possible" (ibidem, p. 16). The second pattern is represented by the participants going through a habituation period where the high-risk activity, once seen as 'extraordinary' is gradually perceived as the norm. The theme of the illusion of control is more likely to occur at this stage in practitioners of moderate experience than novices or highly experienced ones. Like the experts they tend to

adopt an attitude of complacency towards their activity. Since everything has been without problems till the present day they don't see the point of being afraid of possible future difficulties. They feel in control without realising that in particularly severe circumstances this feeling may be an illusion.

The third pattern, risk acculturation, is highly related to motive evolution during the process of becoming a fully fledged member of the community. When a new member enters the community, acculturation into the belief that the risks the activity involves are psychologically manageable begins almost immediately. The initiate is taught that the people who do get hurt do so because they failed to do what they were trained to do. He "[…] gradually assumes the ideology of the subculture, which places the properties of the high risk behaviour clearly within the realm of the normal" (Celsi Rose and Leigh 1993, p. 18). For this very reason skydivers usually view their activity, judged by the layman as particularly hazardous, as a reasonably safe one. As a matter of fact, "Risk is whatever is defined as risky at a particular time, in a particular place, by a particular group of people" (Frey 1991, p. 139).

8.2.2   The possibility of death

In some activities, such as rock climbing, risk is maintained by socially constructed rules devised with the double purpose of avoiding excessive exposure to danger, at the same time always allowing a certain amount of it (Williams and Donnelly 1985). In some cases, risk and risk-taking behaviour can be construed as part of a specific subculture: they can be occasions to exemplify the core values of that sport. "[…] Far from being merely an inconvenient – even peripheral – element in sport, danger and risk-taking might be better understood as constitutive of participation in the first place" (Albert 1999). Risk has been described as "the essence, the spice that attracts climbers to the sport, gets them involved, and may eventually cause them to leave" (Williams and Donnelly 1985, p. 4).

Besides physical risks there are social risks as well: for example, calling in sick at work, or cancelling plans with significant others – the practitioners may jeopardise their social status and relations in order to have more spare time

for their favourite activity (Butts 2001). At stake isn't only physical safety but also social standing, on-the-job proficiency, self-esteem. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in the sport setting every time the practitioners engage their social and emotional selves by demonstrating skill and involvement before peers and audiences they put a fraction of their symbolic capital at stake (Waquant 1992).

Risk also implies the possibility of death. Practitioners can deal with it in different ways. The first is the attitude of most people who are professionally involved in risk, who behave according to a different set of values. For old-time mountaineers, for example, risk implied worry more than excitement (Le Breton 1995). Risk was an anti-value. The old mountaineers constantly tried to elude it. For those for whom the mountain constituted their job (i.e. guides, Sherpas) risk was an inevitable fact of life to be taken into account, not a means of authentication. They didn't think of themselves as heroes; they were workers and danger was the stuff of which their job was made (Ortner 1999).

The other way of dealing with fatal accidents consists in denying or repressing the problem. Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* is a case in point. Wolfe, in his book about the beginning of the US space program, tried to find out what test pilots selected to become astronauts were like. He developed the theory of the 'right stuff', an amalgam of stamina, guts and military macho. He realised that physical bravery only happens in a social context. Test pilots formed a kind of fraternity that set standards and whose approval was all-important to its members, so that there seemed to be no other alternative without losing face. "[…] Shooting dice with death, a small price to pay for such extraordinary living, for the opportunity to be among the very best" (Wolfe 1979, p. 39).

When a test pilot died in one of the very frequent accidents all his companions tended to deny responsibility by blaming the deceased himself. The victim's stupidity was considered the cause of his death. The others felt themselves much smarter, and convinced themselves that they could avoid such a fate. Human error and failure to manage the situation were the causes of accidents, not exposure to an uncontrollable amount of risk. In the scientific literature, this kind of rationalisation for voluntary risk taking has been pointed out by Mitchell (1983) about mountain climbers, by Lyng (1990) and Celsi, Rose

and Leigh (1993) about skydivers, and more recently by Lois (2005) about rescuers.

In most cases, the beliefs that uphold the people's certainties about their possibilities of escaping accident, injury and death are those of the illusion of control and risk acculturation. "From the perspective of a high risk performer, virtually all feel that they are capable of managing the context in which they perform, with most leaving what to them is a comfortable margin between their risk taking behaviour and the edge. Even those who operate on the extreme edge emphasise that they rarely go beyond the limits of their control. [...] Still these individuals freely state that the slightest mistake in their performance could be catastrophic" (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993, p. 17).

It has been noted that individuals tend to be optimistic about probabilities affected by their own behaviour (Douglas 1985). "The best established results of risk research show that individuals have a strong but unjustified sense of subjective immunity. In very familiar activities there is a tendency to minimise the probability of bad outcomes. Apparently, people underestimate risks which are supposed to be under their control. They reckon they can cope with familiar situations. They also underestimate risks of events which are rarely expected to happen" (Douglas 1985, p. 29). Living near danger for a while or practising a high-risk occupation breeds familiarity and gives way to a sense of subjective immunity, so that people tend to ignore the associated dangers. Douglas points out that this "sense of subjective immunity is also adaptive if it allows humans to keep cool in the midst of dangers, to dare to experiment, not to be thrown off balance by evidence of failures" (ibidem, p. 30). A series of fatal gliding accidents that occurred in Italy during the last years and the way people reacted to them has provided me with first hand material about this type of reaction which will be examined in paragraph *8.5*.

The optimism that characterises voluntary risk taking seems to have another important implication. During the long years of my fieldwork I almost never encountered issues of glider pilots having to negotiate with partners and spouses about their involvement in a dangerous sport. For this reason, the pilots' intimate relatives who represent surrounding society, are not examined in this thesis. Only on very few occasions did I hear how pilots had to deflect, counter or otherwise negotiate the opposition of close relatives. Almost nobody reported

a partner or spouse defining her/his activity as a form of selfish individualism. On the few occasions when opposition became the subject of my conversations with my informants, it was a mild form of opposition that didn't touch on big issues – i.e., that gliding itself is dangerous and must therefore be avoided – and it didn't pose difficult questions, such as "who will bring up our daughter if you get killed in an accident?" or "who will provide for me in my old age if you, my only son, were to get killed?" One mother didn't want her pilot son to buy a share in a syndicate glider because she thought he could put his money to better use; a pilot reported his wife's complaints about the financial strains his gliding put on their household. Total opposition on the part of parents and lack of empathy with their son's or daughter's 'need to fly' was rarely cited (i.e., Tristano's mother). Surprisingly, the bottom line seems to be that the glider pilots' close relatives (wives, husbands, partners, parents and children) don't represent "[…] other people who do in fact interpret the world differently" (Horton 1993, p. 252) giving the pilots an alternative way to framing the risk they run. This is at odds with what happened in the hang-gliding subculture analysed by Brannigan and McDougall. There, the young practitioners (mainly males in their early to mid twenties) had to overcome their parents' opposition to their activity. Only one pilot stated: "They have learned to accept it, but they pray I'll quit it before I get killed" (1983, p. 42).

8.3   Risk perception

In Bilonia the perception of what is hazardous has assumed quite a peculiar hue and in many respects is very different from other settings where dangerous sports are practised. When a pilot who belongs to the community of Bilonia hears about an accident, her/his reaction is determined by the social values s/he has learned to recognise as proper and which s/he has incorporated into her/his judgement. The club of Bilonia may be seen as one of those institutions[89] studied by Mary Douglas (1986) that determine the way people see and judge the world around them. In fact, she remarks that the "[…] perception

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[89] It is important to remember that in Douglas' analysis the term 'institution' has a loose meaning; institutions are defined as the 'conventions that it pays to observe'.

of risks is encoded in social institutions" (1985, p. 5). Institutions channel our perceptions into forms of relations they deem compatible with the social life of the group. Our experience of the world in which we live is mediated by conceptual categories which are the product of social intercourse. "[…] According to the anthropological argument, the individual makes an initial choice for a kind of organisation and this commitment itself generates the decision-making and perceptual bias" (ibidem, p. 89).

My fieldwork in Bilonia is full of examples that illustrate this mechanism, which also applies to situations which, on the strength of common-sense, ought to be free from such biases. Such an influence also affects professional pilots the moment they act as members of the club. For example, I happened to break the news to Urbano about an accident which had occurred in Piti to Rocco. Urbano is a gliding pilot and fellow member of the club, but he is also former airline captain. Rocco is a leading figure in Piti, maybe the gliding pilot whose flights are most admired. Rocco's reputation comes from his consistent performances (always flights of several hundred kilometres). He destroyed an ASH25 (one of the most expensive sailplanes) by miscalculating the final glide towards the airport. He was forced to land in a vegetable garden, just metres short of the airport fence. Due to the tiny dimensions of the spot, the landing resulted in serious damage for the craft. The pilot and his companion were, however, uninjured. Urbano was shocked by this piece of bad news. He immediately exclaimed:

> Somebody who always tries like he does, always pushing to the limit, sooner or later ends up that way; that's unavoidable! (9-15-2005).

The reaction in Piti was quite different. People didn't blame the pilot for what had happened, since he was just doing what a seasoned pilot does to get the maximum from every flight. Tristano – who went to Piti the day after – told me how witnesses described Rocco as depressed and humiliated after the event. His pilot's reputation had suffered a serious blow, not because he had done anything intrinsically wrong, taking the wrong decision at a crucial phase of the flight, but because he showed himself not up to his usual standard of proficiency. Besides, added Tristano, expressing the thought prevalent in Piti, "now he doesn't have a

glider to fly any more". For a fellow member of the subculture this seemed to be the most important consequence of what had happened. That an experienced pilot shouldn't have run such risks was not the first thought. As a matter of fact, things in Piti are very different and Rocco displayed that dedication to performance shared and approved by most of the pilots there.

Pilots who belong to two different cultural worlds are struck by the salience of the differences in behaviour these bring about. Roberto, a man in his late fifties, a relatively new member of Bilonia, is an Argentinean of Italian descent who learned to fly in a club near Buenos Aires. He told me how every weekend his club organised little informal competitions for its members. These competitions, held over flat terrain, ended usually with one or more pilots landing in a field. That was the accepted regular outcome of a day of flight and people were organised with retrieving teams and trailers. Nor was there any particular training given in order to cope with such stressful situations[90]. The first time he was forced to make an out-landing, he misjudged the field he had selected for this purpose. He only realised it was a ripe cornfield when it was too late. Luckily, the landing was uneventful although afterwards:

> To see where I was, I had to step over the sailplane seat in order to clear the view from the corn (2.28.2005).

According to his report, he only got scared when he realised that landing in a field was unavoidable. Immediately afterwards he recovered his nerve and things happened so fast that he didn't have time for fear. Speaking with me, he highlighted how many differences he found when he started to fly in Bilonia in 2003. One, of course, is that there we practice mountain flying whereas near Buenos Aires the country is flat; but in Bilonia people are not driven and they remain scared by the high risks of an out-landing, a high risk that is more imaginary than real[91]. He also remarked on the lack of collaboration and

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[90] The flat countryside was in itself a guarantee of safety. It meant plenty of fields of adequate length at the pilot's disposal for such events.

[91] Since an out-landing is not considered an accident by the ENAC (Ente Nazionale Aviazione Civile, the Italian civil aviation authority), uneventful out-landings go unreported and it is therefore impossible to establish the percentage of accidents for the total number of out-landings. A *Safety Study* conducted in France by the BEA (Bureau d'Enquêtes et d'Analyses pour la sécurité de l'aviation civile) on all the glider accidents that occurred in the years 1999-2001

fellowship between the members. This could account for the frustrating sense most pilots report of too often not having other pilots with whom to take important decisions about their soaring strategies.

Since social influence is a dynamic process, it reflects the different experiences an individual goes through, and the different institutions that at different times affect her/his perceptions. Even a few days' immersion in a new environment can start to alter rooted perceptions, for a short time modifying how a pilot flies. In Bilonia this process is particularly visible among pilots after they return from an intensive cross-country course in Piti. One day, almost by chance, I happened to fly with a pilot who I knew only superficially. He had just accomplished an intensive course organised by the ACVV in L'Aquila[92]. He was full of enthusiasm, although his experience amounted to only 70 hours. Although we took off very late, since it was a wonderful day that offered very strong soaring conditions, I suggested that we should do a small cross-country triangle, towards Lake Turano in the first leg, and then to the village of Pilastro and back to Bilonia. He had never been to either of these places and didn't know exactly where they were, since from Bilonia he had never left the valley. Near the lake at an altitude of 1900 meters, we struggled to find lift under some cumulus clouds that were decomposing; I was tense but he wasn't. Not heeding my stress, he proposed to press forward towards the next lake (Salto). From there he suggested we could go to the Monte Velino (in another valley) and forward as far as L'Aquila (in a third valley). Caught up by his enthusiasm, he was even unaware that we ought to have given notice by radio of our plans to the airport tower. I was the pilot in command and the more experienced one, so that I turned our course towards Pilastro. Later, thinking about this flight, I was struck by the influence a different environment could have on a person with so little experience. He was imbued with the notion prevalent in Piti that soaring means flying to a distant goal, notwithstanding the possible drawbacks occurring during the flight (7.18.2004).

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found that - in a population of glider pilots eight times larger than in Italy - the number of fatal accidents as a consequence of an out-landing was nil, the number of pilots injured was 10. The distribution of the accidents and their consequences showed that, although the largest number of accidents occur during this phase of gliding, these are rarely significant. However, during my fieldwork I recorded six serious accidents due to out-landing, three of them fatal.

[92] When the airport of Piti hosts a competition, the gliding courses held by the AECVV are moved either to Foligno or to L'Aquila, the first is 50 km north of Piti, the other 50 km east.

8.4   Denying risk

For the happy few flying is fun and seems to have nothing to do with risk, stress and fear. I already mentioned Urbano. This former Alitalia captain – who, in many respects, adheres to the conventional way of thinking in Bilonia – states that in his life he only really feels relaxed when flying; when airborne he is detached from all the earthly problems and concerns[93]. In a like way, others bring to flying what might be termed as 'the old mountaineer's attitude' (Ortner 1999). Among my informants Matteo, with all his aged wisdom and grumbling about new customs, may be put into this category. Before every flight he always is very particular about going through a detailed checklist in order to leave as little to chance as possible. Gliding is a serious matter, but it ought not to be dangerous, in so much as the pilots carefully follow established procedures. There is still another kind of attitude, rare but not at all unheard of, in which I think includes those people for whom flying is second nature. People who have an attitude towards it – but I would add, towards life itself – of near-total spontaneity, a way of devoting themselves to it, free from second thoughts, taking in the sheer enjoyment of the act itself. For them gliding is almost a natural activity which they take for granted the way birds do. This character shows itself in different degrees, sometimes just a hint in a pilot's behaviour, in other cases a frame of mind. Among the few I know that belong to this category is Leandro. Before he begun gliding and was still a paraglider pilot, he took part in an advanced safety course. It was based on practising spins, stalls and other manoeuvres performed in really bad weather. The other participants were so scared that, in order to avoid the day's program, they all agreed that the weather didn't allow for flying. Often, Leandro was the only one to take-off, nonetheless enjoying all the exercises. An interesting detail is that he is not conscious of having this natural feeling towards flying and he doesn't seem ever to have reflected on the other participants' behaviour (5.30.2005).

But, apart from the exceptions that fall into these categories, for most amateur pilots who are not involved in competitions there is always the knowledge that they are dealing with something serious and potentially

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[93] A similar position is expressed by Leden (1996).

dangerous. Pilots otherwise totally committed, with no doubts about gliding, in certain situations show varying degrees of unease. This can be perceived, for example, in the careful way pre-takeoff-checks are often performed. Experienced pilots, strapped in the seat of their glider, ready to take off can be seen meticulously checking over and over again that the canopy is properly locked and all the commands move freely.

Before their flight, some pilots are scared and openly admit it. During the intensive cross-country course in Piti, Salvo told me how he couldn't help thinking of all the deceased people about whom he had read on the electronic mailing list. He also said that every time he is about to fly, he thinks about how alone the pilot is in the glider, totally alone, and that if he feels sick there is nobody that could help him. If he gets really sick he could even die from an illness that would be only a minor problem on the ground. During the same course, I overheard Alberto jokingly remind Tristano – who was already in his glider waiting for the tug plane and from whom he had first heard this story – to 'comb his hair'. Asking for an explanation, I was told the story of the Spartan warriors before Thermopylae. The soldiers knew that they were facing a certain death, and yet, just before the battle they were absorbed in this mundane activity. This anecdote of the doomed Spartans is a poetical and humorous image for the predicament of the glider pilot. S/he knows that s/he is running some very dramatic risks, nonetheless, her/his attention ought to be focused on the trivial details that will allow her/him to best perform the task at hand.

