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Women's mountaineering and dissonances within the mountain guide profession

"Don't go thinking he was a guide for ladies"

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"So that's how it still is with the indecisive ones, who waver when faced with a dangerous section or get nervous when a storm rumbles above them; they may well boast in the village squares, recount their daring feats to whoever will listen to them, the fearful porters are soon unmasked and their reputation established as dubious [...]. If these porters ever manage to become guides by some strange stroke of luck, the village gossips do not falter and rightly debase them: prairie guides, they will say, good for guiding young ladies!"

Louis Spiro (1944), *Guides de montagne*

- 2 A researcher is an explorer. Rarely brilliant or heroic, he is more often than not driven by trivial motives, by curiosity interspersed with lack of understanding (at times the opposite), in the face of fieldwork that sometimes gives nothing away – the worry when adopting ethnographic approaches – sometimes too much. In the research I had undertaken, dedicated to the conditions of professional practice for mountain guides, I took, so to speak, a secondary path by focusing on the guide-male client relationship then, going forward, the guide-female client relationship (Martinoia, 2009). In the privacy of a private interview, guides admitted to liking their female clients, with regard to their advantages in service management. It is true that when women conform to the gender stereotypes of humility, obedience, hedonism, and fear of danger (Lois,

2001; Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, 2003; Gallissaire Mennesson, 2004), they facilitate service co-production and reduce risk-taking. Yet, the triangulation of sources and methods, the researcher's compass, led me to an area where the echoes of the first interpretations were greatly distorted. In public, and more particularly in the presence of peers, guides failed to mention the advantages of female clients for service management. All that remained was the seductive element of the relationship – something all of the interviewed guides (a 99% male profession) did not fail to mention spontaneously to the female researcher facing them¹ – together with masculinised discourses that seemed to exhort them not to be labelled as a “guide ‘for ladies’” (Busk, 1974, p. 89). My secondary path had taken me to an intersection, or rather a labyrinth; that of the construction and social validation of the professional and gender identities of mountain guides, which I will endeavour to present here.

- 3 For the guides, women are not only efficient “partial employees” (Chase *et al.*, 1983) in service co-production. They also represent resources for the production of their masculinity (Terret, 2004). Nevertheless, the stones that the female clientele may lay in the construction of the guides' gender identity and professional identity can be rearranged differently by peers. In the new context, the construction may collapse. The guides, therefore, negotiate compromises by manoeuvring between the multiple axiological frameworks that construct and validate both their gender and professional identities. Among peers, guides seem to seek to save face (Goffman, 1974, p. 13) by clinging to the myth of the masculine guide. For them, in a strongly gendered professional world, it is about not being identified as the Trojan Horse who would bring into the citadel, not so much women into mountain practices – the deed was done – but the feminisation of practices and professional skills.
- 4 In addition to the collection of guides' own autobiographical texts, the primary sources of this research come from fieldwork allowing the cross-cutting of discourses and practices in different types of interaction²: with the researcher, with peers and with male or female clients, both in and outside the mountaineering playground. The fieldwork is made up of 10 semi-directive interviews (from 1.5 to 2.5 hours), informal interviews, passive observation (as an independent mountaineer) and participating observations (as a guide's client; 4 French guides, 47 days), recorded in a logbook over a period of 6 years. The fieldwork does however have its limits: as a woman, my presence, albeit discreet, prevents me *de facto* from gaining access to situations where men are exclusively amongst themselves.

