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## Meaningful vacation experiences

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter explores vacations as a source of meaning. Qualitative data captured using a photo-elicitation technique are presented. Participants selected photographs depicting their most meaningful vacation experiences, and explained why the scene was meaningful to them. This technique is considered particularly appropriate in the context of vacations and travel, where photography is an integral component of the experience. An inductive thematic analysis of the data identified the general sources of meaning that become more important on vacation; the specific sources of meaning that are inherent in vacations; and the ways in which vacations themselves can be a source of meaning.

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of meaning has been a central topic in the positive psychology literature, and is often considered an important factor associated with well-being, life satisfaction and positive affect. Research in this area has explored the structure of meaning (its components or levels), sources of meaning (including both external life domains and inner dimensions of self); the process of meaning making (meaning detection as well as meaning construction); and the relationship between meaning and well-being (Delle Fave, Brdar, Wissing, & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). According to Delle Fave et al. (2013), meaning is central to eudaimonic well-being, while life satisfaction is more closely aligned with hedonic well-being, although there is some overlap between the two.

Various domains of life, including work, standard of living, family, interpersonal relationships, health, personal growth, leisure, spirituality, society and community are considered sources of meaning, which vary in importance across the lifespan (Delle Fave et al., 2013). Steger and his colleagues (Steger et al., 2013) reviewed a range of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method studies that have sought to identify common sources of meaning, i.e., ‘the specific aspects and domains of life that people say they find meaningful or say that they use as a resource from which to draw meaning’ (p. 530). They concluded that there was some level of consensus regarding the most common sources of meaning, and cited those identified by Emmons (2003): relationships/intimacy, achievements/work, religion/spirituality, and self-transcendence/generativity.

Using an auto-photography technique, Steger et al. (2013) extended the findings of previous research, and provided a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the things that make life meaningful. They identified 15 categories (nature; hobby/leisure; relationships; pets; possessions; everyday necessities; religion; values; education; technology; organisations/organised activities; physical environment; future aspirations; occupation/work; and self), and a miscellaneous group.

Of the categories above, relationships were found to be the most common source of meaning, along with hobby/leisure, nature, and education. Steger et al. (2013) included travel in the

hobby/leisure category. Other researchers have argued, however, that leisure at home should be viewed as a separate quality of life domain from leisure away from home, i.e., vacations. Leiper (2004), for example, outlined several ways, some positive and some negative, in which tourism differs from other forms of leisure as a source of satisfying experiences. Dolnicar, Yanamandram, and Cliff (2012) were able to demonstrate that respondents' ranking of the contribution that vacations made to their quality of life was almost equal to that of leisure and recreational experiences.

### **Vacations and travel as a source of meaning**

Increasingly, vacation time is recognised as a quality-of-life experience through which people (in the industrialised West) often define their lives (Darity, 2008). Vacations offer opportunities for social interaction, personal growth and identity development (Richards, 1999). Vacations are believed to offer a level of freedom that is not attainable in everyday life, thus allowing participants to not only escape the demands of everyday life, but also to construct an alternative world (Darity, 2008) and an alternative, temporary identity (Stein, 2011). Because the vacation experience is seen as separate and different from everyday life, vacationers are able to enact different, but personally meaningful, roles within a new context (Stein, 2011). Vacations also provide the time and space for people to reflect on their lives, thus allowing the meaning and benefits gained from travel to be transferred back into their everyday lives, in the form of 'new relationships, changed perspectives and different desires' (Wilson and Harris, 2006, p. 169).

Harrison (2003) addressed the question of what makes travel meaningful, using tourists' photographs, videos, journals and souvenirs to prompt memories and discussion. She identified four themes underlying people's reasons for travel, which reflect the meaning they invest in the experience: opportunity for human connection and/or intimacy; expression of a personal aesthetic; a way to explore and understand 'home'; and an aid to make sense of the world. Based on qualitative analyses of tourists' diary, interview and open-ended questionnaire responses at three different destinations, Andereck, Bricker, Kerstetter and Nickerson (2006) identified three dimensions of meaning underlying tourists' reports of their experiences: the social aspects (interaction with others, sharing the experience with others), the environmental aspects (being in beautiful places, appreciating local heritage), and activities within those environments (learning about other places and times, experiencing renewal and escape). Using a phenomenological approach, Little and Schmidt (2006) explored the subjective spiritual experience of travel, including an enhanced awareness of self and other, sense of connection, and intense sensation (emotional and physical reaction). As in Andereck et al.'s (2006) study, experiencing nature, cultural diversity and leisure activities were among the factors that together led to a memorable and meaningful experience. Little and Schmidt (2006) concluded that even mundane tourism experiences can inspire, engage and elicit significant meaning.

