From its drifter past to nomadic futures: future directions in backpacking research and practice

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20th Anniversary Reflective Commentary - From its Drifter Past to Nomadic Futures – Future Directions in Backpacking Research and Practice.

Abstract

While the label 'backpacker' didn't originate in 1990 when first noted at an academic conference by the late Philip L. Pearce, its usage rose within an emerging academic discourse community, who established shared interests, sources of information, terminology, and methods of communication, along with a certain level of expertise and knowledge on the subject. While the community internationalized and globalized and embraced interdisciplinary approaches, a review of the academic scholarship points to the communities instability, as differential authoritative voices conflict over the discursive rules that regulate discursive knowledge. While there have been conceptual and theoretical developments in backpacker research, distinctions within the community point to new hierarchies as smaller groupings with their own particular histories and interests emerge. As disparities, incongruities and deviations in backpacker research emerge, this overview explores current research directions, identifies paradoxes, challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Introduction

Backpacking as an 'alternative' type and form of travel is distinctively recognisable in the Western World, given backpackers and the structures that support are inscribed in images, representations, symbols, narrative, text and video that circulate and flow across newspapers, mobile devices, bookshelves, cinemas and television screens; from websites, magazines, films, television shows, literary fiction, guidebooks, and a background component within movies, book plots, charity appeals, documentaries and reality shows. As there is now a large and complex repertoire of images and narratives throughout the world, backpacking has become embedded in western social imaginaries as an organised field, with its building blocks, key story lines, narratives, cultural representations, affinities, performative conventions, understandings, regularities, ethos and practices in the public domain. While guidebooks, like the Lonely Planet, which were instrumental in ideologically codifying and further naturalizing backpacker discourses have slipped away, backpacking's fluid and irregular shape has remained relatively intact. It remains characterised by extensive spatial mobility, time and space flexibility, as well as alternative social and cultural interactions and engagements (Chen and Huang, 2019). However, when once backpackers were cast as categorically different from 'institutionalized' tourism flows (Sørensen, 2003), the implicit assumptions, conventions and background knowledge about backpacking that allowed researchers to study this sophisticated and complex phenomenon are breaking down. As backpacker research reaches across different disciplines such as medicine, management and sociology, and different socio-cultural contexts, the discourse community has become unstable and the backpacker label unrooted, with increased claims that the label itself is redundant. As disparities, incongruities and deviations in

backpacker research emerge, this overview explores current research directions, identifies paradoxes, challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

A Discourse Community

Backpacking discourse, within the genre of academic writing, has long attracted a network of authoritative scholars who sought to exercise (or seek to exercise) control over the meaning of backpacker discourse, produce accepted 'truths' about it and make certain representations of it appear real. Since the early 1990s, scholars from within this discourse operated as a 'specific interest group' and generated numerous articles, books, articles and syllabi that entered into discursive circulation. These included a Channel View edited book series and the ATLAS Backpacker research group, which grew from a few members in 2001 when it was established to more than 35 researchers across 15 countries by 2005. As a discourse community (Swales, 2016), they shared a set of ideas, sources of information, terminology, beliefs and methods of communication, with backpacker discourse operating within conventions defined by the community, and defined by a body of texts about backpacking. The shared engagement with these texts and interpretations of them, facilitated new members with changes in discourse conditioned by the existing and ongoing work in the community. However, as a discursive formation is never truly fixed, the discourse community has not necessarily been harmonious or conflict free. While the 'backpacker' label has become dominant one in research studies (Pearce, 1990; Scheyvens, 2002), individual authors positioned their own contribution from within the discourse through new labels including 'free independent travellers; (Clarke, 2004), 'long-term budget travelers' (Riley, 1988), 'noninstitutionalised tourists' (Uriely et al., 2002), 'non-tourists' (Tucker, 2003), 'budget tourist/ economy tourists' (Elsrud, 2001), 'youth students' (Richards, 2015), 'budget travellers' (Larsen et al., 2011) and 'anti-tourists' (Maoz, 2007). There have been also been multiple discursive associations linking backpacking to earlier forms and types of travel like the 'Grand Tour' (Riley, 1988) and the Youth Hostel movement (Loker-Murphy and Pearce, 1995).

