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Extreme Sports: A Study of Free-Solo Rock Climbers

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ABSTRACT

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Extreme sport participation has traditionally been conceptualized as a psychological disorder and something to be avoided (Cashmore, 2002). Viewed in this way, these individuals are thought to be enacting an unhealthy psychology (Ogilvie, 1997; Slanger & Rudestam, 1997). Other research has described participants in extreme sports as sensation seekers under-stimulated by their normal surroundings and out of control (Zuckerman, 1979). Using Brymer's (2005) focused definition of extreme sports, "activities where a mismanaged mistake or accident would most likely result in death, as opposed to injury" (p. 5), this study utilized a phenomenological method to analyze semi-structured interviews with 16 free-solo climbers (n =16). The participants described their motivations in terms of overwhelming enjoyment, heightened focus, and personal progress. These results support more recent research describing extreme sport experiences as opportunities for positive transformation with outcomes including gains in courage, humility, eco-centrism, and emotional engagement (Brymer, 2009; Willig, 2008). These findings challenge the traditional, stereotypical notions of extreme sports participants as young and male (Wheaton & Beal, 2003), sensation-seeking (Zuckerman, 1979), and psychologically unwell (Ogilvie, 1997; Slanger & Rudestam, 1997). Answering Brymer's (2005) call to investigate all extreme sports individually, this study focused on the specific extreme sport of free-solo climbing and found the experience of the free-solo climber is a powerful undertaking enjoyed by young, old, male, and female.

Keywords: extreme sports, free-solo climbing, meaningful learning experiences, enjoyment, progression, focus

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Introduction

Yosemite is a place carved, shaped, and molded during the last ice age. It is characterized by old forests, huge waterfalls, and enormous granite cliffs. Entering the valley brings visitors a sense of awe and wonder. Sensing this magnanimous atmosphere, rock climbers from around the world flock to Yosemite to practice their craft of scaling these challenging and vertical rock walls, continuing a long tradition of adventurous climbing in this grand landscape. Climbers bring with them ropes, harnesses, carabiners, and countless other devices as protection from potential falls.

A small subset of these climbers chooses to leave the safety equipment on the ground and climb without any of the protective gear mentioned above. They use only specialized rock climbing shoes made with rubber, designed to better stick to the rock, and a bag full of gymnast's caulk to dry their sweating hands. They ascend cliffs hundreds, even thousands, of feet off of the ground, putting themselves in positions where a fall would almost certainly result in death. These climbers are called free-solo climbers. Having met some of these climbers in years previous, I knew they are reluctant to discuss their free-solo climbing. Maybe they are not eager to be criticized for these actions so often regarded as selfish, suicidal, or reckless.

On one particular outing in Yosemite, I took some friends on an easy hike up the backside of a well-known 900-foot granite dome. The front side of this dome is a vertical cliff with some challenging rock climbs (also known as routes). The year before I had climbed one of these routes with ropes and protective gear. This particular route is also climbed in the free-solo manner by a few who dare to do so. I was hoping to encounter a free-solo climber at the top. My small group and I zigged and zagged up the enormous, curving granite dome. As we gained hundreds of feet of elevation, many in the group became uncomfortable with the steepening

angles of the vast expanses of this massive formation. Using our hands became necessary as we hiked higher and higher until we had finally reached the top of this giant granite dome. As we rounded up to the plateaued peak, we saw a climber come up the opposite, sheer side of the rock, with no ropes and with no safety gear. His hair was wild and wind-blown; his eyes seemed to stare right through me. I was amazed to see a person accomplish this feat. Having had my own physical and psychological battles as I scaled the same cliff-face the previous year, fully protected with ropes and traditional gear, I likened myself to a fresh soldier just reaching the frontline viewing this free-solo climber as a battle-hardened veteran. Clearly a master of his chosen extreme sport, he transitioned seamlessly from the difficult vertical challenges of the rock face to taking some calm and conscious breaths at the top.

This was a free-solo climber. He had just completed an ascent of a 900-foot vertical rock cliff without any protective gear. He was alone and had spent the past couple hours moving vertically, hand over hand, and foot by foot up a sheer cliff. He looked confident and engaged. His clothes seemed perfectly suited to his epic quest, as if he were a knight proudly presenting the garb adorned with symbols representing his mythic and noble ideals. He stood strong and tall as if he had encountered menacing monsters and found some invisible treasure in their bellies. We looked at each other and I saw his eyes were clear and blue. Was he looking past me? No. He looked straight ahead with direct and startling contact. “How was it?” I asked. “Good, good”, he said dismissively. He was cool as the summit breeze. Here I stood, an experienced climber myself, in approbation and recognition of the skill and mental ability a feat of this nature required and struggled for words to express these feelings. He seemed disinterested in conversation and consumed by the experience he was having. The presence of our group seemed to surprise him, and I got the sense he wanted to remain alone. Everyone

seemed to be enjoying themselves. The sun was setting, the tops of surrounding peaks were highlighted pink, orange, and yellow, with a radiant brilliance. Swallows swooped by, riding the rising currents of air. A marmot stood on its hind legs appearing to enjoy the commanding view. In these beautiful surroundings, the free-solo climber seemed full of energy and eager to keep moving. We asked him a few questions and he moved on quickly, almost running down the large peak, as if completely at home in this rugged environment. Traditionally, explanations of extreme sports have regarded participation as pathologic (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997) or otherwise emotionally unhealthy (Ogilvie, 1997). My encounters with these free-solo climbers were different.

Many of these theoretical perspectives rely on the presuppositions of non-participant scholars (Brymer, 2005). These perspectives simply do not include the personal insights of these extreme sport participants they presume to describe. Researchers have suggested one needs to spend time with the participants of these sports, live among them, participate in activities with them, and socialize with them in order to move beyond these psychologically negative explanations (Brymer, 2005; Celsi, 1993; Willig, 2008). In an effort to extend the research involving the perspective of the participant, the need for a more thorough understanding of each extreme sport individually was stated by Brymer (2005), "an improvement would be to fully explore the phenomenological structure of each distinct activity before attedaympting to consider the phenomenological essence of the global concept of extreme sports" (p. 212). Such access is not easily obtained. Seeking these personal insights by an outsider is often difficult.

