



# Exploring hiking experiences in Northern Italy: organization, socialization, and unstated rules

## *Explorando experiencias de senderismo en el norte de Italia: organización, socialización y reglas no declaradas*

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### Palabras clave

- Senderismo,
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- Ocio

### Abstract

Hiking is often studied for its physical and mental health benefits. Yet little research describes the actual practice of hiking itself as a social activity. Based on a qualitative approach, with in-depth interviews conducted with 7 subjects in Northern Italy during 2019-2020, this study aims to explore how hiking is performed, in terms of its organizational and social dynamics, as well as the shared visions around this practice. The result shows that hiking has specific ways of being performed materially and socially, and that these ways of performing hiking are maintained and reproduced through subjective norms about how hiking should be performed.

### Resumen

*El senderismo es normalmente estudiado por sus beneficios para la salud física y mental. Sin embargo, pocos estudios describen esta práctica como una actividad social. A través de un estudio basado en un enfoque cualitativo, se han realizado entrevistas en profundidad a 7 sujetos en el norte de Italia durante el período 2019-2020. El objetivo era explorar cómo las personas practican el senderismo, en términos de organización y dinámica social, así como las visiones compartidas acerca de esta práctica. El resultado muestra que el senderismo es una práctica con aspectos materiales y social es específicos, y que estos aspectos se mantienen y reproducen a través de normas subjetivas sobre cómo el senderismo debe ser realizado.*

## 1. Introduction: hiking as a lifestyle

Hiking is an activity that has been studied by social scientists almost always with regard to modern or post-industrial society. John Urry, a British sociologist of tourism, leisure, and their intersection with modernity, provides a useful first definition: "Hiking is a slow-paced simple mobility characterized by intermittent face-to-face relationships with other people, places, and events." (Urry 2007, 3) As an activity that is undertaken voluntarily during one's free time, it has often been the object of study of scholars who work in the tradition of tourism, sports and leisure studies, subfields that sit within sociology. In the 70s and 80s, the novel post-industrial context in advanced Western countries made it so that decreased working hours allowed for more time to pursue leisure (Parker 1975); scholars thus focused on conceptualizing and categorizing different types of leisure (Stebbins 1982).

Hiking today is performed in the domain of what Giddens calls "lifestyle". For Giddens, the continual self-reflexive construction of individuals' identity is what distinguishes the self in "high modernity" from the self in pre-modern, traditional societies. This constant adjustment and inclusion of one's life choices into a coherent narrative is done through participating in certain lifestyles: "(...) in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so-- we have no choice but to choose. A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity." (Giddens 1991, 81). Hiking can thus be seen as an activity that belongs to particular lifestyles or lifestyle "sectors" meaning that it is performed in relation to one's constantly evolving identity (Giddens 1991).

In this vein, myriad studies have focused on why individuals participate in leisure and sportive activities in general (Beard and Ragheb 1983; Delaney and Madigan 2009), while recent studies on hiking have tried to explain *why* individuals engage in this specific activity (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot 2016; Svarstad 2010). Svarstad found three main reasons for why hikers do what they do in Norway: re-creation in order to be able to function well in society, living out a critique of society and a sense of belonging and continuity with the past. Relatedly, Collins-Kleiner & Kliot found that hiking is practiced in Israel for both universalistic (i.e., curiosity, escapism, health) and particularistic (i.e., love of a specific place) reasons. Other studied focus of recreation and the impor-

tance of place attachment (Kyle et al. 2004; Williams 2002).

These analyses are informative, insofar as they contribute to answering *why* humans engage in practices such as hiking. Yet little research describes the actual practice of hiking itself, as a practice that uses specific objects, is social and has particular norms with regards to how hiking is performed. The emphasis on the reasons for hiking often eclipses *how* hiking is performed. For example, how does a hiker achieve the mental purification, critique of society, or healthy life that she cites? Does she use particular objects for her hike? Does she go hiking alone, exclusively with friends, or with strangers? Does she hold particular expectations of herself, and for others during the hike? How does she conceive of her own hiking, and how does she talk about? These are the type of questions that are related to our research problem, that of understanding how hiking, as a social activity, is carried out.

The aim of this research is, therefore, to explore the practice of hiking and the specific perspectives expressed by hikers about their practice. More precisely, we are interested in learning how it is carried out (in terms of organization, different ways and uses of hiking, common requirements), and investigating the social aspects of hiking. We are also interested in exploring how hikers describe this practice, and how it forms or shapes certain ideas about how hiking should be performed. These specific ideas can be considered as part of a "Discourse" (Gee 1999). By Discourse (with a capital d), we are referring to not simply the way hiking is talked about, but more broadly the objects used during hiking, common ways of acting or behaving during the hikes, and shared values and established expectations individuals hold while hiking. We aim to understand some of the shared practices and ideas about hiking via interviews of hikers and participant observation conducted on organized hikes.