However, and as is widely admitted in the literature, a common way of dealing with risk consists in denying the problem, and not only when talking about gliding, but also when actually flying. This is easier to do when one is the pilot in command. From the psychological point of view, when somebody is piloting an aeroplane or driving a car, he feels safer, more in control of the possible outcomes, than if he is a simple passenger. It has been found that a generalised expectation of being in control reduces the experience of stress (Douglas 1985). In his psychological analysis on the 'acceptable' amount of risk, Povlic found that "The public will accept risks from voluntary activities (such as skiing) that are roughly 1000 times as great as it would tolerate from involuntary hazards (such as food preservatives) that provide the same level of benefits" (2000, p. 223). I can recollect numerous examples of this difference in risk

perception due to a passive role as passenger. Cristiano (a dedicated and daring pilot, who was to die in a flight accident a few years later) the few times that we happened to fly together reproached me from the back seat. He made it clear that he was alarmed by my behaviour:

You're going too slowly! You should never go this slowly when you're close to the slope like that!

he shouted once as I was flying near the flank of Monte Sterrano at a speed that seemed to me perfectly fit to the situation. Another time, when I was performing very timid side-slips to lose excess altitude before landing, he remarked with noticeable alarm in his voice:

Take it easy, we might tip over!

Again, my impression was something like that would have only happened if I had executed the manoeuvre much more briskly. A third time, when I was trying to gain the lee side of Monte Zeppo in a strong wind:

No, no … if we go there we'll never be able to get away! Don't even try it in this wind!

Along with most of the pilots in Bilonia, I learned the basics of cross-country flying in a two-seater sailplane with an experienced pilot in the back seat. At the beginning I had blind faith in my teachers (they were mainly: Valentino, Silvio, Livio and Silvano); although I could notice a difference between the way they piloted and the established safety norms, I wasn't in a position to challenge them. Gradually as I became better acquainted with the sport, my first doubts arose about how they were piloting. After some years of practice the risks they sometimes took began to scare me.

This same difference in the risk perception between an active and a passive role is often clearly perceptible in the last phases of the flight. When the ground comes closer before the landing, the pilot in the back is often ill at ease. I can remember plenty of examples of people (but also myself, when it was my

turn to sit through that phase of the flight as a passenger) making comments that revealed their stress:

> Keep your eyes wide open, the tug ought to be approaching the landing circuit!; Remember to perform all the checks!; Reduce your speed well in advance, so you'll have time to adjust your reactions to the circuit speed; Don't do the last turn so close to the ground and with such a shallow angle! Hey....watch your speed....the speed......don't risk stalling now!

At other times the pilot in the back stays quiet but is not always relaxed. In September 2005, when we were flying together in a two-seater, Urbano was quick to point out how insufficient my speed sometimes was when we were approaching the mountain. When it was his turn to pilot the glider he showed me how to safely and effectively reduce the speed in order to improve the rate of climb near the slope. It was then my turn to be frightened by a manoeuvre which I judged inappropriate for the situation. By the same token, the previous year I had been worried by the way Stilo, an old member of the club, was handling the sailplane in order to exploit the energy of the air raised by the ridges of the mountains. His manoeuvres were performed at a speed which was not sufficient to guarantee us a safety margin in case of a sudden and unexpected change in the angle of attack[94].

These last instances raise another matter linked to risk perception. Both these extremely experienced pilots, away from the mainstream gliding environment of Piti, too old to follow the gliding list on the Internet (both in their late sixties), were unaware of the debates prompted by the numerous accidents of recent years. The majority of these crashes had involved highly skilled pilots and was caused by an inappropriate piloting decision near the mountains. From the heated discussions that followed, it emerged that some of them may have been caused by unwanted incipient spins near the terrain. These were due to a flying speed optimised for climbing performance but that failed to account for possible and deadly sudden losses in speed due to the sudden rising of a powerful thermal

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[94] During spring and early summer the slopes of the mountains, overheated by the sun, can release sudden bubbles of fast rising air that could bring about a sudden change in the angle of incidence of the wings, resulting in a sudden stall close to the ground.

bubble. When other younger pilots or I tried to urge the older pilots to change how we perform our mountain flying they pointed out that their way yielded the best results and was the way gliding had always been done. Although they were well aware of the high number of pilots killed crashing against the mountains, they didn't consider it worth while changing their techniques of piloting. This seems to be an attitude that the psychological studies on risk perception are well aware of. "People are remarkably resistant to changing their prior risk estimates when given new information" (Breakwell 2007, p. 59). "Strong initial views are resistant to change because they influence the way that subsequent information is interpreted. New evidence appears reliable and informative if it is consistent with one's initial beliefs; contrary evidence tends to be dismissed as unreliable, erroneous or unrepresentative" (Nisbett and Ross 1980 in Slovic 2000, p. 222). As a matter of fact, the older pilots go on gliding as they always have, refusing to recognize that new experiences and a new generation of sailplanes (with higher wing loads and thinner wings profiles – more prone to sudden stalls and more difficult to recover from such a situation) dictate a change in attitude and behaviour.

A subtler but widespread defence mechanism consists in accepting some risks if a situation that would otherwise be considered dangerous has been pronounced safe by someone else with authority. The case in point is when an otherwise cautious pilot runs risks because another highly respected one has showed her/him that this is the right way to tackle a certain situation. In mid June 2004 I was a passenger (a position that may have sharpened my perceptions) with Lino. Noticing how daring this always excessively cautious pilot was in exploiting the wind that rose over the mountain slopes, entering the ravines every time he thought there was lift to be found, I remarked how, especially at this time of year[95], this could be a very dangerous practice. But, Lino assured me, he knew what he was doing: Silvio, the local champion, had taught him this technique. With official approval of this kind it could not fail, and besides it would have been embarrassing and unwise not to conform to a rule held by those who knew what they were talking about (6.6.2004). The risk characteristic of this situation implies a big difference between the perceived and the actual hazard. It

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[95] See previous note.

also reveals how the complacency that comes from a great deal of experience "[…] by creating a false sense of security, compromises coping ability. […] 'The classic example here is the Titanic, where the new ability to control most kinds of leaks led to the understocking of lifeboats, the abandonment of safety drills and disregard of reasonable caution in navigation'" (Ravetz 1980[96], quoted in Douglas and Wildavsky 1982, p. 196).

When a dangerous situation arises the way pilots react may seem odd and inexplicable since they often fail to adopt measures to avoid a repetition of the event. The following example is particularly revealing. A serious accident happened in Bilonia in May 2005 (when it happened I was out having a coffee, but I arrived on the spot just a few minutes later to receive on-the-spot reports). The recently licensed pilot of an ASK13 sailplane[97], turning into base for landing, was attempting to operate the lever that activates the airbrakes, when it broke off; the airbrakes were sucked open by the airflow causing an unprecedented steep angle of descent. The glider barely missed the airport fence, but was forced to touch the ground before the beginning of the tarmac causing minor damage to the sailplane. Only luck had prevented the incident from being far more serious. Once the sailplane had been recovered, the person who was in charge of the club that day discouraged the frightened pilot from entering a proper description of the event in the sailplane logbook, as he was legally required to do[98]. He wanted to be sure that on that official document it would not be stated that there had been a structural failure, since this would have grounded the glider for a long time. Afterwards Tristano made a philosophical comment to me on what had happened:

> We fly in planes that are over 30 years old, you can't expect them to be completely without defects! (5.9.2005).

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[96] Jerome R. Ravetz 1980, *Public Perceptions of Acceptable Risks as Evidence for Their Cognitive, Technical, and Social Structure,* in *Technological Risk: its Perception and Handling in the European Community,* ed. Meinof Dierkes, Sam Edwards, Rob Cappock, Cambridge (Mass.): Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain; and Konigstein/Ts: Verlag Anton Hain, p. 46.

[97] This is the standard glider in which pupils are taught to fly during their course and in which they often fly for a certain period after obtaining their license.

[98] However, the following day the board of the club thought it better to report the issue. The ANSV (Agenzia Nazionale Sicurezza Volo) subsequently published an official report.

For both Tristano and the person in charge of the club that day, the priority was to not endanger the availability of sailplanes, not the possibility that a similar accident could occur again. They both claimed that the failure which had just occurred was so infrequent that there was no need to consider it as a warning of lurking danger.

8.5   Confronting the reality of death in Bilonia ….

Risk denial seems even more pronounced in those cases that have involved a fatal outcome. In the seventeen years I have been gliding in Bilonia five of its members[99] have died in flying related accidents. Statistically the risk of dying is very high indeed, although only one of the fatal crashes occurred in Bilonia; two others took place in Piti and the fifth in Sardinia[100].

In the first ten days of June 2005 three serious accidents occurred in Italy or had Italians as victims. In the third of these, one of the few Italian female pilots was killed in a failed attempt to make an out-landing during an international military competition held in the North of France[101]. Her name was Giulia, she was 23, and was considered a talent, one of the promises of the new generation of Italian pilots. The day after Giulia's death, Tristano with whom I often fly at weekends, and with whom I have had long conversations about safety issues, sent me an e-mail to arrange our next flight.

Another blow what happened to Giulia, isn't it? It looks like a bad year. Do ring me up tomorrow for Saturday? The weather forecast says it should be a very good soaring day.

The death was acknowledged, but overcome and the interest went immediately to the next flight. This is typical of high-risk-subcultural behaviour: the real issue being flying, not death. Inside the subculture, what really counts is

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[99] Out of a variable total population of 44 in 2006, a little over one hundred in the early-mid 1990's.
[100] Although the pilot involved was a core member of Bilonia, this accident occurred in a microlight plane when he was flying over the Tyrrhenian Sea on his way to Sardinia. His name was Cristiano and I have already mentioned him in this chapter.
[101] I describe this accident in detail in the next paragraph.

not being alive, but flying. Only the outsider (in this case, the anthropologist) takes note of the apparent incongruity of this behaviour. The various hazards involved in the activity are well known, but the members of the gliding culture don't expend too many words on it. It seems as if there were an unspoken rule, according to which the only thing that matters is gliding.

In 1992, in the aftermath of the first fatal crash that occurred during my membership in Bilonia, I remember a steady flow of comments about what had happened. Some members showed real grief; for several old guys the loss was serious, but that didn't imply a rethinking of how gliding was practised.

For the core members of the community gliding is so intertwined with their lives that even when it involves the death of a close relative it doesn't necessarily induce the pilot to give up the sport. When I started attending the airport of Bilonia, in 1990, I was struck by the existence of a small contest open to members of the club. It was called 'Trofeo Stilo', the surname of one of the leading members, a man in his late fifties who at the time was also the glider pilots' representative on the board of the Aeroclub di Sirto. To me it sounded odd that somebody would sponsor a trophy with his own name. The contest went on for some years, till it faded away. Mr. Stilo himself gradually lost interest in gliding and now I don't see him at the airport more than once a year. Only many years later did I discover that the trophy had been established in the memory of a Mr. Stilo junior, the twenty-year old son of the sponsor, who had died a few years before I started gliding when he crashed in a sailplane over the hills around the airport. This episode highlights a few remarkable aspects. The unfaltering commitment of a father, who wanted to keep the memory of his son alive, that his son's death should never call into question his own dedication to gliding, committing himself doubly to the subculture – with his unfaltering passion for the sport and with his need to elaborate the loss inside it. Moreover, the scanty support he seemed to receive from the community of Bilonia which didn't even bother to mention his son's death to a newcomer like me.

According to my experience, deaths which have occurred in gliding soon fade out of the group's collective memory. All the members of the club who have died in crashes over the years (not to mention the others, less numerous, who died of natural causes) belong to the past. The accidents that caused their death are almost never mentioned, as though the memory of them were

something to be afraid of, as if they represented the object of Freudian removal, the process by which bits of unaccepted conscious content likely the create feelings of guilt are pushed into the unconscious for the Ego to get rid of. After an accident some pilots (but not all the members of the club) attend the funeral. At the club in the days following the event the deceased is lamented, and the probable causes of the accident are discussed in order to find an explanation, but that is all. I can recall only two instances in which a deceased pilot was celebrated after her/his death. At Piti airport, a year after the death of the then chief instructor of the club, the board of the club, the mechanics and the pilots organised an informal ceremony, which was followed by a lunch that was also attended by the mother of the deceased pilot. Apparently, the woman herself had asked for the ceremony since after her son's death she had started visiting the airport occasionally in order to get to know the very places her son had loved. In Bilonia, almost one year after Cristiano's death, Fausto, who had been very close to the deceased pilot, reminded all the pilots that their companion was buried in a nearby cemetery while they were happily flying. On that occasion Fausto asked Padre Gabriele, the monk-pilot, to hold a mass for Cristiano. But in the end the mass was never celebrated.

The very rare occasions in which fatal accidents continue to be discussed is when a deceased pilot is remembered for his commitment to the group, as though his loss had diminished the subculture as a whole, and when people try to find a scapegoat for the accident, sometimes the pilot himself. This, from an anthropological perspective, highlights the important issue pointed out in paragraph *8.2*, how "[…] blaming the victim is effective for silencing indictments of the whole social system. […] Blaming the victim is a hand-washing ploy good for all sorts of occasions. When the deceased pilot can be blamed for the error that crashed his plane, there is no need to inquire further into the adequacy […]" of the safety procedures adopted (Douglas 1985, pp. 56). These explanations for the accidents characterise all cultures. "Throughout Africa a traditional belief associated leprosy with incest. […] An element of hand-washing lurks in the whispered allegation of scandalous sex as its origin. When a mother dies in childbirth in many countries her adultery is considered a possible cause of her death. […] Deaths in childbirth are warnings posted by nature to women tempted to infidelity" (ibidem, p. 57).

If it is not the pilot himself to be blamed it is somebody else. In 2005 I had a long discussion with Lapo – a former instructor – who went into great detail explaining how he was 'absolutely sure' that a crash which had happened in Bilonia in 1992 – in which two people died – had been the result of a hunter shooting at the passing sailplane from a nearby hill. He told me that he had collected the main wheel of the sailplane with the sign of the bullet as a proof. The authorities who investigated the crash had concluded that it had been an accident.

8.6   … and in the subculture of Italian gliding

In a cautious gliding environment like Bilonia the issue of fatal accidents is dealt with through an attitude composed of collective removal and 'victim blaming ploy' (Douglas 1985). Although every pilot is well aware of the hazards of gliding, nobody is willing to engage in a serious discussion on the extent to which these hazards might jeopardise her/his possibility of flying safely. I now turn my attention to the situation in the wider subculture examining the reactions to fatal accidents as they appear in the electronic mailing list of the Italian gliding community.

On this electronic list, emotion caused by the death of friends provokes people to comment, to try to understand, to 'let-off steam' and to mitigate their sorrow, rage and fears over what has just fatally happened. The way accidents should be commented upon and interpreted is often the source of bitter friction. Nobody disagrees with general remarks like the following:

> If there is anything that our lost friends have taught us it is that gliding is NOT a game (7.27.2002).
> This year for every 7000 hours of gliding a pilot died; the timer has already started ticking again and sometimes it goes fast (8.1.2002).

Some pilots seem disconcerted:

I've already heard more than one pilot say he was seriously thinking of taking up a different sport with a more acceptable level of risk! How can I blame him? What's happening is disconcerting even to people who are more committed than we are! […] We all got used to taking too many risks to 'go higher!!! Up to now we have been the lucky ones; not our friends. Folks, let's stop with all this bullshit, because sooner or later we will have to pay the bill! […] Is it worth it? (8.1.2002).

8.6.2   Nobody is really safe

The realisation that most accidents occur to experienced pilots and not to beginners frightens some people since it shows that nobody is really safe or, rather, that maybe there is something wrong with the activity itself, in the way it is practised. This point is particularly difficult to grasp.

It is our mindset that needs to change. Give up. Give up emulating and competing. Flying is beautiful anyway. […] Today, we often hear pilots saying: 'I was a bit too low; too close; I made it by the skin of my teeth, but everything was under control! […] Almost all the accidents that occurred last year were probably due to mistakes in piloting and in evaluating the situation. […] The road towards a new gliding mindset is a long one, but we have to get started immediately, today, right now (7.27.2002).

This appears to be a difficult task, since it requires the eradication of deeply ingrained ideas about what flying is and what it means to be skilled.

You need feeling to be able to handle a sailplane; it's the pilot's experience and sensitivity that keep him alive […] Flying close to the side of a mountain you have to feel the glider, you have to feel how it reacts to your commands, you have to be one with it (1.25.2004).

To these statements another comments:

Yes, that helps. But I also think recent events have shown us that there's more to it than that (1.26.2004).

Some people try to find simple recipes to avert danger:

Speed, speed, speed, speed[102] … at any cost! Remember the last fatal accidents we talked about on the list and in person (1.13.2004).