Through women's eyes

- 5 Roped up or tied by a symbolic rope (Boutroy, 2011), guides and clients evolve interdependently in a dangerous, uncertain, and sometimes highly irreversible natural environment. Their bodily integrity, even their survival, is at stake – “at the end of the day, we're risking our necks” (Gilles, 53). In this rather singular context of service co-production, guides appreciate the female clients who underestimate their abilities, seek pleasure rather than performance, and obey authority. Women give guides the feeling that there will be less exposure to danger, easier coordination among members of the roped party and more easily satisfied customers.
- 6 These stereotyped qualities – that guides bestow upon their female clients and that their own behaviours cause or reinforce – recall the fact that in spite of the isolation,

the uncertainty of the environment and the engagement, which serve to build an extraordinary experience (Belk, Tumbat, 2011), the mountains remain a space for social relations woven onto a canvas of representations and pre-existent social relationships, including gender (Kergoat, 2005, p. 98). Gender, as a system of beliefs, with which psychological attributes and roles and status assigned to each sex are associated (Hurtig, Kail, Rouch, 2002, p. 13), is intimately linked to power relationships (Scott, 1986, p. 1067). Yet, to the prism of service management, power is the cornerstone of the guides' performance (Martinoia, 2012).

- 7 For safety purposes, it is essential that guides maintain complete control of their decision-making power and do not succumb to any attempts made by their clients to influence them – “If you ever allow yourself to be influenced by a client when you deem the situation dangerous, then you’re heading for disaster” (Christophe, 48). Psychosocial mechanisms may be used for this purpose: give the illusion of sharing decision-making in order to encourage the decision to be carried out and its consequences accepted, or place clients in a situation of inferiority and dependence, so they have no alternative but to obey. Although these mechanisms may be independent from gender, their effectiveness is nonetheless increased in women who accept the gender roles – “I have never had any real argument with women [...] they trust me more easily and they accept more quickly that I am more of an expert than they are” (Sébastien, 35). It is therefore in the guides' interest to maintain these stereotypes, by conveying, both in words and gestures, the humility, fear, fragility and inferiority of women,³ despite the fact that the reality of the situation shows different qualities – “Their level is good and often higher than they think – Shush! Don’t tell them “ (Sébastien).
- 8 Conveying – to both the female client and female researcher – women’s inferiority and his ability to lead them is also for a guide a way of demonstrating his masculinity (Lois, 2001).

“Take Evelynne for example, she always assumes it’s not for her. She easily feels apprehensive. At the beginning of each section, she’ll tell you it’s much too difficult for me.” (Éric, 32)
- 9 And not without a certain satisfaction, Éric narrates in detail the way he manages to carry out his protective role and enables his client to overcome her apprehension. “[S]he is delighted, says ‘thank you, thank you!’ to you”. Like many of the other guides who were interviewed or watched, Éric dramatises gender obligations in his words and actions (Goffman, 1977, p. 50). Albeit not without the help of his female client, he makes possible this “arrangement” in which “a female [...] can constitute herself into the sort of object to which a male can properly extend his helping hand”(Goffman, 1977, p. 71). Moreover, Éric “love[s] climbing with women for that reason. A woman stays in her place in the mountains.”⁴ Which means, by contrast, that he stays in his ... that of a man.

Female clientele through the prism of peers

- 10 In its hegemonic form, masculinity is a process of differential construction. It develops in contrast with femininity (Badinter, 1986, p. 175; Connel, Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 847). Supervising a female clientele thus contributes to the construction of gender identity –

as the feeling of being a man and recognised as such – of masculine guides. However this construction in interaction with alterity, i.e. women, must be validated by men.

- 11 Amongst themselves, guides are quick to talk about their female clients in terms of seduction – implicitly conveying a normative model of heterosexual masculinity (*infra*). In any case, through judgements, representations and behaviours, what is at stake is not only the gender identity of the guides, but also their professional identity – “as a man and as a guide” (Jean-Louis, 52). In discussions among peers, the professional advantages of a female clientele – co-producing quality service with greater facility –, conveyed in other contexts, are ignored. Likewise, guides keep quiet about the pleasure they have in being able to break some rules of masculinity, including difficulty, performance, speed and risk-taking, with their female clients.
- 12 In an almost exclusively male profession in contact with female clients, gender identity and professional identity are closely linked, with the risk of becoming entangled. Having and appreciating a female clientele may in fact send out dissonant signals. On the one hand, the feminisation of the clientele may confirm, through the prism of heterosexuality, the guide's masculinity, and thus prove valorising. On the other, it may be stigmatising and throw suspicion upon a feminisation of the guide's practices and skills, with the guide therefore transgressing a mythical normative framework.