Having spent many seasons with free-solo climbers, having lived with them, camped with them, climbed with them, eaten with them, I was well-situated to execute this study. The purpose of this study is to tell their story, describe the experience of free-solo climbers, and

answer Brymer's (2005) call to investigate individual extreme sports for further understanding and comparison. Gaining this access was not easy. The participants would often ask me if I free-solo climbed, or at least if I had climbed the routes they had free-soloed. They seemed reassured that I had. I would pass the inclusion criteria for participation in this study. And while I had inclusion criteria for their participation in this study, it was as if they had participation criteria of their own. They tested me, as if unwilling to share their stories with a non-climber. Those I did not know personally were at first reluctant. Many were persuaded only by other participants of this study, or after a conversation qualifying my intent.

The name of the free-solo climber we met atop the giant granite dome was Lou. After meeting him, I was able to carry out semi-structured interviews with him and 15 other free-solo climbers. What emerged from these exchanges comprises the basis for the findings of this research.

Literature Review

Extreme sport participants are conventionally viewed as being risk-takers or adrenaline junkies (Zuckerman, 1979). Involvement in these activities has been considered an expression of a death wish (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997) and otherwise revealing an unhealthy psychology (Ogilvie, 1997). Many of these studies relied on social and psychological theory and did not include data gathered directly from the participants. Subsequent theory-based research has echoed this negative emphasis and have found extreme sport participants to demonstrate sensation-seeking behavior (Breivik, 1996), a lack of control (Laurendeau, 2008; Lyng, 1990), and narcissistic tendencies (Elmes & Barry, 1999). Recently, the perspective of the participants of extreme sports themselves has been addressed in research. The findings of these investigations have begun to identify aspects of the extreme sport experience such as, increased

self-awareness (Pain & Pain, 2005), the building of personal strengths (Willig, 2008; Brymer, 2009), and the development of transferable skills (Brymer & Oades, 2008). These studies have examined participants of many different extreme sports (Brymer, 2005; Willig, 2008), sky divers (Celsi, 1993), and BASE jumpers (Pain & Pain, 2005). These findings contradict previous perspectives and present a different understanding of extreme sport participation.

Theoretical Explanations of Extreme Sport

Theoretical perspectives explaining extreme sport participation as pathology include a few general approaches and will be considered broadly as sociological perspectives and psychological perspectives. The main sociological theory attempting to explain extreme sport participation is what Lyng (1990) has coined "edgework" (p. 852). This theory puts forth participation in extreme sports is a social phenomenon where the participant willingly pushes himself beyond the edge of control (Lyng, 1990). In research linking various sociological theories, Lyng (2014) posits edgework is a way to escape a feeling of alienation brought about through dull working conditions ultimately caused by a sense of class immobility. He further relates participation in edgework to individualism and anti-institutionalism. Thus, the extreme sport participant, or edgework participant, is understood to be influenced to behave in this way by his surroundings and his class situation. Using this theory, researchers have considered edgework as a means to further explore sociological factors in extreme sport participation.

In his research, Fletcher (2008) found the professional middle class to be disproportionately represented in the participation of extreme sports. Fletcher identified common characteristics of the professional middle class as persistence and being oriented toward goal-setting. He makes the case extreme sports require these characteristics to be successful. Attempting to explain why the professional middle class is disproportionally represented in the

overall body of participants of extreme sports, Fletcher theorized participants rationalize their involvement in edgework as an escape from alienating and disenchanting living conditions of their class. He further theorized their involvement in edgework offers an opportunity for the demonstration of the characteristics of their class, namely persistence and being goal-oriented. Seen this way, participants of extreme sport, believe they are escaping their undesired feelings of their class situation, but enact the characteristics of this self-same class to become successful in extreme sport (Fletcher, 2008).

Exploring edgework, Laurendeau (2008) gathered ethnographic data from skydivers over several years and found they construct an illusion of control of hazardous environments and use the notion of fate to describe evidence to the contrary. Laurendeau found these constructions to vary by gender, for example males tend to have a different explanation for participation in extreme sports than women. This suggests participation in extreme sports may be due in part to one's gender and thus outside of the conscious minds of participants.

Researchers have also attempted explanation through a psychoanalytic viewpoint and have described participation as "denying limitations and vulnerabilities, rationalizing unacceptable behavior and feelings, overestimating abilities and accomplishments, and offering consistently self-serving explanations for successes and failures" (Elmes & Barry, 1999, p.165). Following a climbing disaster on Mt. Everest, many observers linked to leadership decisions, researchers used psychodynamic theory to suggest commercialization and overcrowding in the practice of climbing Mt. Everest lead to "pathologically narcissistic, competitive, and regressive dynamics that ultimately contributed to numerous climbing deaths" (Elmes & Barry, 1999, p. 167). This psychoanalytic perspective views these participants of extreme sport as victims of unhealthful psychological developments.

In another line of research, it is proposed everyone has a certain level of a sensation-seeking trait (Zuckerman, 1979). In some, Zuckerman (1979) said the trait is expressed more than in others and can reach a level which reduces the chances of survival for that individual. Seen in this light, extreme sport participation is a psychological need for novel experience and powerful sensations through the taking of physical risks (Zuckerman, 1979). Those scoring high on the sensation-seeking scale are considered to be continually seeking new excitements and exhilaration to combat boredom.

In a study of a Norwegian Everest expedition, elite climbers were compared to control groups in terms of the sensation-seeking scale (Breivik, 1996). It was found the profile of elite climbers revealed they were more willing to take risks than the control group in situations related to economic, political, and physical concerns, but not in achievement-related, academic, or public matters. Brievik (1996) determined there is a high-risk participant profile identifiable in personality tests and in specific trait tests. This suggests there exists a certain type of person with identifiable psychological traits who participates in extreme sports.

These theory-driven perspectives argue aspects of one's personality and socialization compel a participant to risk their life in extreme sports. Participants, thinking they are escaping their class situation, enact their class characteristics to become successful in extreme sport. Participation in extreme sport is also considered in gendered terms to be a product of social conditioning. Participants have been understood to be expressing a morbid psychological traits and exhibit sensation-seeking, ever searching for thrills and risk. Yet, a growing body of evidence reveals these presuppositions may not be completely accurate (Brymer, 2005; Celsi, 1993; Slanger & Rudestam, 1997; Willig, 2008).

