

Women's private negotiations of holidays

Penny Davidson
Charles Sturt University
pdavidson@csu.edu.au

Abstract

Recently I reflected upon a case study I undertook some years ago which raised the problems associated with 'privatised' resistance or negotiation. These issues seem particularly current again today. This paper presents how holidays for mothers are negotiated in the private realm, and how the consequence of this is that what is considered a right for other 'workers' is totally absent as a considered right for other groups of people eg mothers. The mothers in this case study in various ways negotiated a space from their work to achieve what they called a 'holiday', however this negotiation – as is their role – remained explicitly within the private sphere of personal relationships and home. At the same time they were drawing on concepts and ideas, or discourses, that were brokered in the public sphere of paid work. Because their resistance or negotiation remained in the private sphere they were never able to challenge the public discourse; holidays are a result of negotiating personal roles and choice of consumer activity; broader social structures are not questioned or altered.

Women's private negotiations of holidays

Some time ago I explored the holiday experiences of mothers with young children primarily because I was interested in the phenomenon we call 'holiday'. Recently I revisited this data and one of the conclusions – that of the private nature of the negotiated experience – seemed to have even greater currency in a society that has continued to shift toward a consumer-oriented and privatized culture. I concluded in the case study that because women's negotiation remained in the private realm the broader social structures which defined 'holiday' and the tools available to construct a holiday – which they had limited access to – would remain unchanged. That is, women, or at least mothers, in comparison with others would continue to find limited access to holiday experiences. Upon my re-reading I felt these aspects of women's lives were worthy of sharing as whilst there has been a significant shift in gender roles the issues are perhaps even more 'privatised' than they were ten years ago. I also felt that this example can contribute to the broader literature on consumption and privatization.

Women's holiday experiences occur within a social framework constructed by multiple and sometimes conflicting holiday discourses; discourses which reflect the beliefs, meanings and practices associated with work, leisure, consumption and broader notions of liberalism. The implications of liberalism on leisure have been articulated in previous papers (Bramham and Henry 1985; Cushman et al. 1991), and whilst, perhaps, more recent discussion has been around neo-liberalism it is the central tenants of a 'the right of individuals to choose directions in life with the minimum of interference' (Cushman et al. 1991: 4) that I draw on here.

The intention in the case study intention was to understand the meaning that women themselves created of their holiday experience. The study comprised of semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 24 women with pre-school aged children living in the rural region of Albury-Wodonga. The women came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and family circumstances. Two were separated from their first husband. At the time, only one was a single mother. The women engaged in a mix of full-time and part-time paid work, and some had no paid work. The location of their homes reflected diverse socio-economic situations – some lived in the worn-looking suburbs of Albury and Wodonga, others in homes on large rural blocks, or in the wealthier parts of town. The women were a variety of ages but all had pre-school aged children.

The case study found that women drew on the available discourses of the holiday, femininity, and motherhood to make sense of their experience enabling them to live up to their expectations of themselves as mothers, wives and women. One of the discourses they drew on is that of the holiday as being part of a work-leisure dichotomy. Leisure theory provides a variety of interpretations of the relationship between work and leisure, one of which presents work and leisure as separate spheres of life (Cohen 1979; Graburn 1983). Feminist and critical theorists reject the idea of leisure being a separate sphere of life and present leisure as a site of oppression and resistance (Wearing 1990; 1991; 1996; Lynch and Simpson 1993; Karsten 1995). The notion of leisure as defined in opposition from work, however, is arguably a dominant discourse in Australian society, and therefore one of the sets of ideas with which individuals, including those in this study, have needed to negotiate.

The construction of a holiday as a place with no work clearly emerged from the women's reflections.

Lesley: I was very sick after I had Aaron and there were times when I just couldn't cope at all, and he [husband] would take both children away for the weekend to his mother's place and I would stay home and that was a real holiday. I was in the same house, but I didn't have to do anything. I could just rest.

Carol: An ideal holiday? I would like to go somewhere where you could take a nanny or someone like that, you know, where if you just felt like going out at night time, just the two of you, you could go.

In these instances the holiday irrespective of where or how it occurs is a space where the normal workload is reduced or removed, allowing greater overall choice. Whilst they couldn't say that their work had been reduced to nil they could say that their workload had been reduced in part, and this made possible the feeling of a 'holiday'.

How were the women able to create spaces free from their unpaid work? Women in the case study were able to construct non-work events by engaging in opportunities provided by the free market. Liberal notions present individuals as having the right to maximize their own interests with relatively little involvement of the state; the state's role is to provide a stable currency and infrastructure (Braham and Henry 1985). The liberal premise is that the individual, through their expressed demands, will find the services they desire in the market system. Aside from legislation and protocols around workplace agreements and practices of fair trade government bodies have no interest in who gets a holiday, the quality of that time or how they might achieve a holiday. That is, the holiday for people with unpaid work is constructed in the private domain, left solely to the individual and the market. Indeed, consumption was a significant tool that mothers used to reduce their workload, and as Ironmonger (1989) points out, is an act located in the private sphere of the household as opposed to production in the public sphere. In order to construct their holiday women purchased convenience foods, disposable nappies, babysitter services, and for some, facilities that provide house cleaning; their workload is thereby reduced.

