



## Motives for participation in prolonged engagement high-risk sports: An agentic emotion regulation perspective

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the agentic emotion regulation function that prolonged engagement high-risk sports (ocean rowing and mountaineering) may serve.

**Design:** In two studies, a cross-sectional design was employed. In Study 1, ocean rowers were compared to age-matched controls. In Study 2, mountaineers were compared to two control groups, one of which was controlled for the amount of time spent away from home.

**Methods:** In Study 1, 20 rowers completed measures of alexithymia and interpersonal control before rowing across the Atlantic Ocean. They were also interviewed about the emotional and agentic changes that had occurred as a consequence of completing the ocean row. In Study 2, 24 mountaineers and the two control groups ( $n = 27$  and  $n = 26$ ) completed measures of alexithymia and interpersonal agency.

**Results:** In both studies, high-risk sportspeople had greater difficulty in describing their emotions. The lowest interpersonal agency was in loving partner relationships.

**Conclusions:** Participants of prolonged engagement high-risk sports have difficulty with their emotions and have particular difficulty feeling emotionally agentic in close relationships. They participate in the high-risk activity with the specific aim of being an agent of their emotions.

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### High-risk sport

A sport is typically considered “high-risk” if the consequence of something going awry is life threatening. As such, although there are likely many more injuries in a sport such as soccer than in bungee jumping or skydiving, it is the latter that are normally classified as high-risk. All high-risk sports are typically classified as a single category (e.g., mountaineering, skydiving, hang gliding, paragliding, automobile racing, white-water kayaking, motocross riding, downhill skiing, BASE jumping, bungee jumping; see also Zuckerman, 2007), despite there being considerable diversity between many of these activities. For example, although both are considered high-risk sports, bungee jumping and mountaineering have little in common. The bungee jumper can participate with minimal preparation in a rather passive fashion with no previous experience. The activity lasts approximately one minute and involves a large percentage of thrill. In contrast, expeditionary

mountaineers need to spend much time carefully planning and organizing an expedition. This can last several weeks or months and the activity involves a large percentage of toil and hardship, as illustrated in the following quote:

What I was doing up here [climbing Mount Everest] had almost nothing in common with bungee jumping or skydiving or riding a motorcycle at 120 miles per hour. The ratio of misery to pleasure was greater by an order of magnitude than any other mountain I'd been on; I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was primarily about enduring pain and ... subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering (Krakauer, 1997, p. 136).

Given the contrasting characteristics of different high-risk sports, it seems likely that researchers may have over-simplified a complex question by classifying high-risk sports as a single category of activities. As Leon, McNally, and Ben-Porath (1989) stated, “individuals who seek out highly organized challenges that include a significant element of risk may be quite different from the daredevil, sensation-seeking adventurer whose gratification comes primarily from the danger itself” (p. 163). There are relatively few empirical psychological studies that are devoted to the category of “highly organized challenges” (Breivik, 1996, Butcher & Ryan, 1974;

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Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Leon et al., 1989) and, to the best of our knowledge, none have specifically investigated the emotion regulation function that such challenges may serve. We aim to bridge this gap here. In the present study we chose to investigate two prolonged engagement high-risk activities for which the motives appear to lie beyond simple thrill seeking: Ocean rowing and mountaineering. *Ocean rowing* requires people to row across an Ocean (e.g., the Atlantic Ocean) aided only by oars and Ocean currents. To cross the Atlantic Ocean in a rowing boat typically takes 5–12 weeks. The dangers include: not being detected by large ocean-going vessels; wildlife (e.g., sharks); man overboard; and various ailments (e.g., deep septic blisters; dehydration). *Mountaineering* most often involves an attempt to attain a high point in a remote area of mountainous terrain, which can require days, weeks, or months of walking and climbing, typically with no external aid. The dangers include falling (off a mountain face, into a crevasse), avalanches, rock fall, hypothermia, and frostbite, all of which can result in serious injury or death.

### Sensation seeking

According to Zuckerman (1994), “the goal of sensation-seeking behavior is the increase rather than the decrease of stimulation” (p. 3). Sensation seeking has long been established as a correlate of engagement in high-risk sport (e.g., Arnett, 1994; Cronin, 1991; Fowler, von Knorring, & Orelund, 1980; Jack & Ronan, 1998; Levenson, 1990; Rowland, Franken, & Harrison, 1986; Zuckerman, 1983, 1994, 2007). Studies have typically revealed that those engaged in high-risk sports are higher in sensation seeking, especially in the factor of thrill and adventure seeking. However, as highlighted earlier and elsewhere (e.g., Lester, 2004), some high-risk sports do not reflect thrill seeking. In fact, some prolonged engagement high-risk physical activities (e.g., Ocean rowing, mountaineering) reflect something that is seemingly antonymic to thrill seeking and certainly more akin to experience seeking of a different sort; one that reflects a long and arduous battle with the elements and the self (see Lester, 2004). Furthermore, and more importantly, the sensation-seeking model does not attempt to measure motives for engagement; it measures the desire or propensity to engage in sensation-seeking activities. As such, it would be unsurprising and uninformative to reveal that high-risk sportspeople had a desire or a propensity to engage in so-called sensation-seeking activities more than people who do not engage in such activities; by definition, they already engage in such activities. The present research aims to explore motives that underlie the engagement in those high-risk sports that specifically fall into the category of prolonged engagement organized challenges or events.

