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Backpackers as a subculture

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Joint Honours

This paper investigates the legitimacy of calling the contemporary community of backpackers a subculture. I will support this position by firstly establishing the criteria necessary for a group to be considered a subculture. Following this, an analysis of the backpacking community reveals whether or not it meets these specifications. There are arguments for and against applying the label of subculture to this group, both of which will be considered through the use of research and articles authored by sociologists such as P. Welk and A. Sorensen. A brief description of the origins of backpacking is given in order to better understand the group. The phenomenon of "road status" is explained and through this explanation the argument for the label of subculture is strengthened. To further support my position, I differentiate between backpackers and mainstream tourists and compare aspects of these groups' practices, highlighting both the similarities and differences between the two groups, hence reinforcing the argument for the title of subculture. Research for this paper is mainly from secondary sources but I have however used my own experiences as a backpacker to further validate and illustrate the argument.

Introduction

In this paper I will argue that the culture of long term backpackers is a distinct subculture within the dominant culture - tourism. After clearly defining the concepts of culture and subculture, as well as the characteristics necessary to be regarded as a subculture I will briefly look at the mainstream culture of tourism. Once these issues are clear I will outline values, norms and artefacts and explain their importance in labelling a group as a subculture. I will use these concepts to argue that backpacking is in fact a subculture in its own right. While sharing

many traits with the dominant culture, long term backpackers differ greatly from tourists on these three issues. It is these differences that I will focus on in this paper. Most individuals within the backpacker subculture admit that travel and tourism share some elements, however, they also insist there is a difference between travellers, "us backpackers" and tourists (Sorensen 2003, p.858). From my experience many backpackers are emphatic about this distinction and in a sense look down on tourists.

Backpackers norms, values and artefacts are all tied up with the phenomenon of "road status". Paying "local prices", effective "haggling", extended travel, getting off the beaten track, tales of exotic illnesses and unusual experiences are only some of the ways in which it is possible to gain road status (Sorensen 2003p.856). I will explain "road status" more clearly and discuss many of its elements in distinguishing between the norms, values and artefacts of backpackers and those of tourists. I will also look into the origins and development of the backpacker subculture. Once all of these factors have been considered, I feel it will be clear that backpackers do in fact fit into the category of subculture.

From 2005 until 2009 I was in Asia, both as backpacker and expatriate. I have used my experiences during this time as well as conversations with backpackers and tourists to further my understanding of the tourist culture and the backpacking subculture.

The Origins and Development of the Backpacking Subculture

While the tourist culture has roots that can be linked back to "early European exploration" (O'Reilly 2006 p.1003), the backpacking subculture stems back to the 1960s and 1970s in Western Europe and in particular the United States (Welk 2004). It began with the hippie counterculture, the youth of that time. As

well as being disillusioned with society they were rebelling against their "conformist parent generation". "Basically, your parents were tourists. Straight people were tourists. You were a traveller, you had pretensions of another order" (Tomory 1998, quoted in Welk 2004, p.85). The self-viewed distinction between backpackers and tourists was present from the outset. Backpackers or drifters as they were known set out on their travels to, at least in part, "change and revolutionise society at home" (Welk 2004 p.85). It can then be surmised that backpackers differentiating themselves from tourists is a "continuation not only of a class conflict, but also of this generational one" (Welk 2004 p.84).

Despite their origins, today's backpackers travel for different reasons. All backpackers today are certainly "fun-orientated" and if they do seek change it is change within themselves (Desforges 1998). Backpacking is sometimes seen as a 'status enhancing' experience and has the possibility of being used to enhance one's career prospects (O'Reilly 2006 p.1006). Many backpackers view it as a type of informal education and a way of gaining life experience (Desforges 1998, O'Reilly 2006). My own recent history has led me to believe that this is reflected in some Western societies; the knowledge, awareness and practical skills that one gains from travel, such as time and money management, responsibility for one's own actions, adaptability, the ability to deal with new and potentially stressful situations and cultural awareness, are often viewed with high regard by potential employers and institutions in society such as universities. They can increase your chances of gaining employment and access to education. This, however, is not the same for all societies where backpacking can be viewed as an escape from the responsibilities of everyday life.