Of course access to market opportunities greatly depended upon their own access to financial resources to purchase these goods and services.

Joanne: We went down to Phantom of the Opera and we stayed overnight and came back the next day, the kids stayed here. I had a ball. That was the first time in six years that I never had children to be responsible [for]. ... Oh definitely [it was a holiday], it was only for 24 hours, maybe a bit longer. We left on the Saturday afternoon, we had dinner in Chinatown, and then we went to the Phantom of the Opera. We stayed at my brother's place.

Emma: If we were going to be out for a while, we'd perhaps take some lunch although we bought things like fish and chips once or twice ... we always use disposable nappies on holidays ... I try to keep the cooking fairly simple and although I'm usually pretty economical in budgeting and everything on holidays we don't mind to buy easy extras that cost a bit more. It's sort of a treat because we don't normally buy them and it makes cooking easier and we'll buy some more takeaway meals. On holiday I cook chooks or you know those frozen, well not frozen dinners, but things like frozen chicken, mini-drumsticks or pizzas or things like that, that you don't have to duffle around with lots of little ingredients.

Carol: Probably about once a year I go away with the girls you know for a long weekend or four days ... last year we went to Melbourne for Phantom of the Opera. It was very nice and in a couple of weeks we're going to Sydney. When I'm with the girls we'll go out all night, and sleep-in in the morning. When we went to Melbourne we saw about five movies in one weekend, it was great.

Each of these women's financial circumstances differed. Joanne's opportunity to go away for weekends in comparison to Carol's is considerably constrained; Joanne's trip was not to a hotel, took in just one event and was only for one day in a six year period. In contrast Carol stayed for several days, the trip occurred every year, they stayed at a hotel and then involved numerous outings. Emma and her husband had the resources to go away to the coast for short holidays and reduce her work load whilst there by purchasing convenience foods and items which she would usually not do for financial reasons. The 'market options' then are used to construct holiday opportunities, but for women on low incomes this might mean having a holiday every six years.

Many times women's respite from work didn't derive from the market economy, rather the reduced work load was a result of other family or friends taking on the duties of mother or carer. The cost of replacing women's work in the market system was beyond most of the women's resources. Instead they operated outside the market system – the resources they drew on were not financial but relational.

Sharon says of her mother: I still really appreciate that she does the cooking and the cleaning and that's her way of giving me a break. Because she says to you, well I can have a break when you go home, but she's still got to cook and clean. But she hasn't got to look after the children. So you go there, and you feel that your workload has reduced, because now your main work is just looking after the children. But yes, I classify that as a holiday because my workload is reduced, and then I take disposable nappies there so all I have to do is keep the children ...

Deborah: I particularly noticed that when we went to the coast that was so much more relaxed that time of the day ... and it's refreshing and nice to have your husband say "I'll just take them for a while and you just go off and do something" because he's very aware of how much I have them during the day and how much I do with them and he's also very aware of how little he sees them so he really tries his hardest to spend time with them and give me the odd little break during the day just so that my day is not regimented the way it is during the term.

Without the social structure of paid employment and the financial resources that it provides women are left to construct their holiday experience themselves, re-working their obligations, often with the assistance of others in their social network, such as Sharon's mother, and Deborah's husband. But for Joanne the network of support is something that one draws upon very judiciously:

It was just a nice break, you know you didn't have to look behind you to see where they (children) were or what they were up to. [It was a] free feeling I would say which you don't get until, I suppose I'll never feel free again, but oh yes I will if I ever get a weekend away like that again. I'd do it again but I wouldn't do it in the near future 'cause I might wear out my welcome with the babysitters ... once every so often, you know. Perhaps we might do it again in twelve or eighteen months time, but it doesn't matter if we never do it again, it was just nice to do it at that particular stage.

The holiday for women with young children is not a socially expected 'right' of the workplace, is not a publicly resourced or supported activity. It can only occur after each individual woman negotiates and organizes the private domain of her personal life. It is worth reiterating here the difference between paid or public work and unpaid or private work. Paid employment provides a structure of 'work' and 'non-work' time but also influences women's access to holidays and other forms of leisure in other ways. Paid work offers a status and subsequent system of opportunity and choices that is not extended to unpaid work (Alford 1984; Deem 1986, 1988; Sargent

1987; Waring 1988; Probert 1989). Women's limited access to paid employment constrains women's leisure in a number of ways (Shelton 1992). Women's unpaid work is considered of less value than paid work (Eichler 1980; Probert 1989; Reiger 1990). This is the basis of a system which perpetuates women's lower social status because, as Hargreaves (1989, p. 135) notes '... money determines value in capitalist societies' and therefore paid work is valued and seen as 'real' work (Armstrong and Armstrong 1978; Eichler 1980; Ironmonger and Sonius 1989). There is a perception that unpaid domestic labour, that is women's work, does not 'deserve' social rewards such as holidays or recreation (James and Saville-Smith 1989; Lynch and Simpson 1993). However, participation in paid work, the more 'valued' form of work, offers a sense of identity and control, self-esteem, confidence and financial independence (Probert 1989; Henderson 1991); a range of factors which greatly facilitate the opportunity for choice in holidays.