A couple of accidents due to structural failure are cause of concern and complaints about the attitude displayed by some pilots. A contributor to the list describes his experience:

When I first started my training course, with just three hours of experience, I got the opportunity to come along as a "ballast passenger" with one of the hotshots at my club. It was an awesome acrobatic flight that took my breath away […] Now that I have a few years of flying under my belt and more experience I can see that that pilot was thrilling me with stunts that were forbidden in the manual of that particular sailplane. He was risking his life and my own, and maybe the lives of anyone who happened to use that same over-stressed glider afterwards. Sure he was really experienced and skilful, but how can anyone think they are free to ignore the manufacturer's safety standards for that model? (10.27.2003).

Another adds:

If a young pilot complains about the bad flying behaviour of one of the elders … at the very least he risks a lynching … that's why some people go on for years with this fucking behaviour till their luck runs out […]. If we want to improve the way we glide let's start by admitting we're wrong… even if we don't mention anybody's names… and from tomorrow we'll turn over a new leaf (10.28.2003).

Most people agree that the most experienced pilots may also fail to correctly evaluate particular situations which can arise during a flight. More

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[102] A higher than usual speed is needed in mountain flying to prevent sudden effects due to wind gusts.

generally, there is the tendency to ignore the warning bell that so many serious accidents sound.

And the fatal accidents? We try to put them behind us and move on: unaccountable…, maybe the pilot suddenly felt sick… or maybe that time he just fucked up… or it was wind shear near the mountain slope, he made a mistake, he was going too slow …he was a German … (7.16.2003).

These are identified as some of the recurrent excuses for not facing the challenge that the real problem poses to everybody.

And all the serious accidents avoided by a hair's breadth? They never happened; often nobody even talks about them in the club. They're taboo (7.16.2003).

Commenting after two fatal accidents:

Two accidents in one day, in such a small area, it makes me think that yesterday the weather conditions were 'anomalous', or at least we need to know more about them. I'm not saying that the weather caused the accidents […] but I am sure that finding out what the weather conditions were like that day could help us understand what happened, so we can be more careful in the future. But I'm also convinced that first we need to work on ourselves, and the way we fly (7.26.2002).

The chairman of the Italian Gliding Association (FIVV) writing to the list the same day:

I am speechless. Saturday I was in Piti for the opening day of the championship *Promozione* and there I was introduced to Andrea[103]. He seemed like a nice guy, somebody … just like the rest of us. I want you all to think about that. I'm totally convinced Andrea was just like the rest of us, so if we don't do anything, if we don't change anything, if we don't find

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[103] Andrea Gnesutta, aged 37, was a pilot from Milan. He lost his life on the first day of competition crashing with his Discus sailplane on Monte Terminillo.

the courage to act and change, I'm afraid we're going to be in the same situation again, having to write sad words (7.26.2002).

In that same letter the institution of a *Commissione Sicurezza* (Safety Enquiry) is announced. But a month later an e-mail posted to the list notes that:

The emotional wave of attention to safety sparked by the tragic events we are all familiar with is already fading. This isn't serious, for God's sake, nobody likes to talk only about accidents, but I'm sure that it won't be too long before all the good intentions will be forgotten and, as usual, nothing serious will be done (8.28.2002).

The author goes on to suggest making a public report of all accidents which have occurred, following the example of the BGA[104] in the UK; that could help all the pilots learn from the mishaps of other less fortunate companions.

8.6.3 *The wrong frame of mind*

A long letter, taking its cue from numerous accidents which occurred in 2002, denounces the 'cultural problem' that weighs on Italian gliding.

This is a long message and I guess it will receive some criticisms. First of all, I want once more to state clearly that we have a 'cultural' problem, not a technical one. When I was young I used to brag with my friends how I could lean my motorbike into a curve, scratching its exhaust pipe and pedals on the asphalt. After a few years I began to realise that if I had slipped in those conditions the consequences could have been serious. Today, I recognise the same attitude in people flying near the flanks of mountains. It looks like they're showing off by 'rock polishing', better if during a turn. Certainly, there's the risk of emulation by the less experienced, so that the best pilots ought to refrain from doing so. […] If the problem is, as I fear, cultural, there's no immediate solution. We would need years to change the mindset. Recent attempts, on the mailing list and

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[104] British Gliding Association.

in person, to explain the dynamics of so many accidents, seem to me without purpose and misleading. We look for specific explanations for each event in order to find our mental peace, and to be able to file away the problem as best we can. […] I only observe that every now and then (but too often …) we hit against the side of a mountain, with consequences which are often but not always fatal. In order to avoid this, we need to stay farther away and widen the safety margin; we need to fly faster; we need to avoid any kind of distraction, like gauges, sandwiches, loggers, etc. If we want to blame the air, the wind, the weather, we should at least use the sentence: 'the pilot failed to adjust his piloting to the weather situation'. I don't see the point of making other hypotheses […] The cause is our lack of caution, and we haven't even made the first step: to admit that we are reckless (8.3.2002).

To this e-mail another pilot retorts:

We look for an explanation so that we can go on faithfully practising this sport. Otherwise if all accidents were without explanation we would be idiots to continue, knowing that sooner or later it could happen to ourselves, to run up against something unknown with dramatic outcomes (8.4.2002).

The first one again:

[…] the need for specific explanations hints at the desire of those who ask these questions to ascribe the accident to a gross mistake in piloting or to an absolutely anomalous situation (destiny) or to some characteristics of the type of glider involved. The bottom line is that we try to find a culprit in something alien to us. On the contrary, I'm really convinced that the 'fault' is inside every one of us. […] Moreover, as we tragically saw in July, after so many discussions about accidents we went yet again to another funeral. The victim was a pilot who was among those who attended the funeral in May. […] It is all very well to increase the training of the instructors, but the weak link in the chain is the pilot's mind. (8.4.2002).

However, notwithstanding these attempts through analysis to find a cultural 'rule of thumb' to account for what happens, most of the efforts to come to terms with the accidents (especially those which occurred to the most experienced) hinge on technical interpretations: insufficient speed, slow appreciation of deteriorating weather conditions, sudden change in the wing's angle of attack due to a thermal bubble, unexpected drop in the speed due to a sudden tail gust.

Sometimes serious accidents, if the victim wasn't well known to the contributors, don't elicit comments on the mailing list.

> I would like to know if anybody can provide me with some information about the crash in Asiago, since after the initial announcement nothing has been written about it (8.31.2004; this e-mail received a detailed answer a few days later).

> How come the list doesn't report on Italian accidents? (7.20.2004).

A letter posted by the safety officer of the Italian Gliding Association (FIVV) poses the same problem:

> The ANSV[105] expects our co-operation in evaluating our level of maturity in preventing accidents. Till today only one Club has sent us reports on any kind of accident or incident which has occurred. […] and yet there is no shortage of serious accidents. Moreover, it is clear that for every serious event there are several other less severe occurrences from which there would be a lot to learn (9.2.2004).

8.6.4   Death of a woman pilot

At the beginning of the summer 2005 there were two fatal accidents, only a few days apart and involving two people who were very popular in the gliding community. These events sparked a fierce discussion on the topic of safety and

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[105] Agenzia Nazionale Sicurezza Volo.

risk as a frame of mind. The first accident occurred at the end of May. The pilot (Aldo Bellato) was 60 years old, very experienced and with a strong reputation for his cautious approach to flying. He crashed against a mountain at the end of a long flight. The person in charge of safety for the Italian Gliding Association (FIVV), having again to break the sad news on the mailing list, added his comment:

> Ours is a dangerous game. I would ask everybody again to make a critical self-appraisal of their level of caution, for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for the future of our sport itself (5.31.2005).

The second victim was a young woman (Giulia Incisa della Rocchetta), one of the very few female competition pilots. During my flying camp in Piti, I overheard Alberto, the manager of the one week intensive courses held in that airport, complaining about who was to blame for Giulia's death. The story was that her ego had been boosted by some older pilots who now and again told her how skilful she was, how brave, daring and competent. In this way they reduced her sense of judgement, whereas what she would have really needed was somebody to curb her daring, leading her to reflect on her actions.

In the site of the World Gliding Competition 2005 in which she took part she introduced herself with these words:

> I started to fly at the age of 16 and from that moment I found it hard to study. However, I finished high school and went to university – but very soon I found out how to get to the nearest airport and definitively stopped studying. From that moment I have flown in different clubs in Italy and France and I'm well known all around as 'the girl who does the out-landings'! I also have the PPL[106] and I am training to become an instructor and join the Airforce Gliding Team. (www.worldgliding2005.com. Retrieved 6.15.2005)

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[106] Private Pilot Licence.

When she died, after a failed attempt to perform a very difficult out-landing, her popularity, her age and gender prompted an emotional wave of comments.

> She was young, too young (6.11.2005).

> It's impossible to get over what happened, wait for the 'safety report' to come out to understand its causes. There's something in this sport that doesn't work and it needs to be changed in hurry (6.9.2005).

Another message:

> I'm flying less and less, and I'm afraid that these pieces of news are gradually taking away my desire to fly (6.9.2005).

Since Giulia lost her life during a competition, her death became the subject of a discussion about the usefulness and role of competitions.

> I am definitely not very qualified to discuss races because I am not able to take part in them. Besides, for me, gliding is a pleasure and I'm not particularly fond of final results and contest rules. But, if I look around me, I can notice a strong pressure to take part in competitions, first of all in the Italian Gliding Association (FIVV) itself. As if gliding had no natural purpose outside of competitions. […] If we look at what goes on during a competition, we discover that wisdom and rationality are often pushed aside to get a good result. Sport should be a school for life, not a way to lose it. Especially if you're 23 years old, are highly skilled and have a big desire to fly and win (6.10.2005).

Another pilot involved in competitions, shocked by this death, reflects that the time seems ripe to rethink the way competitions are practised. He describes some examples:

> I have seen with my own eyes gliders descending through apartment blocks in Rivoli trying to make the airfield. Others crashing

between Coronelle and the field in a failed attempt to land, and the pilots getting out alive thanks to divine intervention; people in final approach at Piti, flying under the electric cable. More than once I myself have been so caught up in the 'blind enthusiasm' of the race, that I put myself into situations that, when I think back on them, give me the shivers (6.10.2005).

Giulia's later gliding teacher – the person who introduced her to competitions – intervenes (maybe he felt compelled to):

> For the last two years Giulia was like a daughter to me; she lived alone in Turin and every other evening she would drop in for supper. […] One day she made an awesome out-landing and from then on I made a point of teaching her that also in gliding you can get hurt really badly. I told her about friends of mine who are no longer with us; and about myself, and how on three occasions I managed to survive thanks to the help of God. Once she took such a fright that I hoped I had vaccinated her. […] Last time I met her was last week; we were both crying because of Aldo Bellato who two Sundays ago had crashed on our mountains. Like Giulia, Aldo was my pupil. Caution was his creed […] For me he was an unparalleled flying mate, since he toned down my exuberance the same way I did with Giulia. […] Folks in gliding we die! We have to do everything we can to avoid paying the bill. And there is just one way: use your mind! […] But I have already attended far too many funerals and met too many people who have survived miraculously (me included) to think it's not dangerous.

In a *post scriptum* he added:

> It wasn't the competition rules that killed Aldo and Giulia, or Andrea, or Bob, or PierMario, or Beppe, or all the others, but the […] intrinsic danger in the union between machine-pilot-weather-terrain. Please, stop talking as if 'we can change this or that rule'. Instead, we should try never to lose sight of the fact that, in this sport, there is a real danger of dying or getting hurt, so that it is always necessary to be aware of the risk, understand its symptoms and try to reduce them to the minimum (6.10.2005).

This 'positivist' approach, by a person who some blamed for putting the wrong ideas in the head of a girl who was already prone to a reckless behaviour, was answered by several angry posters.

I've never written to the mailing list before, but I was deeply shocked by Giulia's death. Maybe because she was 24 [sic], like my daughter; maybe because she was a girl with her whole life ahead of her […]. I am really indignant and disappointed and bitter because we go on talking and talking while our friends die. Others will follow Giulia just as we mourned others before her. […] I just don't see how a 23 year-old girl, full of athletic spirit, could be expected to 'use her mind' rationally in certain moments. The rules must change. You certainly taught her to 'use her head', but before this you taught her how to win and you taught her that in order to win you have to fly at 200 km/h 100 meters from the ground, because these days that is the only way you can win. And the risks that you continue to run while trusting in the blindfolded goddess are precisely another confirmation of how low we have sunk (6.10.2005).

This hinting at a wrong 'frame of mind' elicited some answers, and the call for being more cautious was felt to be a straight jacket:

Come on guys, […] how many new rules do you want to impose on gliding? […] He's right, gliding is dangerous and it requires a good mind. But do you know how many people I've personally seen die during my two years internship as a surgeon because they tried to light their barbecues with petrol? Many dozens!!! (6.14.2005).

To this e-mail, another pilot retorted:

[…] Nobody with a 'good mind' glancing at the statistics and at the percentages of deaths of recent years would go on practising this sport. Of course, deep inside us all there's a small voice that says: I won't be the next, I'm too skilled, too cautious, too careful ……. But ask yourselves:

'am I more skilled than Bob Monti was[107]?', 'am I more careful than Aldo Bellati was?', 'are my reflexes as quick as those of a 23 year old girl?' … come on! …. The only thing that we can say is that up until now we've been luckier! (6.14.2005).

The discussion went on till the dispute faded away as the gliding season reached its zenith. As every year, the mailing list was again absorbed by competitions, cross-country flights, technical issues and the like.

8.6.5   Withdrawing from risk

At the end of the 2005 gliding season Alberto, the instructor in charge of intensive courses held by the ACVV in Piti, posted a letter on the list to raise an alarm.

Dear all, after a season of flying I noticed an unpleasant tendency that is affecting us. Pilots' average level of training is going down at an alarming rate!!! Too often I have to spend the first three days of the course retraining a pilot in safety so that it won't be too dangerous for him to go cross-country flying. An issue which particularly needs to be addressed is landings […]; a short flight in the winter helps pilots stay efficient. The 'so called experts' […] should also continue to practice the sport during those months. Otherwise, why do we have so many accidents especially in the Spring? (10.15.2005).

The high risks gliding implies are sometimes acknowledged from diverging positions:

[…] What should we write? 'Gliding is forbidden because it is lethal?'(6.16.2005).

To this approach some others retorted:

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[107] Bob Monti was a renowned gliding competition pilot who, among the other victories, won an Italian championship.

Unfortunately we are right to be scared (the statistics bear this out) and every new pilot who dies in a gliding accident scares away 5 pilots and 20 would-be pilots (this is a personal estimate that needs to be verified) (6.16.2005).

Recommending that pilots should fly at high speeds near the sides of the mountains during spring, an experienced pilot goes on to acknowledge the fact of fear and risk:

Actually, it is exactly this kind of certainty that kills. Near the mountain there is a thermal layer that could be over heated and thus extremely unstable. In these conditions we may move from the very heart of the thermal to a –4 m/s with a big bang and without warning – and we can find ourselves with a dead stick in the hand, and our heart in our throat (2.24.2003).

A few days after a fatal accident a pilot writes:

Hello everybody, Saturday I went flying for the first time since Giorgio's crash. The accident made a big impression on me, and I have to say that I had to force myself to go, otherwise, if I had skipped this time, my desire would have been even less. [After describing in detail some minor problems that arose during the flight, he wraps up]: I experimented on myself how much stress could be a limit on my skills (9-7-2004).

Although the existence of risk, fear and stress is acknowledged, their meaning has a specific value:

This is a small personal comment from a pilot who does mostly competitions, both in Italy and abroad. Me too, whenever I'm in a World Championship, I never think about the possibility of taking a 'RISK', by RISK I mean '… if everything doesn't go right I'm going to get hurt, or worse…!!! Risks (this time without capitals) that I usually take during

competition are the ones that: 'if things go wrong, I'll just make an out-landing and say goodbye to a good score (6.15.2005).

Sometimes, however, a different kind of moral attitude peeps through – gliding is nothing but a game, detached from what really matters in life.

I'd like to take part in some competitions next season, but if I were to find out that I wasn't having fun I wouldn't hesitate to withdraw, as I actually did this season. Maybe there are other situations in life from which we can't withdraw (9.12.2002).

8.7   Conclusion

In this chapter the focus has been on risk and on how it is perceived and managed in a high-risk activity such as gliding. According to the analysis developed in the previous chapter I show that the way pilots perceive and react to risk is connected to the overall subcultural reality of the sport and especially to the local subcultural situations.

