# Sleeping in strangely familiar places:
## ‘the working holiday’ experience as represented by young Australian graduates in the United Kingdom

Rosie Roberts
University of South Australia

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on research conducted in 2005 and 2006 investigating young Australian graduates on working holidays in the United Kingdom (UK). One aspect of the research shows how respondents actively participated in shaping the worlds they inhabited, in an interview context which operated as a site for knowledge construction. Respondents used stories to continually recreate and reinforce particular versions of their experiences and identities. Their descriptions and representations of their working-holiday experiences showed how their ‘imagined’ journeys progressed from being on holiday, to being at work, to being a resident engaged in all the routine practices of ‘home’. In the process of this journey, they needed to persistently reconcile contradictory experiences and feelings of strangeness and familiarity.

**Introduction**

This research asked several central questions. Firstly, how do young Australian professionals experience the working holiday, and secondly, how do they describe the impact of the working holiday on their career and life trajectories? Eight in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with young professionals aged between twenty and thirty who either held a Right of Abode visa which, because of their ancestry, allowed them to work indefinitely in the UK, or who held a two-year working holiday visa. Interviews were conducted with some

respondents who were preparing to travel, some who had already made the transition to the UK, and others who had returned from a working-holiday. This framework was deliberately chosen to mimic the stages of the journey that each individual working-holiday maker might take.

The research problematises the way the working holiday is conceptualised within travel theory by theorising it in three complementary ways. First, it examines the working holiday as a contemporary redefinition of backpacker culture in which participants blend tourist sub-categories (such as backpacker, traveller, tourist). Second, it locates the working holiday experience in relations of space and identity, and thirdly, it demonstrates how the everyday practices of discourse and narrative shape travellers' social worlds. I have paid attention to what the respondents' experiences were as well as what their stories accomplished through their telling. Research respondents used multiple speech practices to position themselves dialogically with respect to other 'voices' and discourses where the interview context provided opportunities for deriving multiple meanings through social interaction. The context was not just related to the immediate interaction and the situational aspects of the interview, but also to the multiple speech practices of respondents, who drew upon their wider social worlds and social identities beyond the interview. Two methodological approaches were used to discuss the interview data. Firstly, the interview data were treated as a relatively reliable description of participants' experiences which were thematised by identifying common categories. However, the focus of this paper is with the second approach, where the interview context itself was treated as an interactive event, where techniques of discourse and narrative analysis were used to show some of the ways in which these participants interpreted and represented their experiences. It is suggested that the retelling of experience is an important aspect of the experience itself, and that hearing these tales allows the researcher to come closer to an understanding of the experiences of these travellers. As Bruner (1986, p. 36) proposes, separating 'a life as led from a life as told' is often problematic.

**Between representation and interaction: narratives as socially situated utterances**

The representational function of narrative refers to how respondents, through telling stories of their experiences, have the opportunity to re-work their identities. According to Bruner (1986, p. 36) stories are a way of 'laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present, but for directing it into the future'. A life can be represented in many ways where stories can be seen to foreground one particular telling over other possibilities. It is a transformative process where the same story can be retold on numerous occasions to revive or change its effects. What narrative achieves is more than just a representation of an event or experience; it also makes meaning from it. In other words, telling stories is not only a way of representing events but also a form of social action where narrators enact distinctive interactive positions. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) is useful here to account for the interactional positioning present within the narratives of participants in my research. His perspectives allow me to develop a dialogic approach to the ways people position themselves in relation to others within the context of the interview, and also in relation to potential and anticipated audiences. He suggests that there is a difference between the linguistic and fixed system of language and the individual speaking that language in a context. The use of his theory opens up discussion for exploring how narratives are marked by dialogics and intertextuality, where the speaker draws on multiple voices to construct their social world(s). As a consequence, life narratives can be treated as open, or as Bakhtin (1981, p. 37) more poetically expressed it, an 'unrealised surplus of humanness'. It is a useful approach for exploring how respondents construct and position themselves within particular discourses and through particular narratives, offering productive ways of thinking about and 'hearing' language, of the context in which we use it and of the ways in which we act and interact with each other through language.

