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It’s not the falling I’m worried about it’s hitting the ground - investigating the fear of falling, comfort zones and camaraderie between extreme grade rock climbers

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It’s not the falling I’m worried about it’s hitting the ground - investigating the fear of falling, comfort zones and camaraderie between extreme grade rock climbers

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Abstract

This paper explores some thoughts and explanations from people who submit themselves to higher than normal degrees of danger whilst rock climbing. The research idea at the start of the study was to reveal some of the ways in which extreme climbers might physically and psychologically control their anxiety in order to perform at their highest ability. That is, the researchers wished to find out from the climbers how they explained their apparent calmness whilst climbing very difficult lines on seemingly blank rock faces. It soon became apparent that when the climbers were asked a direct question like, “how do you control fear” most gave an answer of not really knowing or were unable to express their thoughts clearly. A development of our research was then to try and reflect the phenomena of personal-fear-control back to the climbers which they exhibited in their actions but found hard to articulate to us. A discovery during the study was the overwhelming sense of camaraderie amongst the climbers and their ability to express their thoughts through stories about past adventures. From this reflective data a pattern emerged allowing us to conclude with a suggestion that the act of climbing might really be a means of social interaction for those disposed to extreme climbing – that is, that their actions spoke louder than their words - and that their exposure to fear served to cement that camaraderie.

Introduction

The data was collected by observations and interviews with a group of rock climbers from the self named Burnley Team. There is no affiliated club but most live within the East Lancashire area of England and are aged between 25 and 65. The group studied came from a range of working backgrounds including the semi-skilled through to professionals, all of whom were white males.
The data from the group was collected using various strategies including; unstructured interviews with an outline schedule of question areas, narrative interviews to capture reflective story-telling (Bailey, 2007: 162) and also observations in the field. Data was collected over a period of twelve months, however, members of the group have been known to the first author for many years prior to this research. The primary data is presented with some key discussion from secondary sources in climbing literature, for example, by incorporating quotes from well-known rock climbers, Andy Kirkpatrick and Jerry Moffat These helped to clarify the initial concepts within the research which was useful for developing theory and providing direction for analysing later field observations. The latter stage of the paper features dialogue; transcript excerpts, from an expert climber attempting a very difficult rock climb. This led the researcher to an interesting query about the nature of data; that being data beyond words i.e. a non-textual series of noises which seemed to provide a genuine insight to the experience of the climber as he climbed. It was also a convenient point to write up these initial findings. The paper is structured as a “narrative inquiry” which endeavours to establish the path of our research activities to date (Smith and Weed, 2007) allowing the reader to follow the chronology of events and discoveries made from the data. Access to influential people and otherwise closed social situations was a potential difficulty in this research and there were a number of “gatekeepers” (Silverman, 2005) with whom trust was gained and access granted affording some genuine insights to this difficult-to-explain aspect of climbing. The real names of the climbers have been changed for confidentiality although there were no contentious issues arising from this research and real names could have been used in this instance. However as a matter of consistency and consideration for the educational context of the Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies the names have been altered. Interviews ranged from ten to fifteen minutes and were transcribed verbatim with simultaneous analysis for key themes emerging. Selected excerpts from this primary data are featured in the text below as the story unfolds. The recording device used for interviews was an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-3100pc.

**Why do you climb?**

At the start of the research it seemed reasonable to ask the perennial question of our climbers, “why do you partake in the sport of climbing?” Unlike the famous response from George Mallory, who, when asked about his attempt on the summit of Mount Everest in 1924 answered, “Because it’s there”, we discovered this group of extreme climbers were identifying and ascribing a
different kind of value for their activities; a social value. It became apparent from this point onwards that the majority of our climbers enjoyed the company and social aspects of climbing as much, and perhaps more than the actual activity of climbing itself. For some the act of rock climbing was actually secondary.

Ross: I don’t know why we don’t just take it in turns to drive to the pub and miss out the climbing bit.

Although some might say that the Burnley Team were quite competitive amongst themselves, this indicative comment seemed to add some value or sense of being and belonging to the camaraderie shared amongst the group.

Mick: Camaraderie is high amongst these climbers. You get it from looking out for one another, as well as experiencing heightened situations with like-minded people, this adds to a close bond and the ability to laugh and enjoy the experience.

An initial thought about these climbers was that the more extreme the climb undertaken the greater the social bond might established be as a result. However this judgment was far too simplistic to have any sensible correlation, however, the indication for social outcomes from climbing seemed to be strengthening.

