

Rock Climbing Culture Ethnography

Hunter Corkery, McKenzie Flaherty, Austin Meyer, Harrison Rogers, and Casey VerWoert

University of Northern Iowa

September, 2014

Introduction:

We chose to research the rock climbing culture at UNI because our group wanted a good excuse to go rock climbing. Not only is rock climbing an activity that we all enjoy, we wanted to learn more about the culture and community that exist within the UNI rock climbers. Austin has a good friend, Enrique, who works at the rock wall. He is also the vice president of the UNI Climbing Club. Enrique became our gatekeeper for this project.

The rock wall came to UNI in 1998 when the WRC was first built (Witthoft, 2012). Measuring at around forty feet tall, the rock wall is made of styrofoam and covered in concrete. According to the Rod Library website, the wall was modeled after the rock walls in Backbone State Park (Witthoft, 2012). There have also been rock climbing classes offered through the WRC as well as a Rock Climbing Club. The UNI Climbing Club's purpose is to teach climbing skills and techniques, climbing history and etiquette, and increase general knowledge of climbing throughout the community. In the past, the Climbing Club has put on events to try to gain popularity throughout campus. For example, last year around Halloween, the UNI Climbers hosted an event called "Climb in your Costume" in which all students were invited to come to the rock wall and show off their costumes while climbing the wall. For the last sixteen years, the rock climbing community has been prominent at the University of Northern Iowa.

Preconceived ideas make up the main mindset for most activities. While being presented with a rock climbing project, we all had different opinions. For Kenzie, her preconceived notion was "rock climbing is a very secluded group of individuals." For Casey, she thought that the rock climbers

were “hipsters who didn’t really have a life outside of rock climbing.” Hunter agreed. He also added that he thought “it was physically straining.” Harrison and Austin were overly excited. They both thought of it as a “great learning opportunity.” Harrison and Austin have always been interested in the process of rock climbing. In discussion, they admitted their secret love for the “hippie culture” and couldn’t wait to get involved. As a whole we were all very excited to learn more about the climbing culture on campus.

Even though we did our interviews separately, our first impression of the rock climbing culture was unanimous. Our impression of the rock climbers was that they were very open and excited about their sport. Enrique, the gatekeeper, and other workers were willing to work with us and answer our questions. Enrique was great at answering the entire question and went in depth with his explanation. The climbing community was extremely supportive of all climbers, new and experienced. It seemed like every one of the workers wanted to help people succeed and overcome the challenge of getting to the top of the wall. The climbers were also very knowledgeable about the different styles and techniques. While we were climbing the rock wall, they were able to tell us which paths take and which rocks to grab. The workers were able to explain and demonstrate multiple techniques that give you a few extra inches of reach when you need it. They were also very passionate about what they do. Passionate rock climbers at UNI are involved in the UNI Climbers club. They climb the wall almost daily and many of them participate in outdoor climbs. One of the belayers we talked to, Ben, had recently climbed rocks in Utah, Las Vegas, and Colorado. We were also interested to learn that there are rock climbing competitions that the UNI Climbers club participates in. In these competitions the climbers get points based on the difficulty of the climb and if they reach the top. This just shows how dedicated the rock climbing culture is about their sport.

Similar Previous Studies:

A questionnaire by Robert Roczniok was used to compare and contrast all different types of climbing preferences. To my surprise, many factors are played in finding these specific roles. Some focus solely on physical fitness and characteristics while others branch out and cover the idea of

preferences. Either way, rock climbing is a common love to many. It is amazing to see the change and determination one has for this sport (Magiera, 2013).

In Lisa M. Bogardus' study of the rock climbing culture, she spent sixteen months delving into a conflict within the climbing community. Bogardus was interested to find out traditional climber's views on the use of bolts as opposed to non-traditional climbers. Throughout her research she discovered that traditional climbers thought the use of bolts should be kept to a minimum, while non-traditional climbers wanted to use bolts as a safety concern. The rock climbing culture is very divided on this issue and it was interesting to hear both sides of the argument (Bogardus, 2012).

Emily Coates wrote a study involving parents who rock climb. Within her study she used ethnographic methods to tell the journeys of parents whose hobby is climbing. Coates uses personal reflections in her research as well as a creative approach to ethnography (Coates, 2010).

The article by Theresa Lillis describes how ethnographies can be a beneficial form of research. She discusses the value of ethnography when it comes to academic writings and research. Lillis uses the term "deep theorizing" to convey her idea of methods and methodologies. The researcher also describes how deep theorizing can have positive effects on academic writing (Lillis, 2008).

Molly Yasto Butz explains in her article how many health benefits rock climbing has to offer. Yasto Butz discusses how rock climbing provides a full body workout, as well as flexibility, mental strength, and coordination. Yasto Butz mentions that climbing can be thought of as a team sport because someone has to hold your rope. This creates trust in your teammates as well as a social community (Yasto Butz, 2014).