In order to narrow down the potentially endless queries into the practice of hiking, we have selected three research questions that will orient us throughout this study. First, how is hiking organized, both before and during the trip? This leads us to our second question: how do individuals socialize during hiking? Last, what ideas do hikers hold about how hiking should be done? Answering these three questions will help us further detail the practice of hiking from its organizational and social dimensions, as well as the existing subjective norms that guide the activity of hiking. This, in turn, may better inform the understanding of *why* hikers go hiking, as we believe that a detailed description of the practice is a prerequi-

site for interpreting the reasons why individuals engage in this leisurely, sportive activity<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Research methodology

### Participants

A qualitative research was conducted to capture and analyze the hiking experiences lived by individuals in the region of Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy. The sam-

ple includes individuals who are members of the local hiking organization and others who are not associated with any organization (hiking occasionally with their family and friends). The sample was diverse in age (from mid-twenties to mid-fifties), sex (both male and female), and experience. Most of the hikers interviewed were part of the hiking organization *Società degli Alpinisti Tridentini* (SAT). In total, seven hikers were interviewed, whose characteristics are presented in the following table 1:

**Table 1. Respondent's profile**

Interviewee (anonymized)	Sex	Age	Hiking experience (years)	Profession
Valeria	Female	47	20	Optometrist
Elisa	Female	30	5	Psychologist
Alfred	Male	27	20	University student
Giulio	Male	26	10	Business Analyst
Antonio	Male	51	15	IT professional
Silvia	Female	33	8	Engineer
Michele	Male	50	35	Military

### Procedure and Data Analysis

The interviewees were recruited both by convenience, through our own network of friends and professional contacts, as well as snowball sampling, being indicated by other interviewees. They were previously scheduled with the participants and lasted an average of 1.5 hours. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide, which was divided into five groups of questions. The first group included questions related to the respondent's background, followed by a group of questions that explored the respondent's hiking experiences. The following three groups explored how the interviewees first got in contact with this practice, questions on the respondent's everyday life, and a final group of questions addressing the respondent's perceptions and opinions towards hiking.

The interviews were audio recorded and were transcribed and inputted into a software, which aided the textual analysis. The analysis processes included the categorization and the codification of the qualitative data, that was later examined and interpreted in light of the existing literature. In addition to the in-depth interviews, data was collected through the participant observation method in two organized hikes. The dimensions identified through the interviews and participant observations were established inductively. Table 2 shows the dimensions analyzed.

## 3. Results

Three main dimensions emerged from the analysis of our interviews, comprising the organizational, social, and subjective-normative aspects of hiking.

<sup>1</sup> Whether hiking can or cannot be considered as a sport is an open debate (cite source, possible) that goes beyond the scope of this research. From here on, we will refer to hiking as a sportive activity or sport for simplicity's sake.

The first dimension details some central elements of going on a hike, such as prior preparation and the material resources brought to be used on the hike itself. The second dimension focuses on the social aspects of hiking. Hiking, we argue, is a predominantly social activity, from its introduction to individuals' lives to its performance as a communal act. The third and final dimension focuses on the words of hikers themselves, specifically on how they believe hiking *should* be performed. These subjective norms that we found in our interviews, we argue, act as a "glue" that help maintain hiking as a smooth-functioning, orderly activity, which in turn helps hikers derive the meanings that scholars have uncovered in prior literature (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot 2016; Svarstad 2010).

**Table 2. Dimensions of analysis**

The preparation for a hike
Socialization and interaction in hiking
Subjective norms of hiking

### Going on a hike

Unlike more traditional sports, hiking is an activity which very often is misunderstood. What hiking is, or what constitutes hiking is not self-evident or readily present in people's minds. Even the word hiking is used interchangeably with other terms, such as trekking and mountaineering. This first part of our work is therefore dedicated to detailing what it actually means to "go on a hike" by exploring its organizational aspects, as spoken about by our interviewees, and seen in the field.

At first glance, hiking may seem to be a simple sportive activity in which people engage in relaxation and enjoy nature. However, even if it is commonly understood as simply "walking", this mere notion hides a practice that involves a preparatory routine that starts from even days before the actual hike, lasting until the end of the hiking trip. It comprises both personal and group coordination at the material level (items for the backpack, first aid kit, food) as well as information retrieval (weather report, maps). As evidenced by Silvia:

*So, the first thing I do is, precisely decide the path, then study it very well, to understand... essentially how long it will last, the different levels that there will be, if there are points of support, what effort is required, which gear is required, because maybe there is a piece of "via ferrata", maybe if you also need skis if it is winter, in short, to understand what I need.* (Silvia, hiking guide and engineer)

In this excerpt we can read in a very concise manner the steps that Silvia takes when organizing a hiking trip. She stresses that one important point of the preparatory routine is gaining prior knowledge about the mountain paths that she plans to take for the performance of her activity; this is done through means such as analogue maps and the internet. In this first moment, she also gains knowledge of the different characteristics of the trail, such as the length, the difficulty level, the infrastructure, or facilities available in the area. This is deemed to be important in order to sort out all the necessary items for the hike. She mentions that some of the paths might include a piece of "via ferrata"<sup>2</sup>, which requires very specific gear and equipment to be done. In this respect, learning about the characteristics of the path is vital for successfully performing the hike.

