
Kevin D. Lyons

School of Social Sciences
University of Newcastle

Examining the Impact of Working-Holidays upon Future Careers

This paper discusses research being undertaken in Australia that examines the impact of working holidays upon the career and life trajectories of participants. An initial qualitative research study has been completed that examined the experiences of a group of 72 young Australians who worked at summer camps throughout the USA. This study found that the intense nature of this experience had an important impact upon participants and provided clarity to their career interests. This initial study has provided a foundation for a larger research project about to be conducted that examines the impact of working holidays upon the clarity and intensity of individuals' 'career anchors'.

Key Words: Career development; working-holidays; summer camps, life trajectories.

Kevin D. Lyons, EdD
Lecturer
School of Social Sciences
University of Newcastle
University Drive Callaghan NSW 2308
Australia

Phone: (+61 2) 4921 8989
Fax: (+61 2) 4921 7402
Email: kevin.lyons@newcastle.edu.au

Dr. Kevin Lyons is the Program Coordinator of the Bachelor of Social Science (Recreation Tourism) at the University of Newcastle. Kevin's research interests focus broadly around the area of career development in and through leisure services, specifically in the area of outdoor recreation services. Kevin is currently undertaking research that examines the impact of leisure experiences upon young people's life trajectories.

Extended international travelling has become a symbolic rite of passage for many young adults (West, 2004). This increasingly popular form of travel exposes young people to different cultural perspectives and value-systems, and provides opportunity for perspective and reflection that is difficult to achieve from within the comfort zones of one's own homeland (Rojek, 1999).

Extended travel experiences have been traditionally accessed through organised tours, study abroad, programs, and cultural exchange programs. However, a number of countries recognise the economic benefits of attracting young overseas visitors on working-vacations, or working-holidays as they are known in Australia. As a result, a number of nations including the USA, have developed visa classes specifically designed for the international working-holiday market. Working holidays have been defined broadly as extended travel experiences that include a period of employment (Havenhand, 2000). The work undertaken on working-holidays typically requires little previous experience or training, involve menial task and duties and is poorly paid (Havenhand, 2000). Working-holidays enable travellers to supplement their budgets so that they can travel for longer and further (Havenhand, 2000).

It has been argued that travelling and working for an extended period immersed in the culture of another country can be a potentially life-changing experience (Wearing, 2003; Lyons, 2003). However, despite their recognised potential to teach young people about themselves and their life directions, working-holidays are typically dismissed as a respite from the more serious concerns of adulthood such as life and career decisions, with only a vague concession that such experiences might look good on individuals' resumes (see Havenhand, 2000). Indeed, tourism and travel research has rarely considered the impact of travel experiences upon one's future life trajectories. Given that recent research and government reports argue that increasing youth unemployment rates are in-part the product of a dearth of opportunities for young people to gain meaningful work experiences that enable them to build career goals (Vanstone, 1997; Bessant, Sercombe & Watts, 1998), it is important to pay more serious attention to the potential role working-holidays may play in providing career clarity to young people. This paper summarises a research project that seeks to begin filling that gap by examining the impact of working-holidays upon future careers. Specifically, this research examines one particular type of working-holiday that has gained popularity over the past two decades in Australia - the J-1 Camp Counselor Visitor Exchange Program.

The J-1 Camp Counselor Visitor Exchange Program which is administered by the United States Government enables approximately 12,000 young adults aged between 18 and 35 from 27 countries to travel to and work in Summer Camps throughout the USA over a 9-week summer camp season annually (United States State Information Agency, 2002). Australia is disproportionately represented in this program with over 17% (2500) individuals expected to participate this year (United States State Information Agency, 2002). The J-1 program is promoted in Australia as a working-holiday program and is marketed specifically at recent high school graduates and university students who typically have limited work experience and who are unlikely to have forged clear career interests (Lyons, 2003). However, little is known about the impact of this program upon Australian participants.

