

Telling Tales: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Travel Narratives

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Abstract

Feminist methodology has influenced the way in which we interpret the narratives of women's lived experiences. Drawing on these influences, this paper will explore the ways in which women construct, perform and negotiate their gendered identities through the event of narration as they recall their experiences of global travel. Continuing to discuss feminist perspectives, this paper will then engage with the complexities of the research process to question whether collective interpretation is the most effective way to analyse women's narratives in future research.

Introduction

Feminist methodology has stressed the importance of bringing women's voices and personal experiences into the research process. Whilst deeply complex and continually evolving, this importance is largely recognised as twofold: firstly to challenge the dominant, masculine power relations that influence both quantitative and qualitative social research, and secondly to expose the political significance of seemingly individual, personal stories. Through women's narratives therefore, we can achieve a greater understanding of the socialised position of gender, and examine to what extent dominant, patriarchal ideologies are created, reproduced or resisted through the process of recounting our experiences. Whilst these ideologies of structural inequalities are still of paramount importance to many feminist researchers, it is also necessary to examine how post-modern influences have challenged the way we interpret narratives to allow for multiple identities and 'messy' narrative texts. This paper will begin by discussing how narrative interpretation is a useful tool for understanding how women construct and negotiate their gendered identities through recounting their stories and memories of backpacking travel. Drawing on the influences of feminist and narrative methodologies and ethnographies, I illustrate how an analysis of women's accounts of backpacking experiences reveals tensions between how the participants construct both their gendered identities and the identity of the global backpacker, often resulting in fragmented and conflicting narrative.

Moreover, engaging in the process of data analysis also raised important questions about the significance of the research process itself as a narrative performance. Therefore the second half of the paper provides a reflective account into how the influences of feminist methodological principles shaped the interview process, and, in turn, the resultant narratives of this particular research. Whilst it is crucial to engage with the challenges and difficulties that unfold both during and beyond these processes, I hope to conclude with positive suggestions for future research concerning the collection and interpretation of women's narratives. It is important to note that this is foremost a methodological discussion, and for the purposes of this paper the theoretical concepts of gender and tourism will not be fully discussed.

Background

This paper introduces my current postgraduate research on women's experiences of independent travel or 'backpacking'. Existing academic research on backpacking follows the move from earlier forms of 'drifter' travel stemming from the political and social upheavals of the 1960s, where socially alienated young people sought alternative lifestyles as a form of social and political resistance, to a more post-modern, hedonistic quest for intense, heightened states of experience and personal development. My research aims to develop this post-modern shift by focusing on women's experiences of backpacking in a questionably 'post-feminist' era where the earlier movements of second wave feminism have become increasingly fragmented. Drawing on contemporary theoretical works and women's own narratives of their travels, this research explores whether issues of gender and power remain central to the analysis of women's global travel. Issues include fear of physical and sexual violence, spatial restrictions and constraints, embodied and sexual experiences, motivations, opportunities and changing attitudes to both gendered and global inequalities. One such quest for 'exotic' experiences through backpacking travel includes cross-cultural sexual encounters. Part of the article seeks to examine the changing sexual identities of women as they move throughout the globe, and adds to the current feminist debates on female sex tourism and gendered and racial power relations, as well as the discourses and realities surrounding sexual agency and freedom within contemporary global travel. I therefore aim to politicise the study of leisure and tourism, and determine whether independent women's travel can act as a lens through which to examine the changing character of feminist debate both within the academy and society at large.

Methodology

This research is still in the early stages of my doctoral thesis, and so far I have conducted eight semi-structured interviews with women who have returned home to the UK after a backpacking trip. Identifying exact criteria for what constitutes backpacking travel is problematic, however as a starting point participants were required to be travelling for a minimum of three months, either alone or with other female travellers (some participants had a male partner or friend visit at one point during their journey, but all participants were selected on the basis that they had travelled without male company for the majority of their trip). Participants were recruited through advertisements situated throughout Manchester Metropolitan University, and snowball sampling. The interviews lasted between forty minutes and two hours and were conducted in quiet areas of public spaces (coffee shops, canteens), recorded on a digital Dictaphone and later transcribed. The sample has clear limitations with regard to a number of demographic issues, and a far broader range of participants will be involved as the research progresses (considering social class, education, religious and political beliefs and sexual orientation). However this small sample has raised key methodological issues relating to the analysis of narrative data. These issues act as the basis for the discussion in this paper, and will contribute to the development of the future direction which the research will take.

