

Exploring resilience among mountaineers preparing for an attempt on Everest by the West Ridge

Resilience: Underpinning Theory

Conceptually, 'resilience' has developed from being focused on personal hardiness and invulnerability (Kobasa, 1979) to more contemporary perspectives of an elastic personality and 'normal development under difficult circumstances' (Fonagy et al., 1994, p233). Resilience can be conceptualised as either an outcome (based on a set of functional responses and adaptations to circumstances and events) or a process (which ensure adaptation). We have aimed to distinguish these understandings within our data analytic approach.

Currently, 'resilience' is the label given to 'bounce-back-ability' and is particularly pertinent among individuals who experience severe mental or physical distress. In effect, this refers to coping with setbacks and has strong associations with personalised notions of capability and competence (Vanderpool, 2002) and there is a need to explore the acute processes that lead to resilience. Further, with only few psychometrically validated devices (Wagnild & Young, 1993), there is a need to undertake this exploration based on longitudinal, qualitative study designs.

In sport psychology the nature of coping has focused on emotional and problem-based coping (Jones and Hardy, 2000), rather than personal estimates of what needs to be managed, avoided or diffused. Resilience and 'learned resourcefulness' (the application of behavioural and coping resources toward a set aim; Akgun and Ciarrochi, 2003) offer a range of different concepts that may benefit the management of unfolding and unanticipated experiences, including intellectual functioning, emotional attachments, optimism and altruism (Charney, 2004). Previously, the negative effects of stress have been moderated by learned resourcefulness although the 'lived experience' of engaging these personal resources is not well understood.

Importantly, the beneficial effects of resilience-based interviews are well-established. Within this programme, there are opportunities to explore similar issues among a group of new army recruits and developing mountaineers who have been selected to shadow the main squad. In these terms, there is a unique opportunity to explore 'resilience-as-prevention'. We recruited volunteers from this group in the same way as for the Main squad. In this group the study focused on (a) adaptive processes in the context of the extraordinary engagement that this project represents and (b) how novice / developmental climbers protect and adapt themselves to these unique challenges while navigating life within the army.

Crucially, Outdoor Adventure (OA) experiences have also been associated with heightened markers of resilience. In a recent meta-analysis based on over 12000 young people (Hattie, March, Neil and Richards, 1997), effect sizes at least equivalent to standardised educational effects were determined for OA exposure in both male and female high-risk youth and early-aged adults. These effects were achieved through controlling alcohol and drugs use

and by delaying initiation of involvement in substance abuse through enhanced social, emotional, spiritual, physical and intellectual health. Many of the incremental effects of OA continued long after initial exposures and the strongest effects were found in programmes lasting 20-days or more. For this reason, Hattie et al., (1997) endorse the need for more process-based longitudinal studies.

In this study, resilience can be distinguished from the concept of positive mental health by the absence of an 'average expectable environment' (Vanderpool, 2002). The potentially life-affirming, but equally life-threatening, experiences of this challenge offers a unique opportunity to understand how climbers (and their support teams) support themselves through the preparation for an attempt on Everest by a route never before completed. Climbers' 'unknowingness' of their impending experience adds a unique dimension to this exploration and makes the application of 'resilience' particularly pertinent.

Aims of the project

The project aims to explore how resilience (personal growth) develops among three levels of climbers (novices, intermediates and experts) engaged with the Everest West Ridge attempt, in spring 2006.

A secondary aim is to develop an anonymised database that will be amenable to secondary analysis for expedition planners and researchers

Design of the project

This longitudinal study addresses personal growth (resilience) in the preparation and execution of this hazardous climb. Volunteers will contribute up to four interviews over the preparation period, during and following the attempt. Interviews will progressively focus on (a) personal growth, then (b) growth in the context of the climbing team, and finally (c) growth in the context of the person x team x mountain environment.

Participants are volunteers drawn from three groups;

(1) The Main Team (MT); 19 experienced climbers recruited for the main attempt on Everest (8848 metres)

(2) The Development Team (DT) comprises a further group of 15 who are developing their climbing and mountaineering skills by shadowing the MT. They will be helping establishing advanced base camp on Everest before climbing two significant peaks in the adjacent valley (ie Lhakpa Ri 7045m)

(3) The Junior Squad (JS) is only 6 months recruited into the army. These 8 16 year old volunteers will be undertaking a 21 day trek to the foot of Island Peak (6250m) which they intend to summit on Easter Day.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with all groups. Interviews progressively focus on the individual issues but within the overall context of how the three stages of preparation (individual, 'individual x group' and then finally 'individual x group x environment').

Data reduction: Established concepts of resilience provide a sensitising framework for conducting preliminary analyses. Data is reduced inductively to address how resilience changes and in relation to different challenges posed within the preparation process and through the expedition.

Procedures

Interviews involve semi-structured discussions. These have been conducted up to four times across the preparation period. At each meeting recurrent themes are addressed along with new developments that the mountaineers wish to address. At the same time, we focused on different themes in the different interview rounds. These themes reflect the development plan for all participants.

All discussions were conducted in venues convenient to the participants, although they have taken place at training camps (because many of the elite team are posted in military locations around the world). Expedition planners confirmed their enthusiasm for this approach and planned their gatherings to accommodate this interviewing.

Interviews will be converted to scripts and then edited to protect identities.

Risks

There have been few obvious risks in the interviewing. However, the expedition is clearly a dangerous pursuit as are many elements of the preparation which will simulate the attempt. However, all members of the Main and Development squads are experienced in coping with a range of adversities. Indeed, it is this coping and the 'rebound' effects which make the project so innovative. There are numerous retrospective studies of climbing experiences, but remarkably few that are located in the unfolding events.

Regarding the Junior Squad (novices), issues focused on meeting the demands of the training and of being away from home etc.

As part of the preparation, a qualified sport psychologist has worked with the individuals and contributed to planning preparatory activities. These were designed to develop individual capacities, to strengthen capacity to cope with adversity and to generate personal growth. We are working closely with him to ensure offering compatible activities and to avoid adding to the 'participant burden' beyond what will benefit the climbers.

The full range of Army support services is available to the volunteers. These services are used to debriefing after monumental life experiences such as being involved in a war.

Participants have been able to refuse to answer specific questions. Neither have contributors been required to contribute at every interview round. All had the right to withdraw their contributions and on-going consent was sought at each round on interviewing. No volunteer withdrew at any point; all participants from the climbing teams actively endorsed and expressed benefit from discussions.

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