



# White-water rafting guides, leisure behaviour and liminality

## Guias de rafting, lazer e liminaridade

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### Abstract

Tourism, leisure studies, sociology and psychology are some of the academic fields that in recent years have included research related to adventure activities. However, there is still a lack of studies about adventure guides: their personalities, responsibilities and lifestyle. This study aimed to understand the leisure behaviour of white-water rafting guides and the concept of liminality. Exploratory research with white-water rafting guides in Queenstown, New Zealand, was conducted using as methods of data collection twenty-two in-depth interviews and fifty days of participant-observation. Findings show that the relationship between rafting guides goes beyond the workplace, permeating their social and leisure environment thereby creating liminal states and a 'liminal-style'. Data also revealed that the relationship between guides and clients is not limited to the rafting environment and sexual encounters between these two groups are recurrent. Finally, the excessive alcohol consumption observed during white-water rafting guides' leisure activities stimulating a discussion about deviant behaviour as well as the different moral and ethical codes present in their non-ordinary lifestyle.

**Keywords:** Adventure guides, leisure behaviour, liminality.

### Resumo

Turismo, lazer, sociologia e psicologias são algumas das áreas de estudo que recentemente tem pesquisado as atividades de aventura. Porém, ainda são escassas as pesquisas relacionadas aos guias de aventura bem como suas personalidades, responsabilidades e estilo de vida. Este estudo buscou compreender o comportamento dos guias de rafting durante os momentos de lazer bem como o conceito de 'liminaridade' no estilo de vida dos guias. A pesquisa exploratória foi realizada com guias de rafting de Queenstown, Nova Zelândia, utilizando como método para coleta de dados 22 entrevistas semi-estruturadas e 50 dias de observação participante. Os resultados apontam para um relacionamento entre os guias que vai além do 'trabalho' permeando ambientes sociais e de lazer e criando um estilo de vida baseado na 'liminaridade'. Os resultados também revelaram que o relacionamento entre guias e clientes não se limita ao rio e ao rafting, mas se estende a outras esferas onde encontros amorosos entre estes dois grupos é comum. Por fim, o consumo excessivo de bebidas alcoólicas observado durante os momentos de lazer levanta uma discussão relacionada a um comportamento desviante bem como acerca dos códigos morais e éticos presentes no estilo de vida não-tradicional dos guias de rafting.

**Palavras Chave:** Guias de rafting, lazer, liminaridade.

## 1. Introduction

Research about tour guides has been widely published (Cohen 1985; Mancini 1990; Pond 1993; Mossberg 1995; Ap & Wong 2001; Reisinger & Steiner 2006) and a wide diversity of guiding roles has been identified. To Cohen (1985), guides have an instrumental role, an interactional role, a social role and a communicative role. To Weiler and Davis (1993), guides are also motivators and environment interpreters. Pond (1993) develops Cohen's (1985) classification in a more detailed way and believes that guides need to be responsible leaders, educators helping guests with their limitations, ambassadors of hospitality, hosts creating a comfortable environment for guests, and social facilitators. Holyfield and Jonas (2003) and Sharpe (2005) include an emotional managerial role for guides. Randall and Rollins (2009) tried to verify the importance and performance of the tour roles identified by Cohen (1985) and Weiler and Davis (1993) and found that just five of the six roles (instrumental, interactional, social, communicative, motivator, and environmental interpreter) are relevant for guides with the communicative role being the least evident. However, Buckley (2010) contradicts Randall and Rollins (2009) and maintains the importance of the communicative role in adventure tourism, asserting that "guides need to be sure that clients have both (a) understood the technical aspects of what to do and (b) appreciated the importance of doing so" (p.14).

