

Meaningful travel: Women, independent travel and the search for self and meaning

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SUMMARY

It is increasingly recognised by researchers that tourism experiences incorporate more than just physical travel to a place, as they can also involve spiritual elements, psychological and physical benefits, altruism, self-development, and life-change. Building on this recognition, this paper puts forward the idea that independent travel plays an important and meaningful part in the course of people's lives. The concept of 'meaningful travel' is defined and explored, using women's experiences of independent leisure and business travel as a context. Conceptualising travel as meaningful and relevant to everyday life reveals the complex, fluid and dynamic nature of the tourist experience, and calls for an effort to transgress simplistic and uni-dimensional interpretations of tourism, business travel and holiday-taking.

Analysis of the women's stories and words revealed that 'meaningful travel' centred around three key themes: a search for self and identity; self-empowerment; and connectedness with others/ 'global citizenship'. Essentially, what the findings demonstrate is that meaningful travel is not about a mere search for authenticity and a collection of 'cultural capital'. Rather, meaningful travel involves women searching for an increased sense of self and reconsidering their perspectives of life, society and their relationships with others. Furthermore, the results also demonstrate how women are able to transfer the meaning and benefits from their travel experiences upon their return home, within their everyday lives and contexts.

Key words:

meaningful travel; women; empowerment; independent business and leisure travel

INTRODUCTION: TRAVEL AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

The term 'tourist' has been progressively deconstructed over the last three to four decades. Early conceptions of the tourist centred on a homogenous, mass group

of people travelling for one of two reasons: leisure or business (Cohen 1973; Yiannakis and Gibson 1992). Being a tourist therefore usually referred to a 'mass tourist' - the "camera-toting foreigner, ignorant, passive, shallow and gullible" individual (Cohen 1974: 527).

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Since the 1970s, however, academics working from an increasingly knowledge-base platform (Jafari 1990) have questioned the assumed homogeneity of the tourist. It is now claimed that tourists are a complex, fragmented and varied group of people, who may be classified into several different markets (Leiper 2003; Weaver and Oppermann 2000; Yiannakis and Gibson 1992). Cohen (1972) was one of the first authors to dispel simplistic notions that all tourists were alike. In his paper on the sociology of international tourism, Cohen offered a spectrum of tourism, ranging from 'standardised/highly institutionalised' through to 'individualistic/least institutionalised'.

Deconstructions of existing typologies stress the importance of the individual's practice, in which the subjective negotiation of meaning by the human actor is illuminated (Uriely 2005). Today, we recognise an increasingly fragmented and alternative group of travellers (Buhalis 2001; Poon 2003; Weaver and Oppermann 2000), including independent and solo tourists who need or wish to organise and plan many aspects of their travel themselves. The increase in demand for independent and solo types of travel is reflective of a wider, global phenomenon referred to as 'new tourism' (Buhalis 2001; Krippendorf 1987; Poon 2003). In this new and globalised world of tourism, new tourists are said to be individualistic, flexible, spontaneous, unpredictable and environmentally-conscious. Poon (2003) distinguishes 'new tourists' from 'old tourists', the latter being described as unsophisticated, homogenous and predictable in their tourism consumption choices and activities.

For the purposes of this research, the term 'independent traveller' is used as a broad term to refer to tourists who primarily prefer flexible, self-directed tourist experiences in the context of pleasure holidays, but can also be self-directed in the business travel context. The concept of independent travel, however, does apply beyond leisure travel to other contexts, such as business travel. Traditionally, business travel has been conceptualised as a large organisation phenomenon, yet business travellers can be classed as independent travellers as many build flexibility into their itineraries, often travel alone, book their own travel - particularly those who are small enterprise owner-operators, and engage in unplanned activities while away. The popularity of airlines such as EasyJet, who were voted Best Low Cost Airline 2003 by Business Traveller Magazine and Favourite Low Cost Airline 2005 by Barclays Business

Survey as noted by EasyJet (2005) are testament to the demand for more independent alternatives to the traditional business travel model.