Knowing the weather forecast in advance is an important element during the preparatory phase too: hikers are vigilant with regard to the conditions in which they will be hiking. As pointed out by several interviewees, during the trails, the different ranges in elevation or temperature throughout the day can lead to sudden weather changes, which requires the right hiking clothes as well as any other gear that the hiker may need. This element also emerged when interviewees talked about the kinds of skills that are required when going on a hiking trip; knowing how to "read" the weather is outlined as an important skill to have on the mountain, and ultimately leads to a better hiking experience. In this next excerpt Silvia emphasizes the relevance of the weather when going for a hike:

*The weather report is fundamental, and it is important to look at sites in which the weather is updated every hour, to understand who the weather in the mountain will evolve. The hike may be canceled, the day before or on the*

<sup>2</sup> A via ferrata, Italian for "iron path", is a mountain route equipped with steel cables, to which the hiker can attach himself with a via ferrata set, in order to cross tricky and steep rocky terrain.

*same day. If the conditions are deemed inadequate, I won't be able to face the hike.*  
(Silvia, hiking guide and engineer)

Here, Silvia stresses the importance of constantly checking the weather forecast, even while doing hike. This can be done with the support of web pages where the forecast is updated periodically during the day. As our interviewee stated, it is imperative to have the adequate weather in order to perform a hiking trip safely; indeed, the journey can also be cancelled at any moment, such as before departure, or even in the middle of the hike if the conditions are not appropriate.

Once the path is decided by the subject or collectively by the group, preparing the backpack becomes a major part of the hike; it is carefully organized prior to leaving for the trip, with the length and difficulty of the trail taken into account, as well as the weather conditions as mentioned above. There is not one standard way or manual for organizing a hike, but it is common practice that hiking is planned and organized in advance. This is due to the fact that it is important to minimize any possible risks and problems in order to ensure a good and smooth experience in the mountains. One important part in the organization of the event is preparing the backpack, which will be carried during the entire duration of the trail (that can take a couple of hours to an entire day or days, in the case of trekking). In this sense, balance and comfort are crucial, and to achieve this, the backpack is carefully loaded up. In this next excerpt Elisa illustrates well how this object is thought out precisely:

*You have to weigh your bag, think of water, of what you need for food, of the distance, and if need be, the minimum first aid, band-aids, disinfectant, tweezers, also the bag must be all thought out, optimally.*  
(Elisa, psychologist)

Here, Elisa describes how the backpack needs to be weighed carefully. She thinks about all the items that will be loaded in the bag, such as the food and a first aid kit. Everything needs to be well thought out considering the distance that she will be carrying it. As we can see, the backpack is an extremely important object for storing all of the material resources subjects deem necessary for the hike, a receptacle that contains all of what can make a hike truly comfortable and secure. Other interviewees have mentioned that underestimating the weight of the backpack can bring serious trouble for the conclusion of the trip.

At the collective level, hikers must organize themselves logistically. A first meeting point is often decid-

ed upon in advance, with hikers subsequently guiding each other to the beginning of the mountain trail of choice. For hikes managed by organizations, logistical coordination also involves guides informing themselves about the identities of the hikers participating on the trip, whether they are members or not, collecting fees and deciding upon how many vehicles, if any, are necessary to bring hikers to the mountain. For both casual and regular hikers, organizing for a hike seems to be a completely shared experience, from the beginning to the end:

*Once we have decided the place and the time that we go, we prepare the food that we are going to take, and we decide how to get there... normally... and we usually share transportation, and then we go to the place where we start the route.*  
(Alfred, master's student)

Here, Alfred highlights that the group of people who are going to hike together normally share the transportation until the starting point of the trail. His very frequent use of the collective "we" denotes a collective process of coming together before the start of a hike. From a statement such as this, we can make the claim that the process of hiking does not begin on the trail, but significantly before getting to the mountains. This was a common practice among all our interviewees, and reflect the fact that hiking, as a group activity, is a shared experience from the very beginning. During our participant observation, we found that hikers often met in a parking lot and formed a group circle that grew until everyone arrived. In this group circle, hikers not only greeted each other good morning, but also spoke about things such as gear, displaying new hiking brand purchases and the like (M. Zaslavsky, observation, February 16, 2020).

