Leaving it all Behind to Travel: Venturing Uncertainty as a Means to Personal Growth and Authenticity

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Abstract

The potential for personal growth in cross-cultural travel has been posited by numerous psychologists, however, a "gaping hole" in empirical research has left these hypotheses unexplored (Montuori & Fahim, 2004). Meanwhile, rapidly increasing numbers of people are choosing to leave their careers to pursue a personal dream of extensive foreign travel (Travelex, 2009). The aim of this study was to explore the motivations, psychological experiences and outcomes from travel in this growing "career-break" demographic. Ten men and women who had exited their careers to pursue extensive culturally engaging travel participated in an individual semi-structured interview which was analyzed using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Three main themes emerged: an existential yearning to travel, "jumping off the ledge" (courage) and discovering authenticity. Personal growth occurred via adversity within the travel experience itself, but also at the pre-travel stage of departure, where leaving security and venturing uncertainty was experienced with "milestone" significance and for some, as a seismic event akin to trauma. Future research should explore the potential for a new type of intrinsically-emerging trauma in posttraumatic growth (PTG; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) and the potential for anxiety as a positive construct in authentic becoming and growth.

Key words

Authenticity, self-actualization, career-break, independent travel, personal growth, posttraumatic growth

Introduction

The potential for personal growth in cross-cultural encounters has historically been hypothesized by numerous psychologists, though there has been a notable absence of follow-up with empirical research (Montuori & Fahim, 2004). Meanwhile, in recent years the decision to walk away from a successful career in order to pursue extended foreign travel has been rapidly increasing in prevalence. The term "gap year" is used in the UK to describe the popular choice of British students leaving high school to spend a year abroad before entering university, as an opportunity to explore the world before committing to their future career. While previously considered a rite of passage for young students, the gap year is now instead emerging as the territory of the over thirties, who stand to sacrifice established careers, earnings and long-term relationships in pursuit of their travel ambitions. 30-55 year olds are now more than twice as likely to take time out to travel than 18-24 year olds (Travelex, 2009), a pattern that is predicted to steadily increase (Mintel, 2008). This trend is reflected within the travel sector, as travel company *Gap Year For Grown Ups* (the UK's leading gap year provider), whose client base comprises 61% in the 25-50 year age bracket compared to 12% aged under 25, has seen 300% growth since 2005 (Real Travel Group, 2010).

However, despite the call for research into cross-cultural encounters and the increasing prevalence of this demographic, the motivations, psychological experiences and outcomes for those leaving their careers to travel have not been empirically researched. This decision therefore remains poorly understood in terms of both its rationale and its psychological costs and benefits. Why leave everything behind? And what outcomes are there - if any - beyond a period of respite and an indelible "gap" on the résumé?

Research polls among those who have chosen to leave work to travel suggest its motivation may ultimately be existential in nature. In a UK survey, key reasons cited for leaving work to

travel were career burnout and being fed up with the "rat-race" (Direct Line, 2006). Similarly, online social network *Gapyear.com,* comment that later gap years are motivated by job dissatisfaction and wanting a change in life direction (Fraser, 2010). That career burnout may in fact represent a frustration of deeper existential needs is highlighted in a review of career burnout research (Pines, 1993). Pines concludes its cause can be understood in terms of the human need for existential meaning, noting that in US culture (and arguably Western culture) career has replaced religion as a socially constructed "hero system" for meaning, but that aspiring to find meaning in work and failing leads to career burnout - a state of fatigue and emotional exhaustion caused by a gradual process of disillusionment (*ibid.*) It is feasible therefore that while manifesting as work dissatisfaction and burnout, the motivation to exit a career to travel may stem from deeper existential needs.

In line with this reasoning, psychologists may better understand the draw toward cross-cultural travel on reflection of interdisciplinary evidence that it can offer an opportunity for personal growth. Empirical findings (largely from the fields of sociology, tourism and education) suggest the independent travel or live-abroad experience offers growth in areas including autonomy (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Brown, 2009), flow and eudaimonia (Filep, 2008), self-efficacy (Cushner & Karim, 2004), time satisfaction (Montuori & Fahim, 2004; Elsrud, 1998) and creativity (Maddux & Gallinsky, 2009). The processes by which growth is posited to occur include challenge to perceptions of self and own culture, release from routine and conformity, gathering of social and cultural capital and necessary adaptation when living abroad. All researchers conclude it is the close cultural engagement of the extended independent travel experience (to which people are not exposed in more generic, shorter vacations) which is crucial to this process. While these explorations have mostly utilized terminology and methodology outside of traditional psychological frameworks, their findings present an encouraging foundation upon which to undertake more rigorous research using psychological methodologies.

Despite the relative absence of empirical research in psychology, numerous psychologists historically have hypothesized that the shock of contrast and exposure to difference in culturally engaging travel presents cognitive disjunction, which can act as a trigger for personal growth (Adler, 1975; Hall, 1959; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Beyond exposing difference, this disjunction also presents adversity, such as insufficient linguistic and cultural skills, prejudice, discrimination, homesickness and loneliness (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001) and it is this confrontation with hardship that has also been designated a key pre-cursor to growth (Adler, 1975).

