

Livin' the dream: working and playing in a ski resort

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Abstract

Backpacking has become a popular geographical topic. Many studies, however, seem to only look at young people who travel around countries such as Australia to escape entering either further education or the workplace. This paper aims to broaden these definitions by looking specifically at young budget travellers who work their way around the world. Focussing on research undertaken in Whistler, B.C., Canada this paper aims to explore how narratives of self are defined as much by a naivety of the travelling experience as by the desire to have an adventure. The paper will go on to argue that company culture plays a larger role in this self-narrative than many of these young people realise. This will be illustrated by looking at the ways in which their work often becomes performance before going on to discuss the ways in which these young people can either resist these experiences or utilise them in order to enhance their cultural capital. This paper will conclude by arguing that current popular views on backpackers are often too simplistic and that the role of work within these young peoples travels needs to be taken into account in order to understand how these young people see their work and travelling experiences as a way of expanding career and life chances.

Introduction

'Livin' the dream' (see Keane and Brown, 2003) is a phrase you hear quite often in Whistler. It is the type of saying that the employers use; live the dream; work hard, play harder; we work to play; our employees come first. But are the employees actually doing that? Living the dream? Perhaps more importantly the question is what are they doing here and what do they want to get out of their time working and playing in Whistler – besides, of course, the free ski pass and the discounts on food, beer and equipment? My aim today is to begin to consider what roles do work and company culture play in the lives of the young people who go to Whistler for a winter season.

Whistler is located some 75 miles north of Vancouver in British Columbia on the West Coast of Canada. The resort grew up in the 1960's as a result of local businessmen's dreams of holding the 1968 winter Olympics there¹. It is a town that consists of about 10,000 permanent residents, a figure that can quadruple during the winter season as the town employs young people from all over the world to cater for the crowds of tourists who come to ski the 7000 plus acres of ski-able terrain or travel up the gondola to look out over

¹ The bid for the 1968 Winter Olympics was unsuccessful, as were similar bids for the 1972 and 1976 Olympics (Christie, 2000). The area however, did not give up and Vancouver and Whistler were awarded the 2010 Winter Olympics on July 1st (Canada Day) 2003.

the mountains. During the winter season of 2002-2003 I undertook qualitative research in Whistler, looking specifically at those young budget travellers who are undertaking work in the time they are spending away from home; as Uriely and Reichel (1998: 268) define them, 'working tourists'.

The Working Tourist

'Working tourist' is just one phrase that can be used for the group of young people I have been looking at. The more common phrase both in academia and within society is, of course, backpacker and there are many other phrases in common usage such as, young budget traveller, the Big OE, the year out, the gap year. The body of literature on these young people has grown considerably over the last few years (see for instance, Loker-Murphy and Pearce, 1995; Murphy, 2000; Richards and Wilson, 2003; Sørensen, 2003; Clarke, 2004; Noy, 2004). However, these terms still tend to be problematic as they do not represent a tightly defined phenomenon and so can be seen as ambiguous (Jones, 2004b). To illustrate this, I want to show you a few definitions.

'a gap year in general can be defined as any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes 'out' from formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory'

Andrew Jones (2004b: 8)

Review of Gap Year Provision

(Report for the Department for Education and Skills)

'Both popularly and in the research literature, backpackers are most often characterized as self-organized pleasure tourists on a prolonged multiple-destination journey with a flexible itinerary, extended beyond that which is usually possible to fit into a cyclical holiday pattern.'