Despite yet different members of the discourse community having varying perspectives and interpretations, the language and discourse was similar, given the discourse community shared practices of thinking, research and learning, as they made interpretations and assumptions about the discourse. The community brought backpacking firmly within the realm of tourism studies, and communicated it as a 'better mode of tourism' (Sørensen, 2003: 856). There was a positive shift in perceptions of a category of travel held by many and 'tacitly ignored, or at worst actively discouraged in official tourism planning' (Hampton, 1998: 640), due to the continuation prejudicial attitudes towards the hippies and drifters that preceded them. The discourse community, researching predominately western backpackers, produced, disseminated, shared and changed discursive knowledge in research associations, policy documents, conferences etc. By 1995, the Australian government launched its 'National Backpacker Tourism Development Strategy', 'the first targeted policy of its kind in the world' (Jarvis and Peel, 2008: 157). However, this discourse community is

becoming unstable, with investigations peaking in the early 2000s, and falling into a period of prolonged decline. The backpacker researcher group was renamed as Independent Travel Research Group after the last conference in 2013, and where once authoritative writers shared common language, ideas, lexis and interests, new voice and discursive texts have emerged with conflicting concepts focus and knowledge.

The Backpacker Plus Plus

Given any academic specific interest groups main purpose is to create or produce knowledge in a specific topic or subject area, academic discussion, criticism and academic competition remain at the heart of knowledge creation. This can emerge in the continual competition in research exploring the 'basic' form of backpacking (based on the search for road status etc.) and other forms evoked by way of discursive deviations and fused discourses. The increased identification of new types of backpacking based on deviations from 'standardized' backpacker characteristics represent a discursive struggle within western backpacking texts, that pits the dominant discourse against new specialized vocabulary to illustrate other types of backpacking. Researchers have found cohorts of 'humanistic backpackers' (Uriely et al., 2002), 'holiday hippies' (Westerhausen, 2002), 'conformist backpackers' (Hottola, 2008), 'flashpackers' (Paris, 2012), the 'backpacker Plus' (Cochrane, 2005), 'backpacker tourists' (Bell, 2005), 'youth train backpackers' (Bae and Chick, 2016) and 'study backpackers' (Jarvis and Peel, 2005). These conceptions of backpackers are often short-lived, and are advanced by different authors identifying deviations from codified understanding of backpacking found in early backpacker research (Loker-Murphy and Pearce, 1995; Pearce, 1990), which broadly identify backpackers as predominantly young, on an extended holiday, with a preference for budget accommodation. Those deviating from researcher imposed criteria as identified either as a new type of backpacker with specific type-related attributes or deviants/non backpackers. The furious reaction to 'begpackers' prior to COVID-19 (Tolkach et al., 2019) for example, led to accusations of cultural superiority and entitlement, rather than appraising the practice as a common amongst some contemporary nomads, as well their drifter predecessors. Rather than moralise about the practice, Cohen (1973: 95) noted how his idealised drifter sought to see the world as it really is through 'begging, scavenging and 'sharing' food and lodgings with friends and acquaintances' (Cohen, 1973: 95), while Richard Neville (1970: 210) boasted that he learned to say 'I have no money', in seven different languages. While it is important to explore what/who constitutes the quotidian reality of a shared world and deviations from commonly known 'truths', many of these deviations bind backpackers into various economic, educational and humanitarian logics (O'Regan, 2019), whilst negating the legacy of countercultural ideas which culturally shaped backpacking.

