

## decision·making



Author Margaret Wheeler rips it up in Chamonix, winter of 1999.  
 Photo by Brett Schreckengost Photography  
[www.brettschreckengost.com](http://www.brettschreckengost.com)

I like to go into the mountains with women. I feel like I'm safer when I do. When I'm out with my male friends, I know that I have to keep a sharp eye out for competition, pride, and all the other traits that tend to go along with groups of men...

—Bruce Tremper  
*Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain*

...under certain circumstances, men in the presence of female peers will behave more competitively, aggressively, or engage in riskier behaviors... Across all groups, accident parties that included women had a significantly higher exposure score.

—Ian McCammon  
*Heuristic Traps, TAR 22/3*

Story by Margaret Wheeler

## BACKCOUNTRY SKIING & GENDER—

The Collision of Hormones and Relationships  
 with Decision-Making in Avalanche Terrain  
 or  
 The Possibility of a 'Gender Heuristic Trap'

# Who are the biggest risk takers: men or women?

Who are the bigger risk takers, men or women? How does your gender affect your risk exposure level in the backcountry and, therefore, your decision-making process? These are tricky and controversial questions, and as such they become a matter of opinion – rather than science – almost immediately. Each of us has had experiences that shape our opinions, and we mingle this with the available body of knowledge from research studies and the media that focuses on these very questions. But for the backcountry user, how do we reconcile the contradictions offered by the two quotes above? And how do we integrate this factor of gender into what we know about human factors and decision-making?

In considering these questions, it is important to understand the evolving paradigm of backcountry skiing groups. Not only are winter backcountry user numbers in general increasing, the ratio of men to women is also changing. How many women were skiing in the backcountry 20 years ago? How many women are skiing or riding in the backcountry today? In 1988 you would have been hard pressed to buy a women's backcountry ski; in 2008 there are myriad skis and other backcountry tools available designed specifically for women.

If this paradigm is shifting, then it is of utmost importance to understand how the changing fabric of backcountry ski groups figures into the group decision-making dynamics. If we don't consider the ways in which gender shifts or exacerbates human factors in decision-making, we run the risk of creating a *gender heuristic*. If you believe that skiing in a mixed gender group will keep you safer (see Tremper's quote, at left), how can you protect yourself from the findings described by McCammon? A gender heuristic might look like either of these statements: "If we have at least one woman in our group, we better listen to her so we make better decisions and don't get avalanched." Or how about this one: "If we have a girl in our group then everyone starts acting like chickens without heads, posing and taking big air. Let's just go out as a group of the guys, ok?"

We all have perceptions, or mindsets, about gender; we all start sentences with the words, "Women like to..." or, "Men are always..." While these mindsets may help us process and accept the otherwise baffling behavior of our friends and lovers, they may set us up for mistakes in understanding group decision-making. One of the best ways to dissect a perception/stereotype is to pin it up on the wall, and evaluate it with an analytic eye as it squirms under a bright light. As we do so, we continuously ask ourselves: what are the underlying assumptions that contribute to our given way of thinking? To that end, here is a starter list of perceptions I have overheard about groups of men and groups of women in the backcountry.

What are some perceptions about male behavior in the backcountry?

- ➡ Men are driven by testosterone.
- ➡ Men are physically competitive (Who is the strongest? Every day out is a race.).
- ➡ Men are bigger risk-takers than women.
- ➡ Men are goal oriented (It isn't a good day unless you get to the top.).
- ➡ Men are ruled by their egos.

Now let's look at perceptions we have about women in the backcountry:

- ➡ Women won't take on as much risk as men.
- ➡ Women are more likely to make decisions that lead to group happiness over individual happiness ("I just want everyone to have a good day today.").
- ➡ Women are less likely to speak up in a mixed-gender group.
- ➡ Women are better communicators than men.
- ➡ Women are conscious of men's egos, and will seek not to bruise them.
- ➡ Women who are used to being The Only Girl at the Party are competitive with other women.

If each of these could be interpreted as fact, we could use them as solid guidelines in understanding our human decision-making process. But these are stereotypes, and allowing ourselves to be overly guided by such stereotypes, no matter how much they may resonate with our own experiences, can be a trap – especially in the backcountry. What if some of these are incorrect, even just some of the time?

