

PERSONALITY AND CLIMBING

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Adapted from an unpublished dissertation by J. Jackson on 'Personality and Rock-climbing'.

'WHY do people climb?' is a question which will probably always defy a general answer because so much depends on the individual. Even to decide one's own reasons can be very difficult: hence a climber usually either evades the question altogether, or gives a stock answer designed to halt further probing. Indeed, its sheer irrationality may be one of the attractions of the sport.

There are, however, other questions which modern research methods are more capable of answering, such as; 'Do climbers differ in mental outlook from non-climbers?'; or to put it another way, 'Is there any type of person whose personality especially suits him to be a climber?'. This latter question is highly relevant in Britain at present because the demand for teachers of 'outdoor pursuits', which include rock-climbing, is outstripping supply to an extent which makes it imperative to select and train more of the right kind of teachers and instructors to fill the gap. A research programme directed to answering this question was recently carried out by Jeff Jackson at the University of Leeds Institute of Education, with the assistance of various helpers of whom I was one. A condensed version of the results is in *Research Papers in Physical Education*, No. 5, December 1967 (published by the Carnegie College of Physical Education), and the purpose of the present article is to summarise them and also to throw light on certain cherished myths about the personalities of top and average climbers respectively.

Before doing so I should like to explore how climbers have seen themselves and their companions in the past. Gaston Rébuffat in *On Snow and Rock* for instance stated, 'Mountaineering calls for important physical attributes; strength, skill, toughness and stamina' but he emphasised they would be worth nothing if not governed by a cool head. Frank Smythe wrote in *The Spirit of the Hills* 'Mountaineering is essentially a matter of skill, rhythm and temperament'. While Malcolm Slesser in *Red Peak* said that 'the British climbers displayed an easy going attitude'. Heinrich Harrer in *The White Spider* quoted Julius Kugy as saying that a mountaineer should be, 'Truthful, distinguished and modest' to which Harrer added, 'Courageous and reliable'. Noyce had so much to say in his two books *The Springs of Adventure* and *They*

¹ I should like to express my grateful thanks to Dr. Mason (Carnegie College of Physical Education) and Jeff Jackson (Bedford College of Physical Education) for permission to use their material.

Survived that any single quote would be inappropriate except to point to a general picture of physical and mental toughness as understood by the ordinary man. Many have suggested that expedition work requires particular emotional stability and Shipton, Hunt, Houston and Fuchs could all be quoted on this subject.

We all have our own ideas of ourselves and climbing and I think most of us see ourselves as partakers in a fine sport, dangerous and challenging, requiring special training, abilities and character. However, what does objective analysis reveal?

One of the few previous studies in this field was that by J. T. Lester of the Berkeley Institute during the American 1963 Everest Expedition.² He found that the members of the expedition behaved in a way highly congruent with the pre-expedition personality assessment: that the climbers of the party were more interested in possibilities than facts and what had been done; and that the party on the whole was introverted and not highly gregarious (i.e. not out-going or exceptionally sociable or boisterous). This latter ties in well with some of the Leeds results and shows the potential value of personality testing for expeditions particularly in helping to select successful partnerships, although it is not suggested of course that anybody would pick a team solely by such methods.

R. B. Cattell (University of Illinois) has much experience in this broad area of psychological work, although he has not investigated rock-climbing as such. He states³ (and Lester agrees) that aggressive and competitive factors are most associated with activities requiring boldness and courage. Aggressive and Competitive? This certainly seems at variance with the generally accepted view of climbers. However, there are many areas of personality bias and I think it appropriate now to examine Jackson's actual research results.

The test applied was the Cattell and Eber Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire,⁴ developed over many years and now of a high standard of proven accuracy. This test is used by the U.S. Government and many industrial projects, by educational and similar programmes, and is of a restricted nature mainly for research projects. It breaks personality assessment into sixteen compartments and of course the questions are indirect on interests and subjects which cannot in any way be connected with the object of the test. The questionnaire required the subject to mark with ticks only, ruling out any misinterpretation

² 'Men to match Everest,' *Naval Research Reviews*, December 1964; and 'Correlates of Field Behaviour: Behavioural Research during the 1963 American Everest Expedition,' *Technical Report No. 1, Group Psychology Branch, Office of Naval Research*, 1965.

