Learning through narratives of experience: Exploring Mount Everest climbers' cognitive dissonance from an ethnomethodological perspective

Description

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Date: 2007

Abstract: The purpose of the present study was to explore how Mount Everest climbers experienced cognitive dissonance in their natural setting. This study also set out to explore the role of self-concept and feelings in Mount Everest climbers' experiences with the phenomenon. Guided by the ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, 1967) school of thought, Aronson's (1968, 1992) self-consistency revision of Festinger's (1957) original cognitive dissonance theory and the Resonance Performance Model (Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush, & Doell, 2002) were used as conceptual guides. The research methodology included a narrative (Sparkes, 2002) multicase study (Stake, 1995) approach involving multiple in-depth interviews captured on video and participant observation captured by field notes. Six climbers attempting to scale Mount Everest comprised the case studies; five men and one woman. Data were collected over an entire climbing season and one month after the participants returned home from the mountain. Guided by Gergen and Gergen's (1983) strategy for
analyzing the structure and content of narratives, data analysis occurred on three levels. First, for each participant the researcher developed a background profile. Second, a narrative case study analysis was performed to explore how the participants experienced cognitive dissonance. The third level of data analysis entailed a cross-case study analysis to explore the patterns of similarity and difference between narratives or themes expressed. Cognitive dissonance was routinely experienced by all six of the participants to socially organize behavior and produce a sense of order from within the Mount Everest culture. That is, whenever the participants interpreted a discrepancy between their behavior and their own standards for competence and morality, which derive from the conventional morals and prevailing values of the society to which they belonged, they experienced feelings of psychological discomfort which lead them to try and reduce or eliminate it through a process of self-justification. Specifically, this process of reducing cognitive dissonance involved the climbers reconstructing the past in such a way that restored their pre-formed notion of self. Through language and reasoning, which were part and parcel with the situated activities of climbing the mountain, the climbers arrived at an interpretation of their day-to-day activities that not only appeared normal, natural, and real, but also felt good to them. The climbers' experiences with cognitive dissonance, which were defined by an ongoing reconstruction of meaning, allowed them to make sense of self-discrepant acts as they strived to achieve not only a sense of cognitive and affective self-consistency but also shared knowledge. The findings in the present study provide support for Aronson's (1968, 1992) self-consistency perspective of cognitive dissonance. More importantly, the study's most notable contribution to the existing body of work on cognitive dissonance is not the empirically based confirmation that Mount Everest climbers do indeed experience dissonance when their self-concept is involved, but
Two experienced climbers explain why they're attempting the challenging feat. Oxygen bottles weigh about 5.6 pounds each, and there are stories of many climbers going through dozens of them during their ascents, oftentimes simply leaving the canisters behind as trash. Sherpas often carry them, and there have been reports of under-the-table deals made high on the mountain to sell the canisters to desperate climbers who need more of them. It's for all of these reasons that Ballinger and Richards are aspiring to change the way climbers start approaching Everest. For them, the future isn't just in getting to the top; it's in doing it in the best way possible. I recently spo Mount Everest at that time was unknown territory; climbers were still seeking ways to access the mountain and trying to figure out possible routes up it. Shipton explored much of the area around Mount Everest, finding the route up the Khumbu Glacier, the usual route now to the South Col, in 1951. That year he also photographed footprints of a Yeti, the mythical mountain ape of the Himalaya. Eric Shipton's biggest disappointment, however, was that the leadership of the successful 1953 Mount Everest expedition was pulled from him since he favored small groups of climbers attempting mountain... Photos: Exploring Mount Everest. Sherpa climbers pose at Everest Base Camp after collecting garbage during the Everest cleanup expedition on May 28, 2010. A group of 20 Nepalese climbers collected nearly two tons of garbage in a high-risk expedition to clean up the world's highest peak. Hide Caption. 19 of 23. Photos: Exploring Mount Everest. Mountaineer Ralf Dujmovits took this image of a long line of climbers heading up Everest in May 2012. "Mount Everest is a huge mountain, and it can accommodate a lot of people at one time," said Alan Arnette, a mountaineer who has attempted to climb Everest four times, reaching the summit in 2011. But he said the mountain is getting too crowded, citing the example of May 19, when about 200 mountaineers tried to scale Everest.