Recent discourse in tourism has increasingly showcased the importance of the cultural and experiential dimensions of tourism, revealing that tourism is a cultural process rather than just a product. This discourse of tourism as a cultural process acknowledges tourists' subjective negotiations of meanings and the active construction of the experience by the tourist as an interacting agent and active performer (Ateljević and Doorne 2005; McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Selby 2004). Few tourism studies have explicitly examined how independent forms of travel can lead to transformation and increased well-being, though a growing body of literature has turned its attention to the empowering role of independent travel for women (Cockburn-Wooten, Friend and McIntosh 2005; Elsrud 1998; Jordan and Gibson 2005; Wilson and Little 2005). Encouragingly, though, an increasing number of scholars propose that tourists are searching for meaningful experiences through tourism, seeking a sense of physical, emotional or spiritual fulfilment through travel, rather than just escapism or a hollow search for 'authenticity' (Bruner 1991; Callanan and Thomas 2005; Digance 2003; Noy 2004). Indeed, Jamal and Hollinshead (2001: 64) have stated that "whereas travel and tourism used to be commonly perceived as the quest for the trivial ... an emergent view is that travel and tourism constitute an educative and self-formative realm of spiritual and creative significance".

Leading on from these works, this paper proposes the concept of 'meaningful travel', in an effort to recognise the deeper emotional and spiritual (not just religious) aspects and impacts of the travel experience. Through an exploration of women's independent business and leisure travel as contexts, we suggest that meaningful travel refers to a travel experience which sees individuals searching for or finding an increased sense of self-confidence and empowerment, considering their options and perspectives of life, and thinking (or re-thinking) their relationships with society and others. While a sense of spiritual or soul fulfilment is indeed a part of 'meaningful' travel, meaningful travel is not merely about pilgrimages or 'finding God'. More broadly, meaningful travel provides an important arena in which individuals can explore, reflect, consider and analyse; it can be a time (or a lifetime) of gleaning subjective meaning from travel experiences which can

trigger new perspectives, changes or renewed appreciation of life. In the context of this paper, meaningful travel is not necessarily time or space specific, as it also encapsulates how people are able to transfer the meaning and benefits from their travel experiences upon their return home, within their everyday, changing lives. We believe that independent travel provides a fruitful lens for examining aspects of meaning and life change, as it is through time on one's own – away from partners, families or domestic responsibilities – that people, particularly women, are able to locate the time and space for reflection and self-development (Elsrud 1998; Mehmetoglu, Dann and Larsen 2001).

MEANINGFUL TRAVEL FOR WOMEN: HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY JOURNEYS OF INDEPENDENCE

The earliest known female travellers were primarily pilgrims, making the journey to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Helena made her pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 327 AD (Hunt 1982), while the first documented female travel account is attributed to the abbess Egeria (or Etheria), a Roman citizen who made the same journey around 383 AD (Birkett 1991). The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a 'boom time' for world exploration, travel and the colonial project, but these arenas were construed as the sole right of men; as a result, it was only a minority of women who were able to access the social position, funds and time to be able to explore (Robinson 1990; Tinling 1989). Despite these few women's significant contributions and achievements, they have generally been overlooked in the history of travel and exploration (Clarke 1988; Towner 1994). A recent resurgence in the publication of historical accounts of women's independent travel attests to the fact that women have been travelling and exploring for many centuries (see, for example, Birkett 1991; Fenton Huie 1990; Foster and Mills 2002; Russell 1986).

Since the end of the nineteenth century, there have been a number of social and political changes which have led to increases in female participation in contemporary travel. Compared with even a generation ago, social conventions concerning the roles and behaviour of women have altered considerably throughout much of the Western world. Women's education and employment opportunities have increased and improved.

In 1971, Australian women made up only 37% of the labour workforce, compared with 55% in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2003). In New Zealand, of the total number of employed to September 2005; women comprise 46% (Statistics New Zealand 2005). Women also continue to outnumber men in the pursuit for higher education (ABS 1998; Ministry of Education 2005). Ideologies of the family have also shifted so that women are no longer expected, nor do they automatically choose, to be partnered or to parent children (Summers 2005).