Anders Sørensen (2003: 851),

'Backpacker Ethnography', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30(4)

'Backpackers, ..., are young and budget-minded tourists who exhibit a preference for inexpensive accommodation, an emphasis on meeting other people (locals and outsiders), an independently organized and flexible itinerary, longer than brief vacations, and an emphasis on informal and participatory recreational activities'

Laurie Murphy (2000: 50-51)

'Exploring Social Interactions of Backpackers', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 28(1)

(This definition is also in Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995: 830-830), Murphy has expanded it slightly by added 'young and budget minded tourist')

'the term 'backpacker' is well-known and accepted by the tourism industry, travelers and the community as a description of predominantly young budget tourists on extended holiday or working-holiday'

Laurie Loker-Murphy & Philip L. Pearce (1995: 819)

'Young Budget Travelers: Backpackers in Australia', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 22(4)

The problem with these definitions – and yes, they do begin to provide us with a picture of who we might be talking about – is that they are not specific. What age are these young people², how long do they go away for, are these important questions to ask? And do their reasons for travelling and working vary? Can we not simply lump all together under the term young budget travellers or backpacker? Another point is what they define themselves as. According to Richards and Wilson (2003), young people often refer to themselves as 'travellers' rather than 'backpackers'. Of the two and a half thousand young people they surveyed, only a third called themselves 'backpackers' whilst over half considered themselves travellers (ibid, 2003: 16)³.

Not only is there not then a definitive definition of what a young budget traveller or backpacker is (or perhaps is not) thus making it difficult to try and compare studies that have been done on these young people (see Carr, 1998). But also, only one of the definitions above mentions work. Yet, how many young people do not, at some point on their travels, undertake some kind of work, either paid or voluntary (for some exceptions see Uriely and Reichel, 1998; Wyn and Willis, 2001; Simpson, 2003; Clarke, 2004). And, as Howy put forward earlier, there is this a semantic confusion in the phrase 'working holiday' and 'working tourist' (see Abram and Waldren, 1997).

² Carr (1998) suggests that age in itself can no longer define this type of travel. He says, 'the term young [when related to tourism] may be seen to describe 'aspects of a person's social position which are partially caused by age, but not completely determined by it' (Clarke, 1992 cited in Carr, 1998: 313).'

³ They do point out that this self-designation tended to change with travel experience (Richards and Wilson, 2003: 16).

Media Interpretations

Before I go on to talk more about the role of work for young budget travellers, I want to quickly show you some quotes from various media sources.

'[t]aking a Gap Year is a great opportunity for young people to broaden their horizons, making them more mature and responsible citizens. Our society can only benefit from travel which promotes character, confidence, decision-making skills'

Jack Straw, U.K. Foreign Secretary (cited in Hogg, 2001:1)

'We at UCAS believe that by adding the experience of a planned year out to their qualifications students actively improve their chances of successfully completing a course. Quite simply experience complements education. Universities and colleges widely recognise the potential benefits of taking a year out which, when well-organised, extend into later life.'

Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive of the U.K. University and College Admission Service (UCAS) <http://www.yearoutgroup.org> (last accessed 10 August 2004)

'What better way to sample another country than through an extended working stay, during a long summer vacation, or for up to a year in some countries. Taking part in a BUNAC programme has changed lives and affected career choices. It has the potential to be one of the most fun, rewarding, exciting and challenging things that you will ever do'.

BUNAC, <http://www.bunac.org/uk/default.aspx> (last accessed 10 August 2004)

'A work abroad experience is a fantastic way to enjoy an extended holiday and gain an entirely new perspective on life. When you live in another country, you are immersed in a new culture and grow to appreciate the day-to-day flavours of the people and customs. Working and travelling abroad is also an impressive addition to your résumé. For a Canadian employer, foreign work experience of any sort shows that you are flexible and independent, open to challenges and interested in the world. Your foreign employment, whether or not it is related to your field of study, complements your academic experience and make you a more interesting job candidate upon your return'.

