Because it involves physical danger and no discernible external rewards, rock climbing is an outstanding example of a particular class of flow activities. Furthermore, the artificial, sheltered universe of climbing can assume a reality of its own more meaningful to the actor than the reality of everyday life. In this sense, the analysis of rock climbing shows how flow activities can serve as models for societal transformation and provide experiences that motivate people to implement change.

The presence of risk places rock climbing squarely in what Jeremy Bentham, the 18th-century British philosopher, called “deep play.” He used that phrase with misgivings, to describe “play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his [Bentham’s] utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all” (Geertz, 1973, p. 432; see chapter 1 in this volume). And certainly, if one thinks in terms of economic utility and the support of existing cultural values, deep play is useless, if not
subversive. But that is exactly why it interests a student of human nature. Why are people attracted to an activity that offers no "rational" rewards? That is the question we shall try to answer with the help of the flow model. The second issue, concerning the effects that playful activities may have on "real" life, has been often mentioned in the past but with very few concrete examples. This study of rock climbers may help to redress the lack of empirical information on the topic, for rock climbing is a form of deep play in the sense of involving an extreme wager which acts as a vehicle for the deeper personal and cultural interests of the participants who risk it.

Climbing and Climbers

Rock climbing is an autonomous sport which developed out of the older and more general activity of mountaineering. The separation began roughly half a century ago, when in the 1920s some mountain climbers in the Alps perfected the use of equipment and techniques to make diretissima (most direct rather than roundabout) ascents of mountain faces previously thought to be unassailable. The two sports still overlap, but there is now a clearly established group of "technical climbers," interested not in reaching summits but in climbing the sheerest faces, as opposed to traditional climbers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1969).

Climbers consider their sport one of the purest forms of human activity, partly because achievement in it is a private experience rather than a public event. Feats of rock climbing are impervious to inclusion in the Guinness Book of Records: neither speed nor height nor any other measurable dimension is meaningful to assess performance. Only the initiated can appreciate the blend of objective difficulty and the artistry of the climber; however, climbing is usually done without an audience, and no one but the climber himself knows what he has accomplished and how well. Rock climbing is the exact antithesis of the American preoccupation with spectator sports.

Advances in technology and physical conditioning, together with the conquest of all the major summits, have led to the pursuit of ever more challenging rock walls, regardless of their location. More and better climbers regularly queue up at local climbing areas or jet about the world seeking new challenges. But the basic nature of the activity as a form of deep play has not changed. As far back as 1854, Thomas Murray confidently noted in his Handbook for Travellers in Switzerland that mountaineers suffer "of a diseased mind" (quoted in Lukan, 1968, p. 43). Contemporary opinions of rock climbers are not too different. We have undertaken to question what there is in the activity itself which leads men to engage in it despite its "irrationality." Historical and literary references are employed where helpful, but the bulk of the material comes from the climbers we interviewed.
Informants

Thirty rock climber/mountaineers were personally interviewed, by researchers who themselves are rock climbers, in Boulder, Colorado; Chicago, Illinois; and Devil's Lake, Wisconsin. Informants were selected to provide a range of experience, involvement, and skill. The mean age of the group was 28, with a range from 19 to 53. Five were female; twenty-five were male. The educational level ranged from high school equivalency to PhD, with most at or near the BA level. Place of birth, father's occupation and income, and personal financial status varied widely.

Mean length of experience was 5 years of technical rock climbing and 8 years of general mountaineering, with the range in each case being from 1 to 36 years. In the summer, most of those interviewed climb once every two weeks, though some get out as often as four times a week and others as infrequently as once a month. During the winter, the activity level is approximately halved for most of the sample. Mean investment in rock-climbing gear—rope and hardware—approximated $138 at 1972 prices. Five climbers owned no equipment of their own; two had equipment worth more than $400.

A word on the international rating system is necessary, since this system permits a fairly accurate absolute and comparative estimate of the climbers' skills. In the last two decades a system of numerical ratings has been devised to describe the strenuousness of individual climbs. The rating expresses the most arduous move or series of moves to be encountered, taking into account such factors as type of move; degree of strength and gymnastics required; size and number of holds; and shape, inclination, friability, and exposure of the rock. The rating is established by the climber who makes the first ascent, although it may later be revised by a more recognized expert or by subsequent alteration of the rock itself. This rating system seems very subjective and mysterious, especially to the beginner; in practice, however, it is remarkably objective and consistent.

Serious rock climbs are termed "fifth-class" climbs, further broken down into a decimal range from 5.0 to 5.11. Climbs which are made "free"—that is, via the natural footholds and handholds provided by the rock alone—are rated by this system. An additional numerical value, from A-1 to A-6, describes direct-aid or "high-tension" climbs, in which artificial holds are created with the help of equipment designed for this purpose. The climbers interviewed in the course of this study ranged in ability from 5.3 to 5.11/A-6, from moderate skill to the limit of human potential, as it is currently estimated. Mean ratings indicate a slight skew toward the upper reaches of the spectrum (5.8/A-2).

On fifth-class climbs, climbers must be protected by ropes anchored to
the rock by lashes, pitons, or chockstones. Such climbs generally involve two or more individuals and proceed in inchworm fashion. The first climber up the pitch, the “leader,” is belayed from below and places his own protective anchors when he reaches a convenient perch. The skill ratings just mentioned for the climbers in the sample are for “following.” Because a leader’s fall is likely to involve more serious consequences than a follower’s, separate ratings are kept for leading, according to the same numerical schema. The mean grade of rock led by the informants is 5.5/A-1, representing a more even distribution. Two climbers had led at the 5.11/A-6 level, while five had not led at all.