Beebie (2003) believes that guides sell their knowledge to clients because they are experienced in their activities, have the skills and expertise to conduct a group, and are the medium through which adventure tourists experience the adventure. Thus, adventure guides are the professionals who can show something extra-ordinary to clients (Arnould & Price 1993), while functioning also as the guardians and trustees of clients' safety. Simultaneously with needing to control, teach and lead clients, guides also need to empower clients and make them part of the adventure and not merely buyers of it (Priest & Gass

2005). To Priest and Gass (2005), guides are also facilitators of the adventure experience and play an important role in the educational process through adventure. Priest and Chase (1989, p.10) believe that outdoor leaders have a legal and moral influence on the group they are leading: "Legally, the outdoor leader is responsible for the learning, the safety, and the positive wellbeing of the group members. Morally, the outdoor leader helps the group members to create, identify, work towards, achieve and share in common goals". In adventure tourism, where clients are also looking for an emotional experience, it is part of the guide's role to work towards this goal. It is part of the adventure guiding job to offer feeling cues - including smiles and confident faces - to clients and to contribute to the generation of appropriate emotions (Arnould & Price 1993; Holyfield 1999).

Adventure guides play an important role in the commercialisation of adventure activities given their position as company representatives to the clients. Adventure guides, similarly to tour representatives, are seen as the 'face' of the company (Guerrier & Adib 2003; Sharpe 2005). Indeed the guiding role is not just technical. According to Holyfield and Jonas (2003), white-water rafting guides play a leading role in the construction of danger and in its management. This emotional role played by adventure guides is part of the identity formation process of the 'River God' or 'River Goddess' who are the entities able to control the natural environment and protect humans against misfortunes (Holyfield & Jonas 2003). The perception of risk as constructed by guides is a technique to enhance their status, to create an 'authentic' identity and provide a perception of adventure for their clients (Palmer 2002; Holyfield & Jonas 2003; Sharpe 2005). To Holyfield (1999), the need to create excitement and thrilling experiences dominates the values of companies working with adventure.



This paper will focus on white-water rafting guides, workers actively involved in the white-water experience of clients who have needs and expectations regarding their leisure moment (Arnould & Price 1993; Holyfield 1999; Sharpe 2005). The emotional expectations of clients can also go beyond the limits of the activity and, according to Fluker and Deery (2003), involves sexual aspects and affective relationships between guides and clients. Indeed, it is suggested that the relationship between clients and guides can go beyond the professional approach, involving the guides' leisure behaviour and creating a liminal world. It is in this liminal world that tourists and guides are able to pursue some pleasures that could not be achieved in a routinised, everyday life (Wickens & Sonmenz 2003).

## 2. Liminality and adventure guides

In 1909 van Gennep introduced in his book *Les rites de passage* the term liminal, derived from the Latin word (*limen*) for threshold. Van Gennep's use of liminal was focused on rituals accompanying humans in changes in social status. To van Gennep, rites of passage are basically formed by three different stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. The liminal state is exactly the transition moment when the person does not belong to their previous experience nor to their new status, group or lifestyle (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003). However, the concept of liminality is not just related to status; it is also connected to the need created by uncertainty to identify the transitory space between what is known and what is unknown (Nisbet 1969). This space between the traditional and the non-traditional universes is the space for liminal experiences defined as "the metaphorical crossing of some imagined spatial or temporal threshold" (Pritchard & Morgan 2006, p.764).

Inserted in a liminal space and active participant of liminal experiences, the tourist has also been defined as a liminal person in a threshold state (Ryan & Hall 2001). To Wang (1999) a tourist experience is also a liminal experience because people are engaging in a non-ordinary activity that make them feel more authentic and freely self-expressed. Nonetheless, workers of the tourism industry are not just part of the liminal world of their clients, but they actually actively engage in the liminal environment, creating their own non-ordinary rules and behaviours. Tour reps or workers of cruise ships, for example, belong to non-ordinary spaces, living their lives based on constant spatial mobility (Wood 2000; Matuszewski & Blenkinsopp 2011).