³ Cattell, R. B. *The Scientific Analysis of Personality*, Penguin Books, 1965.

⁴ Cattell, R. B. and Eber, H. W. *Handbook for the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire*, Illinois Institute for Personality and Ability Testing, 1957.

by the assessor. The answers were then analysed by a comparative process which was a complicated task requiring a year's work and a computer.

The groups

It was decided to test five separate groups (to give a good range) all of whom were male and had in common regular pursuit of some outdoor activity in mountainous areas; thereafter they were classified as:

(a) *Top climbers (28 subjects)*. These were all members of the Alpine Climbing Group, which contains a high proportion of outstanding rock climbers and top mountaineers, with considerable expedition experience.

(b) *Rock-climbing instructors in Outdoor Pursuits Centres (28 subjects)*. These all possessed at least the technique and skill needed for employment by both National and Local Education Authority Centres as instructors in this field.

(c) *Rock-climbing (39 subjects)*. This group comprised subjects who were interested in the activity to the extent of participating on average once a month, or, alternatively, were interested to the point of attending a residential course on rock-climbing of at least one week's duration.

(d) *Those interested in mountain activities (45 subjects)*. These had no strong feelings either way about rock-climbing; they would climb if it became necessary in the pursuit of their interest in mountains, but, on the other hand, they would not go out of their way especially to climb.

(e) *Non rock-climbers (11 subjects)*. This group comprised those who had sampled the activity sufficiently to decide that they had absolutely no further interest; it also included those who had never climbed and had no desire to do so. They served a dual function, acting in some spheres as a control group.

The sample of the Alpine Climbing Group was obtained by selecting at random from a list of the entire membership. The other four groups were self-selected in that assistance was sought of all male members of adult national courses to be held at The Snowdonia National Recreation Centre, Capel Curig, North Wales. The subjects' occupations ranged from the professions to unskilled labouring, and their ages from seventeen to forty-five.

The Results

I must emphasise that the work cannot be regarded as conclusive: certain weaknesses are apparent in the delineation of the groups, and other methods of assessment should be used besides questionnaires. However, at least it gives a general indication.

For convenience, I itemise the results in terms of the hypotheses chosen. These were that rock-climbers who have reached a very high standard of proficiency in the activity will be more:

- (a) aloof, withdrawn and retiring, aggressive and critical;
- (b) emotionally mature, stable, phlegmatic and calm;
- (c) assertive, self-assured and independent minded;
- (d) casual, undependable, demanding and impatient;
- (e) unconventional;
- (f) simple and unpretentious;
- (g) self-sufficient and resourceful than non rock-climbers.

The main conclusions in respect of these hypotheses were:

(a) *Aloofness etc.* The top climbers were shown to be more reserved, detached, critical and cool than the non rock-climbers, the mountain activities group and the rock-climbers; and the rock-climbing instructors were similarly more so than the non rock-climbers and the mountain activities group. The hypothesis was supported.

(b) *Emotional maturity, stability, etc.* There were no significant differences on the trait of emotional stability and therefore the hypothesis was not supported.

(c) *Assertiveness, self-assurance and independence of mind.* The top climbers, rock-climbing instructors, rock-climbers and mountain activities groups were all more assertive, aggressive and stubborn than the non rock-climbers. The hypothesis was supported.

(d) *Casualness, undependability, etc.* The top climbers were more expedient, evaded rules more and felt fewer obligations than the mountain activities group and the non rock-climbers. The hypothesis was supported.

(e) *Unconventionality.* There were no significant differences on the trait of conventionality and therefore the hypothesis was not supported.

(f) *Simplicity and lack of pretence.* There were no significant differences in the trait of artlessness and therefore the hypothesis was not supported.