In this same interview, Alfred brings up another relevant part of the hiking experience: nourishment. Since these hikers need to walk for long periods, the food ingested needs to be adequate for the activity. For short hikes, food preparation is normally an individual task, but on long hikes, it can become a collective effort, where the entire group prepares together their lunch or dinner. Here, Silvia stresses the relevance of food for the hiking activity:

*Food is an instrument for doing the hike as well as possible. So... Yes. It's a, a function in order to achieve the objective, that is, in order to do the hike. So, I learned with time, what to eat, what not to eat...*  
(Silvia, hiking guide and engineer)

This interviewee referred to food as the “instrument” which helps the hikers to better accomplish their mission. She evidences that choosing what to eat is a deliberate, conscious act. She also emphasizes that with time, she learned how to best select the food she takes during her hikes, which implies that certain hiking skills and behaviors are developed overtime. Thus, organizing for a hike on an individual basis is not a static routine: it is learned and constantly adjusted over time, as hikers become increasingly experienced in the performance of their activity.

Just as organizing food for hiking is not a static practice, neither are the actual conditions in which one does hiking; the way hiking is performed changes throughout the year, especially due to weather and climatic conditions. Some of the gear used is constant throughout the seasons, like knives, compasses, maps and so forth, while other gear is more suitable depending on the season. Winter hiking, (the most involved type of hiking from a material perspective) which is very popular in the Trentino region, requires specific gear such as snowshoes and special clothing for extreme weather conditions. It emerged from our interviewed that walking on snowy mountains implies more preparation, as it involves many more risks, such as avalanches and extreme temperatures. As part of this research, we took part in SAT activities for learning how to deal with these issues – formal seminars and courses are provided by this organization, with professional instructors – which illustrates the importance that is given to security and preparation of hiking in general, the latter word being brought up several times in most interviews and that is central in this activity.

The various ways hiking can be done is not only dependent on the season of the year, but also on how the path is followed (in loop trails, return trails, point to point trails, among others) as stressed by Giulio:

*Usually you have two types of hikes: you either do the same path, back and forth, because, you have no other option, so there you really have the destination, which is the point you stop and start coming back, which is generally the highest point, or maybe a lake, or a place where you can, find food or eat, and you can seat. The other option is what we call sort of ring tours because you never go through the same path.*

(Giulio, business analyst)

In the excerpt above, Giulio emphasizes “return trails”, as in back-and-forth trails, which start and finish at the same location. In this case, there is a final

target destination which can be the highest point of the path, a lake or a restaurant where you can have food or any other place where the group can eat the food they take or prepare. Apart from different types, as mentioned by Giulio, our interviewees also mentioned the different difficulty levels of the trails, which are normally described with alphabetic letters (T for touristic, E for hikers, EE for expert hikers, among others). This technical language that emerged from our interviewees suggest that more than simply “walking”, hiking is a formally organized activity, with its own terms and guidelines, much like skiing.

Although group or accompanied hiking is the most common way of carrying out this activity, it emerged from our interviews that solo hiking is also performed, even if less frequently. It can be said that group hiking and solo hiking are two different ways of hiking, which require different approaches and mentality, as stressed by Antonio in the excerpt below.

*It's obvious that if you go alone, you have to be much more careful, you know that, you know beforehand that you're going alone, right? So, you have to consider that maybe, some decisions you can't take. I mean, I won't go climbing a cliff by myself, or take a path that I know may be difficult.*

(Antonio, photographer)

Antonio suggests that being alone on a path requires the hiker to pay much more attention during the hike to avoid troubles. He stresses the fact that this condition constrains the individual's behavior, from for example, climbing or taking a more difficult path, while potential risks are slightly attenuated in group hiking. For the interviewee, this last form of hiking provides more liberty for the hiker to take certain decisions as he or she can count on the support of the group in case of any adversities. However, Antonio, as the only interviewer who was an avid solo hiker, also mentioned that hiking alone means more liberty in terms of not needing to follow any rules that are dictated by the collectivity. As we can see, group hiking as opposed to solo hiking involves a general trade-off: personal liberty for increased security.

As we have seen in this first section of our work, the activity of hiking, both group and solo hiking, goes beyond the mere act of exploring on foot. It constitutes a practice with specific organizational tasks that involves preparation, through appropriate gear and specific knowledge. This prior organization and preparation are prerequisites for a successful and enjoyable experience. The material resources and organizational practices observed above can be considered

as forming a stratum of a specific hiking discourse (Gee 1999), and as an expression of lifestyle in the Giddensian sense.

As observed in this first dimension, the organization of hiking is mostly a shared experience, and serves as a rich ground for socialization, which we will now explore in the next section.

### **Socialization in hiking**

As seen previously, the organization of a hiking trip is a fundamental part of the activity. After assessing how hiking is commonly organized and carried out, this next part of our work is dedicated to exploring the various ways in which hiking serves as a space for socializing with other people, which constitutes another important part of the hiking experience.

