A tale of two caravan parks: friendship, community and the freedom thing

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a research project that explored notions of friendship and community in the context of caravan park holidays for repeat visitors to two caravan parks. The study was conducted by way of in-depth interview with 22 visitors to a caravan park on the south coast of News South Wales (Australia) in 2006 and 20 visitors to a caravan park in far north Queensland (Australia) in 2007. For both parks the findings indicate that the major attractions of caravan park holidays for long term repeat visitors are the friendships that build up over years of repeat visitation, and the relaxing lifestyle that the holiday affords. For the older and smaller of the parks the respondents also reported that a strong sense of community existed among the visitors and that this was a very satisfying feature of their holiday experience. There was less mention of a sense of community from respondents at the larger and more recently established park. Theoretical implications: there is an emerging literature documenting the possibilities of ‘serious leisure’ and ‘focal leisure activities’ as significant investment channels in the accumulation of social capital. This paper supports the theory that focal leisure activities can foster the development of a sense of community, however, our findings indicate that factors influencing this growth may include the “age” of the group and also the size of the group. Management and marketing implications: caravan park (and other tourist service) organisations may benefit from including notions of friendship and community in their marketing campaigns rather than the usual narrow focus upon facilities. From a management perspective it may be useful to consider programming activities and providing amenities that facilitate social engagement and communal activity.

Key words: caravans and camping, community, friendship, social capital, holidays.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the notions of ‘friendship’ and ‘community’ in the context of regular annual holidays in caravan parks. While not previously associated with the tourism and leisure literature, theories concerned with social capital (Putnam, 2000; Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Rojek, 2005), social engagement (Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, forthcoming; Urry, 2002) and community attachment (Kyle & Chick, 2004) are beginning to be discussed as significant aspects of
leisure and tourism involvement. In this paper we explore some of these emerging ideas through the use of stories and reminiscences from two groups of visitors, the first to a caravan park in far north Queensland, Australia, and the second to a caravan park on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia.

Caravan parks in Australia are generally small businesses run by private operators and, at times, by local authorities. Typically they have a mix of caravan and camping sites and self-contained accommodation such as cabins available for hire. Many parks feature attractive facilities such as swimming pools, ‘jumping pillows’, mini golf courses and tennis courts (for images refer to Big4.com.au and TopTouristParks.com.au). While caravan parks have traditionally offered an accessible holiday alternative for lower income families, the rising costs for camping and accommodation over the past decade has impacted upon this ‘traditional’ group and the market appears to have shifted toward middle income families.

Caravan parks have long been a popular holiday choice for domestic travellers in Australia (Prideaux & McClymont, 2005, p.371). Many Australians, including the authors of this paper, have enduring memories of family holidays in caravan parks. Indeed, family groups continue to be the major users of caravan parks (Ipalawatte, Carter, Heaney & Lubulwa, 2005). Recent growth in the sector, however, has been attributed to the increasing popularity of caravanning and camping among the over 55s. New caravan registrations increased by 40 per cent in the period 2000 to 2003 (Prideaux & McClymont, 2005, p. 371) and according to Ipalawatte, Carter, Heaney and Lubulwa (2005) caravan park holidays are currently one of the fastest growing niche markets in the Australian tourism sector.

Domestic travellers who stay mainly in caravan parks tend to travel in groups as an adult couple 55 years and over, or in a younger family group (Ipalawatte, Carter, Heaney & Lubulwa, 2005). In 2003/2004 these two groups accounted for 24 per cent and 37 per cent respectively of total visitor nights spent in caravan and camping accommodation (Ipalawatte, Carter, Heaney & Lubulwa, 2005, p.13). Family caravan park holidays tend to be concentrated around the Christmas and Easter periods that coincide with school holidays. The older group travel consistently throughout the year, peaking during August (Ipalawatte, Carter, Heaney & Lubulwa, 2005, p.18). The industry forecast further increases in demand from the seniors market (age 55 years and over) for caravan park holiday accommodation with the ageing of the Australian population over future decades (Ipalawatte, Carter, Heaney & Lubulwa, 2005).

Despite the long term popularity of caravan park tourism in Australia, the literature in the area is quite limited. A number of industry reports and academic papers have identified growth trends and management issues in the caravan and camping sector (see Hayllar, Crilley & Bell, 2006; Prideaux & McClymont, 2005; Ipalawatte, Carter, Heaney & Lubulwa, 2005) but limited literature exists on any socio-cultural aspects of these holidays.

A notable exception to the above is Marles’ (2002, 2003) research which explores the
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relationship between place attachment and the frequency of visitation to caravan parks. Marle’s (2002) study documents a quantitative relationship between place attachment and years of visitation for visitors to caravan parks. The study also found that as the number of visits increased over time a sense of community within the caravan park becomes an attraction.

It is often the place that attracts people back to the same destination, but as the number of visits increase over time the community within the place also becomes an attraction. Thus with very regular repeat visitation, the visitor feels at ease, facilitating a positive emotional response to the place, the community and the holiday (Marles, 2002, p.51).

While Marles’ (2002, 2003) analyses are focused around the concept of place attachment, “the exploration of the emotional attachments that people have to geographic locales” (Marles 2003, p.1), she recommends further research into the sense of community attachment reported by the repeat visitors in her study.