The comparative analysis carried out on three levels – the airports of Bilonia and Piti and the entire Italian gliding subculture – allows us to see how the gliding subculture acts and thinks like the 'institutions' described by Mary Douglas (1986). Glider pilots in their perception and management of risk are not autonomous. Certainly each of them acts on the basis of their own personal motivations – competitive success, the desire to show that they are competent, that they are up to situations which at times can be very demanding. They also act on the basis of their own uncertainties and fears, their unease in facing situations during flights which they feel are excessively stressing. Nevertheless, the manner of assessing risks connected to the activity and the correct approach to dealing with these risks does not depend on the isolated individual. It is rather the fruit of an attitude which characterises the entire milieu in which the pilot operates: the local gliding club s/he belongs to, the reality of the gliding subculture as expressed in a particular locality. The cultural processes Douglas

pointed to with regard to risk perception in situations far from the world of gliding would appear to obtain in the gliding milieu as well.

Another element brought to light by Douglas' anthropological studies on risk, and which is confirmed by my analysis of sailplane flying, is the phenomenon of denying the danger of situations of voluntary risk, which takes the form of blaming the victims of accidents who are accused of being the sole causes of what happened. If the members of the subculture are able to convince themselves that the fatality was the result of incompetence, superficiality, insufficient ability to put into practice the procedures which every pilot knows they must adopt in particular risk situations, they can avoid blaming the entire cultural system in the gliding milieu, or the practices current in their club, or the inability to contain the risk in flight. This type of reaction has received a great deal of attention by the scientific literature on voluntary risk assumption in sports (Wolfe 1979; Mitchell 1983; Douglas 1985; Lying 1990; 2005; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Lois 2005).

The fact that fatal accidents occur makes the game of sailplane flying an extremely serious activity, even if pilots are reluctant to change their attitudes and generally cling to the kinds of rationalisation described in the literature, as long as they don't have to admit to themselves that their sport is too risky. However, contrary to the prevailing opinion in the scientific literature, pilots can sometimes go beyond the rationalisations which are their most common reaction. Besides denial reactions and rationalisations like the "victim blaming ploy", certain accidents which provoke particularly strong emotions are able to give rise to an unusual capacity for reflexivity on what has happened, to an understanding that the real culprit is not the companion who was killed, but the way all glider pilots choose to fly, that the problem besetting the milieu is one of a wrong mindset, what in anthropological terms could be defined a cultural problem. Caught up in the heat of their game, pilots (even the most expert and prudent) abandon degrees of caution and run risks for motives which, for those members of the subculture able to reflect on them, appear pointless and completely out of touch with the things that really ought to matter in peoples' lives.

Only very rarely is this understanding of the issue translated into a different attitude, and a different, perhaps safer approach to flying. Any real change is feared because it might dilute the idealised purity of the activity and its

objectives. As we shall see in the next chapter flying sailplanes is so important for members of this subculture, that it cannot easily be renounced. In fact, in the next chapter I investigate what has been left out of the picture in this one, that is the positive meanings the middle-aged pilots give to their voluntary risk-taking: adventure, finding excitement, overcoming fear, being brave, self-actualisation, finding personal agency and identity.

Chapter 9

Voluntary Risk-Taking in Middle-Age

9.1   Introduction

Up to this point, the motivations of practitioners haven't been the main research issue of this thesis. Instead, in analysing a subculture linked to the practice of a hazardous leisure activity I have dealt mainly with the social management of risk involved and with the peculiarity of the subculture itself which is composed mainly of older people. The personal motivations that lead my subjects to group together and run inordinate amounts of risk have lain in the background of my research, although they do deserve an analysis. The reason for this theoretical priority is that already plenty of research has been devoted to the central concern of motivation (Albert 1999; Brannigan and McDougall 1983; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Le Breton 1995; 2004; Lyng 1990; 2005).

In the following pages I look at the motivations that lead people to gliding. The main points of some of the theories on voluntary risk taking introduced in Chapter 2.4.4 are discussed in the light of my understanding of risk perception as a cultural product shaped by particular variations (idiocultures) in a sports subculture, and belonging to an age bracket which subcultural studies have tended to leave unexplored. Adding to these concerns, I also look at how the gliding subculture idealises a certain notion of 'heroism' that seems to best explain the type of drive that propels people towards subcultures of voluntarily danger.

9.2   Feelings and flow

Why are the middle-aged, middle-class people who represent the object of my thesis so fascinated by gliding? The practitioners themselves sometimes try to answer this question in their messages to the electronic mailing list. They underline this or that aspect of the activity: the poetry of un-powered flight, the

sense of freedom it conveys, the satisfaction that comes from having to rely for one's survival entirely on one's skills, the strong emotions, the sense of accomplishment.

For example, advising a would-be pilot, an older pilot writes in his e-mail to the list:

> Maybe the best thing is to ask somebody to take you up for a flight when there are the right conditions for soaring. Then you could feel how much energy there is in the air even if you can't see it. You might then understand what it means to find lift looking at what the birds are doing. You might meet a falcon or an eagle flying in your same thermal (in Piti it happens). You could weave in and out of the clouds or, flying over a ridge, you could feel your heart skip a beat when you peep out over the void. You could be suddenly scared when you realise that you are far too low and that you're not at all sure you'll be able climb up again. Or you can relax and enjoy the view since you aren't the one doing the piloting, and you can think that gliding is the best thing in the world (7.18. 2002).

Another pilot explains his point of view:

> I think that gliding appeals so much to us because it gives us back the touching and now unusual feeling of individual responsibility. Some of the same pride that children have when, for the first time, they begin to be considered as adults. Depending only on ourselves to solve a myriad of problems for our survival, results in an emotion and in a kind of personal satisfaction hardly attainable with other human activities (6.13. 2003).

A third remarks:

> You can describe the technical aspects of a flight, the environmental conditions, but to convey what you really feel, that is to say, the main reason why you are up there, is almost impossible. Flying through the quietness, through the whistling of the wind, in front of huge mountain landscapes brings human beings to experience a total sense

of freedom that goes beyond the earthly conception that we all have
of this term (10.17. 2004).

In my own experience I remember many flights performed in easy conditions, often in the afternoon. I flew on the slope of the mountains borne up by a light wind and by a faint thermal activity which released small bubbles of energy. I could savour all the appeal of climbing the slope buoyed up by what seemed to be mysterious forces. Most of the times, there was no stress, only joy. In my memory these flights epitomise the appeal of gliding.

Psychoanalytic studies can offer a clue for the sense of overpowering freedom one derives from gliding. The pilot who glides swiftly past mountains, ridges and gorges taking in a single glance the view offered by large valleys dotted with tiny villages and the narrow tracks of the roads feels overpowered by the possibility of encompassing so much of the surrounding world and life in his swift course. He is at the same time part of this world and above it[108]. Michael Balint (1959), noticed how in the dreams about flying there is always a feeling of oneness with the universe. He remarks how Sigmund Freud traced this feeling back to the baby at its mother's breast. In *Civilisation and Its Discontents,* Freud interpreted feelings of 'oneness with the universe' as a late manifestation of 'primary Ego feelings', of the kind that occur in the early stages of life before the Ego becomes separated from the external world. "Nowadays I think it will be accepted as self-evident that the flying dreams and the oceanic feeling are to be regarded as repetition either of the very early mother-child relationship or of the still earlier intra-uterine existence, during which we were really one with our universe and were really floating in the amniotic fluid with practically no weight to carry" (Balint 1959, p. 75). The flow experience of oneness with the universe, of lack of distinction between self and environment could be related to these early experiences.

This kind of explanation is not limited to psychoanalytic theory but is shared by social scientists (see paragraphs *2.4.3* and *2.4.4*), whose "accounts of the nature of the thrill in risk-taking leisure activities often emphasise ecstatic

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[108] It has been remarked (Selby 1989) how looking at a landscape from an aeroplane is not the same as looking at the same landscape from the top of a high mountain. Being suspended in the air confers a lack of reality to the experience of viewing. The actor feels detached from the environment, as if s/he didn't belong to it.

feelings of oneness with the environment, the loss of self in the activity and the intense awareness of the moment […]" (Stranger 1999, p. 268). Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in his theory of flow also explains the lust for unity with the cosmos linking his analysis of motivations and rewards to be drawn from sports to the psychoanalytic interpretation. This psychological concept, although alien to anthropology, becomes a useful tool for understanding a state of mind the practitioners of gliding often report when they talk about their activity and the feelings it inspires. When in the state of flow, people feel as if they were merging with the environment. Csikszentmihalyi quotes a dancer saying: "I become one with the atmosphere [...] I get a tyrannical sense of power" (2000, p. 44). These are the same feelings that are also reported by glider pilots (see next page).

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1992) speculates on the characteristics of sports such as gliding. He points at one of these aspects: "Running, throwing a javelin and so on, effort, resistance, with a starting point, a lever. But nowadays, I see movement defined less and less in relation to a point of leverage. Many of the new sports – surfing, windsurfing, hang-gliding – take the form of entry into an existing wave. Here is no longer an origin as starting point, but a sort of putting into orbit. The basic thing is how to get taken up in the movement of a big wave, a column of rising air, to 'come between' rather than to be the origin of an effort" (Deleuze 1992, p. 281). Exploiting these sources of natural energy creates an unprecedented harmony between the self and the external world, i.e. feeling the atmosphere's energy and the fusion with the landscape mentioned in the quotes above and below.

A Bilonia glider pilot (Marco), who died in 1992 in a crash[109], once expressed the overpowering feeling of being at one with the atmosphere and his thrill in gliding in single-seat sailplane whose cockpit fitted very closely around the pilot's body:

> You wear it like a jacket! The wings protrude from your shoulders
> and are a part of you. And then you go and you're a bird in the sky!
> You are the sky!

Another one (Guido):

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[109] He was the companion of the pilot quoted in the Introduction.

> Sometimes I'm so involved in my soaring that I forget where I am in relation to the airport. Only lift and sink are what matters. The earth doesn't exist for me.

A third one (Erri), commenting about a particularly strong thermal after his landing and urging me to take off in order to enjoy the same feelings:

> It was a cannon ball! It was nothing but energy, energy pure and simple. And I was bang into it!

During action the practitioner is so focused on her/his activity which absorbs all her/his concerns that s/he doesn't have time to be afraid. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) quotes as a typical example rock climbing where the actor is compelled to ignore all distracting stimuli by the knowledge that her/his survival depends on total concentration.

In gliding, total concentration oscillates between the narrow field – the actions at hand, i.e., assessing the strength and shape of a difficult thermal, devising a means to quickly centre it, judging which way to turn in order to find lift, recognising the right moment, which must not be too early so as not to waste a powerful source of energy, nor too late to risk being sucked in, when to leave the dark base of a cumulonimbus – and the broader field represented by the complexity derived from piloting an airplane without an engine. Besides the normal skills required for piloting, much energy is absorbed by the need to always have an overview of the total situation of the environment in order to plan the next step well in advance, that is, where to move to find the energy required to stay airborne. When the pressure of the flight is high – during cross-country flights or in competition – there is no room for other thoughts. When performing less challenging forms of soaring total engrossment in the task is interspersed with more laid back moments.

In some flow activities, enhanced concentration implies great awareness of internal processes. In gliding this translates into a peculiar attention to kinetic sensations. When seeking lift, even the smallest movement of the air under the wings has to be detected at once. The pilot flies with her/his kinetic senses alerted in a state that is referred to as 'being super-sensitised to the air mass'.

Pilots often refer to this way of feeling the air through their body, rather than by a careful scanning of the cockpit gauges, as "piloting by the seat of your pants"[110]. In piloting a sailplane the use of the seat of the pants is even more important since it is not limited to the perception of the trim of the craft on the three axes, but includes the active search for lift, to reduce to the minimum the loss of height when soaring, and to a constant assessment of the environmental situation (i.e. energy in the atmosphere). When a less experienced pilot flies with a more experienced companion in a two-seat sailplane, the latter being more skilled in reading this kinetic information often says things like:

> Watch out! Here it goes … Did you feel that? The right wing was
> lifted! Turn right, turn quick! It lifted the right wing!

Sometimes, the control of the environment takes on the character of a fight between the pilot and the lift surge. This is particularly true when in presence of particularly turbulent air. A turbulent thermal has a tendency to spit the sailplane outside its core and the pilot must fight hard to prevent this from happening. The environment, the atmosphere, becomes an enemy and centring the thermal turns into a battle. Some pilots feel the pleasure derived by this struggle more than others. Their utterances reflect this way of visualising/representing that phase of the flight.

> Kick it in! Slam it in there, now! You have to kill it! Think that you
> want to kill it!

A pilot from the back seat (Cristiano) commented on my cautious style of piloting.

The passage of time acquires a different value. In one instance, in Bilonia Antonietta, the secretary of the club, came to the hangar to ask the only newly licensed female pilot how she felt after her first really long flight (almost four hours). For those on the ground it had taken all the afternoon. But the girl was surprised at the question:

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[110] Earthier expressions are also used.

I was really enjoying the flight; it was a terrific experience. I didn't really think about how long it was lasting (9.13.2006).

Intense experience cannot be continuous. Periods of intense physical and mental concentration are interspersed with others of less focused behaviour during which the practitioner recovers her/his energies (Mitchell 1983). On a good soaring day a flight can last several hours. After s/he has released from the tow, the pilot tries to gain height as quickly as possible and starts her/his first glide away from the airport area aiming at the next thermal (source of energy) on her/his course. The maximum of tension and anxiety is usually reached approaching the new thermal. If the glide has been long enough, the sailplane will have lost plenty of height, and finding lift will be a must. Away from the airfield without reliable lift the only option would be an out-landing. After s/he has found lift and has managed to get the craft to circle securely inside it, the pilot can start to relax. This can take some time, since the pilot's heart is often still racing even in the safety of a thermal. But once a certain altitude has been reached, this is usually the time to relax. An informant told me that at this point he generally tells himself: "Now I put the auto-pilot on". That implies switching into an almost automatic mode of piloting, which doesn't require any conscious effort. The mind can go wherever it wants while the pilot "recharges her/his batteries". Sometimes this relaxed mode of piloting can be very efficient. Without realising it, the pilot feels the atmosphere and reacts to it in the most appropriate manner.

"In terms of social actors, motivations, and aspirations flow is not some stress-less lacuna but a balanced, dynamic tension" (Mitchell 1983, p. 189). Flow in most activities, depends on a very delicate balance between being in control and being overwhelmed. It creates a tension that attracts the actor towards "[…] a self contained universe that one can control" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 67). However, feelings of control sometime give way to feelings of anxiety. For this very reason, it is possible that some of the numerous 'dropouts' from gliding are technically competent pilots unable to avoid anxiety. In the first stages of the pilot's career , especially after the first solo flights, anxiety levels can be very high, but the pilot can deal with them with the support of her/his instructors. The following stage is more delicate, during which the pilot is experienced enough to

be left on her/his own but not adept enough to deal with all the possible situations which may arise, to control unplanned as well as planned events. Fears and anxieties can be very high at this stage and most dropouts are people with this level of competence. In Bilonia, during my fieldwork many recently licensed pilots gave up, two of them immediately after a difficult landing. Luciano, a physician in his late forties, procrastinated his first solo flight in a single-seat glider for a long time. He preferred to fly in two-seat gliders with more experienced companions since his professional commitments didn't allow him enough time to practice. When the time came to debut on the single seater, the pressure of the novelty led him to bungle his landing which was hard and wide off the mark. Ginetto, in his mid-thirties working for a real estate agency in a village near Sirto, had made practicing landing the main purpose of his gliding, since he didn't dare attempt cross-country soaring, which – as he confessed to me – caused him too much anxiety. One day, in front of a numerous audience, he hit the tarmac very hard and lost control of the glider that ended out of the runway. Neither pilot was ever seen at the airport again.

9.3   Edgework: the usefulness of risk

Edgework appears to be based on an apparent paradox. Its actors are mainly people who feel threatened or frustrated by social forces beyond their direct control; but the shield they choose appears to be even more threatening since it involves risking life itself taking part in a dangerous activity[111]. Risk becomes for them a means to experience self-actualisation and acquire a state of well-being.

The experience of edgework is analysed in detail by Stephen Lyng who identifies its main components. The actor is usually scared especially before the experience has begun when s/he is anticipating in her/his mind what lies ahead. "Even skydivers with thousands of jumps report being very nervous and fearful

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[111] This is a mechanism made plain by novelist Joseph Conrad. Most of his seamen characters feel safer on board their ships exposed to all the uncertainties of the open sea, than at home, where incomprehensible social forces threaten their security. See also Leden 1996 for an application of this mechanism to flying.

in the 15 or 20 minutes before reaching jump altitude." (Lyng 1990, p. 860). By the same token, the glider pilot – especially if s/he has the daring of her/his youth behind her/his shoulders and doesn't fly very often – feels particularly vulnerable and insecure during the first minutes after takeoff, when her/his sailplane follows the tug in the rough air encountered in the lowest layers of the atmosphere. After s/he has released from the tug, fear goes away. Now the pilot is totally in control of the glider. Approaching the edge the actor becomes totally involved; her/his perceptual field becomes focused on their task, excluding all the rest, taking in only those factors that can determine success or failure. In gliding this implies monitoring the two instruments that gauge the air vertical speed; concentrating on the slightest movement of the air under the wings (which of the wings has a faint tendency to rise) in order to move in that direction; looking for the direction of the smoke from farmers' fires; noticing the presence of birds (swallows and especially hawks and eagles) that thermal in the surrounding rising air; appreciating the swell of the clouds and their shapes: all factors that mark the presence of rising air that can be exploited to gain altitude.