Lyons (2010) extends the notion of adversity and exposure to difference as key pre-cursors to personal growth, by urging some forms of travel offer an opportunity for personal transformation. Lyons (2010) posits the construct of "'autonomous cross-cultural hardship travel" (ACHT, p.286), that is, foreign travel characterized by intense cross-cultural engagement, challenging conditions and extended periods of movement. In this type of travel one not only encounters adversity as a facilitator to growth, but the loss of the home culture's supports, cues and roles, which can force sudden recognition of one's identity as socially constructed and allow space for the emergence of the rudimentary "truer, more basic, deeper self" (p.294). Drawing a comparison between opting for ACHT and the "growth choices" Maslow (1968) saw embraced by self-actualizers, Lyons (2010) concludes that the desire to pursue challenging long-term solo travel may embody the self-actualization impulse.

Pointing to a "gaping hole" in empirical research in psychology into the cross-cultural encounter and its psychological outcomes, Montuori and Fahim (2004) argue for a reopening of this vital discussion and present the case for humanistic-existential psychology as the ideal conceptual framework to explore this area. Where psychological research to date has been limited to exploring negative experiences of cross-cultural encounters (such as culture-shock)

or extraordinary experiences (such as shamanic journeys), the open-ended phenomenological approach of humanistic-existential psychology would allow for exploration of both the positive and more "ordinary" experiences of everyday people. The aim of this study therefore, is to empirically explore the motivations and psychological experiences of the encounter within a relevant emerging contemporary population; those who have chosen to exit their career for a period of extended independent travel.

Method

Methodological Paradigm

The lack of existing research in psychology in the domain of career-break travel led to the selection of grounded theory as the methodology of choice due to its theoretical sensitivity in exploring new areas of research. Rather than imposing preconceived hypotheses onto data, it instead enables theory to emerge from it (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher recognizes their unavoidable influence on the data, both in its collection and subsequent analysis, distancing from traditional scientific realism and moving toward a more contextualist perspective of reality (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000) and therefore the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) was selected.

Participants

10 participants (six female and four male) with experience of leaving a career to undertake independent foreign travel were recruited. The selection process required that all participants had either resigned from their job or accepted a temporary career-break offer from their employer to travel abroad for a period of at least three months and undertake some form of culturally engaging activity, such as backpacking, volunteering or working. These criteria distinguish the typical career-break experience from the more generic vacation (Department

for Education and Skills, 2004; Direct Line, 2006; Travelex; 2009; Simpson, 2005), targeting the former and eliminating the latter from investigation.

Participants were aged between 25 and 38, and of mixed nationalities including British, American, Canadian and German. Professions prior to travel represented a range of sectors including finance, education, charity, media, marketing and IT. Five participants had traveled solo, four traveled as a couple, and one had traveled with two friends. A range of urban and remote locations were visited across six continents (Asia, North America, South America, Africa, Australia and Europe) for time periods ranging from three months to three years. At the time of interview, one participant was mid-travel and the remaining nine participants had returned to their home country, with the time elapsed since return ranging from three months to 10 years (see Table 1).

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Sample Selection Procedure

Participants were recruited through contacts of the researcher and by contacting authors of online blogs written about personal experiences of career-break independent travel. An information sheet was emailed to potential participants explaining the nature of the study and its objective. Participants were asked to respond if they were interested in taking part. In line with grounded theory methodology, participant recruitment continued until the point of theoretical saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006).

Procedure

Each participant was briefed on ethics and confidentiality issues before completing a consent form. During interviews, the researcher made no comments and used minimal probes to spontaneously pursue leads raised by the participant, such as "Can you expand on that?" and

"How did that make you feel?" to fully understand participants' comments and enable a "directed conversation" which is flexible and emergent (Charmaz, 2006). Once finished, participants were debriefed. Seven interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded using the voice memos application on the iPhone 4, and three interviews were conducted over the phone, recorded using a Sony audio-cassette. Interviews lasted between 22 and 36 minutes.

Each interview was transcribed and analyzed in turn by the researcher prior to the next interview being conducted. In line with constructivist grounded theory procedure (Charmaz, 2006), occasionally after transcript analysis the question schedule was adapted slightly for the next interview in order to explore emerging concepts in greater depth. Memos were recorded by the researcher throughout to record the analytic process. A reflexive diary was also recorded by the researcher throughout to note initial thoughts on the interview, interviewee, interesting quotes and the quality of interaction, which enable a more thorough recall of the interview long after it has taken place.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method described by Charmaz (2006), involving a process of initial line-by-line coding, where descriptive labels are created that stay close to the language in each line of the text to ensure all analysis is grounded firmly in the data. This was followed by focused coding, where initial codes were raised to higher order codes, and finally theoretical coding, where comparisons between focused codes enabled the conceptualization of higher order themes and sub-themes. Four to five main themes emerged from each participant's data to represent the transcript's most salient themes, each also incorporating three to five descriptive sub-themes. Each transcript was subjected to the same rigor in analysis and data collection continued until no further

themes were forthcoming and a point of theoretical saturation was reached (*ibid.*). Finally, comparisons were made across the group and themes were collapsed to create a representative theoretical model for the whole sample.

