

A LIFE TO RISK: CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN MOTIVATIONS TO CLIMB AMONG ELITE MALE MOUNTAINEERS

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Abstract: This study explored the cultural differences and motivations to climb of elite, male mountaineers. The purpose of the study was to first determine the motivations of elite male mountaineers and then link these motivations to the culture in which the mountaineer lives or grew up in. Five co-researchers participated in the study: two Canadians, two Americans, and one from the United Kingdom. To understand the co-researchers' motivations, culture, risk perceptions and cultural perceptions, a standardised survey was sent out containing fifteen open and closed ended questions. The survey was qualitative in manner and achieved a greater understanding of the climbers' knowledge and opinions about motivations, risk and global culture. Through a thematic analysis of survey results, various common themes emerged. Discussion of co-researchers' common themes regarding risk, motivation and culture allowed for a variety of findings, including: mountaineering because you are good at mountaineering, mountaineering to go places, enjoying the hard work, having barriers of physical difficulty and time, overcoming such barriers through persistence, managing risk to reduce it, being sensitive to mountain cultures and being aware of economically dis-advantaged cultures that have little time for recreation. Overall, this study found little connection between a mountaineer's culture and his motivations, perhaps due to the similarity of the co-researchers' cultures.

Introduction

This research project exposed and examined the cultural motivational differences of elite male mountaineers to climb and determined which of the differences and commonalities in motivation were based on cultural background. To accomplish this, a survey of 15 open-ended questions was mailed in May, 1999 to 17 elite male mountaineers from five countries (Canada, the USA, the United Kingdom, Russia and Austria). These mountaineers were assessed as elite through sponsor and national mountaineering organisation assistance.

A thematic analysis of the collected data from the five respondents from three countries (response rate of 29.4%) uncovered numerous themes showing congruence across the three respondent cultures (Canada, the USA and the

United Kingdom) and led to some interesting conclusions. Emerging themes were drawn from the data and compared across the five participants to create clusters of common themes. These common themes were then closely analysed and are discussed in the following pages

Significance

Past researchers have often touched on the topic of cultural differences in mountaineering motivations and mountaineers in general, but to date no in-depth research on the topic has been found. Perhaps this research can, in the wake of recent tragedies, such as those on Everest (Boukreev & DeWalt, 1997), explain why a Russian mountaineers are often misunderstood, or why Western mountaineers will often shun their principles for money or fame. Through this study, it is hoped that certain cultures can come to realisations, or at least recognise how their overall attitudes can affect the mountaineering community.

This study also has significance in opening new perspectives towards the lifestyles of mountaineering and what mountains mean to mountaineers. A glimpse into the understanding of the mountaineering sub-culture and mountaineering's place in various cultures is also discussed by this study.

Previous Research

Williams and Donnelly (1985) provide what is likely the best look into the sub-culture and transformation of climbing among western society. The authors provide a glimpse into the similar social backgrounds and values of climbers, thus showing a place for the examination of social differences, and from there, cultural differences.

Research by Rossi and Cereatti (1993) used Zuckerman's scale of sensation seeking to observe many categories of mountain athletes. Findings showed that cavers generally show the same quest for uncertainty as mountaineers, which may be attributed to the periods solitude and intensity associated with these activities (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993). Furthermore, the study investigated the specific activities of mountaineers from various nationalities; the authors note differences in activity preferences by culture.

Ewert (1985) provides strong insight into why people climb based on his study of participant motives and experience level with regards to mountaineering. He also evaluates the underlying motives of mountaineers, which create the need to invade a hostile environment, the mountains. The focus of motivation appears to stem from the anticipated benefits of risking life and limb whether it be in the mountains or elsewhere (Ewert, 1985). Ewert's (1985) study indicates that experienced mountaineers are less interested in external motivations, and more motivated by personal testing and developing an internal locus of control. In 1994, Ewert extended his research on motivation and risk taking by moving into a high altitude environment on Denali. Study results proved to be somewhat inconclusive with regards to risk playing a role in mountaineering motivation (Ewert, 1994).