In summary, vacations in general and travel in particular provide focussed opportunities for people to encounter many of the things that make everyday life meaningful (for example, relationships with others, encounters with nature, and recreational activities). They can also provide the time, space and motivation for reflection and personal growth.

### **Meaning and memory**

In investigating travel and/or vacations as a source of meaning, researchers have mostly relied on participants' memories of their vacation experiences. This retrospective approach raises a question regarding the extent of the overlap between memorable experiences and meaningful experiences. Recent research on memorable tourism experiences has identified meaningfulness (defined as 'a sense of great value or significance') as one of seven dimensions that contribute

to a tourism experience that is likely to be positively recalled (Kim, Ritchie and McCormick, 2012, p. 15). On the other hand, memorability is also likely to contribute to meaningfulness, as people reflect on and construct meanings around the experiences they remember.

Packer and Ballantyne (in press) argue that the remembered experience is one of the valued outcomes or take-away benefits of a visitor experience. The activities, events and environments in which visitors engage provide the opportunity for an experience, which is then interpreted, narrated and transformed into a meaningful memory or a reportable story. The place of meaning-making is paramount in the process of constructing a remembered experience; but at the same time, the ongoing construction or reconstruction of meaning is built on the remembered experience. Photographs play an interesting role here, as they allow the remembered experience to be anchored to a specific place and time.

### **Tourists' photographs – the capture, construction and communication of meaning**

Photography is an integral component of the vacation experience and is commonly used by tourists as a means to capture memories which can then be used to extend the boundaries of the trip by sharing experiences with others, creating self-narratives and promoting a self-image (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). Cederholm (2004, p. 236) found travellers often mentioned trying to 'catch the moment' or 'freeze and frame the experience' so that it can be preserved in time, thus providing a kind of 'proof' of the experience. Further, it has been argued that the act of photography itself is a performance that can be used for impression management, to experiment with or reconstruct identities (Belk & Yeh, 2007; Lo & McKercher, 2015). Photographs can thus be taken, preserved and shared to represent a place, an experience, a memory, or an idealised self.

Botterill and Crompton (1996) highlighted the value of photographs as a medium for understanding different aspects of tourism, as the pictorial content of the photograph provides a point of departure for participants to describe and attribute meaning to the situation. Harper (2002) further defined and discussed the use of photo elicitation as a research method that evokes not only information, but also feelings and memories. According to Harper (2002, p. 23),

... photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk.

Steger et. al (2013) pioneered the use of photography as a research method to explore sources of meaning in life. They distinguished between two approaches: auto-photography asks participants to take photographs of things that are important to them and to provide descriptions of the photographs; photo-elicitation uses photographs (which may be provided by the researcher or the participant) to prompt responses during an interview. These photograph-based techniques have some advantages over other methods. For example, they are less reliant on participants' ability to verbalise what makes life meaningful; they draw on cues from participants' own lives to prompt their responses; they are less reliant on culturally-stereotyped sources of meaning; they provide a more direct and immediate record of the phenomena of interest; and they can convey emotion (Steger et al., 2013).

## AIMS AND METHOD

This research used a photograph-based method to explore the aspects of a vacation that people find meaningful. Steger et al.'s (2013) 15 categories were used as an initial framework for analysis of participants' narratives. The results illustrate how these everyday sources of meaning help to enrich vacation experiences, identify a number of other sources of meaning that are particularly important in the context of vacations, and explore the vacation as a source of meaning in itself.

### Participants and procedure

A total of 77 participants were recruited through various means (30 responded to an advertisement in a university-wide staff newsletter; 24 responded to an invitation distributed at two Brisbane Travel Expos; 17 participants of other research projects agreed to participate; and six responded to social media requests).

Participants were asked to choose five photographs that best represented their most meaningful vacation experiences. The photographs may have been taken by the participants or by someone else and could be from any of their past vacations. Participants were asked to respond to a web-survey in which they briefly described what was depicted in each photograph, and explained why it was meaningful to them. There was an (optional) opportunity to upload each photograph. Participants were given one month after recruitment to complete the task. This approach gave participants the space and time to reflect on their vacations and thoughtfully describe why each photograph was meaningful.