The present day culture of backpacking has become quite mainstream and is comprised of people from "all social classes, ages and political convictions" leading sociologists such as Welk (2004 p.85) to challenge the legitimacy of its

title of subculture. In calling backpacking mainstream Welk is not referring to "mainstream society" but to "mainstream forms of tourism". However, viewing backpackers from a "cultural angle" makes it possible to see them as "a socially constructed category, involving both self perception and peer recognition" (Sorensen 2003, p.862). The fact that backpackers and tourists both view themselves and each other differently supports the argument that backpackers are in fact a subculture regardless of how mainstream it has become.

Culture and Subculture

The concept of culture does not have one clear definition and is used in multiple ways, for example Marxist sociologists see it as an equivalent to ideology, while others see it as a "way of life". It is this last definition that this paper is concerned with. Those elements that make up a way of life are considered the characteristics of culture, these are many and vary in character (Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p.92). They comprise of "non-material culture" and "material culture". "Non-material culture" is the intangible side of culture, such as values, norms, attitudes, beliefs, language and many more. We learn these through a process called 'socialisation', this occurs in both the private and public spheres of society and begins as soon as we are born. Even when we enter new situations in adulthood this learning process continues (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p. 125; Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p.363). "Material culture" on the other hand includes the man-made parts of society, this diverse and almost endless list rages from kilts in Scotland to a picture of Mao Zedong in China, from a bodhrán in Ireland to a Ganesh statue in India (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p. 119; Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p.92). The dominant culture of a society is that which is shared by the majority or most influential within society.

To be considered a subculture a group must be discernible from the dominant culture in terms of some or all of the following: values, norms, artefacts, language, territorial spaces, activities etc. However, as suggested by the name, 'sub'-culture, there must also be some shared elements (Clarke et al 1975; p.94, Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p. 384) with the dominant culture. While retaining some characteristics of the dominant culture, subcultures differentiate themselves as a separate group (Longhurst et al 2008). How distinctive they are varies from group to group. Some are barely distinguishable from the dominant culture(e.g.??). While others are clearly identifiable, with a distinctly defined structure and characteristics. Furthermore, these former groups are referred to as 'youth subcultures' when they can also be identified by their age and generation (Clarke et al 1975, p.94). Subcultures in the past were studied and understood in regards to "their resistance to and incorporation within the dominant culture"(citation?). It has been indicated from more current research that through studying the activities of a wide variety of groups and the significance of these activities to the participating individuals a better insight can be gained of contemporary subcultures (Longhurst et al 2008 p. 267). There is an extremely large diversity of subcultures, ranging from fans of certain television shows or sports teams, to youth subcultures rising from reactions to class struggles, from ethnic minorities, to subcultures based around music or travel.

The Mainstream Culture of Tourism

Above we have seen the characteristics of culture listed, however definitions of sociological concepts tend to be "ideal types". An ideal type is a "hypothetical constructions" and does not necessarily reflect reality (Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p.189). Bearing this in mind, tourism can be considered a culture. The tourist culture is comprised of people from all over the world, albeit mostly developed countries where money for such activities is more

available. "Social structures, norms and values" which are not from the individuals' home culture are present amongst tourists. These instead have come about as a result of the constant exchanges between tourists and the socialisation process that they have participated in as a result (Sorensen 2003 p.854). Tourism culture is composed of both non-material and material cultural dimensions. Some examples of both non-material and material tourist culture include travel on tourist buses and organised trips, eating in tourist restaurants as opposed to 'local' restaurants, staying in well rated hotels, the use of suitcases, expensive cameras and many more.

In research, tourism is regularly referred to as a culture, however, in studying tourists and their ways sociologists infrequently use the concept of culture as a research tool (Sorensen 2003 p.854).

Road Status

The phenomenon of "road status" (Sorensen 2003, p.856) is similar to what Bradt (1995, cited in Welk 2004 p.80) calls "badges of honour". Bradt (1995, cited in Welk 2005 p.80) explains "badges of honour" as the "pillars of backpacker ideology" and are an unspoken collection of values and ideals which "serve as the bond" between travellers. He lists five "badges of honour" which are as follows: "to travel on a low budget", "to meet different people", "to be (or feel) free, independent and open-minded", "to organise one's journey individually and independently" and "to travel for as long as possible". These have, for the most part, remained unchanged since their emergence in the backpacking counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s (Welk 2004, p.84).

"Road status" includes the above features as well as the norms and artefacts of the subculture. Without explanation it is an unfamiliar term to most backpackers, however, to varying degrees backpackers' lives revolve around it.