In addition to the quantitative skill ratings, attention was paid to the qualitative reputation of the individuals from the standpoint of the climbing population. Three of our respondents are quite well known to the American climbing community. Each has international experience and first ascents to his credit, and is known as a local hero in his home climbing area. Two others have made important first ascents, and one other has made a name for himself locally. The remaining 24 are not publicly distinguished.

Throughout the interview the accent was placed on obtaining the climber’s own interpretation of his involvement in the activity. A common set of directed questions was asked of all informants, but the individual was allowed, even encouraged, to commandeer the interview vehicle to his own purpose. Many of the individuals whom we approached were initially reluctant to be interviewed. For the two most renowned climbers, this skepticism reflected past experience with journalists and psychologists; for others, with friends and family. Still others were generally (and understandably) leery of exposing the deeper layers of their personalities and social relationships. These misapprehensions (discussed freely and fully after they had been overcome in the interview process) reflected the desire to protect the integrity of the deep-play sphere from the perennially reductive glosses of the outsider.

Characteristics of Flow Experience

From the viewpoint of the outsider who uses the utilitarian calculus of normal life, climbing is indeed an irrational activity which needs to be explained by reducing it to a subtle form of mental derangement. But the previous results of this study have alerted us to the fact that certain forms of experiences are their own reward. We know that climbers, when they describe what they do, note “exploring a strange place” as the closest experience to climbing, followed by “designing or discovering something new,” “being with a good friend,” and “solving a mathematical problem” (Table 1). We also know that the intrinsic rewards of climbing are
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Rock Climbers $N = 30$</th>
<th>Composers $N = 22$</th>
<th>Dancers $N = 27$</th>
<th>Male Chess $N = 30$</th>
<th>Female Chess $N = 22$</th>
<th>Basketball $N = 40$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Friendship and Relaxation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making love</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being with good friend</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching a good movie</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to good music</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading an enjoyable book</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Risk and Chance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming too far out on a dare</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposing yourself to radiation to prove your theory</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving too fast</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking drugs</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing a slot machine</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering a burning house to save a child</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Problem Solving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solving a mathematical problem</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembling equipment</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring a strange place</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing poker</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Competition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running a race</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing a competitive sport</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Creative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing or discovering something new</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the ones rated highest by the respondents. But how exactly does the activity provide this creative, enjoyable experience? To answer this question, we turn to an analysis of the structural components of rock climbing and the associated experiences they stimulate, within the framework of the flow model.

**Opportunities for Action**

Rock climbing provides an unlimited range of action challenges—both "horizontally," in the sense of progression from easy to difficult, and "vertically," in that, like chess, it permits the actor to be involved in the activity on a variety of dimensions. By Dember's (1960) definition, climbing offers "high complexity values" with "graduated pacers." A 5.5 climber may select the increased challenges of a 5.7 route, or he may choose to decrease the demands with a 5.3 climb: "It depends on the mood I'm in. There are days when you're not up to perfection, when you want to mellow out on some easy rock; others when you're quite willing to maim yourself for all time."

To a large degree one can choose in advance the level of challenge that best suits one's level of skills. Moreover, within each class of climbs, variability is potentially infinite; no two climbs are ever exactly alike: "The rock changes with a kind of psychological ecology. Depending on that ecology, which is to say where your head is, the 5.4 move you did yesterday might be a 5.10 ass-buster today." Differences in the kinds of moves required, texture of the rock length of the route, quality of protection, and so on, render the hundreds of available climbs at, for instance, the 5.7 level into thousands of novel and interesting action opportunities. In addition, less predictable factors—weather, conditioning, mood, partner's performance, equipment failure—can always provide unexpected challenges.

The climber may also recomplexify a familiar route by adding new goals to the obvious central one of safely and successfully completing the climb. He may lead others to their limits; or he may change the demands upon himself by focusing on aesthetic criteria, such as the elimination of wasted motion or the reduction of reliance upon equipment; or he may increase the danger by eliminating equipment altogether on a solo climb. As one climber puts it, "When you run into something you've either done before or experienced the equivalent to, . . . you're going to be concentrating more on form than achievement. When you get up to 5.9, you get more into the achievement side of things. You just want to live through the son of a bitch. 5.4 is achievement, but in the form sense. It's achievement of as close to perfect balance, perfect gracefulness as you can get."

By a variety of such measures, the individual in effect "changes the rules" and alters the evaluative criteria. Climbers may return time and
again to the same route and find it freshly interesting. Whether one chooses progression to higher objective ratings, or increased aesthetic and emotional achievement at a set skill level, climbing offers perpetual novelty: "Obviously you're not going to reach any perfection in climbing because your mind is always one step ahead. . . . You can always think of one step more perfect than you can do. Each time you move up, your present flow is imperfect. . . . It's an endless moving up."

Good flow activities, like chess and rock climbing, offer a wide range of "flow channels" at various levels of skill and commitment. As in all forms of deep play, control over the choice of challenge levels—the calculation of the "odds," so to speak—is extremely important. At the same time, a degree of uncertainty is always implicit and necessary to the process: "The uncertainty factor is the flow factor. Uncertainty is the existence of a flow, whereas certainty is static, is dead, is not flowing. . . . You can't have a certain flow any more than an uncertain staticness. They cancel each other out."

Centering of Attention on Limited Stimulus Field

In contrast to normative everyday life, the action of rock climbing is narrow, simplified, and internally coherent. From all the actions an individual might undertake, sensations he might process, thoughts he might entertain, the parameters of the activity define a narrow subset as relevant—a man climbing a rock. The remainder of the human repertoire is rendered irrelevant and irritating and is screened out from this simplified, manageable stimulus field. The physical and mental requirements involved in staying on the rock act as a screen for the stimuli of ordinary life—a screen maintained by an intense and focused concentration. Our informants universally recognize this effect, as these sample comments indicate.