The aptitudes required by Csikszentmihalyi for flow to develop are the same required by edgework. Says Lyng: "The more specific aptitudes required for this type of competence involve the ability to avoid being paralysed by fear and the capacity to focus one's attention and actions on what is most crucial for survival" (Lyng 1990, p. 859). In gliding, one of the best examples of such situations is when the pilot suddenly realises that s/he is going to out-land in a field. The risk for the novice is that s/he will be paralysed by fear. This can lead the pilot to making one of two mistakes. S/he might put off the inevitable landing as long as possible. The result of this procrastination is that the various stages of the process will be rushed – finding a suitable field, assessing its length and its soil, starting a regular landing circuit composed by a down wind leg, a base leg and final glide – in a wide turn performed when already too close to the ground. On the other hand s/he may hurry towards the ground too early. According to pilots who reported this experience, they do this in order to get a threatening task over with as soon as possible since a long wait can prove to be agonizing. One of my informants, Cristiano, when he was starting out in cross-country soaring, was forced to land in a field. He rushed through the stages and in his hurry to land failed to notice that his glider still had its water ballast on board, which must

always be dumped before landing by opening the taps of the wing tanks. He crash-landed his sailplane, seriously damaging it and injuring his backbone. His gliding licence was suspended for some time and he had to undergo physiotherapy.

9.4   Adventure

For a different interpretation of these feelings we can turn to the analysis offered by a classical work of sociology of the beginning of the Twentieth century. As a matter of fact, as with so many other leisure activities, gliding represents a form of adventure. It seems to possess all the encompassing characteristics of adventure identified by Georg Simmel: totally different in its main respects from the everyday activities; it is enthralling; it takes place in a specialised space separate from the rest of people's lives; it has a distinct beginning and an end. Like all other forms of adventure, each flight has such importance that the pilots continue to re-live it in their minds long after it is over.

Almost always, this re-living of the adventure takes a social form in the drive to tell it to other people. From the moment s/he lands, the pilot feels the urge to communicate the experience to bystanders, all the phases of the flight, its high and low points, the difficult situations encountered and how they were dealt with. All this is told and re-told in great detail. Big chunks of the usual conversation at the airfield take the shape of tales about flights. The bystanders are usually interested in some technical details which they can use to improve their own technique through vicarious experience; and they are generally interested in the tales of the strongest pilots, those they can learn the most from, or who set the bar for future performances. The tales of one's peers are less engrossing and often are decidedly boring. Detailed accounts of how a pilot managed to locate and to 'centre' a particular thermal or how s/he decided to push their glide towards as distant cumulus cloud are no fun. But interrupting such unwanted tales is very difficult and one risks hurting the feelings of the pilot who is struggling to communicate their very deeply felt emotions. Alberto, chief instructor at Piti, calls this "the pilots' syndrome of the unwanted flying tales". He jokingly states that it affects every pilot. Since Alberto is held in very

high esteem by most pilots and is a popular character whose advice is considered precious he has to face more than the usual share of these pilots giving vent to their post-flight emotions.

The telling and retelling of a flight (I might almost say, of every flight) also takes on a more intimate aspect. "The more 'adventurous' an adventure, that is, the more fully it realises its idea, the more 'dreamlike' it becomes in our memory" (Simmel 1911, p. 1). In my own experience, I recall how when starting on my drive back home from the airport I analyse in my mind some facets of the flight with a daydreaming attitude and use intensely felt bits of my flight to mentally recreate a different flight. In this mental flight the stress, anxieties and even fears that usually characterise a normal gliding day recede into the background and events take a new life, one that is more fulfilling more positive and totally engrossing. I can savour the sources of energy I might have encountered in my glide in places where I know they probably were to be found on that particular day. My mind can create an audience to listen to this private tale and the feeling of this fake flight created from the scraps of a real one is the source of deep pleasure. Following Simmel, the more the pilots play with their soaring day, daydreaming about it, re-enacting it in their minds, savouring every bit of it, the more their soaring adventure becomes "a foreign body in [their] existence which is yet somehow connected with the centre" (Simmel 1911, p. 1).

The comparison between adventure and gliding can be drawn even further, drawing on the fact that "[s]ome practitioners refer to their activities as art or as a spiritual experience" (Wheaton 2007a, p. 298). Simmel remarks how there is a "[…] profound affinity between the adventurer and the artist […]. For the essence of a work of art is, after all, that it cuts out a piece of the endlessly continuous sequences of perceived experience, detaching it from all connections with one side or the other, giving it a self-sufficient form as though defined and held together by an inner core" (ibidem, p. 2). "It is because the work of art and the adventure stand over against life (even though in very different senses of the phrase) that both are analogous to the totality of life itself, even if this totality presents itself in the brief summary and crowdedness of a dream experience" (ibidem, p. 2). Simmel points out that this is why the adventurer represents the extreme example of the 'ahistorical' individual, he who lives only in the present.

We have seen in the chapter on the subcultural qualities of the gliding community how important the activity around which the subculture is born becomes for the individual. In the beginning it may represent just a break in the usual routine of life. But as soon as the pilot is totally committed to it, s/he "achieves a central feeling of life that runs through the eccentricity of the adventure and produces a new, significant necessity of his life in the very width of the distance between its accidental, externally given content and the unifying core of existence from which meaning flows" (ibidem, p. 3). The specific nature of gliding is rooted in its being a *form of experiencing'* in which – contrary to what the practitioner may think of it – the '*content'* of the activity doesn't count very much since its nature is 'accidental' – that is to say, the same state of adventure can be obtained by different means, some more glamorous than others and the individual doesn't choose them with a rational decision[112]. He just happens to be involved in one or the other. The process becomes more important than the substance. According to Simmel, this is another reason why adventure matches more the needs of the young and less those of adults; the latter want to reflect on the substance of things and the way they became what they are – their historical becoming. However, we have seen in Chapter 7 how according to ethnographic research elderly people are drawn into a leisure activity – in the cases examined, lawn bowling and shuffleboard – that quickly and almost by chance becomes the main purpose of their life[113].

9.5   Gliding as a form of heroism

In popular culture the image of the aviator is likened to that of a solitary knight (Carocci 1997). This adds a further dimension to the motivations behind every type of recreational flying, gliding included. And yet while this desire to be 'heroic', belongs to the early stages of the pilot's career, as his/her experience

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[112] Although, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, the choice of 'adventure' may answer to precise unconscious needs. These needs can be met by activities that are apparently very different from one another. In September 2006 a glider pilot (the person with whom, apart from myself, my main informant shared most of his flights) died in a scuba diving accident. Though practised under water, scuba diving appears to have much in common with gliding.

[113] My main informant, Tristano, was scandalised by the possibility that the content of the activity doesn't count. He rejected as outlandish the reality that sports far less challenging than gliding can be as well engrossing for their practitioners.

increases, it loses importance and slides into the background (see also Donnelly 2006). There are three main cultural domains where the heroism of the pilot is expressed: movies, autobiographies and novels. Here, I trace the birth of the popular beliefs about flying in movies that describe the deeds of war aces (Paris 1995), in an autobiography by a former World War I pilot (Lewis 1993) and in some novels by William Faulkner[114]. Movies are a useful source since "[t]he cinema, like any other form of popular culture, reflects the beliefs and attitudes of the society in which it is produced" (Paris 1995, p. 10). The first films about flying were produced just a few years after the first flight by the Wright brothers[115]. The pilot was depicted as a heroic figure, a man able to master technology and to conquer the elements, always confronted with the risk of a sudden death. The filmmakers pointed to the risks inherent in flying and enlarged its dramatic dimension. In so doing they contributed to the myth of the aviator as a hero. The pilot was already considered a hero before World War I, but at the beginning of the war his status increased and he became like a "knight of the Air" (Paris 1995, p. 2). The battles fought on the ground were squalid and unglamorous. The soldiers spent their days in the trenches, an anonymous mass wading and struggling through the mud. By contrast the airmen fought alone in the clear sky. Their combats were similar to the medieval tournaments, to duels of individuals left to their free will. They were reminiscent of the jousts of ancient chivalry and the movies made every effort to promote this idea. "In the public imagination, even the most bitterly contested battles in the sky were fought according to knightly rules. Thus, while propaganda from all sides was directed at creating a monstrous image of the enemy soldier, air fighters, all honourable men and worthy opponents, were the single exception" (Paris 1995, p. 33). "Like duelling, air fighting required a set of steely courage, drained of all emotion, fined down to a tense and deadly effort of will" (Lewis 1993, p. 170). This image was proposed, during and after the war, in innumerable films with

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[114] Another important author, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, is instead left out of the picture, since his approach misses the point I am pursuing here. His literary model is not the familiar memoir in which the pilot is cast in a special light. In his novels most of the values contained in pilots' accounts are overturned and the pilot is seen as belonging to a community of human beings linked together by chains of solidarity. The most enthralling part of the flight is the return to earth to take one's place in life.

[115] See, for example, *Dash through the Clouds* 1912, dir. Mack Sennett.

few variations[116]. Through their mystification about the nobility of the soul of the knights of the air, totally other to the rude fighters on the ground, they contributed to the creation of the image the audience has of the airmen. Moreover, they even shaped the image the aviators have of themselves. Laurence Goldstein analysed the memoirs of aviators of the Great War defining them "the closest approximation one can find to the knightly tales" (1986, p. 89).

The movies dealing with the Second World War also contained the same ideas of heroism, exuberance and dislike of the constraints of the war that was being fought on earth[117]. If these are the popular images and beliefs about the fighters of the air, by the same token the civil aviators had a public role to play in the collective imagery forged by popular films. The freedom and the heroism attached to the knights of the air affected them too. Flying became "a liberating force against the confines of middle-class convention" (Paris 1995, p. 102).

To get rid of this limited image and obtain a more rounded view of the airmen we must look at a movie based on a novel by William Faulkner, *Pylon* (1951). Entitled *The Tarnished Angels* (1957, dir. Douglas Sirk) it tells the story of an alcoholic journalist, Devlin, who meets a group of stunt flyers who perform pylon races[118] in small rural towns. Devlin is fascinated by the pilots and their lives, which he sees in a characteristically romantic, biased way. But becoming acquainted with these men he loses his romantic illusions and sees them for what they are: people driven by the monomaniac obsession for flying to which moral values and life itself are sacrificed. Although he was also able to see the other side of the coin Faulkner in his youth had been under the strong influence of the myth of the pilot as a hero. In 1918 he enrolled in the RAF in Canada, but a few months later at the end of the war he had not yet learned to fly. Nonetheless, he contrived a bogus identity for himself as a World War I pilot, even pretending for some years that he had been wounded in a leg during an aerial combat. He acquired a RAF officer uniform that he wore for a while affecting the same nonchalance of the real pilots (Harrison 1985).

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[116] For example, *The Shield of Honor* 1927, dir. Emory Johnson; *Daring Deeds* 1927, dir. Duke Worne; *Air Eagles* 1931, dir. Phil Whitman; *The Dawn Patrol* 1930, dir. Howard Hawks; *Hell's Angels* 1930, dir. Howard Hughes.

[117] See for example, *God is My Co-Pilot* 1945, dir. Robert Florey; *Fighter Squadron* 1948, dir. Raoul Walsh; *Dragonfly Squadron* 1954, dir. Lesley Selander.

[118] Pylon racing is a form of air race, popular in USA before the World War II, in which small aircraft compete on a circuit marked by two pylons fixed on the ground that represent the turning points.

In today's popular culture the image of the pilot is still surrounded by a magic aura encouraged by the media, and glider pilots are no exception being on the contrary at the top of the ladder, maybe second only to the acrobatic pilots.

In an article published in January 2004 in the popular Italian weekly "Oggi" (730.000 copies sold to a mainly female audience) the Russian woman glider pilot Larissa Khamitova was interviewed after she had taken part in the military World championships held in Italy (Rieti) in the summer of 2003. The journalist introduced gliding to an audience which was totally ignorant of the subject as a daring activity, at the same time describing Larissa, who at the time was 34 and mother of two children, as a hero of our times. This presentation was in striking contrast with the pilot's assertions that, since competition gliding is very common in Russia among women, she is not considered a hero at all in her country and almost nobody takes notice of what she does.

The influence of the media in determining how some risky and individualistic activities like flying are perceived by the audience has also been used by academics to account for the pursuit of risk taking leisure[119]. Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993), inspired by Goffman (1967; 1990), have devised a model based on the classical Greek drama. They ascribe these pursuits to what they call a 'dramatic model' at work in our culture which is determined by the interaction between three key environmental variables: mass media, social specialisation, and technology. In the contemporary Western world mass media have a pivotal role, since "[...] our affective and cognitive expectations are shaped, as dramatic story lines form the content of cartoons, comics, music, novels film and television. [...] While we consciously pay attention to the content of movies or novels, we tacitly adopt their dramatic framing as the structure of our world view" (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993, p. 3): thus we assume the stark feelings and actions of the idealised world they depict as a benchmark for our lives. At the same time in their workplaces people experience forms of alienation that are the result of the forced specialisation demanded by the modern means of production. Workers lose autonomy. They cannot see the immediate purpose of their job and are distanced from the products of their labour. As a result of this, the workplace itself is the source of tension to be released. Technology contributes to the

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[119] In Chapter 8 we have already examined the role of the media in helping the subculture to give shape to its identity (see Thornton 1995).

increased consumption of high-risk activities in that it makes available the sophisticated technical equipment needed for these pursuits (i.e. gliders, snowboards, motorbikes). Celsi, Rose and Leigh hold "that the juxtaposition of the western dramatic model with the specialised social forms of the twentieth century creates a context of motivating tension that requires outlets that are prototypically dramatic in form" (ibidem, p. 4). At the same time, the mass media offer alternative models of behaviour and technology provides the instruments upon which high-risk leisure behaviour is based. "Ultimately, high risk activities provide individuals with an enabling context for performance on a stage carefully delimited to match their abilities and motives. Dramatic scenes can be readily scripted, which, when creatively enacted, provide catharsis and, above all, a sense of maximised potential and a life more richly experienced" (ibidem, p. 20).

Glider pilots themselves are by no means immune to the spell of such dramatic models, though they would react with scorn were this suggested. Examples abound. One day I was chatting with a fellow member of the club who is both a tug and glider pilot. When I showed my surprise at his deep knowledge of airline jets, he stated self mockingly:

> My dream has always been that I am in a airliner when suddenly one of the flight attendants asks if anyone of the passengers can fly the plane because both the pilots are incapacitated. I stand up and I say: 'Yes, I can!' (6.6.2006).

A pilot, who was injured during a competition held in Ferrara[120], wrote to the electronic mailing list in order to thank all those that had inquired after his health:

> Besides the 30 stitches in my face, a broken nose but still working (I can breathe from both nostrils) and looking like Rocky Balboa after escaping from Ivan Drago's claws, I'm fine. Strangely morale is not underground (5.25. 2004).

The last sentence is telling. Of course, he now can view himself as the hero just came back from his last adventure!

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[120] He mishandled an out-landing.

One of the tug pilots, on the landing circuit with his plane at the usual low altitude, nearly crashed into a radio controlled model aeroplane. A few years ago during weekends, model planes were allowed to fly in the airport in a purposely-allotted area. In that particular instance, the owner had allowed his model to stray outside the established flying box which is positioned so as to stay clear of the landing circuit. After the landing, the pilot confronted the owner of the model accusing him of incompetence in abusive terms. Besides the real danger encountered, the point at stake was likely one of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995). The tug pilot (also a glider pilot) was the real pilot, endowed by virtue of his activity with a superior status of 'pilot'. The other fellow was forced to recognise his lower standing, similar to that of a child who plays with her/his toys. Even when the pilot is not a hero (and in this case he is not, since he is an old hand, a person for whom flying is routine), her/his position is a privileged one since s/he runs real risks. S/he dares and therefore s/he reaps social rewards for that (1.25.2001).

