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Because I Can, So I'm Going To: Solo Female Travelers and the Absence of Constraints

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Because I Can, So I'm Going To:
Solo Female Travelers and the Absence of Constraints

Research on female travel has largely examined the topic through a lens of constraints, constraint negotiation, and later, the benefits of leisure and travel for women. This body of research provide an in depth understanding of the constraints women experience, negotiation strategies, and the benefits a travel experience ultimately provides the women.

Following both the constraints models suggested by Jackson and Crawford (1991) as well as Wilson and Little (2005), research has examined how women experience and negotiate constraints to travel. Studies specifically interested in women's travel used Wilson & Little's more tailored framework. Constraints there include; sociocultural, such as gender roles and expectations; personal limitations, such as lack of confidence or belief in ones ability to travel solo; practical constraints, like lack of money or knowledge of the area; and what they call spatial constraints, which refers to lack of safety.

Regarding socio-cultural constraints, studies have found that women feel a sense of guilt about neglecting their commitment to others, such as their spouse or children, when they solo travel. This could come from women feeling a sense of an ethic of care and tend to place the needs of others above their own (Harris & Wilson, 2007; Little, 2002; Warren, 1996). With regard to personal limitations, research has found that women may lack knowledge, or the confidence or ability to navigate foreign lands, (Fendt & Wilson, 2012; Hudson, 2000). (Spatial constraints are addressed in part of this study, thus not discussed in this literature review).

Despite these constraints, an increasing number of women travel alone, especially retired American baby boomers, and young 20somethings seeking 'authentic experiences' before they settle down (hospitalitynet.org). Market research by various travel companies also indicates a growing solo female travel trend. Google keys word data indicates a 52% increase in searches for "solo female travel" between 2016 and 2017 (TrekSoft, 2018). The tour company *VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacations* reported that 68% of its travelers in 2016 were solo females, and *Country Walkers* reported that same demographics accounted for 87% of its clients (Lippe-McGraw, 2017).

Women may continue to seek solo leisure in spite of – or perhaps motivated by – constraints, and the benefits they believe such travel could bring. Studies have found that women travel solo in order to feel self-determined and autonomous, to meet new people, challenge themselves, feel empowered, self-reliant, to extend themselves beyond their comfort zone, for a sense of individuality, and for personal growth (Chiang & Jongaratnam, 2006; Durko & Stone, 2017; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010; Wearing, 1990; Wilson & Little, 2005; 2008).

Yet looking at women's leisure through the lens of constraints and as limited by gendered, social or structural norms and has to be negotiated, assumes there are still unmovable, oppressive structures in place and that women have and always will be, subjects of oppression. While important to understand constraints, it is a limiting lens. Poststructuralist feminist philosophy suggests that power is located throughout relationships, not as a top down structure. This assumes that power is within and part of everyone, which means women have agency and power, as well as cannot remove themselves from power dynamics or relationships (Beal, 2018). In contrast to critical feminism, which sees power as an issue of access to and control of resources and thus change happens when access and control change, post-structuralism sees social change as coming from the creation of different discourses in which power is "more diffuse, fluid and contextually bound," in which "a multitude of gendered subjectivities are legitimated," (Beal, p.235)

A shift from looking at women's travel from a critical feminist perspective to a poststructuralist perspective means moving away from research focused on constraint negotiation (presumably under patriarchal, gendered expectations and norms) to one of a dynamic discourse in which women recreate themselves through dialog, in which their self is fluid depending on context, and they are equal in creating power dynamics and relationships.

Some research on women's travel has sought to do this. Recent studies have examined women's travel experiences and focused not on constraints but on empowerment. Harris and Wilson (2007) suggest acknowledging, but that women should also "be seen as active participants who make their own choices and actions, rather than as passive victims of circumstance and constraint" (p. 240). In the mid-2000s, several studies looked at women's leisure purely from a standpoint of empowerment. Wilson and Harris examined women's "search for self" in travel; Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely (2013) looked at women's sexual behaviors as empowerment while on holiday; and McNamara and Prideaux (2013) suggested a typology of solo female travelers, and their findings did not support previous research that solo female travelers were fearful, cautious, and unadventurous. They found that when solo females viewed a destination as safe, they were more likely to plan a trip there, and engage in (usually physical) risk-taking activities.

The current study sought to understand how women perceive themselves in their travel – are they operating from a critical feminist stance – in which oppressive systems and constraints must be negotiated – or if they operate from a poststructuralist place – one of agency and action, aware of their own power and co-creating power dynamics in their travel experiences.