Undoubtedly, market provision of goods and services enabled women with young children to buy out their own workload and construct a holiday experience. There are two problems with the market solution: the rewards and opportunities are only as good as the resources available to purchase the market solutions. Markets will only provide services or goods that are likely to make a profit. The availability of nanny services in holiday resorts or the availability of chefs to cook in the holiday unit are therefore not readily available options. What is patently obvious here is that some of these services do exist but that most women do not have the financial resources to use them in order to have a holiday that is indeed free from work. The second problem is that the market is a mechanism which falls into the private realm of the public-private dichotomy. As such it is not likely to produce broader structural changes that might legitimise women's quest for holidays or increase their access to resources (time, money, place) which make the consumer version of the holiday possible. 'Holidays' are constructed as a result of the private negotiations that occur with partners and other family members, organising them to take over some of the usual work roles. This negotiation does not occur in the public or policy realm. It is considered a private issue and, unlike in the paid workplace, the responsibility of each individual woman.

As consumers, mothers of young children, are not likely to be rich in either 'spare' time or financial resources, and therefore not likely to be identified as a viable market.

Apart from the career woman (Bartos 1982), or families in the higher income brackets the market is not likely to produce additional services that might facilitate a mother's holiday. That is, if left to market forces women's holiday opportunities are not likely to expand. What I am arguing here is that the situation is in part a consequence of the private nature of the holiday experience. But perhaps this is not an issue, why should women with young children have ready access to holidays? Indeed, why should any of us?

References

- Alford, K. (1984) *Production or Reproduction? An Economic History of Women in Australia, 1788-1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Armstrong, P. and Armstrong, H. (1978) *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and their Segregated Work*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Bartos, R. (1982) 'Women and travel', *Journal of Travel Research* 20: 3-9.
- Braham, P. and Henry, I.P. (1985) Political ideology and leisure policy in the United Kingdom, *Leisure Studies* 4: 1-19.
- Cohen, E. (1979) 'A phenomenology of tourist experiences', *Sociology* 13: 179-201.
- Cushman, G., Purvis, A. and Rickards, D. (1991) *Liberal ideology and its relationship to leisure theory and policy: The case of Australia*. Occasional Paper No. 5. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, Lincoln University, Canterbury.
- Deem, R. (1986) *All Work and No Play? The Sociology of Women and Leisure*. Milton-Keynes: Open University Press.

- Eichler, M. (1980) *The Double Standard: A Feminist Critique of Feminist Social Science*. London: Croom Helm.
- Graburn, N.H.H. (1983) *To Pray, Pay and Play: The cultural Structure of Japanese Domestic Tourism*. Aix-en-Provence Cedex: Centre des Hautes Etudes Touristiques.
- Hargreaves, J. (1989) 'The promise and problems of women's leisure and sport', in C.Rojek (ed.) *Leisure for Leisure*. Hampshire: Macmillan.
- Henderson, K.A. (1991) *Dimensions of Choice: A Qualitative Approach to Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Research*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.
- Ironmonger, D. (1989) *Australian Households: A \$90 Billion Industry*, Research Discussion Paper No. 10, Centre for Applied Research on the Future. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne.
- Ironmonger, D. and Sonius, E. (1989) 'Household productive activities', in D.Ironmonger (ed.) *Households Work: Productive Activities, Women and Income in the Household Economy*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- James, B.L. and Saville-Smith, K. (1989) *Gender, Culture and Power: Challenging New Zealand's Gendered Culture*. Auckland: Oxford University Press.
- Karsten, L. (1995) 'Women's leisure: Divergence, reconceptualization and change - The Case of the Netherlands', *Leisure Studies* 14: 186-201.
- Lynch, P. and Simpson, C. (1993) 'Gender and leisure', in H.C.Perkins and G.Cushman (eds) *Leisure, Recreation and Tourism*. Auckland: Longman Paul.
- Probert, B. (1989) *Working Life*. Ringwood: McPhee Gribble.

Reiger, K. (1990) *Priceless Toil: The Labour of Reproduction and Care Work in the Household*, Research Discussion Paper, no. 12, Centre for Applied Research on the Future. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

Sargent, M. (1987) *Sociology for Australians*, 2nd edn. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Shelton, B.A. (1992) *Women, Men, and Time: Gender Differences in Paid Work, Housework and Leisure*, Contributions in Women's Studies, no. 127. New York: Greenwood Press.

Waring, M. (1988) *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Wearing, B. (1990) 'Beyond the ideology of motherhood: Leisure as resistance', *Australia New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 26: 36-58.

Wearing, B. (1991) 'Leisure and women's identity: conformity or individuality?' *Society and Leisure* 14: 575-586.

Wearing, B. (1996) *Gender: The Pain and Pleasure of Difference*. Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.