Participant Perspective

For some, the preliminary reason to participate may be the excitement or risk of these activities. However, when the perspective of the experienced extreme sport participant is considered, evidence suggests motives change with sustained participation (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997). For example, in a study examining three groups of participants of extreme sports of varying degrees of experience, Slanger and Rudestam (1997) found no relationship between sensation-seeking and the most experienced participant group. They further suggested "maximizing risk is not the goal of their activities" and found experienced participants demonstrated emotional control and low anxiety (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997, p. 369).

In interviews with participants of various extreme sports, Willig (2008) identified emergent themes as challenge, suffering, community, and powerful emotion. Suffering was considered useful by the participants because it represented confronting limitations. Many participants described storytelling to be an important part of participation in extreme sport. Storytelling allowed for others to validate the experience and provide lasting meaning. Powerful emotions were experienced by some participants who described themselves as being aware of the tranquil surroundings of the natural setting while being involved in strenuous physical activity (Willig, 2008).

Additionally, Brymer and Oades (2008), through interviews with 15 participants of various extreme sports, analyzed the emergent themes of the transcripts. The researchers stated, "the extreme sport experience strips away the socio-cultural noise and allows an individual to hear their authentic own self" (Brymer & Oades, p. 225). Discovery of what Brymer and Oades refer to as the core self through participation in these sports was often described by the participants. Conceptualized as a practice place for confronting fears and practicing

intrapersonal communication, participation in extreme sports was found to allow for an increased ability to deal with difficult situations outside of extreme sport (Brymer & Oades, 2008).

Pain and Pain (2005), in interviews with BASE jumpers, found participants were self-aware, highly-trained, and favored control. They wrote, "Most of those involved are well aware of their strengths and limitations in the face of clear dangers… and individuals do not want to put their lives in danger by going beyond personal capabilities" (Pain & Pain, 2005, p. 34). From this perspective, participants' experience includes self-awareness, extreme care, discipline, and control.

Summary

Given participation in extreme sports is rising faster than participation in traditional sports (Pain & Pain, 2005), and extreme sport participation continues to be described in terms of negative psychological states (Brievik, 1996; Lyng, 2014), it is important to include the perspectives of the participants themselves to come to a complete understanding of extreme sport participation. Some research has been done investigating extreme sport participation from the perspective of the participant and has described extreme sport participation in terms of positive psychological effect (Brymer, 2009; Celsi, 1993; Pain & Pain, 2005; Willig, 2008). These studies have examined extreme sport participation by sampling participants from many different sports and have begun to challenge the traditionally negative understanding of extreme sport participation. This clear contrast begs for further investigation to further map these changes through research. The overall weaknesses of this body of literature are the lack of a thick description of the perspective of the participants themselves coming from a trust gained over years of participating in the sport with them, and an in-depth look into the differences between the different extreme sports. This research is a response to these gaps and an attempt to validate

or contradict the findings of the research reviewed here. An in-depth understanding of participation in free-solo rock climbing, will contribute to the body of knowledge concerning extreme sport participation. Understanding the experience of extreme sport participation, comparing and contrasting the findings of this research with previous studies and perspectives, and further defining the experience specific to free-solo climbing were viewed as important reasons for this study.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews with 16 free-solo climbers were audio recorded; responses were coded to determine emergent themes, and analyzed. A phenomenological method was chosen to collect and analyze the data in this qualitative study.

Phenomenology in Research

Begun by Husserl, the phenomenological movement was a new way of accomplishing the work of philosophy and included focusing on experience as lived, description of essence, and consciousness of phenomena (Finlay, 2009). The phenomenological tradition challenges the priority given to what is claimed to be known empirically with the primacy of lived experience. One cannot speak or refer to something without implicitly implying consciousness, and it is thus unavoidable. Understood in this way, consciousness constitutes the "medium of access to whatever is given to awareness" and is not neutral in the process of presenting objects, but active in contributing to the meaning of these objects (Giorgi, 1997, p. 237). Therefore, the phenomenological stand posits, to acknowledge and account for consciousness is more rigorous than to ignore it (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenology begins its investigation of intuitions, not in the objective sense, but in terms of the "given-ness" that is present, and in terms of meaning of the phenomena for the subject (Giorgi, 1997). When applied to research, the ideas of

phenomenology center on a return to "embodied, experiential meanings aiming for a fresh, complex, rich description of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived" (Finlay, 2009, p. 242). Phenomenology, as a research method, is thoroughly descriptive, investigates the intentionality of consciousness inherent in relationship between individuals and situations, and discloses the essences and structures of meaning in human experiences (Finlay, 2009).

Phenomenological research is best suited to problems concerning generating policy, developing practices, or gaining a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). To understand the essence of the phenomenon at the level of the lived experience of the participant is valued as a contribution to a full understanding. With little research covering free-solo climbing, and questions concerning motivations and appropriateness of extreme sport, a phenomenological method was appropriate for this research.

Data Gathering Procedures

Data was collected through dyadic semi-structured interviews with experienced free-solo climbers. Participants were asked broad, open-ended questions dealing with the contexts influencing the experience of the phenomenon and to report the first-hand account of the experience.

Interview questions were designed to achieve triangulation based on Flick's (2008) criteria by using a variety (at least three) of different question types in order to approach a subject from different angles. O'Donoghue and Punch (2003) describe triangulation as a "method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data" (p. 78). Flick (2008) further categorizes these different types of questions as follows: (a) situation narratives, or personal perceptions of focused events, (b) repisodes, or regularly re-occurring situations, (c) examples, including metaphors and/or actual experiences, (d) subjective

definitions, which are personal perceptions of specific terms or constructs, and (e) argumentative-theoretical statements, or explanations of concepts and their relations. The following sample of interview questions, used in this study, illustrates these criteria discussed by Flick (2008):

- Define the term free-solo climbing. (Subjective definition)
- Tell me the story of the first time you climbed free-solo? (Situation narrative)
- How do you prepare for a free solo climb? (Repisode)
- Describe the free-solo climbing experience? (Argumentative-theoretical statement)
- Describe a moment you felt your life was on the line? (Situation narrative)
- Describe any resistance to this practice of climbing you've encountered outside of yourself. (Argumentative-theoretical statement)

These prompt questions along with follow up questions, to clarify their meaning, constituted the semi-structured interview. Using these different question types allowed for an arrival at common themes from various sources. What was shared in a story about a first free-solo climb was also reiterated in a description of the free-solo climbing experience generally. A subjective definition of free-solo climbing would also be reified in a repisode, or regularly re-occurring situation, for example when telling about how one prepares for a free-solo climb. These questions were, therefore, chosen to reach the essence of the experience of free-solo climbing from a diverse set of starting points, to find commonality through asking in different ways.