Tourism researchers have claimed that women are the primary decision-makers regarding family holidays (Fodness 1992; Smith 1979; Zalatan 1998), but their role in travel consumption is now much broader than this, as women are becoming more prominent in their involvement in other types of travel. Research shows that in terms of travel for pleasure, women seem to be more prominent than men in their desire for adventure travel (Davidson and McKercher 1993; Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie and Pomfret 2003), ecotourism (Weaver 2001) and educational tourism (Gibson 1998). According to Bond (1997), solo women travellers are in search of adventure, social interaction, education and self-understanding, and are confident to go alone. In a different context, Harris (2002) found that business women travellers have chances to interact with different people thereby gaining increased visibility, both within their organisation as well as externally.

Certain types of travel, particularly independent pleasure or business travel, have been discussed within gender/feminist research as heterotopias, or spaces of potential resistance for women (Jordan and Gibson 2005; Wilson and Harris 2004; Wearing and Wearing 1996). For young women growing up in 1950s and 1960s Australia and New Zealand, for example, women's roles were usually connected to their contribution to the home and the raising of children (Pesman 1996; Warner-Smith 2000). Independent travel abroad, for work and/or pleasure, allowed women of these eras the opportunity to transgress and resist gendered ideologies of what was 'feminine', providing "a space which permitted the rewriting of the script of what it [is] to be a woman" (Warner-Smith 2000: 44).

A number of studies over the last two decades have demonstrated the empowering and meaningful aspect that travel - particularly independent forms of travel where control over one's own choices is central - can

play in women's lives. Riley (1988), in her study of American budget travellers, found that women reported increased feelings of independence and self-control related to their ability to travel alone. Most relevant to the current study is that Riley's research revealed that women, more so than men, wanted to travel alone for a sense of independence and autonomy, to see if they 'could do it by themselves'. Gibson and Jordan (1998), in their comparative research on American and British solo female travellers, showed that solo travel provided a sense of freedom, empowerment, and enhanced feelings of confidence. Elsrud (1998) found that independent forms of travel provided women with a feeling of freedom and control of their own time.

Likewise, McArthur (1999) noted that the Canadian solo women travellers she interviewed felt more confident, empowered and stronger in their sense of self as a result of their journeys. Harris (2002) found that as business travel is an activity associated with success and importance, it also is a vehicle for the empowerment for women who travel independently for business. Similarly, Presser and Hermsen (1996) elucidate that business travel experiences can provide women freedom and autonomy. Such findings, as a whole, make a statement that independent travel for women offers a unique and important way of building their sense of self, confidence and empowerment. All of these aspects lead to the idea of 'meaningful travel'.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a discussion based on the select results of two qualitative, interpretive studies of women's experiences of travel, both of which were located within a gendered framework which views women's life opportunities and constraints as socially located, and which places women's lives as central in the research agenda (Gibson 2001; Kinnaird and Hall 1994). One study, by the first author, focussed specifically on independent solo travel for women, how they are constrained in this type of travel and how they negotiate their constraints to enjoy the travel experience and to bring meaning into their everyday lives. The other study, conducted by the co-author, focused on New Zealand women as business travellers, determining their experiences and expectations in relation to the tourism industry's perceptions of business travellers.

While the contexts of these studies are somewhat different, both researchers could readily recognise the similarities in the women's experiences related to issues of the meaning and benefits gained through independent travel.

