Risk, excitement and emotional conflict in women’s travel narratives

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Abstract

This paper focuses on my PhD research into the emotional, sensual and embodied journeys of female backpackers. Existing academic literature has largely characterised this form of tourism as a hedonistic quest for intense, heightened states of experience where embodied sensations are highly sought after. However this type of ‘experience tourism’ can often result in tensions between how the backpacker constructs and negotiates her responsibility for personal safety with her desire for exciting, and occasionally risky, experiences.

Drawing on narratives from female backpackers during my field work in India, as well as interviews with women who have returned home after an extensive backpacking trip to a variety of destinations in Asia, Latin America and Africa, this paper will focus on stories of ‘bad’ or frightening experiences, embodied constraints and examples of sexual behaviour that the participants perceived as carrying a high degree of both risk and excitement. Many of the travel narratives of the women fluctuate between promoting a strong, resilient character who embraces risk taking behaviour as part of an enriched travel experience, and feelings of anger, fear, vulnerability and loss of control. This 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 lone women travellers.

Furthermore, the paradoxical nature of these narratives can be linked to the shift in feminist identities, and reflect wider theoretical debates on cross-generational feminisms. Disassociating with feminism as a movement which is directly relevant to their lives, the participants in my study preferred to present a more individualised identity where they choose the activity of travel to strengthen and enhance their personal development. I argue that the ways in which the women negotiate risk in their travels with regard to personal safety, sexual behaviour and
construction of ‘the other’ notably mirrors this trend. Furthermore, the paper concludes by suggesting that it is the very conflicts and controversies between feminist identities and the search for risky, intense and sensual experiences that either inhibit or enhance the excitement of the backpacking journey.

Keywords: Backpacking tourism, gender, feminism, sexuality, risk

Introduction

Within tourist studies there has been a growth of literature that is specifically geared towards backpacking research. What constitutes as ‘backpacking’ is unstable and disputed, yet the key anthologies of backpacking research (Richards and Wilson, 2004, Hannam and Ateljevic 2008) for the most part identify backpacking as low budget, independent tourism that can extend over long periods of time and often lacks a specific prescribed schedule. Covering diverse areas of focus, existing academic literature has largely characterised independent travel, or ‘backpacking’, as a hedonistic quest for intense, heightened states of experience where embodied sensations are highly sought after (Cohen 2004, Black 2001). This ‘experience tourism’ often results in behaviour associated with risk taking and adventure. A gendered approach to this framework (Elsrud 2001, 2005) further asserts that women travellers adopt the arguably masculine traits of adventure narratives, incorporating ‘risky’ experiences into their travel stories as part of their journey of independence, empowerment and self-development, as these characteristics are often perceived to be achieved through backpacking tourism. Keen to develop my interest into the complex shift between second and third wave feminism and contemporary social identities surrounding gender politics, part of my research aims to amalgamate the activity and study of backpacking tourism with parallel theoretical debates in
gender studies on feminist identities and the decline of collective consciousness in western societies, specifically through changing notions of risk, sexuality and empowerment. The broader aim of the research therefore looks towards politicising the study of leisure and tourism, to 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.

This paper adheres to a gendered approach to backpacking, exploring how ‘experience’ tourism can often result in tensions between how the female backpacker constructs and negotiates her responsibility for personal safety with her desire for exciting, and occasionally risky, experiences.

Drawing on narratives from female backpackers during my field work in India, as well as interviews and focus groups with women who have returned home after an extensive backpacking trip to a variety of destinations, this paper examines the role of risk, excitement, fear and emotional conflict in women’s travel narratives. Examples from interview data focus firstly on risk and excitement, especially with regard to accounts of sexual behaviour, drugs and alcohol. Thereafter, the paper moves onto stories of ‘bad’ or ‘frightening’ experiences and embodied constraints. I am to politicise the study of backpacking by situating these narratives in tourist theory as well as wider frameworks of feminist debates. Establishing links between these areas of work enhances our understanding of women’s complex relationship with risk taking behaviour in spaces of travel and mobility.

**Literature review**

The paper will begin by examining some of the motivations for women’s independent travel by exploring some key concepts in backpacking tourism theory and research, specifically with
regard to discourses of adventure and risk. Furthermore, I will introduce Noy's concept of the 'master script', which applies to a gendered analysis of backpacking behaviour as it can prescribe how women negotiate risk in their narratives. Relevant links can be made with the theoretical issues concerning women's experiences of travel in existing research and parallel contemporary theories into women's relationship with feminism, risk and sexuality. A brief review of the changing character of feminism will be introduced and referred to throughout this paper in order to situate women's emotional responses to risk within a wider context.