There is little doubt that hiking is a predominantly social activity. Two simple observations can be made with regard to why this is so. The first is that walking around alone on a rugged terrain is not always the safest endeavor. Hikers must be ever vigilant when they make their way into and out of the mountains. When asked, our interviewees often responded that they tended to avoid hiking alone. The second reason is the perennial need for humans to congregate and share experiences. When asked about why he thought hiking was a group activity, Alfred responded:

*Because it is an activity that can be dangerous if you do it alone, something may happen to you. For example, mountain paths can last hours, if something happens and you don't have anyone to communicate, it is something dangerous. Second, we spent hours walking. If you are alone, even though can still meditate, it can be a little heavy if you are alone.*

(Alfred, master student)

For Alfred, the unpredictable nature of hiking, that "something" may happen in the mountains, is a big argument for always having someone you can communicate with and rely on. This fear that is mentioned by Alfred has been extensively studied by leisure behavior researchers and is known as "leisure constraint" (Coble et al. 2017). But Alfred does not only avoid solo hiking because of fear: hiking alone for a long time, even if done for the desire of solitude and self-reflection, may eventually become "heavy". The implication is that having someone to share the experience with can be more pleasurable and less lonely. Meditation is fine, but when one gets tired of meditating, having a friend around is ideal.

Additionally, a third observation may be made when considering the social aspect of hiking. Individuals who hike are very often brought into this activity by their families. When asked about their first experiences with hiking, most of our interviewees described going on trips into the mountains with their families when they were very young. One of our interviewees, Giulio, provided a classic example of this:

*So, I think we can divide my hiking experience in two parts; the first one was when I was a child. Let's say from 6-8 years until 14-16. That was the period when I went hiking in the company of my parents, and very seldom with a few friends. That was the period when I was following someone else. So I didn't go because I wanted to.*

(Giulio, business analyst)

Giulio describes the beginning of his experience in the mountains as having to "follow" his parents, an act that was not of his own conscious volition. Despite feeling as if he were being dragged along on these excursions when he was little, Giulio's initiation into hiking happened in the context of his families' social life. Giulio's introduction to the activity in the context of relationship formation with family members is an extremely common one and can be understood as an impetus for this activity to remain social later in life. This is in line with a broad body of sociological literature that demonstrates that socialization by parents is an important determinant of adult leisure style, such as Burch's study on the social circles of leisure (Burch 1969). Giulio's separation of his hiking experience in two periods of his life also aligns with the finds of a study by Zeijl et al. (2000), which examines the changes that take place in the role of parents and peers in relation to leisure activities during the transition from the childhood phase to the youth phase. Another one of our interviewees, Elisa, further illustrates the connection between initially hiking with the family and then coming back to the practice in a different (but still) social context:

*So, when I was little. With my parents I went to the mountains, Sundays, for mountain walks, then after I became a teenager, I didn't have any more desire to wake up early in the morning, I had other interests, and then I restarted three months ago, with a friend group that really loves mountains.*

(Elisa, psychologist)

Elisa's hiking was interrupted in her teenage years, when she had no more desire to wake up early

in the morning for an activity that she did with her parents. Her adolescent phase made her discover interests that were more pressing to pursue in those years, and only after a long period of time did she start hiking again. This time, she has returned to hiking not with her family, but with enthusiastic peers. Albeit in a different context, hiking continues to be a social activity for her.

Being an intrinsically social event, hiking has the potential of creating intense forms of social intimacy and bonding, as the result of the shared experiences that hikers have during the trails. For Fronzen (2016), the relationships that are developed among the members of the hiking community can be best described as “communitas relationships”, which refer to a specific form of social relationship that emerges from an area of common living. In this sense, various are the ways in which hikers navigate this social aspect of their practice. Our interviewees often emphasized the fact that during the hikes they have the opportunity to interact and chat with each other about their walking experiences, and exchange information about hiking trips that they can discover in the future. This emerged to be the case in our participant observation, where hikers on the trail split off into groups of three or four and mingled merrily, with some cycling back and forth between smaller subgroups (M. Zaslavsky, observation, February 18 2020).

The members of the group spend a substantial amount of time together, in sometimes challenging conditions, which helps generate unity in the group and a sense of community. Several of our interviewees highlighted that they appreciate having people around with whom they share the experience and receive support from:

*Other times there is silence, in the tiring parts, we help each other a little, even the conversations are focused on the walk itself. Watch out! Stop! How much we have walked... how much is still left...*

(Elisa, psychologist)

Here, Elisa’s words describe the supportive influence that hiking participants have on each other during the difficult moments of the trail, when people are tired. They take care of each other on the trail: for example, their warning shouts (watch out! stop!) epitomize the supportive nature of walking together in difficult conditions. She also stressed during the interview that there is mutual encouragement, not only demonstrated verbally, but also by attitude; they observe each other, and wait for someone when he or she is tired. This genuine group behavior that is pres-

ent during the hikes is a fertile ground for the growth of relationships.