Backpacker Diversity

However, a welcome shift from unifying depictions of the backpacker as a general type 'toward an approach that stresses its diverse and plural characteristics' (Uriely, 2005: 205) has occurred, with research analysing backpacker homogeneity/ heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, class, age, and gender (Elsrud, 2001; Maoz, 2007). The move to research backpacking practiced by citizens from various countries has had the effect of decentring the Western focus of much backpacker literature and reclaim epistemological space for backpackers from Israel, Brazil, Japan, China, South Korea and Indonesia (Prideaux and Shiga, 2007; Teo and Leong, 2006). However, there is growing propensity of applying the backpacking label to describe conventional touristic pursuits driven by novelty, escape/relaxation, interaction with others, and self-development (Pearce and Lee, 2005) and exempt most arrangements linked to backpacking, such as long length of trip, flexibility of itinerary, alternative clothing, thrift and so forth. While backpackers from such countries can re-interpret and re-construct backpacking, to create their own spaces, dispositions, orientations and patterns of action, there often isn't evidence of any 'literal' escape in many of these studies (Iso-Ahola, 1982). From possible reactions to stress caused by deaths in the family, divorces, marriage break-ups, health scares or from workplace issues, retirement, redundancy, sabbaticals, or the end of formal education and military service (Pearce, 1990), there is often little to suggest escape from oppressive, patriarchal and heteronormative structures or escape into an imagined community of backpackers (Myers and Hannam 2008). The studies indicate a lack of time and inability to withdraw from economic necessity, or a lack of unrestrained freedom of travel due to social and cultural restrictions imposed upon them (Zhu, 2009). If studies cannot identify those separated from the social structure, or those searching for 'road status' (Sørensen, 2003) or subcultural capital (O'Regan, 2016), they may be simply be a distinct type and form of tourism.

The backpacker label has become a convenient and accepted shorthand for those with disparate personality traits, beliefs, values, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles. If backpacking exists, it should exhibit similar type and form characteristics irrespective of ethnicity and origin. While Chinese, Israeli and Japanese in particular have distinct particular linguistic, historical, social and cultural codes, their mobility and mobility related practices should make this world visible as backpacking, bringing it into material and social reality, producing 'knowledges, stories, traditions, comportments, music, books, diaries, and other cultural expressions' (Clifford, 1992: 108). While backpackers from various nations may not share a single code, their efforts should yield a recognisable style of performance. Israeli backpackers, for example, integrate Israeli culture, traditions, media, history, military service and language to develop their own set of dispositions that can be seen as a structural variant of the western backpacker habitus, just as Japanese backpackers drew from the Japanese counterculture (Andrews, 2016).

Therefore, there will never be a singular, pure drifter / backpacker habitus, or 'turned-on league of nations,' who 'could dress, talk and travel the same language' (Neville, 1970: 207-210). If we apply the label to acceptable and structured beliefs about tourism experiences and interactions

dominated by one's own social culture and values, we may instead be describing the workings of an emerging discursive formation, similar to what Poon (1993) calls 'new tourists,' who are flexible, independent, educated, experienced and affluent. Individuals not obsessed with authenticity and unique experiences, but with pleasure and consuming the tourist places open them may not be Chinese 'backpackers', for example (cf. Kimber et al., 2019) but post-modern 'post-tourists' (Feifer, 1985; Li, 2017). That is not to say that Chinese backpackers don't exist, but if researchers apply only certain type/form backpacker characteristics, given the constraints and limitations they perceive in the discourse, they may instead be undermining the discourse rather than decentering Chinese backpacking from its Western articulations of backpacker discourse, which historically formed out of the by the 1960s/70s counterculture (Hellum,2010).

Research Challenges and Opportunities

In the past decade, few researchers have sought to connect to backpacker informants by becoming socialised through and into their world, and understand the practical and spatial logic that drives them from place to place. Backpacker research has stalled as the label becomes a free-for -all, as particular form-related attributes have become fixed defining criteria for manipulative hypotheses stated in advance in propositional form and subjected to flawed empirical tests. The use of pre-defined criteria as to whom backpackers should be, where they should be and what they should be doing, even though they may have never have previously backpacked is widespread. Collecting data from those staying in hostels (Hecht and Martin, 2006; Hughes et al., 2009) for example is problematic given hostels have changed beyond their original functions for budget travellers and backpackers (Richards, 2016). Sampling at places, where you think backpackers might congregate may mean missing those experienced backpackers who behave in ways that are not necessarily accommodating to dominant forms of social and spatial organization. Other criteria used to find 'proper' backpackers involves limiting respondents and informants to particular age groups, using research locations such as backpacker enclaves (Kimber et al., 2019) and identifying them by their use of a backpack (Chen et al., 2014). Using redistricting criterion to identify 'backpackers,' is problematic, given the choice one or two particular criteria is certainly no guarantee of finding them or probably a better guarantee of missing them. For example, identifying backpackers using the criteria of backpack (travel luggage travel) only, or hostel use (Chen et al., 2014; Larsen et al. 2011; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhu, 2009), whilst ignoring all other type/form characteristics is problematic. While criterion should be considered, the quality of the research project is positively affected when a 'backapacker-centered' approach takes precedence. Any use of criteria should first understand when and why they were developed, and whether they are still appropriate. Backpacker research is also positively affected by investigating the relationship of mobility to subjectivity, by exploring the lives, competences and experiences of backpackers on the move, through fieldwork (O'Regan, 2015). Researchers should be careful when