**Backpacking, risk, gender and the 'master script'**

Research into backpacking tourism encompasses multiple areas of focus, and covers a diverse range of issues within disciplines throughout the social, geographical and environmental sciences. The body of literature that explores backpacking as an individual journey of empowerment, personal experiences and development is most influential to my research into gender and risk. To begin with, Richards and Wilson (2004) outline the key characteristics of the 'global nomad'. Born out of an increasingly restless and mobile society, the alienated backpacker is 'driven into the far corners of the globe by the 'experience hunger' of modern society' (2004:5). Whilst some backpacking theorists claim that the backpacker is now less alienated from society as travelling becomes more acceptable and mainstreamed as part of a rites of passage, such as between finishing university and beginning employment, this 'experience hunger' still remains a crucial element of the journey of the improved self (Welk 2004). According to Cohen, this is reflective of the postmodern experiential mode, and he explains how 'freedom' for backpackers has become void of political analysis and replaced by 'unrestrained permissiveness found in enclaves, which enables utter hedonism and
experimentation under simple and affordable circumstances’ (2004:51).

With regard to a gendered analysis of backpacking travel, there has been an emergence of research that supports the motivations of women travellers as following this trend of self development, journeys of independence and empowerment. Myers and Hannam (2008) refer to the association between women’s growth in independent travel and their ‘empowerment’, highlighting the benefits of travel to women’s identities as free and liberated individuals. Drawing on research into the differences between male and female travel, as well as the work of Humberstone and Collins (1998), Myers and Hannam put forward that women are much more concerned with the quality of their reflective and spiritual experiences of travel and the process of this reflection, where men are more orientated towards activity. Academic interest in gendered approaches to women’s experiences of tourism appeared in 2005 in a special issue on ‘Female Travellers’ in *Tourism Review International*. Elsrud’s paper on women’s narrative and identity carries the most weight to my main argument. She asserts that the ‘adventure discourse’ that is still prominent in contemporary backpacking is still very much connected to masculinity, and women need to adopt this masculine discourse in order to perform their identities as a successful ‘adventuress’. Elsrud notes that ‘adventure narratives are particularly effective when it comes to expressing a strong and independent identity’ (2005: 127). These ‘tomboy’ traits often reveal how traditional, weaker forms of femininity are abandoned in favour of masculine adventure, and downgrades women who cannot compete with such bravery and resistance to feminine restrictions. More recent research into women travellers (Wilson and Harris 2007, Wilson et al 2009) continues to confirm that a key motivation for their backpacking journeys is one of empowerment; to challenge gendered constraints, resist the gendered
geographies of fear and enhance their development as liberated, independent women with freedom of mobility.

Nevertheless, Elsrud further asserts that although strongly influenced by masculine norms, women can realise they have been given a discourse that does not belong to them or match their experiences. In this case, Elsrud uses the post-tourism framework to understand how their stories become ironic, thus mocking the traditional masculine adventure and become highly critically reflexive of their own adventurous acts. Elsrud’s own approach to how gender is constructed in narratives acknowledges the post-structuralist polarisation of genders, yet also uses a structuralist perspective claiming ‘whilst women and men as individuals can be ‘individualistic’, complex and contradictive in action, the structures of thoughts, the discourses, framing femininity and masculinity are more rigid’ (2005: 125). To perform their roles as successful travellers, women must adopt the discourses of bravado and adventure while still working within existing frameworks of femininity and masculinity.

How women negotiate and subsequently portray elements of risk throughout their travels is therefore crucial to meeting this motive. Alongside challenging gendered restrictions is the concept of the ‘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 backpacker and researcher enters in and accesses cultural capital, ‘arriving at new destinations or colonies of knowledge previously unknown’ (2003: 14) Regarding the backpackers in his study, Noy asserts that part of the motivation for such travel is 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 their itinerary of travel and also their expectations of how a ‘travel story’ should be both performed and later narrated. Already familiar with the dominant discourses of risk and responsibility relating to travel, Noy argues that backpackers travel to gather their own stories, which will in turn reproduce the ‘master script’ of the backpacking tale 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 in my research 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. I refer to this conflicted subject position in the narratives of my participants throughout my discussion, which I define as the conflict between the desired identities of the risk-taking, liberated, empowered, sexualised women travellers and the complex difficulties of gendered constraints and fluctuating notions of femininity that these women often experience during their trip. However this ‘conflict’ can be better understood when situated in the wider context of current debates on feminist identities and the issue of empowerment in current feminist literature.