Central to both Bakhtin's and Volosinov's work (from the same theoretical circle) is the idea that utterances are shaped by an implied audience and their anticipated response. In an

interview with Lauren[1], a respondent who had recently moved to the UK from South Australia on a working holiday, I asked the question, 'How would you describe yourself to others? For example, are you a tourist, a traveller, or a backpacker?' Lauren replied with one word: 'antipodean'. It took some effort to encourage her to expand on this utterance. An outsider to this interview may not understand all of the immediate assumptions that I made about her just from her use of that word. The term 'antipodean', while originally having a geographical rather than social heritage, is marked by a history circulating within discourses shared by Australian, New Zealand and South African expatriate communities, and perpetuated by its use in media such as magazines and travel guides which are targeted towards these communities. Some of the connotations of this word that I assumed included Lauren socialising among predominantly Australian, New Zealand and South African networks within which she might form friendships and mini 'communitas' (Gennep 1960) during this liminal phase, finding accommodation, or opportunities for employment, as well as travelling partners. What all of these associations encouraged was a sense of familiarity and comfort in a foreign place. While Lauren is able to access multiple identities, in this instance and within this context she identified herself not as Australian but as antipodean. Lauren then went on to say that 'most' of her friends were antipodeans, either Australian, Kiwi or South African and for some funny reason we tend to all stick together'. The language that interviewees use draws on common cultural knowledge. The way they take part in the dialogue and what they assume and do not assume that the listener will understand is shaped by that reciprocity of dialogue. This example demonstrates how the meaning of the utterance, 'antipodean', is at least partly produced by the context and what the speaker expects the hearer to understand. Lauren's use of the word 'antipodean' shows that she expected I would understand many of the connotations it presented, and so constructed herself within these terms. Therefore, it is not just what is said but what is contextually implied.

During the research participants often set themselves up as the risk takers, against those who are still living at home in Australia, whom they construct as having taken a traditional or 'safe'

pathway. Mitigation and qualifying techniques are often used by respondents to construct themselves in opposition to others, allowing them to do this 'safely'. Statements of self-correction such as the use of 'you know' (Mishler 1991) are also used in this way. This colloquial saying works by drawing in the listener, and is often used as a checking device to confirm that they can go on and that you, as the listener, support their interpretation. For example, as outlined below, Jess positions her working holiday experience in opposition to her friends who stayed at home, as a way of performing an identity beyond the interview. Mitigation allowed Jess to qualify her comments so that she avoids giving offence. Sometimes mitigation or politeness strategies are a conservative way of allowing a respondent to say what they want to say. During the interview with Jess this mitigating function of language is strongly evident. In particular the following statements perform this function:

> I think that's what makes me smile when I come home now is that umm, I'm at the same stage as a lot of my other friends but then again a lot of my mates have got houses and are engaged and all that which is great, I mean there's best, you get the best, you know there's advantages and disadvantages. For me, I'm much more comfortable now buying a house, knowing that I've already done a huge trip.
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> I've got a friend who's my age, she's 25, she's on her second house, she's not been out of the country but she's happy, you know she's married, everything's going well and they're going to save up for a trip later on. And I think that's great 'cause they're, I guess they're ahead of me in terms of investments and house and all that umm but I, I, I think it's different for everyone but I think you learn so much more about yourself when you go overseas and you get thrown out there in different cultures.
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> You learnt from all that and you can come back and go yep cool, you know (laugh), you appreciate all the mundane things in life now.

Jess in this instance may be aware that she is applying a judgment to her friends but the use of mitigation allows her to do this in a safe way. If we were to look at the way the interaction happens it can be seen that Jess performs who she thinks she is against who she might be, and who she believes her friends are. What this kind of language accomplishes is an opportunity for Jess to justify to herself the choices she has made. She actively constructs herself against her friends; they are the 'normal' while she constructs herself as different, transgressive or other. This is just one example of how the interviews allowed respondents to put their experiences into a life trajectory through conversation that could potentially shape their social worlds and social identities.

**Not just telling stories but performing identities**

Narrative is a performative struggle between the interviewer and the interviewee. We are constantly testing different ways of telling our stories, like shining a flashlight into the dark, illuminating different parts of ourselves as we conjure up our pasts and futures through talk. Social life is itself storied.

