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Self-identity (de)formation among lifestyle travellers in northern India and Thailand: a double-edged sword in late modernity

Introduction

For most people with the resources to travel abroad, time spent away from 'home' is temporary and often experienced as a time-out from routine or as a transition period, or rite-of-passage, between life stages (Graburn 1983). However, for some individuals, travel can become a lifestyle that is no longer a break from 'normality', but is instead a preferred way of life that the individual returns to repeatedly (Welk 2004, Westerhausen 2002). For these 'lifestyle travellers', travel most often takes on the form of backpacking (Uriely et al. 2002) and usually includes extended sojourns within other cultures.

Contact with the 'Other', and travel in general, has been frequently described as on opportunity for individuals to engage in the (re)formation of self-identities (Desforges 2000, Galani-Moutafi 2000, Neumann 1992). It has been suggested that 'one reaches a self-realization in view of that from whom he/she differs' (Galani-Moutafi 2000, p.205). But while it is widely accepted that the travel context does foment self-identity work, there is little empirical evidence as to whether or not individual subjects perceive a more unified sense of self-identity as a result of travel. Indeed, prolonged exposure to a variety of cultures and ways of living may serve in the opposite manner, resulting in a confused sense of self-identity for the individual (Gergen 1991).

This paper addresses this gap by exploring the journeys of self-identity work undertaken by lifestyle travellers interviewed by the author during fieldwork to northern India and southern Thailand in 2007. Using an interpretive approach, the paper highlights that while increased contact with other cultures may engender a stronger sense of self-identity and even a feeling of 'cosmopolitanism' among some of the interviewees, an over-saturation of life options may also lead individuals to a confused sense of self-identity. Before voicing the subjectivities that both support and add complexity to these notions, it is helpful to underpin the discussion with a brief examination of the importance of self-identity within the context of late modernity.

Self-identity in late modernity

The complicated concepts of 'self' and 'identity' 'point to large, amorphous, and changing phenomena that defy hard and fast definitions' (Ashmore & Jussim 1997, p.5). Nonetheless, self and identity as concepts of personhood are used often and commonly interchangeably within academia. However, it is important to distinguish that self is more individualistic in scale than identity. Thus, the notion of self-identity as a level of analysis is more concerned with questions of 'who am I', as opposed to broader collective identifications (Desforges 2000).

Of course, any discussion of self must take into account discursive theory, which is based on Foucauldian understandings of selves as multiple and linguistically constructed (Holland 1997). While a postmodern understanding of the self as socially constructed may clamour for the

death of the subject as agent (Cohen & Taylor 1992), it cannot deny that many individuals still seek a coherent sense of self as an 'anchoring device' (Kuentzel 2000). The need for an anchoring device is attributed to living in a world of increasing fragmentation and pluralisation of context (Giddens 1991).

Giddens (1991) has conceptualised late modernity as offering a plurality of choices wherein the concept of lifestyle has gained increasing importance. While self-identity tended to be handed down in more traditional societies, late modernity is marked by a social 'openness' in which self-identity is increasingly up for negotiation among a diversity of options. As such, Giddens (1991, p.81) has suggested that 'the more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking.'

In fact, Gergen (1991) has suggested that the pluralisation of life choices offered through mounting exposure to media, new technologies (such as the airplane) and other forms of social communication has resulted in the saturation of the self. Gergen recognised that while some may feel liberated by the postmodern condition, such as Urry's (2002) 'post-tourist' for instance, others may feel what he (1991, p.73) has described as 'multiphrenia', which refers to 'the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments.' Within the dimensions of space and time, multiphrenia is likely accompanied by a degree of 'deterritorialisation' of home, a concept commonly used within globalisation studies to refer to a weakening connection between culture and place (Hannerz 2002). Multiphrenia also bears resemblance to Erikson's (1968) depiction of 'identity crisis', wherein an individual may experience a subjective sense of identity confusion that is characterised by behavioural disarray (Cote & Levine 2002).