Breivik (1996) researched risk taking behaviours among Everest climbers on a Norwegian Everest expedition. From the study a relationship between sensation seeking, as categorised by Zuckerman (1979), and risk taking appeared with relation to reaching goals. Within his results, Breivik (1996) compared his findings with those of other studies that took place in the past on mountains such as K2. Breivik (1996) found the Norwegian subjects to score in the tough-minded, independent, low anxiety category along with Czechoslovakian elite climbers. In direct contrast, were English elite climbers and the Italian K2 expedition members scoring as more introverted, sensitive and more tense.

Bratton, Kinnear, and Koroluk (1979) observed the specific sector of the Canadian Alpine Club-Calgary Section for their research project. To Bratton et al. (1979) the conclusion is almost assumed, "there can be little doubt that many forms of mountaineering border on the ultimate in stress seeking" (p. 23). It appears from the research presented, that elite athletes look more to the risk factor, where as novices look to the exercise and relaxation aspects (Bratton et al., 1979).

From the studies cited above, a critical gap in the research on mountaineers becomes apparent. Mountaineering is highly researched, as is motivation and risk; the missing link is a specific study on culture, a study that brings the aforementioned concepts together. This study attempts to contribute to all the areas of mountaineering, motivation, risk, and culture, and specifically tie together the question of whether there are cultural differences in motivations of elite male mountaineers to climb.

Research Findings and Discussion

To understand the results of the study a brief introduction to the participants is imperative. Each of the five respondents has over 15 years of personal mountaineering experience. Two of the respondents were from Canada, two from the USA and one from the United Kingdom. Some have summited on all seven continents, others have led expeditions from the Himalayas to Antarctica, some have made highly acclaimed first ascents, while others have guided clients on peaks from Argentina to Alaska.

A common theme is defined in this study as one that emerged from three of the five respondents. Particular attention was paid to those common themes which, were backed by either both American or both Canadian respondents. Verification of a common theme by both respondents of a culture showed cultural significance rather than just individual opinion and allowed for a more in-depth analysis. Due to study participation, no cultural verification could take place for the culture of the United Kingdom, as there was only one respondent. The following section interprets and provides a meaningful discussion on each common theme. The co-researchers who expressed a common opinion are analysed and any vastly different or interesting opinions are exposed.

Clusters of Common Themes

- 1) Mountaineering Motivations
 - a) good at mountaineering (1 Canada, 1 USA, 1UK)
 - b) going places-exploring the outdoors (1 Canada, 1 USA, 1UK)
 - c) exercise/hard work (1 Canada, 1 USA, 1UK)
 - d) inner love, being alive (1 Canada, 1 USA, 1UK)
- 2) Mountaineering Barriers
 - a) physical difficulty (2 Canada, 1 USA)
 - b) psychological/time (2 Canada, 1 USA, 1 UK)
- 3) Overcoming Barriers
 - a) persistence (2 Canada, 1 USA)
- 4) Risk
 - a) manage risk to reduce it (1 Canada, 2 USA)
- 5) Cultural Thoughts
 - a) mountain cultures are more supportive (1 Canada, 1 USA, 1UK)
 - b) cultures with less economic advantage have little time for recreation (1 Canada, 1 USA, 1UK)

Mountaineering Motivations

As stated by Bratton, Kinnear & Koroluk (1979), mountaineering, in essence, is the deliberate intrusion into a dangerous, but beautiful setting. The motivations for such a journey, as determined by previous studies, makes a list of great length. For mountaineering motivations, common themes were found to be: good at mountaineering, going places-exploring the outdoors, exercise/hard work and an inner love, being alive.

Good at mountaineering

Achieving a high level of success at any activity brings about positive reinforcement to continue pushing ones limits and continue in that activity. Mountaineering is no different in this sense; if a mountaineer is good they will likely continue to enter the mountains. One Canadian described himself; "I am a mountaineer because I am a failure as a hockey player". An American respondent likened being good at mountaineering to his hatred of team sports, in particular the US national sport of baseball. Becoming good at an activity through one's own hard work tends to drive a participant to continue, but when this high level of achievement is forced, being "good" can push someone away from an activity. Three respondents stated that they mountaineer because they are good at it or have become respected because of it. Tied into this is the fact that they all have financial interests in being good at mountaineering; their personal income dictates that they are good at their chosen profession, mountaineering.