As part of the web-survey, participants were able to peruse two example responses which demonstrated the level of reflection and detail that was sought from the instruction 'Please explain why this photograph is meaningful to you'. They were also given five questions to help focus their reflections, although they were not expected to respond separately to these questions:

- What were you thinking or feeling at the time the photograph was taken?
- What were the associated events that made this vacation experience meaningful?
- Has the photograph taken on new meanings since the time it was taken?
- What do you feel or think as you look back on this photograph?
- What does the photograph represent for you?

Figure 1 provides an example of one participant's entire response to one of her five photographs.

Demographic information was collected at the end of the survey. Participants who completed the survey (N=72) received two movie vouchers to thank them for their contributions to the research. These 72 participants were predominantly female (76.4 per cent), spread fairly evenly across age groups from 20 to 60 years (2.8 per cent were under 20 years of age, 29.2 per cent aged 20-29, 26.4 per cent aged 30-39, 25 per cent aged 40-49, 16.7 per cent aged 50-59), had taken an average of 6.3 overseas trips and 8.4 domestic trips in the past 10 years, and travelled mostly for leisure (72.2 per cent) or a combination of work and leisure (26.4 per cent). An additional five participants did not complete the whole survey, but did contribute a total of 10 reflections, which have been included in the data analysis (yielding a total of 370 reflections). Of these, 64 per cent referred to international destinations. A total of 48,342 words of text were provided in response to the question 'Please explain why this photograph is meaningful to you' (an average of 130 words per entry) and 324 photographs were uploaded.

Figure 1. Example of a participant's response

### Sagavanirktok River in Alaska



Photograph and reflection by Magdalena Zych, used with permission

The photograph shows the Sagavanirktok River from the Atigun Gorge, in the arctic in Alaska. I reached this place by hitchhiking for around 400km from Fairbanks and then hiking for around 6 days in the mountains.

It was the first destination on my two-months-long trip to remote places in the northern-most part of Alaska, to Kamchatka and central Siberia. When the photograph was taken I was just amazed by the view, the sheer beauty of a meandering river which does not have a single bed but bifurcates in sandy braids and very slowly flows towards the Arctic Ocean, along many different routes at once. After the trip this view became for me a metaphor of the many, and completely different, ways of life that I encountered during this trip. What is ironic is that most of the time all of us - people I encountered and me myself - thought that we are well aware of the differences and understand them. But a conversation always revealed how naive our views most of the time are and how much there is to learn about things which we were taking for granted. Experiences of this trip very strongly changed my perspective in life and remain an important inspiration.

### Analysis

The text responses regarding 'why this photograph is meaningful to you' were analysed in the following manner. Each response was examined using Steger et al.'s (2013) framework, and the categories represented in the response were identified. At least one of these pre-defined categories could be identified in the majority (97 per cent) of responses. The ways in which these 'everyday' sources of meaning enriched vacation experiences, and were intensified by the vacation context, were summarised descriptively, and frequency counts were used to identify the relative importance of the 15 categories. Sources of meaning that were not adequately represented by Steger et al.'s (2013) framework, but that were particularly important in the context of vacations, were also identified and described. Some themes were identified wherein the vacation itself was considered a source of meaning. Finally, participants' insights regarding photographs as a way of capturing meaning were also analysed.

## RESULTS

### How do everyday sources of meaning help to enrich vacation experiences?



All 15 of Steger et al.'s (2013) categories representing common sources of meaning were present to some extent in participants' responses; however, their frequency of occurrence fell into three broad levels, as indicated in Table 1. In the following presentation of results, the ways in which each of the sources of meaning enriched and in turn was intensified by the vacation experience, is described and illustrated using examples from participants' responses. (Participants' responses are presented using parentheses and single quote marks.)

<b>High Frequency</b>	Mentioned as a source of meaning in approximately half of all responses	Relationships
<b>Moderate Frequency</b>	Mentioned as a source of meaning in 10-25% of responses	Nature Everyday Necessities Education/Learning Physical Environment Values Hobbies Self
<b>Low Frequency</b>	Mentioned as a source of meaning in fewer than 2% of responses	Religion Pets Technology Future Aspirations Occupation/Work Possessions Organisations

Table 1. Frequency with which participants drew meaning from everyday sources in the context of a vacation.