Although, where multiphrenia differs from identity crisis is that the former is not characterised as an illness. While the experience of multiphrenia can be disconcerting for some, for others, it may be 'suffused with a sense of expansiveness and adventure' (Gergen 1991, p.74). This more positive spin on multiphrenia can be linked to 'cosmopolitanism', which is described as self-identity formation through selective appropriation from the world's different cultural forms (Hannerz 2002). Of course, in the sense of 'selective appropriation', this definition of cosmopolitanism is likely giving too much agentic clout to the individual and under representing the power of discourse.

Nonetheless, it is possible that individuals experiencing the social saturation and potential deterritorialisation of late modernity may react along a spectrum ranging from identity confusion through to an embracement of the condition. Moreover, an embracement might entail the ongoing formation of a perceived coherent sense of self-identity based primarily on one cultural form, or it might extend to multiple forms, as in the ideal of cosmopolitanism.

Returning to the context of lifestyle travellers, extended sojourns within other cultures offers both exposure to other ways of living (Neumann 1992) and prospective physical distancing from one's own culture. However, recent research on backpacker enclaves suggests that some travellers significantly buffer themselves from contact with the Other through refuge among common cultures in the bubble of the enclave (Wilson & Richards 2008). Thus, the exposure to other cultures that one experiences through travel is variable. In addition to a lifestyle traveller's degree of time spent in enclaves and intentional engagement with other cultures, identity (de)formation is surely also individualised and contextualised. As such, the paper's focus now turns to the individual journeys of the study's lifestyle travellers, in an effort to interpret the potential self-identity work taking place in this highly mobile group.

Study methods

The author, with several years prior long-term travel experience himself, conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-five lifestyle travellers, while engaging in participant observation, over three months in northern India and southern Thailand from July to September 2007. The criteria used for selecting lifestyle travellers was a fluid combination of self-definition of travel as one's lifestyle and multiple trips of approximately six months or more. Multiple trips of approximately six months or more ensured that the individual had adopted the travel lifestyle for a significant life period and had the opportunity to reflect on her/his reasons for travel outside of the travel context.

Data from the interviews pertaining to self-identity work was part of a wider inquiry, which focused on why the respondents travel as a lifestyle and the subjective meaning(s) they may have placed upon their travels. The data was thematically analysed, from which self-identity work emerged as a major theme underpinning the interviewees' travel motivation. While this paper endeavours to deconstruct the personal, lived experiences of the respondents, Elsrud (2001, p.599) rightfully points out that from the interviewees' emic perspectives, the 'experiences are as valid and real to them as the construction is to the researcher.'

India and Thailand were selected as sites for the study based on India's well-established reputation as a lifestyle travel pinnacle, largely due to its association with counterculture discourse in the 1960s (Tomory 1996), and the growth of Thailand as an alternative lifestyle destination in recent decades (Westerhausen 2002). The respondents were approached mainly within backpacker cafes, budget guesthouses and budget island resorts, a method also used by Sorenson (2003) and Davidson (2005). The lifestyle travellers ranged in age from twenty-three to fifty with education levels spread from high-school dropouts through postgraduate certifications. The sample was nearly evenly divided between females and males and spans thirteen nationalities with a scope of long-term travel experience from three to seventeen years.

From a stronger sense of self-identity to self- identity confusion

It is critical to note that while some respondents were conscious of their self-identity work, others alternatively became aware of the work retrospectively at various points during their travels, with some only reflecting upon it lucidly for the first time during the interview. Nonetheless, self-identity (re)construction emerged as an important factor underlying why many of the individuals travel as a lifestyle. Of course, the lifestyle travellers used different words in describing the process, often using clichéd phrases such as 'searching for self', 'finding my self', and 'learning about my self', amongst others, as indicators of the self-identity work that takes place. For example, as Julie (German, 27), commented from her temporary position as a scuba divemaster in southern Thailand, 'I found my self during the travelling. That's for sure. I know now what I want, what is important for me, what I don't need.'

Within the self-identity work, there was much variation as to whether the lifestyle travellers felt that their travels were resulting in a more coherent sense of self-identity, such as for Julie, or not. Also among those who perceived a stronger sense of self-identity through travel was Tamara (Canadian/Indian, 34), an interviewee that had been travelling for the last seventeen years, who remarked:

I'm quite certain that I would not have been able to arrive at the solid sense of self that I

now feel inside and out without having travelled. Because travelling gives you freedom of space and time to even meet the self, right, because you're completely out of anything familiar.