Andy Cave has written two autobiographies about his experiences from climbing. He has climbed frequently with individuals from the Burnley Team although he is originally from Barnsley. Andy notices the camaraderie amongst climbers in his book entitled, On Thin Ice where after the loss of a close friend he is taken to a bar in Chamonix where he meets two climbers he has never met before,

Soon a whole series of outlandish tales began. It had been a while since I’d laughed so much and it reminded me of the special bonds between climbers. Like the men I worked with in the coal mine, the dangerous day to day living engendered a special sense of camaraderie (Cave, 2008: 23).

Dangerous sports for dangerous men

According to Russell (2005: 3) a dangerous sport is one in which the participants are subjected to the possibility of basic human activity becoming impaired, while carrying out, or as a result of participating in some sporting activities. However, as Russell (2005: 3) continues to clarify, impairment can also occur from injury in for example, golf or badminton by making contact
with other participants, or by being hit by the ball or racket which can cause injury, but these, then, are not classed as dangerous sports. In categorizing a sport as being dangerous it seemingly must have a degree of unpredictability that the outcome of participation might result in serious injury or even death. The notion of sport, as being a codified and rule governed activity seems to become more critical for the dangerous sport label to hold true. Consequently, the concepts of “dangerous sport” versus “dangerous play” may be useful to consider in this rock climbing context. Usefully, Russell (2005:5) recounts that the play activities of the Oxford Dangerous ‘Sports’ Club, where people used to ski down a mountain behind a grand piano or were fired from a catapult, may cause serious injury but may not really be codified sports, dangerous or otherwise. These, along with activities such as bungee jumping may be more recreation or a type of [dangerous] play rather than dangerous sport (Russell, 2005:5).

Whether rock climbing might be categorised as a sport or a type of play would be interesting to explore in greater depth, as to all intents and purposes, rock climbing is a rule governed activity with a code of ethics, comprising standard physical climbing skills and a documented structure from climbing guides to climbing literature. It also has national and international governing bodies and a World Cup competition which has been contested annually since 1989 with ongoing discussions about becoming an Olympic sport (Green, 2009). This kind of foundation may indicate that rock climbing is a sport in a formalised sense of the word. But is it a dangerous one? There is a comprehensive library of climbing literature espousing safe protocols for this so called, “dangerous sport” (Styles, 1954; Blackshaw, 1965; Langmuir, 1984; Shepherd, 1990; Fyffe and Peter, 1990, Graydon, 1992; Peter, 2004). The intent of these authors is seemingly to guide others to safe practice through their publications which may expose a contradiction or at least an anomaly that rock climbing is in fact a safe sport and not a dangerous one - if their instructions are followed competently. This seems to be a comparable state of affairs with other established sports such as gymnastics or athletics which may only be “safe” sports if their coaching points are adhered to, followed competently and practiced regularly which may reduce the risk of injury for the performer. The development of rock climbing from this perspective could indicate that it is something more than play and may only be as dangerous as some other sports performed at a high level such as gymnastics, diving, boxing or athletics. The ever-present danger of these sports may become unpredictable and uncontrollable for the performer when safety protocols are ignored or poor judgements are made. Therefore, notwithstanding bad luck in some situations, rock climbing could be regarded equally as a sport
where, like many others danger is always present and provides an element of excitement. This may be different to labelling rock climbing as a dangerous sport, which may have negative connotations.