Bi-monthly meetings between the two researchers enabled an ongoing review of the analysis process and discussions about its emergent themes. Regular meetings with fellow researchers further enabled the comparison of emergent themes as well as highlighting potential new lines of inquiry.

The analysis yielded three main themes to produce a model representing the process of personal growth by exiting a career to travel: *existential yearning to travel*, *"jumping off the ledge" (courage)* and *discovering authenticity*. Each of these themes is comprised of two to three descriptive sub-themes (see Table 2.) A visual model of the theory is presented in Figure 1.

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_____INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE_____

Discussion of Findings

The three main themes identified represent a timeline and narrative of participants' experience from pre-departure to post-travel.

1. Existential Yearning to Travel

This theme represents the emerging desire to travel pre-departure, and is comprised of three sub-themes: *a calling to something "more"*, *mortality and timeline awareness* and *yearning-associated anxiety*.

1.1 A calling to something "more" Participants' desire to travel was often catalyzed by a sense of being on a dissatisfying, meaningless work "treadmill". However, motivations to travel appeared to be deeper and more significant than a reactive desire for respite or escape. While some specific motivations for travel were pinpointed such as challenge and freedom, most participants described an elusive, long-standing need for something "more", "bigger", "wider", "potential", "possibility" and "to feel alive".

A common experience that triggered participants' awareness of this need was a process of deep life questioning. Participants described scrutinizing social norms that advocate career success as life's central goal, feeling it insufficient to meet an alternative long-standing desire to autonomously explore the world. The common backdrop to this questioning was reflection on the purpose of their existence, leading to a nagging sense of a life meaning beyond the confines of the work domain.

> I did a lot of questioning about not just the job but my entire lifestyle … corporate work and what I'm working for and why I'm doing it. So I think that spurred on just a lot of general life questioning. (Belinda)

For some participants this unmet need was experienced physically in the body as frustration and a sense of emptiness, leading to feelings of anger with self and even the desire to hate work in order to make it easier to leave. Overall, participants felt their current existence to be somehow deeply deficient.

> … I just had this strong feeling that in my lifetime I don't wanna live small and just accept the existence that I've been given... this like, real hunger to actually go and experience something different... it's like this revelation of whole different ways of being. (Ella)

Jen describes a sense of lack, despite her career success:

> …it didn't touch that feeling on the inside, that there's more… it would go dormant for months at a time but it would always resurface…. of what it was I really wanted, of all the possibilities I'd felt as a child. I'd ignored them for this other track that was clearer I suppose, more well-defined. (Jen)

This scrutiny and life questioning brought participants the sense that part of their human potential and possibility remained unfulfilled, resulting in a sense of deep lack and an overwhelming calling to something "more". Bound up with reflections on the purpose of existence and meaning in life, this yearning was deeply existential in nature.

1.2 Mortality and timeline awareness The yearning for something more described by participants was further catalyzed by reflections about the passing of time and finiteness of existence, which heightened the urgency of the travel opportunity. Some participants

reflected on their mortality, including having only one life and imagining their hypothetical death:

> When I was working in the city it was just... some days I felt close to tears… I wasn't doing anything I wanted to do… And I wasn't existing... if I'd died nothing different would have happened... I was just another cog. No difference to the world, before, after or present. (Adam)

Other participants made further timeline reflections, including imagining later life regrets, aspirations to share valuable life experiences with future children and grandchildren and acknowledgment of their advancing age; all highlighting the unique opportunity of the present moment:

> ...that was more my age thing, that if I don't do it now I'm never gonna do it. I won't do it later. I will then start thinking about settling down a little bit. Now is my chance. (Carrie)

Adding to the sense of existential lack and desire for more presented in the previous theme, participants' mortality and timeline awareness highlighted the singularity of the current opportunity, functioning as an impetus to act.

1.3 Yearning-associated anxiety By giving serious consideration to the intrinsic desire to resign from work in order to travel, participants talked of arising anxieties about the uncertainty ahead. Some participants relayed a wide range of anxieties:

> ...whether it was the right thing to do, whether this was gonna spoil my future... it's really scary … doubting yourself … whether we'd be in debt, whether we'd

miss things at home, whether we'd go there and think it was a waste of time, whether it would change anything. (Georgie)

Other participants described more selective fears, including loss (social and material), failure, change, debt, disapproval, letting employers down, returning to nothing, loneliness, wasting time, missing family and spoiling future career.

In addition to these tangible fears, Jen describes anxiety about uncertainty itself:

If you start to listen to the sense, this pestering sense that you want more, then the next logical step is to remove yourself from all the things that you know, from all the structure and all the comfort ... So it's removing yourself - and for what? To go to the complete unknown. It's terrifying really. Even letting go of the physical things ... to let them go, and strip that back, to just bare nothingness … it was terrifying not knowing what that would look like ... The breaking down of what I know for something I can't define. (Jen)

These anxieties presented psychological conflict and torment in participants' decision-making process by highlighting the inherent risks and potentially life-changing nature of their decision.

2. *"Jumping off the Ledge" (Courage)*

This theme captures the experience of facing fear, both at the time of departure and during the travel experience, and is comprised of two sub-themes*: leaving as a self-determination milestone/seismic event* and *courage as a vehicle to growth*.