The main question we wanted to answer was this: What is it about the rock climbing community that makes people keep coming back?

Methods:

When we were first introduced to this project, we had a hard time thinking of a culture we knew nothing about and wanted to learn. We threw around a few ideas including sororities and fraternities, the Great Wall employees, the UNI Chess Club, the UNI Climbing Club, and the Harry Potter Club.

After a while of discussing all of our options, we finally decided to dig deeper into the UNI Rock Climbing culture. As mentioned before, Austin knew a friend that worked at the rock wall in the WRC. We knew that we could use his friend as a gatekeeper.

This was a fairly easy culture to gain access to as they were extremely open to answering questions and also very friendly. Our group was able to meet the gatekeeper, Enrique, and other workers at the rock wall. It was not difficult to gain access to the climbers because the WRC rock wall is open to all students and faculty. The climbing culture is not one that is limited or restricted; they are very welcoming. One limitation we faced in our first encounter was that Austin already knew one of the members of the rock climbing group. It seemed as if maybe he was only giving us some of the information and elaborating as extensively because of his previously established relationship with Austin. Another significant limitation was our group's inability to meet as a whole. Between student organizations, class, and part-time jobs, our schedules rarely matched up. This not only limited our groups ability to collaborate information but also disrupted our interviews as they were at different times and we were unsure if we were interviewing the same people or even collecting the same information. Our group agrees that if we had spent more time with the rock climbing community we could have gained much more information.

Climbing is something that comes naturally to all of us, as most of us spent our childhood climbing trees, furniture, and things on the playground. While interviewing rock climbers, we found out that each person climbs for different reasons. We also discovered that as you continue climbing you get more comfortable and your own styles will develop. There are many types of rock climbing; aid climbing, bouldering, soling, and sport climbing (Thibeau, 20-10).

Aid climbing is a technical style in which devices are used to make upward progress. Aid climbing is usually found on larger walls where some types of rock climbing would be nearly impossible. Mental endurance is a huge key factor in this style. Bouldering could be considered very scary to new beginners. It is an extreme form of climbing where the climber does not use a harness or a rope. A crash pad is often used. Solo climbing can be also refereed to as "free climbing." It is one of the most pure forms of climbing simply because there is nothing holding you up and there is under

you if you may fall. A more traditional climbing may be thought of as "sport climbing". Beginners are more likely to start with this because it does not require gear and it has relatively short routes (Thibeau, 2010).

When our group met for the first time we found it somewhat difficult to choose a culture that would be interesting and would provide us with good information. We eventually decided on the rock climbing community due to our lack of knowledge on the subject and our group's mutual interest. As mentioned earlier, finding a time to meet with the group was a challenge. Because of this, our group split up and interviewed the rock climbers separately. During each encounter we asked an array of questions aimed at shedding some light on the rock climbing culture. After all of our questions were answered some of us even attempted to climb the wall.

Although we each had separate experiences, our group can agree that the rock climbing culture at UNI is very open and inviting. This could possibly have been positively influence by Austin's relationship with our gatekeeper, Enrique. After that first encounter we were treated like a member of the club; just like we were "one of the guys".

In our experience, our group believes the rock climbers tried to gain our trust, not the other way around. They seemed very excited about having the opportunity to coach us along in on our first rock climbing adventure. If someone acted like they were scared of falling or if they didn't trust the rope, the instructor was right next to you ready to talk you through, as well as give his advice on what path you should take going up the wall.

Field Notes

The first day of interviewing Casey and Austin met up with Enrique, our gatekeeper, at four in the evening when the rock wall opens up. They went in with a few questions regarding his interests with rock climbing and involvement. "Why did you choose to start rock climbing?" "I went rock climbing with my friends and it (rock climbing) came easy to me. I kept going back for the thrill of climbing and wanted to get involved within the community. They were very welcoming and wanted me to become more involved knowing that I frequently came. The community of rock climbers itself is very friendly and open to everyone. They are willing to answer questions you have and are always

giving helpful advice.” “Why do people keep coming back to climb?” “The overall atmosphere and the thrill of the climb. You can always learn new ways to climb the walls and the workers are always friendly and willing to lend a helping hand.” After asking a few questions, Casey and Austin wanted to get a hands on experience and went rock climbing. They found it a lot more challenging than just climbing a wall. Luckily their experienced belayer and Enrique gave them helpful tips for which path to take up the wall, even though they crashed and burned a couple of times.