It has been argued (McIntosh 1998; Small 1999; Swain 1995) that qualitative techniques such as interviews are particularly poignant for allowing the tourist 'voice' to be heard. Influenced by interpretive and feminist theory, there was a concerted effort in both studies to listen to the women's experiences of travel, as they expressed them in their own terms and words (Wall and Norris 2003; Reinhartz 1992). The first author's study relied upon semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore 40 Australian women's experiences of solo pleasure travel. Non-random, purposive sampling methods were used to locate the women, including 'snowball' sampling (starting with the researcher's own networks and finding other women from those initial contacts) (Neuman 1997), and advertising in local newspapers. A range of ages (19-85 years), socioeconomic statuses, and ethnic backgrounds was deliberately sought in an attempt to broaden the sample as much as possible, although predominantly the women interviewed were white and relatively highly educated. The semi-structured interview guide covered a broad array of questions related to women's backgrounds and solo travel experiences, including life histories; travel history and experience; travel preparation techniques; travel motivations; constraints and challenges; negotiation strategies and outcomes/benefits associated with their solo travel.

The co-author's study relied primarily on interviews and focus groups with women business travellers to investigate issues such as their business travel history and behaviour, experiences and expectations, and organisational and family support for business travel. Six focus groups, consisting of between five to eight participants, were held with women who travel frequently for business. Personal and business contacts of the researcher were used to recruit about half of the participants. The other strategy that was particularly successful for the recruitment of participants was the use of snowball sampling (Babbie 1998; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson 2000). Some women who agreed to participate recruited other eligible participants from their own personal networks and/or organisations to take part in the research.

Women business travellers are difficult to reach as they vary by travel behaviour, so the use of snowball sampling was beneficial. The participants were business women aged 25 to 60, employed in a cross-section of industries in both the private and public sectors. Both studies adopted a grounded, unfolding approach to data analysis, largely rejecting positivistic axioms of drawing *a priori* samples in advance of data collection (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Using a method of 'constant comparison' to analyse the women's stories from both studies (Glaser and Strauss 1967), key quotes or sections from interviews and focus groups were continually compared and contrasted against other similar quotes or sections. The process started with each other reviewing the transcripts from the women in their respective studies, then they came together to compare the analysis and interpretations from both studies. At this point, the researchers readily recognized the similarities in the women's experiences related to issues of the meaning and benefits gained through independent travel. The women in both studies reflected on their experiences pre/during/post travel. That is, the challenges and rewards experienced not just while physically away travelling, but also before they left home and upon their return also. Several of the women, especially the business travellers, travel frequently, so they have had many experiences on which to reflect, including the benefits gained from their cumulative travel experiences. The authors also engaged in reflexive practice to consider our own experiences, as to how they resonate with the meaning the women found from their travels.

RESULTS: THE 'CORNERSTONES' OF MEANINGFUL TRAVEL

By reflecting and comparing the women's stories from the two studies, common premises and experiences became apparent in terms of how women found 'meaningful travel'. The women described their travel experiences as 'changing them', 'containing much meaning', 'proving they could be strong', 'connecting them with others and the world', 'powerful', 'giving them room for reflection and appreciation', 'conquering', and 'successful'. Based on the grounded analyses of both studies, three overarching themes emerged which describe women's search for meaning: 1) *a search for self and identity*, 2) *self-empowerment*; and

3) *connectedness with others/ 'global citizenship'*. We have called these three themes the 'cornerstones' of what constitutes a meaningful travel experience for these women, though these cornerstones should be considered together in a connected and overlapping sense, not independent from one another.

It should also be noted that these key categories are not necessarily time-specific, in that they do not relate to a particular stage of the travel experience (pre/during/post). Rather, the three themes discussed below are reflective of the tourist experience overall, and meld elements of motivation, benefit, and outcome. For example, a search for self may not be a stated or clearly recognised motive for these women, but could be something that was discovered along the journey or reflected upon once at home.