Sample¹

All interviews began with a general overview of the reasons and motivations for choosing to travel at a particular time in the women's lives, as well as determining which countries and places they had visited and the reasons for these choices. Often, participants spent the first part of the interview describing and 'listing' specific locations throughout the globe, interspersing casual cultural observations. As the interview progressed, participants were asked to consider more specific themes (see below). Whilst the interviews did not adopt a strict structure and the women spoke at variable lengths about different topics, the questions relating to motivations, fear and body and appearance always elicited detailed responses. With regard to the questions surrounding sexual relationships, this was only directly relevant to some of the women, although the remaining participants offered observations they had made from other female travellers.

¹All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of participants. To adhere to the research principles of confidentiality, any personal information that may identify participants has also been omitted or changed

Name	AGE	NATIONALITY	ETHNIC ORIGIN	DURATION OF TRAVEL	LOCATION OF TRAVEL
Amy	23	British	White	3 Years	USA, South East Asia, Australasia
June	23	British	White	10 Month	Africa, Central America, India
Erica	27	Irish	White	6 Months	Argentina
Samantha	27	Canadian	White	4 Months	Europe, South East Asia
Holly	25	British	White-Chinese/ Guyanese	17 Months	Central America, South America, Morocco
Fiona	27	British	White	1 Year	Eastern Europe, China, South East Asia, Australasia
Mary	27	British	Black-African	2 Years	Africa, USA
Julie	27	British	White	9 Months	South America, South Africa

Table 1

The themes are outlined as follows:

- *Motivations*

(What made you want to travel? What did you get out of the experience? Did it live up to your expectations? What if anything has changed for you?)

- *Fear*

(Did you have any bad or frightening experiences? Did you feel restricted in any way due to personal safety?)

- *Body and appearance*

(What was everyday life like on the road? Was it sore, exhausting, exhilarating? Did you have to change your standards of hygiene, dress and beauty rituals? Was this a positive or negative aspect of travel?)

- *Sex/ Relationships*

(Did you get into any sexual relationships with local people or other travellers? Did you notice other travelling women engaging in

crosscultural relationships? Do you think that sex is part of the travelling experience?)

Narrative Interpretation

With regard to feminist methodology, a key factor in interpreting women's narratives is the legitimisation given to subjective knowledge, and the space allowed for complexity and contradictions (Madge et al, 1997). However recognition that women have been systematically silenced in social research is also important and it is the responsibility of the feminist researcher to make public and validate women's own experiences (Bloom, 1998, p. 144). Through personal narratives, subjects create and recreate representations of the self within socialised contexts, and feminist researchers have therefore stressed the importance of using women's own experiences as a starting point to theorise about broader social relations. Women's narratives therefore illuminate the relationship between the individual and society, where collective patterns of gendered socialisation emerge through seemingly personal accounts. However, Teresa de Lauretis (1987; Bloom, 1998, p. 62) warns against privileging personal narratives as a form of liberating women from cultural silences, as often when women create narratives they unconsciously reproduce the 'master scripts' of patriarchal ideologies. Bloom further argues that we must be aware that, as socially constructed beings, women's narratives will also attempt to unconsciously maintain gendered social relations:

'While it is imperative as a feminist strategy to continue collecting and interpreting women's life stories and ethnographies of women, we must not fall into the fallacy of assuming transparency of the narratives. We must recall that people are invested in maintaining particular identities and forms of cohesion of 'the self', are caught in webs of structures that determine particular kinds of storytelling, and have the capacity for managing self-representation' (Bloom, 1998: p. 146).

This is not to suggest that only oppressive patriarchal ideologies are buried unconsciously within all women's narratives, and to do so would be both simplistic and inaccurate. Denzin (1997) is critical of reading the standard narrative model, whereby individual beliefs directly correspond to the institutions and culture of the studied group. Poststructuralist theory often warns against the risk of essentialising women through adhering to binary structures such as male and female, and calls for the deconstruction of the concept of gender. Instead Denzin advocates the contextual, performance

based, 'messy' approach that 'embraces critical readings that are always incomplete, personal, self-reflexive, and resistant to totalizing theories' (1997, p. 146). Indeed whilst Bloom does recognise the crucial links between the experiences of individual women and their gender status in society, she too claims that these links shift and change both in their daily lives and over the course of a lifetime. Women's narratives therefore indicate a continual negotiation and development of female identity, and expose the multiple ways such narratives function through gendered relations in everyday life (1998, p. 146).