Narrative is a tool that guides actions and within which we construct identities by locating ourselves within a repertoire of publicly available social and cultural narratives (Ricoeur 1991; Somers & Gibson 1994, pp. 38-39). Bakhtin (1981, p. 341) suggests that 'the ideological becoming of a human being … is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others'. Thus I suggest that the narratives expressed by speakers in this research, in a sense, represent two texts. Firstly they narrate the content of an event, and secondly, on an interactional level, they draw on the words of others, and in this research in particular, they draw upon the canonical aspects of dominant story lines within Western culture, to frame their own experiences and perform identities.

As a researcher, I brought certain expectations to the interview about the likely responses of participants. I thought that perhaps respondents would talk about the multitude of identities

available to them within the UK, and the freedom they took from the anonymity of being in such a big city like London, where they could change their personas as often as they changed their ‘temp’ placements. However, what I found, despite this potential for many selves, was a deep longing for finding a coherent self. While in some respects I refer to the working holiday as a liminal stage in one’s life, offering a break from the constraints of life at home, for some respondents it actually served to strengthen and extend what appeared to be an already partially cultivated sense of identity. The stories they related during the interview were in constant motion; they had a certain temporality and chronology. They arranged incidents with a beginning, middle and end because as one respondent said, ‘it just makes for a good story’ (Jess).

I drew upon Robinson’s (2000) framework of the archetypal hero’s journey to analyse a story told by both Jack and his partner, Jess, who travelled around Europe in a Kombi-van at the conclusion of their working holiday. Both Jack and Jess had been home in Australia for six months when I interviewed them. They had had time to construct and arrange their experiences and make them meaningful in ways they may not have realised until their return, when they could reflect upon their journey. Those who described their experiences to me while still living in London tended to tell clusters of disjointed, episodic experiences and skipped back and forth between events, whereas those who had returned from their working holiday such as Jack and Jess, told fully- formed stories, often with strong moral, didactic or confessional undertones and with a strong, seemingly chronological, order.

Jack and Jess, a couple from South Australia, had worked in the UK for three years. Before their return, they spent three months driving around the European continent in an old Kombi-van they named Barney. They each described in detail the events leading up to the robbery of their van, but in very different ways. Jess’ story described the risks associated with this kind of travel (as alluded to in her Lonely Planet guide) as well as outlining the lengths they took to ensure their safety and the security of their belongings. She also gave the actual event of the

robbery a clear temporality, telling us what was stolen, what was recovered and how they found it. Alternatively, Jack's narration began by describing what he lost in terms of camera gear, but also what he gained, referring to the story of what happened to them. He described the experience as 'a real turning point in our holiday'. Jack's actual description of the event compared with Jess' is much more concise. Jack was very direct in his telling and used short and active phrases, which ran on to one another, building the atmosphere around his story. Listing or building these actions throughout his account seemed to heighten the intensity and importance of the event. The narrative core of both stories consists of a series of narrative clauses which take us through the order of events. Their stories also have a clear point. Jess says 'we've really taught ourselves here that it's just about our own experience that counts'. What is particularly interesting about this case study is that not only does it have the characteristic qualities of a 'good story', but both Jack and Jess talk more broadly about the significance of stories in their lives. Jack says 'it's just one of those travel stories you just have to pass on to people', and Jess says:

> and then to have the story of what happened to us and to be able to tell people 'don't do this' and 'don't do that'. We were like the Griswalds from *National Lampoon.*

Here, she even directly compares her experience with the storyline of a fictional film. Story is clearly very important to them and acted as a form of cultural capital.