2.1 Leaving as a self-determination milestone / seismic event Participants' anxieties in anticipation of loss and uncertainty were often exacerbated by explicit objections from friends and family urging that the sacrifice to earnings and career progression was naïve and misjudged. The act of leaving despite the personal anxiety and social objections therefore required courage and commitment to the yearning to travel, described by Carrie as "jumping off the ledge". Honoring this yearning allowed participants to feel authentic, described in terms of "being myself", "being me" and giving less credence to the judgments of others. For many, the decision to leave in the face of fear and objection represented a challenging but crucial moment of self-determination, which Belinda described as a "milestone":

> Choosing to take time off work was probably one of the first times in my life where I decided to ... do what I felt like doing and not worry about what other people had to say about it ... So I feel like now I've gone over that, I've experienced that milestone. So now I feel more comfortable with being myself because I've already done it once and since then I realized that it didn't matter that much what other people think, it ... matters more how I feel. (Belinda)

For some participants, the urge to travel was so compelling they sold their cars and homes. Two participants even described leaving significant relationships as if by force, experiencing the process as both highly anxiety-provoking and beyond personal control:

> I ended up breaking up that relationship in the end ... I was completely in love with him and I'd assumed that we were getting married ... So that was terrifying ... And yet at the same time ... it was like I was on this river that was taking me in a direction that I couldn't stop ... I was being me for once. Completely ... So it was kind of like this cruel choice that in order to be myself I had to let go of everything, including him ... And it was heart-breaking. (Ella)

I left this guy who I completely fell in love with ... and there was always a really big fear of just like, what am I doing? ... that morning that I was leaving, and I was crying ... I sat on the plane and I was just bawling my eyes out and just thinking ... what have I done? But … what I wanted to do was bigger, and it was more powerful in me ... I needed to do it for myself ... He was like my best mate. And I was just leaving it behind, and it was devastating. (Carrie)

The experiences described by Carrie and Ella specifically resemble trauma, or a "seismic event", as it is termed in posttraumatic growth literature (PTG; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), by presenting challenges to the personal narrative, being highly disruptive and shattering the assumptive world. Trauma, however, is traditionally defined as an unexpected event that occurs outside of personal control. While in the current study the act of departure was self-determined, cognitively and emotionally it was described as feeling painfully beyond personal control and therefore raises the question if in some instances, trauma may emerge intrinsically.

Experienced with milestone (and at times seismic) impact, the decision to leave was described by participants as an act of overcoming personal anxiety and social objection in order to honor a deep-seated yearning, representing a life-changing act of courage and self-determination.

2.2 Courage as a vehicle to growth In addition to pre-departure fears, participants experienced numerous anxieties within the travel experience itself including culture shock, fear of personal attack, involvement in road accidents, daily uncertainty, prejudice, shyness and extreme sports. By facing and overcoming anxiety pre- and mid-travel, participants described personal growth by learning life lessons about the value of courage.

By overcoming the social anxieties that emerged during his travel experience, Harry realized how he'd previously been "playing it safe", now identifying courage as a source of vitality and meaning in life:

> …when I was doing this job, it was all about social pressure and social conforming, and living up to social expectations and well … it was all about safety. But erm, when I was there ... I realized that ... that's a big part of feeling alive I think. Not always playing it safe ... The meaning to life can't be to play it safe ... the meaning of my life is to dare to do things and erm, to explore and erm, to have a little bit of courage, instead of being a coward, you know? (Harry)

Ella describes courage in overcoming pre-departure anxiety as a springboard to vitality, self-efficacy and a new life perspective:

> …fear is part of the package … It's really hard work and letting go of stuff and taking big risks and jumping into the unknown completely. But if you're willing to accept the fear and like, kind of, ride it out, then that leads to just, an amazing sense of accomplishment. And excitement and exhilaration and feeling alive … it is not just exciting in itself but a lesson you can carry with you forever then. And that's how I always want to live my life now. (Ella)

However, one participant, Dee, presented a disconfirming case analysis by reporting no personal growth. As she was the first participant interviewed who had traveled with a partner as opposed to solo, theoretical sampling was then conducted by interviewing further participants who had traveled in partnership. Interestingly, in contrast, personal growth did

emerge in these subsequent cases, thus eliminating solo travel as an essential pre-cursor to growth. Further comparisons instead revealed that while Dee had maintained psychological safety both in departure (by being offered a career break rather than resigning) and throughout her trip (by finding refuge from fear in her partner), the subsequent couples who showed personal growth made explicit links between their development and encouraging one another to face their fears. While Dee states she "never actually burst through that bubble" of finding refuge from fear in her partner and ultimately felt no lasting impact from her travel experience, in contrast, Georgie describes how her boyfriend's presence inspired personal courage and growth:

> …when I was scared to jump, I'd just look at him. And he'd like, look away. Or look at me as if to say, what's the big deal? You can do this. And I'd think, what is the big deal? I *can* do this. And then I jumped … Facing my fears - just makes you realize … even when you don't want to speak or you don't want to do something that's out of the ordinary, you've just got to do it. And then you see the outcomes from there ... Happiness, confidence, adrenaline ... And changing as a person. (Georgie)

Courage was therefore isolated as potentially key to personal growth. This hypothesis was further supported when a subsequent participant, Frank, described his relief to have unexpectedly been made redundant while contemplating resignation (therefore negating his need to "jump off the ledge") and presented a second disconfirming case analysis with no evidence of personal growth.