When I start on a climb, it's as if my memory input had been cut off. All I can remember is the last thirty seconds, and all I can think ahead is the next five minutes. . . . With tremendous concentration the normal world is forgotten.

When you're [climbing] you're not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It's a concentration thing. Once you're into the situation, it's incredibly real, and you're very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world.

It's a centering thing, being absolutely in the here and now, in the present. It's the most important part of climbing.

You're moving in harmony with something else, you're a part of it. It's one of the few sorts of activities in which you don't feel you have all sorts of different kinds of conflicting demands on you.
One thing you’re after is the one-pointedness of mind.
You’re into an entirely different universe that the usual daily things don’t really affect that much.

An expert and sensitive climber, Doug Robinson, in an article entitled “The Climber as Visionary,” refers to this limited stimulus field as “the sensory desert of the climb.” “To climb with concentration,” he writes, “is to shut out the world, which, when it reappears, will be as a fresh experience, strange and wonderful in its newness” (Robinson, 1969, pp. 7-8). As in any “desert,” there is less to look at, but what there is is seen more intensely.

How do climbers maintain this intense concentration? First of all, climbing problems attract the individual’s interest, pique his curiosity, and titillate his desire for a decision: “One of the nicest things about climbing is figuring out the potentials of any one position. Each has an infinite number of balance potentials, and figuring out the best moves from among all those potentials, both moving from the position you’re in and what the next move is going to be from the position you will be in, is really wild!” Some compare this intrinsic interest to problem solving in mathematics or engineering: “The satisfaction of working out a problem . . . like a math problem. You keep trying till you find a solution. It seems like there’s always a solution.” Others relate it to artistic creativity: “It’s almost like an art, putting different combinations of moves together in order to get to the top”; “It’s an aesthetic dance”; “It’s a physical poem on the rock.” This is the aspect of the activity which prompted the climbers to rate “designing or discovering something new” and “solving a mathematical problem” as experiences similar to their own.

But in rock climbing, as in most forms of deep play, a heightened concentration and enforcement of attention boundaries is achieved through the addition of risk to the intellectually engaging aspects of the activity. Whatever subsequent meanings the informants attach to physical danger in rock climbing, it functions principally as a compelling motivation to attend to the immediate situation. Any lapse of concentration, any opening of the postern gate to the concerns of ordinary life, is always potentially disastrous: “Mind wandering is dangerous. The more competent you get, the less your mind wanders.” “If you’re thinking about your old lady, you’re not thinking about where your hand’s going. You’ll be back with your old lady soon enough, but right now you’ve got to put your hand in a place were it’s going to stay. . . . Death’s always on the mat with you.”
Feelings of Competence and Control

In his attitude toward deep play, as we have seen, the outsider systematically misestimates the role played by the "irrational" counters of the activity, either by mistaking them for an end rather than a means or by assuming the player's obsession with them. As Geertz (1973) has shown for the Balinese cockfight, money is not all that paramount in the minds of the bettors. Similarly, in rock climbing, physical danger, while a very real and structurally crucial aspect of the activity, stands neither as an end in itself nor as a dominant preoccupation of the climbers. Only one respondent claimed that he climbs "for cheap thrills," and his statement was extremely qualified. No one else gave any indication of pursuing danger for its own sake. "Danger" as one put it, "is not a kick." Rather, danger is accepted and utilized as a part of the gestalt of climbing, in which feelings of control and competence predominate over voluntary risk in the figure-and-ground relationship. Indeed, when asked directly whether they consider climbing dangerous, 21 of the 30 informants responded negatively. Sample comments include these:

No I don't think it's too dangerous, if you take a little precaution and use your head.

No more dangerous than driving a car. You just can't let it affect you.

No, emphatically. I did snow skiing since childhood; it's twice as dangerous. Climbing is only dangerous if you climb in a dangerous way.

Very rarely, once in a while I do something insane but most of the time I'm safety conscious.

No, I don't consider it dangerous. . . . I'm belayed and I'm sure of the people I go with, mainly because I trained them myself.

You get so absorbed in the climb that you no longer think about danger.

No, I consider it as dangerous as driving a car.

The sport itself is safe, safer than driving a car.

Most of it isn't dangerous, not more dangerous than walking in Hyde Park.

The press and popular media overemphasize the danger. They generalize from the carelessness of irresponsible climbers. People see climbers as risqué, danger-loving daredevils—all misconceptions.

Climbing may be less dangerous than walking down the street, because I haven't got control over the latter; there are more variables that can't be calculated.

The degree of danger is in a way determined by you.

Not really. The most things happen out of ignorance; the better climber you are, the more you can judge what's ahead.
I like being up and looking down. When I look down, I look at the view, not the danger; I know I'm protected from that.

No, I don't consider it that dangerous. The variables are subject to evaluation.

The intriguing recurrence of the statement that rock climbing is less dangerous than everyday activities, such as driving a car or walking down a street, is a point to which we shall later return. For the moment it is sufficient to note the objective correlates of the feelings of control: experience, training, precaution, anticipation, protection, judgment, responsibility, evaluation. All these qualities unite into the "discipline" of mind and body in climbing and allow the degree of danger to be managed by the individual. Most informants would concur with the climber who summarized it this way: "There's risk, to be sure, but it's a highly calculated risk, much more so than driving a car. You relate the risk involved to your own experience and that suggests the number and kinds of precautions you must take. If you do, you'll feel in control. Beyond that, there is always the unknown which simply is there and nothing can be done about it, so you can't worry about it." "Control," said another, "is just a feeling, but it's a very accurate feeling. That's what climbing depends on, how accurate that analysis is."