Space and time away from what is familiar theoretically becomes replaced by space and time with the unfamiliar, or the Other. As mentioned previously, voluntary contact with multiple cultures may afford some individuals an image of cosmopolitanism, which while this might be criticised as a narcissistic and privileged position, is present nonetheless. As Alec (Scottish, 34), another traveller of seventeen years with no intentions of ceasing the travel lifestyle suggested:

> You just become broader, you learn about so many things. Every culture on the planet has something rich and diverse to offer, so you pick up little bits and pieces of them, which I suppose you just integrate into yourself as you just go along, consciously or subconsciously.

Alec adroitly noted not only how a feeling of cosmopolitanism can be derived from appropriating images from different cultures, but also how self-identity work can take place consciously or subconsciously. For a few of the respondents in which self-identity work was not consciously noted, there seemed to still be a searching element to the individuals' travels, yet perhaps more ambivalent and confused. Barry (English, 32) attested to feeling:

> I'm always going to be searching because I do think I'm missing something and I don't know what it is and I'll know when I find it, and I will keep travelling as long as it makes me happy and as long as I think there's something out there.

Barry stressed what he perceived as a weak attachment to his family and friends in England. This self-professed deterritorialisation coincided with Barry's commitment to maintain an open-ended search through his travels.

Another respondent, Laura (Canadian, 28), who after considerable reflection during the interview openly acknowledged confusion regarding her self-identity, was not as optimistic about travel as a vehicle for her 'self-fulfilment'.

> I'm almost thirty and I feel like I just graduated but I'm ten years older and I have no idea where I want to go and what I want to do. I'm feeling a bit lost. I mean I've been trying to figure it out for the last five years [through travel] by talking to different people and getting their opinions. Just sort of trying to get an epiphany.

Laura's openness regarding self-identity confusion was quite atypical among the respondents. While it was common, and possibly self-affirming, for respondents to claim a coherent sense of self-identity, it is not surprising that it was rare for an individual to volunteer her or his self as struggling with a confused sense of self-identity, at least at that moment. Alec (Scottish, 34) summarised how experiencing a saturation of images from other cultures once lead him to a feeling of being lost.

It's like a double-edged knife in some ways, in some ways it's really giving you that sense [of self] because you're getting a lot of experiences that are shaping who you are, but at the same time, I was doing so much of it, so much travelling. Then, you're like, ok, where do I? – you're like swimming amongst it. And that's one of the dangers of too much travelling, I would say, getting kind of really lost in it.

Thus, prolonged exposure to other cultures can be assimilated in different ways by different individuals. While one person may feel that travel has helped in forming a more coherent sense of self, another's experience may have lead to a sense of self-identity confusion.

Conclusion

Indeed, the prospect of subjectively 'finding one's self' through travel may not be as clear-cut as travel brochures like to suggest. Even without travel as one's lifestyle, the social saturation of late modernity can lead many individuals to a fragmented sense of self-identity (Gergen 1991). However, as implied by Giddens (1991), the more post-traditional a setting, such as the multiple cultural settings provided by a long-term travel lifestyle, the more that lifestyle is likely to concern questions of self-identity.

While not all of the lifestyle travellers interviewed for this study focused on self-identity work as a primary theme underlying their respective journeys, most of the respondents did identify the travel lifestyle as a context in which they experienced a sense of self-identity (de)formation. Within the latter, while some respondents welcomed a more unified sense of self-identity through travel, reflecting cosmopolitanism, others experienced a quite opposite effect. For some, the multiple cultural images and ways of living invested in through travel instead contributed to a sense of self-identity confusion, sometimes described as a feeling of being lost.

Globalisation continues to permeate traditional ways of life, disembedding cultural forms not only for touristic consumption, but also for others with less mobility. As such, the experiences with self-identity of the lifestyle travellers interviewed in this study may offer a window to broader social changes taking place that will continue to fuel the growth of post-traditional lifestyles. With an ever-expanding array of images available with which one may attempt to build a sense of self-identity, late modernity can present challenging circumstances for those who wish to try to resolve, rather than play with, questions of self.

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