Some psychological aspects of advanced rock climbing

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Before looking at the subject matter it may, for those who are not too clear about the word 'Psychology', be helpful to have some definition. One can say that psychology is that branch of the biological sciences which studies the phenomena of conscious life. Within this ambit would be included abnormal, social, child, industrial, genetic and many other branches including the fast developing field of sports psychology. And within its disciplines are to be found the adherents of various schools; analytic (the best known of course being those of Freud, Jung and Adler); behaviouristic, which includes people like Harvard's Skinner; then there are gestalt, statistical, etc. However, these definitions apart, this article is not the place for any further extension about the history or current development of psychology; rather I would prefer to lead in by looking at some elements of the science which are relevant to advanced rock climbing under the following broad headings:

Perception	Learning	Motivation	Personality
Anxiety	Balance	Strength	

Before going any further, I think we should note that there has been some work of a sound scientific basis in the field of rock climbing and mountaineering and the most relevant known to me are: Lester of the Berkeley Institute Interpersonal Studies during the 1963 Mount Everest Expedition (USA); Edwards of Bristol and Leeds, 2 investigations into 'Anxiety, Balance and Strength in the Rock Climbing Situation' in 1967; Jackson of Leeds, an investigation into 'Personality and Climbing' in 1967; Rossi also in 1967, a clinical investigation into the psychological profiles of Italian climbers; an investigation in 1969 at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium into the Psycho/Physiological requirements for high standard rock climbing; and finally, the work of Ryn in Poland over a number of years at Cracow University, the results of which were published in 1971. This was, in the main, research into climber personality traits but he also has studied in some depth the effect of prolonged exposure at high altitude on the brain cells and nervous systems. There were studies prior to all these above and there may be many more contemporary investigations I do not know about, but the foregoing are still recent enough to be looked upon at least as indicative of modern trends.

Enough, however, of academic reporting: I will try to write in monosyllables, avoiding scientific jargon and I wish to make clear that much of what I am stating is based only on personal observations. It has no scientific basis in fact, but in drawing attention to certain matters I hope to stimulate thought and discussion. I will not follow the dictates of science which would place motivation first; I prefer to start with:

Perception How we see the mountains, how we look at a rock face, depends entirely on our normal environment, our learned skills, our hereditary factors. A non-climber would see El Capitan as unclimbable, an average climber will know it can be climbed but will say 'It's not for me!' Why? He

has not acquired the skill perhaps, but also he has not the learning patterns, the mental development to say, 'Yes, it would be possible for me!' The extreme rock climber, even though he has never seen it before, would look at El Capitan in a particular way, he would see its strengths and perceive its weaknesses, experience would allow him to rationalize, control his anxiety levels, co-ordinate his motor reactions and he would be able to say 'Yes, I can climb El Capitan!' But he too could be influenced into perceiving things differently; bad weather can alter his rationale, or companions whose anxiety levels are raised by anticipatory factors will challenge his judgement by their very presence and by making adverse comments. Society demands that we conform and in the group situation the pressure is always to agree rather than otherwise.

Learning Hard rock climbing is a learned skill. One who has never climbed is unlikely to walk to the foot of a rock face and climb an extreme route unless he is a baboon! It is a learned skill, and an interesting question is what accounts for the variations which abound in the time it takes to acquire such proficiency. Some people can climb at extreme standards within a year of beginning to climb, others might take 10 years to reach the same level. I would say it depends on 2 factors; first and foremost is one's conditioning (learning) before commencing to climb, and then the environment and norms of the people one is climbing with. If you are surrounded by persons who regard Grade IV rock climbs with awe, then it is likely that you will do the same. If, however, all your companions climb VI Superior you too will strive to be like them. Also you will perceive the climbs as they do.

At the very tip of the ice-berg, however, it is how we have learned our skills that will count. Emphasis on rigid skills is bound to be bad in the long run and my own feelings are that in teaching rock climbing at any level, awareness is what we should aim for. If we are learning for ourselves (operative conditioning) new techniques then this is absolutely imperative.

Technique is an interesting thing: it is of course a part of the learning process but once a technique is firmly established then everyone copies it and few experiment to try to develop new ones or for that matter, attempt to refine existing ones! But people who do and succeed are the ones that usually make major break-throughs. You can see this very clearly in the development of modern ice climbing techniques using curved axe picks and front points and abandoning the old tradition of step-cutting.

A consequence of this is the need for outstanding climbers to have at their disposal an approach based on flair, flexibility and spontaneity. This again is a part of perceptive and learning skills, and here I think an example from competitive sport might help to underline my point. Everyone will have heard of the 'Fosbury Flop' in the high jump. Fosbury was a good 'scissors' jumper who found that because of the way he perceived his run up to the bar, he occasionally arrived at the take off point in reverse, with his back to the jump. Once for an experiment he tried to leap backwards and it worked for him. A bit of experiment and he found he quickly perfected this to such a degree that he could easily outjump his other competitors by this method. Other athletes and coaches tried to dissuade him from using his new found technique because they felt there was something 'wrong' about it. However,

once the other jumpers found him winning events with this technique and clearing heights previously thought impossible, they also quickly mastered this new method and now most high jumpers throughout the world copy Fosbury. Maybe some day it will be found that to jump say 3 metres in height can only be done by running backwards in a rubber suit and as soon as somebody does it, all high jumpers from thereon will be running backwards, wearing rubber suits! The thing of course, is to be the innovator and perhaps this is one of the motivations behind extreme rock climbing; an attempt to be creative or even to be an artist? Anyhow, to recap, I am sure that emphasis on learning skills should be one of awareness.