Going places-exploring the outdoors

All the co-researchers enjoy travelling the world in search of new mountaineering challenges. There is, however, some difference between travelling simply to climb a peak and travelling out of love for exploring. Leaving their

homes for the high altitude wilderness never loses its draw or effects on them. A mountaineer from each culture placed going places and exploring as a mountaineering motivation. One Canadian respondent stated that his love comes from "going to beautiful places and moving around in an exotic environment". Developed mountains will push one American respondent away and for the lone British co-researcher, travelling appears to be a natural progression, which simply came with moving up his personal climbing ladder.

Exercise/hard work

Exercise and hard work have always been a part of global culture. In the past, the affluent enjoyed being physically active, while for the poor labour class this meant hard work for the benefit of the wealthy. Today, among the western world, exercise is highly valued, while the hard work ethic appears to be losing ground in the west. For the third world hard work is still the basis of the economy.

Every culture studied expressed the need to exercise and hard work as a motivation for mountaineering. For one Canadian the hard work involved in mountaineering was at first a barrier to participation, but as time went on the pain left and the beauty of the exercise in a beautiful environment remained. The pain of backpacks held a US respondent back as well, but the joy of feeling his body move over rugged terrain prevailed. In being able to mountaineer the British respondent had to engage with natural and real challenges, while also working hard in the politics and regulations associated with Himalayan mountaineering. As a preamble to every expedition, one respondent stated that he must "train like hell... to prepare mentally and physically".

Inner love, being alive

An inner love of the mountains is a difficult theme to explain because each individual's inner love is a separate entity. As one American indicated, he feels a need for climbing-mountaineering: an inner love of the mountains, travel and adventure. The British inner love seems to come from being alive and free in an inspiring environment; such an environment could not hold such inspiration without comfort. To a novice mountaineer the environment would appear dangerous, not that it isn't, but to the elite the mountains inspire the inner child.

Mountaineering Barriers

In any activity there are barriers to participation and success. What makes a participant strive is the ability to overcome such barriers. Mountaineering barriers are varied due to the unpredictable nature of the sport. For the co-researchers of this study, two barriers appeared common among the myriad of others, those of physical difficulty and psychological/time.

Physical difficulty

Physical difficulty can include many factors such as injury, illness, disability, training regime or stature. Difficulty, although a barrier, results in a challenge or an object for which a solution must be found. Difficulty can result in a

driving force for some individuals to continue, for without difficulty there would be no motivation. Three respondents indicated physical difficulty as a barrier to be overcome, in fact one went so far as to say that he is "a skinny weakling"; an interesting comment from such an accomplished mountaineer. For all three mountaineers who found physical difficulty a barrier it was overcome with time, either by simply dealing with it as a fact of mountaineering or by becoming stronger.

Psychological/time

Psychological barriers are often the most difficult barriers to overcome. Unlike physical barriers, which mostly heal with time and rest, psychological barriers often shake a person so deeply that to face a particular barrier takes an enormous amount of courage. Psychological barriers can take many faces such as: fear and the thought of death, but also time. Time, as a psychological barrier to mountaineering, can become overwhelming. Lack of time during an expedition can create excessive pressure to push on and put oneself in dangerous situations.

Psychological barriers became common through the responses of four co-researchers. Again the thought of being "a skinny weakling" is a psychological barrier. In some situations these thoughts may have held a person from attempting aspects of mountaineering. For the British respondent, the primary psychological barrier was time with regards to being able to find funds for an expedition or be on an expedition for such a long period of time. Time as a barrier, appeared for one Canadian, in terms of the time it takes to grow strong and learn the ways of a mountaineer. This psychological barrier of time is directly tied to physical difficulty.

