

Daring Dan and Mrs Dull – The reciprocal construction of heroic risk and dull safety in organized outdoor activities

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In an incident reported on the social website Skridskonätet (a site for tour skaters) February 8, 2012, a group of highly competent tour skaters went through the ice at the same time and in the same place at high speed – a potentially dangerous situation – on the sea ice in the Stockholm Archipelago. They all re-entered the ice nearly as quickly as they went through it.

This incident, which was the consequence of going too fast, on unknown ice, not following established safety routines, was reported as a glorious, comic adventure and commented in the same style by other skaters. This kind of reporting and the reactions to it, including the absence of outspoken critique, push the meaning construction of what outdoor safety is all about, into a drama with two standard stereotypes; The risk taking (young male) hero Adventurer, and the risk avoiding, (older and more feminine), perhaps wiser but boring, non-adventurer.

Here it is shown that they are both stereotypes in the drama of a reciprocal process of interdependent social identity construction which often leads to polarization, conflicts, and in the case of outdoor, to the downplay of safety. It is suggested that polarization can be avoided by a strategy built on reconceptualizing based on inclusion.

Recent research (Beech 2008, Faber & Mayer 2009) defines identity as a sense of identity due to active intrapersonal processes – identity work. It comprises managing the “inside”, intra personal processes, in negotiation with outside actors and contextual factors. Thus identity is an ongoing and changeable construction, a narrative of whom we are and why, which gives meaning and sense to our life-projects.

According to Beech (2008) the negotiation of the identity is related to expectations and frame of reference, and therefore strongly influenced by stereotypes and archetypes (Jonas et. al 2003). The latter meaning not only story characters but easily recognizable prototypes of personality or character, operating more or less unconscious. Both are often used in media reporting strategies (Davidson 2008). Typically such polarization can be found in classical dichotomies of good guy/bad guy, winner/loser or adventurer and non adventurer as well as in other fundamental strategies of making sense of what we call reality. A sense of identity, or the lack of it, is therefore central to how we understand and act on changes and challenges (Jonas et.al. 2003).

A classical stereotype to identify with in the outdoors and in media is the Adventurer (Elsrud 2001, Jonas et.al. 2003, Faber & Mayer 2009). This archetype is a courageous risk taker, action oriented and male. In order to visualize the Adventurer, the background (audience) must be contrasted as not courageous or risk taking but passive and female,

which all are characteristics the proposed Adventurer must dissociate himself from (Elsrud 2001).

Claims or proposals for an Adventurer identity can therefore (Beech 2007) meet at least three possible reactions: Confirmation, demands for negotiation/refinement of the identity construction and rejection. Both Beech (2008) and Jonas et.al.(2003) points to that any of the reactions could be initiated by, or come from any of the actors, giving rise to the following variation of possible reactions in a dialectic identity process.

As long as the proposed adventurer and the audience agree on the identity claims or the rejections, everything is fine. But when the proposed adventurer and the proposed audience disagree, or are ambitious on their respective identity claims it will lead to negotiations of meaning or to conflicts. An example is when tour skaters don't want to be reduced to a passive audience to spectacular adventures they haven't taken part in, and reject the adventurer's claim of being adventurous. Instead his or her identity will be re-assessed, perhaps to a jester, and the person's lack of judgment is deprecated. The proposed adventurer in turn, challenges the others resentment as dull and cowardly, perhaps taking even greater risks in order to make a stronger claim to his identity as a real adventurer.

Struggles over the adventurer identity in organized outdoor activities often lead to tension and conflicts about the code of conduct and safety rules in the organization. Another important consequence is the downplay of the importance of risk awareness and safety work since safety symbolically represent the not adventurous. A striking example can be found in the symbolic avoidance of the use of malaria blockers among backpackers concerned about their identity as “real” adventurers in contrast to the identity as regular tourists (Elsrud 2001).

The identity process thus becomes more of a polarization process with readjustments to readymade, stereotyped identities, just as in the reported incident. In the field of politics, a similar phenomenon can be found in the polarization between moderation and extremism. Based on how British Islamic groups holds extreme standpoints both in moderation and radicalism, Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins (2009) found these polarized categories of little use in both theoretical understanding and practice. They suggest reconceptualizing of the categories by choosing perspectives and by changing the frames of references, into alternative practice taxonomies based on inclusion instead of exclusion. Thereby it would be possible to transform the social identity processes from polarization to inclusion,

The conclusion here is that identity construction practices easily turn into polarization processes inspired by media

Table 1. Identity construction process

	Audience propose	Audience confirm	Audience reject
Individual propose	Negotiation/refinement	Agreement	Polarization/conflict
Individual confirms	Agreement	Agreement	Polarization/conflict or acceptance
Individual rejects	Rejection/conflict	Abdication/involuntary identity or rejection/conflict	No issue

stereotypes and archetypes. In the case of the construction of an Adventurer identity the polarization can lead to conflicts and the downplay of safety issues.

To avoid polarization in the identity construction process, one suggestion is to go beyond

obvious dichotomies in the identity work and find criteria for inclusion.

Applying this suggestion on the reported incident, instead of blaming the irresponsible Daring Dan and his friends, it is possible to identify constructive contributions to the shared safety culture among tour skaters, where reports from mistakes and close calls are important sources for identifying safety hazards and facilitate learning. By reporting this embarrassing incident the skaters showed their respect for this shared policy and contributed with their experiences and reflections. Implicitly, they also contributed with their tacit expectations of others to do the same,

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