Liminality has also been the focus of some previous research about adventure tourism (Fluker & Deery 2003; Varley 2011). In Fluker and Deery (2003), the sexual encounters between rafting guides and clients during multi-day trips can be considered a liminal encounter where a non-routinised world is created. This liminal encounter discussed by Fluker and Deery is corroborated by Pritchard and Morgan (2006), who believe that liminal and transgressive spaces are intertwined. To Varley (2011), sea-kayaking tourists transcend their 'ordinary-life' in different ways while participating and engaging in a temporary, marginal environment. Water for sea-kayakers is not their natural habitat, "yet the kayakers spend hours sitting in it, paddling over it and (at times) rolling under it" (Varley 2011, p. 92). Moreover, Varley adds that the liminal experience of sea-kayakers is also based on the exploration of territories that are on the edge, territories where the water of the sea meets the dry land. This liminal space is not normal for sea-kayaking tourists: it is a non-ordinary space and a non-ordinary experience (Varley 2011).

However, Carnicelli Filho (2010) shows that in adventure tourism the liminal experience can also be created outside the activity environment, such as the river when emphasising the relationship between work and leisure in white-water rafting

guiding. In his results section, Carnicelli Filho (2010) focuses specifically on the moments rafting guides share in pubs and parties away from the 'work' environment. Indeed, his paper suggests that for rafting guides the lines dividing work and leisure are completely blurred. It is also suggested that the behaviour of rafting guides is similar to the behaviour of serious leisure pursuers and that it is defined by their lifestyle (Carnicelli Filho 2010). At the same time, Carnicelli Filho (2010) does not focus his attention on, or deeply discuss, the presence of clients in the lifestyle of rafting guides. Data presented in this paper will analyse the leisure behaviour of rafting guides as well as the liminal and transgressive experiences involving rafting guides and their clients.

## 3. Methods

Two methods were used to collect data regarding the leisure behaviour of white-water rafting guides in Queenstown, New Zealand. Participant-observation was used to gather data during fifty days of fieldwork during two different rafting seasons (2008/2009 and 2009/2010). In-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were also conducted with twenty-one white-water rafting guides and one operational manager. The author allocated pseudonyms to the participants in order to guarantee confidentiality and personally transcribed the interviews from which the quotes used in this article were extracted. The interpretation of the data started simultaneously with the data collection (Lofland and Lofland 1994; Silveman & Marvasti 2008). The interrelationship between data collection and interpretation is clear in the participant-observation diary, for example, where the observation is written as part of an on-site data interpretation (Dey 1993; Veal 2006). The data collected during the fieldwork and the on-site interpretation were then analysed after the fieldwork. The data were read interpretively, signifying that the researcher is responsible for the construction and representation of the meaning of the data (Mason 2002). Interpretation was based not only on the literature but also on the researcher's experiences during the fieldwork and the personal point of view of the researcher. The research themes in this paper did not emerge exclusively from the data collected but, in fact, from a combination of the fieldwork material and the deductive process involved in the researcher's conceptualisation of the phenomenon, corroborating Veal's (2006) point of view.

## 4. Findings

In the second day of fieldwork on the way to the river where the white-water rafting activity starts, Bob, one of the rafting guides, affirmed that pubs are the place to find rafting guides after work. The daily happy-hour that guides have after the afternoon trip was the main social activity observed in the rafting community in Queenstown. In eight weeks of fieldwork, it was verified that Bob's idea about the presence of guides in pubs and bars is correct. Rafting guides usually meet in pubs around 6 p.m. and, since this is a community originating in a professional activity, it is usual that their conversations usually relate to work issues:

"Ivan, a Swiss guide in his first season, invited me for a couple of drinks after the trip... I went to one of the pubs in Queenstown for a happy-hour with some of the guides (Ernest, Tony, Ivan, Carmelo, Marcus, and Sonny). We talked about my first trip, the cold weather, and Ivan explained to me that they (rafting guides) have some internal rules. One of the rules is that rafting guides are prohibited from wearing the company T-shirt after 10 p.m. – if the rule is not followed the guide needs to pay a jug of beer during the rafting guides' party named Jugs Night" (Observation Notes – 4<sup>th</sup> day)