Additionally, this format allowed for variation from the interview guide and further exploration of sub-topics. Attention was focused on gathering data leading to a textural

description of the structure, meaning, and essence of the common experiences of the participants. Before I began the interview, in every case, the participants had a question of their own, "Have *you* ever free-solo climbed?"; they were interested in my involvement in the sport. I have free-solo climbed some well-known routes and always answered the question honestly. This simple affirmative answer to their question seemed to set them at ease, allowing for a comfortable exchange.

Selection of Participants

A group of free-solo climbers, loosely organized around a Search and Rescue team in the Tuolumne Meadows campground in Yosemite National Park, served as a starting point for contacting potential participants. I engaged contacts within this community to find willing participants for this study. Participants were also recruited via flyers posted at the historic Camp 4 information board in Yosemite Valley. Camp 4 has been an historic meeting place for climbers for decades, and continues to attract climbers from around the world. The campground is where many climbers prepare for ambitious routes, hone their skills on the surrounding boulders, or attempt to find potential climbing partners. Additional participants were found through snowball sampling, where participants voluntarily recommended other free-solo climbers to participate in the study.

Distinguishing free-solo climbers, for the purposes of this study, depended on answers to questions in an informal setting related to their climbing practice. All of the participants were volunteers and engaged in this free-solo climbing practice of their own free will. The criteria for selecting these participants included: (a) all participants engaged in the activity of free-solo climbing, as defined by climbing without protective gear 80 or more feet above the ground (b) all participants acknowledged the consequence of a mismanaged mistake on these climbs would

most likely be death, (c) the participants free-solo climbed at a moderate grade, as measured by the Yosemite Decimal System, 5.6 or greater. These criteria were established to provide a clear selection process resulting in a sample relevant to the purposes of the study.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to come to a full description of the experience of free-solo climbing. In this section, an analysis of the both supportive and resistant factors of participation and the emergent themes of the semi-structured interviews is presented.

Participants

Nine of the 16 free-solo climbers interviewed were young males and ranged in age from 22 to 35 years old. Three older males were 57, 62, and 68 years old, and three female climbers aged 22, 31, and 41. Twelve (75%) were university graduates, and two (13%) held graduate degrees. Eight participants (50%) were engaged in seasonal employment in Yosemite National Park, four (25%) where there for various other professional reasons, and four (25%) were in Yosemite for leisure.

Becoming a Free-Solo Climber

Brian was a 34-year-old former trial attorney from a small Southern town in the United States. He was successful in his work as an attorney, yet felt as though there was a passion beyond his profession he had to explore. At the time of the interview, he worked seasonally on the Search and Rescue (SAR) team in Yosemite Valley, had 12 years of experience rock climbing, and had been a leader of the SAR team for the past three years. Brian spoke about a gradual build up to becoming a free-solo climber. He felt in his experience rock climbing, there were many instances where the hike up to the climbing route felt precarious. He began to experience a sense of caution while he traversed challenging terrain approaching these climbing

routes. He called these difficult sections of the approach to a climbing route "no-fall zones." He stated, "having a reservoir of experience being in no-fall zones" on exposed approach terrain starts to "break down barriers" until eventually "the distance between being in a no-fall mindset and actually going out and doing free-solo climbing becomes so minimal." His extensive experience on exposed mountains allowed him the confidence and background to successfully navigate even established climbing routes without protective gear. Simon had been climbing since childhood and remembered climbing trees with his brothers when still a pre-teen. He had worked various manual labor jobs since high school and was a member of the SAR team at the time of this interview. He revealed his experience of climbing more and more difficult climbing routes naturally gave way to a sense of comfort on steep, technically challenging terrain. Climbing on the relatively easier sections of rock, once viewed as difficult and requiring gear, eventually lead to a calculated risk of climbing them without gear as a matter of efficiency in order to achieve other goals. This gradual process of becoming accustomed to climbing with a "no-fall" mentality allowed Simon and Brian to make the choice to explicitly engage in the activity of free-solo climbing as such.

Arnold began free-soloing at the age of 19 years old and was 24 at the time of this study. He was a very accomplished climber, with protective gear, when he began climbing free-solo. He would climb routes, with protective gear, a short drive from his home with friends on the weekends and then return shortly after to free-solo the routes he thought were "easy." He mentioned one form of support as being financial in nature. He mentioned he was able to make a living climbing, mainly due to the adventurous nature of his free-solo climbing. He said his ability to make a living free-solo climbing was not the main motivation he chose to do these free-

solo climbs initially, nor was it the motivation for him to do them now. Yet it was a "positive support" for those actions.

For nine (56%) of the participants, getting into free-solo climbing had a social component. These nine climbers were guided by climbing friends through the initial experiences of climbing without protective gear. Chad, aged 27, was a seasonal worker in Yosemite National Park and pursued climbing and photography since graduating from university. He described a common sentiment, “I thought it was within my abilities, and I was comfortable with Zack taking us up there. I was definitely peer-pressured in a way.” Sue, a 39-year-old with an advanced degree in engineering from Stanford University, decided to buy a recreational vehicle and pursue climbing and travel after having worked as a project engineer for a major petroleum company for a number of years. She described her early motivation to free-solo as a social decision as well, “It never really occurred to me to free-solo something per se… I have friends who I respect a lot, who I consider ‘not crazy’, so it’s very socially accepted to free-solo certain climbs, once you climb a certain grade.” Randy was 25 years old and worked seasonally as an employee of Yosemite National Park. He pursued climbing as a top priority since graduating from university. He commented on the social nature of his entry into free-solo climbing, “The whole climbing thing wasn’t presented to me as you needed gear to go climbing, it made sense to do it like that [free-solo] .” This social aspect of beginning to free-solo climb was a clear support for those participants who experienced it.