Method

Drawing from a poststructuralist approach to research, this study listened to women's voices as they talked about their gendered experiences in travel. Discourse is at the heart of poststructuralism, and through writing, actors can generate new life forms, disrupt old meanings, and "eclipse the gendered discourses and regulatory practices through which we are constituted," (Davies & Gannon, 2009, p. 319). Writing and reading are pathways to agency, and are ways to resist, subvert and breakdown old discourses, and thus social structures and processes. Writing and discussing to create a new discourse leads to greater agency and "a recognition of one's love of, immersion in and indebtedness to that discourse, and also a fascination with the capacity to generate life," (p. 319).

With this poststructuralist approach, data for this study were gathered from the ongoing comments of solo female travelers who participate in a very active Facebook Group; Solo Female Travelers Network. With 184,600 members from around the world, except China, where Facebook is restricted, women share their stories, ask questions, and seek guidance about solo travel, from other solo female travelers. Questions range from a simple 'should I ask my Airbnb host to turn up the heat,' to a middle of the night post looking for a safe place to stay when the hostel became unsafe for the woman.

Looking at posts from the past 18 months, discussion threads were selected that addressed the study purpose. As recent research suggests studying female travel from a frame of empowerment rather than constraint, the topics selected for analysis were broad, and related to: 1) why women travel solo, 2) what social identity they create when locating their actions in a social world, 3) how they experience the 'ethic of care' their family and friends (usually worried parents) claim on them, and 4) what advice they give other women who want to travel solo.

Discussion threads (total of 275 comments) were copied to a spreadsheet and each idea in a comment was coded, per Charmaz's *initial coding* approach. *In vivo* terms were used in the first phase to identify all ideas, then *focused coding* was applied to select and re-name the most apparent and frequently occurring codes into broader themes. Student assistants also coded portions of the data to cross-check the authors findings. The author and students discussed themes, agreed on meanings, and chose quotations to best illustrate each theme.

Results

Why Solo Travel

When asked the simple question of 'why do you travel solo,' the most common response was not 'empowerment,' or 'independence,' as the literature suggests. For most women, they traveled solo was because they did not have or could not find a partner, or the partner dropped out of planned travel.

Comments from 75 women (~3,700 words) to the question 'why do you travel solo' were analyzed. The major theme that emerged was because they did not have a travel partner, and this was often viewed as a positive, motivating, or empowering factor. Women expressed ideas of not wanting to "wait around for others" in order to do something personally exciting and interesting. Sometimes the lack of an available partner had to do with logistics, such as trip timing or cost, but other times it had to do with lack of friends or partners with a similar interest in place or activities. So the women went alone. Lack of a partner became a very empowering and freeing experience.

"I simply travel alone because none of my friends want to. I refuse to pass up opportunities for the fact that I won't have company."

The women did not see lack of a partner as a constraint. Sometimes it was by chance, other times by very intentional choice to go solo:

I like to have my own schedule, to decide by myself what I want to visit and where I want to eat, when I want to wake up in the morning and when to go to sleep etc, without feeling bound to another person's preferences. It's not that I haven't enjoyed travelling with friends, but you can't compare it to the freedom of solo travelling!

Other responses stemmed from desires for personal growth and strength. Solo travel provided a challenge and freedom. Some women specifically said solo travel was very empowering, though they did not define the term. For some, empowerment seemed related to the need to feel empowered at home or more independent in their own lives.

"Independence, seeing the world, taking control of my life, wanting to learn and grow, challenging myself."

"It is just amazing, its empowering. It gives you a different perspective and you become more aware of your surroundings and of yourself. You can feel the culture and place's vibe much better."

Social Identity/ Social Role

For the topic of 'how do you explain or justify your travel to others, 85 comments were analyzed (~1,600 words). The overwhelming response was that this question was problematic - why would she need to explain or justify anything to anyone? "Don't" was often the response.

"I don't. I enjoy it, so I do it,"

Others explained further why they don't feel the need to explain their behavior.

"I don't explain anything. I don't owe anyone an explanation. What I do with MY time is purely my choice and no one else has a say in that. The moment I stopped caring what others had to say about my life choices, the happier I became."

Second to not needing to explain their reasons for travel was a theme of travel as essential to living a full, rich life, part of their essence as humans, and provided a lifeforce that kept them going.

"Why do you breathe? Oh because it makes you feel alive? Yeah... that's why I travel!"

"I tried to explain it once... that it is part of who I am and if I didn't travel, I would feel like a part of my life was missing... they didn't get it, so now I don't bother explaining."

Other women offered a more specific response. Most were about travel providing excitement, change, novelty or adventure that was largely missing from their everyday lives.

“My life is so annoying when I don't travel that I would die because I'm so bored. I don't smoke. I don't go out, I have no kitchen high tech material, I save everything I can just to feel alive while traveling.”