Gendered Identities

The importance of such an analytical approach became evident through initial analysis of the interview data collected so far. Substantial sections of the transcribed interview data revealed how the women's identities were continually constructed, performed and negotiated through their memories and narrative of their backpacking travels. The process of storytelling evokes tensions between the women's portrayal of their multiple gendered identities with discourses surrounding how they situate themselves as independent global travellers. The following examples illustrate the ways in which women's multiple representations of gender enter into their narratives as they talk about self image, dress codes, beauty regimes and hygiene whilst backpacking over a lengthy period of time.

June: *In India, they made it very clear that we had to dress conservatively, we had to cover up, it was in the course notes. I just felt really unsexy. I felt so frumpy, just plodding around in these hideous outfits. They weren't that bad but, you know, I was trying to regain confidence and self esteem, and it really doesn't help if you frump around in these things! Whereas in Africa and Central America I liked slumming around and not caring what I was wearing. I think it's really liberating to think ah ha! I don't care if I'm stinking!*

Holly: *I absolutely loved it. I mean I'm not really that feminine or girly anyway. I don't really use a hair dryer or straighteners or anything like that. So it wasn't a very difficult transformation but I really loved it. I remember the freedom really! And I think it's really exciting not to feel tied down.*

Amy: *Like now (back home) I work in an office and I am*

expected to look smart and wear a suit, have my hair done, have my make up on, that's just what's expected of me. Whereas I suppose you can do what you want when you're away. I guess I didn't need to make myself look attractive. Because that's all it is when you do your hair and put jewellery on, so you look good. And looking good wasn't an issue. I guess I just didn't feel the pressure. Whereas in Western society there isn't a pressure to wear that fashionable thing, you know. Although when I say it's not an issue you do dream of looking good, like you would think lets scrub up tonight and get out your one nice dress that was stuffed at the bottom of your bag and put your different sandals on! It wasn't a daily importance, but then sometimes you feel that would be nice to be that way. Does that make sense?

The above narratives can be used to examine Bloom's concept of nonunitary subjectivity (1998, p. 102), where the conflicted ways in which the participants describe their experiences both conform and resist hegemonic, hetero-normative and personal meanings of femaleness. The specific phrases used to represent gendered symbols and behaviours- such as 'feminine or girly'- indicates that the women actively disassociate with these roles in certain contexts. Holly equates not being 'girly' as an exciting, liberating feeling and this proud rejection seems to fit her identity as a traveller who is not 'tied down'. The narratives for both June and Amy are more complex; they are rich with contradictions and fluctuate between different gender performances. Both women draw correlations between physical appearance and confidence, self esteem and sexual attraction, and their narratives reveal the constraints they feel due to the nature of backpacking where access to certain clothes, facilities and products may be limited. In the very same narratives, we can see this confidence regained as the subjects enjoy breaking free from the pressure and constraints of prescribed gender roles, and suddenly not caring about 'stinking' becomes a refreshing new experience. Amy asks the researcher 'does this make sense?' Indeed it appears all sense is lost as we try to ascertain which realm the constraints facing these women take place: in the strict dress codes of propriety and lack of access to hot water, or the social pressures of femininity and image to which backpacking offers an escape. Narratives of the self are in flux, and representations of conflicting gender roles can be performed simultaneously as subjects work through the memories, events and emotions of their everyday lives.

‘Master Scripts’ and Backpacking Stories

Combined with the traveller’s ongoing negotiation of her gendered identity is the added ‘master script’ of the backpacking story. Noy (2003), who has conducted studies into Israeli backpacking, uses the metaphor of the backpacking journey to describe the research process itself, where both the backpacker and researcher enter in and access cultural capital, arriving at new destinations or colonies of knowledge previously unknown (2003, p.14) Regarding the backpackers in his study, Noy asserts that part of the motivation for such travel is for the stories. Amongst a variety of influences and across a diverse section of travellers, many of his participants had been enthused from the travel stories and narratives of others, which in turn may have pre-shaped both their itinerary of travel and also their expectations of how a ‘travel story’ should be both performed and later narrated. To apply this concept to the participants in my research, we can assume that many of the women are already familiar with the dominant discourses relating to travel. Therefore the concept of the ideological ‘master script’ is useful for interpreting both gendered narratives and narratives of backpacking. They travel to gather their own stories, which will in turn reproduce the ‘master script’ of the backpacking tale (for both genders) encompassing, for example, adventure, risk, authenticity, cosmopolitanism, surrealism and hedonism. This concept is supported by Desforges (2000) who argues that the process of talking through their travel biographies provides travellers with the opportunity to construct their preferred self-identity, representing the positive role of travel in their lives. Similarly, Elsrud (2001) claims ‘mythology is vital to narrative survival’ (2001, p. 600) and addresses the construction of an ‘adventure identity’ where risk-taking behaviour plays a prominent part in women’s travel narratives, thus promoting strength of character. As the narratives so far reveal, normative gender roles are both reproduced and resisted through the construction of travel identities, and this ‘master script’ often produces accounts which are fraught with contradictions.