3. Discovering Authenticity

This theme captures participants' phenomenological experience during travel and its impact on return home and up to the present moment. It is composed of three sub-themes:

experiencing vitality by connecting with "true self", finding faith in intrinsic will and *implementing authentic life change.*

3.1 Experiencing vitality by connecting with "true self" Via self-determined activity, exposure to difference and the experience of anonymity, traveling offered participants opportunities to connect with a sense of "true" self, felt phenomenologically as vitality, fulfillment and presence.

Ella describes how the uniquely self-determined nature of her travel venture exposed her to these sensations:

> **…**it's just a huge sense of energy. It's a connecting back to being real, to being true to yourself … everything becomes so vibrant ... before, when you're … retracing the same steps day in day out, you lose that sense … you're just doing things automatically instead of consciously. Everything comes to life - the smells and the colors and the language. And what that does to yourself inside is just incredible … things start sparking … I just felt completely exhilarated and fulfilled ... and happy … it just feels very real. (Ella)

Belinda identifies a new sense of well-being that is distinctive by its intrinsic nature:

> ...I think it's just more clarity. Because... I guess the happiness and satisfaction is coming from inside as opposed to outside. (Belinda)

Harry identifies how the unique sense of anonymity in his travel experience promoted the shedding of a socially constructed self, allowing a "core" self to emerge:

> …you're like a blank space, nobody expects anything from you and you can start from scratch ... there's no expectations, there's no people who know you. It's like you are reduced to this … the core, to your own essence, to what you just are. You realize that you've gotten out of touch with yourself and yeah, that's what scared me too. I thought like, who am I? And am I just functioning? Am I just what other people want me to be? (Harry)

Participants also described how exposure to cultural difference (in terms of local people's values and ways of life) enabled clearer recognition of the socially constructed aspects of themselves. For example, several participants described witnessing alternative cultural values such as prioritizing family relationships above materialism and career progression. This triggered personal reflection about the source of their own values and the identification of those that are culturally imposed rather than necessarily self-determined. The recognition of socially-imposed standards enabled participants to connect to a sense of "truth" and a "core", enabling them to experience themselves more authentically and with greater vitality.

3.2 Finding faith in intrinsic will Via positive phenomenal experiences of connecting to a "core" self within the travel experience, participants described a new found faith in intrinsically-motivated activity on return home, not necessarily with an end goal in sight, but as a goal in itself. This faith was described as empowering, in two different ways. First, by valuing engagement in the present moment above outcome, participants felt able to counteract the anxiety presented by lack of predictability and tolerate uncertainty. Second, by valuing intrinsic will above the judgments of others, participants gained self-acceptance.

Despite feeling challenging, Harry's new faith in pursuing intrinsic will enables him to tolerate uncertainty in life and embrace change:

I think the whole experience taught me that time is a very precious thing … that I shouldn't spend my time … just functioning and just doing something you don't like at all … you know it's not easy to do things your own way, it never is, because it keeps changing and you keep changing as a person … you can't stick to one decision and then go with it, like forever … That's like self-deceit for me… (Harry)

Adam relates a new faith in intrinsic will that has enabled self-acceptance and self-expression in the face of judgments from others:

If something bothers you, talk about it. If something makes you happy, show it... And just express it, rather than thinking, if I express this, are people gonna think I'm a weirdo? …Because it's just me... I don't need them to say I'm doing the right thing because I know I'm doing the right thing... (Adam)

Participants' connection with "true" self, as presented in the previous theme, was experienced as so liberating and energizing they developed an empowering faith in intrinsic will that enabled them to withstand the judgment of others and tolerate uncertainty in their on-going life decisions.

3.3 Implementing authentic life change Participants described how their connection with "true self" and new faith in intrinsic will encouraged them to implement meaningful behavior change on return. Isaac relays his new career plans:

I've actually grown up and I'm thinking … I just need to … find my place in the world, whatever that is ... I just think it's affected how I want to live my life … I always thought that I would get a job in business and do a lot of work and climb a lot of ladders … And now I really, really don't want to do that ... I'd much rather to do things by myself and for myself ... (Isaac)

Belinda describes a new commitment to more personally fulfilling pastimes:

I find that I plan less. I'm less militant at planning now. I'm more laid back … I don't try to fill my time or my schedule with as many things. And the things I do fill it with I actually want to do and value them more ... I feel like they're more meaningful. (Belinda)

Harry relates his desire to retrain and terminate some disingenuous personal relationships:

…when I got home I had a completely new idea of what I wanted to do ... I knew that I wanted to continue my studies ... And also, the thing about the relationship I talked about … we had to part company ... I also decided not to maintain a few friendships when I was there ... I just felt like it was overdue to you know, make room for the new. (Harry)

Other participants described a similar newfound recognition of their most sincere social relationships and new intentions to focus on these at the expense of those felt to be disingenuous. This was experienced as an enhancement to their relational world and further contributed to a heightened sense of authenticity.