### Agentic emotion regulation

Alexithymia is a difficulty in identifying one's emotions and in expressing them to others (Sifneos, 1972; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). It is a stable trait (Luminet, Rokbani, Ogez, & Jadoulle, 2007; Mikolajczak & Luminet, 2006) that is related to poor emotion regulation, which is the process of initiating, maintaining, and modulating the occurrence, intensity, or duration of emotions (Thompson, 1994). The alexithymic difficulty in interpreting emotional signals, and the concomitant poor emotional communication, frequently hampers interpersonal relationships (Taylor et al., 1997). Although there is now some evidence that people may engage in high-risk sports activities for emotion regulation purposes (e.g., Cazenave, Le Scanff, & Woodman, 2007; Le Scanff, 2000; Levenson, 1990; Shapiro, Siegel, & Scovill, 1998; Taylor & Hamilton, 1997; Woodman, Cazenave, & Le Scanff, 2008;

Woodman, Huggins, Le Scanff, & Cazenave, 2009), the role that agency plays has yet to be explored.

In his extensive review of the mountaineering literature, Lester (2004) proposed that one of the motives for mountaineering is the desire to feel agentic, to feel as “a force expressing itself, rather than a pawn of other forces” (p. 94). Personal agency is a complex dynamic and interactive system that allows an individual to be both responsive to an ever-changing environment and proactive in determining that environment (Bandura, 1997). The most central and pervasive mechanism of personal agency is individuals' belief regarding their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1989, 2001). There is scant literature on Ocean rowing, but for mountaineers the domain in which this struggle for personal agency appears to be the greatest is interpersonal relationships, particularly those of a romantic nature. For example, in his study of a successful Everest expedition, Lester (1983) observed that certain aspects of domestic life, specifically meaningful interpersonal romantic relationships, “were more stressful to the average team member than were the icy conditions in a fragile tent on a snowy ridge in a high wind with inadequate oxygen” (p. 34). This position is further supported by research on Everest ascendants and Antarctic explorers, who showed a lack of interest in social interaction for its own sake, and a low felt need for intimacy or affection; they also sought less sympathy, protection, love, or reassurance from other people than age-matched controls (Butcher & Ryan, 1974; see also Leon et al., 1989; Lester, 1983, 2004).

The prolonged engagement high-risk sports person likely chooses the stress, toil, and tedium of prolonged exposure to the high-risk environment as an attractive alternative to the perceived prolonged stress, toil, and tedium of interpersonal relationships. The attraction of the prolonged engagement high-risk domain is that it enables people to initiate and modulate their own emotional expression rather than perceiving that this is dictated by others in their relationships. In other words, it is in such high-risk domains that the person can escape the perceived stress, toil, and tedium of relationships by acting in an emotionally agentic fashion (cf. Lester, 2004).

In summary, the high-risk domain provides the opportunity for alexithymic individuals to initiate their emotions and to be an agent of these emotions; difficulty with emotions is likely a motive for engagement in high-risk sport. This is the theoretical position for the two studies reported here. Specifically, we hypothesize that individuals engaged in prolonged engagement high-risk sport will exhibit greater difficulty expressing emotions and have lower perceptions of agency within relationships, especially those of a romantic nature. In Study 1 we sought to test this theoretical framework by investigating transatlantic rowers' difficulty with their emotions, especially in those relationships that are typically the most emotional (i.e., loving partner relationships). Furthermore, if rowers engage in the sport for emotion regulation and agency purposes one would expect their perceptions of emotion expression and agency to increase after participating. The hypotheses are thus that transatlantic rowers will have a low sense of agency and a difficulty identifying and expressing their emotions and that they will perceive these limitations to improve as a consequence of rowing across the Atlantic Ocean.

### Study 1

#### Participants

Twenty (18 men; 2 women) transatlantic rowers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.10$ ,  $SD = 9.43$ ) took part in the study. Participants were aiming to cross the Atlantic Ocean from the Canary Islands (West Africa) to the Caribbean island of Barbados in a rowing boat without any external

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