

Research Note

Self-Handicapping in Rock Climbing: A Qualitative Approach

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According to social psychologists, self-handicaps are impediments to successful performance created or reported by a person prior to performance (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Covington, 1992; Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991). Theoretically, the use of self-handicaps allows people to capitalize on the attributional principles of discounting (or protection) and augmentation (Kelley, 1972). Moreover, self-handicapping is stimulated by evaluative situations where uncertainty exists about the likelihood of success (Berglas & Jones, 1978), and where failure could pose a threat to private or public esteem (Prapavessis & Grove, 1998). Thus, sport competitions emphasize social comparison, contain uncertainty about performance outcomes on a task that is perceived as important, and for which evaluation standards depend on the performance of another (Self, 1990). Self-handicapping, then, can be used to protect the athletes in the face of potential failure. Nevertheless, Kolditz, and Arkin (1982) have argued that self-handicapping is primarily an impression management strategy. The sport competitions present considerable opportunity for impression management, the process through which persons monitor and control others' impressions of themselves (Leary, 1992). Thus, there is evidence that handicapping serves as both a means of protecting one's own self-esteem as well as a presentation strategy aimed at manipulating others' perceptions (see Prapavessis, Grove, & Eklund, 2004, for a review). For these reasons, sport was considered to be an ideal social context to examine self-handicapping.

Clearly, it is important to differentiate between behavioral and self-reported handicapping (Hirt et al., 1991). Martin and Brawley (2002) suggested that the majority of self-handicaps relevant in sport settings would be impediments rather than behavioral self-handicaps. Thus, descriptive information about the types of handicaps reported by athletes was gleaned from studies using an open-ended, "impediments approach" (e.g., Carron, Prapavessis, & Grove, 1994; Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Prapavessis & Grove, 1998; Ryska, Yin, & Boyd, 1999;

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Ryska, Yin, & Cooley, 1998). All these researchers pointed out that the most frequently cited impediments by athletes prior to competition were school commitments and physical state or injury. However, Hausenblas and Carron (1996) came up with two further suggestions: reported self-handicaps depend both on the type of sport being practiced and the sport culture. Moreover, it is of interest to take into account the age, the involvement level of athletes, and gender differences to understand self-handicapping. For example, it has been suggested that the women may use a claimed self-handicap such as reporting high levels of stress (Hirt et al., 1991), a bad mood (Baumgardner, Lake, & Arkin, 1985), or anxiety (Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982).

Previous research has conceptualized self-handicappers as being either chronic or occasional. Chronic self-handicappers use self-handicaps that are more applicable over time and in varied situations, such as persuasive psychological or physical symptoms (Smith et al., 1982). Occasional self-handicappers may be more inclined to use transient self-handicaps developed for a specific situation (Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986). Jones and Berglas (1978) claimed that self-handicappers are “legion in the sports world, from the tennis player who externalizes a bad shot by adjusting his racket strings to the avid golfer who systematically avoids taking lessons or even practicing on the driving range” (p. 201). However, limited research has been conducted investigating self-handicapping in sport, particularly among elite-level performers. Moreover, some researchers have suggested that self-handicapping should be conceptualized as more situation-based (Ryska et al., 1999, 1998). Consistent with a more situational approach, self-handicapping was conceptualized and assessed in the present study as a claimed impediment to performance that may or may not be genuine and may not have actually occurred. Due to previous research that has shown difficulties detecting actual use of self-handicaps among athletes (Martin & Brawley, 1999), some researchers have considered a level of ≥ 4 on a 7-point Likert scale as a representative estimate of context-specific handicapping (Carron et al., 1994; Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Ryska, 2002).

The purpose of this study was to provide information into the types and the nature of self-handicaps reported by elite teenage rock climbers prior to performing in competition, and to improve our understanding of the reasons that athletes self-handicap. Only a few studies have examined self-handicapping in adolescents and little work has been carried out in self-handicapping among elite teenage athletes. Failure can be interpreted by many teenagers as being indicative of low ability and because ability is equated with self-worth, failure holds implications for these elite teenage athletes' self-worth (Covington, 1992). In a stressful competitive context, it was hypothesized that elite teenage rock climbers would claim performance excuses to reduce his/her accountability for potential failure.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were six French elite teenage rock climbers (M age = 15.7 years, SD = 1.2 years) who trained for approximately 20 hours a week. Of the participants, three were female and three were male, and all were considered to be the elite of the national junior team. They were chosen because: a) all these athletes were “talented” and at the beginning of their international sporting careers; and b) the national coach was always present in the competitions and had set the climbers the objective of coming in first place or at least gaining a place on the podium in all competitions throughout the year. The subject sample comprised highly skilled climbers (7b, French climbing rating). According to Watts, Joubert, Lish, Mast, and Wilkins (2003) participants are characterized by a low body mass index (M = 19.0 for male participants, M = 18.2 for female participants respectively) and a relatively low body fat percentage.