Examples of the ‘Master Script’

Many of the travel narratives recounted by women during interviews began with a conscious attempt to represent a coherent story that constructed an image of a worldly, strong, confident, independent traveller. The following two narratives from Fiona and Erica show how their perceived identity as a backpacker was one of liberation and character strengthening, and many of the participants often referred to ‘people who travel’ as distinct to those who do not travel. Favour is given to narratives that promote personal development, such as confidence building or becoming a more adaptive,

flexible person. They celebrate the experience as fun and hedonistic where, as Erica recalls, you had the freedom to do 'crazy things'.

***Fiona:** Oh I would say it was a very positive experience, I mean I think to realise what your limits are, and realise you can do more than you think you can and also on your own! And feeling more confident about that. I mean you arrive in a place on your own, you don't really know anyone, and you know- you're not going to die! You're going to manage. And if I think, well I managed it in China, I can definitely manage it here! It builds confidence.*

***Erica:** Oh I just skipped about. I think I actually felt more that I was a different person when I was there than I am here. I would go out clubbing and all this sort of thing and I'm not even a clubbing person and to be able to go out to a club at three at night and stay up till nine in the morning....and then go horse riding! Crazy things! I could hardly speak any Spanish and I met someone for ice cream at one o' clock in the morning!*

Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 26) refer to the 'defended subject', where all research subjects 'are invested in particular positions in discourses to protect vulnerable aspects of self, may not know why they experience or feel things in the way that they do, and are motivated, largely unconsciously, to disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and actions'. As part of this defence, there is a tendency of participants to unconsciously stay 'safe' through comfortable, well rehearsed generalisations (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p. 33). The above examples offer the participants the comfort of deciding which aspects of their travelling identities they wish to promote, in this case elevating the qualities of the strong, resilient, 'crazy' fun backpacker, and the 'well rehearsed' narratives give the illusion of control. Erica is proud of her new identity which involves spontaneous and daring activities, and her accounts of meeting Argentinean strangers at one o' clock in the morning supports Elsrud's (2001) work on risk creation in backpacking narratives. However, this script begins to lose unity throughout the interview. It seems therefore, that it is important for researchers of women's narratives to find an approach which takes accounts of such defences and conflicts of identity. As opposed to perceiving incoherent narratives of self-representation as problematic, feminist methodologies such as those outlined by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and Bloom (1998) allow for the positive representation of women's subjectivity as nonunitary, fragmented, conflicted, fluid, and in flux (Bloom 1998, p. 62), as it is precisely this fragmentation that reveals the

conflicted nature of contemporary gendered identities.

Tensions between ‘Master Script’ and Gendered Identities

The presence of both the travel story and the defended subject can be seen most clearly in the conflicted subject position of many of the participants as their narratives display the tensions between how they should respond, and how they actually feel, towards local strangers. As the interview progressed, participants were asked to rethink their ‘amazing’ travel stories to remember a time where they felt threatened or frightened. The following examples highlight how the ‘master script’ of the culturally aware backpacker who integrates into local communities battles with socially constructed fears about personal security, particularly surrounding women’s vulnerability. June remembers an incident where she was walking alone at night down a darkly lit street with parked trucks, in Bangalore, India:

And the drivers were sleeping in their trucks, and I had to walk past them and I thought ‘shit, this is not fun’, and I got a bit tense. And then this pissed, drunk guy staggered round from behind a truck and I just put my hand up and shouted ‘don’t talk to me, don’t touch me!’ And there were a good few times I felt horrible, really shit, because this isn’t me! I’m ignoring these people. They are saying hello to me and I’m being so rude, I can’t even respond with a smile! I knew why I was doing it, but I hated it. I hated just feeling horrible. I would feel cross if someone did that to me, I’d think how rude, you have bloody come to my country and you can’t even say hello to me!