The group’s second time meeting with the rock climbers, Harrison, Casey, Hunter, and McKenzie went to interview the workers at the rock wall. They met with Ben and asked him a few similar questions. “Why did you pick rock climbing?” “I chose rock climbing because of the social aspect. I went rock climbing with a few of my friends, but they eventually stopped going. I continued to go and one of the climbers recognized me from how frequently I went and asked me to come to a poker night they were having. Not only did they help me with the rock climbing, but they welcomed me into their group of friends. The community is a very ‘close-knit family’. I love how friendly everyone is within this community and I’m glad I made the decision to rock climb.” “Do you feel that the stereotype of ‘hipsters’ is accurate to describe the rock climbers?” “For the most part? Yeah, that’s a pretty accurate statement.” “What keeps bringing you back to climb?” “The challenge of rock climbing is endless. Sure you can scale the wall, but there are endless routes to take to climb the wall and it takes mind and body to do so. There is always room for improvement.” The group’s thoughts on the rock climbers after getting to know them and asking a few questions definitely showed how open and friendly they are if you are interested in climbing. The community of rock climbers is a great environment to be apart of if you are ever interested in joining.

Annotated Bibliography

Bogardus, Lisa M. “The Bolt Wars: A Social World’s Perspective on Rock Climbing and Intragroup Conflict.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41.3 (2012): 283-308. Web.

This article discusses a controversy within the rock climbing community. Older, more traditional

climbers feel that the use of bolts (hooks put into mountains to attach your belt to) should be minimized. These traditional climbers only use removable bolts. Non-traditional climbers prefer the method known as “retro-bolting.” Traditional climbers are opposed to this idea because it can potentially damage the rocks and modify the original course. This article interviews traditional climbers and non-traditional climbers about why they prefer their specific method of climbing. The researcher had a variety of climbers with different age and experience levels. She also spent sixteen months doing her research which implies that she was very dedicated to her work. The researcher admits to only interviewing white able-bodied climbers and only three women.

Coates, Emily. *A Personal Journey through 'moments': Doctoral Research into Parents Who Rock Climb*. 2nd ed. Vol. 10. Taylor and Francis, 2010. Web. 28 Sept 2014

This paper is a personal reflection of the author in which they discuss their journey into researching parents who rock climb, and looks to show how “postmodern forms of representation in outdoor education research would provide engaging and emotive recollections of both personal and collective narratives”. The strengths of this article, especially for the purpose of studying qualitative research, is that it looks to develop new ways to go about qualitative research, and looks to fully understand an interpretive approach. The limitations of this article are that it doesn't go into much detail about physical health benefits from rock climbing and focuses more on rock climber's narratives, and taking an interpretive approach leaves the author with a lot of uncertainties and undiscovered aspects of their research.

Lillis, Theresa. "Ethnography as Method, Methodology, and "Deep Theorizing: Closing the Gap Between Text and Context in Academic Writing Research." *Written Communication* 25.3 (2008)

This article works to enlighten us about ethnography and the different ways it can help us understand

context, through text. The main aim of this article is to outline the definition of ethnography and to show its usefulness in academic writing.

Magiera, Artur, and Robert Roczniok. "The Climbing Preferences Of Advanced Rock Climbers." *Human Movement* 14.3 (2013): 254-264. *SPORTDiscus*. Web. 23 Sept. 2014.

A questionnaire was administered to see the differences, if any in climbing preferences. It was measured by the participants' anthropometric characteristics, physical fitness and aerobic power. In terms of training exercises they preferred, they were mostly similar. Their preferences for types of rock faces and rock handholds were also similar. The differences were mostly found between people with different characteristics, physical fitness and training. The biggest difference was if they preferred climbing styles such as (on-sight vs redpoint) and climbing routes that included (crux vs endurance). Many that have the same ending goal train about the same each week. It was interesting to get many people's thoughts and personal experience. It may have been a limitation to get responses from such experienced rock climbers. Another limitation may be that the climbers used the same "course".

Yatso Butz, Molly. "Healthy Oshkosh: Climbing Offers Numerous Health Benefits." *TheNorthwestern.com*. A Gannet Company, 18 Jan. 2014. Web. 28 Sept. 2014 <<http://archive.thenorthwestern.com/article/20140119/OSH0405/301150503/Healthy-Oshkosh-Climbing-offers-numerous-health-benefits>>.

This article discusses all of the health benefits that rock climbing has to give. It does an extraordinary cardiovascular workout for the body, weight loss, and muscle tone. Some people enjoy the workout of rock climbing and others prefer the community that provides helpful advice. Rock climbing also provides flexibility, balance, coordination, and focus. A few of the strengths within this article show

how beneficial rock climbing can be for our health. With regards to the community this shows how people keep coming back because of the physical workout. A few limitations of this article is that it didn't talk too much about the community of rock climbers. It mostly just gave the benefits towards your health.

Bibliography:

Thibeau, Jeff. "Types of Climbing." *Types of Climbing*. Jtbo, 4 Mar. 2010. Web. 29 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.rockclimbing.com/cgi-bin/forum/gforum.cgi?username=Jtbo;>>.

Withtoft, Susan, and Gerald L. Peterson. "Wellness and Recreation Center." *Rod Library*. 1 Sept. 1996. Web. 30 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.library.uni.edu/collections/special-collections/building-histories/wellness-recreation-center>>