*Relationships (emotional connections with others).* Relationships with both companions and hosts were often noted as a meaningful aspect of vacations. ('Being with friends was what made it special.') Participants reported that friendships and family bonds had been strengthened or 'cemented' through the sharing of experiences, the opportunities for deep and meaningful conversations, and the need to work together as a team. In some cases, the vacation itself was an expression of the value of the relationship. ('It is a true form of friendship that people are prepared to travel the world to see each other.') International vacations provide the opportunity to interact across cultures and language barriers, and to experience the hospitality of strangers. ('I will remember their generosity for the rest of my life and I'm still friends with them now.')

*Nature (elements of the natural world).* Participants described vivid sensory experiences in nature, for example, recalling the softness of the water; the sound of the waves; the colours in the reef; the smell of the sunscreen; the taste of saltiness. They reported a sense of awe and wonder; peace and relaxation; reflection or contemplation; connection or re-connection with nature. Some reported that being in nature gave them a sense of perspective. ('How small are humans in comparison to these natural wonders?')

*Everyday Necessities (e.g., food, money, sleep).* Everyday necessities often take on new meaning on vacation. Food in particular becomes an integral part of the experience of relaxing, spending time with friends, or participating in the local culture. ('The holiday is also about eating local food and visiting markets and cooking local products.') Money is necessary in order to travel. Having saved for some time to take a trip, or to be able to enjoy little luxuries while away, added to the meaning of the experience. ('It meant a lot to us as we were both still students

and it had taken us a while to finally save up enough money to do a decent trip.’) Sleep is also a luxury that some types of vacation allow more than everyday life. (‘This was the most relaxing holiday I have ever had. The children went to kids club during the day, if I chose to have a sleep I could.’)

*Education (actively pursuing new skills, knowledge and insights).* Although respondents rarely mentioned formal education or study as a source of meaning while on vacation, learning new skills, gaining knowledge, and learning about life in general were benefits of travel that were highly valued. In particular, travel provided opportunities to learn about different cultures, histories, people and events. (‘I appreciate seeing the differences in cultures and reflecting on the history that has made us who we are today.’) Some also found meaning in giving their children opportunities to learn. (‘I hope that my kids learn to love the open spaces and serenity of nature rather than the dull concrete of the city.’)

*Physical environment (a location that holds special meaning).* Physical environments other than nature held meaning for many respondents. Being immersed in history, inspired by architecture, or discovering an environment with special aesthetic appeal were all memorable experiences. Physical environments were imbued with meaning as they were considered to represent more abstract ideas such as peace and chaos, change and permanence. The connection between the abstract ideas and the physical environments allowed personal reflections at a particular time and place to be captured and preserved. (‘There is a feeling of permanence and strength of purpose there’; ‘A tangible reminder of an iconic, peaceful and beautiful oasis among complete chaos’; ‘It was a kind of marker for life to me...the feeling that everything is for its season’.)

*Values (principles that are important to the participant).* Vacations provided opportunities for people to reflect on their priorities in life and the things that were important to them. For some, these reflections were prompted by observations of different cultures or environments and often resulted in a commitment to take action. (‘This was our first encounter with this reality and it made an impression on us both. For me, it was a greater commitment to support aid organisations.’) For others, being away from the daily routine, or being separated from family and friends served as a reminder of what was most important to them. (‘It reminded me of all the friends I had back home in Australia at the time and that no matter the distance it is still possible to be great friends with them.’)

*Hobbies (activities pursued for pleasure).* Vacations provide opportunities to engage in hobby or leisure activities that can only be accessed by travel, for example, mountain climbing, diving, surfing, skiing and snowboarding; or that take on new meaning during travel, such as photography. These often provide a sense of pride or achievement. (‘I was very proud of my achievements on the ski field.’) Some activities are considered more acceptable or valid when on vacation, for instance, relaxing and spoiling oneself. (‘We felt that we were able to be selfish for a little while and do whatever it was we wanted, just for us.’)

*Self (expressions of self-identity, self-acceptance, self-understanding or self-esteem).* A number of respondents reported feeling proud of themselves as a result of their achievements while travelling. (‘The effort to get to the top made the finish much more special and it felt like I had achieved something.’) Just being able to negotiate the many challenges that travel provides contributed to a sense of self-sufficiency, especially for those who were travelling alone. (‘So proud of myself for travelling by myself.’) Although rarely expressed overtly, travel for many



people became an expression of identity. ('This was the first time I have travelled internationally on my own. It kicked off my travel bug and my new title of global adventurer!')