Twelve (75%) of the participants mentioned a positive support for getting into free-solo climbing in the culture of climbing itself. These 12 participants mentioned climbers who had come before as inspirations and mentioned the bold style in which they climbed. Brandon was 22 years old and had pursued climbing as a top priority since high school. He camped most of

the year, often living out of his vehicle, and worked as a means to support his climbing. He was proud of the various routes he had free-solo climbed and said he enjoyed sharing the routes he had free-solo climbed with other climbers as a way to show them what can be done because it had never been done before. He saw himself as continuing a long tradition of bold climbing. He felt very connected to the climbing community was inspired by the climbers of the previous generation, "Just watching those guys do extreme stuff like that and I said I want to be like that."

The continuation of a tradition of bold climbing was experienced as an inspiration for this set of free-solo climbers. Arnold spoke about how he is expected to write about certain solos for his sponsoring organizations. He expressed comfort in knowing other free-soloists would know what has been done and the history of free-solo climbing is being recorded. He thought it might inspire others giving them a sense of scope of what has been accomplished, "it's nice to lay it out there, like these are the next great challenges, this is what's happening."

Three of these 12 participants thought of this community of dedicated climbers as a "tribe", a group of people with common goals, common practices, expressing a personal connection to the style of life accompanying a dedication to challenging climbing. Julia was a 34-year-old college graduate and seasonal employee of Yosemite National Park. She found inspiration in the early climber, John Muir, and found self-identification with the group of adventurers continuing the tradition of bold climbing. "I'm constantly inspired by the group of monkeys (climbers) that I've hung out with in the last 10 years in the Valley." While describing the people he has met while climbing, Randy described the experience as, "having an identity, something to identify with, I've climbed with people I can barely communicate with, but we are still having an awesome time." Waxing enthusiastic about his enjoyment of free-solo climbing Randy said, "I goad my friends into free-solo climbing all the time, I like going soloing with

people. You can climb right next to each other and hold a conversation all day." He continued speaking of an admired climbing friend who had spent much of his early life climbing in Yosemite Valley, "Watching that guy was so inspiring, he had similar goals, and similar interests." These participants described a process by which they identify with a group which encouraged free-solo climbing.

A commitment to the activity seemed to define motivation of participants. All of those interviewed pursued rock-climbing as a top priority in their lives. Brandon summed up the average position of the participants, "I worked in Yosemite for two seasons but yeah I tend to work for a few months out of the year and then travel for six or seven months out of the year … rock-climbing as much as I can, making money when I have to." The clear goal was to do as much rock-climbing as possible, minimizing other responsibilities which might distract resources from the primary objective of climbing. Randy acknowledged the main motivation in his life was climbing and he is willing to put up with a "dead-end job" to pursue his climbing. These above-listed positive supports to free-solo climbing begin to describe the motivations of participation.

Emergent Themes of the Free-Solo Climbing Experience

In response to questions about the experience of free-solo climbing, it became clear the participants' answers to these questions could be categorized into several themes. The following are the three most-mentioned and shared by a majority of those interviewed.

Overwhelming enjoyment. If the definition of enjoyment is "a feeling of pleasure caused by doing or experiencing something you like" (Merriam-Webster, 2003), all of the climbers (100%) stated some level of enjoyment with free-solo climbing. Carl stated a common opinion, "I remember it being not scary, but full-on excitement. It makes me really happy, I

don't know why, I'm obsessive with it and extremely passionate about it, for no logical reason." He continued, "free-solo climbing is like going for a nice jog, it's relaxed, mellow, and nice, you get to move over so much rock and touch so much rock, and play with so many different moves." Carl captured the overall sentiment of the participants when he said, "It (free-solo climbing) is a playful interaction with the natural surroundings, a way to engage the rock with added challenge." In other words, Carl stated the absence of protective gear increased the challenge and was connected to his sense of enjoyment.

Early in his climbing career, Randy described "breaking through a field." He chronicled an all-day route where he had little prior information about the climb, "It was a mind-blowing experience to pop over the edge and have this epic journey where you're just so engaged; It was really, really fun." Julia stated, "It is a very elative experience because the movement is beautiful, the rock is beautiful, and so are the surroundings. I feel like I'm more in tune with everything in nature when I'm soloing, everything feels really grand." The participants returned to this theme of enjoyment most frequently when asked about their motivations to free-solo climb.

Sue commented, "I want to go over certain terrain, I want to move my body in a certain way, I don't want to do something hard or strenuous, I want to do something fun." Each of the climbers, in turn, and independently, described their free-solo climbing as enjoyable. Arnold described an exemplary moment on one of his climbs,

> You climb up some crack systems and you get to a ledge and traverse the ledge, and then you down-mantle the end of it, and then step into a corner, and the corner continues for several hundred feet below. You're down-stepping into this mega-exposed corner and doing an 11+ ish technical stemming thing, it's kind of

> a hard core position, and so I remember that was like 'what a glorious moment', caus' you kinda shuffle the ledge and then you're like whoa! And then you drop in and do some technical locks with stemmed feet and stuff, and you're like this is pretty hard core, just an amazing position. And I remember looking down and thinking, this is rad, what a cool place. I wasn't all gripped, I wasn't hurrying it, I wasn't just trying to get through it fast, I was just kinda stemmed out like 'this is ****ing rad'."

It is clear the participants found enjoyment in this activity. Enjoyment was unanimous, and the most commonly mentioned theme.

Heightened focus. Michael was from Australia and affiliated with the Search and Rescue team in Yosemite. He had worked with building companies in establishing safety systems for workers, and had once been a practicing attorney. He spoke about how, in free-climbing, the primary system of safety is one's ability to use the features of the rock to move vertically, while protective gear would be the secondary safety system preventing injurious falls in the event of a failure in the primary system. In free-solo climbing, the secondary safety system is not used and presents a total reliance on the primary system, namely, using your own strength and skill to move vertically up a rock cliff. According to 12 of the 16 (75%) participants, this creates a concentrated effort and heightened focus on their abilities. This focus was stated as being valuable to them. Regarding the act of free-solo climbing, Michael said, "The survival instinct is higher, and one is forced to focus on the climbing, rather than the secondary safety system of traditional climbing." He furthered commented this instinct leads one to notice the "mindfulness of the activity". This heightened reliance on the ability to move oneself up the cliff under one's own power, this primary system, resonated through the responses

of other participants. Randy stated, "It puts me into a position where I can concentrate and be more mindful than any other thing I do." Simon said, "The act of climbing without a rope has been very valuable, in that it's been one of the things I can go do that truly forces me to quiet my mind." Chad stated, "You are much more aware of what you are doing, of your movement." Julia linked this focused state with a connection to the flora and fauna,

> I'm more in tune with everything in nature when I'm soloing. My awareness of the rock's texture, the surrounding beauty and birds whistling by, all become so elevated. The over-riding feeling is a state of gratitude, beauty, and being in the present moment. Nothing else matters except for that moment of focus and awareness.