Guides' gendered professional identity: a “mystification”

- 13 Professional identity is the “process of construction and recognition of a definition of oneself that is both satisfactory for the person and validated by the institutions that support it and anchor it socially by categorising it” (Demazière, Dubar, 1997, p 49). This potentially polymorphous definition is the fruit of a dual socialisation process. Primary socialisation relates to the biographies of the actors themselves. Secondary socialisation is linked to the professional environment and to interactions with clients (Dubar, p. 1992) and peers. These interactions are structured by norms resulting from the cultural and social history of amateur and professional mountaineering (Majastre, Decamp, 1988; Bourdeau, 1991; Keller, 2005). Within their variations, these norms show a constant in that they are a factual and ideological space of male domination.
- 14 The mountains were “conquered and narrated by men”(Majastre 2009, p. 204). Although in France, women were not excluded during the institutionalisation of mountaineering in the late 19th and early 20th century, their inclusion was nonetheless conceived, organised and led by men. Within a hierarchised framework carefully sustaining gender differentiation (Morin, 1936, p. 148; Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, 2006, p. 20), women are absent or silenced in the collective memory of mountaineering history. They are mentioned only to immediately highlight their “exceptionality” (De Ségogne, in Morin, 1936, p. ix). The question is raised as to “how they could have got lost?” in this environment, with regard to supposedly antithetical natural predispositions – proof moreover that these castaways are not real women (De Chatellus, 1953, p. 158).
- 15 The wave of social transformation during the 20th century however spread within the sporting milieu and mountain activities. Amateur practices, followed by the professional milieu, became feminised (Galissaire, Mennesson, 2004). The guide

profession has been mixed since this moment. Since 1983 in France, 16 women have qualified – for 1574 men, i.e. 1%. The figure is low, but the trend is underway: since 2005, each year more than 5 women on average (i.e. 3.7%) have sat the “*Probatoire*” – the entrance exam for mountain guide training school.⁵

- 16 It is hardly surprising to note the simultaneity between the feminisation of the mountain guide profession and the reactivation in some discourses of a historical figure of masculine heroism (Bozonnet, 1992, p. 218; Majastre, Decamp, 1988, p. 97-106): any threat for male domination gives rise to defence reactions. Although the citadel is no long exclusively male in deed, it can still remain male in values: men thus strive to revivify the “myth of masculinity” (Badinter, 1986, p. 201), even though – or even more so since – it would seem to hardly correspond to actual behaviours.

“For the very purpose of myths is to immobilise the world [...] Myths are no more than this incessant and relentless request, this insidious and rigid demand, according to which all men should recognise themselves in this eternal and yet dated image that was built of them one day as if it should be so for all time.”
(Barthes, 1957, p. 229-30)

- 17 More than deeds – with the scene of professional practice being not at all or only partially public – it is the discourses that make it possible to sustain “the mythical image of the guide” (Majastre, Decamp, 1988, p. 83) and to resist the threats of feminisation. In this respect, the guide’s service should be seen as a performance; not in the sporting definition of the word but rather the Anglo-Saxon one relating to the theatrical performance of an actor putting on a show (Majastre, Decamp 1988, p. 143; Goffman, 1974). The guide is “someone people told stories to, who tells himself stories and who is about to tell stories” (Majastre, 2009, p. 117).
- 18 Guides rearrange facts *a posteriori* in discourses that internalise the representations expected by their audience (Goffman, 1977, p. 50; Connel, Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Thus, in order to save the myth of the guide – and endure the reality of a less epic everyday life (Majastre, 2009, p. 117) – the guide on stage is the “man, the adventurer, hyper responsible, physically irreproachable, never thirsty, never frightened, never cold”. As for the “tired, dirty, sad guide preoccupied with doubt and fear”, and thus too far from the myth, he remains confined to silence or in the backstage of private life (Cormier, in Crabières *et al.*, 2008, p. 127).