The best I can do is to share some of my own experiences and observations, and examine how they may reinforce or deny each of the mindsets I've listed above...and what that means for decision-making in the backcountry. As I do so, McCammon's original heuristic traps (FACETS) immediately bubble to the surface.

Consider three anecdotes: one for all-male groups, one for all-female groups, and one for mixed-gender groups.

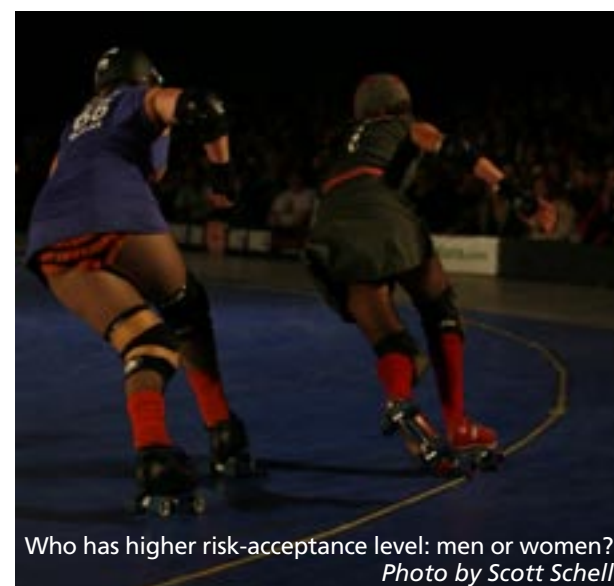
## ALL MALE GROUPS:

### Trying to Be One of the Guys – Ski Bum in Chamonix

(Any group I'm a part of will, of course, be a mixed-gender group; this is the closest observation I have!) Ski-bum culture is a social hierarchy determined by skiing ability: whoever skis the hardest is the coolest – period. My experience in Chamonix was characterized by the following:

- ➡ Working very hard not be "the girl in the back," uphill and downhill.
- ➡ Joining the race, every day, that started out of every tram, gondola, or skin track.
- ➡ Asking no questions, expressing no doubts. The decision to go or not go was always made before the day started and we got on the tram.

Looking at this experience from the perspective of gender stereotypes offers me limited insight in understanding the dynamics that developed. Was I exhibiting stereotypical male behavior, or female? How did my own background and desires affect my behavior? In contrast, looking at them from the perspective of McCammon's heuristic traps (familiarity, acceptance, consistency, expert halo, social facilitation, and scarcity), some patterns emerge. My friends and I were constantly driven by scarcity: we were seeking acceptance from our ski-bum peers, and we would commit each day before leaving our tiny apartment to execute the day's plan. As such, our risk-exposure levels were certainly higher than we realized at the time.



Who has higher risk-acceptance level: men or women?  
Photo by Scott Schell

## ALL FEMALE GROUPS:

### Women's Expedition to Hanuman Tibba, Himachel Pradesh, India

This was a ski expedition in high-altitude, high-risk terrain. We were a group of four women: ambitious, motivated, eager to climb and ski a first descent off a big peak. This was an amazing trip, characterized by:

- ➡ Varied experience levels in the group: some of us had high altitude, big mountain experience...some of us didn't (I was the latter.).
- ➡ Ambitious and competitive women: all of us trying to make a name or build one – and in a mostly male-dominated industry
- ➡ High commitment level: we had traveled far to do this, spent time and money – not to mention blood, sweat, and tears – getting to our high camp.

Comparing this experience to my lists of stereotypes, I get mixed results. Yes, we were all used to being the Only Girl at the Party, but did that drive us to be more competitive than we naturally are? I'm not sure. Were we taking on more risk because we felt we had something to prove, or because we were ambitious and had a common goal? Again, not sure. Under the stress of high risk and high reward in the mountains, our decision-making process seemed to me to be gender free. From the perspective of heuristic traps, however, I can see that even though we thought our decision-

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From: imccammon@*****.net
Subject: Re: women and heuristics/ TAR article
Date: March 6, 2008
To: lwolfe@tetontel.com
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Hi Lynne,

My apologies for the delay in getting back to you. Between teaching and research it's been a busy winter!