Measures

Perceived Event Importance

Previous research has suggested that for individuals to be motivated to self-handicap, they should perceive the event to be of importance (Self, 1990). With the present study, the athletes were asked to rate the degree of personal importance of three competitions over a three-month period on a 10-point scale. The scale was anchored by 1 (not at all important) and 10 (extremely important).

Reported Handicaps

The day before each climbing competition, participants were requested to report impediments that could prohibit them from performing successfully in this competition. Before the first competition, the instructions gave a description so that all participants would have a common, controlled definition to respond to. When participants agreed that they understood the definition of self-handicapping, they were asked to: "List any disruptive events that could prevent you from performing successfully in this competition." Participants were then asked to rate the extent to which each of the listed impediments was disruptive on a 7-point Likert scale anchored from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). No limit was set for the number of disruptive events that could be stated; consequently the number of events listed by each athlete varied.

Interview Schedule

The full interview schedule was comprised of four sections. First, the climbers self-reported handicaps were presented to them. Second, it was explained to the participants that they could talk freely about their self-reported handicaps. Third, the main section of the interview was comprised of specific questions relating to their self-handicapping assessment before the competition. A semi-structured format was used for the interview schedule and each participant was taken through the same central questions to ensure consistency (Patton, 2002). Participants were asked to talk about their reported handicaps (i.e., "why have you reported this impediment"; "What are the circumstances in which this impediment was reported?"), but if recall was problematic, the participants were asked to take their time in telling the interviewer rather than lie. For each question, elaboration (i.e., "could you say some more about that?") and clarification (i.e., "what do you mean by that?") probes were used. When appropriate, additional follow-up questions were asked. This flexibility allowed greater depth of information. No participants refused to answer any questions in the interviews. The closing section summarized the interview and invited the interviewee to discuss any issues that may have been overlooked by the researcher. All the interviews were conducted by a former competitive athlete (first author) trained in qualitative methods, familiar with the high-level context and the various ways of speaking with athletes. The issues related to confidentiality and informed consent and the quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewees enabled both to limit biasing responses and to encourage participants to be honest and open with their responses.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the University of Human Research Ethics Committee and written informed consent was obtained by the French Federation, the coach, and the parents. Upon receiving approval, the athletes were informed that their participation in this study was voluntary and that all information provided would remain confidential. This research was carried out over a three-month period from the end of March until the beginning of July. First, the rock climbers assessed the importance of three competitions among the outdoor bouldering and on-site competitions. A bouldering competition is characterized by

short routes and high strength moves. With on-site competition, the height the climber achieves determines the number of points awarded to the climber. Second, the day before each climbing competition, an open-ended approach was used to elicit the type of self-handicaps employed prior to competition. Third, a one-on-one interview was conducted one hour before each competition at the competitive site, in a quiet area without distractions or in an isolation area. Each interview lasted approximately 25 min. A portable micro-cassette dictator with a built-in microphone and a notebook were used for the interviews. All interviews were audiotaped and were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. The interview transcripts were returned to the participants in order to check the content and the quality of the transcripts. No changes were recommended by the interviewees.

Data Analysis

Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. First, researchers read and reread all of the transcribed interviews to become very familiar with the words and the sentences of the participants. Next, the second and third authors independently identified raw data themes that described reasons given by participants to self-handicap. The three authors came together again to discuss the findings. Until agreement was reached, the raw data themes were combined into lower-order themes. Then, the lower-order themes were combined into higher-order themes, and the latter were regrouped into categories. In a further step, peer debriefing sessions including direct meetings with other researchers unaffiliated with this study but familiar with qualitative methodology, were conducted in order to examine methodological procedures as well as, discuss and debate the authors' interpretations of the overall findings. With the triangulation of sources, we tried to strengthen the study's reliability (Patton, 2002). Sources of triangulation were the existing self-handicapping theory, data at different times and the use of peer researchers as an external audit.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scores related to the perceived event importance and the types and nature of self-handicaps are provided in Table 1. Results revealed that the reported impediments can be considered as both actual impediments and potential handicaps.

The inductive content analyses of the interview responses regarding self-handicapping yielded 2 categories, 9 higher-order themes and 19 lower-order themes (Table 2). The quotations are meant to illustrate the variety of responses obtained.

Directly Related Impediments to Competitive Climbing Performance

Bad Climbing Conditions

The difference in responses between rock climbers on this impediment vary according to the perceived competition importance: inclement weather, weariness due to constantly being on the move, pressure, mixing different categories of climbers, unpleasant comments from the coach, and body-building exercises. Nevertheless, by stressing these handicapping circumstances, participants showed the importance of protecting the self from the implication of failure. This is described by a girl rock climber who said:

In every competition, I have something to prove to myself. The word failure echoes in me. Thus, bad climbing conditions are interesting to report.