The danger of the feminisation of professional skills

- 19 In order to gain the recognition of peers, guides show a profile that conforms to the mythical normative framework, i.e. heterosexual and with professional skills considered masculine. As already suggested, women clients play an ambivalent role here. They give guides opportunities to cultivate their heterosexuality.⁶ Depending on the dominant sporting culture, this position is sometimes reinforced by homophobic semantics – “‘pussy’, ‘queer’, ‘fucker’, ‘wimp’ come from all directions” (field note, *bureau des guides*, mont Blanc Massif, winter 2009). Female clients however constitute a threat if they are associated with a feminisation of forms of practice and professional skills – “it’s not very valorising for a guide, I don’t mean feminising his clientele, but feminising his professional practices” (Jean-Louis). Signs of belonging to the other gender – since gender is hierarchized (Hurtig, Kail, Rouch, 2002) – lead in effect to the risk of being downgraded (Penin, 2006, p. 655). Guides should therefore remove any

stigma (Hurtig, Kail, Rouch, 2002) of feminine skill in the presence of their peers – regardless of the fact that there may be “total dissonance between this myth from another time and the clientele of today” (Yanis, 54). The discourse of guides on the subjects of risk-taking and managing clients’ emotions, two prominent themes in the fieldwork, clearly show this.

Risk-taking

- 20 Guide-supervised activities fall into the category of edgework activities, in that they imply voluntary and real emotional and physical endangerment (Lyng, Matthews, 2007). Bodily engagement and the risk of death may moreover be a criterion for objective categorisation of these activities (Rotillon, 2002). The mountain guide profession is therefore intimately linked to taking risks – “[a] guide who doesn’t take risks is not a guide” (Gilles) – and, at the same time, to overcoming them (Decamp dans Crabières *et al.* 2008, p. 155). Insofar as it calls upon emotional norms considered to be masculine – self-control, ability to confront a changing and dangerous environment – the edgework approach makes the presence of women as amateurs, and even more so as professionals, unthinkable (Lyng, Matthews, 2007; Lois, 2001).⁷ In the narration of their professional activity, guides convey and respect these gendered norms.

“In the office [of the guides], everyone is in the mood for teasing. In a noisy commotion, Thom’s technical skills are being made fun of. Thom who, last summer, hurtled down a snow slope on his back and, today, fell into a crevasse while he was skiing down the Vallée Blanche with clients. “Better learn to ski eh Thom!’. Thom used his mobile phone to call for help himself from the bottom of the crevasse, after a fall of 12 metres broken by the snow. After a helicopter rescue, he then continued his descent with such composure that his colleagues were impressed. ‘Respect, guys! A guide who falls in a crevasse in place of his clients ... Respect!’ The schoolboy atmosphere seems to be a way of releasing fear – Thom lets slip that ‘all the same [he did] scare himself a bit’. At the same time, the bodily engagement of the profession and activities is valorised. With a look of false modesty, Quentin adds that he ‘[has] broken one of them this morning’. A client (sprained ankle on an off-piste slope). Everybody laughs” (field note, discussion among guides in the *bureau des guides*, mont Blanc Massif, winter 2009)

- 21 “Taking risks obviously makes you more masculine” (Penin, 2006, p. 655). It is therefore valorised in strongly masculinised spaces such as the professional guide milieu. By contrast, refusing to do so may appear as an expression of anxiety – an emotional norm associated with the feminine or amateurism. Such refusal thus doubly discredits a guide (Lois, 2001, p. 403; Lyng, Matthews, 2007, p. 88-89).

“Quentin, who was asking a colleague about the conditions in a rock face the latter had recently climbed, was given the answer, in front of his colleagues: ‘if you’re afraid of falling stones, better not go there’. He felt humiliated” (field note, mont Blanc Massif, winter 2009).