To this end, a qualitative study of 72 young Australians working in American Camps was conducted over the course of a 9-week summer-camp season. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with as wide of a range of life experiences as possible and also ensured that a wide range of camp types and locations were also represented. Each of the 72 participants were interviewed in-situ toward the end of their summer camp work and were asked a series of questions that allowed them to reflect upon the impact of the experience and upon how they saw

themselves and their futures. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using content and textual analysis to identify broad themes that constituted the findings of the study.

One major theme that emerged from the study was that the experience was ‘eye-opening’ for participants and gave them pause to reflect upon their future. Without exception, respondents felt the experience had taught them a great deal about themselves. Some reported that the experience simply exposed them to new working contexts such as the outdoor environment, and working with children. Others were more specific and felt that the experience taught them specific skills that will be useful in their future careers such as being able to teach a particular recreation activity. Others felt the experience provided them with documented experiences that they could include on their resumes in the future. A related major finding from this study was that the experience enabled participants to reflect upon their work-related values, specific work conditions and factors that motivated them in their work. The majority of participants attributed these reflective insights to the intense nature of the work conditions at the camps (e.g. living-in at the camps, working 12 to 16 hour days with one day off per week, and sleeping in a cabin with their charges). These tentative findings challenge previous work by Schein (1990) who theorised that career interests emerged slowly over the first five years of work-life.

This qualitative research is currently being followed-up with a larger population-based study that uses a modified Career Anchors survey instrument (Schein, 1990) to quantitatively assess the impact of camp work participation upon the values, interests, and motives that form what Schein has described as career anchors. According to Schein (1990) careers emerge once an individual can identify their career anchor. A career anchor is considered as those subjective and self-identified motives, values and talents that an individual recognises as an essential aspect of their career interests. Schein (1990) developed a 40-item survey instrument that measures the clarity and relative importance an individual places upon 8 identified career anchors. Research suggests that those with a strong score (i.e. an indication of intensity) on one particular career anchor (i.e. an indication of clarity) are more likely to be able to articulate their career goals and interests (Schein, 1990).

This larger study will also provide base-line data for follow-up and comparative research projects including projects that examine the long-term impact of working-holidays, differences in the impact of different types of working-holidays upon career interests, and differences between Australians and working-holiday makers from other nations. The results of this study will have important implications for tourism research and for those seeking to promote the benefits of tourism and travel. The findings of this research will be particularly relevant to those interested in researching the leisure/work nexus and will provide a better understanding of the role leisure plays in influencing and shaping life decisions, particularly those related to work. It is expected that the findings of this study will also be relevant to career counsellors and human resource managers, enabling them to recognise the important impact life experiences such as those derived from working-holidays can have upon career and professional development.

References

- Bessant, J., Sercombe, H., Watts, R. (1998). *Youth studies: An Australian perspective*. Longman: Melbourne.
- Havenhand, B. (2000). *Working Overseas: For Australians and New Zealanders*. Global Exchange: Newcastle.
- Lyons, K.D. (2003). Ambiguities in volunteer tourism: A case study of Australians participating in a J-1 visitor exchange program. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 28(3), 28-43.
- McCowan and McKenzie (1997). *The guide to career education*. New Hobson Press: Sydney.
- Rojek, C. (1993). *Ways of escape: Modern transformations in leisure and travel*. MacMillan, London.
- Schein, E. (1990). *Career anchors: Discovering your real values*. Amsterdam: Pfeiffer.
- United States State Information Agency. (2002). *Exchange Visitor Program Services, GC/V Eligibility for Exchange Visitor (J-1) Status*. Washington: U.S. State Department.
- Vanstone, A. (1997). Youth employment: a working solution. *Report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training*. AGPS: Canberra.
- Wearing, S. (2001). *Volunteer tourism: Experiences that make a difference*. CABI Publishing: London.
- West, B. (2004). Introduction, In B. West (Ed.), *On One's Own? Backpacking and Independent Travel*, Queensland University Press: Brisbane.