DECISION-MAKING LIKE A GIRL?

A Look at the Gender Heuristic Trap

By Emma Walker

Heuristic trap: a mismatch, where we base decisions on familiar but inappropriate clues.

—Ian McCammon, 2002 ISSW paper

I spent my college years skiing, climbing, and backpacking in the Colorado Front Range, mostly in the company of men. I didn't yet have a name for what I was experiencing as an outdoorswoman; namely, that I was usually the only woman. More than once, a group of guys turned to me as iconic Rocky Mountain thunderheads approached, asking if we should turn around. Why are you asking me? I always wondered. I wanted to reach the summit as badly as anybody, but I often found myself relegated to the role of Mother Hen.

Years later, thanks in part to Margaret Wheeler's April 2008 TAR piece ("Backcountry Skiing & Gender: The Possibility of a 'Gender Heuristic Trap'"), I finally have a name for what I experienced in my early twenties—which, for the record, were fraught with poor decision-making, both in the back- and frontcountry. My partners, it seems, had fallen victim to the gender heuristic trap.

It was the dearth of women in the backcountry that inspired the question behind my eventual graduate thesis: Why are there so many fewer women in the backcountry? Is it really because we're more conservative?

As it turns out, this is a tricky question to answer. While a great deal of energy has been put into researching the effectiveness of various decision-making tools and the ways avalanche professionals employ them, little attention has been paid to the methods male and female professionals use to gather information and make decisions—specifically, whether they really use different methods. This study sought to understand the influence of an individual's gender identity on their decision-making and risk tolerance.

The hyper-subjective nature of this question necessitated a mixed-methods approach. I was looking for a finite population of professionals whose answers might shed some light on general attitudes in the outdoor community, so, with the permission of Denali concessioners, I surveyed guides working on the mountain during the 2014 season. The survey collected basic demographic information about guides—background, age, experience, certifications, and, of course, gender. The demographics section also contained more subjective questions about respondents' personal and professional risk tolerance levels. The survey asked guides to prioritize a set of ten decision-making factors from most to least important. (The options were derived from an earlier pilot study, and included an optional fill-in-the-blank "other" selection.) Guides then ranked Ian McCammon's FACETS—the acronym American practitioners use to remember the human factors that might otherwise lead to our ruin—in order from most to least challenging to them personally. Finally, respondents were asked to visualize a trusted backcountry partner and answer a set of demographic questions about them.

Of roughly 150 guides working on Denali in 2014, 48 completed the survey. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 57, and 40 of the guides (83%) were male. (This gender breakdown is consistent with NPS user data collected on Denali climbers over the last fifteen years.) Professional experience levels ranged from one season to 25; participants' collected experience totaled 395 seasons. Most guides held a Level 2 avalanche certification (56%) or above (29%). In addition, guides had a wide variety of other certifications, including Wilderness First Responder (83%), an AMGA certification (43%), AAA professional membership (13%), and AIARE instructor training (10%).

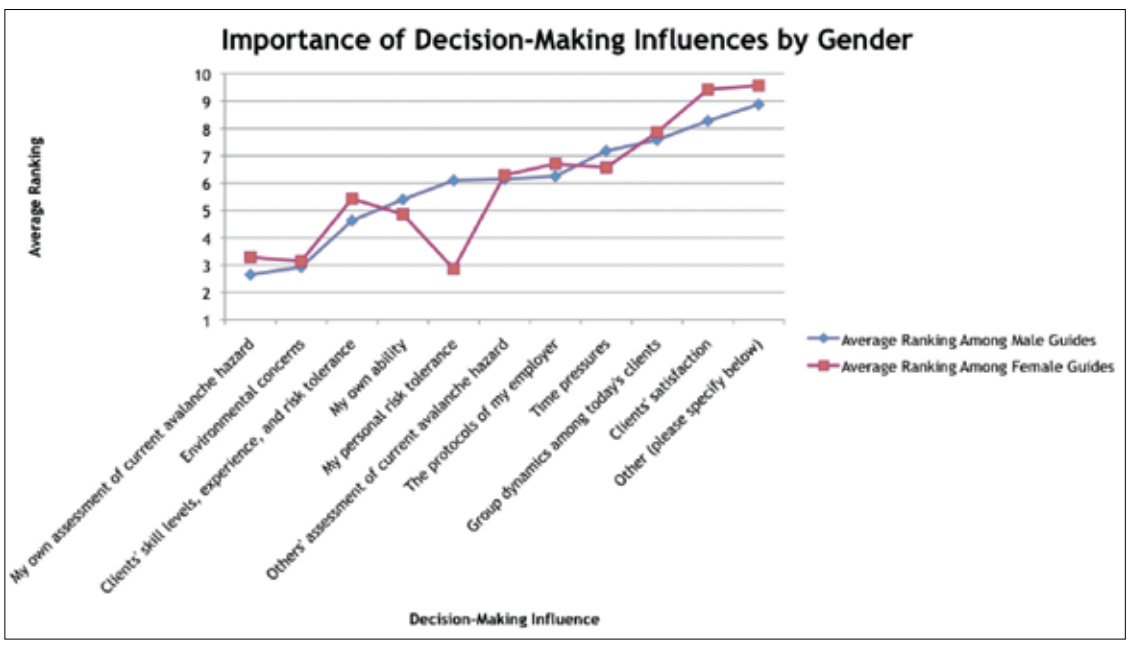

Fig. 1: Guides' rankings of decision-making factors were averaged. Lower numbers mean higher priority (i.e. #1 is the highest possible average).