Sue continued this common thought, "The challenge is to be perfect, focused, and humble." Her experience was summed up, "Your focus is clear and your intentions are pure." Brandon sustained this thread highlighting the potentially fatal consequences of a mistake,

> It's more the free-flowing solitary experience of using your body to stay alive, it's just so simple, you know it's such a simple process, if you fall you're gonna die, if you hold on you're gonna stay alive…the whole game is to climb the same as you normally would without letting your mind get out of control.

Chad, presented his experience of this focused awareness as an opportunity for emotional catharsis, "It was a way to take some emotions I didn't have a place for, a constructive outlet for, and explore them, because it's such a hyper-focused and, at the same time, calming experience." This heightened focus was often described as spurring further advances within the free-solo climbing experience.

Personal progress. Twelve of the 16 (75%) participants expressed an element of progress associated with their practice of free-solo climbing. Chad expressed personally placing a high value on his climbing and saw it as a motivation in and of itself. He developed a goal-orientation, which held an importance in his life. "I've found myself wanting to progress, as a personal thing, you know to see what I'm personally capable of. I am definitely goal oriented. I get big goals in mind and get obsessive, doing things faster." The idea of polishing the craft of climbing seemed to motivate Chad, that is, becoming better, faster, and having a sense of pride about having done a particular climb in great form.

Randy viewed his practice of free-solo climbing as an avenue for emotional release and a process through which he was able to relate the challenges of climbing to the other challenges he faces. "It's a way to experience suffering, then also experience perseverance and overcoming that and understanding a lot about the impermanence of the suffering… being able to induce that and go through the process of it can be extremely cathartic." Randy found progress in free-solo climbing through inducing emotional healing, "Like after today, I felt like if I didn't go (free-solo climbing) I would be in a negative mind-space."

Arnold shared Randy's view of free-solo climbing as an avenue for achieving positive emotion and viewed the challenge of free-solo climbing as a worthy goal in and of itself. Arnold had a sense of pride about having excelled at his chosen practice of free-soloing. "I don't think free-soloing is unique. That's why monks just sit in a room all day and they get the same experience. I just don't know how to do it, so I go climbing instead." For Arnold, free-solo climbing constituted an access to a desired state of being. He also described taking pleasure in the difficulty and development of his practice of free-solo climbing, "that's part of the reward of it, is that it is actually hard to do… once you solo something you kinda like alright, I did it. You

know there's like a certain mastery … I kinda like that." A sense of progress toward disciplined mastery to reach a desired state of mind was, viewed by Arnold, a reward of his free-solo climbing.

Sue saw her free-solo climbing as engaging in a difficult task leading to opportunities for operating through moments of uncertainty, she said,

> I've got to acknowledge this fear and control that fear before it controls me, it feels really good to be able to control that fear. I think that is a good practice for life in general. There are times when I've been anxious [outside of climbing] and it's the same thing, just control it.

She spoke specifically about her free-solo climbing as a practice to handle problems in her non-climbing life, specifically with feelings of anxiety. She opined these experiences have helped her overcome other perceived obstacles in her interactions with others on a day to day basis. Whether "fear of public humiliation or summoning courage to pursue a sensitive topic", the difficulty of free-solo climbing contributed to inner strength in her everyday experience, "It has made me realize I can get almost anything I want, it's amazing." This sense of progressing through difficulties in other areas of her life, while free-solo climbing, was shared by others.

Lou is the free-solo climber we met on the hike in the beginning of this thesis. He was 26 years old and worked making furniture near Joshua Tree National Park where he climbed many times a week. He had been climbing for 10 years and saw his free-solo climbing as a rhythmic, calming, emotionally healing activity. He told a story about a standout free-solo climb where over a matter of three weeks he began a certain route he wanted to free-solo climb 25 times, always to back off and down-climb at the critical moment. He eventually completed the climb because it "felt right" and started laughing thinking about what was preventing him from doing

it. He felt like there was another stress about his financial situation included in the act of completing this climb. He stated this process of working through stressors in other areas of life was specific to his free-solo climbing. He felt the aspects of free-solo climbing such as being alone and focused were a way to embody the intrapersonal dynamism of conflict.

Demotivation In Free-Solo Climbing

Demotivating factors, or limitations to their involvement in the sport, were also described by the participants. The climbers mentioned being aware they were negatively perceived by others. Some of them shared harrowing or life-threatening experiences as being demotivating. Some had friends die in the sport and described this as demotivating their involvement in the sport.

Perceived notions of others. Thirteen of the 16 (81%) participants expressed notions about how they were negatively perceived by others in their role as a free-soloist. How they were viewed by others was commonly described as selfish, dangerous, brazen, stupid, death-seeking, and adrenaline-addicted. Chad agreed with these perceived notions and recounted he had experienced a high level of danger. Chad questioned his own involvement, "Bold, reckless, dangerous, selfish…I mean yeah there have been times where I was like this is stupid, I shouldn't be doing this right now, so yeah that's reckless or dangerous." He acknowledged the concerns he perceived others having about his free-solo climbing.

While Chad acknowledged and accepted these perceived notions, 12 of the 16 (75%) reacted, disaffirming these perceived notions of danger and death, and described their experiences as low risk, safe, and calming. Brandon commented on the characteristics of most of his free-soloing by the following, "I just want to be by myself today and just be in nature and flow, it's not really about the adrenaline." Julia echoed Brandon, "I don't feel like I do it for the

adrenaline rush at all, in fact it's beneficial to not get that, it's definitely not a motivation for me, in fact I like to keep it calm, in that middle state while I'm free-soloing. The over-riding feeling is a state of gratitude and beauty and love." Dave agreed with Julia, "It's all about being the most alive you can be." Simon offered, "I don't think anyone goes out free-soloing desiring to die." Lou expanded, "The idea of it being some thrill-seeking, or some kind of brazen dare-devilry is completely antithetical to my experience." When asked to sum up his experience free-solo climbing Lou stated, "Love of life." Most of the participants did not identify with the perceived common-sense notion of free-solo climbing being a dangerous, thrill-seeking, adrenalized, pathological behavior.

