

Investigating Climbing as a Spiritual Experience

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Background

Although defining the concept of spirituality has remained elusive, discussion on the topic is pervasive within academic literature (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2010). Spirituality can embody different meanings for different people. For some, spirituality may reflect that which is religious. For others, spirituality may embody a state of being that is transcendent, allowing a person to search beyond that which they can readily explain from their immediate senses. Experiences of this form may often occur in virtue, moving a person closer to their ideal sense of self. Outcomes such as these are frequently part of discussions that speak to the benefits derived from different leisure activities (Schmidt & Little, 2007).

Previous research has shown that participation in certain leisure activities can lead to a number of spiritual outcomes (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Schmidt & Little, 2007). Although climbing, as an activity, has not yet received specific attention in this area of inquiry, it may possess components ideally suited for a spiritual experience (Heintzman, 2010). The purpose of this study was to better understand the experience of spirituality within the context of climbing, and explore the factors that may contribute or lead to certain spiritual outcomes among climbers.

Methods

In order to investigate climbing as a spiritual experience, the research team utilized a grounded theory approach based on the principles of phenomenology. Broadly defined, phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced first-hand by an individual (Valle & King, 1978). Drawing on that approach, the study sought to understand the meaning, structure, and essence of spirituality as it related to climbing. Although each interview occurred as more of an open discussion, there were certain questions addressed by respondents in every interview. Initial enquiry asked respondents to identify whether they considered climbing a spiritual experience. Those who answered in the affirmative received an immediate follow-up question aimed at respondents describing their general spirituality. Other directed questions focused on the extent to which the respondent had experienced a spiritual epiphany while climbing and the degree to which climbing had perhaps contributed to one's spiritual development.

Participant recruitment occurred by way of convenience sampling techniques. A majority of the study's respondents volunteered to participate as a result of advertisements posted on websites and forums frequently visited by avid climbers. Following the transcription of all interviews, the research team used open-coding to identify prominent concepts and themes. This process was followed-up with axial coding of the data in order to identify relationships in the themes among interviews. Data analysis initially revealed eleven themes within the transcribed interviews, which were then reduced to five based on the techniques outlined.

Results

The study sample consisted of 20 climbers who self-identified climbing as a spiritual experience (85% male). The average age of study respondents was 35, with years of climbing experience ranging from 1.5 to 47 years. Climbers who participated in the study possessed varying levels of education, with most having earned at minimum, a bachelor's degree. For the purpose of this study, climbing type was not limited to a single form and thus included respondents who pursued activities like bouldering, sport, traditional, ice, mountaineering, alpine, and big wall climbing. Among the climbers interviewed, all identified climbing as playing an integral role in their spirituality. Following this admission, a number of salient themes emerged.

Based on the information garnered from each of the interviews, *personal experiences* seemed to serve some function in the formation of a climber's spiritual beliefs and practices. In many cases, respondents spoke directly to the significance that climbing played in that formation. For example, many climbers alluded to the notion that climbing often moved them to another place mentally. For many of the respondents, this reflected a deeper state of consciousness that often fostered a sense of self-discovery. Although the evidence garnered does not necessarily allow for the delineation of certain stages of spiritual development, a general trend existed within the data. That is, younger and less experienced climbers tended to be in their spiritual adolescence in comparison to the more seasoned and older climbers interviewed. A second theme to emerge from the data suggested that many respondents had developed somewhat of an *individualized spirituality*; independent of any formal religion or existing traditions.

The idea that climbing embodied a form of *spiritual fellowship* was also a common theme among climbers interviewed. The interpersonal connections that formed as result of a shared climbing experience not only seemed to have personal significance, but also spiritual implications. Climbers often acknowledged how their physical connection to a person while climbing (i.e., the bond of the rope) was very much transcendent as they knew that life was quite literally in their hands. Another prevalent theme found within the interviews highlighted the role that nature played in evoking certain spiritual benefits. The aesthetic qualities of the settings where the

various acts of climbing took place appeared to serve as a catalyst for transporting climbers to a more peaceful state of mind. Finally, from the evidence obtained, climbers spiritual experiences ranged in their variety (*varieties of spiritual experiences*). Of the climbers interviewed, climbing as a spiritual experience embodied everything from the meditative to the mystical. The latter of these experiences were often more intense, reflecting instances where climbers described directly experiencing God, or a sense of rebirth.

Discussion

Given the paucity of existing research on climbing and spirituality, the present study aimed to investigate more closely climbing as a spiritual experience. To that end, findings from the study illustrated a number of qualities that are consistent with the meaning and structure of other spiritual experiences that been investigated (Heintzman, 2010). Among the climbers interviewed, climbing as a spiritual experience often offered opportunities for reflection, served as a source of connection to others and nature, and at times even brought a person closer to something unexplainable. Although such examples are more positive in nature, are there circumstances in which the spiritual experiences derived from climbing are perhaps more negative in the outcomes they provide? The information garnered, while meaningful and interesting, still leaves a number of questions unanswered. For example, of the many factors that may elicit a spiritual experience (i.e., nature, fellowship, challenge), which perhaps are the most prominent. Understanding these factors could assist in facilitating a spiritual experience for others.

References

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