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Single women and holidaymaking

Introduction

My interest in understanding female singlehood and holidaymaking started in 2001 when I, at the age of 37, for the first time travelled alone. During the one-week stay in a Turkish beach resort, I started to reflect on why I did not enjoy this holiday much, I felt lonely, self-conscious and vulnerable. At that time in my career, as an applied tourism researcher, I had never thought about notions such as familism, ageism and singlism in relation to holidays (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Gordon, 1994; Sandfield & Percy, 2003), concepts that later inspired my thinking.

My feminist research on gender and tourism started with my PhD in 2003. The focus was on the interrelationships between the holiday experience and social identities of gender, singlehood and midlife (Heimtun, 2007c). At that point, other dissertations had focused on similar issues (Jordan, 2004; Simmons, 2003; Small, 2002; Wilson, 2004) and a few studies had explored the market potential of older single women (Chirivella Caballero & Hart, 1996; Stone & Nichol, 1999), none of them, however, had the spotlight on midlife single women. Based on my PhD, I later conducted a survey among young single men and women. In 2016, I interviewed midlife single women about holidays with aging parents. Later in this chapter, I will explore these studies in some detail. Before doing this, I will present some of my methodological and theoretical underpinnings.

Methodological and theoretical framework

My research on single women and holidaymaking is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing on disciplines and subject fields such as sociology, gender studies and tourism studies. I position myself within a post structural feminist epistemology which involves a both/and logic (Lather, 1991). This logic makes it possible to build a bridge between relativism and realism that locates both ‘systemic’ power relations such as gender, class, race and sexuality, and ‘localized, contextualized and pluralized’ gender power relations permeating language and praxis (Aitchison, 2005, p. 220). I also draw on feminist methodology, which involves a critique of positivist tenets of objectivity and neutrality. Aligned with feminists, I argue for a situated and ethical knowledge production through reflexivity (Stanley & Wise, 1990). For

me, this entails an awareness of my single status, gender and age and acknowledgement of their impacts upon the research process.

Feminism also advocates knowledge as the basis for social change (Ramazonđlu & Holland, 2002). My decision to study singles' holidays was based on a desire to produce knowledge that could change academics' and practitioners' knowledge. Contrary, to many feminist scholars who prefer qualitative methods, and who uphold the divide between quantitative and qualitative methods (Letherby, 2004; Oakley, 2000), I have contributed to the softening of this divide by acknowledging that methods are only tools (Heimtun, 2007b; Heimtun & Morgan, 2012). Thus, I agree that quantitative as well as qualitative data provide fertile knowledge in the struggle for social change (Leckenby & Hesse-Biber). Thus, my research on single women includes qualitative and quantitative studies.

I have drawn on several theoretical insights in making sense of single women's holiday experiences. One central theoretical framework has been a feminist reading of Bourdieu's 'phenomenology of social space' (Heimtun, 2007c; McNay, 2004). In this reading, women's experiences are situated and lived within social spaces or fields. A field, such as tourism, is a 'structured space of positions' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72), which consists of a network of objective social positions functioning in specific ways (McNay, 2000). Gender is one social position, which often intersect with class, race, age and sexuality (Adkins, 2004a; Skeggs, 1997). How gender impact singles' holiday experiences therefore depends upon social context and in my research the women's age. Tourism as a field also has its own logic and power relations shaping these women's economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital (cf. Adkins, 2004b).

Social capital and habitus have been core concepts in my research. To Bourdieu (1986), social capital is about membership in a group such as family and friendship networks that become an asset in the field. Such memberships are also about obligations, trust and recognition. Habitus, which is one part of cultural capital, can be understood as the knowledge about how to 'play the game' and 'feel the game' of the field (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72). It is 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Habitus is the conscious and unconscious embodiment of social norms and power relations, which pre-reflexively regulates and guides how a person acts, talks, dresses and so on in the field. It is the inscription of social positions and distances

upon the body (McNay, 2004). It indicates how power relations are implanted in people's bodies and behavioural patterns. Habitus makes and forms actions and is the non-unitary embodiment of the field (Adkins, 2004b). Single women, for instance, learn the game of holidaymaking, and its' organization shape their capacity to capitalize upon it (cf. Skeggs, 1997).

