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Mountain guides' everyday work: Articulating safety and service relationship

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THE WORK IN CONTEXT

With a worrying accidentology (ten fatal accidents per year for approximately 1700 professionals in France), a culture that promotes a high level of performance and a profession based on the craft-type approach, the practice of mountaineering with a guide can be considered as an unsafe system (Amalberti et al., 2005; Morel et al., 2009). This practice has two particular characteristics. Firstly, it is currently undergoing a deep transformation not only in terms of its environmental context (with global warming), but also because of the media, legal and regulatory pressure that weakens the sustainability of the profession, due to low safety standards. Secondly, it belongs to the service situations. The client is present and involved in the production phases (Falzon and Cerf, 2005): they may be a novice or more experienced and may themselves be a victim of accidents. For instance, fifteen clients died in 2018 in France. If, for the guide, clients are a variable to be monitored in a dynamic situation (Hoc, 2001), they are also participants, with their own goals, in the interactive process of the service relationship (Falzon and Cerf, 2005). This service situation, where a professional applies specific skills to provide the service requested by the client, should be distinguished from situations of cooperation between two operators (Falzon and Cerf, 2005; Flageul-Caroly, 2001). According to these elements, this study examines the way the guides build safety with their clients, in a hazardous, dynamic environment and in this particular socio-professional context.

KEYWORDS

Safety, service situation, dynamic situation

A brief outline of the work carried out

This study focuses on observations of the actual field work of professionals. It is based primarily on the idea that safety issues can be addressed by understanding how the professionals are able to achieve, every day, a successful performance (Hollnagel, 2014). The analysis of the variability of this performance then allows a better understanding of the possible migration towards loss of control (Hollnagel, 2014), as well as of the strategies for adjusting performance at an acceptable level of risk (Cuvelier et al., 2008). The method used was first based on eighteen interviews with mountain guides focusing on risk perception and professional interactions (clients and other guides). In a second phase, participant observations were conducted and video-recorded during ten alpine tours with experienced guides or aspiring guides being trained. These observations were followed by ten self-confrontations (five with individuals and five with collectives) in order to identify the challenges guides that are confronted within their everyday work. The data collected was analysed in order to identify and describe some difficulties of the mountain guides' activity in their trade-offs between the constraints of safety issues and the service situation.

Findings/solutions (the outcome)

The professional activity of mountain guides takes place in a context of uncertainty. In the preliminary phase, guides must deal with partially known parameters concerning the environment (weather, snow conditions, etc.) and the client (technical level, personality, etc.). During the tour, the guide must not only observe the differences between the forecast and the reality that can be perceived in the field, but also follow the evolution of these parameters over time (client fatigue, rising temperatures, etc.). To ensure an adequate level of safety, the guide may control the situation by modifying the speed of progression, the itinerary and the techniques used, but also by acting on the client (for example with instructions). These choices can have an impact on the achievement of predefined goals and can therefore lead to negotiations with the client or create goal conflicts.

Between guides and clients, three characteristics of the service relationship could have an impact on risk management:

- 1) An asymmetry of cognitive and physical resources: for example, to limit the exposure to thunderstorms, the guide can increase speed, but this may increase the client's fatigue.
- 2) A difference of representations: due to a false representation of the environmental hazards, the client may not understand or even oppose the guide's decisions.
- 3) An implicit and undefined contractual dimension: financial pressure, caused by the fear of not getting paid in case of a downward reclassification of the project, may push the professional to take risks that he/she would have liked to avoid.

At the collective level, we observe that the competitiveness context, generated by the presence of clients and other professionals in the field, can influence the guide's decisions on at least two points:

- 1) In the mountaineering practice, the cultural emphasis on technical and physical performance can lead to risk-taking. In context, the individual risk-taking of some guides can lead the other present professionals to take more risks in order to maintain the image that their clients have of them as good guides.
- 2) Faced with situations considered as unacceptable in terms of risks (for the guide), it is sometimes difficult and costly (financially, cognitively and emotionally) for professionals to justify their safety choices to their clients (for example abandoning the planned tour) when these choices are not shared by their colleagues (who continue).

These results highlight the complexity of some trade-offs between the service situation and safety goals for the professional. It is therefore important for the profession to enhance the understanding of accidents related to work activity, by placing the issues related to the service situation as top priorities.

Impact

As the guiding profession is mainly composed of self-employed workers, there is no hierarchical link between the main professional institutions and guides. This characteristic limits the means of action to regulation, prevention (experience feedback), and training (initial and continuous). The results tend to confirm the importance of taking into account the professional's relationship skills when dealing with safety issues, which are mainly built in interaction with the client (Caroly and Weill-Fassina, 2006; Falzon and Cerf, 2005). By highlighting the close link between these skills and safety, particularly by managing trade-offs, the first results suggest the development of training modules, which are for now mainly focused on hazard diagnosis and technical management of critical situations.

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