Unambiguous and Immediate Feedback

Along with its function as a device for centering and intensifying attention, physical danger provides the clear and immediate feedback requisite of a good flow activity. Eleven informants imagined that it is possible ideally for a good climber to always feel in control; 19 did not. But in the actual experience of all informants, control feelings are not always present. In figure-and-ground relations, control feelings sometimes give way to anxiety feelings. The climber knows he is "doing well" if he feels in control of his actions, whereas the arousal of fear signals immediately that he is "doing poorly" and must make adjustments. In the course of the average climb, this feedback loop, regulated by differential control/fear signals of varying intensity, is continuously operating. In those rare moments when the climber enters the deep-flow channel, control feelings intensify and stabilize to the point of presumption.

Merging of Action and Awareness: Transcendence of Ego Boundaries

If the ego is taken as that construct we learn to interpose between self and environment (Freud, 1927; Mead, 1934), as a broker for competing demands and an arbiter of ambiguities, we may begin to grasp the origins of that "egolessness" reported by our informants. When the actor's attention is highly focused in a limited stimulus field which provides non-
contradictory demands for action appropriate to the actor’s resources, with clear and immediate feedback in the form of control feelings, a state may be reached in which the ego has, so to speak, nothing to do, and awareness of it fades. The extremely processual nature of climbing—the continuous alternation between balance and movement, homeostasis and change, from position to position—is nicely expressed in one informant’s statement: “It’s self-catalyzing. . . . The moves . . . create each other. The move you’re planning to do is also the genesis of the move you’re going to do after you’ve done that one. It’s an indefinite interrelationship, a kind of crystalline hookup.”

This fluid process of movement-balance-perception-decision-movement-balance . . . forms the internal dynamic of climbing. One might visualize it as a strip of movie film. Each synchronic slice of the action (balance, decision, movement, and so on) is like a frame of that film. When the action is too easy or too difficult, the film stutters and the actor is very aware of the black borders of each frame, the negotiation of the ego construct. But when the difficulty is just right, action follows action in a fluid series, and the actor has no need to adopt an outside perspective from which to consciously intervene. Awareness of the individual frames disappears in the unbroken flow of the whole. “Your moves,” as one respondent noted, “become one move.” Action merges with awareness. The actor is immersed in the flow of his movement. The flow experience emerges as the psychological correlate of this kinesthetic-cognitive process.

Dennis Eberl (1969, p. 13), recounting a trying Matterhorn ascent, expresses this point clearly: “Just as we reached the base of a small icefield, the clouds enveloped us. I resigned myself to the fight and even began to hope that our struggle would be a classic one. What followed was one of those rare moments of almost orgiastic unity as I forgot myself and became lost in action. . . . At the top of the icefield I placed a rock piton, and as I reached to clip in, I was surrounded by a blue flash as a two-foot spark jumped from the rock to my hand. Unhurt, I traversed away from the rock and then downclimbed the ice. When I reached Gray, the moment of unity between my thoughts and actions was already over” (emphasis added).

But one need not turn to accounts of heroic success or retreat to find validation of this aspect of the flow experience in climbing. Our informants’ statements are replete with it.

You don’t feel like you’re doing something as a conscious being; you’re adapting to the rock and becoming part of it.

You feel more alive; internal and external don’t get confused. The task at hand is so rich in its complexity and pull [that] your intensity as a conscious subject is diminished; a more subtle loss of self than mere forgetfulness.
It’s a pleasant feeling of total involvement. You become like a robot ... no, more like an animal ... getting lost in kinesthetic sensation ... a panther powering up the rock.

When things are going poorly, you start thinking about yourself. When things go well, you do things automatically without thinking. You pick the right holds, equipment, and it is right.

You’re so involved in what you’re doing [that] you aren’t thinking about yourself as separate from the immediate activity. You’re no longer a participant observer, only a participant. You’re moving in harmony with something else you’re part of.

When you first start climbing, you’re very aware of capabilities. But after a while you just do it without reflecting on it at the time.

When you’re climbing, you have to devote yourself totally to the climb; you fuse your thinking with the rock. It’s the ultimate in participation sports, participation endeavors.

It’s the Zen feeling, like meditation or concentration. One thing you’re after is the one-pointedness of mind. You can get your ego mixed up with climbing in all sorts of ways and it isn’t necessarily enlightening. But when things become automatic, it’s like an egoless thing, in a way. Somehow the right thing is done without you ever thinking about it or doing anything at all. ... It just happens. And yet you’re more concentrated.

If you can imagine yourself becoming as clear as when you focus a pair of binoculars, everything’s blurred and then the scene becomes clear, as you focus them. If you focus yourself in the same way, until all of you is clear, you don’t think about how you’re going to do it, you just do it.

The right decisions are made, but not rationally. Your mind is shut down and your body just goes. It’s one of the extremes of human experience.

Strongly correlated with the merging of action and awareness is an altered time sense, a distortion in the congruence of chronological and psychological time. The climber who finds himself in a fearful predicament may feel time speeded up and may consistently misestimate the duration of his strain. Similarly, in periods of boredom, when time drags along, the subject often overestimates its passage. In both cases, self-consciousness or ego awareness is accented. In the flow experience, however, where ego awareness is decreased, the climber loses track of time altogether. Later he may even feel that for the duration of his flow he was lifted out of time entirely, disattached from internal and external clocks. The temporal aspect of the deep-flow experience is characteristically reported with such oxymorons as “an eternal moment.” In Robinson’s words (1969, p. 6): “It is said to be only a moment, yet by virtue of total absorption he is lost in it, and the winds of eternity blow through it.”
Transcendent Aspects of Deep-Flow Experience

Thus far we have stressed the narrow, contracted nature of the activity frame of rock climbing, its irrelevance to the concerns of normative life, its literal and figurative "away-from-it-all" qualities, the internal focusing of attention and merging of action and awareness on a severely restricted field of action and cognition. But within this intense contraction, indeed on account of it, there occurs a grand expansion, an opening out to the basic concerns of the human condition, a blossoming invisible to the flatland observer but real and compelling in the minds of the climbers. As one informant said about the pursuit of the useless in this human "miniature": "That one thing [climbing] is a complexity as great as the whole."