The changing character of feminism and sexuality

Whereas the concept of the ‘master script’ applies to backpackers of both genders, women's
travel narratives often reflect wider theoretical frameworks of risk and risk-taking behaviour within a feminist context. The emergence of literature that seeks to address and understand the changing character of feminism as a cultural and political movement and ideology can offer valuable insights into these travel stories. This development is largely categorised under the metaphor of ‘waves’, where second wave feminism refers to the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the third wave taking shape towards the end of the 20th century. Second wave feminism has been very much associated with the works of radical feminist thought where patriarchal institutions were challenged. Claiming the personal as political, second wave feminist thought exposed issues such as violence against women into the public domain. Findlen (1995) and Drake and Leslie (1997) offer a more refreshed version of feminism which they hope more accurately reflects the lived realities and desires of young women in the aftermath of second wave feminism. They call for a ‘messier’ feminism which embodies the empowering values of the feminist movement, but allows for the complex pleasures and differences that emerge in women’s lives.

Women’s sexual behaviour and practices is an area that evokes intense disagreements between feminists. Segal (1994) strongly argues that the feminist movement must abandon the second wave notions that heterosexual pleasure is incompatible with women’s happiness and empowerment. Vance (1992 in Kemp and Squires 1997: 327) highlights the tension between sexual danger and pleasure, claiming that whilst acknowledging danger is important ‘to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live’. Vance exposes the paradox that where women have been traditionally shamed about sex, the radical
ideology on pornography reproduces this shame, and now sexual pleasure has become a ‘guilty secret’ amongst feminists. The message is clear; feminism must put forward a politics that supports pleasure and not focus on fear alone.

More recently, other feminist theorists have warned against the turn to ‘pleasure’ within practices of female sexuality. McRobbie refers to the post feminist masquerade, where young women want to reclaim their sexuality and the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasure are encouraged. However under the illusion of equality, there is no critique of masculine hegemony. In the name of sexual equality, women are encouraged to ‘overturn the old double standard and emulate the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men, particularly in holiday locations’ (2009: 84).

Drawing on these debates, I assess the extent to which links can be made between the increasing individualism and self-reflexivity of third wave feminism and the existing research on motivations and discourses of self-development of backpacking tourism. It is this very ‘hedonistic’ behaviour which is so closely related to narratives of risk within the travel stories of the women in my research, and how they communicate their experiences of risk often resonates with these conflicting theories. For instance returning to Elsrud and Wilson, I argue that their research into backpacking women as free and liberated individuals who seek heightened experiences, experimentation and masculine forms of adventure bears close resemblance to McRobbie’s depiction of the post feminist masquerade and the issue of pleasure. It is of further importance to examine what is left unsaid. Woodward and Woodward (2009) further reveal the uncertainty silences and absences brought about by this changing character of feminism, and it is this current condition I want to unravel further through the narratives of travelling women as
they try and articulate their emotions and experiences of their journeys. Therefore the concept of the ideological 'master script' is useful for interpreting both gendered narratives and narratives of backpacking.

