Journeys around Australia: Money and Survival as a Rite-Of-Passage

Dr Wendy Hillman, Institute of Health and Social Sciences, School of Human, Health and Social Sciences, Central Queensland University w.hillman@cqu.edu.au

Dr Kylie Radel, Marketing and Tourism, School of Management and Marketing, Central Queensland University k.radel@cqu.edu.au

Introduction

The research focuses on the escape of Australian individuals from unbearable situations caused by a major event in their lives. The travellers in the investigation ‘escaped’ from intolerable life event situations only to thrust themselves into a life of little money, deprivation and uncertainty. They survived their journeys around Australia to be able to recount how they survived and how they perceived their journeys as a rite-of-passage.

From a ‘western’ perspective travel for a ‘holiday’ has been perceived as a fundamentally self-indulgent experience that empowers the individual to embark on invigorating, life-changing occurrences (Zahra and McIntosh 2007) that are frequently promoted as core reasons for travel. This type of holiday travel is often short term and characteristically requires an identifiable destination and timeframe (Burkart and Medlik 1974; Leiper 1981; World Tourism Organisation 1981). However, contrary to the conventional understanding of touristic escape for holiday, recreation and leisure, survival travel requires physically removing oneself from the everyday way of life that
is unbearable and does not require a known destination or activity to motivate this type of travel experience (Radel and Hillman 2013).

Preliminary findings from the research suggest that participants in the research project were primarily motivated to embark upon their journeys of escape and survival around Australia because of the ‘trauma’ experienced in their lives. The journeys were frequently chaotic and perilous for the travellers; demonstrating perceptive, endurance oriented, unplanned and intransigent decision-making processes as a response to the original reactional event. However, through their journeys of survival travel, participants also experienced a ‘rite-of-passage’ through which they also ‘travelled’ and which left them with a relentless desire to keep on travelling – a continuous rotation of transforming and reforming their personal perspectives and an opportunity through which to redefine their perspective about their own self-worth (Radel and Hillman 2013). This paper addresses one of the themes that emerged from the research process, which was that of money, or a lack of money, as a tool and mechanism for survival. All travellers experienced a lack of money during their journeys, and many experienced significant levels of deprivation and went to extraordinary lengths to scrape together an existence throughout their travel around Australia. This then, became a ‘rite-of-passage’ for them into their next phase of journeying.

Travelling around Australia in response to a ‘life-changing’ event marks an important stage in a person’s existence in both life and travel experiences. Even though travellers in this research were of varying ages (24 to 45 years of age), all went through a ‘rite-of-passage’ (van Gennep 1960). This was then able to be linked to their life transitions in
the Australian journey. The effort to link the rite-of-passage model (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1973; Turner and Turner 1978), to survival travel, originates from this affinity between life transitions and the trip around Australia. Rite-of-passage is a term first coined by anthropologists, and then adopted by sociologists, to describe the 'rituals dealing with movements of people and groups on the land and of persons between groups, and with movements into new statuses' (Gluckman 1962: 2).

The survival travellers can be seen as escaping from their conventional lives, detaching themselves from their family and social circles to try the untested, ‘liminal’ situation ‘away’ from their home. They authenticate themselves by negotiating problems faced on their trip, and make self-reliant survival choices without the assistance of family and friends. Their successful resolution of the problems and the consequent achievement of their trip can be seen as representative of their capability in handling their own situations independently, a meaningful value of travel status in Western cultures (Hillman 2010). They will therefore have travelled through a ‘rite-of-passage’ and will conclude their trip (Cohen 2003), as escapist travellers who have survived.

Although this type of travel is at odds with the ordinary expectations and conditions of a journey, the survival travellers were able to use their experiences of ‘deprived’ travel to grow as people and to come to realise that travelling in a western capitalist society requires money, wealth and ‘means’, and not just survival skills alone to ‘get by’. However, in some cases the reversal was not complete, as many journeyers continued to travel – the quest never ended. Thus, the rite-of-passage continued to lurch forward in a never ending circumnavigation of the continent (Cohen 2003).
The travellers were able to use the fact that they were travelling to pass into another phase of their lives. It was a signpost that could be recalled at a later stage and was seen as a definitive event in their histories. The idea that it was a journey and that they were 'passing through' could also be perceived as a stage in personal growth and maturity. Another point of concern for the travellers was about using their travel as an 'escape'. This also included independence as a salient issue. This argument is underlined by Graburn who argues that ‘...This type of tourism is commonly found in conjunction with major changes in status such as adulthood, divorce, or career changes’ (Graburn 1983: 12).

For many of the participants in this research, the ideas of deprivation, experience and escapism transpired as substantial dynamics in their attitude to travel. The participants also identified with the notions of being on an escape path from something. This was also connected to the idea of independence, and a 'setting free' of one's ability to be responsible for oneself. It led the participants through a rite-of-passage and onto the next phase of their journeys.