On various occasions, at Bilonia airport, I witnessed scenes redolent of 'heroism' unfold before my eyes. For example, once, while together with other pilots I was waiting for my turn to fly, a glider belonging to the Italian Air Force took off. The flight was short but spectacular: the glider made a couple of perfectly executed loops, a low passage at high speed, using its momentum to gain altitude and landed at the end of the runway, scaring onlookers in the process. Fearing a collision we hurriedly pushed our gliders (the two we were going to fly in) out of the way. We didn't know who the pilot was, but on the radio we heard a female voice. When the flight was over, two good-looking young pilots got out of the sailplane, a man and a woman. One of the witnesses of the episode communicated to the rest of the audience that the male pilot regularly took part in gliding competitions and had placed second at the gliding international military championship in 2003. The female pilot also belonged to the Air Force. She had arrived a couple of hours earlier, flying alone in a training fighter jet. While she was in Bilonia for a short rest before the flight back, her colleague had given her the opportunity to test a glider. We civilian glider pilots were dumbfounded. They seemed to belong to another world. Noticing that we had hurried to move our gliders, the male pilot asked us if his landing too close had worried us. He then said:

Don't worry, I had everything under control (9.8.2004).

In this episode, various elements contributed to creating an aura of mysterious superiority, far removed from everyday concerns. The two main characters belonged to an elite – they were jet fighter pilots. One of them was an attractive young woman performing an activity girls usually don't engage in. My naïve beliefs in the popular assumptions about jet pilots made me perceive them as belonging to another sphere, that of the 'heroes'. The other pilots, who I questioned after the episode, revealed similar perceptions[121].

My informants confirmed a widespread feeling of superiority, of belonging to a privileged elite (with some exceptions, for example, Tristano and Matteo, who are both too experienced to still be prone to this sentiment). In the course of conversations we had on this subject, some pilots (Salvo, Ginetto, Cesare, Achille, Dario, Maurizio) revealed that at the beginning of their careers they had been elated to be perceived as a person apart, a man able to rely on themselves to accomplish very difficult tasks. This feeling was for them one of the rewarding aspects of being a glider pilot. On many occasions I noticed how some pilots – some more than others, in particular, Lino, Achille, Gino, Silvano and Vasco – relished the role of 'adventurers' or 'heroes'. They delighted in telling stories about their daring flights before an audience of inexpert pilots or laymen. Whenever possible they seized the opportunity to give joy flights to novices, startling their passengers with simple stunts and with a lot of talking about the difficulties of soaring.

Doing something out of the ordinary and running real risks contributes to building a kind of perception on the part of the others that the actors in the front stage clearly relish, even though the way they perceive themselves when they are not in the limelight can be very different. Besides, years of experience and age tend to modify this feeling, giving the pilot the capability of being self-mocking when s/he indulges in it.

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[121] Hearing in September 2006 that the male pilot had been seriously injured during an international contest, held in Piti the previous month, gave me food for thought. His trivial accident (he had crashed after ending low in a narrow valley were the possibility of out-landing was non-existent and hitting the electric line) was in sharp contrast with the invulnerability of the hero he had portrayed when I had witnessed his stunts.

9.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a discussion of the main body of theory concerned with the motivations that lead people to run voluntary risks for reasons of sport or leisure. Starting from what glider pilots themselves state as important in their liking of the activity, such as the sense of freedom and fusion with the environment, the satisfaction on having to rely for one's survival entirely on one's skills, the strong emotions, the sense of accomplishment, it shows how all these motives are expounded in the literature. Psychoanalytic studies linked the appeal and thrill of flying to the sense of oneness with the universe it conveys (Balint 1959). Csikszentmihalyi's theory of 'flow', subsequently adopted by various authors, explains in psychological terms the lure of activities where opportunities for action are in balance with the actor's skills and that have the power to completely absorb the individual. Lyng's (1990) notion of edgework explains the voluntary assumption of risk in recreational activities with the need of thrill seeking, on placing oneself in threatening situations over which the actor has full control. The actor experiences feelings of self-determination, s/he moves from her/his everyday constraints towards a spontaneous realisation of her/his self. In a classical sociological interpretation of these feelings Simmel (1911) has spoken of the fullness and intensity of the adventure and the fulfilment the actors derive from an engrossing activity that lies outside their ordinary lives.

In the last section of this chapter, I briefly drafted a personal analysis on how flying is perceived in popular culture. The image of the aviator, glider pilot included, is likened to that of a solitary knight, a lone hero of our times. I contend that for the newcomers one reason for practising such a sport could be an intriguing allure to belong to such an elite. Even in middle-age, the possibility of acting according to a script that follows an idealised model of life in which real drama is still possible seems an attractive way to overcome daily frustrations (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993). All the theories presented concord in highlighting the role of dangerous action in the self-actualisation of practitioners.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to rethink sport subcultural theory by applying it to an unusual age bracket and to chart forms of reflexivity in risk perception in the practitioners of a dangerous sport, showing how risk perception follows a precise pattern. It is shaped by the cultural norm of the gliding subculture and affected by the average age of the members, and by the specific hues it takes inside a specific location. To this purpose I adopted the subculture created by middle-class, middle-aged Italian men around gliding in the village of Bilonia as an empirical point of departure. The data presented here reveal the existence of a middle-aged sport subculture, something that has been seldom encountered in the literature on the subject. In fact, most of the members of Bilonia gliding club belong to an age bracket that spans from thirty-five to sixty-five. Most studies on sport subcultures have hitherto looked at people with homogeneous socio-demographic characteristics: i.e., participants belong to the same age group (15-30 years), are mainly male and upper middle-class. Only in a few cases does membership in the subculture extend over several generations and include persons who are middle-aged or even elderly. But apart from a few exceptions their number is too small to be able to define the groups as adult subcultures.

The paradoxical title of the thesis was chosen to place the reader before the very heart of the ethnographic data that emerged from my research. In their interactions with each other glider pilots appear to cherish one supreme value: the desire to fly at whatever the cost. Provided they can go on flying they are quite ready to shrug off the deaths of friends and acquaintances as events that do not concern them directly. How are we to account for this paradoxical fact? This is the other aspect that I examined in these pages, showing how it is largely brought about by two factors: the fact that glider pilots comprise a subculture, that is, they think and act according to values which are different from those of the wider culture. As a result, a leisure activity and its goals can seem more important to them than their own chances of survival, or conserving the quality

of relationships with spouses and next of kin. What is apparently a marginal activity can take on a disproportionate significance. In the case of some pilots it can become their main purpose in life. Secondly, the death of a glider pilot is always the death of someone who has committed errors and who was therefore the main cause of what happened. Hence, my research supports the cultural theory of risk by showing that the fact of belonging to a particular subculture, or even to the various nuances the subculture acquires in different locations (idiocultures), provides a model that explains how people come to adopt a particular cultural stance when they are called on to face situations of risk (Breackwell 2007; Douglas 1986).

The particular age bracket of the individuals in this study involved not only discrepancies between their subculture and other sport subcultures, but it also implied differences in the manner of facing risk. I was in a position to point out how the literature has overlooked an important issue linked to risk perception: the practitioners' capacity to overcome the rationalisations usually adopted to explain the causes of accidents. Pilots commonly resort to various types of rationalisation while denying the possibility that one day they themselves could be victims of a serious accident. The mechanism generally adopted is to blame the victim of the accident. The extremes to which this manner of thinking can lead were examined at a local and national level through the reactions to a long series of fatal accidents (30 in ten years over a population of around 1700). What emerged is that, contrary to the prevailing opinion in the cultural theory of risk, adult pilots can sometimes go beyond the rationalisations that are their most common reaction. They can reveal a high level of reflexivity and awareness that allow them to perceive the risk they run as a cultural problem linked to a wrong frame of mind. We saw an example of this in the spate of fatalities that occurred the first ten days of June 2005, when three popular pilots died in three different accidents, stirring feelings of sorrow and reflexivity. Their deaths led people to focus on the risky irrationality of gliding and enabled them for a while to step outside of their system of thought and view the activity from a different perspective. And yet the ethnographic data show that during the period covered by the study (2001-2005), this ability to grasp the true nature of the danger and the simple fact of being aware of the various accidents which had occurred did not, apparently, result in a decrease in the riskiest behaviours on the

part of pilots. In other sports, however, a reduction in the number of accidents through knowledge of past accidents has been shown to contribute to fewer fatalities, i.e., skiing (Levine and Gorman 1994).

The unusual age bracket of glider pilots lends itself to two types of considerations: on the one hand it highlights the need for further ethnographic research which could identify and analyse other sporting contexts with similar characteristics, the same kind of "dynamics", and the same sense of adventure and risk as may be found in gliding. Current research tends to separate these two aspects: studies look at the participation of individuals who are not so young in various sports, but they almost never deal with physically demanding sports and the skills, technical knowledge and risks these sports involve. There are other subcultures which are well represented with regard to their number of middle aged practitioners – for example, the world of regattas – sports which demand a similar type of involvement, and these sports might furnish a wealth of data which could be compared with sailplane gliding in Italy. On the other hand, it might also be worth looking at how sports which are related to gliding (i.e. hang-gliding, paragliding) express the perception and management of risk, and how risk is structured in relation to the different age bracket of their members, while investigating the possibility that alongside the younger practitioners there are also middle-aged ones. If this turns out to be the case the study could highlight possible differences in risk perception.

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

There are implications to which I could have given further analytical attention. What emerges from my research is that sailplane gliding has a number of things in common with extreme sports without itself being an extreme sport or a lifestyle sport (Wheaton 2004), although in a research project on new sporting forms it was included in this category, since it involves extreme difficulty and technical competence, and it requires skills that are learned through years of practice and dedication (Tomlinson et al. 2005). There is one aspect which distinguishes sailplane gliding from other dangerous sports: pilots do not seek out danger for its own sake, the kind of danger that creates dependence. In this sense glider pilots more closely resemble mountaineers than the devotees of

extreme sports. If anything sailplane gliding is more a form of adventure: this is the effect of the separation from daily life that the subcultural context creates, encouraging pilots to adopt – even if only during the short time of their activity – different values and standards, and also because exposure to risk in gliding is gradual and occurs during the course of an activity that often lasts several hours, and is not limited to a few adrenalin charged moments when the practitioners put their lives on the line. In this thesis I perhaps should have given greater emphasis to this aspect of protracted time in gliding which is in clear contrast to the ephemerality (Palmer 2004) of post-modern sports which court risk.

Sailplane gliding is not an extreme sport because it doesn't involve transgression or physical skill: it is a sport based on the control of a sophisticated technical piece of equipment, so that the pilot's age is of little importance or at least of less importance than her/his experience and technical skill. In effect, sailplane gliding only shares some of the characteristics which have been identified as defining lifestyle sports (Wheaton 2004): the emphasis on participation; the fact that it revolves around the consumption of objects of technology; that it makes great demands on practitioners' time and financial resources; that commitment creates involvement and self-realization; that it is practiced mainly by members of the middle class; that it takes on an individualistic form; that it doesn't involve aggressive behaviours or physical contact; that it is practiced in the outdoors in a situation in which the pilot becomes one with her/his environment. It is differentiated from extreme sports in that the latter are a recent phenomenon, while sailplane gliding has a long tradition behind it, that extreme sports are practised as a form of resistance to more traditional activities which are seen to be too regulated and institutionalized. Sailplane gliding is not a lifestyle sport because it comes out of a long tradition, it is institutionalized and highly regulated (for example, consider how difficult it is to obtain and periodically renew a licence). It is more comparable to skiing than to snowboarding. Besides, several other airborne sports are offshoots of gliding, like hang-gliding or paragliding which because of the level of physical preparation they require and the absence of tradition and clear rules and lower economic costs have been taken up more by young people (Brannigan and McDougall 1983).

I have described risk as a cultural product: the individual pilot is influenced in her/his choices by the social context in which s/he practices her/his activity. However, we should also ask: to what extent is it the pilot her/himself who chooses that context in accordance with her/his own temperament and psychological tendencies (in our case Bilonia instead of Piti)? This is a question that further study might illuminate. On the basis of my present knowledge, I would venture to say that many but not all pilots (but how many? and in what percentage?) make judicious decisions based on their own attitudes to risk and their competitive desire to distinguish themselves. This desire may be more pronounced in some than in others. Like many other situations it is very difficult to know which comes first: an individual's attitude or the normative practices of her/his social context.

In this thesis we have seen the power sporting subcultures have to absorb all the interest and commitment of their members. No matter how trivial its objectives, a subculture based on a recreational activity can sometimes assume a central role in the lives of its practitioners. As has been shown by studies on lawn bowling and shuffleboard (Heuser 2005; Snyder 1986) this can even occur in the case of simple skill games (Simmel 1911). In sailplane gliding the subculture in its local variations undoubtedly influences the perception of and response to risk: but how far is the subculture itself influenced by and determined by risk? How much does the sway it exerts over its members derive from the fact that it is a dangerous activity? To put the question in other terms: to what extent do the sense of adventure and the occasionally euphoric consciousness of voluntarily running risks account for the activity's power to enthral the lives of pilots? Studies on stylistic youth subcultures would appear to deny any such influence of risk on the creation of a subculture.

Also related to this question is another, which I did not examine directly. To what extent do the pilots themselves perceive sailplane gliding as an extreme sport? During the numerous conversations I had as part of my fieldwork none of them ever used this expression, though many pilots agreed that flying is a 'special' and dangerous activity that made them feel 'special'. Moreover, the question of adults searching for an identity through the practice of sporting activities needs to be further clarified. In sailplane gliding and in its inherent dangers, in its glorious tradition of 'knights of the air', pilots are attempting to

give some sort of meaning to their lives, even if they are no longer boys. I often returned to this point during the course of this thesis without ever elaborating it organically. Popular ideas about heroism have an important role in forming pilots' identities. In gliding, risk is real, but doesn't operate as an attraction *per se*, although pilots sometimes affirm that they like gliding because risk is exciting, 'adrenalinic' as one of my informants defined it. There is the possibility that they are inventing a scenario for themselves, one in which they can act as 'mythical heroes' and rise above the mundane by conferring meaning and excitement to life.

Another important theme that might have deserved greater attention is how the technology on board sailplanes influences the manner of flying from the point of view of technique and above all in its psychological and social implications. Besides experiencing the flight first hand, onboard electronics allow a mediated participation that creates a distance from immediate experience by allowing the pilot to follow her/his flight as it unfolds on the screen of a palmtop computer connected to the GPS device which is an integral part of the navigation system of the more sophisticated sailplanes. The pilot flies the plane, making all the necessary decisions, while at the same time s/he watches it unfold from the outside, as the path is traced on the computer screen in front of her/him. How does this situation affect her/his manner of flying? Does it produce a different attitude with regard to risk? It has already been shown how recording a feat in order to review it later can encourage the practitioner to push to her/his limits. This has been labelled 'Kodak courage' (Gasperini 1999). Since most of these electronic aids are installed on private sailplanes, and not on those belonging to the club for use by members, my ethnographic work did not directly touch on this question. I looked at gliding in two clubs: it would be interesting to compare my ethnographic findings with a study, not yet done, on pilots who own their own sailplanes.

Other aspects might have been taken into consideration, and these include a historical survey of data on accidents that might lead to a view of the current situation as being something abnormal, associated only with a certain period, over the last ten or twenty years or so. Moreover, I didn't engage directly with issues of gender and risk, although I do refer in detail to the single case of Giulia.

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A further methodological reflection must be directed to aspects of the reality I examined, which were not included in the analytical framework, but which could have led to further findings. In particular, there are two elements to consider. The first is that, while ethnographers who study sport subcultures often manage to grasp the most intimate sides, they almost always neglect fundamental aspects like gender identity and relations between genders, and, as a rule, they do not take into account the presence of women within the group (Free and Hughson 2003). The second is based on the observation of how post-subcultural theory, in spite of its usefulness in studying dangerous and extreme sports, does not take into account important questions like the race and sexuality of the participants (Wheaton 2007a).

The gender position from which my ethnography was conducted - a male researcher studying the experiences of an almost exclusively male world - was not analysed, particularly its effects on theoretical interpretations, and the oversights and silences it involved. Situations that arose during my fieldwork – as for example, when I witnessed an episode of collusion that took place among a group of pilots in response to a comment one of them made behind the back of a young woman parachutist at the airport over her particularly scanty T-shirt, or how Filippa, a woman pilot during a competition at Piti accepted to take on the most boring organisational tasks and renounced her own flights – were passed over in silence, even if they reveal a lot about the position of women in the gliding milieu and the polarisation of genders that remains intact, notwithstanding the fact that the few women pilots are perfectly assimilated into the subculture. My profile as a male researcher tends to hinder the realisation of the fact that the study of a male subculture essentially takes the shape of an exploration of masculinity, and that the experience of glider pilots may also be viewed as the expression of a collective sense of masculinity (Free and Hughson 2003), and of how this masculinity is closely related to the fact of belonging to the white race, of how the roles of adventure and heroism are connected to each other and to the masculinity of the environment that encourages them.