Lastly, we can also use this framework of contradictions, confusions and continual negotiations of feminist identities to look at the emotional affects of independent travel. Feminist theory has taken great interest in the politics of emotions, yet it is interesting to examine how the changing character of feminism has resulted in multiple and conflicting emotions for women, and examining risk within the travelling arena is a key space in which to explore how feelings of fear, shame, anger and empowerment can fit into wider theoretical frameworks. Through researching both embodied and narrated emotions, these debates can be applied in lived realities. When applied to the notion of risk for example, it is important to analyse how risk and danger are felt, as well as how these emotions are then understood, resisted, articulated and narrated into the travel story.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are taken from a wider research project into the sensual and emotional experiences of independent women travellers. My empirical research into women travellers took place between 2008-2010, comprising of in depth interviews with 34 women who were independently travelling in India in 2009 as part of my field work. Between 2008-2010, I also carried out individual, semi-structured interviews with women who had returned home from an extensive backpacking trip to a variety of global destinations in Asia, Africa, Central and South America, Europe and Australasia. Identifying what constitutes as a 'backpacking trip' is problematic, which is why I use the terms 'backpacker' and 'traveller' interchangeably.
However, all participants had travelled independently (not as part of an organised group or tour) for a period of time between two months and two years, alone or partly alone, and without male company for the majority of their trip. Whilst the youngest participant was 18 and the eldest 64 years of age, the findings used in this paper focus on interview narratives from women in the age range of 20-40. Similarly, although diverse nationalities were involved in the research, the examples in this paper are from samples with women from the U.K and USA. As part of my fieldwork in India, I immersed myself into the travelling community and gained access to participants through shared spaces such as hostels and cafés. In the U.K, I advertised for women who had returned home after a backpacking trip, and invited other women to become involved in the research through snowball sampling. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours, and were recorded and later transcribed. The transcribed interview data was then coded and analysed in accordance to the themes of the research.

Drawing on feminist methodologies and 'memory work' (Haug 1983, Small 1999) I also carried out four focus groups in the U.K with 4-8 women who had experience of independent travel to a wide range of countries. As part of the memory work project, participants were asked to write down a specific memory or 'travel story' from their travels and discuss their memories, alongside their reflective views and emotions, within the group. Influenced by the principles of memory work, the focus groups provided a forum for collective analysis and the process of collective reflection and group discussion is paramount to my data analysis.

All names and personal information have been amended to ensure the research participants remain anonymous.
Risk, excitement and sexuality

The following examples will attempt to link together notions of the backpacking master script and third wave discourses of the empowered, pleasure-seeking woman. Risk and excitement were very much linked with issues of high-risk sexual encounters, drugs and alcohol:

*I really liked this guy too, in Cambodia, he was 47, so I think the high risk thing for me is that he was probably far too old, and we were taking crystal meth (an amphetamine based drug) and the whole thing was quite crystal meth based and so it got quite seedy. But then I just hopped on the back of his motorbike, no helmet, with this older risky man...we would then zoom through the streets off our heads, with me pressed up against him. There is something about motorbikes in those hot, mad countries...it gets me excited just thinking about it now...!* Raquel, referring to her travels in Cambodia

*And the other thing that I was so aware of in terms of personal safety was safe sex, and alcohol played a massive part, and I think again here you have structure but when you are away with no structure you are pretty much drinking every night and that distorts your mind anyway let alone when you are actually drunk. I did find at times myself taking personal safety risks way beyond what I should have been in terms of safe sex. Again alcohol being a massive factor there. And the sense of risk or anything just completely distorted, despite the fact I was in a country with a very high prevalence of HIV and pretty much everyone having sex with everyone else all the time! Hilarious fun at the time....* Maggie, referring to her travels in Thailand
There are no inhibitions (with sexual encounters). You know you are not going to see them again so you can just be a bit more outrageous or...you can be whoever who want to be Meena, referring to her travels in Thailand

You get into stupid situations because of the hype of being away. You get carried away in the moment don’t you? You kind of have a moment of madness don’t you? Looking back it was shocking behaviour.... but it was excellent fun! Louise, referring to her travels in Thailand

It appears that stories that involve a high degree of risk are seen as part of the travelling experience. With regard to narrative and the master script, 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 resilient, daring ‘crazy’ fun backpacker, and the well rehearsed narratives give the illusion of control. Raquel expresses the sexual excitement she feels on the back of the motorbike, whilst Meena entertains the focus group with ‘outrageous’ stories of sexual encounters (many of which involved drugs, alcohol and unprotected sex). Tying into the pleasure seeking discourses of female sexuality and backpacking tourism discussed in the literature review, it can be argued that the women have been influenced by these discourses and acknowledge that to achieve a high state of stimulus, pleasure and gratification there often needs to be risk involved, resonating with Cohen’s theory of the search for ‘experience’ tourism. However the above examples portray this risk as a pleasurable and enjoyable experience, both ‘at the time’ as Maggie points out, but also in the
process of the story telling thereafter (illustrated, for example, by laughter in the focus group). These narratives show how women can reject the notion of risk as a constraint to their travelling experience, and instead use it as a tool to enhance their experiences and subsequent travel stories.