A search for self and identity

One of the ways in which many of the women reflected a desire for 'meaningful travel' was through their recognition of independent travel as a search for self, identity and a way in which to 'better' themselves. There was an admittance that independent travel was as much an outer journey as it was an inner one: *'Journeys are a mixture of exploring myself as well as abandoning myself – and seeking to blend the two'* (Amanda, solo traveller). *'Travel's more than a physical thing; it's a psychological thing... a spiritual thing... there's that combination of going somewhere on a physical plane, but you're also going somewhere on a psychological, experiential plane'* (Maryse, solo traveller). Others spoke of having to overcome fear to get out of their 'comfort zone' and to travel alone, but that doing so allowed for a different kind of introspection. As one solo female traveller noted: *'[Travel's] about getting to know yourself... good things and bad, you know, your weaknesses and your strengths. Sometimes you need to do that sort of trip to even get to those places in yourself'* (Mary, solo traveller). Transcending fears of travel also resulted in increased confidence and a sense of strength self-growth: *'Travel has made me feel more confident within myself and made me feel strong'* (Kay, solo traveller). *'Travel provides me with opportunities to grow personally through overcoming obstacles and meeting challenge'* (Hillary, solo traveller).

Independent travel also gave the women space for reflection, and to prioritise time for their own needs and wants. For the business women, travelling for work

allowed time for 'indulgence' in an otherwise busy personal and family life: 'A good thing about travelling for work is there's just no partners and family there – it's indulgence time, it's a treat' (Gina, business traveller). 'I actually like being on my own, as I don't have that much time alone. Business trips give me time on my own which is nice as you can do your own thing and think about life' (Bev, business traveller). 'You can completely think about yourself continually. Put your dishes outside' (Nicole, business traveller). 'I never used to travel alone, before I began travelling for business. It is different, but a great mix, to travel alone for business sometimes' (Ruby, business traveller). Similar comments were made by the solo travellers, both those in later life stages who had raised families and those who had just travelled for the first time:

'It's being responsible for my own decisions. Travelling with somebody would not have been the same, because I think you make plans and consult with somebody else and you have to compromise. ... But in my case, I was my total own free agent' (Anna, solo traveller).

'My travel experiences have been the greatest learning and growing periods of my life. A large part of my identity has developed through these experiences. Qualities I developed when travelling, particularly alone, represent most who I am: independent, adventurous, bold, tolerant and humane' (Hillary, solo traveller).

'I feel thoroughly privileged to have had this opportunity in my youth to explore my attitude to life. Certainly I haven't found all the answers, but perhaps I have a considered framework from which to continually grow' (Amber, solo traveller).

Several of the women further discussed the benefits of realising their strengths, weaknesses and limits once they had returned home and were involved again in 'everyday life'. As one woman noted 'travelling has made me very clear about what I know and want; and it's taught me to say no when I don't agree with something' (Sue, solo traveller). This increased strength and confidence transferred into the women's lives at home, well beyond the trip itself, and self-reliance learned from travelling independently built confidence in their sense of their future abilities:

'The travel helped me to understand myself more. ... It really taught me to be a bit more confident in

my own decisions, so I've really had to rely on myself a lot, you know, and I realised that I love independence, like, I'm really independent' (Jo, solo traveller).

'Travel is great ... I come back and I feel stronger and ... just get a whole identity thing. ... I feel great again. That's what travel does for me, anyhow ... [my travels] make me very inspired about what I want to do next' (Michelle, solo traveller).

'I came back buzzing. I was just so much more confident after having made that deal. I felt just so pleased with myself for being brave and doing it well. I look forward to future trips now I have clinched it' (Macy, business traveller).

Self-empowerment

Closely tied with a search for self and identity was the women's description of independent travel as empowering. Through a combined and interlinking process of negotiation of constraints, dealing with the challenge of travel and resistance to societal expectations, many women reported a sense of empowerment and benefited from independent travel in a myriad of ways. Empowerment for many of the women was linked to making their own choices and controlling their own actions:

'When you travel – particularly on your own – it's the total sense of freedom and you can be completely uninhibited. ... You've got the freedom to wake up in the morning and decide on the course of action. You don't have to be anything. Just be yourself – totally – complete freedom to do whatever. You find yourself - you get a lot of confidence' (Diane, solo traveller).