The use I made of subjectivity and autobiography in the work of ethnography can be extremely productive, insofar as it allows the researcher to

overcome naïve attempts at objectivity, but it should have been tempered by a necessary degree of reflexivity, that is, by more self-awareness (Carrington 2008). From the point of view of method, my status within the group studied did not generate any contrast able to elicit meaning. My belonging to the white race, my male gender, my heterosexuality, my being middle-aged and middle class might have appeared as neutral fact and this apparent neutrality necessarily masked possible profundities of vision that could have enriched the picture with new meanings. A more reflexive attitude towards the type of ethnography I was carrying out could have led me to be more wary of accepting this unproblematic sameness which led the researcher embodied in the field to coincide with the subjects he was studying. Given that 'all knowledge is situated' (Hughson 2008), a different position assumed by the researcher might have opened up new prospects. A critical ethnography cannot be based on accounts that uncritically take for granted that the protagonist is a white male, rather such assumptions need to be deconstructed. Conversely, a female researcher in a male dominated area may be able to highlight ways of expressing/experiencing masculinity that elude the male researcher (Robinson 2008; Wheaton 2002).

White race, masculinity, adventure and heroism are closely interconnected themes. Adventure and heroism so closely represent hegemonic discourses of masculinity and whiteness, that in many cases they depict the embodied virile white explorer, as, for example, British explorers during the age of imperialism (Farley 2005). Adventure creates a masculinity that is idealised and hegemonic through two key elements, both well represented by the hero: the model it offers through its conventions, in fact, prevents other perceptions of masculinity in other more mundane and everyday situations (ex. in the family, in the daily life) that are less tied to the myth of virile supremacy. It is only perceived as 'hypermasculinity' of a militaristic kind ((Farley 2005). The status of glider pilots is authorised, reinforced and structured by the discourse of adventure. During the course of this thesis I might have mentioned episodes in line with this representation. For example, Alberto, director of the intensive courses in Piti, during one of the theory lessons that preceded the day's flying, drawing on his exceptional talent for histrionics and seasoning the sentence with various ironic winks (which also referred to the incongruity of the average age of the participants with his remarks) once declared: "I promised your mothers that I

would make real men out of you! But believe me, it's hard…really hard!". The remark, which was received with amused laughter, appealed to a real desire of the mature participants in the advanced cross country flying course: to attain through glider flying to a hypermasculine identity based on the model of wartime flying aces. This type of hegemonic masculinity is partly mitigated by the age and social class of the glider pilots. Of middle age and from the middle class, for the most part well educated, they do not fall into the more 'laddish' or working class forms of rhetoric in forging their ideal of masculinity, and they accept the few women present in the subculture and offer them good levels of support and integration.

The masculine identities that the gliding subculture makes possible might nevertheless have been enriched with a wider perspective, had I decided to use interviews as a method for enquiry. In the second chapter I explain the reasons for this choice, which I am not going to do here. What I feel is important to emphasize here is how the most recent studies (Robinson 2008) show the utility of this method in highlighting the role of the mundane and family life in masculinity. A strong masculine identity that is sought by practicing a hazardous and potentially extreme activity is counterbalanced in the everyday, private sphere by the world of the family and affections, a sphere that requires a shift in priorities, an acceptance of new responsibilities and new roles – for example, as a partner or father – that lead some participants to relativize the importance their sport has in their lives. Some of the rock climbers interviewed by Robinson used derogatory language to describe members of the subculture who, by now middle aged, continued to consider climbing the only interest in their lives. For many members their sporting activity continued to be reasonable only if the extreme masculine identity it involved did not clash with mundane relations (Robinson 2008). These two images overlap and suggest a more nuanced picture of adventure and heroism involving multiple axes of identity beyond the hypermasculinazation of adventure as a trope (Frohlick 2005).

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The activity of glider pilots flying out of Bilonia is marked by a considerable amount of risk. It appears to satisfy a fantasy that is shared by many

people. It provides the pilots with marvellous emotions, a sense of excitement that comes with having to rely solely on themselves and their skills, a feeling of communion with the environment, the opportunity to savour moments of perfect solitude, but also of intense camaraderie with other pilots who share the same passion. Flying sailplanes offers pilots a chance to win a new status based on the respect and support of other members of the subculture; it enables them to broaden their network of friendships by creating a sense of solidarity and belonging that reinforces the desire to be part of the subculture. For the seasoned pilot the set of values of those who do not fly loses importance, while her/his own identity increasingly comes to be based on participation in the world of gliding.

The sense of self-determination, of adventure and edgework that pilots draw from gliding appears to support the critique of the definition of youth as an exclusive bracket based on chronological age that has emerged from the most recent studies in sport subcultures. Rather, youth should be defined as a state of mind that also allows older members to perceive themselves as younger (Wheaton 2007a). Italian glider pilots seem to be the perfect products of the "post-traditional" society, according to which each individual is given the task of finding the lifestyle best suited to her/him (Giddens 1991; Phillipson 1998). Pilots appear to profit from the implications of this change. Thanks to flying they can turn the fact of growing old into something modern. They can develop youthful images of themselves and redefine middle age as mid-life, transforming this in-between period into an opportunity for personal growth (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989).

The argument put forward by this study is that there exists an interaction between the age of the members of a subculture and the way in which risk is faced. The two elements, the age of the pilots and the perception and management of risk are both of importance since each brings something new to the study of sport subcultures based on the voluntary assumption of risk. By examining how these elements interact one can perceive a complex process at play. On the one hand, maturity brings with it an attitude in which risk is no longer experienced as a challenge or test and mitigates the risks one is ready to accept. On the other hand, it is precisely the fact of chronological age as translated into years of flying and experience accumulated over time that leads to

a complacent excess of confidence in one's own skills, with the result that it is often the most skilful, most expert pilots who die. And finally it is also age which allows a mature recognition of the risks that derive from the mental schemata generated by the gliding subculture.

Appendix

Gliding as a Technical Practice

Introduction

This appendix sketches a history of unpowered flight, and provides a brief outline of how modern sailplanes were first developed. It then describes a generic glider, its technical characteristics, and the way it flies. It specifies the difference between gliders and motor gliders, and provides details about production and prices of different craft. It continues with a discussion of the various sources of energy the glider pilot uses in order to perform her/his flights. The appendix then deals with changes in the way gliders have been flown over the years. The last paragraph describes a number of safety devices that glider manufacturers have introduced in their products in order to reduce the consequences of accidents, and how the pilots – with a very few exceptions – have failed to adopt them.

A brief history of the sport

Early in the history of unpowered flight Sir George Cayley and Otto Lilienthal were both aware of the lifting properties of airfoils (an airfoil is the shape of a wing as seen in cross-section. When an airfoil-shaped body moves through the air it produces a force perpendicular to the fluid, a force that generates the lift that allows aeroplanes to fly). By the end of the Eighteenth century, Cayley had realised that human flight couldn't be achieved by the flapping of wings like birds. He recognised the need for more engineering, through such devices as cambered airfoils, dihedral of the wings for lateral stability[122], as well as tail and fin to provide pitch stability. In 1891, Lilienthal,

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[122] The dihedral is the upward angle from horizontal in the wing from root to tip, when viewed from directly in front or behind.

together with his brother Gustav, built the first sailplane and was able to perform some flights, although he made most of his experiments in gliders which were controlled by shifting the weight of the pilot as is the case in modern hang gliders. The words 'sailplane' and 'glider' are synonymous, although in some older contexts – i.e. from the 1920s to the 1940s – 'sailplane' implied an emphasis on a craft's soaring capabilities which doesn't apply to 'glider'[123].

Over a period of many years, before trying to fly with a powered aeroplane, the Wright brothers taught themselves to fly gliders in order to develop a machine that would be sufficiently stable and controllable. After the successful flight of the first powered aeroplane in 1903, men devoted all their efforts to improving powered flight, especially during the First World War. At the end of this war the Versailles Treaty banned the defeated Germany from having an air force and from building new aeroplanes. The Germans by-passed this ban by resuming the development of unpowered flight. In the 1920s they had already designed and built sailplanes which could soar for hours by relying on the updraft of wind blowing over slopes and ridges.

The wings of these early sailplanes had a thick airfoil and a low wing loading that developed plenty of lift, and therefore had a low rate of sink. Being without an engine, sailplanes always fly in a downward sloped path in order to maintain the required speed. A low rate of sink means that a glider loses a minimum of height in order to maintain enough speed to fly. Conversely, a high rate of sink means that a glider 'sinks' through the air more than would be desirable.

The disadvantage of these early sailplanes was that they created a lot of drag whenever the pilot tried to increase her/his speed. The amount of lift generated by a wing compared to the drag it creates by moving through the air is known as the 'lift-to-drag ratio' (L/D). A good L/D is one of the major goals in wing design. Since a particular glider's needed lift doesn't change, delivering that lift with lower drag means better gliding performance, that is to say, a better glide-ratio.

During the following decade, pilots practically stumbled across another source of available energy, that they sometimes were able to exploit in spite of

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[123] In Italian this difference doesn't exist, there is only one word *aliante*, although in the past a distinction was made between *aliante libratore* which stressed soaring performances, as opposed to *aliante planatore*.

not knowing its origin. It was constituted by strong up-currents that developed also in zero wind conditions. They were related to the sun's radiation of the soil, and often above these up-currents the presence of a cumulus cloud could be noted. On a stormy day, during a flight a German pilot named Max Kegel was sucked up by a large cumulus cloud that was in the process of developing into cumulonimbus. During that particular flight, Kegel was able to gain enormous height and glide much further than hitherto had been the case. When he landed 55 km from the place where he had taken off he had accomplished the first sailplane cross-country flight (Welch 1986).

After a while, glider pilots came to be aware of the existence of such thermal convection bubbles of air that rise from the earth's surface because they are warmer than the surrounding atmosphere. They started to understand how to exploit efficiently the energy of thermals in order to gain altitude and also be able to fly where mountain ridges weren't available. For the following years, until the outbreak of the Second World War, distance flying was all that mattered. To avoid being forced to retrieve the sailplane where it landed, pilots started to fly all the way to a turning point where they reversed their course to land back home. The problem was that this required them to fly not only downwind but also against the wind. For this reason, the slow gliders of the beginning of the sport were abandoned in favour of faster ones more fit to penetrate the adverse wind. A low rate of sink became less important than speed, and thinner airfoils gradually replaced the thick ones used for low speed hill soaring. At the end of the 1930s the best sailplanes had an efficiency of about 30:1. That is to say that they were able to fly a distance of 30 kilometres for every kilometre of lost altitude[124].

After the Second World War the new airfoils which had been developed for the wings of the fighter planes were adapted for gliders, increasing their already good performances until the limit imposed by the available materials was reached. In order to improve performance even further it would have been necessary to create wings with a totally smooth surface that wouldn't slow down the flow of the air over their skin. At the beginning of the 1970s the use of fibre-

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[124] A powered aeroplane has an efficiency of less than 10:1.

glass allowed this improvement and fibre-glass quickly became the material with which the majority of sailplanes are built.

Today it is not unusual for flights to cover hundreds of kilometres, either during contests or soaring cross-country for the sheer pleasure of it. The competitions tasks are triangles that have grown larger and larger (often more than 500 km) and are completed at very high speeds. The progress has been such that "[…] it might seem that there is no achievement left that is within reach of the ordinary pilot, but the intricate behaviour of the air is still not yet fully understood. Soaring is attractive because every flight is different and is an exploration in its own right" (Welch 1986, p. 7).

Each nation has a National Gliding or Soaring Association to look after the sport. In most countries the sport of gliding is practised out of gliding clubs, which provide the sailplanes, training (training flights are made in two seater sailplanes with dual controls) and launch equipment. Gliders don't have engines, so in order for them to become airborne, they have to be aero towed by a light aircraft until they reach an altitude sufficient to start soaring (usually between 500 to 1000 meters), or they are launched by means of a ground based winch.

Sailplane and motor glider

Sailplanes are characterised by long and narrow wings that have the purpose to obtain the flattest possible glide. Most single seat gliders have a 15 meter wingspan, 17-20 meters for two seaters. There are shorter models with a span of 12-13 meters (they belong to the so-called 'World class' or to the microlight category) and larger ones, 25-26 meters (the largest with a span of 31 meters).

The sailplane flies in the same way as any other aircraft; thus, the wings have to move through the air fast enough to produce sufficient lift to support the weight of the craft. But unlike 'real' aeroplanes that have an engine to provide the speed, the sailplane obtains the required airspeed from gravity. For the entire duration of the flight glides downward through the air, also when, circling into

an up-current which carries it upwards into its rising mass of air, it is gaining altitude[125].

A two-seater sailplane parked in front of the airstrip at Bilonia airport. In the sky, a big cumulus cloud shows signs of the strong thermal activity that characterises strong soaring days.

Sailplanes are controlled in the same way as aeroplanes. The standard commands are the stick, which, with its sideways movements, controls the ailerons (that affect the roll of the sailplane) and with its fore and aft movements moves the elevator which controls the pitch and alters the speed. Two pedals are used to control the rudder which determines the yaw, the swinging on the vertical axis to the left or the right, so that the longitudinal axis of the glider forms an angle with the line of flight. In order to turn, the wings have to be banked with the ailerons. At the same time enough rudder has to be applied to prevent the glider from slipping and to achieve the required co-ordination of the

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[125] In this case the up-current must be stronger than the rate of sink of the glider at the speed it is flying inside the thermal.

turn. Other commands are the trimmer that allows flying hands off at an established speed, the lever for the airbrakes which are used for landing or whenever the need arises to lose altitude in a hurry, and the release knob which is pulled by the pilot to release the tug rope.

Front seat of a two-seater glider in Bilonia. It shows the instrument panel, the stick (black in the centre), the yellow knob used to release the tow rope, the trim lever (green, on the left side), the airbrakes lever (light blue, on the left side), the microphone (right side).

In the design and construction of sailplanes one of designers' biggest concerns is drag, the resistance caused by the air when an object is passing through it. In any aircraft it is of two types: profile drag and induced drag. The first is mainly due to skin friction so that the more streamlined the glider's shape and the smoother its surfaces, the less drag. The wings create induced drag when they produce the lift required to fly. Moving through the air, the wings produce a depression on the upper surface that 'sucks' them upwards, and a force on their lower surface that pushes the air downward. This difference in pressure leads to the generation of vortices that originate mainly from the wing tips. Much

research is being done to try to reduce these vortices and, thus, induced drag (i.e. by adding winglets or making the wing tips very thin) but with the high performance which has already been achieved even minor improvements are tricky and very expensive.

Up until the 1970s sailplanes were made either of sheets of aluminium for both wings and body or of a welded steel tube frame coupled with wooden wings, both covered with plywood and fabric (Dacron). In the case of some light single seat gliders the body was also made of wood. Nowadays most sailplanes are made out of fibre-glass and epoxy resin. Not only does fibre-glass make it possible to build wings with the required smoothness, but it is also very cheap to repair. Craft with the better performances have their wing spars and other structural elements made of carbon fibre. The gel coat used to coat these materials gives the superbly smooth finish gliders need to have in order to achieve a smooth surface and decrease induced drag. These materials account for the white colour which is standard in modern gliders, since fibre-glass is heat sensitive and white is the colour that absorbs the least radiation. A streamlined bulb of Plexiglas, that allows the pilot an unobstructed visibility on all the sides, forms the canopy above the cockpit of the sailplane.

In order to create wing profiles that offer the best compromise between high speed and lift, flaps are incorporated in the trailing edges of the wings of the most sophisticated sailplanes. These are used to change the wing profile to obtain either higher speed or better lift depending on the needs of the pilot. When lowered they make the wings more efficient while circling in the thermals at low speed. Raised at a negative angle they transform the wing profile to be more efficient at high speeds, during the transitions from one thermal to the next. In order to make landings easier sailplanes have air brakes which project from the upper surface of the wings, so that when needed, the pilot can adjust the amount of airbrake-surface exposed to the airflow to create extra drag and increase the angle of glide. In a sailplane whose normal glide angle is 40:1 fully opening the airbrakes reduce it to around 8:1 – that is to the glide path of a small engine aircraft.

Fibre-glass sailplanes can be loaded with ballast in the form of water filled in water tanks in the wings and behind the seat. Competition sailplanes can load 180/260 litres of water, club sailplanes around 120 litres. The ballast

increases the wing loading and this, in turn, affects the performances: a ballasted glider has its best glide angle at a higher speed, so that it can move faster when soaring cross-country.

The dashboard of the sailplane is fitted with some instruments that are used to maximise the finesse of flying. The two-seater gliders have two separate dashboards: one for the front seat and one for the rear one. The three most important instruments are the airspeed indicator, the altimeter and the variometer. The first gives the sailplane's airspeed through the air; but it takes no account of the wind that is drifting it over the ground. The altimeter shows height calculated as barometric reduction in pressure as the altitude increases. Before take off the pilot sets the altimeter through a knob either on zero (that is equating to zero the elevation of the field from which the take off happens) or to read the exact height of the airfield above sea level. The problem is that any given setting is correct only at the time it is made because air pressure is constantly changing, especially if the weather is changing too. When landing in an unknown field the problem of guessing the right height is compounded by not knowing the elevation of the field. The soaring pilot must always remember that the altimeter is not telling her/him how high s/he is above the ground.