SWAP, <http://www.swap.ca/english/html/faqs/> (last accessed 10 August 2004)

These quotes obviously promote the positive side of a year out. Both BUNAC⁴ (British Universities North American Club) and its Canadian counterpart, SWAP (Student's Working Abroad Programme) promote the work aspect of the time abroad in conjunction with the

working holiday visas they provide to young people. It is also worth noting that in the case of BUNAC, they have recently changed the rules. Previously, you had to be registered on a full-time educational course in the UK to be eligible to take part in BUNAC schemes – particularly in Canada. Now, the age limit has been increased from 29 to 35 and you no longer have to be a student. To me, this reflects to some extent, the changing profile of who is going travelling⁵.

Then on to the newspapers.

“Official: gap year travel is just one long holiday”

Mark Prigg in The Evening Standard, 5th September, 2003⁶

“Mind the gap: most gap-year students fail to learn anything about different cultures”

Michael Roberts in The Guardian G2 section on 9th September, 2003

“Topless models, nightclubs and a visit to a brewery ... so much for Prince Harry’s ‘mind improving gap year!’”

Richard Kay in The Daily Mail on 7th February, 2004

Andrew Jones’ recent report for the Department of Education and Skills suggests that it is what you do in a year away that is important and it can be, he says, ‘a key to success in later life’ (Jones, 2004a, see also Curtis, 2004). He suggests that for some graduate employers, taking a gap year is seen as beneficial as the work and life experience gained differentiates them from other graduates (Jones, 2004b: 61). With this, however, he also notes that little research has been done on the benefits of working on your year out and stresses that whilst there is evidence that gap year activities can improve employability for certain graduate sectors, this is not always the case for those young people going back into employment or entering further training schemes. It is also worth noting, and I am sure many of you saw this article in The Guardian on Wednesday (Manzoor, 2004), that gap years are still dominated by white, middle class, well-educated young people.

⁴ BUNAC is a registered charity and has been established for more than 40 years.

⁵ This comment is based on the interviews I collected, my own observations while in Whistler and talking to employers and local residents. The people I interviewed tended to be in their early twenties, about half having come straight from university, but the other half had been working for a period of time before deciding to travel. This was confirmed by the Human Resources manager at Whistler Blackcomb who said ‘certainly in terms of applicants they’re getting a little bit older, a little bit more mature, they come to us with more experience, life experience, more education...’.

⁶ Some readers may remember this headline as the article talked to Kate Simpson about her work on gap years. She had presented her paper at the 2003 RGS-IBG conference held in London.

What is it about Whistler?

I want to suggest that for some young Brits, or Australians, Irish, or Kiwi's travelling to Canada is, sometimes, a comfortable option. The tourism motivational literature tends to see the reasons for travel revolving around motivational points such as the need to escape the every day for purposes of relaxation, or the ability to discern new places, exotic peoples, authentic nature and most importantly to my research, the need to discover the self (see Boussavain 2002; Ryan 1997). Looking again at Richards and Wilson's (2003) report on youth and student travel, they find that exploring other cultures, experiencing excitement and increasing knowledge are most important to the young people surveyed. Canada, for some young people, allows them to experience all of the challenges of travelling abroad without worries about language barriers or cultural differences⁷. As one of my respondents said, 'I think Canada as a whole has a reputation for being a very safe, friendly country'. If we can say 'the life of one's own is an experimental life' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002 cited in Conradson and Latham, forthcoming: 12), then travelling to, in this instance, Whistler, does not demand that things get too experimental (see Conradson and Latham, forthcoming: 12)⁸. This was one of things I was trying to find out in my interviews. Was Whistler first on people's list of possible destinations, and why?

Interviewer: Do you think that idea that it's not that culturally like diverse is, is one of the reasons that people come here or maybe start here?