Sorensen (2003 p.856) sums "road status" up as a combination of "hardship, experience, competence, cheap travel, along with the ability to communicate it properly". Conversations between backpackers are undoubtedly tied up with "road status" and it is through these conversations that the socialisation process occurs. It is also conveyed through appearance; backpackers can give the impression of "experience and endurance" by wearing or using items of clothing or equipment that are tattered. Under normal circumstances these items would have been thrown away, however among backpackers these artefacts help reveal a deeper meaning as it is assumed that this wear and tear is caused by extended and hard-core travel (Sorensen 2003 p.856). Another unspoken way of expressing "road status" is by sewing small flags of each country that you have travelled to onto your rucksack. These badges are sold at many of the backpacking hot spots such as Kao San Road in Bangkok, Thailand. These emblems shows extensive and prolonged travel.

"Badges of honour" or "road status" are not a strict set of rules (Welk 2004, p.79) but rather make up the norms that backpacking subculture is built on. In their sum, they are what distinguish backpacking as a subculture. From what I saw while travelling, to be a backpacker is to consciously or subconsciously live by this ideology albeit to different degrees for each backpackers.

Values

Values are the shared ideas among a culture about what is acceptable and unacceptable. They are "prescriptive" expressions of "moral and ethical" goals which cultures strive for. They are the fundamental basis for beliefs and are an extremely important factor in uniting cultures (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p.125). Values are an enduring, essential element of culture that are slow to change (Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 2006, p.409). They are learned by the members of a society through a process called socialisation, which occurs in

various institutions in society such as family, schools and religious organisations. How we interpret events and interactions is dictated by our values, furthermore they greatly influence our moral views. They play a large part in defining how we act in our various roles in society (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p.125).

Through the use of the sociological perspective, most notably 'seeing the general in the particular' (citation-Bauman 2000), we can see what sets one group apart from another. Values are one aspect in which they differ greatly but not completely. There are certainly shared values, what these shared values are varies between subcultures. Without both these differences and similarities a group could not be considered a subculture.

In the backpacking culture the process of socialisation is quite different to that of territorialised cultures. As there is a lack of 'fixed and permanent institutions' values are passed on from experienced backpackers to 'newcomers' through the constant interactions between backpackers whose main topic of conversation is travel (Sorensen 2003, p.855). It is through these interactions that "road status" is conveyed. Road status has many uses, as well as conveying values and norms, it also verifies a 'shared identity' and 'serves as a social glue' (Sorensen 2003 p.858). Some of the most important values for backpackers are flexibility, nomadism, self-organisation and independence. This is reinforced by the fact that most backpackers arrange their own trips which are set to a flexible plan, with the aim of at least sometimes getting off the beaten track, while 'tourists are led or herded' from one tourist attraction to another on organised tours (Sorensen 2003 p.858). These tours are seen by most as being too easy and constraining by backpackers, most backpackers have no respect for them and look down on those who avail of them.

Many sociologists such as Welk (2004) and O'Reilly (2006) argue that backpacking has become very mainstream, in doing so the subculture itself has become divided. These divisions can be caused by seemingly small things such as the "alternative guidebook" (explained below) as well as organised tours as mentioned above. As explained already sociological concepts are generally 'ideal types', in this the backpacking subculture is no different. Self-organisation and spontaneity are 'ideal' characteristics but are applicable to varying degrees to individuals within the subculture. This has become more evident as backpacking becomes more common and mainstream (O'Reilly 2006 p.1001). One example that is clearly evident today is the emergence of travel companies that cater to backpackers. Not all backpackers avail of these tours and those who do tend to be somewhat looked down on in the same way as tourists are by the more independent backpackers.

Norms

Norms are the "rules" and "expectations" of a society that govern the actions of its citizens. Prescriptive norms direct us in what is expected of us, while others, proscriptive norms, dictate what we should not do. Some norms are "situation-specific" whereas others are relevant in all social settings (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p. 127). Not all norms are of equal importance. W.G. Sumner (1959, cited in Macionis and Plummer 2008, p.128) termed the norms that are vital to a stable society as "mores", they differentiate between "right and wrong" and are "a society's standards of proper moral conduct" and are applicable in every situation to all members of a society. "Folkways" is the term he gave to norms that do not have as much moral importance, they are "a society's customs for routine, casual interaction" and identify what is "right and rude" (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p. 128).