**Risk, fear and personal safety**

Despite the well rehearsed narrative of this master script, many of the participants also expressed negative emotions in response to situations of risk and danger. Often, the women felt intimidated, threatened and uncomfortable with situations which encompassed a high degree of risk, especially with regard to their positions as lone women and personal safety. However without what could be described as a feminist analysis to their experiences, arguably due to McRobbie’s theories of feminist de-politicisation, these difficulties emerge as confused and fluctuating feelings about their positions as empowered and privileged women; a paradox which is often highlighted by feminists who study the shifts between the second and third wave. This 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 lone women travellers. Hollway (2000: 26) refers 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’. The reflective interview process offers the participants the comfort of deciding which aspects of their travelling identities they wish to promote, often elevating the qualities of the strong, resilient, tough and fun backpacker, and the well rehearsed narratives
give the illusion of control. 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 script of the culturally aware women 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.

The narrative accounts of these stories reveal the strain between the women’s feelings of responsibility for their personal safety, and their guilt for not being a fully open, risk-embracing world traveller. Feelings of doubt and alienation are prevalent in the narratives as the participants struggle to justify their hostility to local people. The 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 both of travellers who value authentic experiences and assimilation into local culture, as well as feeling excited by risk taking and rejecting gendered constraints. 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. The women’s narratives shift from affirming their backpacking identities to assuring us that they are sensible woman responsible for
their own safety. Holly justifies her behaviour by claiming ‘But of course you always think….. (the worst)’. My experience of this interview and subsequent interviews, noted that Holly’s position is assumed to be received empathetically by a female interviewer and fellow traveller, as running parallel to the script of the world traveller is also the well established gendered discourse of personal safety in public spaces (Wilson et al 2009), despite this discourse being largely absent of wider, socio-political explanations. This reflects the research of Wilson et al (2009) who studied the constraints on lone female travellers. Using critical discourse analysis, Wilson argues that travel guidebooks often fuel the conflicting discourses between ‘empowerment’ and ‘fear’ for women travellers, promoting both the ‘gutsy’ travelling character whilst reminding women travellers to always exercise a degree of caution.

However the paradoxical nature of these narratives can further be linked to the shift in feminist identities discussed in texts which seek to address cross-generational feminisms. Woodward and Woodward (2009) reiterate the point that whilst there is a general assumption by young women of the third wave that gender equality has been achieved in the West, and that there are no tangible hurdles to overcome, the concrete experiences in their everyday lives present a different picture, and often feelings of inequality are internalised and obscured under the identities of ‘empowered’ and ‘lucky’ contemporary women. Indeed with regard to the above examples, we can see these feelings of fear and objectification internalised into personal guilt and confusion. Shoemaker (1997 in Drake and Leslie 1997) observes how these tensions run parallel to the aftermath of second wave feminism:
We had to be just as hard as the boys....it was precisely this contradictory message- generated by the filtration of second wave feminism through the gender backlash of the Reagan years- that has created a generation of feminists who live this same contradiction everyday of our lives. (1997: 105)

This contradiction is very much in the forefront of the above narratives, where any collective, feminist analysis is replaced with a more individualised approach to self-reflexivity and ‘messy’ narratives which are continually in flux. If we are to refer this to Elsrud's theoretical research on the masculine and 'tomboy' nature of women's travelling adventures, the independent women travellers perceive themselves to be as ‘hard as the boys’ throughout their journeys, yet encounter challenges along the way when their gender inconveniently stands in their way. In contrast to the goals of second wave feminism which sought to collate the many voices and experiences of women in order to collectively address sociological issues, the women internalise the blame for not being able to situate their feelings of injustice appropriately. One of the predominant goals of the third wave agenda is to make things 'messier' by embracing the contradictions in women’s lives (Drake and Leslie 1997) and their multiple performances with regard to femininity, yet as Woodward and Woodward warn, this can also have the subsequent effect of depoliticising seemingly personal stories.