Overall, guides prioritized the decision-making factors in the following order:

1. My own assessment of current avalanche hazard
2. Environmental concerns
3. Clients' skill levels, experience, and risk tolerance
4. My own ability
5. My personal risk tolerance
6. Others' assessment of current avalanche hazard
7. The protocols of my employer
8. Time pressures
9. Group dynamics among today's clients,
10. Client's satisfaction

These rankings were averaged, both overall and by gender, producing a number between 1 and 10 to describe a factor's importance.

Only two decision-making factors had significantly different rankings: female guides ranked clients' satisfaction lower than male guides, and ranked the importance of their own personal risk tolerance significantly higher than male guides. To better understand the reasons for these differences, I looked for correlations between an individual respondent's ranking and their age, experience, and training. None of these relationships were statistically significant.

Denali guide Leighan Falley on the summit in 2013, after successfully guiding the first Indian woman to reach the Seven Summits. *Photo by Tucker Chenoweth*

Guides also ranked the FACETS, and the same averaging system was used to determine overall and gendered rankings for each factor. Familiarity was by far the highest (it averaged #1.6, and no significant difference existed between genders); it was ranked #1 by 31 of the 48 guides. This trend, which makes sense considering that guides take clients up the same route season after season, is heartening: both male and female guides are aware of this potential flaw in their decision-making process, a step toward avoiding the trap.

Given that few differences existed between male and female responses to questions about decision-making and heuristic trap susceptibility, it was interesting—though not necessarily surprising—that 87% of guides' trusted partners were male. Most guides reported that their partners had more experience (78%), were older (57%), had more training (53%), and similar risk tolerance (66%) relative to the respondent. Of the few female partners cited, all were reported to have similar levels of experience and training to the respondent, but in 50% of cases, were perceived to have lower risk tolerance. The other half was perceived to have similar risk tolerance—never higher.

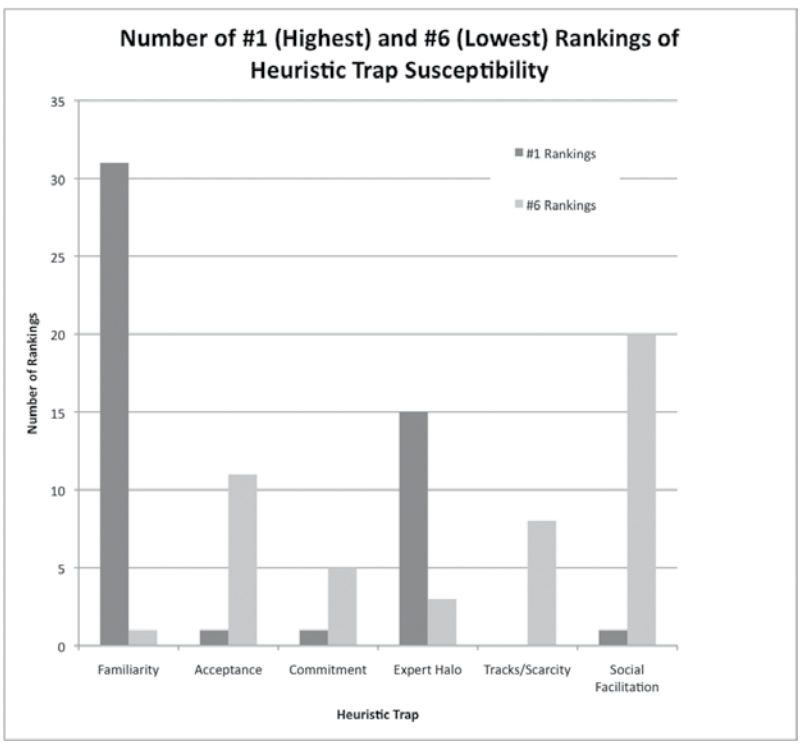

Fig. 2: Number of #1(highest) and #6 (lowest) rankings of heuristic trap susceptibility. Note that Familiarity has both the most #1 and fewest #6 rankings.

Based on these perceptions, I revisited guides' responses to the questions on risk tolerance; no significant differences existed between male and female guides' reporting of their own risk tolerance, either personally or professionally.

In his 2002 ISSW paper, Ian McCammon plainly defines the heuristic trap: a "mismatch, where we base decisions on familiar but inappropriate clues." While there's still plenty of research to be done—this study is by no means a comprehensive look at backcountry gender dynamics—the evidence points to the existence of another potential trap, albeit one that doesn't fit well into our FACETS acronym.

There's no question that individual risk tolerances in the backcountry vary widely, but when we tie a person's risk tolerance to their gender and make decisions based on a partner's (perhaps incorrectly) perceived risk tolerance, we risk falling victim to the gender heuristic trap. Of course, even the most levelheaded among us is affected by complex intra-group dynamics: McCammon's research found that mixed-gender groups expose themselves to greater risk than all-male groups. "Showing off for the girls"—or, as I have do admit I've found myself doing before, upping the ante to fit in and be taken seriously as a woman in an otherwise male group—can lead us to stop paying attention to our systems, and that's when we get into trouble. As practitioners—whether you're a ski patroller, an avalanche educator, a guide, or skiing with friends on your day off—recognizing and acknowledging those preconceived notions about gender, both in ourselves and others, can go a long way toward mitigating this potential trap.

References:

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Emma splits her time between her two favorite mountain ranges, the Chugach and the Colorado Rockies. She recently finished her master's degree in outdoor and environmental education at Alaska Pacific University, and currently works at the Alaska Avalanche School, where her favorite part of the job is doing Know Before You Go programming for local schools. ❄