'I was able to negotiate foreign environments, do business with those of different cultures, deciding when and how to act to relate to my foreign colleagues was a powerful experience. I learnt to trust my own judgement' (Veronica, business traveller)

'It was very empowering, on every single level ... the fact that I would make my own decisions. You know, I had to make some fairly full-on choices, even the choices like what countries I would go to, you know ... It's such a security with inside yourself as well, like I'm okay, I'm surviving, I'm okay, I'm having a great time, I made these decisions myself.

I've got that control over my whole destiny' (Jo, solo traveller).

Several women also spoke of change in their personal and professional lives at home as a result of their negotiation of travel constraints and experiences. The respect that several women gained from friends, family and colleagues by undertaking travel and negotiating new challenges contributed greatly to building their sense of empowerment in personal and professional arenas:

I came back and I really pushed to get change for my career path. I was very pushy, which wasn't me, and insisted that I be given an opportunity to try something else, and I got what I wanted. ... I got into an environment where I was speaking in front of people on a regular basis, training, giving presentations to leadership teams and quite senior people in the bank. For a shy, nervous person this was big stuff. ... I couldn't imagine myself doing what I did before I'd gone away – just the level of confidence was not there to try' (Sally, solo traveller).

For the business women travellers, work trips were regarded as a valued resource because of the opportunities and status that they enabled. Being allowed to travel to act as a representative of their host organisation was clearly a factor that increased the women's confidence and value to their organisations, thus empowering them. As one woman noted: *'I see business travel as privilege and a perk. That you have to fight for the right to go' (Joan, business traveller).*

Connectedness with others/ 'Global citizenship'

As a third theme of meaningful travel, both independent pleasure and business travel allowed the women to build personal connections, to make new social friends networks, and to establish meaningful relationships with those they encountered and interacted on their journeys. As one female business traveller found, work trips provided a chance to network with others and to connect with them on a more personal level outside of the office: *'There is no substitute for face to face. I far prefer to do business with people I have met in person as knowing people personally makes it much easier to meet my objectives' (Pat, business traveller).* Likewise, a young, single woman found that business trips actually improved her ability to meet like-minded

peers in her own industry and expand her work horizons: *'I would like to go away more, just to do more interesting jobs, meet more people and network' (Kylie, business traveller).*

For the solo female travellers, the social meanings found through travel related to meeting other people, learning how to relate to others, and establishing friendships with both other tourists as well as locals. *'Travel has developed my personality' (Alice, solo traveller).* *'It's through doing these different trips that I've been able to develop my social skills a little bit better' (Sue, solo traveller).* Yet another woman talked of how travel led to a building of social skills: *'I'd always thought of myself as a loner, but realised through having to travel that I was way more social and outgoing than I'd thought' (Kelly, solo traveller).* Having to meet and interact with new people helped to develop confidence in the women's social abilities:

'If you're on your own you meet people a lot easier ... you sort of get a lot more confidence and you think oh well, I'm here by myself, I've gotta get up off my arse and go and meet people' (Mary, solo traveller).

'Travelling through other countries in which I do not speak the language brought to the surface skills I didn't know I had which I had to rely on to get by. In particular, my communication skills improved and my confidence grew. I learnt how to be alone and enjoy solitude' (Hayley, solo traveller).

Moving beyond the gaze of viewing local people as primarily culturally 'different', the power of stereotypes were reconfigured and a sense of tolerance, increased understanding and 'global citizenship' was discovered or reconfirmed. Once the social and cultural boundaries of norms and traditions were deconstructed against this individual humanity, the universal communication of understanding the nature of human existence could be achieved:

'I've travelled in all these different countries on my own, and I've met all these different people from different nationalities, and what I realised at the end of the day was every human being has the same issues to deal with. No matter where they come from, no matter what their upbringing, no matter what the structure of society is, their culture ... every single human being ends up with the same issues' (Dee, solo traveller).