Holly describes her feelings towards being approached by local men in the street during her travels in Morocco:

They wanted to take you places and show you things, they were kind of being hospitable but there was a fine line....I wasn’t able to trust that and I didn’t like that, it didn’t bring out a nice side of me, not being able to trust anybody or enjoy it. And I think it’s rude to reject it in certain places too so...it was really difficult. (Holly arranges to meet them the following day against her will, and then does not turn up). It was awful! I just felt horrendous! I felt like I’d offended them but I didn’t know how to get rid of them. I should have been clear. And in a way perhaps their values are better and it was a nice thing they want to get to know

us. What's the point in only meeting someone for the night? But of course you always think well, do you just want sex out of this at the end of the day? It wasn't clear. I felt really rude.

Amy: *In Fiji I was totally harassed. I am not the kind of person who is rude to people's faces. I mean obviously I didn't want him there...I don't know why, I just...he wasn't doing any harm, he was just annoying. (Eventually the man gets arrested) The police took it very seriously, which is great because they were protecting me. And who knows what might have happened if later on I had wanted to go home and it had got dark, I mean you just don't know. But I felt terrible.*

The narrative accounts of these stories reveal the strain between the participant's feelings of responsibility for their personal safety, and their guilt for not being a fully open, 'proper' world traveller. Ellsworth and Miller (1996; Bloom 1998, p. 89) refer to 'situated responsiveness' where responses to particular situations are not generic, but specific to the complexities of the situation. As there is not one definitive way to respond to the situation of encounters with male strangers whilst travelling, using the model of situated responsiveness the female backpacker may feel doubt and alienation about her decisions. This doubt is prevalent in the narratives as the participants struggle to justify their hostility to local people. All three examples deal extensively with troubled reflections with regard to being 'rude', 'offensive' or 'unclear'. We can see in June the fractured, conflicting representation of herself as she exclaims 'this isn't me!' The women have spent the first part of the interview constructing a representation of cosmopolitan, superior travellers who value authentic experiences and assimilation into local culture. It is only through their own narrative whilst recounting memories of times where they felt 'threatened' that they begin to notice these contradictions, resulting in attempts to smooth them out during the event of narration itself. For example Amy stresses that the attention she was receiving was 'obviously' unwanted, and seeks to justify her position by reminding us that 'who knows what might have happened'. Here we can see that Amy's narrative quickly shifts from affirming her backpacking identity to assuring us that she is a sensible woman responsible for her own safety. Similarly Holly justifies her behaviour by claiming 'But of course you always think... (the worst)'. This is a position that is assumed to be received empathetically by a female interviewer and fellow traveller, as running parallel to the master script of the world traveller is also the well established gendered discourse of personal safety in public spaces. We can draw parallels here to Blooms' study

(1998, p. 72) of the narrative of a woman who tells a story of triumph against an employer who was sacked for sexual harassment. Her master narrative depicts herself as a powerful hero, a 'force to be reckoned with', yet it is only later, when revisiting the story, that she recalls how wearing and painful the entire process had been. Similarly, the theme of fear and discomfort in the traveller's memories asks them to reveal the 'less satisfying' aspects of their trip which, although very prominent in all travel journeys, are less often talked about in everyday travel narratives upon returning home. Bloom further reminds researchers of the sensitivity involved in evoking vulnerable memories and steering women away from the master script to reveal the more complex, hidden events and emotions.

Absent Narratives

What is of further interest is what is omitted from this narrative. The participants do not speak explicitly of what it is that makes them feel uncomfortable or afraid, for example fear of sexual violence, or pinpoint why reporting their feelings of hostility towards the local people in their stories make them feel so 'terrible', such as being perceived as racist, ignorant or even associated with the mainstream tourists which they hold in such contempt. Lozanski (2007) in her study of violence in independent travel in India asserts that patriarchal and colonial discourses are permeated into the narratives of Western travellers in India, where both Indian men and travelling women experience violence and marginalisation through colonial racism and sexual harassment respectively. Issues of gendered violence and postcolonial theory are buried within these transcripts and become apparent when we analyse what is kept unsaid. Indeed Bloom (1998) recognises the importance of filling in the omissions in the narratives in order to escape the reproduction of the master script. When talking of experiences relating to encounters of fear or violence, it becomes clear that the more disturbing aspects of their memories are kept on the periphery of their intended narratives. An unwelcome memory becomes interspersed in one of Holly's accounts of markets in Central America, where she is in the process of sharing tips about how to avoid robbery.

