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Backpackers as a Community of Strangers: The Interaction Order of an Online Backpacker Notice Board

Abstract

While commercial images of "backpacking" emphasise adventure, youth and sightseeing, recent ethnographies of backpackers identify other motivations and rationales that accentuate travel experiences as formative of the self and identity. This raises the question of the basis of this apparently common orientation. This paper investigates, through analysis of postings on an electronic backpacker notice board, "backpacker" as a collaboratively constructed category. We propose that the shared understandings of "backpacker" enabled by these notice boards are consistent with cultural orientations captured in notions of cosmopolitanism (Beck 2000) involving a shift to new forms of sociality across borders: a solidarity with strangers.

This study focuses on internet backpacker notice boards as a site for the cultural dissemination of meanings of travel and mobility that refer to backpackers' everyday experience. In seeking to understand the common orientations to self formation noted in backpacker ethnographies, we saw this focus as an opportunity to examine quasi-conversational interaction that located their orientations in specific spatio-temporal contexts. The data analysis describes the teamwork and alignment (Goffman 1971) between participants and the generation of common understandings of everyday backpacker problems, uncertainties and risks evident in the notice board interaction. We further suggest that this is providing the basis of a common culture founded on these experiences. Thus, while ethnographies of backpacking have identified the salience of self-formation in backpackers' narratives, this study provides an insight into the means by which everyday experiences come to constitute a shared orientation.

The paper first turns to an overview of ethnographies of backpacking, identifying underlying themes characterising backpacker practices and rationales. The paper then reports on an analysis of interaction on a backpacker electronic notice board,

arguing that "backpacker" is a category that potentially challenges commercial images of "backpacking".

From "Backpacking" to "Backpacker"

Much of the literature on backpackers rests on the assumption that backpackers can be identified as a group on the basis of their engagement in "backpacking". In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, backpackers are predominantly young people in the 15-25 age category.(Locker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Sorensen 2003) However these studies and others have observed the growing number of backpackers that fall into a more mature category of 26 to 44 years and noticeably a smaller percentage of people travelling from 45yrs and above who identify as backpackers (*TourismQueensland* 2003) Their increasing importance to the tourism market has been noted in Australia and internationally. The term commonly refers to a group seen as self organized pleasure tourists on a prolonged multiple destination journey with a flexible itinerary, extended beyond that which it is usually possible to fit into a cyclical holiday pattern" (Sorenson 2003: 851).

These characteristics are seen to be consistent with preferences for budget accommodation, an emphasis on meeting both locals and travellers, and on informal and participatory recreation activities (Locker-Murphy and Pearce 1995: 830-831). A study of Israeli backpackers points to the overarching importance of these characteristics in backpacker identity in spite of differences within this group. The study sought to distinguish analytically between "backpacking" as a specific form of non-institutionalised tourism and "backpackers" as a group that attribute distinctive meanings to travel (Uriely, Yonay and Simchai 2002). It found that backpackers constituted a heterogeneous group with respect to the diversity of rationales and meanings attached to their travel experiences. However, above this heterogeneity they also displayed a common commitment to a non-institutionalised form of travel, which was central to their self-identification as backpackers. If this is a more universal pattern amongst backpackers, this raises the question of a specific framework employed by this group that is salient for their common understandings of the purposes and rationales of travel.

Studies of backpacker's narratives (Desforges 1998; Cederholm 2000; Elsrund 2001) point to the existence of such a framework that coheres around principles of self-creation (Noy 2003) summarises the implications of these findings:

> They show that what lies at the core of the backpackers' stories, though often covert, is these youths' selves and identities, rather than the exciting activities and accomplishments which constitute the overt topic of narration (p. 79)

The backpacker experience is usually characterized as a self imposed transition or rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, and occurs in the time between the end of formal education and the beginning of full time employment. In the case of more mature backpackers, the experience commonly occurs in other transition periods during life course such as marriage breakdown, "mid-life" crisis or career transition. Either way the experience is a liminal one, forming a transitional experience between the end of one part of life and the beginning of another. This liminality also suggests a disconnection from conventional principles of experience within the bounds of everyday life, which makes certain behaviours like risk- taking,

uncertainty and adventure available to the backpacker more so than other tourist groups.