**Methods**

The theme of money and survival was one of the main categories to emerge from the data. Participants recounted that they struggled for their survival on the journey, persistently striving to control greatly diminished funds and seeking work, relying on support services such as the Salvation Army or national social services, and utilising friendships and networks to survive.
The methodology was designed to augment the researchers’ perception of the lived realities of the participants. Unstructured, qualitative interviews were chosen as the method of data collection to avoid the researchers’ pre-determining the participants’ notions of reality (Merriam and Simpson 1995; Pascoe and Radel 2008). Participants were selected using convenience, snowball techniques relying on the social networks of travellers. Specifically, participants included in the study were Australian residents, travelling within Australia on a journey of more than one month in length, and who identified as experiencing a reactional incident (defined as a significant trauma in the participants’ lives). All the participants chosen for this study were also portrayed as ‘multidestination’, ‘non-institutionalized’ (Noy 2004: 79) travellers. Consequently, each of the journeys was of different length – from four months up to 18 months and each traveller also took on a personal style of travel. Participants were aged between 24 and 45 years old. A total of 12 interviews were completed in the initial phase of the study and around one third of the participants were male and two thirds were female. Interviews were undertaken between December 2011 and June 2013.

The data was collected through a series of in-depth interviews with participants, often recorded over a number of sessions. Participants were asked to recount the stories of their travel around Australia. The stories were transcribed and following the grounded theory process, themes from the narratives were coded by comparing instances in each category and constructing analytic categories through the ‘memo-ing’ process (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Glaser 1992; Charmaz 2000). Theoretical saturation was reached when no new categories or properties emerged from the data.
(Curry 2003; Bowen 2008). The interview material was used to reflect on the theoretical approach.

Through the grounded theory practice of recombining and incorporating conceptual categories (Charmaz 2002; Charmaz 2006) that were coded through the constant comparative process, four main constructs emerged from the data. The constructs established firstly that participants experienced a “reactional” event (Roos and Gustafsson 2007: 96) that provided the stimulus to travel. The reactions comprised events such as divorce or relationship break-down, incurable illness or sudden bereavements. Secondly, participants’ narratives established a common theme of ‘non-arrival’ whereby they undertook no specific destination preparation as is commonly witnessed in holiday tourism. The data showed that participants dealt with the emotions produced by the trigger event throughout their journeys and this response provided a rite-of-passage that prompted their motivations to travel but did not provide them any explicit direction with regard to those motivations. This paper deals with one of the emergent themes, that of survival and by extension, money.

As argued by Steiner and Reisinger (2006: 6), travel can contribute to wellness generally through its ability to revitalise an individual but also, ‘to be well, one’s life tasks must manifest the characteristics of wellness…[including] cultural and gender identity, realistic beliefs, emotional awareness and coping, problem solving and creativity, self-care, stress management, exercise, nutrition, and senses of humour, worth and control’. Travelling with little money, travelling under dangerous conditions and in dangerous situations, and being oblivious to other personal dangers all formed
part of each traveller’s journey. They exhibited considerable coping skills and emotional awareness when dealing with and experiencing their journeys of fiscal deprivation.

**Results and Discussion**

Money is one of the fundamentals of capitalist economies. Money funds the procurement of commodities to guarantee that consumer needs and aspirations are achieved (Mitchell and Mickel 1999). It is well recognised that financial security for individuals and families forms a substantial part of an individual’s assessment of their contentment with life in general (Mammen, Helmick et al. 1981; Wilhelm, Varcoe et al. 1993). Money is also a significant indicator of the capability to manage stress (Boss 1988). Nonetheless, all the travellers in this study experienced a point at which they exhausted all their money and then required drastic actions in order to survive. Most of the travellers sold their possessions to survive the journey.

Money is significant for budget and independent travellers because it acts as a ‘symbol’ for traveller characteristics (Desforges 2001) and indicates the on-going type of travel experience that can be undertaken. One participant explained how she managed her meagre savings while stranded near Perth, Western Australia, after travelling there and running out of financial reserves.

We eventually made it to Perth and then set up camp in Fremantle just south of Perth on the beach. We were living in the car at that point and I had about $10 left to my name. But we discovered that, thanks to Fremantle
hosting the America’s Cup boat race some years before, the public toilets in the main street also have hot showers!! Score!!! Also, we could get 95 cent, all you can drink coffee at McDonalds which was literally right on the beach. Just gorgeous!

The participant’s narrative indicates that even in serious poverty, some level of existence was possible. This idea of ‘luxury living’ while actually subsisting in borderline poverty is emphasised by Desforges (2001), who believes that money is not just a clear method of determined and active exchange, but can be appraised as a social quality. Money may be ethically or ceremonially linked with rank or station and endowed with social, cultural and religious connotations (Zelizer 1994). Notions about money mould the systems in which they are implicated.

Another participant spoke about his time staying in Adelaide while hitch-hiking around Australia, and how he survived without any financial support until he applied for government aid.

