

**Project Title:** Exploring the Lived Experiences of Social Support and Reciprocity among Member's of a Mt. Kilimanjaro Climbing Group: A Symbolic Interactionist Study

### **Purpose of the research**

Physical activity is a complex behavior influenced by multiple factors within the environmental, social, and psychological domains. Within the social domain, social support plays a significant role in what gets people started in exercise and keeps them participating (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It is also an important factor influencing health and well-being outcomes as well as ways in which people cope with daily hassles and major life events (Holt & Hoar, 2006). The focus of the present study is to explore experiences of social support and reciprocity among a small group of individuals who are attempting to scale Mt. Kilimanjaro. In this study, ethnographic fieldwork rooted in a symbolic interactionist approach will be used to investigate how members of a Mt. Kilimanjaro climbing group experience the provision and receipt of social support. The researcher will climb on the mountain with the participants to explore their experiences of support reciprocity. In this way, the difficult and demanding nature of climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro in which group members interact for an extended period of time under intense conditions offers a unique opportunity to understand people's lived experiences of social support exchanges. According to Holt and Hoar (2006), very few studies have examined experiences of reciprocity within the social support process. Exploring how social support is reciprocated among individuals who are attempting to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro may lead towards a more complex understanding of how social support exchanges operate within the culture of high altitude trekking.

### **Why is this research important?**

Social support has been defined as a multifaceted construct that involves structural (i.e. support networks), functional (i.e. actual support received), and perceptual (i.e. appraisal of available and received support) dimensions (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). To date, there is little research focused on these various domains of social support within physical activity contexts (Holt & Hoar, 2006). Specifically, there are no empirical studies that have previously examined people's experiences of social support and reciprocity within the context of the activity of high altitude trekking. Although hundreds of studies are done yearly which include social support as a variable, there remains questions about the mechanisms and processes by which social support operates (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). Mt. Kilimanjaro is the highest peak in Africa (5,895 meters) and attracts thousands of people each year. Exploring how support reciprocity is experienced by members of a Mt. Kilimanjaro climbing group may open a window on the processes involved in social support exchanges. According to the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), reciprocating social support is conceptualized as a generalized moral belief rather than as a simple pattern of exchanges between the receiver and provider of support. Given that there are no empirical studies that have previously examined people's experiences of social support within the context of the activity of high altitude mountain trekking, little is known about how social support interacts with their experiences scaling the mountain. It is important to understand how this construct operates in the context of high altitude trekking in order to shed light on underlying processes involved in the experience of social support. Such knowledge has the potential to lead toward a more complex understanding of the social support phenomenon in action by revealing how social support exchanges are lived and shared between climbers in their natural setting.