Motivation You need to be motivated to climb hard rock! And here aggression is an important trait. All I have seen makes me believe that aggression is learned behaviour (classical and operative conditioning). And psychologists also agree that aggressive and competitive factors are most associated with activities requiring boldness and courage. Although I would like to substitute the word 'courage' by something like 'challenge'. I hate to see the word 'courage' used for activities like climbing; this word is used too freely and should be only reserved for exceptional situations in which human beings find themselves and usually not by their own free choice!

Arousal is another important factor in extreme climbing. Before a big climb this in any normal person should not be necessary; the problem is how to keep it under control. Let us consider this further in a moment under the heading of Anxiety. But it is of no use motivating anyone, however physically and mentally 'strong', to climb VI Superior if they can only muster the technique and skills demanded of Grade III. The likelihood is that they will kill themselves!

Sublimation is at times as important as aggression. If you are climbing with others you have to agree to work towards a common ideal and here at least, in climbing parlance, goals can often be easily identified; a first ascent; a summit; a face; a route, and so on. However, all sociological theory confirms that in any human relationship situation there is always a dominant partner. But the outstanding climber, team member, leader may only be so in the climbing context. It does not mean they will be so in their other activities or group experiences.

I would also like to debunk the widely held beliefs that climbing is a form of sex substitute and that people who take or lead others in the mountains are fulfilling psycho-sexual desires, or that climbers are basically any different in this area than other groups of people drawn at random from the rest of the population. However, having said this, I would like to qualify my statements. These ideas might be shown to be true in some cases, but only in percentages that are not significant. However, Ryn in Poland reports that the Polish climbers tested by him showed themselves to be low in sexuality. This does not mean they were totally inactive in this direction. It means that they were for the time being, so motivated by their climbing activities that sex was of a secondary importance to them. What climbers have to realize here is that psychologists are talking about levels of activity and compared to someone who is obsessed by sex, most climbers would have a low rating in this area, but certainly it does not mean total abstinence!

One other point worth mentioning is the question of homosexuality versus heterosexuality. Clearly people differ in this respect and a wide range of behaviour is found. Climbers are no different in this respect which, however, has little bearing on climbing performance. It is possible to have any kind of sexual bias and still be an outstanding climber; the same is true of introversion and extroversion. These are of course personality delineation terms introduced by the analytical psychologist Carl Jung. Again, one never finds persons 100% introverted or 100% extroverted; if anyone were 100% wholly one or the other they would need to be institutionalized.

Personality Without doubt this is a key area in its relationship to extreme climbing ability. Cattell, one of the outstanding theorists in the field, maintains that in any situation, 'Personality and ability will decide the outcome'. Whether you are introverted or extroverted is immaterial, it is how you balance out in strengths and weaknesses applicable to a particular activity that counts. Personality and all its traits are built by life experiences, mostly when we are very young. Our parents, our schools, our companions, our environment, our hereditary factors all help to mould and make them. But can we change a personality unsuited to hard climbing to one that is more appropriate? The answer is of course, yes, but only if we are aware of our own traits and can control them. Psychologists have broken personality down into specific areas, interdependent, but nevertheless capable of isolation and measurement, intelligence, placidity, artfulness, aloofness, etc. This is one area where there is much data available to us and Jackson at Leeds found after testing some of the leading UK climbers, that they all had certain traits in common. They were shown to be intelligent, abstract thinking, reserved socially, detached and cool, self-sufficient, decisive and assertive in their chosen fields, and resourceful, etc. Most significant to those who wish to try to organize them (why anyone should I am not sure, other than on expeditions) they are evaders of rules and regulations. Looking at these traits I can see them applying to many of my own climbing acquaintances over the years, Don Whillans, Dougal Haston, Robin Smith, Jim McCartney, Tom Patey and almost the archetype, Joe Brown.

Once you are aware of your personality traits, strengths and weaknesses you could by systematic effort change them somewhat if you felt it might be of benefit. Usually things like this happen in the climbing context unconsciously. Many of us will know of persons who have climbed for years at middle grade standards and who suddenly, because of some change in their lives, environment or opportunities, start climbing to much higher standards. They become more confident, more assertive, more assured and start to pioneer difficult new climbs and make early repetitions of difficult and challenging ascents. The most striking example I can think of off-hand, is the late Mike Harris who died on Ama Dablam at the end of the '50s. He had climbed for years at around Grade IV competently, safely and so forth. Then he moved his home nearer to North Wales, became a regular visitor to the Llanberis Pass in the hey-day of the Rock and Ice climbers and at the suggestion of others tried almost apologetically to lead one of the then hardest climbs in the area. Much to his surprise, he was successful and from thereon until his tragic death in the Himalaya he was to be found testing

himself on the hardest climbs of the era—a complete change of his previous expectations and role in climbing.