Another relevant aspect of the socialization in hiking is the fact that much of it happens around the lunch or dinner table, either on picnic tables or inside, in mountain huts. Regardless of how food is prepared and eaten (individually pre-packed food or collective cooking), it became evident from our interviews and participant observation that the consumption of food is not only a physical need. It is an important moment of socialization with the group, as stressed by Antonio:

*for dinner, we eat together, we have the gas stove, and so we know more or less what to bring, things that are light, because they don't weigh down the backpack. If we go to the mountain hut in the evening, we eat in the hut together. And that becomes the moment of togetherness...*

(Antonio, hiking guide and photographer)

As evidenced by Antonio’s words, eating in hiking is a collective moment, it is the moment of “togetherness” as he poses it. In this particular case, having the meal at a mountain hut gives the opportunity to meet and share with new people, even from outside the original group. The importance of “breaking bread” since biblical, ancient times is certainly also relevant in the practice of hiking. Although the hikes we participated in did not include eating inside a mountain hut, we did notice pausing to eat entailed an important moment of social interaction for our hikers. Additionally, even before making it to the trail during one of the hikes we observed, participants made a pit stop at a coffee shop, where almost every hiker took an espresso and a breakfast pastry (M. Zaslavsky, observation, February 18, 2020). For that brief instant, the bar was full of cheery, eager hikers early in the morning, enjoying their coffee and ready to enjoy their time on the mountain.

Antonio, who is also a hiking guide from one of SAT’s sections, perceiving the potential of hiking as an activity that fosters togetherness, brought organized hiking into the LGBT association Arcigay del Trentino. During the past few years, several trips have been organized by Antonio and Arcigay as a means of bring people together:

*I started to bring this passion into Arcigay last year, because we were also looking for a way to get people together, even very diverse people, right? So, several generations, young, older, and the fact of going to the mountains is something that serves this purpose ... We or-*



*ganized six excursions and there were more or less thirty people.*

(Antonio, hiking guide and photographer)

Here we can observe hiking explicitly being used as a way to make people come together. Antonio, who is a member in both a hiking organization and a gay rights organization, decided that there was no reason for the two to be kept distinct: in fact, hiking could be an ideal way to foster the growth of relationships between the diverse constituents of the Arcigay organization. Antonio opines that the mountain is an excellent space for bringing together individuals who otherwise have little in common. This also relates to the idea voiced by another interviewee, that the mountain is a “democratic space”, where people’s differences are not relevant, and what connects all of them is that same act of walking. We can conceive of Antonio’s decision as a way of combining two different discourses, or lifestyles, that before were kept separate and now have been united for him.

Now that we have investigated some of the social elements apparent in hiking, we move to our last dimension, the way hikers talk about their practice. In our conversations with our interviewees, we found broad agreement over how hiking should be performed. We argue that these ideas, which we can consider as subjective norms, are the glue that hold together what we have been calling both a discourse, and a lifestyle.

### **How hiking should be**

In this last section, we will explore what hikers think to be good practice in hiking. How hikers believe their practice *should* be done is intimately connected with the prior dimensions we explored, that is, organizing oneself for a hike and socializing on the hike. Such “subjective norms”, in this case understood as the perceived pressure imposed by the hiking peers, can influence the behavior of individuals (Ajzen 1991; Ajzen and Driver 1991) and contribute to maintaining and reproducing the meanings associated to the lifestyle(s) in which hiking belongs.

The norms were especially strong at the material level, that is, with regard to hiking gear. At the level of organized hiking, these standards were especially explicit: the SUSAT website has a page dedicated to “hiking regulations”. A section of it reads: “Each participant is required to equip themselves in an appropriate manner with regard to the itinerary: boots, bag, sweater, windbreaker *are, as a rule, always necessary*. (...) The person responsible for the hike has the

power to deny access to potential participants who do not have adequate hiking gear.” (susat.it) In fact, when we attempted to join our first hike with SUSAT without appropriate hiking boots, we were kindly but firmly rejected, and eventually had to buy our own sturdy pairs.

It emerged that at the casual level (i.e. not going on an official, organized hike), where individuals had much more personal say in what they could decide to bring or forgo on a hike, the strong emphasis placed on appropriate gear remained. Although there were no official requirements that, if not followed, were grounds for exclusion from a hike, it was evident that appropriate gear was still considered of paramount importance. Elisa, one of the least experienced hikers we interviewed, detailed to us her preparatory routine before the hike:

*and we give each other an appointment early Sunday morning, 6:30 in the morning we meet each other at the ----- parking lot, and so Saturday evening I spend my time organizing my backpack, preparing all of the things, the windbreaker, a change of clothes, shirts, the windbreaker and a raincoat.*

(Elisa, psychologist)

Elisa makes sure to a significant amount of time on the night before a Sunday hike to make ready all of the objects she deems necessary for the practice of hiking. She includes a windbreaker, a change of clothes, shirts, and a raincoat among other items. Some of these items, such as a change of clothes, are not as necessary for the successful completion of a hike, which underlines how seriously Elisa takes her preparation and how important it is for her to personalize her hiking trips.