- 22 This relationship with risk-taking may be purely narrative self-staging and limited to conversation. It may also be turned into action, albeit not without consequences for the image of the professional group as a whole and the legitimacy of its activities in public opinion.
- 23 “The conquering spirit has done some serious damage. It produced guides who often exposed themselves to danger (...) Had to fight that” (Yanis). In a contemporary hedonistic and safe society, the social acceptance of such behaviours is low. Through

the *Syndicat des Guides de Montagne (SNGM)* and the *Ecole Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme (ENSA)*, the profession is therefore working to “valorise something other than commitment, risk-taking (...) Things are changing, but before anything happens in practice, it'll take some time” (Yanis). In this perspective, women guides have been called upon. In accordance with a gendered and stereotyped interpretation, their “particular approach to risk” has been judged “salutary for the profession” (in Carrel, 2006, p. 144) by a former ENSA director. In an environment where professional identity is highly gendered, referring to a feminisation of skills is however perhaps not the best way to remove resistance.

Managing clients' emotions

- 24 Research into service management has shown that, as a general rule, the service provider seeks to manage his clients' emotions. Apart from the fact that this gives him a professionally satisfying image of himself, the provider considers that it also influences his clients' satisfaction (Thoits, 1996). In the guide profession, it has been recognised that managing clients' emotions has an impact on the quality of the service at three levels: limiting exposure to danger; reaching the objective set (Belk, Tumbatt, 2011); and the quality of the relationship (Majastre, Decamp, 1988, p. 129; Martinoia, 2012).
- 25 It is however possible to detect in the discourse of a number of guides, their distancing from the psychological skills they nonetheless admit to using during their performance.

“A bit clumsy, a bit babyish, [my client] appears to be coming out, for the very first time, without the protection of the maternal nest. A bit plump, a little unsteady on his feet, a look of slight worry on his face (...) I was getting a bit fed up of all this close coaching, of dealing with this whole psychological thing”. (Engelbrecht, 2008, pp. 243, 246)
- 26 Faced with this childish client, whose emotions have to be managed in order to ensure that everything runs smoothly, the guide finds himself forced to “mother” him. Such behaviour is not in line with the mythical masculine image of the profession. Therefore, the guide redefines it in his account. His purpose is to show how using these skills, considered typically feminine, require him to go against his (true) (masculine) nature. The attitude of Marc (37) falls within this same discursive production of signs of masculinity. While he confesses he has “the feeling [he is] more attentive to a woman than a man”, he hastens to add “a bit more, eh! That doesn't mean ‘cocooning’ them though”.

Conclusion: Breaking free from the myth of masculinity

- 27 Why finally do guides play the myth game when there is dissonance with other milieus? One answer lies in the fact that guides need the approval of their peers, both concerning gender and at an economic level. This dependence limits any betrayal of the masculinity values pact.
- 28 From a purely economic point of view, the concern for peer recognition and activation of what guides imagine to be their judgement framework may be explained by the fact

that the market of guide service is a market of singularities (Karpik, 2007). Here reigns great uncertainty concerning the quality of products and service providers; so much so that clients' judgement and trust mechanisms are mainly the result of collective construction by the providers themselves. The reputation and recognition of peers prove therefore to be important – “They’re my best clients. They hire me for 3 weeks every year, it’s [a colleague who’s been in the profession longer than me] who passed them onto me 10 years ago” (field note, mont Blanc Massif, summer 2012).