The grading system provides one level of structure for climbing activity to take place with categories such as Extremely Severe (E grades; E1 through to E11), Hard Very Severe (HVS), Very Severe (VS) with an associated numeric system of recognising technical difficulty; e.g. 6a (see table below). There are also different disciplines within the sport such as traditional leading which involves placing protection by means of wires and camming devices in the natural features within the rock by the lead climber; sports climbing using pre-fixed protection such as expansion bolts to clip the rope into; and bouldering which is climbing short micro problems on small outcrops where the climber has no ropes but can drop safely to the floor (Draper, Jones, Fryer, Hodgson, Blackwell, 2008:492). The climbing within these disciplines is graded to denote the degree of difficulty that would be encountered on the route. Also each climbing discipline has its own system of grading such as “E” grades, “French” grades and “Vermin” or “V” grades respectively. These grading systems also vary from country to country and most have developed their own systems. The grading system however, as commonly pointed out in the guide books are for the judgement of each climber. It is a guide for the climber to assess whether the climb is suitable for them. The degrees of difficulty and “extremity” within the grade structure may allude to the possibility of a fall that could cause injury or death, or the amount of moves that are required to be performed at a certain difficulty. An assessment may also take account of the climber’s stature, ability to perform certain moves and psychological capacity to overcome the difficulties and complete the route in a single push without resting on the protection, or experiencing a fall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional climbing</th>
<th>Sports Climbing</th>
<th>UIAA</th>
<th>Bouldering grades in Vermin, “V”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VS 4b/4c/5a</td>
<td>F 4+/5</td>
<td>V+</td>
<td>V0-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HVS 4c/5a/5b</td>
<td>F5/5+</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>V0 – Vo+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E1 5b/5c</td>
<td>F6a/6a+</td>
<td>VI+</td>
<td>V1 – V2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2 5b/5c/6a</td>
<td>F6a+/6b</td>
<td>VII-</td>
<td>V2 – V3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3 5c/6a</td>
<td>F6b/6b+</td>
<td>VII+</td>
<td>V3 – V4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E4 5c/6a/6b</td>
<td>F6b+/6c</td>
<td>VIII-</td>
<td>V4 – V5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table shows the grading system for British routes and the comparison with Alpine Association’s international grading system. The bouldering “V” grades are comparable to the technical grades (5a 6b etc) of the traditional climbing (Camreon-Duff, 2000:13).

These grading systems may, at the time of a new route becoming established, already be changing the original psychological demands upon the climber. As David Craig in his book “Native Stone” (1988:96) explains that as soon as a line has been climbed and the grade formulated with a description of the climb and in some cases the protection needed, then the route changes from a personal challenge and journey of discovery, into a surrogate challenge for a completely different intrinsic or extrinsic goal. An observation of climbers within the subject group showed that some would practice on very high grade climbs when attempting a new line that they had discovered. They seemed to anticipate that they might need reserves of poise and determination to carry them through on new routes compared to routes they had previously done, with which they are reasonably familiar. The venture into the unknown seemed to place extra demands upon their sense of climbing capacity to cope with the unpredictable element of climbing; to cope with the “what if”… I fall off, and get injured or can’t make it back.

**Matt:** I think that I climb harder when I know it’s something that I would be the first to complete, and that I can then give this route to others for them to make a decision on whether it’s any good or not, and hopefully enjoy.

There is another form of climbing called soloing where the climber consciously takes on all the risky consequences of falling whilst they climb. Soloing is where the climber has no form of protection should they fall as there is no rope or other means of safeguard carried. Soloing is, according to some, the most pure form of climbing. In Jerry Moffatt’s book, Revelations, (Grimes and Moffatt, 2009:2-4) he describes the feeling of “complete euphoria” and his “sense of destiny” while soloing at one hundred feet above the ground on routes demanding combined moves at E5 6a standard (although the E grade becomes irrelevant when soloing, the 6a denotes the technical difficulty of the moves). Many climbers will attempt to solo routes that are within their grade, that is, within their comfort zone of climbing, but hard enough to test their ability and “boost” their senses.

**Ross:** I wouldn’t solo hard routes any more but when I did it was for the freedom of not having to think about protection, concentrating purely on climbing.
A study by Ewert (1994) found that climbers had a lower perception of risk than non-climbers and that taking risks had a lower motivational impact on the climbers. Also that their motivation for climbing was for the experience and intrinsic motivations such as greater skill levels and self expression. As the climber gains experience these motivations seemingly move from gaining the skills of climbing and “ticking off the grades” to gaining the full “environmental experience”, which may be a form of extreme exploration such as Leo Houlding’s recent exploits in completing a multi-day rock climb thousands of feet up a sheer face and then parachuting from the top (Roe, 2009).

Robinson (1985: 402) found that some rock climbers felt a sense of affiliation to a group although the climbers he studied were not attracted to climbing for the affiliation aspect. It seems probable that novice climbers may not have developed a sense of being a climber until they have gained more experience and confidence in the role. However, in the case of the climbers in this study their initial draw was for making friendships within the group or with club members. Once a personal sense of being a climber is established Robinson (1985) found that their continued participation in the sport was due more strongly to social affiliation.

Mark: I’ve tried lots of different sports throughout my life and although I think that I was pretty good at some, I think that I’m a better climber. I’m a climbing lifer, as are all the Burnley team, once you’ve climbed for any length of time and got something out of it, you’re hooked for life.