Table 1
Perceived Event Importance, Success or Failure¹ of Each Climbing Competition, and Reported Impediments with Their Intensity by Each Participant

	F1			F2			F3			M1			M2			M3		
	C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3
Nature of the Competitions**	6.00	7.50	9.00	6.00	7.50	8.50	6.50	7.00	9.50	5.00	6.00	9.50	6.00	7.00	9.00	6.00	7.00	9.00
Perceived Event Importance	S	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	S	S	S	S	F	S	S	S	F	S
Success (S) or Failure (F)																		
Bad climbing conditions	2.00	6.00*	5.00*							1.00	2.00	2.00	5.00*	2.00			4.00*	
Type of climbing routes							5.00*	4.00*	7.00*				3.00	4.00*	4.00*	3.00	4.00*	4.00*
Pre-competitive anxiety	4.00*	6.00*	5.00*	6.00*	6.00*	7.00*	5.00*	4.00*	3.00									
Physical fatigue	4.00*	6.00*	4.00*	5.00*	5.00*	6.00*	4.00*	5.00*	3.00				4.00*	2.00	3.00	2.00	4.00*	3.00
Physical strength	3.00	5.00*	5.00*	2.00	3.00	6.00*							5.00*	2.00	2.00	3.00	5.00*	
Competitors' skill level	3.00	6.00*	5.00*	7.00*	7.00*	7.00*	7.00*	7.00*	3.00	3.00	4.00*	5.00*						
Lack of sleep										2.00	3.00							
Headache										2.00	2.00							
School concerns			5.00*															4.00*
Loneliness																		
Separation from family																		
Parent-adolescent						5.00*												
dysfunctional interactions																		

*Intensity level of ≥ 4 on a 7-point Likert scale was considered as a representative estimate of context-specific handicapping (Carron et al., 1994; Hausenblas & Carron, 1996; Ryska, 2002).

**C1 = French national championship; C2 = regional competition for adults; C3 = national competition for juniors or national school competition.

¹Success and failure criteria have been established by the national coach: success (coming first or at least gaining a place on the podium) and failure (not to be on the podium).

Table 2
Content Analysis of Self-Reported Handicaps

High-Order Themes Low-Order Themes	n	%
Related impediments to competitive climbing context		
Bad climbing conditions	4	66
Inclement weather		
Weariness due to constantly being on the move		
Pressure		
A combination of different categories of climbers		
Unpleasant comments from coach		
Body-building cycle		
Type of climbing route	3	50
To dread climbing route		
Lack climbing route knowledge		
Pre-competitive anxiety	3	50
Way to prepare failure		
Anxiety of rigid posture and jerky movements		
Physical fatigue	5	83
Bodily complaints		
Excessive training		
Feelings of control		
Physical strength	4	66
Perceptions of her or his physical strength		
Perceptions of sport competence		
Competitor's skill level	4	66
Advantage to the opponent		
Way to prepare failure		
Low perception of physical condition		
Competitor as partners to enhance motivation		
Indirectly related impediments to competitive climbing performance		
School-related difficulties		
Parent-adolescent dysfunctional interactions		
Loneliness/ separation from family		

Type of Climbing Route

The participants reported this handicap associated with threat and ambiguity. Athlete F3 prior to competition C3 expressed it in this way:

I'm convinced that I won't like the climbing routes. I dread them. I'm worried because I don't know if I can get past this idea.

Another athlete M3 prior to C2 described the dialectic between anxiety and climbing routes knowledge as follows:

You need to know every possible climbing route. For this competition, I'm anxious; I don't know exactly the climbing route. I am afraid.

Pre-Competitive Anxiety

Pre-competitive anxiety was only reported by the female participants. Interviews brought out some differences with regards to the way in which it was reported. One of the female

participants invoked pre-competitive anxiety before the competition as a way of preparing herself in advance for the negative effects of a possible failure and expressed it in this way:

I'm always stressed out. No matter how much my coach tells me that it's not the end of the world if I don't get a good result, I know that's not true: So reporting anxiety symptoms is my way of protecting myself... it's always important to have an "alibi" in the form of an excuse (F2 prior to C3).

Other female participants reported the anxiety of rigid posture and jerky movements which could limit performance associated with fluid movements. This is described by F1 prior to C2: "I'm afraid of becoming stiff in a posture as this would hinder my success."

Some researchers suggested that blaming the performance on anxiety is far less threatening than blaming it on a lack of skill (Harris & Snyder, 1986; Smith et al., 1982). Nevertheless, Degree and Snyder (1985) and Hirt et al. (1991) revealed that excessive exaggeration about some obstacles could be a form of reporting performance-related hindrances.