Be that as it may, there were instances in the interview narratives where the participants tried to ease their troubled emotions and justify these responses to risk and danger, as the following quotes illustrate:
I remember particularly in Bali I would get like...people would say hi and then they would start being irritating....so I just stopped saying hello back. And I just started feeling awful because maybe they were not being obnoxious guys and just being friendly. But from very early on I thought I can't let this get to me. Because if it bothers me it's going to torture me. So it's actually something that doesn't really bother me anymore. I think you know what, maybe I am missing out on something but I can't feel bad about his, because it's better to be safe. Christa, India

And am I am like oh god am I being racist? And then it's like no! These are five men outside a bar at night in the dark I am on my own they know I'm scared! But you feel that horrible guilt.... Like am I judging you? Am I being culturally insensitive? Maybe I'm terrible! Wilma, India

Like the narratives of June and Holly, the above two examples display the emotions of guilt, shame and confusion with regard to perceiving local strangers as threatening, yet Christa and Wilma both express a sense of injustice and resentment at these feelings. Reflecting on her experience, Christa concludes that it is ‘better to be safe’ than embrace the identity of the risk taking backpacker. Although she is aware of the ‘master script’, she refuses to be ‘tortured’ by failing to fulfil the role of the gutsy and courageous travelling woman.

With regard to discussing ‘risky’ situations and their emotional responses to this risk, 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 (with the exception of Wilma) 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 uncomfortable with their privileged and powerful positions as tourists in developing countries. 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 post-colonial theory are buried within these transcripts and become apparent when we analyse what is kept unsaid. 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 in Radstone, 2000: 160).

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. Unlike earlier narratives of risk taking behaviour as bravado, here the participants downplay the
risk element in their narratives. Preferring to question if this risk is imaginary further allows participants to only use risk and danger to enhance their travel story, not to pass comment on cultural, racial and gendered dynamics in a tourist setting.

Conclusion

Risk plays both a prominent and complex role in the narratives of women travellers. Elevated as a key component in the pursuit of a hedonistic journey of self development, an element of risk is an essential part of achieving the heightened states of excitement and stimulation associated with the ‘master script’ of a successful backpacking trip. The examples of sexual behaviour which carry with them a high degree of risk are presented as part of this travelling ‘experience hunger’, identified as a key motivating factor in backpacking tourism by Richards and Wilson and Cohen, but also reflects Myers and Hannam’s assertions that women’s backpacking identities are tied into their positions as free and liberated individuals. Yet when articulated in the interview narratives, participants are able to retain control over how these stories are presented, and emphasise pleasure, enjoyment and empowerment over fear and danger. However, focusing on experiences where participants felt uncomfortable, risk is narrated in very different ways, evoking strong and conflicting emotions of guilt, confusion, anger, shame and doubt. I have referred to this multitude of seemingly opposing emotions as ‘conflict’ within the narratives of women travellers, and continue to assert that the paradoxical nature of these narratives can be linked to similar conflicts and tensions in shifting feminist identities, and reflect wider theoretical debates on cross-generational feminisms.

I argue that significant contributions can be made to the field of backpacking research, tourism and gender through an understanding of how backpacking motivations can be
amalgamated with wider feminist theories on empowerment, pleasure, fear and danger, especially with regard to female sexuality. By exploring the ongoing debates and conflicts within feminist theory itself, we can begin to not only identify how this plays out in women’s narratives of their everyday lives, but also understand how emotions are expressed (and suppressed) through this fragmented process. Elsrud and Wilson’s work has indeed begun to make significant breakthroughs in highlighting how women’s adventure and ‘gutsy’ travelling discourses intersect with geographies of fear and notions of femininity, yet closer and more analytical connections with feminism as a social movement are required. Disassociating with feminism as a movement which is directly relevant to their lives, the participants in my study preferred to present a more individualised identity where they choose the activity of travel to strengthen and enhance their personal development. The ways in which the women negotiate risk in their travels with regard to personal safety, sexual behaviour and construction of ‘the other’ notably mirrors this trend. However some narratives, such as Raquel’s reflective account of how she became aroused by dangerous motorbike rides in Cambodia, suggest a more complex relationship with risk, where the search for risky, intense and sensual experiences are desired as well as feared. Risk, therefore, simultaneously enhances and inhibits the backpacking journey.

Finally, I argue that the discourse of the ‘master script’ and the emphasis on individual female pleasure and empowerment can obscure underlying issues of racial and gendered power relations in a tourist setting, leading women travellers to internalise emotions of blame, guilt, shame and fear instead of attempting to situate how their tourist identities fit in a wider social and global context. The examples in this paper suggest that a greater awareness of the
changing character of feminism and postcolonial theory could offer future clarity to such conflicting emotions, relieving the emotional turmoil present in women’s experiences of risk both during their travelling journeys and in their future lives.

Bibliography