drawing on quantitative samples drawn from online sources (Luo et al., 2015) without first sharing affinity with backpacking. If backpackers are codified as objects of knowledge as backpacking itself evolves as continuity and change coexist, new knowledge gets overlooked. It may mean missing the evolving nature of backpacking as researchers search for niches, taxonomies, segments or typologies.

As individuals act on the basis of a shared imaginary that is culturally shared and socially transmitted, by those who purposefully enter this world, backpacking will continue to modify and change as people, structure and contexts change. Researchers should guard against market and managerial focus driven by lifestyle entrepreneurs, governments, consultants and academics that flatten backpacking's meaning and depth, strip it of its original countercultural symbols, and rewrite it within educational and touristic discourses. While it makes backpacking legible in a modern society, which is a prerequisite for governance and governance systems, those appropriating or misusing the discourse may merely blunt any meaning beyond that of mainstream disposable play (Cohen, 2018).

Research should continue to focus on backpackers from increasingly disparate countries, as well as how their racial or religious background might well influence their socialisation into the role socialisation depends on interaction and encounters with other backpackers. There are also mechanisms of exclusion and inequality for different groups (females, disabled, LGBT, locals, older travellers) within backpacking. As the countercultural imagination gave birth to backpacking, researchers should also explore other practices that emphasize individual freedom, as a means for individual liberation and for rediscovering the lost potentialities of the self (Fairfield, 1972; Yablonsky, 1968). Cohen (2004: 44) himself noted that "If the model for the drifter was the tramp, the drifter is the model for the backpacker". It is the failure of the scholastic imagination to adapt to explore new overlapping imaginaries that emphasise abandoning mainstream values, and other societal conventions. New forms of desire and emerging ways of escape associated with the countercultural imagination include the resurgence of ecovillages, intentional communities, new age travellers (Kuhling, 2007), the Rainbow Family (González and Dans, 2018), WOOFING (Ince and Bryant, 2016), nomad houses, transformational festivals (St John, 2001), hospitality exchange (Ince and Bryant, 2018), hitchhiking (O'Regan, 2014), wild camping (Caldicott, 2020), new agers (D'Andrea (2006), Dirty Kids, Off Grid living and vanlifers (Schelly, 2015)

Discussion

The open contradictory values and language in backpacking texts isn't merely the manifestation of difference in culture-specific aspects of backpacking. Research has stalled given there is no consensus as to evolving type/form characteristics of backpackers. The label is now interchangeable with fully independent travellers, solo travellers, budget travellers, student travellers and youth tourist. Backpack discourse, within the genre of academic writing, is not a reflection of objective facts, but the product of power–knowledge relations within the discourse community. For some authors, there is no countercultural legacy in backpacking the gap between the ideology of backpacking and its actual

practice, and means backpacking is 'more like ordinary tourism than most backpackers would like to admit' (O'Reilly 2006:1005) as unconventional elements have been stripped away. The argument that backpacking should be treated as a touristic pursuit has been around since the labels conception, with a multitude of competing positions acknowledged in texts as authors sought to fuse backpacker discourse with dominant tourist discourses. These discursive struggles and interpretations continue, with authors seeking to reshape and redefine what it means to be and become a backpacker by determining what backpacking is (and isn't) by attributing particular values to particular practices.