So what was the attraction for the climbers in this study to participate in this sport? Most were introduced at high school age by teachers or friends that had been exposed to adventure sports, some had come from a caving background and others came from parents that holidayed and spent a good deal of time in the hills and mountains of Britain. These interviewees were mainly from the older, more experienced end of the climbing spectrum, whereas the younger participants had attended youth clubs and scout trips to indoor climbing walls, as well as having parental influences. The actual reasons for continuing with climbing as their main past time could be in part social with a mix of adventure as Mortlock (1984) points out, that the human race needs exposure to adventure in differing degrees. Mortlock (1984:46) explains that,

Especially in the young, a need for adventure and therefore removal from their comfort zone is an instinctive behaviour and to repress this instinct can only lead to the many ills befitting the western world where the young adolescent is concerned.
Most of the climbers interviewed are from working class or middle class backgrounds and said that they would climb to forget about work and household bills and tasks etcetera, as the act of climbing and overcoming fear needed immense concentration. In one sense that the mundane toil of daily life seemed to be momentarily put on hold to cope with the immediate (immense) distraction of the demands in an extreme grade rock climb. For the older climbers this sport was far removed from their daily work of being engineers or painters and decorators and perhaps the distraction theory makes sense in their context. Only one active climber interviewed had an echo of dangerous sports in his work; that of being a rope access engineer which involves abseiling on fixed structures such as high-rise buildings and bridges for maintenance and testing purposes. For this person the notion of escape or distraction from work may still be valid, although perhaps less obvious to the layman. Because his work is not sport and is highly regulated in health and safety terms it may not present the degree of freedoms that his sport affords for his self-expression and enjoyment. Csikszentmihalyi (1981:333) has also observed that, people who do not strive to gain optimal expression in their working lives tend to use their leisure time in a non-productive way and therefore produce “meaningless work and useless leisure”. As one of the climbers in this study group explained, he would work as a Joiner just to earn enough to spend three or four months in the Alps climbing and mountaineering, but is actually renowned for being a very good joiner and went on to run a very successful building company. Another of the climbers, a high quality painter and decorator with a glowing reputation as a first class decorator, was, in his prime one of the best climbers in the country. Within the group there are many climbers who in their professional careers are being very successful as well as being very competent climbers. For these climbers the concept of working just to pay the bills; a frustrating means to an exciting end which has to take place before they can go climbing did not seem to be a true account of their social existence. They on the whole, took great pride in their work and took great pride in their climbing which may buck the stereotypical view of climbers waiting or working impatiently for their next adrenaline fix.

Due to good access to this group of climbers conducting an ethnography about their experiences seemed relatively straightforward and they all had a good story to tell about their adventures and close calls on rock faces. However, deciphering between what was bravado after the event and what were true feelings was proving less straightforward. As Craig (1988:60) explains, there is a “he-man taboo about expressing ones feelings going back to the days of Shipton and the like”. To find out how they really felt in pressure situations, such as how they overcame their fears on an extreme rock climb was proving
more difficult as most could only recall the practical demands of the situation; the hold that was out of reach etc., rather than their inner feelings or what they were telling themselves in the heat of the moment; their self talk to get through the immediate difficulty. One of the climbers says that the more scared he is the better he climbed,

Ross: you have to or you won’t make it, generally you are climbing at the extremity of your ability so you’ve got to climb at your best.

Another climber disagreed saying that he became “wooden” (stiff with fear) and explained that the level he climbed on sports routes was far higher technically than those on traditional routes. (Sports routes may be perceived to be safer having expansion bolts to clip the rope into whilst traditional routes require the climber to select and place their own protection in the cracks).

Paul: I have no thoughts of falling when on a bolt route and I think that this is the same for most people who climb both trad and bolts regularly. On bolts you think about the next move, you’re in the moment, but on trad you’re thinking about the gear, and if you can reverse the moves back to safety.

A member of the climbing group suggested that he climbed better when fear became a major factor which may hinder concentration and perhaps enjoyment on a climb at the time of climbing. He recalled, in response to the question, “how do you manage to climb and keep mentally focused when you are at the limit of your ability and fear threshold?

Ross: I was climbing an E4 at White Gyhll in the Lake District. I had climbed fifty feet and then climbed over a roof. I then placed some protection and climbed on to a short traverse [climbing in a horizontal direction] when, as I make the moves, all the protection that I’ve placed over the roof falls out. I’m now thirty feet above my last piece of protection that I cannot see, on a seemingly blank piece of rock. I know that it is too much to reverse the moves back to safer ground but know that there’s still some hard climbing ahead.