The existence of subjective norms operating at the level of objects used in the practice of hiking extended to the social aspects of hiking as well. Hiking is not necessarily always a socially pleasant experience: there are certain standards to follow, and if they are not followed, social tensions can be created on the group hike. We witnessed this personally on an organized hike with SUSAT, during which the guides underestimated a trail’s difficulty due to snow and decided to take a shortcut. Not sticking to the original plan that the guides had mentioned to us at the beginning of the hike provoked some general anxiety that rippled through the group and strained social interactions. (M. Zaslavsky, observation, March 8 2020) As compared to before the abrupt change of course, there were far fewer conversations, and when words were spoken they were often in the form of questions about the

new route we were taking, tinged with uncertainty. We found especially relevant in our interviews the unofficial rule of going at the pace of the slowest hiker:

*We wait. There is a bit of a rule that, when we are in a group, the group walks at the pace of the slowest. Or at least it should be this way. Precisely for giving everyone the possibility of, of being in the group, no? Because it is useless if you go in a group, and that guy stays in the back.*  
(Antonio, photographer)

Here, our interviewee stresses the importance of maintaining group unity by not leaving anyone behind. For him, there is no point in going with a group on a hike if some individuals are separated from the pack. Hiking is seen as an opportunity for people to participate in group socialization. It is clear that from Antonio's perspective, the *raison d'être* of organized hiking is experiencing the mountainous terrain together, as opposed to doing it in an isolated fashion. Antonio admits that keeping the group together may be frustrating for those hikers who are used to hiking at a quicker pace, but that this desire to rush ahead should be set aside in favor of keeping the group united.

The importance of hiking as a group emerged in several other interviews, and it did not depend on whether the hike was formally organized by a hiking organization or simply a casual one with friends. When asked about whether there was any competition between hikers to arrive to the peak first, our interviewee Silvia replied:

*Well, oh gosh. There are also competitions, but they are tied to the competitive branch of hiking. We... as an organization, and also when I go with my friends, even when I don't go through an organization, but, in general, if I go with a group of people, I share that experience with that group of people.*  
(Silvia, hiking guide and engineer)

Just like Alberto, Silvia emphasizes the importance of performing the hike as a group and stresses the experiential aspect of the activity. Hiking with others is supposed to be a shared endeavor, a creation of a moment that will then be recalled by all of the individuals that had participated in it as a moment of togetherness. The social aspect of group hiking is its most important aspect, and it has no place for those hikers who would like to rush ahead and compete with other hikers.

This brings us to the conception of hiking that move beyond simply fostering prosocial behavior

on the mountain. Some of our interviewees also expressed opinions of how hiking should be approached in a more general, philosophical way. For example, when one of our interviewees was asked whether there was any attitude necessary in order to hike well, he responded:

*So, there isn't any attitude you need to have in particular, um... you have to have your head screwed on the right way, let's say. Because you can't improvise, you can't say, I've never gone to the mountains, today I want to go, on, let's say, K2. Yeah but... who the heck are you, you aren't Superman. You have to do it step by step, gradually. Unfortunately, today there's a lot of competitive spirit on the mountains.*  
(Michele, hiking guide)

Although Michele at first responded that there was no particular attitude necessary for hiking successfully, he then launched into stressing the importance of being calm and collected. This subjective norm that operates at the emotional level can be best described under Hochschild's concept of "feeling rules", which relates to the idea that certain feelings are expected to be expressed in different situations, and there are mandatory emotions expected from individuals in a particular social space (Hochschild 1979). Hiking is not something that can or should be improvised, it is nothing like a jazz solo. It must be a premeditated act: to do it any other way would be folly. Michele emphatically, even almost aggressively states that we are but mere humans, not supermen, and that as humans we must be careful and have a gradual approach to hiking. This approach he opposes to what he terms as the "competitive spirit" that is increasingly encroaching on mountain activities. This further underlines that what Michele values and sees as the "correct" spirit for hiking is diametrically opposite to competitive: we can conceive of it as social and meditative. This further reinforces Hochschild's assertion about the existence of underlying rules that govern how people should feel on a hike, which shows how individuals are socialized to behave according to the official definitions of the situation, and how it orders their emotions. Such a conception of how hiking should be performed and how hikers should feel was reinforced by what another of our interviewees responded, when we asked him a similar question about whether any particular mental attitude should be present for hiking:

*Maybe one should have curiosity. The ability to, to know how to notice the details, the lit-*

*tle things. See the changes, I don't know. Be able to recognize a plant, see an animal, know to see changes in the weather, right, so, all of those kinds of things.*

(Antonio, photographer)

Antonio equates curiosity with reflection and alertness in this excerpt. In his view, the nature of the curiosity that hikers should have has less to do with discovery and more to do with understanding the changes that are occurring, or have occurred, around them. Hiking in this way seems to be akin to what Michele also views favorably. Competitive hiking, he criticizes, has to do much more with arriving to the peak of the mountain as quickly as possible than engaging in the meditative practice that Antonio believes hikers should be interested in.