*Religion (set of beliefs and practices followed).* Although none of the respondents used the word 'pilgrimage', some spoke about places of spiritual significance, feeling a connection to faith, or being in awe of creation. ('The photo represents a coming together of family, faith and natural beauty – all of which are probably the most meaningful to me as a person.')

*Pets (domestic animals kept as companions).* Four of the 78 participants (5 per cent) mentioned a pet (always a dog) in at least one of their responses. The dog was considered part of the family, and taking the dog for walks was an enjoyable vacation activity. ('I think my Dog is awesome... he loves hanging with us; at the beach we can all have good family time together.')

Three participants spoke of vacations oriented around horses and horse-riding events.

*Technology (use of modern technology).* Most mentions of technology as a source of meaning focussed on being able to get away from the demands of work and modern communication technologies. Technology was mentioned twice as a positive tool for meaning-making, once in relation to 'audio technology to help interpret the site', and once in relation to Facebook as a repository for vacation photographs. ('I like to keep a record of what we have done while on holiday. I post a few photos to Facebook and it makes a great place to reflect back on one's life.')

*Future aspirations (plans, goals, careers).* Some vacations help people to clarify their goals and aspirations regarding work, relationships, and further travel. ('After this holiday I knew what I wanted to do - have my own property and live and work in the country.')

*Occupation or work.* Occasionally, people described meaningful experiences that involved working holidays, or work intersecting with vacation in a meaningful way. ('This holiday was like a dream come true for me, as it combined my passion and love for my work, with a desire that originated from my childhood.')

Others found meaning in getting away from work, or in work as a means that makes travel possible.

*Possessions (material objects identified as important).* Possessions were rarely mentioned as meaningful aspects of vacations – they were only mentioned if they were symbolic of an activity or achievement. ('Our new caravan... represents a new phase in our lives.')

*Organisations (involvement in a specific group).* Only one of the 370 responses mentioned a specific organisation. ('This photograph shows me... preparing to join the International Women's Day (IWD) march across the bridge... As a long time feminist and supporter and participant of International Women's Day events this was an unexpected delight.')

### **What other sources of meaning are particularly important in the context of vacations?**

Sources of meaning that were particularly important in the context of vacations, but were not able to be classified using Steger et al.'s (2013) 15 categories, focused on various types of vacation experiences or environments that were perceived as meaningful by respondents. These included novel or unique experiences; escape from the everyday; idealised locations; and favourite places.

*Novel or unique experiences.* Novel or unique experiences were among the most frequently cited sources of meaning. These included experiencing a different culture or lifestyle, a different

climate, an ancient civilisation, a famous place, a place unknown to others, the smallest, largest, rarest, most remote, etc. Respondents used words such as ‘mysterious’, ‘magical’, ‘eerie’, ‘fairy-tale’, ‘unreal’, ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ and ‘special’ to describe these experiences that were clearly distinguished from everyday life. The element of surprise, unexpectedness or spontaneity also contributed to the memorability and meaningfulness of vacation experiences.

*Escape from the everyday.* Respondents valued being able to get away from work, technology, busyness, stress, the city, other people, and their normal routine. (‘Work and all the related stresses of the city seemed far away.’)

*Idealised locations.* The places they escaped to were sometimes idealised. (‘I felt like I was in paradise’; ‘like heaven on earth’; ‘a dream come true’; ‘a perfect day’.)

*Favourite places.* For some respondents, their most meaningful vacations were not at exotic or novel locations, but rather at places that were familiar, where they felt a sense of attachment. (‘I like to going back to the same place... a place where I can feel safe and know what to expect. This photo makes me feel safe and secure.’)

### **In what ways are vacations a source of meaning in themselves?**

Although Steger et al. (2013) grouped Travel and Holidays as part of the Leisure and Miscellaneous sections (respectively) of their classification, in the current study there was evidence in participants’ responses that vacations might be considered a source of meaning in their own right, not only as a context within which other meaningful domains can be experienced. Participants spoke about vacations as a milestone marker; vacations as a remedy or reward; and vacations that had changed their lives.