The option to carry on, although committing him to a possible ground fall, seemed to be his only option for a positive outcome.

Ross: After a few moves up I find an “R P” placement.

NB: RP’s or micro nuts are very small wires with metal chocks on the end permitting placements in cracks only a few millimetres in size and were developed for aid climbing. They are regarded as marginal protection where no other larger back up can be found (Lurben, 2004: 100).
Ross explained that after placing the protection he “felt a lot safer” at that point and managed to compose himself to carry on and complete the route in one clean attempt. At the moment of placing the RP protection there may indeed have been a sense of feeling safer and if this feeling were tested in a practical and physical way, like placing full body weight on the wires or a fall directly onto the protection it may have exposed the feeling of safety as being fragile and perhaps illusory. The feeling of safety achieved by placing the protection was sufficient for the climber to finish the route without further incident. However this comes with the acknowledgement that it may have been better not to test the physical safety - the actual integrity of the protection at the time. This action brought to the researcher’s attention that this climber did not, after being extremely fearful of a disastrous outcome, when coming upon relative safety realise and act upon the various options that are afforded from a genuinely safe place on a climb. His options seemingly included; resting his weight on the protection to compose himself before carrying on, lowering down or abseiling off, or sitting on the protection and waiting to be rescued. Rather, he chose to climb on without pausing which may indicate that his feeling of safety was a form of self-deception or the completion of the route in the traditional style seemed more important than his safety. That is, based upon his assessment of his abilities and the difficulty on the route above that it was a reasonable gamble to carry on without stopping. It might also indicate that personal strengths of character and experience of being in that situation in the past helped to overcome the difficulty that other climbers in that kind of situation may have retreated from.

**Ross:** I’d been in that situation before, so kept it together by thinking that I’d be ok as I had been in the past.

**Addicted to fear**

It may be that some climbers in the study have a condition called Counterphobia (Duffy, 2008). Counterphobia is defined as the preference for fearful situations. It is a desire to confront fear and results in an addiction to experiencing fear and apprehension. This is what seems to have been demonstrated by Jeb Corliss, who was the subject of a television documentary called Daredevils (Vine, Hodgkinson, Nicholson and Stubbs, 2009). Jeb was a proximity wing suit flyer, which means he flies in a specially designed body-suit which has wings akin to those of a bat and he tries to fly as close to, proximity, fixed structures, buildings and cliff faces etc. as he possibly can. Jeb reported overcoming deep bouts of depression by putting himself in these extreme situations. Jeb also explained that he often felt suicidal and used to act out his own suicide, but
when he was introduced to base jumping (parachuting from building tops or cliffs) it gave him a “no lose” situation. His base jumping activities developed into proximity flying for the greater sense of fear that it seems to have afforded him. In base jumping the idea appears to be to fly away from the feature departed from, because the feature presents greater danger, whereas proximity flying aims to do the opposite, along with the associated risks.

**DAREDEVILS - 9pm, Channel 4 (14th September 2009)**

Wingsuit proximity flying involves skimming along the surface of cliff faces in a plastic bird suit. Jeb Corliss is the king of this insanely dangerous sport: having flown next to Christ the Redeemer in Rio, he's soaring down the side of the Matterhorn – and if he touches the rock face, he will die. Corliss is diagnosed with counterphobia, a pathological desire to confront fear. "I'm going to use my death to do something spectacular," he explains. But there's a prison sentence to avoid first, for trying to jump off the Empire State. (Vine, Hodgkinson, Nicholson and Stubbs, 2009).

During the programme Jeb demonstrated his reasoning for his feats in the context of his ‘illness’, “if the parachute fails to open then I have succeeded and if it does open then I’ve experienced the ultimate high and get to do it again”. This seems to have some resonance with comments from the study group of climbers when some mentioned “the adrenaline rush” and “getting a buzz” from the experience of being close to falling. Might this buzz come from a heightened arousal rather than fear? Perhaps they are one and the same in terms of psychological stress but may be different in terms of understanding the reasoning for these climbers to like putting themselves in these extreme situations. Many athletes talk of “fear of failure” as well as saying they need a certain amount of fear in order to perform and respect the situation or opponent. One of the climbers commented,

**Tom:** Because when it all clicks together for me it is a fantastic feeling. When everything “flows” and it does not seem to take any effort it’s like a drug that you want more of. I may go climbing three or four times and feel it is not happening, but you always remember and strive for that buzz, feeling out there…

Could this be a chemical addiction? Becoming psychologically aroused is both somatic (physiological) and cognitive (mental) which leads to a behaviour pattern that can be both positive and negative to the final outcome (Moran 2004:72). Arousal is a heightened state in a spectrum from sleep to extreme excitement when biochemical reactions release such substances as epinephrine and norepinephrine into the bloodstream. These adrenalin chemicals convert to
dopamine which is a neurotransmitter to the brain that will cause a heightened state of excitement through activation of more senses (Houston 2006:196).