Physical Fatigue

Both female and male athletes have established a link between this impediment and bodily complaints which lower their physical confidence: feeling low or bad feelings (F1, M3); permanent cramps or abdominal pains (F3, M2) or back-aches and shoulder pains (F2). The analysis of the interview data clearly shows that these adolescent rock climbers attached importance to their body. Previous studies with adolescents suggested that high levels of physical activity were associated with high levels of musculoskeletal symptoms (Kujala, Taimela, & Viljanen, 1999).

Physical Strength

The data showed the importance athletes attached to physical strength and particularly to the arm and forearm musculature. This point can be illustrated by the following statement:

Being a good climber depends on physical strength. In this high-risk sport, a climber's ability is dependent on his physical strength on an overhanging, a sloping roof or long-reach moves (M2 prior to C1).

It is interesting to note that when the interviewees were asked to indicate the difference between physical fatigue and physical strength, the responses that emerged revolved around an inter-individual comparison of ability and an ego-involving climate.

Competitor's Skill Level

The three female participants reported the presence of this impediment in different ways. Athlete F1 prior to C1 anticipated performance comparison by giving her opponents a distinct advantage over herself. Behind "competitors' skill level" she describes another handicap, notably "other-enhancement" which implies that the other candidates have an advantage over her: "My opponents here today are in better physical condition than me" (F1 prior to C1). Some studies have shown that other-enhancement, as well as related self-handicapping strategies, are most likely to occur when athletes expect their performances to be compared to others and, in particular under competitive conditions (Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000; Shepperd & Arkin, 1991). Before each competition, athlete F2 claimed that she had managed to convince herself that she would lose. This explains the strong presence (intensity 7) of this impediment:

Several days before each competition, when I see the sheets with the names of all my female competitors, I count those that I know are good. Then, in my head, I automatically place myself behind them and I keep telling myself: I'm sure I don't climb as well as them.

On the other hand, athlete M1 when discussing the impediment "competitor's skill level" stated:

I try to consider my competitors as partners. This allows me to take full advantage of their qualities and their flaws. If I fail, I overcome this failure by telling myself, 'learn from what has just happened.' If I succeed in meeting my objective, I'm a good climber You have to know who you're up against. You go from saying 'physically I'm not able' to 'I'm going to succeed (M1 prior to C3).

This participant approaches the competitions with a high level of self-confidence. Self-handicapping is susceptible to producing supplementary self-enhancement as if performance is successful despite the presence of obstacles; then self-esteem will be enhanced because perceived difficulties have been overcome.

Indirectly Related Impediments to Competitive Climbing Performance

Prior to the competition C3, some rock climbers self-handicapped in claiming specific sport impediments and reported indirectly related handicaps to performance such as school-related difficulties, parent-adolescent dysfunctional interactions, loneliness, and separation from family. The following quotation illustrates how personal problems weaken some of these young athletes prior to the performance:

I feel out there on my own. I find it impossible to speak to my Mother, even more so to my Father. I don't really have anyone that I can speak to. Just one friend, but that's it. It's difficult to perform well. The surrounding climate is too competitive (M3 prior to C3).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study provides information on the types and nature of self-handicaps reported by elite teenage rock climbers prior to performing in outdoor competitions. The in-depth interviews offer considerable insight into the reasons why these impediments might be reported. This data might be directly relevant to people interested in coaching, skill development, and performance improvement.

It has been argued that the achievement criteria used by coaches may impact on the perceptions of the environment, which may be a source of stress for young elite athletes (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2000). In the present study, the performance climate ("win attitude is essential") led the participants' perceptions of these competitions as very ego-relevant. Thus, elite teenage rock climbers reported different types of impediments enabling them to deflect the cause of failure away from their sport competence and reduce the coach's expectations of his/her subsequent performance. Claimed self-handicapping may be as prevalent in elite teenage athletes. Moreover, this study highlighted that some impediments might be self-presented handicaps. Indeed, self-presented handicaps took the form of self-reports of performance-related hindrances such as the exaggeration of obstacles to success or anxiety, and might be claimed to a greater degree than they actually exist. They also reported indirectly related handicaps to performance. Although the number of participants was small and reduced the possibility of generalizing the results to other populations, results reinforced the knowledge

of self-handicaps in a high level context and the interest of studying self-handicapping in a naturalistic setting. Nevertheless, further research is required to examine the long-term implications of using self-handicaps by teenagers in a high-level context and their interference with the teenagers everyday life. The repeated use of self-handicaps might place the athlete at-risk for motivational difficulties that would likely have a negative effect on long-term development and performance. Additional research is needed.

In conclusion, this study suggests that it is important for the trainers to gain knowledge of self-handicapping, to take into account the reasons underlying self-handicapping among teenagers for practical implication, and to examine more closely the ego relevance of high level context which may be an important factor in determining self-handicapping in a sport context.

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