Before discussing these extraordinary aspects of the climbers' deepest experiences, for which adjectives such as transcendent, religious, visionary, or ecstatic are traditionally employed, we must make two important qualifications.

The first is that by no means all of the climbers in our sample reported these deep-flow experiences; only 9 out of 30 consistently did. Others apparently had brushed with them at one time or another but either paid them little attention or even denounced them as mystical tommyrot.

I just don't feel that. I can't say much about its importance because it doesn't affect me.

I don't feel it really. I'm always conscious of the decisions I make on rock.

Bullshit. Of course, you're very self-conscious. At least many people are. I am.

God only knows [what such people are talking about]. Sounds mighty strange because in climbing you're most aware of yourself. I think somebody must be trying to be spectacular. Sounds like Greek to me.

I don't think it's important to me, I don't think that's why I climb. My main reason for climbing is the physical exercise. Well, I suppose it would be a different experience without it [the feeling of egolessness]; it's part of the total experience.

We find ourselves faced with the same phenomenon which afflicted Maslow (1964) in his work on "peak experiences" and led him to divide the human population into "peakers" and "nonpeakers." While this radical bisection might be premature, it is important to search out the reasons for the difference. At the present stage of our work it is not yet possible to say anything systematic about why some people report deep-flow experiences, value them absolutely, and pursue them with vigor, while others do not. However, the climbers themselves offer some hints.
One climber who does have deep-flow experiences suggests the inhibiting effects of ego intrusions: "You can get your ego mixed up with climbing in all sorts of ways, and it isn't necessarily enlightening." Another climber, who does not have deep-flow experiences but wishes she did, explains why she does not: "I'm too into competition with myself to feel that. I haven't done it long enough and am not in good enough shape."

To slip into the flow channel at all, then, an individual must attain certain levels of experience, skill, and conditioning appropriate to the challenges before him. Some simply have not climbed enough, with the right companions, or under the right circumstance to have happened upon the experience or to be able to preselect situations in which it is likely to occur. Then again, various personality and sociocultural factors may interpose themselves between the individual and the flow experience through a process of selective attention. "Getting one's ego mixed up with climbing" may involve overemphasis on one of its structural features, such as competition with self and others. The transformation of conscious attention requisite to the flow experience may thus be inhibited.

The second point is that our informants' accounts of deep-flow experiences are translations of great emotions made after the fact—"emotion recollected in tranquility," as the poet would have it. As with any report of religious, creative, or visionary experiences, more is left behind than crosses the border of speech. Geertz (1973, p. 449) writes, "What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment." So too with rock climbing. While language is the only instrument we have to communicate these emotions and to discover their meaning, the emotions themselves are valued for their own sake as significant messages. Rock climbing, like the cockfight, is finally in this sense a form of art, though one which produces events and not objects. George Mallory, in "The Mountaineer as Artist," speaks to this point: "Artists . . . are not distinguished by the power of expressing emotion but by the power of feeling that emotional experience out of which Art is made. . . . Mountaineers are all artistic . . . because they cultivate emotional experience for its own sake" (quoted in Robinson, 1969, p. 4; emphasis added).

As we have seen, the merging of action and awareness which typifies the flow state does not allow for the intrusion of an outside perspective with such worries as "How am I doing?" or "Why am I doing this?" or even "What is happening to me?" In the moments of flow the individual does not even consciously acknowledge that he is flowing, much less elaborate and comment on the experience and its meaning. Realization, translation, and elaboration take place when the action has ceased: briefly at a belay stance, when the summit is finally reached, or after the climber is back on level ground. The processual structure of rock climbing not only produces great emotions but also offers regular oppor-
opportunities to elaborate and solidify the experiences through reflection. Robinson (1969, pp. 7-8) describes this aspect of the activity very clearly:

The concentration is not continuous. It is often intermittent and sporadic, sometimes cyclic and rhythmic. After facing the successive few square feet of rock for a while, the end of the rope is reached and it is time to belay. The belay time is a break in the concentration, a gap, a small chance to relax. The climber changes from an aggressive and productive stance to a passive and receptive one, from doer to observer, and in fact from artist to visionary. The climbing day goes on through the climb-belay-climb-belay cycle by a regular series of concentrations and relaxations. . . . When the limbs go to the rock and muscles contract, then the will contracts also. And at the belay stance, tied in to a scrub oak, the muscles relax; and the will also, which has been concentrating on moves, expands and takes in the world again, and the world is bright and new. It is freshly created, for it really had ceased to exist. . . . We notice that as the cycle of intense contractions takes over, and as this cycle becomes the daily routine, even consumes the daily routine, the relaxations on belay yield more frequent and intense visionary experiences. . . . The summit, capping off the cycling and giving final release from the tension of contractions, should offer the climber some of his most intense moments.