Ultimately, participants' positive phenomenal experiences of "being me" and letting go of "self-deceit" inspired the courage to withstand the judgment of others, tolerate unpredictability in pursuing intrinsically-motivated activity and make meaningful and authentic life changes.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the psychological outcomes of the cross-cultural encounter within a growing population; those who have exited their career for a period of extended independent travel. In summary, participants described a timeline of experience, beginning with an existential yearning to explore their life's potential and culminating in the experience of growth and authenticity via the willingness to leave everything behind and the adversity in the cross-cultural encounter itself. Courage played a vital role in growth. That is, courage in daring to listen to the inner voice and pursue the intrinsic yearning to travel in the face of anxiety about uncertainty. Phenomenologically participants experienced high anxiety, leading to vitality, fulfillment, self-efficacy, peace and presence, and ultimately felt fundamentally changed by their experience, making meaningful life changes on their return. What began as a study of the cross-cultural encounter eventually emerged equally as a study of courage and the struggle to live authentically.

The impact of these findings is two-fold, with both theoretical and cultural implications. Theoretically, while the cross-cultural encounter has oft been postulated a trigger for personal growth and self-actualization (Montuori & Fahim, 2004; Lyons, 2010), that the act of leaving can itself be instrumental to the process is a new concept. Although this finding may be specific to older career-break populations relative to the more typical student gap year population (due to the sacrifice to career and relationships entailed and the adversity this presents), it has theoretical implications for psychological models of self-determination

theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), authenticity (Wood et al., 2008), courage (Biswas-Diener, 2012) and PTG (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

The motivational process and wider phenomenology participants described, particularly the *existential yearning to travel* and *experiencing vitality by connecting to "true self"*, reflect some key elements of SDT, a robust theory of human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT identifies two distinct types of motivation. When activities are undertaken purely for the interest inherent within them, motivation emanates internally, from the self ("intrinsic motivation"). In contrast, activities that are imposed or incentivized by an external pressure or reward, such as social approval or financial payment, are "extrinsically motivated". Evidence from SDT demonstrates intrinsically motivated activities, relative to extrinsically motivated activities, are characterized by greater interest, enjoyment, excitement, confidence, vitality and general well-being throughout life (*ibid*.). This may explain why participants in the present study reported heightened vitality and well-being by connecting to "true self" and pursuing intrinsic will. However, for eight out of 10 participants in the present study, the courage to overcome anxiety in pursuit of intrinsic will proved fundamental in psychological growth and *discovering authenticity*, yet the concepts of anxiety and courage have not been explored within the SDT model.

Despite this gap in research, that anxiety arose for participants is conceivable in terms of SDT's fundamental principles. SDT identifies the human need for "relatedness" (positive relationships with others) as equally fundamental to psychological well-being as "autonomy" (*ibid*.). It is therefore feasible that when participants in the present study received objections from friends and family in response to their decision to leave, their need for relatedness was violated in their pursuit of autonomy, presenting conflict and triggering anxiety. In line with SDT, this tension was detrimental to well-being, but only in the short-term. Crucially, withstanding the short-term discomfort and pursuing autonomy was ultimately beneficial in

the long-term and led to psychological growth. As participants experienced this tension between relatedness and autonomy so strongly that their actions became a "milestone" in self-determination, the role of anxiety and courage in SDT warrants further research.

Humanistic-existential thought has long held that facing anxiety is crucial to personal growth and transformation (May, 1976, Van Deurzen, 2001). The courage to venture uncertainty specifically is noted as central to self-actualization, which requires making growth choices rather than fear choices, abandoning defenses and leaving one vulnerable and open (Maslow, 1971). However, in other relevant fields of contemporary psychology beyond the domain of SDT, the relationship between anxiety, courage and authenticity also remains unexplored. For example, despite a recent burst of research interest in positive psychology into the concept of courage itself (e.g. Biswas-Diener, 2012), its role in the domain of self-determination and making authentic life change is not addressed. Likewise, recent theories of authenticity (Wood et al., 2008) and authentic becoming (Kasser & Sheldon, 2004) have not explored the role of anxiety or courage. The relationship between courage, self-determination and authenticity therefore represents a key area for future research in psychology.

An active role of anxiety and courage in psychological growth is particularly notable in the experiences of trauma reported by two participants, Carrie and Ella, which may be understood in line with evidence in the area of PTG (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). PTG literature defines trauma as an unexpected event that shatters a person's pre-existing sense of safety and certainty in the world. Post-trauma, these shattered assumptions require rebuilding to make sense of the unexpected event. This process can take two potential cognitive routes, only one of which leads to growth. "Assimilation" is the process of reverting back to the pre-existing worldview, leaving previous assumptions unrevised. For example, concluding the event was an isolated incident and no further traumatic events need be anticipated would constitute assimilation. "Accommodation", in contrast, takes into account the trauma-related

information to develop new worldviews, a courageous cognitive step that demands relinquishing older (and safer) beliefs, thereby triggering growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Adjusting one's view to accept the world can at times be threatening and unpredictable would be an example of accommodation, as suggested in Ella's description of her new life philosophy as a result of her suffering. PTG theory therefore identifies a relationship between courage and growth. Aligning with existential theory, one's response to anxiety is identified as crucial in determining growth; rather than retreating defensively, one in some way changes to meet the threat (Martin et al., 2004).