'From travelling to visit foreign colleagues and business people, I have learnt that we are not all that different. I have learnt to be patient, but not patronising, as they are dealing with markets and environments often more complex than mine. I have learned a lot from those I have met in business and social environments during my trips' (Lucy, business traveller)

'My travels just took me on just a huge growth curve. It just expanded my horizons, changed my belief systems and made me be more flexible and more tolerant, I think, towards other races and understand for what it is like for people, for strangers, to come into a land. I have much more sympathy, empathy and hospitality' (Kate, solo traveller).

The women's meaningful journeys led them to change their life directions and retain ongoing relationships with people and places. For the solo travellers in particular, who had travelled to a wide range of places, there was often a desire to 'give back' to the countries and people they had visited and with whom they felt an established emotional connection. This desire to reciprocate, which often resulted from a pronounced recognition of the women's privileges as Westerners, led many women to embark on charity work, defend the rights of certain disenfranchised people or volunteer English teaching for migrants. One woman spoke of her need to help Cambodian refugees while she was travelling through Thailand, and how this experience had radically changed her perspective of herself as merely a 'tourist': *'I worked in the refugee camps in Thailand - this was when the Cambodians were first coming out of Cambodia. ... So I got very involved in that and I found that I couldn't really enjoy the rest of my travel to get back to Australia, because that had been such an enormous experience that I couldn't enjoy myself. I couldn't feel, oh, I'm a tourist, you know? I had to get back to Australia to do something for these people' (Chris, solo traveller)*. Another became heavily involved in the 'free Tibet' movement once she had returned home to Australia: *'Since I got back, I've just done a lot of volunteer work, especially for the Tibetan community because that's where I went. It really changed who I was and what I wanted to do' (Margie, solo traveller)*.

Others expressed their future desires to work within communities in less developed areas through charity or aid work. Engaging and even living with people, rather than pursuing purely hedonistic experiences,

was found to be a common future travel motivator for many women:

'I'd love to be an aid worker in various countries. I'd love to be able to do something' (Dee, solo traveller).

'I have enrolled in a night course to learn their language, so hopefully I can get beyond the tokenistic greetings on my future trips' (Kate, business traveller)

'I want to involve my work now with travel, and I want to do community work and work with people and the environment ... whereas before it was just an exploration and I guess all of that opened my eyes up culturally, and that sort of brought me to where I am now ... I want to go and work with those people' (Jo, solo traveller).

'I would like to go to developing countries in future, for myself, not just for my company to make money out of them' (Bev, business traveller)

'I mean I'd really like to volunteer abroad somewhere, and really experience a place, I think that was my ultimate dissatisfaction with travelling is you're passing through, and you're only getting a glimpse of how things work ... and I think that's about me and the kind of person I am - very much wanting to give and feel part of a place, and that you can't do while you're travelling. ... I guess that's why I feel that if I was to do something again, I'd like to volunteer elsewhere, 'cause it's about giving something back to the places that you go to' (Rachel, solo traveller).

DISCUSSION

Based on a combined analysis of two qualitative, interpretive studies of women's independent travel experiences, this paper has explored the concept of 'meaningful travel'. Using women's independent travel as a context, meaningful travel appeared to revolve around three main themes, which emerged from a grounded analysis of the women's words and stories. Meaningful travel could be demonstrated through the women's exploratory search for self and identity, their evident self-empowerment and increased confidence as a result of independent travel, as well as a sense of

connectedness with others and a feeling of responsibility to others and the planet in their self-perceived roles as 'global citizens'.

Gauging from the stories of the women interviewed, it could be said that travel was remembered more as an inner journey of personal growth and self development as compared to the mere consuming of sights, faces and places. Travelling alone was also beneficial because it provided freedom from having to deal with the demands of everyday life and relationships. Being away from their normal environments and demands made on them as partners, mothers, daughters, colleagues etc, allowed them time and space to focus on themselves or reassess their life perspectives, to ponder their pasts, presents and what their futures could hold.