Most climbers, at one time or another, experience aspects of the intertwined formal and affective features of the flow experience on a lowered level of intensity. The deep-flow or visionary experience is by all accounts rarer: "It is a state that one flows in and out of, gaining it through directed effort or spontaneously in a gratuitous moment. . . . It is at its own whim momentary or lingering suspended in the air, suspending time in its turn, forever momentarily eternal, as, stepping out on the last rappel you turn and behold the rich green wonder of the forest" (Robinson, 1969, p. 9).

One may say quite properly that the structured behavioral and thought processes involved in climbing point to and manipulate richer referents in the wider realm of cultural interest. But it would be a mistake to assume that climbers ordinarily are concerned with, or even aware of, the symbolic nature of their enterprise. However many symbolic relations are coalesced and condensed by the activity, in the deep-flow experience a sense of participation and immediacy, rather than condensation and displacement, is the key feature. The deep-flow experience is, as one informant said, "particle, wave, and source at the same time." The objects of perception in the sensory desert of climbing are transformed in this way into what Blake called the "minute particulars." The universe is not merely symbolized in the "grains of sand." The microcosm does not simply stand for the macrocosm; it is the macrocosm, fully experienced and assented to.

With the more receptive senses we now appreciated everything around us. Each individual crystal in the granite stood out in bold relief. The varied
shapes of the clouds never ceased to attract our attention. For the first
time, we noticed tiny bugs that were all over the walls, so tiny that they
were barely noticeable. While belaying, I stared at one for fifteen minutes,
watching him move and admiring his brilliant red color.

How could one ever be bored with so many good things to see and feel!
This unity with our joyous surroundings, this ultra-penetrating perception,
gave us a feeling that we had not had for years (Yvon Chouinard on El
Capitan; quoted in Robinson, 1969, p. 6; emphasis added).

With the intense seeing, the vision induced by the activity, comes the
transformation of material objects and the generalized "oceanic feeling
of the supreme sufficiency of the present," "oceanic feelings of clarity,
distance, union and oneness" (Robinson, 1969, pp. 6, 8).

After one prolonged climb in bad weather without food, I had this ex-
perience of having always climbed, always will. Once on top I felt as if I
could open my arms and merge with the whole surroundings. I felt part of
the greater whole—oneness.

It's a physical transcendence, adapting to an unchangeable reality. You
merge with it rather than change it.

You could get so immersed in the rock, in the moves, the proper position of
the body, that you'd lose consciousness of your identity and melt into the
rock and the others you're climbing with.

I would begin to look at it in religious terms. Certain natural settings repre-
sent some intensity or eternity. You can lose yourself in that. It's linked to
the idea of creation, intense wonder, and realization.

Your mind is more likely to be integrated with your body and you with the
rocks and mountains themselves. . . . I like them so much. I feel really high
in a way, grateful that I'm up there and not just drudging along in life
below.

The only religious feelings I ever have stem from the mountains. I feel that
the mountains make one aware of spiritual matters. . . . I'm fortunate
because I can appreciate these places where you can appreciate nature, the
miniscuteness of man and his aspirations, which can elevate one. Spiritu-
ally, religiously I can see in many ways the same thing.

Climbing is unbelievably solo, [yet] the flow is a multitude of one. Climb-
ing is dreamlike. When you're climbing, you're dealing with your sub-
conscious as well as conscious mind. . . . You're climbing yourself as much
as the rock. . . . If you're flowing with something, it's totally still. . . .
There's no possibility of judging from the inside of a car whether the car is
moving or the freeway. So you're not quite sure whether you are moving or
the rock is, for the same reason, being inside yourself as you usually are. So
it becomes very still. . . . Lack of self-awareness is totally self-aware to me.
If the whole is self-awareness, you can have a lack of self-awareness
because there's nothing else there.
Like all numinous experiences, deep flow "elevates and humiliates simultaneously" (Jung, 1963, p. 154). At once critical and synergic, these experiences provide new modes of evaluation and acceptance. The normative order, until now carefully screened out from the deep-play sphere, is made subject to new interpretation and criticism.

**Metasocial Commentary: Antistructure and Protostructure**

The Dutch historian Huizinga first elaborated the paradox that play forms are "good for nothing" in terms of existing economic, biological, or psychological needs, but are "good for everything" because they serve as experiments for new ways of living. "For many years," he wrote, "the conviction has grown upon me that civilization [Cultuur] arises and unfolds in and as play" (Huizinga, [1939] 1950, p. 1). He went on to suggest that the main patterns of human society—arts, religions, science, law, government—had their historical origins in playful activities; after proving themselves enjoyable and viable, these activities then became accepted and institutionalized to give structure to "real" life. From this evolutionary point of view, deep play and other complex flow activities are like laboratories in which new patterns of experience are tested. Although this analogy misses the fact that the "testing" is enjoyable in itself, it may have more truth in it than one would ordinarily expect.

Recently the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, Note 1) has looked at certain symbolic and ritual activities which are "antistructural" in the sense of breaking down utilitarian norms and status roles, but are in a deeper sense "protostructural" because they suggest ways of re-formulating the normative order that gives pattern to everyday life. The connection between the rituals studied by Turner and the protostructural potential of games has been noted by Sutton-Smith (1973).

A classic example of the relationship between the world of play and the world of the normative order is Geertz’s recent description of cockfighting in Bali. The Balinese spend a great deal of time and money training and wagering on roosters, and social status is briefly gained or lost depending on how one handles the game. Yet, Geertz concludes, the Balinese cockfight is finally useless in terms of economic utility or status concerns; the deep play provides, above all, a *metasocial commentary*. "Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive—it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell about themselves" (Geertz, 1973, p. 448; also see chapter 1 in this volume).