The variometer is a vertical speed indicator. In gliding it is one of the most important instruments since it enables the pilot to confirm the existence and strength of the up currents which s/he feels with the seat of her/his pants. The pilot watches her/his variometer to tell when her/his glider is rising or descending. The device makes thermal soaring feasible although success still rests on the pilot's skill. When not flying, the needle of the instrument lies in a horizontal position. When flying in a climb it points upwards on a ring that (in continental Europe) reads in meters per second[126](from 0 to 5); in descents it points downwards (from 0 to - 5). Modern sailplanes usually have two variometers (four if two-seaters). Besides the traditional mechanical one, that works using a small vane inside an annular chamber in which the air out of a vacuum flask flows, causing the vane to deflect, there usually is an electric variometer. Its response is quicker to any variation of the speed of the air (sometimes even too quick to be of any use) and it has the great advantage that it

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[126] In United Kingdom it reads in knots, where 2 knots are equivalent to 1 m/s.

can incorporate an audible signal. The audio vario relies on changes on the frequency of pulse to signal variation of vertical speed freeing the pilot from the constant observation of the instrument.

The slip indicator is a small ball in a curved glass tube filled with oil used to co-ordinate the inputs to ailerons and rudder while rolling in a turn. A string of wool attached to the outside Plexiglas canopy gives the same indication. The compass and a radio complete the basic instrumentation panel.

The instrument panel of a glider flying over a mountain near Bilonia. On the top, part of the wool string attached to the Plexiglas and used to assess the coordination of the turn; above the dash board, the small red knob to eject the canopy before bailing out; the two instruments above are the variometer (left) and the air speed indicator (right); the four instrument below are the g-meter, used to measure the gravitational forces during tight turns and aerobatics (at the far left), the electric variometer with the small knobs used to set its functions (left), the slip indicator (centre) and the altimeter (right). In the centre, on the bottom row, is the radio.

The performance of a sailplane is given by its glide ratio and sink rate. The gliders available at Bilonia airport during my fieldwork had a glide ratio that ranged from 34:1 to 40:1. The glide ratio, or efficiency, is the distance a

sailplane can travel per unit of height lost[127]. Sink rate is the rate at which the sailplane sinks to the earth when flying in still air. It is achieved at a specific speed (a little slower than the speed at which the flattest glide is obtained), and in today's sailplanes it varies between 0.5 m/sec and 0.7 m/sec. As any other aircraft, sailplanes have a maximum permitted speed (Vne) above which severe structural failures may occur; this speed is clearly marked on the anemometer by a red line. In the modern fibre-glass gliders it is typically between 250-280 km/h; there is also a maximum speed for rough air, usually 170-180 km/h.

A sailplane with an engine installed in it is called a motor glider. Its big advantage is that it can launch itself autonomously. There are two different types of motor gliders: those that resemble an aeroplane with remarkably long wings, with the engine (usually four strokes – very similar to those mounted on aeroplanes) and the propeller located in front of the cockpit. They are called TMG (Touring Motor Glider); their soaring performance is quite poor, but they are excellent for tourism and training (since they allow more than one landing for every session). They are used most of the time with the engine running.

The other type is that of high performance sailplanes with a retractable two-stroke engine (or more recently a retractable mast on top of which is the propeller, whereas the engine is fixed in the rear cone of the body) located behind the pilot. These are genuine sailplanes. The engine is used to take off and it is switched off and retracted as soon as the usual release height is reached; it is turned on again only if it becomes necessary to avoid an out-landing. The self-sustaining glider is a particular variety of this type. In this case, the engine is so small that it doesn't provide enough power for an autonomous take off, so that it always has to be launched like a regular glider. The engine is used only to reach the airfield if, far from it, the pilot cannot find more up-currents. The advantage is that, the engine being so small, its weight doesn't significantly affect the climbing performances.

Sailplanes are very expensive pieces of sport equipment. They are hand-built in small numbers[128] so no economies of scale are possible. A successful

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[127] For example: 40:1 means that, in still air and with finesse of piloting, it is possible to cover (using the metric units adopted in Italy) 40 km with 1 km of height.

[128] The small numbers are a direct consequence of the reduced number of potential customers worldwide. I.e., in Germany, the country in which gliding is most widespread, there are 32,000 practitioners. In the United States there are 20,000; in France 12,000; in the United Kingdom

model may stay in production for ten years, during which period only 300/400 are built. Less popular ones may be built in just a few dozens.

A tiny niche market and high costs of research and development, plus the expensive mandatory testing required for all new models of aeroplane, have pushed most factories out of the market. Today German factories, in plants often in the Eastern European countries, build most gliders. Poland and other Eastern countries account for the rest. Countries once famous for their sailplanes, like United Kingdom and Italy, ceased any kind of production in the 1970s.[129]

A second hand 25 year-old single seat club sailplane now sells for over 15,000 euro[130]; for a two-seater that figure can be almost double. For a state of the art used sailplane the price ranges between 35,000 and 80,000 euro. A new one costs well over 100,000 euro; over 130,000 a two-seater.

Sources of energy

The sailplane relies on the sources of energy that it finds in the atmosphere. It usually takes years for a pilot to acquire a deep understanding of these sources, and knowing how they work is one of the main attractions of the sport. They are of different types, and it also may happen that more than one source of energy is available at a particular time. This is especially the case when the weather is unstable (low pressure and a strong decrease in temperature with height) and the solar radiation that cuts through the atmosphere warms the ground which, in turn, warms the atmosphere the ground is in contact with. A big bubble of air which is warmer than the surrounding atmosphere develops. When it has built up enough energy it leaves the ground and starts rising upwards, while cooling down in the process. If it reaches the dew point before its own temperature (which diminishes as it rises) is equal to that of the atmosphere, it condenses to form a cumulus cloud. This releases further energy (in order to transform water into vapour energy is needed; when vapour condenses again

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8000; in Italy 1742; in Spain 500. Moreover, many pilots don't own their own glider; either they share a craft jointly with other pilots, or fly in gliders that belong to their local club.

[129] A few years ago, in Italy a microlight sailplane (the Silent, made by AliSport) began to be produced. It is available either as pure glider or with a retractable engine.

[130] A well looked after sailplane can be expected to last over 40 years.

upon reaching saturation it releases an equivalent amount of energy). Cumulus clouds are puffy and have often a noticeable vertical development. When big, they have a cauliflower-like appearance. When there is strong atmospheric instability and plenty of sun they can develop into huge cumulonimbus clouds, powerful enough to draw in air from all around. In the central hours of the day, the bubbles transform themselves in a single flux of rising air forming the so-called thermal. Circling inside the thermal, the glider can gain altitude. On the best soaring days the wind's action can help to blend more thermals together, forming 'roads' of cumulus under which the glider can fly in a straight course without losing altitude.

The left wing of the glider points towards a street of cumulus clouds on a good soaring day.

The wind is another source of energy especially over mountainous terrain. When it finds a ridge perpendicular to its course, it is forced to rise, thus creating a lift which can be easily exploited by the gliders. This type of flight is called ridge soaring and is very common. As we have seen, in the early days of gliding it was the only known source of energy. Sometimes the same conditions can develop near big clouds instead of mountains. When the wind meets the clouds the different density of the two prevents them from blending at once, so that the wind is forced upwards.

The last source of energy worth mentioning is standing-wave soaring. The winds caused by the differences in pressure in different geographical areas can sometimes form huge waves. The winds are forced to gain altitude in order to pass over a chain of mountains; as they ascend the mass of air of which they are composed doesn't adapt immediately to the atmospheric pressure prevailing at that height but maintains its own: being heavier than the surrounding atmosphere it then starts sinking, acquiring in the process an excess of energy that causes it to bounce back skywards. In this way a system of huge standing-waves is formed which can travel for thousands of kilometres and attain a height of several thousand meters. The waves which are usually available in Central Italy form on the other side of the Adriatic Sea in Serbia and Croatia.

Wherever air rises there are also places where it descends. Glider pilots must avoid these areas at all costs if they wish to remain airborne. Particularly troublesome are the lee sides of the mountains. Finding oneself low behind a mountain or a ridge opposite to the wind is one of a glider pilot's worst nightmares. In these conditions the loss of altitude is almost always severe and may prevent a glider from safely reaching an airport.

Transformations in the way of flying

The transformations in the way of flying originated in the milieu of gliding competitions slowly trickling down to cross-country soaring and even to local flying. After the Second World War, when the practice of gliding had acquired those features that still characterise it today, four phases can be identified marked by differences in how performance was maximised (Brigliadori 2004). Until the early 1950s, the main emphasis was on the centring of the thermals. During this period the most prestigious record consisted in the longest flight.

The following period, 1950s-1960s, has been called the 'time of MacCready' (ibidem). Paul MacCready was a young American aeronautical engineer who was able to devise a theoretical method based on the glider's rate

of sink at different air-speeds[131] to determine the optimum speed at which to fly between thermals to increase the average speed on a circuit. This piece of theory he translated into a movable ring fitted on the outside of the variometer that the pilot rotates to set it according to the expected average strength of the thermal s/he is heading for. On it s/he reads the speed at which it is most suitable to fly in the mass of air s/he is passing through.

In the 1970s, there was the great technical leap forward thanks to the introduction of the new materials (fibre-glass), new wing profiles best suited to these materials, the possibility of loading great quantities of water to ballast the sailplanes and increase their wing loading. This was the phase of 'dolphin flying'. Still applying MacCready's principle, pilots started to race faster, reducing the number of thermals in which they stopped to regain the lost altitude. They flew very fast in sinking air; when they met an updraft they pulled up steeply to convert their speed into height (in a pull up from 180 km/h to 90 km/h more than 100 meters can be gained). When they had overcome the thermal, and the air was starting to sink again they would again increase their speed. They moved through the air the way dolphins glide in the water.

In the 1980s MacCready's theory was generally considered obsolete, not so much because any fault had been found with its theoretical basis, but because of a new 'extreme philosophy' of soaring. Being forced to stop in a thermal in order to gain height was thought to be an inconvenience and every effort went into maximising the glide, making it last as long as possible. Ideally, the pilot's aim is to get rid of the need to stop in order to gain height. The main goal of pilots was to find and exploit the so-called 'energetic tracks' – routes of updrafts which are the by-product of the interference between thermal activity and wind (Brigliadori 2004).

This new 'philosophy' has, in turn, been made possible by the availability of sailplanes of outstanding performance and also by instrumentation that can give the pilot a wealth of information he had never dreamt of before. In some cases, the availability of a small two-stroke engine mounted behind the pilot could have induced some to push forward the limit of their glides.

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[131] In 1956, thanks to this method, he was actually able to win a World Gliding Championship although his piloting experience was far below that of the other contestants.

Today in good soaring conditions, especially if there is a well-established wave system[132], with state of the art sailplanes flights of over 1000 km are quite common. The World record, established in Patagonia in 2005, is over 2000 km. In these conditions pilots can fly at an average speed of over 200 km/h.

Safety innovations

In recent years, following the same trend of the car industry, gliding manufacturers have also introduced a number of safety devices in their products which are thought to prevent or reduce the consequences of some of the most common accidents. Some of these improvements are now standard on most sailplanes. These are a strong landing gear able to absorb most of the energy of crash landings; strong strap tie points, that won't rip off even under the most severe deceleration; a nose hook for tug launching (instead of the ventral one used for either winch or tug launching), to prevent the glider forcing the tug aeroplane in an unwanted dive. If the sailplane has a flight computer, the remote control is fitted on the stick – so that the pilot won't be distracted from watching outside the glider.

Another device useful for safety are energy absorbing foam cushions. They are used to reduce the incidence and the severity of spinal injury in the event of a heavy landing or an accident. They are able to do this thanks to the special properties of the polyurethane material used in their construction, an open cell molecular structure. But their adoption is very, very limited. During my fieldwork, I discovered that in Central Italy most pilots until recently didn't know of their existence, and of those who did know about it, only a few had bothered to acquire one (although they cost less than 50 euro).

By the same token, the efforts glider manufacturers make to provide safety features are often ignored or rejected (and this happens all over the world, not only in Italy). Even leading pilots are no exception. Safety is not on their list of priorities when buying a glider.

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[132] Not to be confused with the 'jet stream' which, being found at the boundary between the troposphere and the stratosphere is too high to be exploited without a pressurised cockpit.

During the German Glider Pilot Symposium held November 21st, 2000 in Stuttgart for the members of the German National Contest Group, a lecture by Friedel Weber – owner of sailplane manufacturer DG-Flugzeugbau – was entitled *Safety does not sell* (www.dg-flugzeugbau.de, retrieved 11.03.2006). It presented some recent safety developments and discussed their acceptance The first was a device for emergency egress assistance. In some countries, Italy included, when soaring, glider pilots are required to wear a parachute. This is not due to any intrinsic structural weakness in the craft, but to give the pilot a second chance in case of an in air collision with another glider or aeroplane. However, bailing out is not a simple procedure, since after an accident the glider may be subject to high g forces[133] which have the effect of increasing a pilot's weight and making it difficult to get clear of the cockpit. Before bailing out the pilot must first jettison the canopy and unbuckle his harness. For these reasons jettisoning is an option only when the accident occurs at high altitude above ground.

Back seat with parachute. In the foreground are the stick and the airbrakes and trim levers.

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[133] Acceleration forces are measured in g's. One g refers to the weight of gravity. A centrifugal force increases this weight. When an aeroplane is spinning towards the ground its apparent weight (the g forces that act upon it) increases, and can easily double.

In case of a mid-air collision, the new device helps the pilot to bail out from the cockpit in the shortest time possible by way of an inflatable air cushion. Pulling on the release knob, the seat and shoulder belts are released, after which the air pillow inflates, lifting the pilot to the edge of the cockpit, so that all he has to do is roll himself out from one side. This device can help save precious seconds, overcome hindering g forces and make a bail out feasible at lower heights than usual. It is known as the NOAH system (Notausstiegshilfe). While it adds only 3,500 euro to the price of a new glider (a negligible amount in a sailplane whose cost is 110,000 euro), it received only 5 orders in seven years. A paltry figure when compared to the DG-Flugzeugbau's output of 45 single-seats per year.

If the pilot must exit the glider by parachute, the wind pressure against the canopy makes it difficult to eject. Besides, when the canopy is thrown open, it flies off, and the danger is that it could strike the pilot on the head. Only about 50% of all attempted jumps succeed. In a high percentage of cases, the pilot is temporarily knocked out by the canopy and is not able to bail out. A simple mechanism has been devised that holds the canopy down in the back, allowing it to open only in the front, where it will catch the wind and fly high over the pilot's head. This safety device is called 'Roeger hook' and it has proven to be so effective that it is now installed on all new certified aeroplanes with forward opening canopies. The DG manufacturer offers this device as an optional retrofitting for all the older sailplanes. Although the price is quite low – 150 euro for the complete set – two years after it had been available only 28 were sold, out of 1,400 possible sailplane concerned: in other words only 2% of the total.

Another safety improvement was a set of measures devised to make a fuselage more crash resistant. It consisted of two strong bars designed to direct the collision forces around the pilot. Also this reinforcement is offered as an optional to the buyers. Its additional cost is only 3,000 euro. But sales have been almost nil, also because pilots dislike having to sacrifice 2 cm of shoulder width in a cockpit which feels already tight without the reinforcement. "My standard response then always is: 'True, but the fit is closer still in the coffin!' […] Possibly these are the same people squeezing themselves into so called

'competition cockpits' from other manufacturers, which are still smaller. However, perhaps 0.2 points of lift/drag ratio less resistance is the result!" (Weber 2000, p. 4).

Near the end of this lecture, Weber asked: "Tell me, are we glider pilots collectively crazy? Do we perhaps disregard safety questions unconsciously? Now I am not a psychologist, but much speaks for the fact that it is like that if a pilot thinks about safety questions, he must also admit that gliding is not harmless – that perhaps the car ride to the airfield is not the most dangerous part. […] Obviously many pilots are subject to the internal conflict, over safety questions and – to not want to think of mechanisms, because that confession results in the knowledge of partaking in a dangerous sport. A 'cognitive dissonance' for you – a contradiction between one's own convictions and the reality. Each pilot knows not to take any unnecessary risks. Additionally one 'knows' that certain errors simply don't happen and that accidents only happen to other people. On the other hand he knows that this cannot actually be correct. Even experienced and careful pilots sometimes make 'such stupid' mistakes. But can he/she admit that?" (Weber 2000, p. 7).

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