While looking at a society using the sociological perspective, at a macro or micro-level, we can see the differences and similarities that define a group as a subculture, without both similarities and differences it could not be defined as such. In addition to values, different norms identify a group as a subculture. As norms are such an integral part of any culture, a subculture must retain some norms of the dominant culture, "mores" in particular. "Members of a subculture may walk, talk, act, look "different" from others within the dominant culture but they "exist within and coexist with" them (Clarke et al 1975, p.95). Without maintaining these important norms it would be extremely difficult for the subculture to survive within the society.

Norms within the backpacker subculture are based around road status. The less you pay for a journey or a room etc. the more road status you get. For this reason it is perfectly acceptable for backpackers to ask each other about prices paid (Sorensen 2003), this is not the case with tourists unless it is ordinarily done within their home culture and therefore is specific to individuals and not a shared norm of tourists. Sorensen (2003) found in his research that most backpackers claim to travel alone or in pairs but they do however, regularly team up with others that they have just met for both short and long periods of time For this reason friendships are formed much quicker than they would at home. These "social interactions" are governed by the norms and values of this subculture (Sorensen 2003, p.854).

Artefacts

Artefacts are the tangible, man made features of a culture (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p.12). They are important for individuals within a society as they are a physical link to their culture. There is a vast variety of artefacts in the world, ranging from chopsticks in China to saris in India, from skull caps for Jewish people to the hijab for Muslim women, from expensive cars in Western

cultures to yurts in Mongolia. These objects can seem as puzzling as the language, norms and values of an unknown culture (Macionis and Plummer 2008, p.129). They play an important role in helping to identify someone within your culture, especially when it is something used in everyday public life such as clothing and jewellery.

As with both values and norms, artefacts are important in differentiating between a subculture and the dominant culture and are an easy but not always accurate way of labelling someone as part of a certain culture or subculture. If a subculture has a distinctive style of dress, hairstyle etc. they can be identified at a glance. Similarly, by looking at an individual's residence it is possible to speculate what culture or subculture they belong to by the style and contents of their home without even seeing the person. If a subculture stems from music or sport it will be evident by posters or fan merchandise. If it is based around religion or ethnicity it could be apparent from statues or ornaments.

As Soresen stated in 2003 (p.5) while travelling, backpackers are instantly identifiable by "appearance, behaviour or associates". Backpackers are generally easy to distinguish from tourists at a glance. For example, backpackers have backpacks as opposed to suitcases and wear more tattered clothes. The less a backpacker carries and the more tattered and worn their belongings are the more road status they gain (Sorensen 2003). The "alternative guidebook" is an important artefact for backpackers, it is used by a large number of backpackers to most destinations. As well as the obvious uses "the alternative guidebooks guide and support backpackers' perception of identity by more or less subtly confirming a distinction between them and the 'ordinary' tourist". It now "symbolises backpackers, their activities, norms and values". It in itself however creates further distinction within the subculture, some backpackers view it with disdain and see it "as a symbol of the lesser travelled"

(Sorensen 2003 pp.859-860) or less competent traveller, while others live by its every word, refusing to eat or sleep in an establishment not mentioned in the book. This again connects up with "road status".

Conclusion

Any definition of subculture makes it clear that to fit into the category a group must simultaneously accept and reject different aspects of the dominant culture. When viewing tourists and backpackers using sociological perspectives it is obvious that this is the case, there is undoubtedly not one single culture, but a dominant culture 'tourists' with a subculture 'backpackers'. While there are shared elements in the activities, norms, values and artefacts of both tourists and backpackers, there are also obvious differences, especially in attitudes to and methods of travel. It is these very differences that help verify the argument that backpackers are a distinct subculture.

Road status is an important issue for a lot of backpackers, especially 'newcomers', and it is through the swapping of this road status that socialisation occurs. Most, if not all, of backpackers' values, norms and artefacts are connected with road status in some way. Backpackers come from a range of different countries, albeit mostly Western countries, and their norms and values do not all stem from their home countries. It is clear that some "social structures, norms and values" are established 'on the road' through their interactions (Soresen 2003 p.8). Those backpackers who put a lot of importance on road status are, in my experience, also those who are most insistent about the division and distinction between backpackers and tourists.

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