While Ella and Carrie's experiences suggest anxiety and courage are key to growth, they also challenge the fundamental definition of trauma itself. Trauma is traditionally understood as the consequence of an unexpected and externally imposed event (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), however the event that triggered their trauma was a self-determined act. Nevertheless, both participants described the *existential yearning to travel* as an overwhelming need that emerged and persisted beyond their personal control, regardless of the level of distress evoked. Where a trauma is traditionally understood to shatter cognitive assumptions from the outside-in, perhaps the yearning to leave everything behind to travel represents an intrinsically-emerging (and potentially trauma-inducing) impulse to shatter the phenomenologically "lacking" world from the inside-out, in order to achieve the same ultimate outcome of growth. This phenomenon may represent a new type of trauma that warrants further research; intrinsically-emerging trauma.

This inversion of the traditional trauma experience also challenges the typical temporal sequence of trauma and mortality salience outlined in the PTG literature. Traumatic events often present a threat to life, which can act as a wake-up call to one's mortality and precipitate growth by triggering a reassessment of life priorities and more authentic reconstruction of the self (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Yalom, 1980). However, the present study suggests participants'

mortality and timeline awareness was not a consequence of trauma, but pre-existing and a catalyst for action, which in two cases was trauma-inducing. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) have called for further research into the relationship between mortality salience and trauma, and the present findings point to a potential reversal in their temporal sequence.

In light of the topic of the current study, it is interesting to note that some researchers have drawn a comparison between a traumatic brush with death and culture shock, as both phenomena shatter assumptions and can change the worldview (Furn, 1987; Montuori & Fahim, 2004). Taking these existing theories and the current findings into account, it is questionable if confronting mortality, leaving everything behind to travel and facing fear within travel are in fact manifestations of a broader underlying precursor to growth; the courage to leave security and venture uncertainty.

The commitment participants showed to *implementing authentic life change* on return from their travels (evident even up to ten years after returning to home country) corroborates interdisciplinary evidence that long-term cross-cultural exposure leads to the discovery of intrinsic career and life motivations and meaningful, sustained life changes (e.g. Brown, 2009; O'Reilly, 2006). Participants' new found sense of vitality, tolerance for uncertainty and faith in intrinsic will also resembles aspects of self-actualizaton, such as openness to experience, living fully in the moment, trusting inner experiences, experiencing freedom and taking a creative approach to living (Rogers, 1961; Maslow, 1968). This lends support to Lyons' (2010) hypothesis that the urge toward culturally-engaging and challenging long-term travel may represent the self-actualizing impulse. Extending this hypothesis, the present findings suggest not only that this impulse can carry sufficient force to propel people from established careers and relationships, but that the independent travel experience holds realistic potential for this form of growth.

Given the current economic recession, it is interesting to note that participants' *mortality and timeline awareness* arose in the context of work dissatisfaction. Some subtle everyday life "awakening experiences" such as birthdays, grief and dreams have been posited to trigger mortality awareness (Yalom, 2008), raising the possibility that career dissatisfaction may represent a new type of mortality awakening experience. This hypothesis may be particularly pertinent to the current social context where disillusionment and career burnout are pervasive (Pines, 1993).

Indeed, the current social and economic climate may be accountable for the rising trend of the later gap year, due to its impact on people's sense of life meaning. The importance of a sense of life meaning for psychological well-being was emphasized by Frankl (1963), who urged that striving to find meaning is the primary motivational force in human beings. In contemporary Western society, career is heralded as a primary source for life meaning (Pines, 1993), however by way of contrast, job satisfaction is showing consistent trends of decline (Bartley et al., 2005), workers are experiencing diminishing satisfaction with work/life balance (CIPD, 2011) and the continued economic recession is causing increasing levels of redundancy and unemployment (CIPD, 2012). The gap between the expectation for finding meaning at work and the realistic probability of doing so may therefore have expanded significantly enough to promote disillusionment and trigger the search for alternative sources of life meaning.

Recent evidence supports this hypothesis, demonstrating that disillusionment about finding meaning at work can cause burnout (Pines, 1993), that key motives for travel gap years are career burnout, work dissatisfaction and seeking a change in life direction (Direct Line, 2006; Fraser, 2010) and that rising "career-gapper" statistics have been fuelled by growing redundancy levels (Travelex, 2009). A period of extensive foreign travel may therefore function as a new or temporary alternative to career for finding life meaning. That most

participants in the present study experienced growth and felt their lives had changed meaningfully as a result suggests it presents a realistic route for fulfilling this purpose. While the global economy remains in recession the travel career-break is poised to continue to rise in popularity (Mintel, 2008), making the present findings relevant to ever increasing numbers of people.

This study has gained strength from the in-depth and personable accounts of 10 people's experience of career-break travel, and grounded theory was instrumental in extracting emergent themes in this currently empirically unexplored domain. It is essential to also note some important limitations, including that theory presented here is not prescriptive. All participants self-selected the decision to exit their careers to travel and the present findings suggest this was in response to an intrinsically emerging yearning. There may also be individual differences in potential for growth, such as the ability to tolerate ambiguity and security of attachment style (Martin et al., 2004), so personal growth as a target may not be realistic for all. Further, despite the growth outcomes experienced by participants in the present study, it would be overly simplistic and potentially damaging to indigenous people to advocate foreign travel merely as an individual opportunity for personal growth. Cross-cultural encounters are inherently social, demanding engagement and interaction with local people different to the traveler, and if they are to be mutually beneficial, rely on the traveler's openness, diplomacy and respect.