How can an autotelic activity like rock climbing provide a base from which one can perceive culture more clearly? And are the interpretations of society thus obtained protostructural as well as antistructural; in other words, do they point toward new structures or simply ignore or counter-
mand the existing ones? Does rock climbing produce metasocial commentary? These questions are addressed in a single text of one informant’s deep-flow experience:

You see who the hell you really are. It’s important to learn about yourself, to open doors into the self. The mountains are the greatest place in the twentieth century to get this knowledge. . . . [There’s] no place that more draws the best from human beings . . . [than] a mountaineering situation. Nobody hassles you to put your mind and body under tremendous stress to get to the top, there’s nobody there to hassle you, force you, judge you . . . Your comrades are there, but you all feel the same way anyway, you’re all in it together. Who can you trust more in the twentieth century than these people? People after the same self-discipline as yourself, following the deeper commitment. The façades come rolling off. A bond like that with other people is in itself an ecstasy.

. . . The investment is bigger. It’s exhilarating to come closer and closer to self-discipline. You make your body go and everything hurts; then you look back in awe of the self, at what you’ve done, it just blows your mind. It leads to ecstasy, to self-fulfillment. If you win these battles enough, that battle against yourself, at least for a moment, it becomes easier to win the battles in the world. Sometimes I think it’s my only survival in the space age; without that I wouldn’t last a week out here. It gives you courage you can’t draw in the city . . .

Too many stimuli in the world, it’s a smog, a quagmire. Up there the clouds lift . . . the façades are all gone. Down here people live a sheltered reality, a false security arranged by extracurricular thoughts. The self-consciousness of society is like a mask. We are born to wear it . . . Up there you have the greatest chance of finding your potential for any form of learning. Up there the false masks, costumes, personae that the world puts on you—false self-consciousness, false self-awareness—fall away. People miscommunicate all the time . . . find it impossible to break through the fog of façades, begin to lose their identity. In civilization man doesn’t live reality. One never thinks about the universe and man’s place in it . . . you think about cars, schools, parties.

There is great potential when man is on the mountain. People are always searching, through booze, drugs, whatever. The closest man can come to it is through nature. Mountaineering builds up body and mind while learning about the deepest chasms of man. Up there you see man’s true place in nature, you feel one with nature.

The mountains and nature bombard the mind with the question of what man is meant to be doing. The fact that one’s mind freaks out in civilizations shows how unhealthy and abnormal they can be. We are the animals that have been most fucked up in the last thousand years. Up there you know you’re right, down here you think you’re right. How could so many things come from nature if we did not belong there. . . ? We consume natural resources at a rate greater than at any time in history. Once resources are gone, that’s it. The Indians have a simple life. They will survive. They live as nature teaches and know so much about the environment and
world . . . a religious knowing. They know far better who they are . . . they are who they are. I want most of all to learn something deep about the animal man; then I can get my ticket and check out. I just have a better chance to find it in the mountains.

Although our informants differ somewhat in their choice of issues and values, and in their degree of concern with them, they reinforce the points made in this extended statement. Taken together, our climbers' statements clearly offer a metasocial commentary along the lines suggested by Geertz. The recurrent themes of this critique are summarized in Table 2. The listing could, of course, be expanded, but it includes the most consensual topics discussed by our informants. Several of these items may be found to overlap with the Balinese example or with other deep players if fieldwork focusing on cross-cultural descriptions of flow experience was available. Other items in Table 2 are perhaps more tied to our own society and peculiar level of culture.

Both the Balinese and the rock climbers' "tales" are antistructural in Turner's sense because they involve the experience and portrayal of values, themes, and relations which are underplayed, repressed, or ignored in "real" life. According to Geertz, the Balinese find true but unsettling what they see of themselves in the cockfight. For the rock climbers, on the contrary, the alternative vision induced by climbing is intensely critical of the normative order. As one informant stated, "The self-consciousness of society is like a mask. . . . We are born to wear it." When society is "unmasked" in climbing, he much prefers its novel visage.

The cockfight, in Geertz's view, displays the social order in a new light, and the matter seems to end there. Comparing the cockfight to another genre in which metasocial commentary regularly appears, Geertz (1973, p. 443) writes: "Poetry makes nothing happen, Auden says in his elegy of Yeats. 'It survives in the valley of its saying . . . a way of happening, a mouth.' The cockfight too, in a colloquial sense, makes nothing happen." What about the climbers who must reenter the realm of facades, social and chemical smog, and worries about money and spouses, jobs and school? Do real changes take place as a result of their climbing experiences?

The climber-poet Guido Rey in *Peaks and Precipices* (1914, quoted in Knight, 1970, p. 44) answered the question in a pessimistic vein: "If climbers remained as good and as pure in the plains as they were in their ideal moments on the summit, other men, seeing them return, would believe them to be a troop of angels descended from heaven. But climbers, when they go home, become once more prey to their weaknesses, resume their bad habits, and write their articles for alpine journals." But for our informants, notably those who have deep-flow experiences, climbing
Table 2
Deep-Flow Experience in Rock Climbing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normative life</th>
<th>Rock-climbing experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informational noise: distraction and confusion of attention</td>
<td>One-pointedness of mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebulosity of limits, demands, motivations, decisions, feedbacks</td>
<td>Clarity and manageability of limits, demands, decisions, feedbacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severing of action and awareness</td>
<td>Merging of action and awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hidden, unpredictable dangers; unmanageable fears</td>
<td>Obvious danger subject to evaluation and control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety, worry, confusion</td>
<td>Happiness, health, vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slavery to the clock; life lived in spurts</td>
<td>Time out of time: timelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrot-and-stick preoccupation with exotelic, extrinsic material and social reward; orientation toward ends</td>
<td>Process orientation; concern for autotelic, intrinsic rewards; conquest of the useless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dualism of mind and body</td>
<td>Integration of mind and body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of self-understanding; false self-consciousness; war between the selves</td>
<td>Understanding of the true self, self-integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscommunication with others; masks, statuses, and roles in an inequalitarian order; false independence or misplaced dependency</td>
<td>Direct and immediate communication with others in an egalitarian order; true and welcomed dependency on others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion about man’s place in nature or the universe; isolation from the natural order; destruction of the earth</td>
<td>Sense of man’s place in the universe; oneness with nature; congruence of psychological and environmental ecology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficiality of concerns; thinness of meaning in the flatland</td>
<td>Dimension of depth “up there”; encounter with ultimate concerns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