However, each athlete is individual in their make-up and may experience a different degree of arousal from gentle excitement to pure fear and may depend upon how the activity is interpreted by the performer. Another climber explained that it was the physicality of rock climbing which appealed to him. In response to the question “why do you climb” he said,

**Matt:** I’m a physical type of guy. I love the physical side to climbing but have grown out of scaring myself to death, and get more out of feeling “the pump”. [By this he means the lactate saturation of muscle which gives an aching feeling that the fore arms are pumped hard full of air, Draper and Hodgson (2008:175)].

Another climber spoke of the environment that he climbed in as providing that essential “buzz” feeling. It was a sensation which he regarded as special because few others might get to experience it.

**Ian:** I enjoy climbing because of the places and situations that I get to see. I’m in the mountains on a tiny ledge or sat on the sea cliffs looking out and taking it all in, thinking there’s not many people get to be in this situation and it makes me feel lucky to experience such beauty.

Mark admitted to being a “ticker”, ticking off routes from the guide books which is an interesting social admission amongst climbers. For this climber it may be that a large collection of ticks allows a sense of accomplishment or perhaps a record of activity to be shared (compared) with friends. The social value of ticks in guide books may also increase when they appear against higher grade climbs, quality rather than quantity perhaps being an indicator of the “man” who has undertaken such committing lines. In so doing they may be an understated way of communicating to others what that climber is capable of. There is also an interesting incongruence with the act of ticking in the guide book in that the effort of the climb far outweighs that of placing the tick. The implicit message may be that the climb was as ‘easy’ as ticking the guide when in fact it may have been an incredibly difficult climb and a well-earned tick. Conversely, an easy climb may not be worth a tick at all in some climbers’ guides. In fact they may wish conceal the fact that they ever climbed it,

**Mark:** Yes I admit to getting home and getting out the guide book to tick off what I have done that day. There is a certain amount of competition between everyone, and to say I’ve done this route and that route gives a certain amount of satisfaction. I think I’m competitive and get a real kick out of climbing a route that none of the others have done or have failed on.
Tom talked about the “flow” and “buzz” he experienced while climbing and this led the researcher to consider whether this feeling can be trained to happen more often in climbing. If flow and buzz were positive correlates to fear and apprehension then the former might be a better state of mind to be climbing with rather than the latter. What did Tom mean when he talked about “flow”? According to Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999:5) flow is when both mind and body are working in harmony and where the mind is fully focused on the task. But, from the interviews with climbers “flow” seemed to have meaning in terms of enjoyment as well as being “in the zone” and moving efficiently. Therefore as humans, are we not always striving for enjoyment, however this might be interpreted, or at least satisfaction in sporting activities? There seems to be little point in striving to become miserable through sport. If the former is the case then the experience of “flow” may become addictive, and climbing for these men may feed that addiction.

**Climbing-actions speak louder than climbing-words**

Deciding to attempt a climb and to commit to the challenges it may present, could be a measure of the climber’s self-belief and confidence given that the decision is a reasoned one and not a foolhardy one. This phase of decision making may be a stressful experience in itself which could raise the heart rate in response to the anticipation of what may lay ahead on the climb. This led the researcher to consider whether the climbers had any methods of self motivation or calming and focussing that they rehearsed either pre-climb or during the climb. The challenge of calming and settling when faced with difficulties during a climb was of particular interest and one climber was asked if he would wear a microphone while attempting to climb “on-sight” a very difficult route. (On-sight: ability to complete the climb without prior knowledge, or falling or resting on the first attempt). The climber, Paul, agreed and was recorded during the preparation phase and when climbing the route that was an E5 6a at Heptonstall Quarry. The route was at the upper limit of Paul’s ability for climbing in the “trad” style (i.e. in the traditional style of placing protection in the rock as he ascends). On “sport” routes however, (when the climber clips his rope into pre-placed bolts), Paul is an F8a man which equates roughly to E7 6c, three grades more difficult than the climb in Heptonstall Quarry. At the foot of the climb as he was putting on his boots the researcher asked if, while he was climbing, whether he could express his thoughts into a few words, thinking that this might be less taxing for the climber who will have other things to deal with at that moment, particularly at the crux of the climb (crux – the most difficult
bit of the climb). The climber was also re-assured that he did not have to talk at all if he did not wish to. His immediate reply was,

**Paul**: The first thing is to talk yourself into starting (laughter)…
**Researcher question**: Is it the fall potential or complete failure that you’re worried about?