Because I can, so I'm going to - I wanna love life, explore the world! Meet new people, see breathtaking sights, dig deep in to history and just wonder/get lost!!

Ethic of Care (from others)

The next topic examined was how women experience an ethic of care (worry) put on them by their parents. Women asked how they appeased worried loved ones during their solo travel. A total of 55 comments (~3,000 words) were analyzed.

The most common response was basic advice; ease their fears. Advice was to maintain regular, yet brief contact by calling, sending a text or photos, or posting to social media daily. Many women suggested sending photos of the traveler looking extremely happy in her latest locale. Finally, women suggested providing concerned ones a complete travel itinerary so they could take comfort knowing where the traveler was.

Another interesting theme that emerged from this was that parents would always worry, but will eventually get used to her travel, and sweetly, will ultimately feel proud of the solo traveler.

“I'm far from my family since some years now and they are still worried wherever I am but they are also proud :) you have to trust each other and just give them some news and act safely wherever you are. You'll always meet tons of travelers ;) you'll never be alone actually.”

Women in this group who are also parents of grown children also responded with their experience. One mother expressed several ideas that were echoed in many comments from parents:

“I am a mother of grown sons - one of who lives in Ireland and travels solo extensively... When he went the first time I was very nervous, but now it's “where are you going next? Tell me all about it!” Checking in, sending pics or a text every now and then is worth every second it takes you to do that. It will keep your folks in the loop and keep the worry away. I am very proud of my son for taking life and making into what he wants - and not what others think he should do.”

Advice

The final topic for analysis was that of how women advise, or help empower other women, interested in embarking on a first solo trip. Sixty comments (~2,800 words) drawn from posts about ‘how to’ take a first solo trip, were analyzed. The most prominent idea given was: start small, safe, and local. After that, advice was themed around do your research before you go, and then many suggested simply booking a small group tour.

“Start off with a day on your own city. Go for lunch by yourself. Walk on the streets as if you were a tourist. Talk with people at the supermarket. Then do a weekend somewhere close by, where you still feel comfortable. You'll start seeing the world with different eyes, see opportunities you usually only allow yourself when you're travelling. When you feel confident enough, go further!”

“It is scary, no matter how many times you will do this. Not going to sugarcoat it. You will feel the anxiety, frustration & fear. But it gets easier each time. You will grow as a person. Start small, go nearby places solo.”

Group tours were also recommended to ease into solo travel. The group tour takes the stress of decision making, the language barrier, different currency, and provides a conduit/medium to help explain and interpret and explain cultural norms and social expectations. Many women recommended smaller to mid sized adventure travel companies.

Finally, many women recommended staying in touch with the online network and drawing information and strength from this resource.

“With technology, google, and us in the Network, you will be a well-organized, well-prepared and educated traveler with lots of stories to share when you return.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how solo female travelers perceive themselves and construct their identities and actions when traveling alone. While previous literature has focused on women’s constraints to leisure, recent research suggests understanding women’s actions from a place of empowerment. This study sought to examine where women locate themselves.

By and large, the voices in first three themes showed they were not constrained. Moreover, negotiating constraints was largely a non-issue. The idea that one might even explain why they traveled solo was laughable. The constraints were within those questioning the traveler. Those outside the solo traveler, such as parents, felt fear, confusion, perceived danger, loneliness, or self-doubt. They projected fear on the solo traveler, demonstrating their perception of constraints. The woman, empowered in her actions, helped others negotiate their constraints.

In the fourth theme, advice was generally given to someone who had not traveled solo before. She did still perceive constraints, yet was actively reaching out and asking for ways to negotiate that. Constraints, then, become empowering. The woman recognized personal limitations and at the same time, found agency to ask for help. With a successful trip, that sense of empowerment and agency should build, in a virtuous cycle of strength building.

The women’s voices heard here absolutely support the idea that women are empowered to travel alone, and demonstrate a clear shift in how women perceive their travel - from one of critical feminism, built on resisting oppression, to one of poststructuralist feminism, in which they use their abilities and agency to create change for themselves and for other women with whom they share experiences via the online group. The women in this study, for example, did not ask ‘should I travel’ or ‘how safe will I be,’ they had already decided they were going to travel; that was not a question. Their discussions were centered on how to be your own engine and move yourself forward, no matter the circumstances.

The purpose of this study was to learn where women locate themselves in their travel identity and experiences. Research suggested looking at women’s travel as empowerment, and this study further fleshed out and supported that idea. The women in a sense resisted old constraint models by not speaking about the need to negotiate constraints. The women have thrown off the chains of constraints and no longer ask, *should I*, or *can I*, but only *how to*. Future research should examine in what ways women navigate their travels in situ – does this empowerment follow while they are there, what challenges occur and how do they manage those in the moment.

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