Thanks for sending me the draft of Margaret Wheeler's excellent article on gender & decision-making. A great topic, very timely, and part of a very valuable discussion (OK I'm biased) that has broad implications for all of us.

I really like how the article deconstructs gender stereotypes and makes the connection to decision-making. It's refreshing to see someone seriously tackle a topic that gets talked about a lot. The qualitative approach is nice – the stories help make Margaret's arguments much more clear and specific. What such stories lack in scientific precision they more than make up for in effective teaching and readability. It's also good to see a concise and accurate summary of the heuristics traps (thanks for the citation). Even though my heuristics work remains preliminary, I'm glad it continues to be a helpful construct for recognizing human factors in both women & men.

Anyway, this is a great article and I very much look forward to reading it in its final form. Feel free to pass my comments on to Margaret, and my congratulations and encouragement for an article that is sure to be of great interest to most TAR readers!

I hope you are well and enjoying plenty of skiing,  
-Ian

**GENDER HEURISTICS**

*continued from page 13*

making process was conservative, the expert halo, scarcity, and commitment all contributed to a higher risk acceptance level than we realized at the time.

**MIXED GENDER GROUPS:**

**Day Tour – Slot Couloir, Snoqualmie Pass, WA**

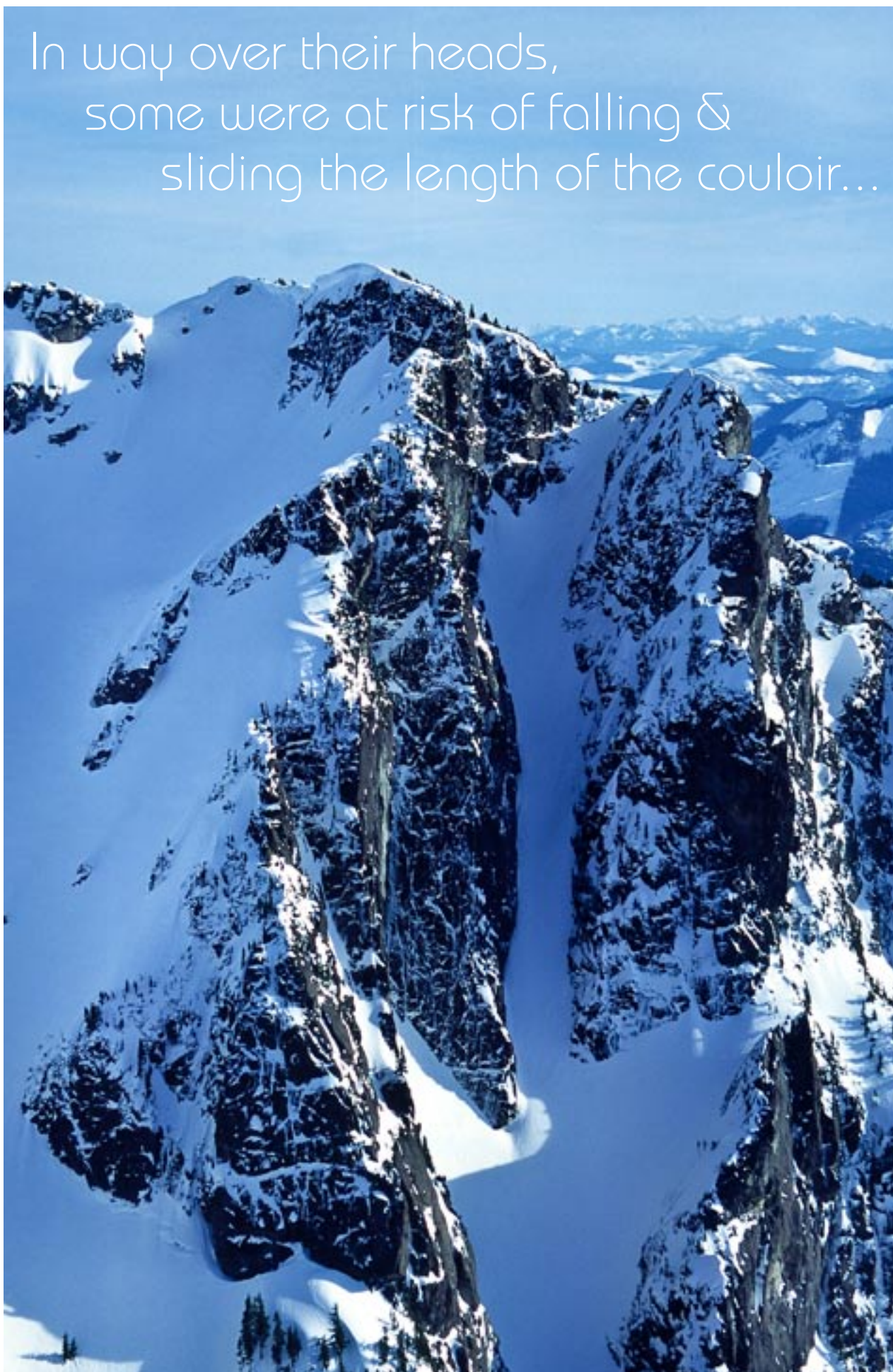
This was a simple day trip – a group of friends and acquaintances looking to ski a great couloir. As the day unfolded, our group committed to skiing the couloir – and realized after doing so that the main hazard wasn't avalanche hazard, it was sliding hazard. This day was characterized by:

