

# Blue seas thinking

What motivates Channel swimmers? One sociologist is taking the challenge herself to find out

Chris Arnot

Few academics plan to immerse themselves in their subject matter quite as literally as Dr Karen Throsby, a sociologist from Warwick University. Next month, she plans to swim the Channel as part of a project sub-titled "Embodiment and identity in an extreme sporting culture".

Her research aims to explore what motivates people to engage in an extreme sports such as Channel swimming. She has funding from the Economic and Social Research Council for two and a half years, towards the end of which she hopes to write a book that will reach out beyond the purely academic market to tap into the post-Olympic debate on the motivation to take part in sport.

"Swimming is a big part of the Olympic action plan," she says. "But I want to look at the really positive things that people can get out of physical activity and move away from the current obsession with seeing it simply as a way of reducing body-weight." In fact, as part of her preparation for ploughing across the 21 miles of chilly, turbulent tides that separate Dover from Calais, she has had to put on a stone in weight. "I simply ate more of what I normally eat and then maintained that weight," she says.

## Orthodox ideas

Throsby wants her research to question orthodox ideas about what counts as a sporting body in contemporary society. And the body she is using to explore those issues is her own. Her training regime has involved swimming around Jersey in 10 and a half hours, as well as ploughing up and



Karen Throsby doing some long-distance training: she is investigating extreme sports

down Coventry's Olympic-length swimming pool, just down the road from the university. Not surprisingly, perhaps, her shoulder and neck muscles have "bulked up", as she puts it, "in ways that are counter-normative for women but not for men".

Throsby, 42, has always been interested in gender issues and is fascinated by the reaction of friends whom she hasn't seen for a while when they remark about her evident upper-body strength. Does that bother her? "In some ways it does. It's not entirely comfortable to know that you're being looked at critically. On the other hand, this is part of an experiment purposefully to change one's body while remaining in control. Women usually make those changes in the context of the socially accepted ideal of what we should

look like." And that is not all the result of celebrity culture and glossy mags. "Medically, we're all supposed to be slimming down. But I have a politicised view of body size and I find the link between thinness and health very troubling. The promotion of physical activity primarily as a way of

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losing weight is the route to shame, self-hatred and guilt."

These issues will be explored in an academic paper to be published roughly six months after her cross-Channel swim.

The success rate of the Dover-Calais swim is between 60 and 65%. Only slightly more than 1,000 people have completed the 21 miles since Captain Matthew Webb, smeared in porpoise oil, took the first epic plunge back in 1875. That is fewer people than those who have climbed Everest since it was first conquered in 1953.

Should Throsby join

their ranks, it will add lustre to what she calls her "auto-ethnography". But the research project won't end there. "The second part will be a more conventional study of the community that surrounds an extreme sporting culture," she explains. "By looking at the obsessive end of sport we can learn about motivation, and that could be transferable to those who want a much more reasonable and moderate engagement with physical activity."

## Online community

Aside from the Channel swimmers, there is an online community all over the world of long-distance swimmers training for stretches of water such as the Catalina Channel in California. This is comparable in length to the Channel, but not as tidal. "Our Channel still has an iconic status among marathon swimmers because of the challenges it poses," she says.

At the moment, Throsby is spending every weekend with the Kent-based community of groups who get together to train in Dover Harbour. "I shall be interviewing them at length, but it's already very clear that their motivations vary. Some are doing it for adventure, others because they enjoy a challenge. Then there are those who like to break records, raise funds for charity or simply improve their health and well-being."

Throsby will also be talking to the wider community, such as the trainers, swimmers' families and the boat pilots who offer guidance, support for swimmers in difficulty and sustenance every half hour or so: an energy drink, banana and - in her case - jelly babies. "Finally," she says, "there are the volunteers who come to the harbour every weekend to give us food, offer encouragement and look after our shoes while we're away."

The aquatic sociologist insists that swimming long distances is relaxing and "empties the mind". She knows that in her own case, however, she is going to have to fill that mind quickly. Once the swimming is over, the writing has to start in earnest.