During happy-hour, the guides started to show the different ways they connect leisure and work. If guides cannot use the



company T-shirt after 10 p.m. this means that until 10 p.m. its use is allowed, so usually the work uniform is also used in the non-work time. In addition, to use the company's uniform is a way of being identified as a member of a specific group or community. Moreover, through the use of the company's T-shirt, white-water rafting guides can be recognised by their clients, and guides' behaviour can have a positive or negative impact on the company's image. Consequently, the fear that white-water rafting guides' misbehaviour could possibly damage the company's image underlies Oliver's (operational manager, 50 years old) explanation: "We have a policy that they cannot go out at night with the uniform, so basically they should not be associated with the company". Indeed, Tony (34 years old, guiding since 2002) recognises this point: "You may not think but sometimes when you are out of here [the rafting base] people that see you can associate you with the company". The constant association between the white-water rafting guide and the company mentioned by Tony shows how elements of work permeate guides' non-work moments.

The happy-hours, the after-work encounters, the use of the uniform outside the rafting base and the possible connections between the rafting guides and their clients outside the river, transform the social environment into a liminal environment. Pubs become a non-ordinary place where work and non-work are mixed, where guides can keep their status of leisure providers in front of rafting clients while at the same time the guides become clients. However, this liminal world where leisure and work are mixed is not an exclusive moment of happy-hours. In fact, as Carnicelli Filho (2010) states, the concepts of work and leisure for guides are usually mixed and indivisible in their lifestyle. In this way, Carnicelli Filho (2010) suggests that the rafting guides' work can be seen as a non-ordinary work and their perceptions of life appears to be different from the social conventions that establish work and leisure as separate entities.

The rafting guides' non-ordinary lifestyle presented its deviant side with examples being observed during the fieldwork and narrated by guides during the interviews. Examples of abusive use of alcohol and sexual involvement with clients were observed during the fieldwork and are connected to the concept of a non-ordinary way of life.

### 5. Rafting guides and sexual encounters

Similar to young adult travellers, some guides are looking for aesthetic experiences (Selanniemi 2003) and sexual encounters with unknown people are part of such experiences in liminal spaces and non-ordinary worlds (Wickens & Sonmez 2003). To Fluker and Deery (2003), this search for pleasurable moments and sexual involvement can start during the trips and be extended to the wider social life, and this was observed in Queenstown during fieldwork. On the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of fieldwork, it was observed that three clients were invited during the trip to join the guides in a pub that night. The clients joined the guides in the pub where Leonel and Rafael were playing music. That night Leonel and Bob were observed kissing two of the clients. The guides used their charming guide mode and talked about their rafting experiences, their adventures, and how exciting the life of a white-water rafting guide is in order to attract these clients into casual sexual encounters.

According to Regan and Dreyer (1999), the main reasons for casual sexual encounters include people's sexual desire, physical attractiveness, spontaneous urges, interest in sexual exploration and experimentation, and the use of alcohol or drugs. Among all these reasons, sexual desire was the reason most cited by men – and the third most cited by women – for engagement in casual sexual encounters (Regan & Dreyer 1999). To Holyfield and Jonas (2003), engagement in casual sexual encounters with clients is enhanced by the creation of a

River God/Goddess identity that elevates rafting guides' status. According to Holyfield and Jonas, the River God/Goddess has four characteristics: the construction of danger and risk; display of fearlessness and competence; the ability to subordinate others via emotion management; and uninhibited behaviour. The white-water rafting guides' charm is directly related to this God/Goddess identity and to the ability they have to show people something different. Guides are able to bring people to places where no other person can, and they use this status to reinforce their image and satisfy their own sexual desires.