- ➔ Our group was assembled loosely: friends of friends came along for a chance to ski the couloir. As a result, skill levels of each group member were not clear.
- ➔ Some folks had skied it before, some had not: those who had skied it were anxious to show the others how great it was; those who hadn't skied it were anxious to do so!
- ➔ Members of the group who were better skiers went in first, assuming all would be well. The unknown members of the group then followed, and ended up being in way over their heads, at risk of falling and sliding the whole length of the couloir.

In this mixed group our communication was flawed, but why? Was I less likely to talk to the folks I didn't know because I am female, or because I didn't want to bruise any egos? Was it both, or neither? Again, the waters get muddy fast. But looking at the day from the heuristic perspective offers good insight to the dynamic. Each group member's communication was limited by the desire to have a good time and to be accepted by the group, and the scarcity of a chance to ski the couloir was driving us all to commit to doing so. The expert halo may have been present that day as well: I was an off-duty guide, trained to take responsibility for groups, but not acting in that role on this day.

As I compare these experiences to the original list of perceptions about men and women, some of them are reinforced, and some of them are contradicted. Yet as I go through these stories from the perspective of the heuristic traps, they are all reinforced. What is the take-away, then?

Until science can prove things – definitively – one way or the other, I'm going to rely on what I know about human factors and be very wary of what I think I know about men and women. Because the rules for



In way over their heads,  
some were at risk of falling &  
sliding the length of the couloir...

Slot Couloir, Snoqualmie Pass, WA  
Photo by Scott Schell

Was I less likely to speak up because I am female  
or because I didn't want to bruise egos?

gender dynamics are not clear – and even if they were, there will be an exception to any rule. Better to think: how do your own perceptions stem from your own experiences? How might they be shaped by them, and how might they be leading you astray? What might your experience level, your training, and your background do to shape your personal mindset, and therefore your decision-making dynamic?

Tune your antennae to what effects gender might be having on any group's dynamic, but make your own observations about how experience levels, age, circumstance, and personality are shaping each interaction. In dealing with human factors related to or exacerbated by gender, don't let your perceptions or stereotypes be a "gender heuristic" trap.

*Margaret Wheeler is a professional mountain guide, and the author of the new book from the Mountaineers, Backcountry Skiing: Skills for Ski Touring and Ski Mountaineering. She is based in the Pacific Northwest, and can be reached at marg@proguiding.com.*



Skinning towards high camp below the summit of Hanuman Tibba, Himachal Pradesh, India.  
Photo by Margaret Wheeler

Left: Margaret Wheeler gives a PowerPoint presentation of this article at the Northwest Snow and Avalanche Seminar in November, 2007. Photo by Don Sveta