The liminality of the backpacker experience is important to the construction of novelty or, as Simmel (1971: 187) described it, "dropping out of the continuity of life". Backpacking differs from the generic idea of tourism or "the tourist" because the backpacker is expected to court risks purposively rather than to avoid them (Giddens 1991: 124). It is important to note here the difference between acceptable and avoided risks. Acceptable risks are those that are self- imposed and "controlled" by the individual as distinct from avoided risks that are imposed by others (Reith 2003). This logic of risk is consistent with the motivation of backpacking in terms of self - creation, constituting a way of testing and displaying the capacity to cope with risk appropriately. This has been seen as a distinguishing feature of the dispositions and practices of non-institutionalized tourist or backpacker when compared to the institutionalized tourist (Uriely, Yonay and Simchai 2002).

Thus ethnographic studies of backpackers' dispositions and rationales point to the possibility of a group habitus (Bourdieu 1984) or commonly shared dispositions, pertaining to the development of a specific kind of self, developed through controlled risks in the context of mobility. However, this raises the question of the specific nature of relationships that enable this development, and, further, the nature of the risks that provide for it. This paper now turns to an investigation of backpacker interaction on an internet backpacker notice board in order to investigate the contexts in which self formation becomes salient as a rationale for travel.

The Research context and Methodology: The Interaction Order of an on-line Backpacker Notice Board

The decision to analyse messages posted on an electronic notice board rather than their more tangible form within backpacker hostels was informed by observations conducted in a backpacker hostel. On our tour of a "newish" backpacker hostel located in an inner city area in Brisbane Australia, we were told they no longer had notice boards in the hostel as the internet provided a more superior version that could be accessed easily by backpackers all over the world. For the most part the hostel entry was quite small, with the majority of the building closed to visitors (not dissimilar to a normal hotel foyer design). The only publicly accessible areas within the hostel were the entry and the bar. The entry itself was made up of the reception desk and travel desk, two small but comfortable lounge areas and a hidden alcove behind the lounges, which housed six computers and two telephones with a toilet facility and shower close by. The computer area was the most hospitable looking section of the entry; however the concealed position indicated its use as a private space for backpackers within the hostel, despite being located within the public access area. The accessibility and homeliness of the computer area focused our attention on information and communication technologies as a central resource for backpackers.

The analysis of the notice board data was informed by the theories and methodologies related to the perspective of the Interaction Order. This perspective has been outlined by Rawls (1989) in order to gather together the theoretical and methodological insights of Goffman, Garfinkel and Sacks. While there are differences between these sociologists in terms of emphases and specific frameworks for data analysis, there are clear commonalities in their focus on a specific level of social ordering – the production of localised order. The interaction order framework takes its

name from Erving Goffman's work in describing and analysing a domain of social ordering that he asserted to warrant attention as a discrete focus of social investigation. Through numerous studies and examples, Goffman documented the way interaction in settings has a life of its own, with its own character and needs. He (Goffman 1967) provides a brief description of his case with reference to conversation as follows:

> A conversation has a life of its own and makes demands on its own behalf.
> It is a little social system with its own boundary maintaining tendencies; it is
> a little patch of commitment and loyalty with its own heroes and its own
> villains. (pp. 113-114)

Goffman's research focus ranged between some key organising principles of the interaction order: the presentational nature of the self, the capacity of selves to resist or survive the constraints of structure, the active production of interaction orders by participants (as opposed to passive responses to pre-defined goals), and the moral requirement for participants to commit to the ground rules of interaction (Rawls 1987: 136-137).