Both Jack and Jess successfully establish a narrative floor. Their stories have a point; they are culturally recognisable as a tale of triumph prevailing in adversity, and they have a clearly sequenced beginning, middle and end. However, narrative was also used in their stories to construct and maintain dominant discourses of masculine and feminine identities. Although here I do not intend to use the term 'masculinity' as pertaining to something fixed or essential, it is useful as a concept that becomes meaningful when I compare it to the stories

told by women within the research group. In Jack's account his actions are central to the story, whereas Jess focuses more on how she felt as a result of the incident. Jack, in particular, performs an act of self-preservation as well as evaluating the experience. For example, he often refers to the incident as being 'character building'. Jack uses active and didactic phrases such as 'you know', 'you can still relive', 'we learnt so much', 'we can pass on', 'you know how to deal' and 'one of those … travel stories you just got to pass on to people'. The abstraction achieved through his language use is very important. He distances the events from his feelings, instead telling them according to their temporality. While Jack's story appears to perpetuate a hegemonic masculinity that is constructed through talk, Jess relates her experiences to her emotions. For example, she talks about the experience as 'rattling the hell out of us', 'we didn't feel safe', 'most upsetting', 'really upsetting', 'we were really devastated', 'I deal with a lot of stress' and 'I felt intimidated'. Her story uses feelings to direct the narrative.

Their stories on a superficial level are about the challenges of having all their belongings stolen, including all of the photographs and documentary evidence of their respective journeys. If we look closer it is also about the importance of this story to them as a cautionary tale that they can retell to others. Furthermore, it draws attention to the significance of shared experience in building their own self-narrative and keeping their memories alive through their retelling. The interview itself allows for the partial recapitulation of past experience. If we look further again there are key stylistic differences between their separate accounts of the same story. Jack tells a story of triumph prevailing over adversity, whereas Jess' account seems to be more disjointed and is narrated around the feelings she had as a result of this event, rather than through temporality and action. It has been suggested that men tend to tell stories that are epic in form and chronological, whereas women experience life in more fragmentary ways (Bloom 1998; Gergen 1998). While this is a binary and abstraction that many of us would like to complicate, in this instance, there was an alignment

between their descriptions of the event and their gender that appeared to support this observation.

This example has been used to show how respondents 'work' their identities by negotiating meanings, constructing identities in relation to 'other' speakers and by telling stories that make claims about who they are and who they are not. Identity work of this kind allows them continually to recreate and reinforce a particular sense of identity by retelling stories. I have endeavoured to bring together a representational and interactive approach to the study of narrative discourse to suggest that the interview provides a context in which the telling of stories has the power to represent and reconstruct selves. This case study has shown how participants, to an extent, have constructed identities by positioning themselves in relation to the interviewer, imagined audiences, others back home and how they wanted to 'story' themselves.

**Conclusion**

While the working holiday experience is often framed within discourses of cultural integration and as an opportunity to experience cultural diversity, what this research actually demonstrated was that, for the participants involved, it was more a case of 'border making'. In many instance respondents even re-created the social bonds formed in Australia within their UK environment. For many, developing friendships and networks outside their Australian background was described as a problematic process. While the working holiday period was anticipated as a liminal zone for many participants, where they had the freedom to operate 'betwixt and between' social categories and identities, for a large proportion of the respondents it became an opportunity to extend the relationships and skills they had begun developing at home.

Respondents used narrative to shape their social worlds and to 'work' their identities within the context of the interview, building reciprocal meanings with the interviewer by drawing on

shared discourses. They represented themselves as antipodeans and as risk takers, positioning themselves against those within their friendship groups, who did not choose a similar pathway. Finally, they used stories to continually recreate and reinforce particular versions of their experiences and identities. Respondents in this study, viewed as contemporary travellers, are symbolic of our ability to embody a myriad of identities and cultural forms. To ask what the working holiday is, or who such travellers are, is like asking how many different ways you can tell the same story. As Jess and Jack have demonstrated, there are infinite possibilities for relating the same event. Claiming complexity as a conclusion would appear to be a convenient solution. However, just as I cut my data in different ways, so respondents tell their lives in a multitude of ways, the threads of their existence merging and parting as they give shape to their social worlds and identities. Throughout this research participants continually complicated common binaries, speaking in terms of both progression and diversion; liminality and extension; home and abroad; familiar and strange; adventurous and vulnerable and travellers and residents occupying real, tourist and temporary spaces, which through their stories, they will take back into their more permanent spaces when they return home.

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**Note**

1. All respondents' names replaced with pseudonyms