

Amusement Park or Learning Experience? An Exploration of Psychological and Philosophical Themes in Challenge Course Usage

By Martyn Whittingham, M.S., T.R.S.

The Current Debate

With the high degree of creativity and imagination as well as entrepreneurship in the field, challenge courses are being built in ever more original ways. As the innovation has increased, so has the marketing potential, with challenge courses also located in amusement parks. This has created the opportunity to ask some important questions about what the challenge course is, is not, and how it should be used. However, to do so requires a thorough understanding of the psychological constructs underlying how people experience the challenge course.

There are several major psychological constructs that can shed light on this argument. To seek to illustrate the “extremes” of this argument, a high ropes course will be compared to a roller coaster to find important differences between them that might illuminate the debate. These will be sorted into two main categories, which although not mutually exclusive, offer a way of thinking about the individual and what they are experiencing (the *intrapersonal*) and about how others are involved in the interaction and making sense of the experience (*interpersonal*).

INTRAPERSONAL

1. **Passive/active experience:** A roller coaster is largely a passive experience, except with respect to the decision to ride and minor options involving opening and closing of eyes or putting hands up in the air. The HRC, unlike a theme park ride, is not a passive experience. It is active and involves choices, control, athletic ability, anxiety management and an ability to continue to take reasoned action under high levels of stress, to name but a few of the processes involved. The chances to experience and actively use coping mechanisms during this process are numerous. In fact the range and associated intensity of the experiences can be overwhelming and stretch individuals’ coping mechanisms to the limit and sometimes well beyond. It is at these points that the potential for experiencing both considerable perceived success or the possibility of failure and disaster are greatest. Therefore, in considering “what is the difference?” between these experiences, the role of the person and their active involvement is a key concept. As we take risks and move through the world, our perception of ourselves and our ability to make choices, control outcomes and perceive our selves as competent in the world is largely shaped in the arena of active experience where we have decision-making or action-taking capabilities.

2. **Manipulation of risk:** The HRC, albeit in a limited way (although this is perhaps a challenge for the next generation of building) allows for manipulation of risk levels. This can include allowing for beginning but not completing the course or adding extra difficulty such as a blindfold. This ability to manipulate risk lies at the core of much adventure programming. With respect to the future of the high ropes course as adaptable to the optimal level of anxiety of each participant, this is also a worthy avenue to explore for builders. In contrast, a roller coaster has a “fixed” level of risk, with eyes open or closed and hands up or down the only level of choice available.
3. **Participant differences:** Factors such as physical ability, size, temperament, strength, personality, prior experience (buffering) and emotional and cognitive coping mechanisms have a great impact on the participant for a high ropes course experience. Although it is easy to think of a high ropes course as a ubiquitous experience where everyone has the same reaction, this is clearly not the case. The wide range of individual variables that contribute to a successful or unsuccessful experience are highly impacting. Although one the temptation might be to design a high ropes experience that is “bigger, better, more innovative” perhaps a greater challenge is to design one that accounts for the wide differences between participants. Achieving ever higher levels of perceived risk for everyone may well just be leading more and more participants into ever higher levels of anxiety that result in increasing senses of failure and trauma for more people. For the roller coaster, the impact of personal difference is minimal. Once you are on, you are on.
4. **Control:** Linked to the notion of an active versus passive experience is the idea of control. The degree of control employed by the participant is far greater for a high ropes course than a roller coaster. This is a crucial difference. Given the research showing that feelings of control significantly impact peoples’ psychological life, this effect should not be underestimated. Research suggests that perception of control over a situation can have a considerable impact on a vast number of psychological processes. With everything from the notion of locus of control (“are my choices determined by me or by others?”) to learned helplessness (a strong predictor of depression) linked to perceived control, the impact of this variable on peoples experience can be expected to be considerable.
5. **“Freezing Up”:** Having an experience of emotional, physical and psychological “freezing” is not going to impact a roller coaster rider. For a high ropes course participant, the consequences can be negative, and in some cases also severe and long lasting. Using a high ropes course without skilled facilitation, as an amusement park event or as a “conveyor belt” with multiple people rushing through it greatly increases the possibility of negative outcomes. Without framing and reframing this possibility is further increased. This is arguably the most significant area of concern for high ropes course use and design since it has implications for consequences in the intra and interpersonal domains that may last beyond the experience itself. The experience of freezing is reached when stress levels become maladaptive. At this point, physiologically, there is an adrenaline spike and other neuropsychological reactions, including heart rate increase, blood pressure increase, muscles contracting in preparation to escape, an effect on the

ability to think and arousal that then needs meaning attribution to discern the appropriate response. If not dealt with quickly, these reactions can turn to freezing, fatigue and failure as the participant becomes “stuck” at every level. When faced with a decision in normal life, we typically experience a thinking and acting process of searching for choices. Under extreme stress, this process can turn into renunciation of search (Rotenberg & Boucsein, 1993) where a narrowing of focus or tunnel vision takes place and all search options are unavailable. At this point, the person is frozen. The implications of this on a roller coaster are negligible. However, on a high ropes experience this can often necessitate a take down. The short and long term impact of a long take down on a participant can, in some cases, be extremely harmful, particularly without debriefing and reframing by a skilled facilitator.