Respondent: I suspect that has something to do with it, ..., the kind of travel pattern that I kind see most amongst that group is that they go from here and then to Africa. Right? Or they might jump off and go to South America. But usually they're coming here to go to North America and then they travel to Europe. So it is almost an easier stop to come, get work, speak the language and then, you know, hopefully keep some money in the bank to keep on travelling a little bit. Yah, so that may be part of it. Um, and we often hear the complaint, you know, I'm here and still surrounded by

⁷ I have phrased this in terms of challenges. It has been suggested that encountering danger and hardship are now necessary parts of a year out (see Trinh, 1994; Sørensen, 2003), becoming part of this self-imposed rite of passage. Various newspaper articles (Harris, 2003; Roberts, 2003) discuss courses that are now being run to prepare young people for their year away. The awareness of the risks and challenges to young budget travellers has increased greatly since September 11th 2001, and especially since the bombing of a nightclub in Bali in October, 2002 (see also Atherton, 2003 and Bartley, 2003).

⁸ Travelling away from home can be seen as an adventure and risk-taking exercise for these young people. It is about pushing the boundaries of and about themselves and disrupting their normal everyday lives (see Elsrud, 2001; Heald, 2003). One reason I am suggesting Canada can be an 'easy option' is about the different perceptions of the risks young people take. For some working and living in Whistler is the adventure; for others, it is a way to earn money, or gain travel experience, in order to go have the adventure elsewhere – South America, Asia, the UK or Australasia for instance.

Australians but I think that is an appeal for them right. Like that they, it's almost a rite of passage perhaps now in Australia. Where you need to come to Whistler and do that.

For a number of respondents, they came to Canada because they had friends or relatives nearby. This gave them some security upon arrival, often somewhere to stay until they decided what they wanted to do and where they wanted to be. Lisa⁹ had friends who lived in Pemberton, which is about half an hour north of Whistler. She said 'At first I didn't really class myself as a backpacker as I had friends in Pemberton who came to get me from Vancouver and who I lived with for the first month I was in Canada.' William only came to Canada because he had spent a year in California on a university exchange programme and Canada was the closest he could get when he took a time out after completing his degree. In actual fact, he found his time in Canada disappointing, but as he says, 'that is probably because I had to work instead of being a student who could party all the time.' Robert, on the other hand, decided to come to Canada because, 'at the time I thought I don't want to be a tourist and go and travel and see things, I want to just live somewhere else for a while and see what, that and just kind of think what I want to be doing irrespective of everything back at home,'. For a number of others I talked to, their time away was time out of a career. Eva had been a supervisor in a computer company before deciding to travel with her boyfriend. She felt that she could take a year or two away from her career – basically put it on hold – to fulfil this desire to see some of the rest of the world. But, in order to finance the rest of her trip, she had to work while she was away.

Company Culture?

Whistler is first and foremost, a internationally recognised resort¹⁰. The resort's biggest employer, Intrawest at Whistler Blackcomb, employs approximately 4,000 people every winter season¹¹ to look after the two million plus visitors that make their way to the town. This recognition is something the company strives towards and they see part of that coming from recruiting the right sort of people and providing the right sort of experiences – for both their guests and their staff. There is a recognition that the young people who

⁹ 'Lisa' and all other respondent names used in this paper are pseudonyms. My interviews were conducted with Australians, Canadians and Brit. In this paper I have used quotes from the British young people I interviewed (Lisa, William, Robert and Eva). Rachel and Byron are both Canadian and worked and lived in Whistler.

¹⁰ Whistler has been acclaimed number one ski resort in North America at least seven times in the last decade in various ski magazines (Employee Handbook 1999-2000).

¹¹ Summer employment by the same employer drops to under 1,000, of which year round employees (permanent staff) make up about 800 of these positions.

come to Whistler want more than a ski season; Byron, in Employee Experience says, 'youth today ... are looking for total life experience so when they come to a ski resort they're not really taking a year off to learn how to ski, they want something that will still fill their resume or prove positive in terms of life experience'. He goes on to say, 'I think that part of that positive attraction working for Whistler/Blackcomb and Intrawest, to a degree because of Whistler/Blackcomb being number one for so long, looks good on a resume regardless of the position you have so kind of adds to that life balance that they're looking for'.