Goffman's establishment of the interaction order as a discrete level of social organisation and his focus on the situatedness of conduct was consistent with, and has frequently been used in conjunction with, studies based on the work of Harold Garfinkel in Ethnomethodology and Harvey Sacks in Conversation Analysis. Both Garfinkel and Sacks developed social analyses of the relationship between conduct and context, departing, like Goffman, from attempts to understand practices in terms of individual motivations or the constraints of social structure. In terms of Garfinkel's perspective of ethnomethodology, practices are related to their contexts reflexively – shaped by a sense of the current context and forming a component of an ongoing context which, in turn, shapes further activity. In addition to this reflexive relationship, practices are seen as indexical – drawing their meaning from the order of events in their temporal sequence (Heritage 1984).

These relationships to context are further seen in terms of the integration of normative and interpretive dimensions of action. Garfinkel's development of ethnomethodology involved bringing together insights from phenomenology concerning interpretive aspects of common experience (such as the work of Alfred Schutz), and social ordering approaches that focus on questions of the normative regulation of conduct (such as the work of Talcott Parsons). For Garfinkel, participation in settings of practice requires ongoing work of interpretation, which occurs within a framework of conventions of conduct in which participants refer to, manipulate, renew and/or change a sense of conduct appropriate to the setting. This postulate of reflexive accountability represents a major departure from "top down" explanations of social order where participants are seen as passive internalisers of a normative order imposed from above. This top down mode of theorising, according to Garfinkel, depicts actors as "judgemental dopes" because it divests them of the ability to reflect, manipulate and make moral choices (Garfinkel 1967). It fails to account for the active constitution of the social world by societal members in which they constantly renew the context to which conduct is responsive.

The other key link between social activity and context that characterises ethnomethodology and informs the interaction order framework is the postulate of the indexical nature of conduct. The term indexicality was used initially in philosophy to refer to the way in which the truth value of statements was related to the context in which the statements were used. In other words establishing the "truth" of statements

such as "Hamlet was the Prince of Denmark" involves an explication of the contextual conditions under which the assertion might be proposed to be true. Further, ordinary language was argued not to be primarily oriented to truth or precision so much as to economies of communication and conduct that rely heavily on common understandings. In the event of usage of words such as "it" "here", "she" etc., actors routinely use the context of the talk's production to identify the referent and meanings of the terms. This postulate thus focuses on the way in which conduct is based on an ongoing and common sense of the setting and the gist of interaction occurring in it.

These two postulates are fundamental to the work of Harvey Sacks in conversation analysis. For Sacks, conversation was the focus for a finegrained analysis of the way these principles of conduct are manifested in settings of practice. The turn-taking system that forms the framework for the sequential organisation of talk was identified as involving a nuanced set of conventions that are addressed and negotiated in the reflexive development of context (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). Studies of, for example, the way interruptions are dealt with illustrate the ongoing salience of participants' attention to – and negotiation of - a normative order. As overlaps in talk that often contravene principles of turn-taking, interruptions are routinely followed by standard resolution procedures but also frequently attract overt sanctions and reprimands. Further, Sacks placed significant emphasis on the nature of peoples' descriptions, and the commonly shared understandings they imply. In this respect, the ways in which utterances refer to or index meanings and experiences that are shared with other participants through lexical choice is a central focus of investigation.

The analytical focus of the interaction order perspective on *in situ* and active production of interaction, involving an emphasis on context and sequential order is suited to an investigation of backpacker dispositions and practices in the context of mobility. The organisation of interaction on backpacker online notice boards provided an opportunity to study both the sequential ordering of backpacker interaction and also, through their descriptions, the backpackers' positioning of themselves and others in terms of a travel sequence. The data were drawn from publicly available archived notice board material. These notice boards are now a common feature of backpacker websites. The key categories listed across the top of the website that was the focus of this study, indicate the overarching purpose as advertising and providing services for the burgeoning backpacker market. The categories, listed as follows included the item "noticeboard" on the right hand side of the list

Home	Accommodation	Employment	Entertainment	News & Sport	Travel	Backpacker Tools	Notice Board

Underneath these categories, in a text box on the right hand side of the home page was the following message:

> **NOTICE BOARD**
> **Questions about Australia?**
> Post a question about travelling, working, accommodation, flights, going out, concerts......Our Notice Board is a great place to find information for your holiday in Australia

The word Noticeboard is hyperlinked to the noticeboard section of the website where visitors can select from "for sale" or "general" categories. Clicking on the general category takes visitors to a page with recent posts on the noticeboard appearing in the following format:

	Topic	Author	Posted
4 replies	cask for oz	Jim	
2 replies	money for oz	Sam G	
4 replies	keeping things secure	Mel	

A key focus for the nature of many of the items posted was that they were oriented to eliciting information and advice. The topic of the question (but not the whole message) is displayed and to the left is a count of how many people have posted a reply to the topic. In order to read the question the "topic" must be "clicked on" and the reader will subsequently be shown the message and all the responses. The responses are listed in temporal order, with the most current reply posted at the top, so that the first person to respond to the message will be at the end of the list with the most recent at the beginning. Thus the replies will 'shift' downward with every posted response and the question remains the focal point of all the postings. The maintenance of a sequential and temporal order of replies also included the subsequent comments of the original questioner to those attempting to answer the question.

Goffman's insights into the way practices are oriented to the needs of the interaction order allowed for an understanding of this interaction in terms of his notion of "teams", where backpackers organised themselves into advice givers and receivers and thus in terms of a stage of travel that gave them a warrant to either seek or give advice. The sequential ordering of original postings and responses, and the nature of the descriptions embedded in them, displayed features of "quasi-conversational" interaction: possessing some features that are similar to everyday conversation and others that are also clearly oriented to other constraints, such as (in this case) the absence of a face-to-face "real time" dimension. The ordering and lexical features of the postings were thus suited to investigation based on conversation analytic principles.

The analysis of backpacker interaction using this methodological framework identified characteristics of the notice board interaction order that were important in understanding the way "backpacker" has become a category that is potentially at the centre of a social change. First, the local order of advice seeking and advice giving revealed the importance of background understandings of backpackers seeking to interact over details of everyday life. Second, this organisation formed a context for exchanges based on first and second stories. The incorporation of stories in both advice seeking and advice giving turns provided public access to the nuances of daily experiences that are the potential sources of a sense of common experiences

not necessarily captured in commercial images of "backpacking". The paper will now examine each of these aspects of notice board interaction in turn.

The sequential order and turn structure of advice seeking and advice giving

The sequential and temporal ordering of on-line advice segments displayed some key quasi-conversational features of the interaction[i]. A central feature of the normative ordering of conversation for Sacks was the turn-taking system where normally one person speaks at a time, and participants are required to monitor the ongoing sequence of talk for points at which a turn might be taken, both sequentially and in terms of the ongoing sense of the conversation. A central element of the turn-taking system for Sacks is the adjacency pair. This refers to a pair of utterances such as invitation-acceptance/refusal wherein the production of the first part of the pair - for example, an invitation – projects the response (acceptance or refusal) as a relevant next activity. In these frameworks of activity, a preference system operates such that the nature of the second parts of the pairs clearly show that some responses are perceived as preferred over others. For example, acceptance of an invitation can be quite a straightforward interactional activity. However, invitation refusals routinely contain a range of strategies that mark them as difficult, including attempts to mitigate implications of rejection or indifference. While clearly the noticeboard interaction was produced through text rather than spoken interaction, there were similarities with the normative systems in conversation as illustrated in adjacency pairs and the preference system.