Practices and signs shape holidaymaking (Crouch, 2000). Practices or experiences are tourists' actions, interactions and negotiations, but also the ways that single women make sense of the world and of how they encounter the holiday. The game of the field is part of single women's habitus on reflexive and pre-reflexive levels (cf. Adkins, 2004b), shaping how they embody and enact the tourist role. When entering the field they use capital to gain symbolic and material power. Signs are abstract and concrete semiotic processes, which inscribe the holiday experience and constitute parts of the field; on- and off-line tourism media represent the holiday experience and signify practices to single women on holiday (cf. Crouch, 2002; Swain, 2004). Such descriptions are never the same, do not influence all women in similar ways and provide different levels of ability and possibility for agency. As the spatiality of the holiday experience is mediated through different body practices, single women's experiences may differ in time and place.

The both/and logic entails a rejection of binary oppositions of home/away and everyday life/holiday (Franklin, 2003). This rejection is also part of Urry's (2006) mobility turn, which opens up understandings of tourism as penetrating every sphere of everyday life and vice versa (Gale, 2009). These insights have opened up for exploring midlife single women's home holidays. The mobility turn also brings other ideas to my research field. It embeds the holiday experiences of the midlife single women in the stage/performance perspective and engages with the materialities of place (Edensor, 2000). Tourism mobilities seeks to integrate 'host-guests-time-space-cultures' and to combine 'material, social *and* cultural elements' (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004, p. 31; Sheller & Urry, 2004, p. 6) when understanding sociality, embodiment and emotions in single women's holiday.

Study methods

The collection of publications that I will explore in this chapter are based on data collected from 2004 to 2016. In 2004, I conducted a pilot for my PhD research. In the pilot, I tested out focus group interviews and solicited diaries, together with four midlife single women. The data collection for the PhD happened in 2005 and included 32 participants. Before and after

the summer holidays, two to four women, aged 35 to 55, participated in one of the seven focus group interviews before the holidays and in one of the nine after. During the summer holidays, the women kept a diary. During the school year 2008-2009, a convenience sample of non-representative 270 single undergraduate male and female students, aged 18-25, comprised the sample for a study on young singles' holidaymaking. I developed the variables from my PhD and a pilot feedback. In 2016, I conducted three more interviews with midlife single women, focusing on filial duty, and I mapped the women's intergenerational holidays from 2014 to 2016. I also kept diaries during five holiday periods in 2016–2017 and reflected back on, and mapped intergenerational holidays over fourteen years. I recorded all interviews and transcribed them verbatim.

In this research, it has been important to reflect upon the similarities between the research participants and me. As a midlife single woman, I share the participants' lifestyles and have had comparable holiday experiences. I have sought to tell the story of the midlife single women, not my own. Sometimes this has also meant telling mine (Trimberger, 2005). Only recently, have I included autoethnographical data. Due to personal circumstances, parental obligation shaped many of my holidays. Situating myself in the knowledge production enabled me to do deeper analyses (Allen & Piercy, 2005). At the same time, involving intimate others required reflections of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007); of my responsibilities towards my family and the effects my stories may have upon them. When doing autoethnography, I followed Ellis' (Ellis, 2007, p. 25) advice on holding «relational concerns high». I sought to protect my mother's vulnerability by excluding some stories and by anonymizing the autobiographical data (Bloom, 2003). I know that the stories only reflect my interpretations.

Holidays with friends

Through my research, I have argued that tourism is a space within which bonding social capital is the symbolic capital, constructed through the investments of tourists and the tourism industry. Because of this symbolic capital, many of the midlife single women enacted the social identity of a friend, by either travelling with friends or joining a group package tour, thereby meeting new potential friends (Heimtun, 2010b, 2012). Even young single women preferred travelling with friends (Heimtun & Abelsen, 2012). By valuing friendships on holiday, in a Bourdieuan sense, these women exercised a 'practical knowledge of the principle of the game' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 74). This social identity enabled them to negotiate a sociable

space discursively and materially accommodated for and filled with people travelling with significant others, very often families and couples.

Bonding social capital gave material and symbolic profits, which protected the women when confronted with male attention, and sexualised gazes. Moreover, with friends the midlife single women were not much aware of singlism or ageism (Heimtun, 2007d). The company created a psychological strength, which empowered them and made them feel socially included in tourism spaces marked by familism, heterosexuality and couples. Such power relations permeated them on a pre-reflexive level as well as being imbued in the discourse and materiality of the field, leaving the midlife single women space for agency and potential social transformation. Bonding social capital was part of the women's habitus as tourists.