Etan (28 years old, guiding since 2007) asserts that sometimes the status of white-water rafting guides helps in flirting situations and that usually women prefer guides rather than just other tourists. "If you are out on the town looking for girls and you meet two of your clients and they are in town looking for girls, your status is gonna be higher than their status because you are a guide, you are a rafting guide... you are an action hero and they are just another drunk English man. So your status is gonna seem higher than theirs". The rafting guides are aware of their status and know how to manage this status when charming clients. Indeed Salim (23 years old, guiding since 2007) asserts that "Ernest is a River God, he has a lot of charisma, he uses raft guide charm, he can charm anyone". However, Leonel (26 years old, guiding since 2003) believes that this sexual characteristic is not just related to Ernest but actually to all the rafting guides because "you can sleep with a lot of women here in this job".

Liminality can be an attraction factor in the relationship between the rafting heroes and their ordinary clients, contributing to sexual encounters. The hero/heroine status is not ordinary but is actually a status given to people with abilities that transcend normality. According to Klapp (1948, p.141), "when a person becomes defined as a hero, he is potentially a very attractive and powerful leader", contributing to an identification with ordinary people. Indeed, it is likely that ordinary people would desire to be close to and are attracted by their heroes. In the case of rafting guides, their hero/heroine status is transposed to the leisure universe in order to satisfy their personal interests in a kind of exploitation of the status given to them by ordinary people.

The use of status would not be an attraction tool without using proper techniques to approach the desired clients. One of the techniques used to allow guides to attract clients happens when the trip leader decides which guide will lead which group of clients. Indeed, guides usually ask the trip leader to have specific clients in their boat. In this way guides can be close to the desired clients and invite them for post-work activities including happy-hours, parties and dinner. According to Etan (28 years old, guiding since 2007) usually these post-work activities "start at the pub and end in bed".

Carmelo (38 years old, guiding since 1995) believes that all the guides go through this phase of using their rafting status to pick up girls and this can be one of the main motivating factors to stay in this adventure industry. According to Carmelo, "sometimes for some of the young guides this job is all focused on picking up girls in town, or at least that is a big motivator factor to work as a rafting guide. I guess maybe everybody goes through that when they are first starting". Indeed, this performance of the guiding role away from the base in order to have sexual encounters with clients is not something that can be generalised to all white-water rafting guides. Nelson (24 years old, guiding since 2006), for example, asserts that nowadays he avoids performing a guiding role away from the base, but he admits that in the beginning of his career he used to perform the white-water rafting guide role with the intention of engaging in sexual interactions with clients. "I definitely try not to be a rafting guide out of here... I used to be when I first



started here, trying to pull 'chicks', but not now... I never wear my rafting uniform out at night".

The sexual encounters between clients and workers could be defined as deviant and non-ethical behaviour in an ordinary world, but the rafting world presented itself as a liminal world where the traditions of the 'normal' world are not always valid. Similar to sexual encounters, excessive consumption of alcohol can be seen as deviant and inadequate in the traditional world but is part of the liminal-style of rafting guides.

## 6. Rafting guides and alcohol consumption

As well as the emotional and sexual involvement with clients, it was observed and verified by interviews and observation that there is a drinking culture in the guiding community. At a party in the 33<sup>rd</sup> day of fieldwork, Ernest and Quentin had a lot of beer and were completely drunk. However, they were not working the day after. The problem of guides' alcohol consumption has been examined before by Holyfield and Jonas (2003) and it is still a topic of concern in the white-water rafting industry. Kraus (40 years old, guiding since 1988), the guides' coordinator, was preoccupied about the excessive consumption of alcohol among guides. "Sometime I'm worried because if there is an accident on the river and they go study what this guy did yesterday: drinking, abusing..." Yet at the same time, Kraus knows that this is not a problem specific to their company but rather a generic problem in the rafting industry. "It's part of the industry. There are a lot of guys that have alcohol problem, usually the young and single ones".