Many of the questions were clearly oriented to by participants as requests for advice and the responses as provision of advice. Further, the salience of the original question in organising topic (Button and Casey 1985) the structuring of responses as second pair parts to an adjacency pair (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), and the common local understandings embedded in them, constituted a cultural form identified as a sub-domain of conversation (Schegloff 1986: 112; Sacks 1995). These features of the interaction are illustrated in the following extract:

Original Notice
Topic : Feeling a bit scared
Hi so I've literally just arrived in Oz! Checked into my hostel, they didn't have clue that I was staying there though I booked, I've been handed my linen and now I haven't got a clue what to do with Myself? There is nobody there at the moment and I'm quite worried! So I've run off to this internet café. Help me!
Responses
Topic: Finding your feet in Sydney
Getting to a new place by yourself is always a bit lonely At the start, but Sydney's a great place to start in and there are loads of others in exactly the same boat. I always get   started by chatting to people in my dorm, have made so many friends that way, its just so easy. See if there is a bit of a pub crawl going on (I know when I was in Sydney there was the Party Bus pub crawl). They're always a great way meeting people and if not get some people together and do one yourself. Don't worry though give it a couple of days you'll be settling   in no trouble. Oh and I totally agree about the sleeping bag advice, its much easier and usually warmer too. There are some great cheap army surplus stores/camping shops down the end of George st. near central station. Or try Kent street down by wanderers hostel, there's loads of outdoorsy shops there right next to each other. Anyway good luck.

> Topic: What to do
> me again Emma - if you haven't already bought blankets buy a sleeping bag instead. a lot more compact for carting around I think you were feeling a bit overwhelmed with the long flight, being tired and feeling very alone but you sound a lot happier now. Hope you find some nice friends while you are here.

The utterances above are organised into different kinds of posts on the noticeboard: an original notice and responses. In the original notice "feeling a bit scared" (a young woman) is seeking advice about what to do having arrived at a Sydney Backpacker hostel. The subsequent responses each read as the provision of advice suited to the request in the original notice. Together, the utterances display characteristics of the structure and sequential organisation of advice provision that have been well documented in conversation analytic research. The status of questioners as advice seekers and of those responding as advice providers is produced and maintained collaboratively by advice seekers' displays of knowledge deficits and an orientation to prospective respondents as sufficiently knowledgeable to provide the advice sought. Alignment to these roles in interaction and the collaboration involved is captured in Goffman's (1971) description of the work accomplished by "teams":

> A team, then, may be defined as a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained. A team is a grouping, but it is a grouping not in relation to a social structure or social organization but rather in relation to an interaction or series of interactions in which the relevant definition of the situation is maintained. (p. 69)

In this sense, the collaboration required for the organisation of the notice board interaction, as advice giving and receiving, constitutes a generic set of team activities organised locally in the context provided by the online notice board. From Goffman's perspective it involves a taken-for-granted but staged collaboration in which participants carry within themselves "something of the sweet guilt of conspirators" (Goffman 1971: 70).

However, the above example also illustrates that a more specific set of team understandings are additionally required in the organisation of a specifically *backpacker* notice board. An examination of the initial question reveals a greeting followed by the production of a "preface" to the actual advice request component of the turn:

> Hi so I've literally just arrived in Oz!

This greeting and advice preface situates the inquirer in space and time as in the early phases of Australian travel and is hearable as potentially a display of knowledge deficit warranting advice due to this spatio-temporal positioning. Following prefaces of this kind, advice-seeking turns tended to move to a story, providing a specific context in which the problem could be identified followed by a specific question/problem component. This occurred in the subsequent part of the advice-seeking turn as follows:

> Checked into my hostel, they didn't have clue that I was staying there though I booked, I've been handed my linen and now I haven't got a clue what to do with Myself? There is nobody there at the moment and I'm quite worried! So I've run off to this internet café. Help me!

The extract illustrates the scenic nature of the story about checking into the hostel in the provision of details of context. The utterance then moved to a rather non- specific call for help: "I haven't got a clue what to do with Myself?" This provided for advice that drew from a range of different options, but also displayed a tacit understanding of the kind of situation faced by 'feeling a bit scared' such that a specific kind of advice might be warranted. The replies implicitly identified her problems in terms of loneliness and also in terms of bed linen and sleeping bags, subsequently describing details of respondents' experiences of these and means of addressing them in the context of backpacker hostels. Thus, while individual notice board participants may be strangers, their online interaction constitutes them as having common access to many aspects of mundane backpacker experiences. This common access was accomplished in the context of advice exchanges as centrally organised around the provision of first and second stories. The paper now turns to an examination of these components of advice seeking and advice provision turns and the way they served to develop a sense of a common culture based on everyday backpacker experiences.