Although most of the midlife single women found comfort in the social identity of the friend and really enjoyed reproducing bonding social capital, this did not mean that they were totally controlled by the field. They also had agency. Agency was primarily noticeable in the ways the women transformed the holiday experience from being about experiencing site-specific attractions, highlights and services to doing friendships. The doing of such friendships transcended the holiday experience and created a sense of belonging and mattering in everyday life (Heimtun, 2007a). The doing of things, talking and being together were important aspects of their friendships in everyday life. By spending time together, the holiday functioned as a space for strengthening and contesting gender/singlehood/midlife identities as well as the identity of a friend. In particular, the women used the holiday meal and the restaurant for this purpose (Heimtun, 2012).

The importance of sharing holiday experiences, furthermore, exceeded its immediate profits, as the memories became part of a 'collectivity-owned capital' (Bourdieu, 1986), which the women could tap from. Such experiences were then a means of achieving social integration (Heimtun, 2007a). Agency was also noticeable when some of the midlife single women joined group package tours instead of travelling solo (Heimtun, 2010a). If friends were unavailable as holiday companions the group package tour accrued social capital and secured visits to inaccessible destinations.

It is, however, too simplistic to argue that when tactically playing the game of the field, the midlife single women only had positive holiday experiences. They also longed for privacy

and independence, and conflicts between friends arose (Heimtun & Jordan, 2011). Holidays with friends were thus about not only happiness, joy and freedom, but also disagreement, irritation, anger, frustrations, disappointments and compromises related to friends' habits such as smoking and drinking, disrespect, stubbornness and addictions. The women also had different needs in regards of wanting to be in control and in enacting their independence, and they had different views on money and holiday activities.

Moreover, not all the women were positive towards group package tours. Some women argued that the group tour context, *per se*, was about surrendering control (Heimtun, 2010a). As puppets on a string they had to follow the instructions of the tour guide, who decided the times and spaces for sociability. The women who did not join the group with family and friends had to trust that the random composition of the group would be successful. In a way they had to turn themselves into tour 'children' (Bruner, 1995), dependent upon the tour operators' ability in selling tours to people willing to bond with midlife single women joining the group alone, and the guide's skills in creating an atmosphere for bonding. In worst-case scenarios, the mix of people could be alienating, not fostering bonding. Besides, in cases when the other group package tourist booked with families and friends, the women without travel companions could feel marginalised and socially excluded.

Solo holidays

The notion that social capital is the symbolic capital in the field of tourism was further strengthened by many of the midlife single women's reluctance of solo holidays. Just the thought of manoeuvring the field alone felt scary. Solo holiday experiences were mainly linked to the social identity of the loner, just a few of the women identified with the independent traveller (Heimtun, 2012). The study of young single women also showed an unwillingness to travel alone, in particular to beach resorts (Heimtun & Abelsen, 2014). This suggested that the women's dislike of travelling alone was not about their age.

The social identity of the loner was in many ways a mental construct. It was also part of the midlife women's habitus. As an incorporated part of their bodies, it partly functioned on an unconscious level and most of the women did not realise the value of social capital before embarking on the first solo holiday or eating out alone for the first time (Heimtun, 2010b). Alone, these women felt the observing and controlling gazes of other people and disliked public solitude. Despite being used to independence and solitude in everyday life, many of the women shunned such qualities when on holiday. Singlism, familism and heterosexuality

overshadowed their preference for independence in everyday life. Furthermore, public solitude in unknown territories aroused the women's well-developed 'normalized distaste' and fears (Heimtun, 2012).

The social identity of the loner, however, also empowered many of the midlife single women. Holiday spaces were mobile; some destinations were easier to manage alone and at some hours of the day, it was good to be alone. Heterogeneous tourism spaces such as restaurants in cities and temporal aspects, such as eating out at lunchtime, placed less value on social capital, reducing the importance of sociability and sameness (Heimtun, 2010b). Other spaces, such as the urban park and the airport, were also easier to manage alone (Heimtun, 2007c). Although, people occupied urban parks and airports with friends and relatives they were not designed for the display of social capital. The social identity of the loner here was therefore more manageable and acceptable.

A few of the midlife women embraced the social identity of the independent traveller. These women enjoyed controlling the holiday experience, what to do, when to do it, where to go, who to talk to and so on in, before and after the holiday (Heimtun, 2012). They were less concerned with the sociality embedded in the tourist gaze and the material structures of tourism. The social identity of the independent traveller contained many of the positive characteristics of gender/singlehood/midlife identities of everyday life; control over the holiday experience, mental and emotional independence, and self-actualization and achievement (Heimtun, 2007d).