does make things happen. They would, it might be said, send out Shelley as their champion against Auden, for they consciously attempt to use the discoveries generated by their “physical poems on the rock” as legislative protostructures for the redesign of daily life.
For some of our respondents, climbing itself forms the center of any new road map of life. They may, as two of our informants have done, exchange lucrative positions for carpentry jobs in the mountains, so that they can climb every day. One of these subjects explains: “I would have made a great deal of money in corporate life, but I realized one day that I wasn’t enjoying it. I wasn’t having the kind of experiences that make life rewarding. I saw that my priorities were mixed up, spending most of my hours in the office. . . . The years were slipping by. I enjoy being a carpenter. I live where it’s quiet and beautiful, and I climb most every night. I figure that my own relaxation and availability will mean more to my family than the material things I can no longer give them.” Other informants also have cross-cut traditional financial, educational, and status pathways to stay close to climbing. For some of these, climbing has become “a bloody drug,” generally because it is the only activity in which they regularly have the experiences they have come to prize most highly.

Most, however, believe that the proper course lies not in the intensification of activity within this one narrowed field but in the internalization of the properties and characteristics of the structure that produced these experiences. The experiences can then be generalized to whatever other situations the individual is forced into or chooses to enter. Some climbers report that they use climbing as a paradigm to which they refer situations from other realms of life for clarity and decision. Others recognize that their goal is to learn to flow in any given situation they find themselves in. Any number of citations could be offered here to show the conscious transfer of formal and affective components from climbing into ordinary life. It seems that the deeper the flow experiences reported by the individuals, the greater effort they put forth in this protostructural cause. It cannot be contested that rock climbing has altered the lives of many individuals; at the same time, no one would suggest that the course of American culture has been seriously affected by the small band of visionaries climbing has produced. However, when we understand the importance of flow experiences in the lives of people in a wide range of activities—particularly those activities classed as “work,” where flow experiences might be least expected—we may find ourselves in possession of a new set of analytical tools with which to approach a class of phenomena too often overlooked. An important new set of questions and insights, perhaps even programs for change, could result.

Conclusions

Like any flow activity, rock climbing has structural elements which produce in the actor a set of intrinsically enjoyable experiences. In chess the
structure involves the actor through intellectual competition; in climbing, danger draws the actor into physical and mental concentration. In each case, the person discovers a state of being which is rare in normative life. For a climber this state of being includes a heightened sense of physical achievement, a feeling of harmony with the environment, trust in climbing companions, and clarity of purpose. These experiences are in some ways different from what one gets from chess or from other flow activities. Yet what is common to all experiences is the total involvement of body and mind with a feasible task which validates the competence, indeed the very existence, of the actor. It is this that makes the activity worthwhile, despite the absence of utilitarian rewards.

A person who has attained this state of being inevitably compares it with the experiences of normative life. The comparison affords a relativizing perspective on the culture in which one is usually immersed. Deep flow is an ecstatic experience, in the sense that ecstasy means "standing out from" the ordinary. Whether this comparative glimpse will be liberating, and result in personal or social change, depends on many internal and external factors. But it seems appropriate to consider the heightened mental state of flow a prerequisite for the development of new cultural forms.

The practical consequences of what one can learn about intrinsic rewards from rock climbers are suggestive but difficult to apply to concrete social change. Our interest in this topic has been both antistructural and protostructural. We are aware of the amount of worry and boredom that people experience in schools, factories, and their own homes. We are concerned about the meaninglessness and alienation in daily activities, and hence the constant efforts we make to get extrinsic rewards which will serve as symbolic counters to compensate for the barrenness of experience. It is for this reason that we have turned to flow activities, to learn from them the mechanisms by which ordinary life could be made more enjoyable.

The most general conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that to make tasks more enjoyable to a significant proportion of the population, there should be a variety of graduated activities available, covering the range of native and acquired skills. In his novel Island, Aldous Huxley made rock climbing mandatory for all the adolescents of that happy utopian society. But since the same challenges are unlikely to produce flow in people of very different skills, prescribing rock climbing to all is no solution to the problem of alienation. By the same token, our compulsory and uniform educational system is a sure guarantee that many, perhaps a majority in each generation, will spend their youth in meaningless unrewarding tasks. To provide intrinsic rewards, an activity must be finely calibrated to a person's skills—including his physical, intellectual, emotional, and social abilities. Such a personalized concern for
each individual is antithetical to the structure of mass society with its rigidly bureaucratic forms of production, education, and administration.

If nothing else, the study of flow has produced some concepts and methods for working more purposefully toward institutions that provide growth and enjoyment. Besides the utilitarian calculus of productivity and material gains, we can set up a criterion of personal satisfaction. Once we succeed in defining flow operationally, we may be able to use it as a benchmark of societal progress, complementing the one-sided indicators of material achievement currently in use.

Note

1. In the original article, this is Table 5 rather than Table 1. (Editor's Note.)

Reference Note


References


ROBINSON, D. The climber as visionary. Ascent, 1969, 9, 4-10.