By concentrating and building up the important strengths I do think any climber can improve his abilities, but here clear goals are paramount. Why do it? What is the benefit in the sum total of things? I climb myself because I enjoy it; the whole panoply of the sport; the environment; the aesthetic appeal; the physical; the mental and most of all, the friendships. Hard climbers might question these reasons, but I am certain that if I could only truly convince myself that the end product of my rock climbing should be to climb as hard as possible, then I have no doubt I could improve, if only marginally, from my lowly standards when measured against today's extreme grades. Unfortunately, I have difficulty in this because of my personality traits, which are by now well set. But it may be possible for others to make changes. And finally, in this direction, it should always be recognized by any individual that standards are set by others. This may take a bit of swallowing but I am sure it is true.

Anxiety This again is extremely important in its relationship to advanced rock climbing. The major work here is as far as I know, by Edwards. He found that persons with high anxiety ratings before they commenced to climb fared badly when introduced into the rock climbing situation. This needs some careful interpretation. We all know that the best climbers stay 'cool' when things get tough and here of course, personality is also a deciding factor. But we do need some levels of anxiety, partly because one climbs better when there are certain adrenalin levels in the blood, but this is also what keeps us from taking stupid risks—it is the level that is important and its control. If persons are already highly anxious before they even get to a climb, then they are likely to be over-affected once they do start climbing and thus be unable to counter the syndrome. What do we mean by anxiety? The only definition I am able to give is a complex emotional state with apprehension or dread as its most prominent component. All of us worry about something—I am worried that an expert will write and run critical riot with this rather facile offering! Over-anxiety can cause lack of sleep, tenseness of the muscles which consequently causes them to fatique quickly. It also leads to an inability to evaluate correctly and to climb efficiently through lack of motor control. My own advice to anyone experiencing such symptoms through extreme climbing is to climb for a while at slightly lower standards but to try to ascend such climbs in an immaculate style. This is I feel, the quickest way to break the anxiety syndrome and the confidence built should usually stay with one when a return is made once more to harder and more demanding ascents.

Balance Like anxiety, this is affected by both physical and mental considerations. There is no doubt that by training it can be improved. The fitter physically a person, the better the balance should be, for it is dependent on co-ordination and motor skills and control is improved if the subject becomes stronger. And here is a most important point for rock climbers to note; balance was shown to be the most important of the 3 factors, anxiety, balance and strength by Edwards's research. This was also confirmed by the results of the

work at Louvain in Belgium in 1969. Low anxiety ratings we have seen are also important, and strength is too, particularly in the way it is used. And here is a clue to what the future will undoubtedly be. All the major attributes demanded by hard climbing can be improved by systematic training; balance, a low anxiety rating and strength can all be developed. Thus, it is obvious that just as today's climbers are breaking new barriers of difficulty so will climbers 20 years hence. The margins of what can be achieved by flair and innate abilities, hereditary and environmental, and what absolutely needs to be systematically developed and learned are now diminishing. It is, and will be, the dilemma of climbing and climbers of the immediate present and the future—how to retain fun, spontaneity, friendships and human happiness with the demands made by a performance which will depend mostly on selfish, utter dedication!

Strength Finally, let us deal with strength—a physical and mental concept. You will all have heard about will power. This always appears as if it were some secret hidden force driving its owner on to greater things. Bonatti on the Dru was an extreme example. Psychologists would not go along with such a concept. It is no magical thing but a controlled response to extreme stimuli. Climbers mean by will power a gathering together of all their physical and mental powers on the edge of control and using them to the best of their abilities for a supreme effort, which might also include within its parameters all previously suggested factors. We are all, I hope, by now agreed that mental strength (or control) is certainly needed in extreme climbing situations, and that by careful preparation we can improve such abilities to meet these demands. Let it here be noted that this is a very subtle process and for those about to rush off to an analyst to start working on such changes, any such process might have side effects which might be harmful in the long run. In the final analysis it may be better to climb only Grade IV and live to be fat, old and jolly than be climbing at Grade VI and be totally unsociable, unhappy with oneself when not climbing, and a bore or dead at 19!

One has to be careful about such things, there must be balance in values as well as in performance. No-one can live the whole of their life on rock climbs. It should I am sure, if one is aware of the possibilities and the issues, ethical and moral, still always be possible to climb as hard as the standards of the day demand and also to still lead a balanced existence, love life and be a warm and happy personality. And it should also still be possible to die—fat, old and jolly.

There is at least one thought I would wish to leave you with and it comes from the recent discoveries of sociologists in the USA. They confirm that behind the average American's dream of wealth, status, power, his desire for his push-button growth orientated society, is hidden the real goal of modern mankind, namely to live his life in a total safety. Safety from want, from war, from accident, from sickness. But it appears to me that the paradoxical laws of nature and the human condition dictate that those who live in such circumstances of total safety soon become the living dead. Whilst those who can afford occasionally to risk their lives from time to time stay the most alive. And this is perhaps a solid justification for always pushing on and setting new standards of extreme rock climbing.