I have suggested that, in particular, the independent traveller had agency (Heimtun, 2007c). Midlife single women holidaying alone challenged the concept of holiday experience as a sociable space with significant others. The social identity of the independent traveller was, however, not for everybody. Only a few of the women had learned to appreciate it. Most of them disliked eating out alone and did not want to resist the tourist gaze upon them, thereby displaying their solitude in public. Even the women embracing the social identity of the independent traveller sometimes felt the temporal lack of bonding social capital, especially when visiting a restaurant alone at night (Heimtun, 2010b). They also sensed that the material structure of the restaurant did not accommodate the single guest and they felt the gazes of the staff and other customers. It was therefore not easy to challenge or change the strong links

between the holiday experience and bonding social capital. Such links were deeply entrenched in the field of tourism and the midlife single women's habitus.

Holidays at home and with parents

In explorative studies, data that do not fit the overarching research questions can, after a while, spark new interest. This was the case with the midlife single women's home holidays. In 2014, Bodil Stilling Blichfeldt, in her keynote, at the 23rd Nordic Symposium on Tourism and Hospitality Research, encouraged tourism researcher to pay more attention to ordinary and mundane tourist experiences. Inspired by her talk, I decided it was time to revisit the midlife single women's stories of home holidays. In doing this, I had to problematize the dichotomies inherent in the concepts of 'home' and 'away', and of 'leisure' and 'tourism'. I also had to challenge stereotypical assumption that "normal adults" will travel for pleasure, that home holidays or staycations are not 'real' holidays and "to stay at home is to be pitied" (Frew & Winter, 2009; Urry, 1988, p. 36). Although research had identified reasons for non-travelling (Dragland, 2011; Haukeland, 1990), pre-Covid-19, little was known about how people reflected upon their home holidays, what they did and the (potential) constraints they negotiated.

When seeking to make sense of the data, I used narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). The result was three cases, which were rich and varied in content. By telling Doris', Nicola's and Paris' stories, I challenged the discourse of tourism as temporal and spatial mobility and partly demonstrated that it was possible to have real holidays at home (Heimtun, 2017). Doris, for instance, enjoyed daytrips in the home area. Her previous experiences as a solo traveller empowered her also on home holidays. Nichola had travelled less and had spent many holidays at home. Often she dreaded the summer holidays, as she did not have any travel plans or somebody to holiday with. Being at home felt boring, she longed for travelling, but feared solo holidays. Singlism and gender power relations constrained her. Paris enjoyed being a tourist in her hometown. At the same time, she had to care for her ill and aging parents. This duty also gave her pleasure; however, she felt that her single and childless status, intensified her parents' expectations. A commonality in the three stories was that home holidays made them long for a partner, something that was not an issue when sharing other types of holiday experiences. Some situations at home made them feel more vulnerable and less independent singles in these holidays.

Paris' story about aging parents' need for care, combined with my own family situation, encouraged me to explore further filial duty or adult children's obligations towards their parents (cf. Keller, 2006). For this publication, I again re-visited the pilot and main study on midlife single women, additionally I conducted three more interviews and I included my own reflections and experiences (Heimtun, 2019).

This research showed that love, care and joint pleasurable activities made filial duty an enjoyable, valuable and meaningful choice. It was something the women wanted to do in the holidays and it strengthened the unique bond between adult child and adult parents. Most of the women's parents were relatively healthy and doing things together was important. At the same time, perceived parental expectations of time commitment and joint activities caused several of the women to also feel compromised in their need for 'me-time' and agency. Several of the women felt a pressure in spending parts of their holidays with their parents. A pressure, which not only came from parents, but also married siblings, a pressure that the women related to their statuses as female and single. For some of the women, filial duty became extra troublesome, in particular for those with difficult relationships with parents and for those who had experienced a decline in parents' health. Some negative experiences, singlism, disempowerment and a sense of obligation thus meant that the women's feelings towards filial duty in the holidays often were ambivalent. Ailing parents and death of a parent also made the women feel vulnerable, fearing their own aging, and missing not having a partner to share the emotional burdens of caregiving.

Conclusion

I will end this chapter by pinpointing some key contributions of my research.

- Giving voice to and scrutinizing single women and their holiday experiences
- Making visible the power of bonding social capital in tourism
- Deconstructing the temporal and spatial power relations imbuing the holiday meal
- Highlighting how holidays with friends matters in everyday life
- Challenging tourism as sites of unproblematic pleasure and total freedom
- Examining the fluidity of choice and obligation related to filial duty in the holidays
- Contributing to paradigm peace in feminist research

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