This research reveals that a problem of excessive consumption of alcohol exists; however, the main causes of such high consumption is an issue for further research requiring a specific study of this broad topic. In spite of this, Phil (34 years old, guiding since 2001) believes that one of the reasons for this kind of behaviour is related to irresponsibility and the young age of the guides, and in an informal conversation during the participant-observation, he asserted that "guides drink too much and this is dangerous because if something happens in the river the first thing that police will do is the blood test. Some of the guides are still very young and irresponsible" (Observation Notes – 35<sup>th</sup> day).

Kraus, the guides' co-ordinator, is worried about alcohol consumption and asserts that guides are immature and sometimes they do not think about possible consequences of their irresponsible attitudes that sometimes can cause personal and professional damage. "Kraus told me that some of the guides are very immature and sometimes irresponsible, they drink too much..." (Observation Notes – 22<sup>nd</sup> day). Kraus posits a correlation between irresponsible attitudes and an immaturity that, not necessarily but possibly, can be related to the age of guides and also to their personalities and social and cultural background. Again a parallel between white-water rafting guides and young tourists in liminal spaces or in a 'state of holiday' can be established. Young tourists look for party places and are interested in a risky leisure lifestyle that, according to Sonmez *et al.* (2006), involves casual sex and excessive drinking in a manner similar to the rafting guides and their 'state' of extended holiday. Also, the single status and the transient position of these young tourists (Bell 2002) resemble the characteristics of some of the rafting guides.

Zuefle *et al.* (2002) and Holyfield and Jonas (2003) also attest that limitless consumption of alcohol is part of the rafting culture and this can negatively affect the emotional performance of rafting guides or lead them to behaviours such as public disorderly conduct. Consequently, rafting companies around the world are worried about guides' behaviour outside the river and the possibility of damaging their image and reputation. Indeed it was possible to observe the conflict

between the liminal world of rafting guides and the ordinary world of business when the company needs to establish rules that relate to the leisure time of the guides, including restrictions on what can be worn.

The conflict between the rafting guides' liminal world and the ordinary world is then extended to the level of social relationships, creating a process of tribalisation that conflicts with social individualism (Maffesoli 1996). To Cova & Cova (2002, p.596), the tribalisation happens precisely as a reverse movement in a period of social "dissolution and extreme individualism". People are now engaging in multiple and ephemeral communities that are influencing their behaviour more than any modern institution or cultural authority (Cova & Cova 2002). To rafting guides the consumption of alcohol and sexual engagement with clients are behaviours that define collectively their 'tribe', a tribe that is not part of ordinary society but inserted in a liminal world.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the liminal world of white-water rafting guides as well as their leisure behaviour. This research showed that white-water rafting guides have a strong relationship between them even when outside the river environment. Indeed, some of the guides tend to party and have happy-hours together showing that their relationship is not limited to the workplace. In this 'tribalised' relationship, behaviour and ethical codes can conflict with the norms of ordinary society. The rafting guides' world operates in a non-traditional world where excessive consumption of alcohol and sexual encounters with clients are not considered deviant behaviour, becoming part of their 'liminal-style'.

However, at the same time that the non-ordinary world of rafting guides is established, it will also interact with 'traditional' society represented by the company that employs them and the clients they take down the river. The data collected for this research showed that the company tries to prevent possible damage to their image that can be caused by rafting guides' leisure behaviour. At the same time, the company is aware of the attraction power that the 'liminal-style' of guides can have on clients. A non-human status, the status of a God/Goddess, is conferred on the rafting guides (Holyfield & Jonas 2003). Guides are heroes able to go places where ordinary humans cannot go alone, resulting in an attraction factor.

This research suggests that new studies on the leisure aspects of adventure guides are needed in order to reveal the blurred boundaries between work and leisure in the tourism industry. Many aspects of white-water rafting guides' leisure time could be explored in future research including their relationship with other adventure guides and adventure adepts including mountaineers, mountain bikers, skiers and snowboarders. Finally, the influence of the deviant leisure behaviour of tour guides on companies' image is also a potential field to be explored by future research in areas including marketing, management and tourism.

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