I was stoney broke in Adelaide, actually I stayed at the Salvation Army…I stayed at the Salvation Army place at Adelaide which I have never done before, so that was interesting too. I was there about three days before the dole check had come through…when my dole check came through, I went to a Chinese restaurant thing and spent about $30 I think actually, on myself. It was incredible, that was a lot of money in those days. I was given
this pork dish and it came with a flame... I’ll never forget that. I wasn’t quite sure whether to put the flame out, or prod it or roast the pork on it.

Even while subsisting in ‘underclass’ surroundings, this participant showed that ordering a seemingly ‘expensive’ restaurant meal was a distraction to his immediate poverty stricken circumstances. Altmann (1903) argues that money tempers poverty because the ownership of possessions has an effect on each individual. Possessions justify various distinctive desires for individuals. However, ‘the significance of the possession of money does not lie in the object, but in its relation to the subject, the possessor, who can use it according to his [sic] wishes’ (Altmann 1903: 57). Money, compresses assets, the ownership of which provides certain control over everything that can be obtained for monetary exchange. The meaning of the ownership of money is integral in the aptitude to manage it in relation to the requirements of life. Trying to gain some money to survive and transform the current situation of her life, another participant also threw herself upon the mercy of the national welfare agency. She explained how difficult it was to convince the organisation to help her.

I was in [Centrelink] one morning and the fellow behind the counter had some good news for me. They had decided to give me a part payment of $70 so that I could get some food. I was on the point of begging for something to eat by that stage as I was down to my last couple of bucks and there was no more spare change floating around on the floor of the car or hiding in the ash tray. Nothing left really. So [Centrelink] had decided to give me $70 and the fellow asked me for my address. So I gave him the
GPO [General Post Office] as the postal address but he asked me for my residential address. I said to him that I didn’t know the name of the street but it is about 5 minute drive south and there is a nice carpark, a great swing set, big lawn area and just over a small hill there is the beach and a wonderful wharf with dolphins often swimming around. I told him he was welcome to visit anytime he liked and he should bring his family ‘cause the place was just perfect. I told him that I was living in my car. He said that he probably wouldn’t be able to give me the $70 unless I had a real residential address.

Disappointment and bargaining with the national welfare agency indicate that people experiencing poverty are at the mercy of strict government rules and regulations. According to Zelizer (1994), charity groups and public welfare organisations try to control impoverished individuals by distributing to them only pseudo monies or in-kind support. Money as a result turns into the focus of a conflict between community institutions and destitute individuals (Carruthers and Babb 1996). Another participant spoke about what she and her travelling companion had to do to survive and also to continue their journey.

We lived in Perth for about one month. We gradually ran out of money. We stared to sell our possessions in order to survive. We also hocked [pawned] any other valuables we had with us such as our jewellery and stuff.
This participant shows that individuals in desperate circumstances will do what they can to survive. As Altman (1903: 51) appropriately suggests, ‘from the standpoint of conflict theory, we have here nothing else than an extremely developed theory of sacrifice’, loss and experiences of abandonment. Survival and transformation of ‘self’ became daily manifestations in the lives of these travellers. A rite-of-passage discourse constituted a significant and ongoing narrative of their journeys. Their destitute circumstances, while on the path to self-realisation and self-transformation in their lives, gave the participants interviewed here, a new ‘sense’ of fiscal consciousness and the realisation that one cannot survive well in a Western, capitalist economy without the possession of at least some money – but one can survive! – even with difficulty.

Relinquishing the ‘essential’ trappings of a Western, capitalist economy and ‘learning to get by’ with limited amounts of cash and little or no feelings of security, pushed each participant in the research to the limit when undertaking their escapist travel. Indeed, the notion of ‘survival’ became the linchpin with which the travellers measured their capabilities to sustain and endure their journeys. Lack of money and the need to just survive became all-consuming and a mechanism for transformation in the narratives of the participant’s journeys. It was apparent that each of them were willing to undertake the experience of destitution to maintain and prolong their journeys of survival around Australia. Locating and procuring any form of financial income became a test of survival and endurance and contributed to the rite-of-passage nature of their individual selves and their journeys. Transformation occurred with the realisation that money is needed for survival in a Western capitalist economy, but that money is a commodity in and of itself and as such, becomes a source of oppression due to its omnipotent status.
Conclusion and Implications

The people in this study travelled because of the traumatic effects life was having on them, and they continued to travel because they were left with a constant desire to continue the experience. They need travel to continuously keep transforming and refining their identity; how they feel about themselves and their lives. The participants established that their journeys resulted in identification of individual transformations. This rite-of-passage status was not reliant on length of journey or time spent away from their points of origin. The rite-of-passage for each traveller was a deeply personal transformation of self – deeper understandings of the value of life and the costs of living, and personal acknowledgement of their capacity to survive in adversity.

References