***Holly:** I did have a friend who had a nasty thing happen to her in Mexico and I had to support her through that which wasn't very nice. She had a taxi driver with nasty intentions, he drove her where she didn't want to go and didn't do nice things to her.....enough said.*

After closing down this recollection with 'enough said', Holly returns to discussing theft in the marketplace, and does not speak to the incident

regarding her friend for the remainder of the interview. This fragment of information illustrates how parts of our memories and consciousness can creep into our narratives, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to take note of avoidances and incoherencies whilst also respecting the right of the interviewee not to speak about these subjects. This may have been an incident which had affected Holly significantly, yet the limited part it played in her lengthy interview implied that this was not a story she wanted to include. For a researcher into the ways dominant gender ideologies are played out through narrative, it is important to bring to light that this reluctance to talk of painful, emotive incidents where people 'didn't do nice things' is so prevalent.

Haug (2000) in her work on women's anxiety supports this notion that in talking about fear of public spaces, women's narratives often take for granted that the interpreter will know what it is she is afraid of:

'All we hear is that a man might be lurking, but not what she expected him to do. She is at far greater pains to describe the brightly lit passage and the approach of that corner behind which there waited she knew not what. We established that we knew this scene from countless horror movies' (Haug 2000, cited in Radstone, 2000, p. 160).

Implying that the unspoken fears of the participants are a cultural reproduction of the geographies of fear helps us to make sense of the above narratives, yet to focus on fear as a social construction denies the importance of the embodied, emotional and affective experience of fear itself. Whilst the participants seem to agree that such caution is necessary in certain situations, their narratives also verge on apologising for such thoughts and feelings as once again they do not fit with the sought after identity of the strong, independent travelling women. For Holly, her socialised fear as a gendered subject 'didn't bring out a nice side' of her, and she repeatedly questions if she overacted to the 'nice' invites and attention from the Moroccan men in her story. The troubled nature of these women's narratives suggests they cannot resolve the tensions between their identities as 'vulnerable' or 'tough' women travellers, but as researchers we neither expect nor desire such resolution. Bloom and Hollway are suspicious of 'making sense of it all', as to do so denies the complexities of lived experience, which is in flux. It is these very contradictions, omissions and avoidances that need to be accorded due significance, as they provide primary data in which we can explore ways that 'different dominant ideologies and power relations are maintained, reproduced, or subverted in the discourses of the respondents' narratives' (Bloom, 1998, p. 145). It is crucial therefore, to consider the whole context of the narrative. Moreover, the commonalties of these narrative

conflicts surrounding such similar examples also raise important theoretical questions, such as the need to explore Orientalism (Said, 1978) and patriarchal, neocolonial discourses in travel narratives.

Narrative and the Research Process

Interpreting the narratives of women involved in the backpacking research has given an insight into the complex ways identities are reflected, performed and negotiated through stories of personal experience. As well as exposing both the construction of gender norms and perceptions of the traits and trends of the contemporary traveller, we further see how these identities continually shift and contest each other. However to look at the whole context of narrative interpretation it is essential to acknowledge that the research process itself plays a major part in the construction and performance of the narrative. It is therefore necessary for me to reflect on the interview practices themselves, in relation to concerns raised by feminist methodological perspectives with regard to collective interpreting.

Adopting a feminist methodological framework in qualitative interviewing involves examining the power relations between researcher and participant. Defining which methods explicitly adhere to the category of feminist is highly problematic, as there are no resolved rules in which to carry out 'correct' feminist research. However what appears to be loosely agreed within the feminist research community is that both the aims of the research and the process of social inquiry should be consistent with the goals of emancipation and social change (Madge et al., 1997). In the attempt to avoid perpetuating the exploitation of women as research subjects, feminist researchers such as Oakley assert the need to break down the traditional hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant so as not to 'objectify your sister' (1981, p. 41). Oakley calls for a more intimate, reciprocal research setting where the participant can identify with the researcher. Such identification, she argues, enhances both the validity of the data and the researcher's interpretive abilities. Oakley examines the aspects of the research process which are less conventionally required in academic social research in her study of motherhood (1981). She describes in detail the degree of hospitality she receives, the quality of the interaction, and explains, for instance, that if the interview with mothers clashed with their demands of housework and motherhood she often offered to help (1981, p. 45). The relationship therefore, exists beyond the limits of question-asking and answering. Similarly, she discussed her own experiences of motherhood with her participants and responded to enquiries about her own situation. Oakley insists that the quality of the responses from participants was a direct result of her interactive

approach, feminist principles and non-hierarchical attitude. Oakley's 'transition to friendship' is not without critique. Cotterill (1992) explores the difficult dilemmas facing feminist researchers who adopt more intimate practices, where participants can be at risk of manipulation or feel obliged to reveal uncomfortable information, and to presume that 'sisterhood' overcomes class, race, sexuality and age inequalities between women is misleading (1992, p. 600). Nevertheless the shift in power relations between researcher and participant is an interesting initiative to bring to my research, compelling me to analyse the nature of the relationships in my own interviews.