While Randy admitted he does not tell his family about his free-solo climbing he disclosed, "They don't understand how little risk is involved." A similar thought was expressed by Sue, "I have friends who think it's unsafe, it ends up sparking a conversation about safety, where we trade safety points." Sue in this way felt as though she was addressing the concerns of her friends while reminding herself and others she has thought a lot about her free-soloing and does not engage in the activity lightly and considers it a calculated and low risk. Lou has seen his motivation to free-solo climb change over the 10 years he has practiced it. While he admitted his early motivations were rooted in a desire to be daring, these motivations quickly found internal roots, "It was a way to take some emotions I didn't have a place for, a constructive outlet for, and explore them, because it's such a hyper-focused and, at the same time, calming experience."

Harrowing personal experience. Other forms of resistance to the practice of free-soloing came from experiences of the participants themselves being in precarious situations (two participants), or from stories about friends who had died while free-solo climbing (three

participants). Given these sources of resistance to their free-solo climbing one participant, Chad, chose to discontinue his free-solo climbing. After mentioning several of his friends died while free-solo climbing he said, "I've basically decided it's not worth it…I was in a situation where I was slightly overhanging and awkward to move around it, kind of a wide hand crack, and I probably spent fifteen minutes there." At this difficult junction he chose an alternate to the planned route and chose to climb on the featureless face of the cliff,

> and that was scary, the knobs felt like they might have been brittle, and there was a drop-off of 100 plus feet below. I do remember thinking this could be it, I could die here and then I put it out of my head and continued. I got really scared and I felt lucky to be alive at the end.

While Chad had this reaction, Dave and Simon had different reactions to harrowing experiences. Simon took a 90-foot fall, in the dark of night, over 900 feet up a vertical granite cliff. He was essentially free-solo climbing, only tailing a rope so he could manage his other gear, and had a near fatal fall. He described his rope system as being incidental to his situation and had often found himself free-solo climbing similar terrain. Because he was climbing other sections of this longer climb using traditional gear he was attached to a rope, an incidental occurrence which saved his life. This event seemed to have made an impact on Simon. He had realized his primary system of safety, his climbing abilities, could fail him despite his confidence and training. Yet, he continued to climb with and without gear. Dave related a gruesome story involving a life-threatening fall including a broken back and a horrific rescue. Yet, even at 68 years of age, Dave expressed he will continue and stated, "Climbing has good opportunities for humility." Despite Dave and Simon having experienced life-threatening falls, they continued to

view the experience as rewarding and worthwhile. It is apparent; demotivation did not deter all but one of the participants from free-solo climbing.

Summary

There exist differing perceptions of the levels of risk encountered in free-solo climbing among the participants. While Chad clearly had experienced enough of the sport and chose to discontinue, most participants expressed a calm, fun experience, and actively dismissed notions of pathology, excessive danger, or erratic behavior. Most of the participants also stated being aware they were perceived by others in a negative manner, yet they failed to give credence to these criticisms. The majority response to the question of motivation was described as overwhelming enjoyment, heightened focus, and personal progress.

These climbers demonstrated being full of enjoyment in their chosen leisure in dozens of ecstatic expressions. When asked to share their experience of free-solo climbing overwhelming enjoyment was the unanimous response. The obvious risk was thought, by the participants themselves, to be mitigated by an honest assessment of skills and the heightened focus embodied in free-solo climbing. Finding this optimal state of performance in a natural setting was described as both necessary and highly valued by these climbers. A majority of the climbers reflected they were gaining insights about themselves, utilizing the free-solo climbing experience to explore intrapersonal conflict, and developing transferable skills. From this perspective, namely that of the participants themselves, it can be seen the participants of this study described their participation as motivated by these positive psychological changes they viewed within themselves as a direct result of their free-solo climbing.

Discussion

While there were differing accounts of the experience of free-solo climbing and differing perceptions of the levels of risk encountered in free-solo climbing among the participants, most expressed overwhelming enjoyment, heightened focus, and personal progress. Nearly all of the participants were college graduates and were engaged in meaningful work. They did not seem to be people with nothing to live for. They chose to make this experience of extreme sport a lifestyle. They knew their capabilities and were competently choosing to do these things. It is clear, these free-solo climbers did not experience a need for seeking risky situations, nor did they experience being burdened by a morbid psychology. In contrast, they were seeking ways to improve themselves, contribute to a community to which they felt connected, and find enjoyment in their chosen activity.

This unanimous enjoyment and heightened focus of the activity can be linked to the concept of flow. Flow is described as the optimal pairing of skills and challenge. Describing the flow state, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) noted, "You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and sense of time disappears. You forget yourself. You feel part of something larger" (p. 12). Participants of studies investigating flow experiences, described these experiences as transcendent, revelatory, and meaningful; they described a pathway to experience positive transformations through challenge in their chosen leisure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). One study investigating flow, identified people who were more likely to seek out flow experience were more likely to say they were satisfied with life, portrayed their life as having meaning and purpose, and described a higher personal aptitude (McDonald, Wearing, & Ponting, 2009). Triggers of the flow experience were categorized into themes, which included:

1) The aesthetic quality of the wilderness experience. The uniqueness, complexity, and scale of the surroundings were commonly cited as grabbing the attention of the participants.
2) Escape from the responsibilities and pressures of the man-made world.
3) Meaningful experiences containing lasting impressions. These experiences produced extraordinary sentiment not often experienced in normal day-to-day life. Participants referred to the dissimilarity between the tranquil silence of the outdoors and the maddening city.
4) The frequency of extraordinary emotions.
5) A feeling of connectedness.
6) Overcoming limitations and enjoying self-sufficiency. Participants experienced negotiating with one another and overcoming challenges.
7) A heightened awareness and a deeper understanding of purpose and meaning in one's life. (McDonald et al., 2009)

Sue's sentiment, "The challenge is to be perfect, focused, and humble" described aspects of the flow experience well. Being humble suggests an honest review of skills and realistic choice of a route. This reveals a particular process of matching one's skill to the challenge. To be "perfect" is an acknowledgement of the challenge and an appropriate matching of skill to overcome a calculated risk. The only option is to find optimal performance where the skill of the climber meets the chosen challenge in intense focus. In addition to Sue's example, the above-mentioned triggers of flow were evident, over and over, in the comments of the participants of this study. Recall Julia's ecstatic description of the animal and plant life as she enjoyed climbing free-solo, a clear example of number 4. Brian's description of being happy to do free-solo

climbs which have never been done and feel as though he is contributing to a community of free-solo climbers is a clear example of number 5.

