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# RISK TAKING AND ETHICS IN ROCK CLIMBERS

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Photo: Jacques  
Van Zyl

## Purpose

- Examine perception of risk taking and sensation seeking in rock climbers
- Do free-soloers practice their sport in an ethical manner, as prescribed by the philosophical discussions that do exist that relate to the question?

We are defining **free-soloing** as climbing higher than 20 feet (6 meters) from which a fall would result in serious injury or death without any protective gear.

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## Risks of Free Soloing

Death  
Grievous injury  
Rescue required  
Access lost  
Copy-cats

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## Is it ethical to free-solo?

Agnafors, Marcus. "The Ethics of Free Soloing" in *Climbing, Philosophy for Everyone: Because It's There* edited by Stephen E. Schmid.

1. If the risks one takes in rock climbing, in particular free-soloing, lead one to take other risks, then it is hard to see rock climbing as ethical.

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## Is it ethical to free-solo?

2: In order to be considered an ethical practice “every free soloist must, before embarking on a free solo, carefully weigh all the above considerations (if not others in addition)” (167).

coincides with what is in the literature on decision making in risky situations.

The activity is considered ethical if it is done with a suitable degree of precaution, with suitable consideration for the risks imposed upon others.

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## Study Methods

- Mixed methods: online survey and one-on-one interviews
- Subjects: 18 yrs +, (sport, trad, boulder, FS)
- Survey: 2 validated questionnaires (SS, RT), demographic and climbing specific items
  - SS: Thrill and Adventure, Experience, Boredom Susceptibility, Disinhibition
  - DOSPERT: Financial, Ethical, Health, Recreational, Social
    - Respondents rate the likelihood that they would engage in domain-specific risky activities

## One-on-one Interviews

- Specific to outdoor bouldering, sport, trad, and free soloing
  - What do you believe are the major risks?
  - How do you assess risk?
  - Tell us about an especially risky climbing situation.
  - Do you engage in risky behaviors outside of climbing?
  - How has your risk taking behavior changed over time? Climbing? Outside of climbing?

## Sample Demographics

Full Sample N=101	Interview Sample N=14
Males: 51 Females: 44	Males: 8 Females: 6
Age (M/SD) 19-71 (34.55/11.40)	Age (M/SD) 19-48 (33.31/7.64)
Years Climbing (M/SD) 0-45 yrs (9.38/8.86)	Years Climbing (M/SD) 3.6-26 yrs (10.29/5.9)
Past 3 Months Days: M=2.41 Hours: M= 8.96	Past 3 Months Days: M =2.46 Hours: M = 8.62

Self-Reported Skill Level YDS	Full	Interview
Level 1 Lower grade Males and Females $\leq 5.9$	19 (18.6%)	0
Level 2 Intermediate Males 10a-11d Females 10a-11a	33 (32.4%)	5 (38.5%)
Level 3 Advanced Males 12a-13b Females 11b-12c	35 (34.1%)	7 (53.8%)
Level 4 Elite Males 13c-14b Females 12d-14a	5 (4.9%)	1 (7.7%)

Best redpoint ascent – climbing without any mistakes (with practice) YDS Draper et al 2016

## 1: Does free soloing lead to other risks?

- Not possible to prove causation with RT in climbing and other areas of life
- DOSPERT: showed similar trends (in large and small samples) and no sig. differences from general population scores with exception of rec risks.

DOSEPERT SubS	Full (M/SD)	Interview Free Solo (M/SD)
Social	35.51 (4.70)	38.75 (4.68)
Recreational	30.24 (7.41)	33.5 (9.91)
Health	20.83 (8.04)	27.25 (7.04)
Financial	16.11 (5.94)	18.38 (6.55)
Ethics	13.60 (4.96)	15.38 (5.55)

## Does risk increase over time?

- Answered through on-on-one interviews
- No one reported taking more risks after becoming a climber
  - Non-climbing risk taking behaviors are from past or ongoing
- Within climbing, 4 described taking more risks
  - Better understanding of how to assess risk
  - More confidence in ability
  - Better understanding of what constitutes real risk

## Risk taking does not increase with increasing skill level

In fact, our study suggests there is either no correlation or a moderate negative correlation with climbing level and risks they take in other aspects of their lives.

Risk Subscale	Full Survey Pearson's r	Interview Sample Pearson's r
Social	.077	-.229
Recreational	.035	-.182
Financial	.153	-.159
Health	.063	-.188
Ethical	-.238**	-.397

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## Do you engage in risky behaviors outside of climbing?

Things our interviewees said they do, or have done, in other areas of their lives that were risky:

Racing motorcycles

Partying

The use of firearms

Starting a business

Mountain biking

Drug abuse

Driving

Back country exploration

Playing soccer

Hiking in the mountains

These do not seem to be significantly different from the risks many people take in their lives. So while causation cannot easily be proven or disproven, our interviews suggests that the risks one takes in free-soloing are not associated with higher risk in other aspects of their lives.

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## 2: Is it ethical to free-solo?

So is it carefully considered risk?

Our interviews seem to suggest that it is.

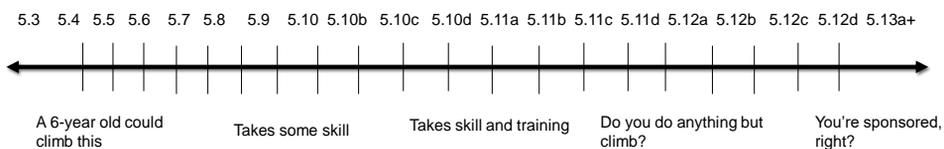
Most of the rock climbers we interviewed are very attentive to the risks inherent in rock climbing and consider many factors when assessing the risk of rock climbing.

## Responses for risk consideration

- Physical ability
  - How am I feeling today?
  - Is the climb within my ability to perform flawlessly AND deal with mistakes?
- Physical Environment
  - Weather
  - Crowds
  - Distracting stimuli
- Mental State
  - Confidence
  - Was described as the most important consideration

## Sample Free Solo Levels

Redpoint Ability	Highest Free Solo
5.10d	5.9
5.11a	5.6
5.11a	5.7
5.12d	5.7
5.12d	5.10a
5.13a	5.11d



# Is it ethical to free-solo?

If done properly



## Quotes from interviews with climbers:

We do this “not because we like to experience fear. The exact opposite. We experience fear as an unwanted byproduct of what we do. We more do this because we want to learn to control fear. To be able to move through this and not feel it or while we feel it be able to perform at the level we need to.”

On free-soloing: “You either wake up one day and it’s the most logical, normal thing in the world or you just don’t do it.”

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Photo: Tim Kemple