Interactive Approaches

Sharing the experience of an extensive backpacking journey myself, I disclosed myself as a former backpacker to the participants in my research. For the most part, the interviews followed the more traditional semi-structured approach of researcher prompting and facilitating relevant information from the participants, there were many instances, however, where the interview slipped into a conversational dialogue where we identified with each other's views and experiences, and even compared stories.

Samantha: *I was actually a vegetarian when I went, but I'm not any more. To be vegetarian is more effort than it's worth.*

Emily: *Oh I know! I wasn't a veggie but I travelled with someone who was and she found it very difficult. (I tell a story about chicken baguettes).*

Samantha: *(Laughs) And did you find bus journeys a nightmare too?*

Emily: *Oh we felt minging all the time! Sitting on those bus journeys for hours and hours, but by the end you just don't care I suppose.*

Samantha: *No, I mean all the bus rides we were sweating buckets and stinking. I don't really care! (We both laugh and agree).*

This interactive style of interviewing requires careful ethical consideration, however it became apparent that the reciprocal nature of the exchange, in addition to my conscious partiality, not only validated the way we both felt towards particular situations, but further opened up the participants to engage deeper in the discussion. Bloom discovered that participants can often feel uncomfortable and self-conscious when their

narratives move from a mutual dialogue to an 'unnatural monologue', where the researcher's responses seem like 'silences' in contrast to their longer, in depth story telling (1998, p. 19) The above example has been selected to demonstrate an instance of reciprocal dialogue in the interview, although it refers to fairly superficial subject matter. On subjects such as personal safety, and feelings towards body image and sexuality, sharing experiences with the participants produced narratives rich with candidness and critical engagement. Reading through the transcripts, I become aware of the amount of laughter and recognition present in the interview, and how this strengthened our connection and, subsequently, allowed the participants to become more forthcoming in their narratives. Whilst it is important to remember these encounters were set under the classification of an interview, where our conversations can arguably never be 'natural', I would hope that this interaction can help moderate the 'defended subject'. Moreover, I often tried to involve the participants in both the style of the interview and direction of the research, continually asking 'Is this a clumsy question?', or 'Do you think this is even an issue worth looking at?' At times I divulged my methodological dilemmas, explaining how difficult I was finding it to ask participants to remember things 'on the spot' and whether I even thought this was the most effective way to conduct the research. Both Samantha and Mary spent part of their interview offering feedback and advice, such as suggesting I ask the women to bring selected extracts of their travel journals to the interview. There are numerous additional factors to consider with regard to my position as a researcher, including personal gain, and the delicate power dynamics in the interview scenario. Whilst eliminating power in the research relationship is unachievable, understanding the complexities of this relationship has revealed how narratives are often influenced by these interactions.

Fragmented Narratives

It became increasingly apparent that a single interview with arguably 'defended' subjects was insufficient for a fully reflective account of their experiences as women travellers. Whilst most of the interviews did progress beyond the scripted stories into reflective and critical discussions about the backpacking phenomena and gender issues, more often than not this only occurred towards the end of the interview. Furthermore, despite reassurance and acknowledgement that particular memories do not emerge 'upon demand', many participants found it difficult to recall relevant experiences and emotions during the pressure of the interview. One participant, Fiona, reflected on the questions and her own travel experiences after the interview had finished, which she communicated to me through email. Having formed a

rapport through arranging the interview and sharing our backpacking stories, the tone of this email is informal and familiar, although Fiona and I were not acquainted before she became involved in the research.

***Fiona:** Hi Emily, Hope all's good with you. After you left the other day I thought of a couple of things which might be of interest to you. In relation to whether I felt my travel experience would have been different if I had been male- in South East Asia a lot of monks at the temples wanted to practice their English and came up to speak to my boyfriend. I was able to ask the occasional question of them- but it often made them look very uncomfortable and they certainly never approached me to start a conversation - so as a man it would have been possible to form a connection whilst a woman could not. Think that's it- you know how you're just doing the dishes and these things come to you! Best wishes, Fiona.*

It is important to recognise these written narratives as equally relevant to the research, and the attainment and analysis of written memories will unfold in greater depth as the research progresses. At this point, the above example acts as an extension to the interview narrative that lacked coherent and ordered responses to the questions and themes. Here, we can see that memories can be triggered at any time, for instance in the middle of washing the dishes later that day, and it is unrealistic to expect these memories to manifest within a limited interview slot. It is clear that narratives are incomplete and continually developing, and can be built on after the interview process by adding fragmented pieces of information that participants remember at unrelated times.