In the findings, we also found participants spoke about personal progress. The obvious risks these climbers take in rejecting protective gear is a conscious choice and clearly lead many through a process of personal progress. Lou felt confronted by financial stress at the precise crux of a free-solo climb. After pushing through these stressors and completing the climb after dozens of attempts, Lou felt he was better able to handle the financial stress and even view it in a different, less-stressful way. Sue reached a point where she believed anything was possible. Whether courage was needed in social situations, or motivation to create desired outcomes in the non-climbing world, Sue felt able to accomplish these things as a result of the challenge and success she found free-solo climbing. These findings are not unlike previous findings where, through suffering and challenge, extreme sport participants found lasting and unique emotional experience (Brymer, 2009; Willig, 2008). As mentioned in the literature review, participation in these sports provides an opportunity to confront fears, practice positive self-talk, and produce transferable skills. It is clear, these climbers are creating opportunities for personal progress through the participation in their chosen sport.

Expounding on the idea personal progress is available to the participants of these sports, Taniguchi, Freeman, and Richards (2005) found risk in leisure lead to opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth. Perhaps the mechanism found in the Meaningful Learning Experience Model (MLEM) of exposing facades within the self through the introduction of risk is a useful model for understanding the process free-solo climbers experience personal progress (Taniguchi, Freeman, & Richards, 2005). In this Model, meaningful learning experiences are defined as experiences leading to change through a realization of strengths, weaknesses, and

potentials (Palmer, 2009). In an investigation of how these meaningful learning experiences are gained it was found perceived risk leads to feelings of awkwardness. This sparks a process of exposing facades covering what these researchers call sublime nature. Experiencing this awkwardness eventually leads to a stripping away of the inauthenticity of these facades. When faced with perceived risk social standing, wealth, and education help little and exposure to the sublime nature of the self begins to occur.

Integral to the process is time for reflection and discussion. With the facades exposed and inauthenticity realized, reflection and the sharing of experiences with others leads to a reconstruction of the self. The participants of this study mentioned they were eager to share stories about their free-solo climbs, but only with special and close friends. In one case, only three people were known to have free-soloed a particularly challenging route. Brian recalled being excited to find the other two who had completed the harrowing task and share experiences. Under the night sky, around a campfire, they would reenact the most difficult moves, laughing and reifying the experience, the way bees dance to show others where the sweetest nectar is. Those in this process are aided by empathetic others who point out strengths and capabilities of which the participant may not have be aware (Taniguchi et al., 2005). This is where the gathering together of shared experiences and socialization amongst those who do this sport help to reflect and reconstruct their perceptions of self. This period of reconstruction of the self, through a recognition of strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities, finally results in a more authentic self (Taniguchi et al., 2005).

In summary, traditional perspectives focusing on an unhealthy psychology or hidden sociological motivations for participation in extreme sports lack a rich description of the lived experience of the participant. Considering the conversations I had with free-solo climbers, and

the resulting research findings, it becomes apparent these notions of sensation-seeking, narcissism, gender and age as being the main motivators of participation in extreme sport are simplistic. These men and women, young and old, are up to something. They strive to reach their goals, to do what has never been done, and find new ways of expression. They are not just finding enjoyment, but reaching states of focus and concentrated energy rare in the world today. To access this group of extraordinary individuals was a pleasure. To hear their stories and be a part of the mythic campfire was the enlightening aspect of this research. And, while not everyone will be willing or able to scale challenging vertical cliffs without protective gear, the implications are clear. We thrive when we are appropriately challenged. We enjoy sharing an epic tale where we can choose to persevere, focus our skills, and find a stronger self at the end. Having these experiences may not have to include the risk of death. But what may be gleaned from the free-solo experience is incredible opportunities for personal progression, enjoyment, and focus abound and are available if we dare.

Opportunities for Further Research

Lewis (2004) stated, "Participants of extreme sport are both given the resources enough to risk their lives in leisure and, concurrently, given the impetus to do so by the environing society" (p. 34). In this context, extreme sport has been understood as a reaction to certain imperatives of late modernity, including a dilemma of choice of uninteresting work options, over-reliance on technology, and the instability of a diversified world (Arnegård, 2006; Lewis, 2004). Lewis continued this thought by claiming changes taking place in cultural and economic life leave many without a sense of authenticity, and adventure climbing is a means by which this separation from authenticity could be overcome. Although the participants of this study did not

volunteer information about societal allowance or influence concerning their free-solo climbing, further research might explore these topics more directly.

In addition to this position, Fletcher (2008) suggests extreme sports have meaning, particularly, to the professional middle class, because these sports provide an escape from the expectations of a certain class role, yet simultaneously allow for the practice of those qualities valued within that self-same class, namely, progress, self-reliance, and challenge. In follow-up interviews with four of the participants of this study, three acknowledged having values instilled in them by their family and class and saw these values as direct motivations for their participation in free-solo climbing. If the professional middle class is disproportionately involved in extreme sports, as Fletcher (2008) and Kay and Laberge (2002) suggest, it could be understood, these participants of extreme sport are negotiating the values of the class of which they are a part. An opportunity for further research would be to collect more comprehensive socio-demographic data from free-solo climbers and thus gain an understanding of how socio-demographic data (e.g. income level, education) interact in the participation of extreme sports.

Lastly, there is some recognizable point extreme sport participants reach in their participation where they become satisfied with their accomplishments and stop participating. Further research could follow up with these climbers continuing to inquire about their lack of participation. Themes may emerge about a common career extreme sport participants have as they progress in their chosen sports and through their lives.

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