*Vacations as a milestone marker.* Vacations were meaningful when they signalled the ‘first time’ the respondent had done something, seen something, or spent time with someone. In fact the word ‘first’ was used 161 times in the 370 responses. Also meaningful was the ‘last time’ they had been able to do something before life circumstances had changed, or the accomplishment of something they had ‘always wanted to do’. Many reported having intentionally planned a vacation as a marker of a turning point or a new phase in their life.

‘This was my first overseas holiday by myself after getting a job, leaving home. It was the first place I had chosen to go. It was on a Contiki tour, so not entirely self-directed, but still a big step out into the world on my own.’

*Vacations as a remedy or reward.* Respondents had used vacations to reward themselves after a period of hard work or other life difficulties. Such vacations were often seen as contributing to the process of recovery or restoration.

‘I had just finished 8 months of chemo and radiation and this trip was my reward.’

‘This was taken during our trip to Thailand after we had both finished our university degrees. This was a trip to celebrate many years of hard work and long hours studying.’

‘After separating from my husband of more than a decade, I needed to run away. To get out of my comfort zone, I signed up to travel from one side of the USA to the other – in a bus – with nine strangers. The highlight of my year was meeting and travelling with these amazing people. Without knowing it, they all have all changed my life.’

*Life-changing vacations.* Respondents spoke of the life-changing impact of vacations on their motivation for living, understanding of themselves and others, and commitment to contribute positively to the world. They used words such as inspiration, courage, and hope; having their eyes and minds opened; and seeing the world in a new way. Life-changing vacations were often those that involved having to face and overcome challenges and personal fears, and in the process reflecting on and learning lessons about life.

‘This trip is one of the few experiences that I would confidently describe as life-changing: we had to face new challenges every day, dealing with situations and people completely different from those we would be normally exposed to... My world-view afterwards was deeply shaped by this experience.’

‘I found in the experience a throwing off of the shackles of fear which have inhibited much of my life. Sort of a "boldly going where no man (or woman) has gone before". It was pretty liberating.’

‘This photo and the event represents overcoming my fears and going outside my comfort zone. When I look at the photo it reminds me that I’m capable of something if I put my mind to it.’

### **Photographs as a way of capturing meaning**

As part of their reflections on the meaningful aspects of vacations represented by the photographs they had selected, several respondents commented on the important role played by the photograph itself, as a reminder of the meaningful experience; a re-creation of the experience; or a record of their lives.

*Photographs as a reminder.* Photographs capture not only images of places and people, but also the thoughts, feelings and meanings associated with these places and people. Looking at the photograph serves as a reminder of relationships, experiences and insights, almost allowing the participant to transcend time and space.

‘This photo is just one example of numerous I took... they all continue to remind of one of the most magnificent places on earth and all that I saw, felt and experienced there’.

‘It always reminds me of my loved family members that live so far away from me.’

*Photographs as a re-creation.* Some photographs held so much meaning that they were given places of prominence, in the hope of re-creating the remembered experience, or making the experience part of everyday life.

‘I feel happy when I look at this photograph – it’s currently set as my desktop background, so it heralds significance for me. It brings me feelings of calm and acceptance... almost a meditative feeling on how amidst day to day life, there are these moments which are almost spiritual snapshots in time.’

*Photographs as a record of life.* Although vacations represent only a small percentage of most people’s lives, they provide a context in which photographs are almost ubiquitous. Thus for many, vacation photographs provide one of the only records they have of their lives and loved ones, as they change and grow over time. For this reason, some photographs hold meaning beyond the vacation experience itself.

‘I like to keep a record of what we have done while on holiday. I post a few photos to Facebook and it makes a great place to reflect back on one's life.’

‘Looking back I see a time in our life filled with wonder, and new learnings, children who bring so much laughter and joy to our life... This photo represents my world, my life.’

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Using the photograph-based method, respondents were able to provide rich and thoughtful accounts of the ways in which they had found meaning in various aspects of their vacation experiences. All 15 of Steger et al.'s (2013) sources of meaning were present in the data, confirming that everyday sources of meaning both enrich, and are enriched by the vacation context. Thus although vacation time is an extension of everyday life, in which existing goals and values are maintained, it is also outside of everyday life, a kind of ‘time out of time’ (Falassi, 1987), when goals and values are able to be recalibrated. Participants’ responses confirmed that vacations offer rich opportunities for social interaction, personal growth and identity development (Richards, 1999), and also provide a context for reflection on life (Wilson and Harris, 2006). Photographs enabled these meaningful moments to be captured in time, themselves becoming a source of meaning and a record of life.