He believes that, as a company, they are providing a certain type of experience. He says, 'for that young group, it is life skills, it's how do I take care of myself, how do I pay the bills, how do I pay the rent, how do I budget, make sure I have enough money for food, you know, plus a little after for beer...., how do I live up to company expectations right? How do I come to work hung over, alright, I'm not going to do that too, too often. Um, it's all that young growing up stuff and I don't think many of them realise they're working for a company with real distinct values, right? I think that they get a sense of again, what a valued company can offer up like. So, that they have a perception that they are valued and ... that we work by those and make decisions by those values and hopefully they ... get some life experience and life skills and friendships and something that they can take away'. He also says, 'in terms of actually career development, like, let's make no mistake, like a one season lift operator, isn't going to add a huge amount to their resume other than the operational specific stuff but they should at least have some guest service philosophies patterned into their head that will be very valuable wherever they go. So it's very simple and um, very correct in the way they are applied so, hopefully they get that, the guest service component as well as some operational expertise; and all the relationships and fun stuff that comes from being in the best resort in the world'.

It is not just however, about providing that experience for the young budget traveller. As Rachel says, 'we are looking for somebody with the right attitude. It's pretty simple. That's really it. Doesn't really matter what kind of education or background they have because the majority of the time we are not going to be able to match that experience with a position given that most of our jobs are front line entry level jobs and so attitude is the big thing,

right? Um, we're looking for somebody who, who really wants to create an experience for our guests and who enjoys doing so. You know, somebody who genuinely cares'¹².

This leads me back to that oxymoronic phrase, 'working holiday'. As Urry (1990) says in the first edition of *The Tourist Gaze*, tourism presupposes its opposite, work. So then, how can a young person working and travelling have a pleasurable holiday experience? There are numerous debates that could be had on this subject; working for some, is seen as a necessary hardship but as I have begun to suggest, one that will add to their cultural capital and employability. It adds to the personal narratives they construct through their working and travelling experiences, regaling others with work related stories and later use these same stories to construct a successful work self. For many others, working in a ski resort is 'fun' in itself. Whistler Blackcomb used to use the phrase 'work hard, play harder'¹³. The boundaries between work and play become blurred. Byron confirmed this when he said, 'Yes, ..., there is a Whistler Blackcomb culture which ... you know, revels in the fact that we're made of a bunch of different groups ... in the sense that it's laid back, it's friendly, it's personable, it's not pretentious, um in that atmosphere I think, does cause a blurring of the lines, and even the way people are scheduled, four on, three off, there's a balance between work and play for most of the front line folks where you know the same people they're working with are probably the group they're living close to in Residence and probably the group they're riding and skiing with on their days off. But, yah I think it really does blur. We also preach that right, fun in workplace?'. For the young people who come to Whistler, they not only produce a product, an experience; they also consume this same product. The boundaries between work and enjoyment no longer can be seen as clear cut and so, are porous (see Baranowski and Furlough 2001; Crick 1985). In my interview with Rachel, she talks about this blurring by saying, 'we expect people to still be a representative of Whistler/Blackcomb on their days off so it's not like you can take your uniform off and then just go out there and, and do insane crazy things'.

Company culture is almost trying to suggest that these young people are not really working at all (see Urry, 1990; Grugulis et al, 2000). By emphasising personality and talent traits in

¹² The recruitment process for Whistler Blackcomb is quite complex. All applicants must have a Canadian work authorization, this applies to both paid and voluntary positions. They fill in an on-line application form. They can then pre-book a screening interview which determines if the applicant is a 'company fit' – the questions are based around the company's core values and are all behavioural based. If the applicant passes this stage then they will be put forward for the the job they want to apply for. At the beginning of a winter season, the ratio of applicants to positions available is usually about 1 in 4.