INTERPERSONAL

1. **Meaning:** We all bring expectations and “scripts” (sets of prior meanings) of what to expect from an experience. The roller coaster carries with it a discreet set of meanings. First, it is supposed to be an “adrenaline rush” experience. It is not commonly linked to physical ability or many other sets of personality variables. The high ropes course experience is often powerful because it is unique and therefore introduces novelty and disequilibrium. With increasing use of the high ropes course in amusement park settings, this will change the available scripts and meanings brought to the experience. While some people will still bring a “blank slate” script to the experience and project their fears onto it, others may well take up a “blasé veteran” attitude and dismiss the experience. This offers a significant challenge to the facilitator to reframe the experience, as well as opportunities for a more sophisticated level of facilitating.
2. **Life Context:** This refers to the context that groups of people bring to the experience. That is, how their work or school culture impacts and is impacted by the high ropes course. This can be the most significant aspect of the experience for participants. For example, if, a corporate employee cries in front of his peers operating within a very “macho” paradigm, the consequences for him can be considerable later and in some cases may result in being passed over for promotion or even fired. While a negative or positive experience on a roller coaster may have little impact on an individual’s continued functioning, the impact of a negative performance on a high ropes course can be long lasting.
3. **Social consequence to fear-based behavior:** Given that meanings of the high ropes course experience can be misappropriated (such as by a corporate group incorrectly assuming someone who performs poorly on a challenge course is a company liability), the consequences can be severe unless well facilitated, including full framing and later reframing.
4. **Self-focused versus other-focused:** The high ropes course, unlike a roller coaster, is also a highly other-focused event. There are constant moments of other-evaluation and chances for social comparison, so the inferences made about self and others can be important.

5. **Peer pressure:** For a roller coaster, the role of peer pressure is variable but in some cases can be very strong. However, research has shown that many participants feel the most important reason for taking part in adventure activity is actually socially related, giving importance to the role of peer pressure and social approval. On a high ropes course, there may be considerable perceived or actual peer pressure to perform. For example, during a recent high ropes event with youth considered at-risk, an individual who is extremely uncomfortable at height is on a group with other young offenders who prize high risk-taking, bravado, individualism and looking “cool”. Even without overt pressure to complete the event, this participant now feels enormous pressure to continue. Given that the set of events that led to his being on probation involved bowing to peer pressure, risk-taking without thought to consequences, and being seen as “cool” by others who were involved in criminal activities, the role of peer pressure can be seen in this case to be negative. Even though he completed the event, this only served to reinforce the very things that had led him to this point. This same set of processes also takes place on a roller coaster, however the role of control and individual differences in ability and experience make this qualitatively different.
6. **Inference about self and others:** Given the way many high ropes courses are framed, the level of inference people make about each other (for example, “that person is fearless / this person is a wimp / I am a failure”) are far higher. Therefore the potential gain and potential harm from the high ropes course are higher than for a theme park event. The high ropes course is, unless well facilitated and framed, an easy place for the “fundamental attribution error” to take place, when people ascribe behavior to disposition rather than context. In the context of the high ropes course, an example of this error would be someone seeing a “failure” on the high ropes course and then assuming this represented a deeper character flaw (such as a “cowardly person”) rather than the person being unfamiliar with being at height.

Amusement Park or Learning Experience?

Clearly a high ropes course is often somewhere between an amusement park and learning forum for many builders and service providers. What is perhaps more important is whether companies can answer the questions posed within this article. How are the potential positive and negative effects of the high ropes course considered? Is the provision of a relatively unsupervised course going to offer significant potential harm?

The answers to this are complex. Certainly the high ropes course offers significantly greater risk to individuals’ coping mechanisms, social systems and self-concept than a normal amusement park event. Equally, the removal of an effective facilitator also increases the likelihood of a negative outcome remaining that way and having a lasting impact. Perhaps the most that can be said against the amusement park idea is that it significantly increases the likelihood of negative outcomes while still allowing for positive ones (albeit with little if any personal or interpersonal learning available).

However, the typical, facilitated model also offers potential for harm without proper thought. If groups are not disavowed of the idea that fear of a high ropes course is correlated with being a fearful person, then harm is possible. If more thought is not put into how to use the high ropes course to develop coping skills rather than as a euphoric experience without further translation into meaning in peoples' lives, then the range of positive outcomes is restricted. Equally, if high ropes courses are facilitated by putting people through "conveyor belt" style, with no psychological preparation, little assessment and sending people on their way regardless of their feelings of success or failure, then they are closer to an amusement park than a learning forum.

The challenge course industry would be well served to consider the reasons for their positions and to consider the substance of the psychological processes they are seeking to engage. This engagement with the substance of participants' experience and possible positive and negative outcomes signals the next stage of usage of the challenge course. Building a challenge course around clients' psychological growth areas suggests another orientation that offers the potential for a new era of challenge course design and construction where the client's psychological processes are front and center. The definition of some of these areas (control, meaning, etc), while not exhaustive, offers the opportunity for a more focused debate on the issues.

Rotenberg, V.S., & Boucsein, W. (1993). Adaptive versus maladaptive emotional tension. *Genetic, Social & General Psychology Monographs, 119* (2) p209-233