Backpackers' first and second stories

For Harvey Sacks, a story is any report of an event (Coulthard 1987). The study of stories in conversation provided an opportunity to examine the sequential management of topic and, thus, categories, in talk (Housely 2000: 426). His studies demonstrated the way in which storytelling required a high degree of collaboration between participants, involving such tasks as participants' obtaining 'the floor' and the production of response tokens (eg "mm hm"). Another key factor Sacks found to be present in these contexts was the production of "second stories" – an important means by which speakers may "tie" their utterances to previous turns. A second story functions as a strong appreciation of a previous story. Following the production of a story, one possible response is a receipt of it such as "Oh really". In place of this kind of utterance, a second story preserves key elements of the first story, exhibiting rather than simply claiming understanding of the first story (Silverman 1998). Sacks (1995) elaborates on this relationship of second to first stories in displaying mutual access to experiences:

> 'showing understanding', searching experience, 'seeing the point' …turns on the fact that the second story involves the hearer of the first turning up a story which stands as an analysis of the other, critically by virtue of that story involving the teller of the second playing a role precisely similar to the first's, for a story which is similar to the first's. In short, that the teller's place in the story is the key thing for searching ones experience, providing a strong clue as to the sort of search one should do. (p. 771)

In the backpacker notice board data, advice seeking and advice provision turns frequently contained first and second story components. This is illustrated in the following extract:

Original Message
ok....nervous as hell...am i being silly?
Leaving for OZ on the 24th of september from Vancouver Canada. I was supposed to go with a girlfriend, but she still doesnt have her birth certificate... which means no passport, and i've already postponed my flight once. Looks like im heading down under all by my lonesome. I am leaving everything behind, and with only 18 days left in canada i am feeling hella nervous. Just wonderin' if anyone has any advise or if anyone is in a simalar sinking ship...

Responses
Nervous
mary
dont be nervous. i just got here and love it. i mean, its easier said then done to say dont be nervous, but yo have no reason to be. I started making friends with people on my flight before it even left LA. eveyone you meet is gonna be a backpacker and down for doing anything. 99.999999999% of the people do it alone. a great experience, i have heard. i did it solo and y know what its kinda wierd at first but its really fun and you will be so overwhelemed with all the new fun stuff to do and people to meet you wont even think about home! im serious!! anywho my email is ……if you have any que or wanna meet up with some people when you get here. you are gonna have a great time. There is SO much fun stuff to do here and all the people are super talkative. if you can understand them that is, HAHAHA.
ps. be prepared to call everyone Mate!

thanx
thanx judith...are you flying to sydney?
im excited one minute, and nervous the next it comes in waves...but im gunna just try to roll with it. thanks again for your enthusiasm.
mary

ok....nervous as hell...am i being silly?
Hey
I just wanna tell you that you shouldn't be nervous because there are soooo many backpackers like you who are going solo. I am going alone. Im not nervous or anything. I've talked to ppl online who are on the same flight as me and to ppl who are already there. Have fun with it!
ttyl
Judith

As in the previous example, the utterances are organised into an original message which reads as an advice request and then responses that orient to the provision of the advice sought. Nervous as hell is concerned about coming to Australia on her own and the responses offer supportive advice and encouragement. It is important to note at this point that again the advice is being sought by a young woman and also that her concerns are consistent with those of "feeling a bit scared" with respect to being alone in a strange place. In the original message "nervous as hell […]" produces a first story that provides the context for her nervousness:

> Leaving for OZ on the 24th of september from Vancouver Canada. I was supposed to go with a girlfriend, but she still doesnt have her birth certificate... which means no passport, and i've already postponed my flight once. Looks like im heading down under all by my lonesome. I am leaving everything behind, and with only 18 days left in canada i am feeling hella nervous.