- 29 Only professionally well-established guides with their own private clientele may ignore the recognition of peers and accept transgression of the dominant myth. In the same way as other professions, it is possible to observe here that the activation or putting on hold, whether in practice or discourse, of skills judged rather feminine or masculine “is greatly conditioned by the context and by the interviewee’s position on his/her professional path” (Zolesio, 2009, p. 131). It is therefore not by chance that, in this fieldwork, the guide who refers to a “feminisation of [his] activity” (Jean-Louis) has 25 years’ experience, an exclusively private clientele and a considerable reputation, which enable him to make a living solely as a mountain guide, on the fringe of his professional group.
- 30 Jean-Louis’ account is also interesting in that it illustrates an alternative representation of the categories of feminine and masculine. The dominant “bipolar” (Vinet, 2008, p. 59) concept considers that femininity and masculinity are two extreme points on a same continuum: moving closer to one moves you away from the other. It is therefore understandable that, in a highly masculinised professional space with such representations, guides seek to divest themselves of any attribute considered socially as being feminine. The “bifactorial” concept (*Ibid.*), on the other hand, considers that all individuals develop in a two-dimensional space, with one dimension being feminine and the other masculine, and place themselves simultaneously on the two axes, without hierarchy. Jean-Louis takes this on board. “We are made up of a feminine part and a masculine part”, he states. In his opinion, focusing on one or the other is “nonsense”. “Common sense [...] is found in merging the two”. Jean-Louis is comfortable with “adopting so-called feminine values”, even with male clients, including “taking your time”, “practising with more self-respect”, moving away from “talking yourself up [...], accomplishing something”, from the “valorisation of performance”. He acknowledges however that he sometimes gives in to the demands of masculinity. He is aware of – and therefore a little sensitive to – the weight of the dominant normative model in the opinion of other mountaineers.

“[if I am with a woman], if a roped party wants to double up, there is no problem. Whereas two guys together and a party who wants to double up, then it’s ‘who the hell is this asshole?’ ... we’ll speed up a bit and leave them on the spot” (Jean-Louis).
- 31 Through this quote and more broadly the fieldwork referred to in the present article, it is possible to perceive collective mechanisms for reproduction of gender. Yet the multiplicity of guides’ discourses and the very existence of compromises between different models of justification may also be perceived as the individual seeds of potential transformation.

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NOTES

1. "I was chatted up once. But casual sex is not unusual in the milieu. There are girls just waiting for it, and guides who are a bit hot. So there are expectations... Sometimes sexual. Quite honestly, in general, all the guides, even the not too good-looking ones, what I mean is the guides who aren't necessarily very charismatic, are chatted up" (Jérôme, 32).
2. The bibliography and the profiles of the guides questioned during semi-directive interviews are detailed in Martinoia (2009).
3. "Come on girls, you can do it!" a guide shouted to the female clients of his group, at the bottom of the long steps you have to climb to get the Montanvers train after skiing down the *Vallée Blanche*, even though his group included gentlemen who were visibly just as worn out as the ladies" (field notes, mont Blanc Massif, spring 2010).
4. Those who refuse to submit to gender obligations are then identified as not being women – "a real guy!" (Quentin's comment concerning a female client with clearly transgressive behaviour).
5. Source: *École Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme*, 2013.
6. The link between masculinity and heterosexuality is not an automatic one. Masculinity may be built through homosexuality. Indeed, there exist masculinities (as well as femininities) and not just one single form. For a perspective in sport, see Terret (2004).

7. Unthinkable for men (De Chatellus, 1953, p.160), as for women themselves who were effectively relatively less present in the most bodily engaged activities (Penin, 2006).

RÉSUMÉS

The mountains are a place for economic activity and work for the guides and a place for fun and recreation for their clients. For each of them, however, the mountains remain a space for social relations, which are woven onto a canvas of representations and pre-existent social relationships, including gender. This article focuses on the ambivalent role of the female clientele in the construction of the gendered professional identity of male mountain guides and its validation by peers. Within a profession normed by a myth of masculinity, female clients may indeed send out dissonant signals: on the one hand, they allow the production of expected signs of masculinity, on the other, they may symbolise a feminisation of professional skills, which, in the hierarchy of gender, is stigmatising. In this respect, the guides negotiate a compromise by manoeuvring between the multiple axiological frameworks, which construct and validate both their gender and professional identities. Supported by an ethnographic survey, this article particularly highlights the prominence of the masculine guide myth which norms interactions within the professional group. It shows why and how guides, essentially by means of discursive artifice, save face in front of their peers.

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Keywords : gender, mountain guides, professional identity, gender identity, masculinity