While the participant sample was of mixed gender, nationality and ethnic origin, all lived and grew up in Western individualistic cultures, leaving the generalizability of findings to those from alternative, more collectivist cultures undetermined. Given that the recent increase in career-break travel may reflect the current economic and social context, the findings of the present study may be culture-bound, relevant to distinct socio-economic groups in Western settings only. To clarify to what extent findings are embedded socially, temporally and

geographically in this specific context or are more broadly generalizable, further research is required among a wider range of populations.

Ultimately however, the finding that anxiety about leaving security proved key to personal growth for participants in the present study highlights the potential for anxiety as a positive force and the need for some collaboration in future research into authenticity (Wood et al., 2008), self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and courage (Biswas-Diener, 2012) to explore the relationships between these processes. A vast literature in existential psychology (Van Deurzen, 2001) and the present findings indicate these themes are intertwined. Leaving everything behind and venturing uncertainty in the name of self-determination and authenticity was experienced with "milestone" and seismic significance, and was ultimately crucial to growth. Beyond inspiring courage, anxiety also functioned as an initial signpost to a deeper, more authentic and vital way of living. Rather than approaching anxiety as a pathological symptom to be soothed or eradicated therefore, future research in psychology may gain great insight by exploring the potential of anxiety as a positive construct; as an indicator and opportunity for growth, self-determination and authenticity.

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Table 1 Participant demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Profession pre-travel	Length of travel	Date of travel	Places visited	Activity	Time since return	Profession now
Adam	M	32	English	Finance	6 months	2010	Europe/Asia	Backpack/cycle	2 years	Finance & Fundraising
Belinda	F	29	Canadian	Finance	1 year	2010	Asia	Backpack	1 year	Web Design
Carrie	F	36	English	Charity	1 year	2005	Asia/South America	Backpack	7 years	Charity & Study
Dee	F	32	Irish	IT consultant	6 months	2010	Asia/South America	Backpack	2 years	Web Design & Study
Ella	F	34	Scottish	Journalist	3 years	2005	Europe/Australia	Work	4 years	Teacher training
Frank	M	31	English	Teacher	6 months	2011-12	Asia/South America	Volunteer/Backpack	3 months	Teacher
Georgie	F	30	English	Graphic Designer	6 months	2011-12	Asia/South America	Volunteer/Backpack	3 months	Graphic Designer & Volunteer Art Therapy
Harry	M	32	German	Sales Administration	3 months	2002	England	Work	10 years	HR & Study
Isaac	M	25	English	Recruitment	15 months	2010-12	Navigated globe	Driving	1 month	Expedition organiser
Jen	F	38	American	Marketing	1 year	2012	USA/Asia	Backpack	-	/

TABLE 2:

Main themes and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-theme	*N**
Existential yearning to travel	A calling to something "more" Mortality and timeline awareness Yearning-associated anxiety	7 5 8
"Jumping off the ledge" (Courage)	Leaving as a self-determination milestone / seismic event Courage as a vehicle to growth	6 7
Discovering authenticity	Experiencing vitality by connecting with "true self" Finding faith in intrinsic will Implementing authentic life change	6 7 8

*Prevalence within participant sample

Figure 1 Visual model of emergent themes

EXISTENTIAL YEARNING TO TRAVEL

A Calling to Something "More"
Undefinable yearning for "potential", "possibility", "bigger", "wider", "coming alive"
(Often emerging in the context of career burnout and dissatisfaction)

Mortality and Timeline Awareness
One life / Now or Never / Imagining Death / Imagining Regrets / Aspirations to share valuable experiences
with future children and grandchildren

Yearning-Associated Anxiety
Fear of uncertainty: loss (social and material), debt, failure, disapproval, change, returning to
nothing, loneliness, missing family, spoiling career and the future. Guilt. Shame.

(DISCONFIRMING CASE ANALYSES)
MAINTAINING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
Being offered a career break
Being made redundant
Finding refuge from fear in partner
Experiencing little fear

(NO REPORTED GROWTH)

"JUMPING OFF THE LEDGE" (COURAGE)

Leaving as a Self-Determination Milestone / Seismic Event
Venturing uncertainty as a "milestone" in self-determination or seismic
event akin to trauma

Courage as a Vehicle to Growth
Overcoming fear as a means to vitality, self-efficacy, meaning

DISCOVERING AUTHENTICITY

Experiencing Vitality by Connecting with "True Self"
via self-direction and courage / anonymity / observation of difference
Vitality, well-being, fulfilment, presence

Finding Faith in Intrinsic Will
Valuing process before outcome, tolerating uncertainty and change, self-acceptance, peace in
present moment, redefining success as pursuing intrinsic will

Implementing Authentic Life Change
Career change, retraining, new commitment to intrinsically motivated pursuits, ending
disingenuous relationships

1