This story component of the turn is then followed by a request for advice. In the advice provision turns following the original message the following second stories appeared:

> I started making friends with people on my flight before it even left LA. eveyone you meet is gonna be a backpacker and down for doing anything. 99.999999999% of the people do it alone. a great experience, i have heard. i did it solo and y know what its kinda wierd at first but its really fun and you will be so overwhelemed with all the new fun stuff to do and people to meet you wont even think about home! im serious!!

> I just wanna tell you that you shouldn't be nervous because there are soooo many backpackers like you who are going solo. I am going alone. Im not nervous or anything. I've talked to ppl online who are on the same flight as me and to ppl who are already there. Have fun with it!

The "tying" principles at work in the first and second stories in the above example provide for an identification of the cultural commonalities that are developed through this sequence. The stories embedded in advice provision also contain components that attest to experiences that provide a warrant for the expertise required for this provision: One respondent "started making friends with people on [his] flight before it even left LA", and another has "talked to ppl online who are on the same flight as me and to ppl who are already there". However, a key element in the relationship between the first story and its seconds is their displays of access to the experience of travelling alone. In the original message, the fragment "Looks like im heading down under all by my lonesome" is met with the respondents' "I did it solo and y know what its kinda weird at first but its really fun" and "I am going alone. Im not nervous or anything." The design of the original message and the subsequent advice thus work to construct a sense of experience in common and a sense of affiliation in attempting to alleviate the "nervousness" of "nervous as hell…", through descriptions of positive experiences of solo travel.

Conclusion: Cosmopolitanism and Communities of Strangers

While ethnographies of backpacking have identified the salience of self-formation in backpackers' narratives, this study of an internet backpacker notice board has provided an insight into the means by which everyday experiences come to constitute a group habitus. Our initial observations in a backpacker hostel suggested that Information and Communication Technologies appeared to be serving as very important communication tools for backpackers. This study provides preliminary evidence that this has enabled the establishment of a specific form and content of backpacker interaction that allows for broad cultural sharing of everyday backpacker experiences. The online notice board provided "just in time", quasi-conversational interaction for backpackers to share experiences and information. The data analysis has suggested that the teamwork and alignment between participants and the highly contextual, local understandings of everyday backpacker problems, uncertainties and risks evident in the notice board interaction is providing the basis of a common culture founded on these experiences.

In this way, the advice exchanges revealed the fine details of everyday backpackers' experiences, which could potentially constitute a culturally shared means of typifying the practices and dilemmas of backpackers

Through the ready availability of Information and Communication Technologies, backpackers have common access to fellow backpackers' stories about mundane issues of survival in the context of unfamiliar or culturally strange surroundings. Sociologically, this takes on a particular cultural significance when we consider that it is taking place across national boundaries and occurring between "strangers". This significance has been articulated by Ulrich Beck in his description of the move to a cosmopolitan perspective (Beck 2000) that replaces earlier forms of modernity based on the salience of the nation state for identity. For Beck, cosmopolitanism owes much to changing patterns of mobility and migration, which produces new bases of solidarity described as solidarity with strangers. This paper illustrates the way information and communication technologies have facilitated the development of this form of solidarity. It has enabled a culturally shared understanding of the category "backpacker" that potentially challenges commercial images of "backpacking". In Sacks's terms we are possibly witnessing "a shift in the rules for application of a category" (Sacks 1992: 14). The exchanges provide collective access to an expanding array of dispositions and practices associated with the "backpacker", where "feeling a bit scared", "nervousness" about travelling alone, and "finding your feet" in a strange city come to be heard as attributes associated with this category.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

i   While the data selected was oriented to sampling backpackers' online interaction, the extracts presented in this paper were screened for any obviously sensitive material. While the interaction was posted in a publicly available domain, it was still considered important to protect identities of participants in the research context. Thus the name and internet address of the specific notice board and the dates and actual names contained in the extracts have been deleted or changed.

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