Overcoming Barriers

To overcome barriers which prevent a person from succeeding are often the strongest motivators and allow for tremendous feelings of achievement and self worth. However, often these barriers continue to plague a person and, in many cases, may never be overcome. Overcoming barriers in this study of mountaineering included themes such as training like hell and personal rewards. Among three of five co-researchers a common theme for overcoming barriers materialised as persistence.

Persistence

Persistence is the ability to be pushed down and then get up again to continue. Persistence could be to overcome physical injury with the will to move on or persistence could be getting hit with bad weather and waiting out the storm. In any case, persistence pays off. Of the co-researchers, three expressed persistence as a common theme when overcoming barriers to their mountaineering careers. As mentioned by both Canadian co-researchers, persistence could be seen as a trait of Canadian mountaineering and culture. Persistence is essentially what may cause one Canadian to train like hell to prepare for an expedition even though he is a self proclaimed "skinny weakling". For the other the long road to success through physical and mental growth can be seen as persistence. For

one of the American respondents, motivation was simply stated as persistence; persistence to reach personal rewards in climbing has driven him to 33 expeditions thus far, created a successful retail and guiding business and also allowed a lifestyle where, "after one trip I plan the next".

Risk

Mountaineering is full of risk both perceived and real, human and environmental, objective and subjective. Strategies to control or avoid risk are many and varied. Each culture and individual has their own way of coping, minimising or dealing with risk. For the co-researchers of this study, managing risk to reduce it was the only common theme.

Manage risk to reduce it

To manage risk is to first identify it and then seek to minimise identified aspects. There is little doubt that risk is a primary draw for mountaineers. Some mountaineers wish to deny the aspect while for others it provides the adrenaline to push the limits of the sport. Risk gone wrong spells disaster when not properly managed. All who identified managing risk as a common theme are guides who must constantly be on the lookout for risks, which may put their unwary clients at risk. An interesting point of view came out of this theme in that the British respondent was the only one to talk about how no peak is worth a life. He stated his primary thought on risk as avoiding risking his life.

Cultural Thoughts

As part of this study each mountaineer was asked to identify their culture, but also give some reflection as to what their culture offered to their mountaineering lifestyle. Their personal cultural reflection proved unsuccessful in creating common themes; however, the common themes of mountain cultures as being more supportive of their mountaineers and cultures who are economically disadvantaged having little time for recreation were exposed.

Mountain cultures are more supportive

In most mountain cultures, mountains are a large portion of the surrounding landscape and are explored and examined from any early age. Mountains to an outsider strike a chord because they are immense and imposing. Mountain cultures are completely immersed in the mountains from birth and, thus, the phenomenon of exploring the mountains tends to seem tame by most standards. Culturally, among co-researchers, one Canadian, one American and the only British co-researcher expressed this common theme.

Cultures with economic disadvantage have little time for recreation

Cultures with greater economic advantage have the money and leisure time available for mountaineering, but what about those cultures struggling to meet basic needs? As expressed by Maslow (1970), it is difficult for a person to worry about being self-actualized and seeking nature's beauty and their inner self if their basic needs of food, water and shelter are not being met. Are there many

mountaineers from third world countries? The answer is sadly, no. Mountaineering, due to its costs for equipment and travel, are thus restricted to mostly first world nations.

Of the five co-researchers, three supported and expressed the statement that cultures with less economic advantage have little time for recreation. These three are all from different cultures, but each are from first world countries and have mountaineering experience in third world countries.

Implications for Professional Practice

In addition to the significance of the research conducted there are several other points or implications which make such research important to professional practice. As expressed above, the motivations of a culture to climb or face risk may give an indication of why an action may occur or if an action could occur. In looking at elite mountaineers, the participants are in small numbers against the general populous of mountaineers, but do provide significant influence. For example, it is these elite mountaineers who often serve as role models or inspiration to the majority of other mountaineers. The elite sub-population of mountaineers serves as opinion leaders and thus, managers of mountainous national parks or protected areas could learn about the motivation of their users based on similar research.

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