**Paul**: Both. I know the protection is not so good and that the moves are pretty “goey” [committing] on the crux section.

Paul then walked to the start of the route and after chalking up (spreading magnesium carbonate on his hands which prevents the fingers slipping) immediately started climbing. The first part of the route shares its start with another E1 graded route and climbs this for 10 meters. Paul has already warmed up on this route and quickly arrived at the point where the two routes split.

**Paul**: Does it go straight up from here or do I carry on up the E1 for a bit then step left?

Another climber at the scene gave him advice and he carries on. After a little while he asks for more clarification that he is going in the right direction. That is then given by the same climber who is onlooking. The recording device which Paul carried was also able to pick up the breathing patterns and indicative heart rate as he climbed and it was noted in later playback that at this point, although his breathing was deep, it was regular.

Paul had long bouts of non-speech and his only reply to a question of “what’s the gear like”? was, “err... it’s not brilliant”. This could have been irony, as he had anticipated that the protection was poor before he had started. There was no more speech until he had passed the crux section, with a couple of attempts - moving back to a more comfortable position in order to recover, but not using any form of “aid” i.e. resting on the protection. Paul then placed more protection above the hardest section to protect the finishing moves to easier ground. It was a further 16 minutes of concentration and exertion until he spoke again.

**Data beyond words and the climbing context**

From the recording and with cross reference to the guide book description of the climb it was possible to judge where on the route Paul was. This was due to the breathing noises captured by the recorder which was held in the climber’s chest pocket on his t-shirt. It was noted that the breathing noises altered when the
tasks on the climb changed. For example, when holding his position to place protection when there was very little breathing noise contrasted with his attempts to make the more difficult moves when there was exertion and when he was recovering when there was a kind of oxygen debt and stress relief breathing - heavy. During the moves through the crux section his breathing was very shallow, hardly discernable and then at two points for about ten seconds there was a sharp but shallow intake of breath, between these, no breathing noise was recorded. There was then a period of three minutes where the breathing became very short, shallow and uneven, this was, as he explained afterwards,

Paul: I had got through the crux but the holds were dirty and it felt a bit friable. I looked up and thought I need some gear in to calm me down and the next moves to the break looked hard. I was pretty pumped and did not think I could do them. I looked at the flake that my hands were on and could not see any placements, I started to panic and knew that I needed protection. I fiddled in a poor wire and relaxed a little but new it would not take any type of fall, but it may just about take my weight. As soon as I looked again slightly further up I saw a bomber placement [secure]. As soon as I got it in I felt so much better.

At this point in the recording the breathing deepened, almost laboured and then evened out as composure was regained. The stressful part of the climb had been completed and the breathing pattern seemed to mirror this which in itself is not surprising, but very interesting to hear the climb played back in this way. For the researcher, who was belaying at this ‘interview’ it felt as if the climbing experience was relived in a way that words might fail to do. Listening to the breathing pattern appeared to indicate the real stresses that were being felt which seemed to provide a closer “connect” with the data. If the climb were simply video recorded from a distance it may have asked less of the researcher to comprehend the experience of the climber. During the playback, the researcher found himself imagining he was the climber in the place of Paul, which prompted greater focussing on these noises as data which appeared to be telling us something of the research topic – the fear of falling. A video recording seemed to risk inviting the viewer to admire the broader spectacle of the climbing feat rather than the ‘reliving’ the climbing experience. During the climb Paul did not say anything until he reached the break where he simply said “that was scary”. Once he had arranged protection he again asked for confirmation of where the line went, when he asked, “and does it go straight up from here?” He then asked, “is it hard”? The reply to the question from the on-looking climber who had completed the route before was, “it’s not too bad but you can get wrong handed” - meaning, that if a hold is reached using the wrong
hand then it can cause a lot of extra difficulty as the climber has to re-order the sequence of moves to climb successfully. The onlooking climber then asked if he wanted to know which hand to go with first. That is, he was offering help in case Paul couldn’t work it out for himself. Paul’s reply was “no…… it’s ok”. After a pause, Paul says,