The backpacker has increasingly become stereotyped, static and typeset, rather than understood as occupying disparate points on a continuum on which we can find discrete gradations or depth and breath. Those starting their trip are slowly socialised into the role, a process initially fastening the subject firmly to social structures like hostels and enclaves given their need for proximity, solidarity, co-presence and sociability. They generate practices and performances that have a visible coherence, and which can be acted upon strategically upon by cultural intermediaries, who offer take care of transport, visas, paperwork, itineraries, transport and so forth. Those who accumulate subcultural capital gain travel know-now, resourcefulness, endurance, fortitude and competences, and can see a range of visible tactical options and opportunities available as they journey, their performance affirming their authentic self and their 'superior; position to themselves and others. Some of their practices and performances, such as busking, wild camping etc. might transgress the 'proper,' since they gain position by differentiating themselves against perceived attempts to co-opt their subjectivity. The less experienced backpacker and the more competent, knowledgeable 'sabateur' need each other, their varying competences, experiences, skills and knowledge crossing over in all sorts of ways.

Rather than look at backpacking as simply as 'just another strand of mass, institutionalized tourism' (Scheyvens, 2002: 149), it is a complex and highly fluid social construction of reality, their practices often hiding their considerable investment, belief and commitment to a world that offers second birth to those that seek it. While there is touristic like consumption amongst those backpackers at the start of their journey as they initially seek out other backpackers, spaces and routes, there is less research emphasis on those tactical backpackers who constantly re-position themselves in their orbit, taking up opportunities without losing their bearings. Rather than moralise about certain practices and signifiers (e.g. thrift) and point to the privilege they say draw from their status, class and ethnicity, we might reappraise the legacy of the counterculture. Where once described as merely a white, middle class and the college educated phenomenon, reacting to a loss of an overriding societal purpose, there are been increased attention on the how countercultural ideas might enable escape from the confines of capitalist realism, and ideological straitjackets that keeps us compliant and unimaginative (Fisher, 2020). Rather than merely dismiss backpacking entirely as a subordinated, appropriated, commodified relic of the counterculture, it can be seen as an alternative mobility culture that celebrates movement, made up of geographically dispersed individuals deploying shared socio-spatial imaginaries and

practices that are generative of intrinsic signifying meaning, their global spread and scope involving social, political, environmental, cultural and economic dimensions.

Post COVID-19 Backpacking

Different events and circumstances have affected the flow of pilgrims and tourists since the late Middle Ages as new ideas emerges, and as well as revolutions, wars, plagues, etc. Drifting declined in the late seventies because of deflation, recession, stagflation, a resurgence of neo-conservatism in many western countries, cold war conflicts, military dictatorships and proxy 'hot' zones in many regions. In addition, countries who had once welcomed the drifters labelled their mobility 'criminal' and 'deviant', with a number of countries refusing them entry visas and deporting them. Just as drifting didn't die during that period, backpacking is unlikely to disappear, given it remains a 'mobility fantasy', and will continue to draw dispersed individuals to see movement as a vehicle to explore new subjective experiences. It indicates that '[u]topian desire doesn't go away […]. in fact never really went away' (McKay, 1996: 6). However, restrictions on movement, long-stay visas, or visas based on income are emerging as regulatory authorities look past backpacking's usefulness. If COVID-19 is being used as a means to reset tourism, authorities may increasingly focus on high value, capital bearing individuals. As the managerial elements of backpacker discourse can influence regulatory frameworks, those in the discourse community should come together to affirm the power of backpacking to empower those individuals whose lives have been suspended or shattered by the COVID-19 pandemic, as it introduces new stresses and anxieties into lives and impacts temporal rhythms governing study, graduation and work.

Conclusion

Backpackers inhabit a world endowed with history, desires, representations, understandings and intentions from its near past, to create a distinct type and form of tourism, with a memory of its own that has been represented, transmitted and recycled for over 30 years. The deployment of images, stories and characters surrounding this world has never been so visible, outlining possible lives, possible futures and new paths. While global scale of backpacking research demands exchange of knowledge between geographically dispersed researchers, the implicit discursive rules by which the discourse community debated, and negotiated particular truth claims have broken down, allowing for contradictory classifications, typologies, clusters, taxonomies and segments. While the discourse community has weathered change over 30 years, there is a disconnect between authoritative voices sitting with the discourse, who haven't come to share a set of conventions or implicit discursive rules. Unless more debate emerges, conflicts may become exacerbated as the discourse becomes fraught with contradictions.

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