Feminist Interpretation and New Methodologies

Understanding the commonalities between both myself and the participants as gendered subjects brings women's realities of the backpacking experience into sharper focus (Cook and Fonow, 1986, p. 6). However one final consideration of this paper is to reflect on how my position as an individual feminist researcher shapes the interpretation of the narratives of others. As we have discussed, the principles of feminist research often work towards achieving the goals of emancipation, conscious-raising and social change for women in society. This raises the question of whether I have (or indeed should have) the capacity to assume that hidden 'truths' about the construction of women's identities lie deep beneath their own presented narratives. If it is the responsibility of the feminist researcher to expose

patriarchal ideologies in narrative, how can I distinguish between 'false consciousness' and true insight? Hollway presents the dilemma of ambiguous interpretation when she asks: 'If you conclude that Tom is more fearful than he lets on, or that Anna is fearful out of all proportion to the risks she runs, what is informing these judgements?' (2000, p. 2). This is especially problematic when either the accounts of the participants are littered with contradictions and inconsistencies, or the women with whom I am researching do not share the same feminist agenda. For example, my interpretation of the apologetic attitudes of June, Holly and Amy as they struggle with their judgments on personal safety and fear of male violence, is strongly influenced by my theoretical feminist standpoint. The women have no control over this analysis and may disagree with the outcomes of my research. Gorelick (1991) notes that the feminist researcher is faced with a dilemma – by claiming social relations occur 'behind the backs of the actors' (1991, p. 466) she professes to a greater source of knowledge or understanding beyond that of her respondents, but if she does not attempt to uncover hidden structures of oppression she limits her contribution to feminist political science. The problem with the concept of false consciousness, according to Gorelick, lies in the implication that there is a true consciousness that is known and complete to the researcher, but not to the participant. It is essential to acknowledge the risk of contradicting feminist goals by becoming a gatekeeper to interpretive practice, and seek to manage these issues throughout the entire research process.

It appears that to achieve the goals of feminist research effectively, it is necessary to find a method that allows for a more collective approach to interpreting women's narratives, where participants are involved in the process of making sense of their own stories and their shared meanings. One such method is the utilisation of 'memory work' (Small et al., 2007, Onyx and Small, 2001, Haug, 2000, Small, 1999) that has been employed by feminist researchers to study the memories of women in a variety of contexts, including experiences of tourism. Memory work is a group method, and involves the collective analysis of individual written memories. With regard to my research into women backpackers, this is a method for future exploration. Whilst memory work is continually evolving, and is not without its own dilemmas, the issues that face interpreting women's narratives call for further methods that more closely adhere to the aims of this research.

Conclusion

The points raised in the discussion are not exhaustive, as the interpretation of narrative is an evolving process which continues beyond

each interview data or research project. Be that as it may, using the backpacking stories of women as they remember their experiences of travel has been a worthwhile starting point to discuss the negotiation of gendered identities. The selected narratives in this paper have illustrated how identities and ideologies are not only constructed and reproduced in story-telling, but continually shift within the same context. It is through the event of narration that the performance of different identities comes to the fore, and that the conflicting nature of this performance becomes apparent. This tension is detected by the participants themselves, who at times are faced with their own incoherent narratives as they try to balance their multiple identities. As feminist researchers, however, 'messy', fluctuating narratives provide valuable insights into the subject position of backpacking women who negotiate diverse gender roles. However while the women's narratives are alive with fragmented, fluid, ambiguous representations, the commonalities that emerge when women discuss their constructions of fear are illuminated by a feminist social constructionist paradigm. Therefore to remain consistent with the feminist objective of social change, the researcher is required to detect patterns from the omissions and avoidances found in women's narratives and accord them significance where it is due. It is necessary to see narrative contexts as a whole, making way for both post-modern, alternative interpretive strategies whilst continuing to discuss and examine collective meanings in women's narratives.

To analyse the delicately complex position of the feminist researcher and her relationship with her participants is crucial when embarking on the interpretation of women's narratives. The issues and concerns that have emerged during the pilot interviews have significantly shaped the direction of my future research, and have highlighted the need for an alternative, collective interpretation of women's lived experiences. While it is crucial that I remain critical of feminist methodology, acknowledging that limitations, contradictions and issues of power remain, it is clear that I must also persevere in exploring collective methods of narrative interpretation that are most appropriate for the overall intentions of the research.

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