Such subjective norms operating at various degrees (material, social, philosophical) that were expressed by hikers in our conversations with them play a part in conditioning behaviors with regard to hiking and facilitate its smooth functioning. Without them, it would be difficult to imagine hiking as an orderly and pleasant social mobility. This suggests that these subjective norms related to how hiking *ought* to be act as a glue that facilitates the successful performance of this practice. This, in turn, enables individuals to feel as if they participate in a coherent lifestyle, full of significance. In other words, *how* hiking is performed and talked about facilitates the achievement of, for example, mental purification, or living out a critique of society, or any of the other reasons for which individuals engage in hiking.

#### 4. Conclusions

Our empirical results show that hiking, a predominantly social leisure activity, has specific ways of being performed materially and socially, and that these ways of performing hiking are maintained and reproduced through subjective norms about how hiking should be performed, which emerged in the dialogues we had with our interviewees. These form what qualitative social scientists call a Discourse (Gee 1991).

A useful starting point for us was to consider Giddens' concept of "lifestyle" as a heuristic device: what could be learned from hiking if it were considered as a practice that individuals actively chose to construct their own self-narrative? We were less interested in the reasons individuals gave for their engagement with hiking, and more with exactly how hiking was practiced on the ground and talked about by its practitioners.

After conducting interviews with 7 hikers in Trentino Alto-Adige, and participating on a couple of hikes with them, three relevant dimensions became visible. The first was the organization of a hike: we found that preparation, from assembling gear, to checking the weather forecast and planning logistics, permeated the practice. Hikers spent significant amounts of time thinking about and planning for their hike, usually at least a day in advance. When asked about their personal process for organizing for a hike, only one interviewee stated that they sometimes went hiking on a whim without thinking out the necessary steps beforehand.

Our second dimension, socialization on a hike, underscored the social nature of hiking. The hikers we interviewed were most often introduced to the activity by their parents, an inherently social introduction. Later in their lives, hikers often continued their activity in the presence of others, be it friends or even strangers on organized hikes. Our interviewees stressed the communal nature of hiking, the activity being a space where enduring friendships can be formed, and the pleasure of hiking can be shared.

The third dimension, the subjective norms about how hiking should be performed, that appeared in conversations with the hikers we interviewed, can be considered the "glue" that reinforces the specific ways in which hiking is materially and socially organized. Strong norms influenced which objects should be taken on a hike, and which should not: this was especially apparent at the official level, where not taking the proper gear with you ran the risk of being excluded from an organized hike. At the social level, hikers expressed unstated rules such as "hiking at the pace of the slowest hiker", which reinforces group unity on the hike. At the most philosophical level, we found that our hikers thought that their activity ought to be uncompetitive and meditative, as opposed to competitive and unreflective. This concurred well with the primacy of extensive preparation for hikes that was practiced by our hikers, and the social practices that we saw on the hikes, in which hikers spoke to each other and moved as a group, instead of trying to outdo one another in their voyage to the peak of the mountain.

These results are important, insofar as they reveal the mechanisms by which hiking is performed and maintained as an orderly activity. The sparse sociological literature that we found about hiking often asked the question: for what reason(s) do hikers do what they do? This existential question is vital, as it helps us understand ourselves as human beings. However, we insist that before asking the *why* questions, researchers must investigate how specific practices are performed. In this case, we identified a few specific mechanisms by which hiking is maintained and re-

produced as a coherent practice that can then serve as something from which individuals derive meaning and construct their identities. We hope that future researchers of leisure and sports activities take the time to investigate just how the activity is performed before launching into more socio-ontological investigations.

As all studies, this one present certain limitations. The authors are quite aware of the exceedingly low sample size, one that was unfortunately imposed upon us by the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the negative consequences of this is that we do not firmly distinguish between casual and regular hikers, and this omission may have had the effect of hiding differences between these two groups in their material approach to hiking and hiking norms<sup>3</sup>. The second major limitation, which we see as an opportunity for future study, is this studies' ahistorical nature. It would be interesting to focus on how the practice of hiking has changed materially and in terms of social norms over time in this territory, and what this tells us about hiking as an evolving practice in general, as some studies have done (e.g., Brown 2009). Future studies would do well to examine changes in leisure and sports activities over time; this would be enlightening, as they are reflections of our societies' ever-changing mores.

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<sup>3</sup> In a classic study, Donnelly & Young (1988) found that becoming part of a sports subculture entailed a particular type of identity construction and identity confirmation. Neophytes often begin adopting codes of subcultures in a rather stereotypical way, and only with time learn to follow subcultural rules appropriately.