What the results also reveal is not only the types of benefits and outcomes that women can gain through travel, but the interconnectedness between travel/leisure experiences and women's everyday lives at home (McCabe 2002; Pohl, Borrie and Patterson 2000). The tourist experience has often been conceived of as an event or set of activities which happens when one leaves home, and finishes when one returns (Ryan 1997). Yet for many of the women in this study, the meaning gained from travel did not become clear until they had returned home, or were living their 'normal' lives again. Our studies' findings concur with other research which has shown that independent travel has been found to be a site of empowerment for women (Gibson and Jordan 1998; Wilson and Harris 2004), and can also act as a platform for more long-term change, impacting on everyday life and existing relationships (McCabe 2002). Based on such conclusions, the dichotomy of 'home' and 'away' becomes much too simple a division and needs to be extended in any discussion of meaningful or spiritual travel. This finding resonates with Botterill and Crompton's (1996: 79) argument that "the vacation [should be] returned to its place within the life of the person and not separated out as some eccentric, temporary and rather meaningless event. ... Thus a study of a person's approach to being a tourist can be illustrative of wider concerns". This study captured many stories of women 'rewriting of the script of what it [is] to be a woman' (Warner-Smith 2000) These new scripts determined new relationships, changed perspectives and different desires that the women transported home and enacted in their 'normal' lives.

Meaning and experience are greatly influenced by how an individual tourist (or host) is feeling, what is happening in their lives, as well as their levels of stress and ability to deal with personal crisis. These emotions can also form motivations for travel in terms of being with loved ones, escaping not-so-loved ones, and travelling to shake the feelings of depression and/or build self-esteem. Indeed, emotions are widely recognised as important sources for behaviour (Mittal 1988; Pratkanis, Breckler and Greenwald 1989; Zajonc and Markus 1984). According to Gnoth (1997), emotions are particularly important in tourism. As shown by the women's stories in this study, emotions strongly underpin the cornerstones of their meaningful travel experiences.

It was further evident that many women gained deeper spiritual empowerment from their experiences abroad, through exposure to various religions, cultures and life philosophies. The benefits for the women appeared to come from the 'meaningful' social and cultural interactions they had with others (tourists and hosts), leading many of them to question their values as a woman from the Western world, on an individual as well as societal level. While the women were interested in development of the 'self', they also remained aware of their impact on, and connection with, the people and societies they visited. Independent travel lead many of the women to question relationships between East and West, and their own relationships with the constructed 'Other' through the interactions they experienced. Many women found particular meaning through interactions in which the positions of both 'host' and 'guest' could be equally powerful, particularly with regard to other women they met during their journeys: *'One thing I learned about is that human beings - it's not that we are so different, it's interesting that we are so alike - especially women'* (Kay, solo traveller).. *I'd almost say that the cultural differences are superficial. ... We're more alike than we are different'* (Joan, business traveller). In stating this, however, we do not mean to suggest that economic, social and political differences do not exist between Western tourists and locals in less-developed countries, nor that 'host' and 'guest' are always on an equal footing. Indeed, this was recognised by many of female travellers; for example, in one woman's statement that *'I know I'm incredibly privileged to have had the chance to travel the world'* (Kate, business traveller).

CONCLUSION

Wearing and Wearing (2001) have argued that travellers are allowed the potential to change and develop their selves and identities through cross-cultural communication and interaction with the so-called 'other'. Ultimately then, 'meaningful travel' implores a shift beyond simple, disembodied dualisms of 'us and them', 'tourist vs traveller' and 'tourist vs Other'. Overcoming the challenges associated with independent solo and business travel brought an increased sense of confidence, well-being and relatedness with others, indicating the unique role that such travel experiences can play in the reconfiguration of self and other. As Fullagar sates (2002: 57), "as a movement in-between home and away, familiarity and uncertainty, travel is a liminal space inhabited by multiple desires that can produce different ways of knowing self and other". This paper, of course, has presented only one view of what might be conceptualised as meaningful travel, and has primarily explored women's experiences. Further research of how other types of individuals or groups find 'meaning' through travel would add to our incipient conceptualisation, and add to a growing – and much welcomed – body of literature which extends the tourist experience towards a more humanistic, personal and reflective tourism research agenda.

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