**Paul:** If I do go up with the wrong hand though, a small…… or even a big hint would be much appreciated (laughter).

There seems to have been an interesting “power-play” hidden within this short conversation which on the one hand may have been a genuine offer of help if needed to a fellow climber; implicitly showing a fellow climber due respect for attempting such a difficult climb, ranging to, perhaps negatively, a kind of attention seeking from Paul and the onlooker where the following inferences might be made; “watch me”, take notice of me to do this climb – admire me, but don’t give so much attention or help that you appear to solve the riddle of the climb for me. This might show a level of dependence by Paul upon outside help to perform at this level – a possible weakness which he may not wish to reveal in this public context?” The onlooking climber then replied “you’ll be alright its easy”. It may have been easy for him of course, this comment possibly setting Paul up to fail? Or perhaps the comment was offered to boost Paul’s confidence but this may be unlikely given that Paul had elected to make an onsight ascent of an E5 6a; a very difficult climb. Paul then makes the final moves and the breathing again became laboured but reasonably even and after a short while he is on top of the crag. While Paul was arranging a belay he is heard to say on the recording;

**Paul:** I don’t care what that silly old git says, that was desperate (referring to the last section of the route).

**Conclusion**

Climbers, as with most sports’ men and women, have a certain amount of selfishness in achieving their goals by dedicating themselves totally to their sport. This commitment may to a large extent remove that person from their family and friends who may also make their sacrifices for that person to follow their dream in sport. The performer may thereby put their wellbeing at risk which Heywood (2005:456) described as *foolhardiness* when the pursuit of their sport becomes obsessive. The obsessive nature of climbing was a phenomena emerging from this research when its addictiveness and almost sacrificial offering of ‘the body and mind’ to be tested to the extreme occurred for some on a frequent basis,
**Mark:** The best time I had climbing was a few years back when we were doing the E6s and E7s at Blue scar; scaring ourselves stupid.

Climbing however, as this research has attempted to demonstrate may be regarded as a social activity and many of the interviewees have been observed or stated as gaining great enjoyment from the *après* climbing. This social aspect has become such a strong influence for some that it determined their participation in the sport. Sharing in the act of climbing, its risks, adventures, travels, calamities, gains and losses seemed to increase the sense of camaraderie amongst the group all of whom agreed that they climbed for the company. Climbing humour was always a significant feature of the social intercourse within this group on the climbs and after them. Humour in the act of climbing is often used in the downplaying of risk which reinforces findings that humour may help to control anxiety by increasing the sensation of enjoyment (Szabo, 2003:159).

For this small group of climbers who shared their biographies and experiences about climbing, there appear to be diverse reasons for them to start climbing but in general, what they seemed to get from it in the long term is social enjoyment and escapism. So, a key question remains, what really drives these people to expose themselves to danger? Are they in some cases only exposing themselves to minimal danger on an easy climb for them, just to be part of the group? Alternatively, a few would say of their climbing experience that they were glad that the route was over and that they did not really enjoy it, but in retrospect that the feeling of accomplishment outweighed the terrifying ordeal. Also, that the accomplishment of the climb and making this public in some way, ticking, or story telling, or performing the climb for others, had a kind of social currency within the group which may be perceived by some as having greater value than the physical experience of the climb itself.

From this research there does seem to be a spectrum of experience which could be explored further in terms of the perceived social gains from climbing. This, taken to the extreme could self-destruct for the person, in the case of those with counterphobia. An interesting question may be whether the climber of extreme grade rock-climbs makes for a socially well-adjusted or socially well-disciplined person given the claims for climbing for social gains by the majority of this group. Conversely, might extreme grade climbers merely seek out more extreme forms of socialisation for acceptance, locating themselves in social networks where they and their activities are readily understood? In closing this
article, Andy Kirkpatrick summed up the stresses of solo climbing and living with the fear and anxiety about climbing over long periods of time, as the climber is alone with his thoughts when he says,

with anxiety and fear you have to make time to love yourself, there are no kind words, save your own (Kirkpatrick 2008: 135).

References


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3. Dear reader, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: Keith McGregor: KJMcGregor@uclan.ac.uk and Clive Palmer: capalmer@uclan.ac.uk