¹³ The parent company Intrawest, now promote the phrase, 'we work to play'.

the recruiting process, companies utilise and 'sell' their employees' personalities as part of the tourism package (see Crang, 1997) which these same employees consume when they are not producing that package. They are as often the tourist – using the mountains, spending time in the bars and restaurants, shopping, going to the cinema - , as they are the worker. This leads to a number of further points. Firstly, this almost policing of a particular type of labour – performative labour in many ways – does give rise to resistance. Whistler Blackcomb has a grooming policy and within reason, it is enforced. It covers everything from what size earrings can be worn (for both males and females) to how long sideburns can be. Yet, both as resistance to this policing of behaviour and as a way of defining membership to young travel culture (however this is defined), some young people adopt radical hairstyles and colours, numerous piercings, tattoos, and certain types of clothing.¹⁴ Secondly, and a point I have touched on only briefly here, is that work can be a way of defining the self. Studies have looked at how travelling experiences affect these young people's perceptions of self (see Desforges 1997, 2000; Noy, 2004). What I want to suggest is that the work they undertake can also affect their construction and perception of self. When I asked my interviewees how their work experiences affected how they perceived themselves and how they felt it would affect their future life chances, a number of my respondents said they had not yet had time to reflect on this. Yet, one respondent, Neil, told me how he intended to take advantage of all the training course Whistler Blackcomb had to offer because he saw them as very useful additions to his CV, realising that this type of experience could affect his future personal and professional life chances. Through talking to so many people about my research, both in Whistler and in the UK, I have heard about young people who have been given interviews because they used to work at Whistler Blackcomb. I have heard of a few people who carefully considered who to work for in order to match up their personal ethics and views with like-minded companies. This was after working for Whistler Blackcomb and appreciating the values they promoted. I have also heard of young people who do not feel they have used their Canadian work experiences in any way until they've been called upon to do a presentation, or take part in a corporate event.

¹⁴ Although the company grooming policy is set out for everyone to see, policing it is often more difficult. Some managers and supervisors are more diligent about enforcing it than others, some see certain rules as flexible (when they are not), and others do not enforce it at all. For instance, dreadlocks hidden under a hat may be acceptable in certain departments. Clear tongue rings are popular amongst staff in order to hide the piercing (although, if the staff member has the unfortunately habit of playing with this piercing, it is often an unsuccessful tactic), hair is often grown longer than the policy stipulates (especially if fashion dictates that longer hair is 'in'), and members of staff often wear more than the stipulated number of earrings per ear.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I know I have only just scratched the surface on many of the points I have raised today. What I do think is important to stress is that taking time out before continuing with education or a career has changed quite significantly over the past decade or so. Compared to the hedonistic 60s and 70s (see Cohen 1972, 1973, 1979, Vogt, 1976) it has become much more institutionalised and corporate (see Simpson, 2003). The growth of many of the volunteer gap year companies has provided structure, security and back up to what was previously seen as an unstructured, exploration of other places, peoples and cultures. I do not think this takes away from the benefits of this type of experience. Classing what young people learn as 'soft skills' means they are often hard to pin down, they come back with comments like Lisa's, 'my self confidence has grown since travelling' or my favourite, William's, 'I went from having no confidence to being what I am now. Although I have yet to become a ladykiller, I am not shy and can interact happily and easily in any social environment.' What I think we need to do now, is explore in more detail who is going travelling – is this type of travel limited to 'the bourgeoisie of the West' (Elsrud: 1998: 330), is it still only undertaken by affluent middle-class kids (Jones, 2004a)? Are young people who have just begun to climb the career ladder as likely to take a year out as those between school and university or those between university and career? And more importantly, we need to consider the role of work in their experiences. How does working for a customer-orientated company such as Whistler Blackcomb affect their future career? Do they see and want to take advantage of the transnational possibilities opening up before them? I think that this temporary and highly mobile transnational work force is very worthy of study and my research aims to begin to consider some of the points and questions I have raised here. To me, there is still so much more to discover and learn about young budget travellers and I look forward to being part of that future. Thank you.

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