(g) *Self-sufficiency and resourcefulness.* The top climbers and the rock-climbing instructors were more self-sufficient, preferred their own decisions, and were more resourceful than the mountain activities group. The top climbers possessed the same qualities only more so than the rock-climbers, and rock-climbing instructors more so than the rock-climbers. The non rock-climbers were also more self-sufficient, etc., than the mountain activities group. The hypothesis was not supported.

The research, however, also threw up the following other conclusions:

(h) *Intelligence etc.* The top climbers were more intelligent, abstract-thinking and bright than the mountain activities group and the rock climbers; and the non rock-climbers more so than the mountain activities group and the rock-climbers.

(i) *Trust, adaptability, etc.* The rock-climbing instructors and the

non rock-climbers were more trusting, adaptable, free of jealousy and easier to get on with than the mountain activities group. Both the rock-climbing instructors and the non rock-climbers possessed these qualities more than the rock-climbers.

(j) *Placidity, confidence, etc.* The rock-climbing instructors were more placid, self-assured, confident and serene than the rock-climbers and the mountain activities group.

(k) *Conservatism of outlook.* The rock-climbing instructors were more experimenting, critical, liberal, analytical and free-thinking than the mountain activities group and the rock-climbers.

Comment

The reader may well think that the results as they stand are very interesting, whether he agrees with them or not.

Predictions by personality experts were that climbers would show themselves to be aggressive, possessors of a high degree of composure, phlegmatic and so forth. These predictions which took account of studies in other fields and the researchers' own experience of the climbing fraternity were strongly supported. However, climbers were also shown to be expedient, evaders of rules, disregardful of obligations, often casual, and tending to lack the type of effort needed for group work and cultural demands. Moreover they were generally assertive, independent, stubborn, tending to the austere and disregarders of authority (in fact a law unto themselves).

It can be argued from the results that the better the climber the more pronounced these traits become. The very top climbers certainly showed themselves to be greatly different from the others in some directions and in particular were more intelligent, abstract thinking, bright, reserved socially, detached, and cool than all other groups including the non climbers. The picture of a top climber in Britain emerges as one who is withdrawn, cautious, and retiring in social interaction and preferring one or two close friends to large groups. Socially they are not bold nor are they abundant in emotional response. They are very self-sufficient, like to make their own decisions, are highly competitive and aggressive in their chosen area of activity, very assertive in this field and resourceful.

The instructors gave surprising results since they were shown to be more closely aligned to non climbers than other climbing groups. Along with non climbers they showed themselves more adaptable, uncompetitive, more concerned about other people, easier to get along with than other climbers. However, many would agree that these are the characteristics which mark the instructor in any field. They also showed themselves to be placid, confident and serene, free-thinking, liberal and analytical.

Subtle but recordable differences exist between top climbers and instructors. This can best be explained by using a psychological concept of role behaviour. Instructors are expected to help develop the character of young people, emphasise safety considerations, and so forth. They also showed a need to justify their jobs to themselves and their organisations. Further investigation here could be worthwhile: I would guess that this is because climbing instruction in Britain is a brand new profession, without any tradition or previous parallel.

On the other hand, climbers in general showed themselves to be neither more nor less favoured than non climbers in sociability, artlessness, integration and emotional stability. This last applies equally to the top climbers, whose results showed no significant differences in the degree of emotional stability; as many of them had been members of expeditions, this would suggest that expedition personnel need not necessarily be more emotionally stable than normal—a surprising conclusion in view of the weight of opinion to the contrary.

As a result of this study I hope we have now a clearer picture of what we climbers are really like. Certainly it explains why climbers are difficult to organise, as anyone who has tried to plan an expedition will agree.

Climbing is of great interest to psychologists and there are still many areas of research worthy of attention. For example, another very interesting study has recently been completed at the Leeds Institute about anxiety, balance and strength in rock climbing: its broad conclusion is that balance is the most important single attribute of the top rock climber, followed closely by low anxiety factors and strength.

If any psychologist approaches you as a climber in the future, watch out for his apparatus. It could be impossible to leave the ground with all the equipment required for certain investigations!

Finally, I should like to close with a quote appropriately from Cattell: 'It is commonplace amongst experienced observers in almost any field that personality and ability together decide the outcome'.