As identified in previous research (Andereck et al., 2006; Harrison, 2003), relationships were a significant source of meaning in the context of vacations, as in other life domains (Steger, et al., 2013). Although this study focussed on meaning rather than motivation, the findings shed some light on the debate regarding whether tourists travel for the discovery of ‘self’ or search for the ‘other’ (Moscardo, Dann, & McKercher, 2014). Overwhelmingly, the aspects that people mentioned most frequently as meaningful related to spending time with their travelling companions, which in Dann’s conceptualisation (in Moscardo et al., 2014) might be labelled the ‘quest for other as brother’ (p. 95). However, in those cases where respondents did refer to aspects of ‘self’, their responses clearly reflected a deeper level of meaning, involving overcoming challenges and developing self-esteem. These expressions were more in line with eudaimonic satisfaction or psychological well-being. Of course, Moscardo’s conclusion that ‘tourists primarily travel to discover themselves’ carries the caveat that ‘they are rarely likely to be conscious of this’ (Moscardo et al., 2014, p. 82). Thus it is not surprising that expressions of meaning focussed on self were relatively infrequent in our data.

The twin ideas of tourism as an escape from the mundane and a search for novel experiences contributed new sources of meaning that had not been identified in other contexts. Gilbert and Abdullah’s (2004) suggestion that vacations enhance a sense of happiness and well-being because they represent ‘a distinct break from normal events’ (p. 117) resonates well with our data. The search for novel or unique experiences is perhaps one of the motivations that can only be met, or can best be met, through tourism. Vacations offer abundant opportunities to encounter different environments, climates, cultures and lifestyles, and many respondents found meaning in doing something for the ‘first time’ or in seeing something that they considered ‘special’ or noteworthy in some way. These experiences contribute to the participants’ social and human capital (Moscardo, 2009) as they provide resources for personal growth, and also for enriching relationships. The claim that visitor experiences are the ‘core product’ or ‘essence’ of tourism (Prentice, Witt & Hamer, 1998; Tussyadiah, 2014) is thus well-supported in participants’ responses.

Vacations were found to offer meaning in themselves, especially as participants used them as markers of significant life events or changes, for instance, a vacation often follows a wedding, a retirement, or completion of a course of study. The vacation not only takes on the meanings associated with the significant event, but adds its own meaning as it contributes to a sense of reward or recovery, or the beginning of a new phase of life. Such occasions prompt reflective responses which the vacation provides time and space to nurture, contributing to the accomplishment of the turning point, as well as providing a memorable marker of it. Vacations also provide opportunities for people to face and overcome challenges, or to establish a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. For these reasons, some vacations can be perceived as life-changing.

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihayli (2000, p. 5), positive psychology focuses on 'positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions' in order to improve quality of life. There is ample evidence in participants' reflections on their meaningful vacation experiences for the contribution of tourism to each of these aspects. The words 'happy' or 'happiness', for example, were used 90 times in participants' responses; positive traits such as persistence, appreciation of diversity, aesthetic appreciation, open-mindedness and commitment were implied, if not explicitly named; and tourism as a positive institution (one that moves individuals toward better citizenship) might be argued from participants' accounts of their meaningful vacation experiences.

Pearce (2009, p. 46) proposed that tourism might be considered a positive institution that promotes 'personal growth and human flourishing'. The findings of this study confirm that at least for some people, some of the time, this is the case. Warnings from Moscardo (2009) would caution, however, that this is not always the case: some people report negative experiences of tourism; the costs of tourism may actually be harmful to quality of life (through risk of injury or disease, financial and opportunity costs, and disruption to local social and community networks); and tourism's impact on host populations and environments can also be negative. Similarly, McKercher (in Moscardo et al., 2014) argues that tourism is a self-indulgent behaviour that may not be sustainable for the planet as a whole. Such negative experiences would not have been detected in the current study, due to its intentional focus on the things that make vacations meaningful. In this regard, however, the study accomplished what it set out to do – it has documented the many sources of meaning that are inherent in vacations, from strengthening bonds with family and friends through to life-changing readjustments and moments of insight. Perhaps the tourism industry, and individual tourists themselves, can benefit from reflection on these sources of meaning, in order to create more meaningful tourism experiences whose benefits outweigh their costs.



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