Marle’s (2002) call for more focus on the sociable aspects of the caravan park holiday experience is particularly noteworthy in light of recent theoretical developments in the tourism literature. Larsen, Urry and Axhausen (forthcoming) argue that the field of tourist studies has been marooned on a narrow theoretical reef resulting in a fixation upon place and a neglect of issues surrounding ideas of sociality. As they argue:

the problem with tourist studies fixation upon place is that it neglects issues of sociality, especially with significant others. Insofar questions of social relations are discussed, these are located within fixed dichotomies of hosts and guests, (“us” and “them”) (Smith 1978), and tourist and guides, where social relationships are instrumental, commodified and ridden with power (Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, forthcoming, p.7)

From this perspective the tourist is a consumer, visually consuming places through gazing, photographing and collecting signs (Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, forthcoming). While more recent literature has embraced the related concepts of embodiment and performance (Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, forthcoming; Urry, 2002, Coleman and Crang 2002, Barenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen and Urry 2004), the continuing focus on place has resulted in researchers overlooking the extent to which much of tourist behaviour is concerned with (re)producing social networks. Evidence of convivial sociality, such as the sense of community enjoyed by long term repeat visitors to caravan parks that was found in Marles (2002) study, has been largely neglected. Larsen, Urry and Axhausen (forthcoming) argue that tourist travel, even to typical tourist places is as much, or more, about catching up with people than about visiting a place.

The importance of interpersonal relationships and community attachment in relation to tourism and leisure experiences is beginning to emerge in the contemporary literature (Byrne, 2004; Kyle & Chick, 2004; Marles, 2002; Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, forthcoming). Kyle and Chick (2004) provide an ethnographic insight into the importance of interpersonal relationships to repeat visitation from the perspective of campers who regularly attend an agricultural fair in
the United States. They found that the fair was primarily seen by the campers as an opportunity to build and maintain relationships with family and friends (Kyle & Chick, 2004). The ten days of the fair were regarded as a sort of “utopia” where the campers were able to relax and unwind and spend meaningful time with friends and family. It was also regarded as a social space in which it was easy to make new friends, due to a perceived sense of safety that the campers felt in the environment of the fair, and to a belief that other campers attending the fair shared similar beliefs and values (Kyle & Chick, 2004).

Leisure theorists including Arai and Pedlar (2003) and Rojek (2005) have begun to explore the notion of social capital in the context of those leisure practices that contribute to a sense of community. Social capital is defined as the communal networks and the sense of trust that help to bind people together, transforming individuals from self seeking and egocentric calculators, with little social conscience or sense of mutual obligation, into members of a community with shared interests and a sense of common good (Arai & Pedlar, 2003, p.192). Further, they argue that focal leisure activities or communities of celebration help to build social capital – networks of trust and reciprocity - bringing benefits for both communities and individuals. These benefits range from a renewed sense of social and personal identity to those associated with a well networked, trusting and caring communal group – friendship and protection. Social capital is a conceptual cousin to the concept of community (Putnam, 2000, p.21).

Working and playing together is the basis for developing bonds of mutuality and sharing (Hemingway 1999). Reciprocity, mutuality and companionship generally score highly in quality of life valuations (Rapley 2003). Through these means the individual’s concept of self esteem is enhanced and community solidarity strengthened. Serious leisure is a significant investment channel in the accumulation of social capital. Reciprocity, mutuality and companionship are frequently the by-product of making music together, playing sports and eating and drinking together (Rojek, 2005, p.182).

Theoretically then, focal leisure activities that draw people together have the potential to contribute to an emergent sense of community (Rojek, 2005; Arai & Pedlar, 2003).

However, working in opposition to the community building opportunities of leisure, are self interest and possessive individualism, so characteristic of western societies post World War II, which have eroded the sense of trust and intimacy required for social capital to ‘accumulate’ and flourish (Arai & Pedlar, 2003). Group leisure practice has diminished as consumption and individualism have come to dominate – computer games of combat and chance, or listening to music on personalised mini devices (Rojek, 2005; Arai & Pedlar, 2003). The challenge is to identify, develop and support those forms of communal leisure experiences that contribute to reciprocity, mutuality and companionship, and therefore to a sense of community. Arai and Pedlar (2003, p.185) argue that people coming together in sports, festivals, hobbies, volunteering and the arts can create space for the production of shared meaning and communities of celebration.
The concept of ‘community’ is not unproblematic. As Raymond Williams (1983) noted in *Keywords*: ‘Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it never seems to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term’ (1983, p76). However, this does not alter the general argument that focal leisure activities offer opportunities to become involved in a community of interest.

Literature on the psychological concept of a sense of community is quite well developed (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996). McMillan’s (1996) theory and definition which developed from his earlier work with Chavis, proposes that sense of community is composed of four defining elements: spirit; trust; trade; and art. For McMillan, these elements are linked in a self-reinforcing circle.

Part of the significance of the attraction to a sense of community within the caravan park is that for many urban dwellers, a sense of community is something that has been lost from our everyday lives (Parker, 2004). We live close to each other in crowded cities but somehow remain socially isolated from our neighbours. Recent media reports in Sydney, Australia highlighted five instances within a ten day period in which people had died alone in their homes in high density urban areas and were not discovered by their neighbours for many months (El-Chami, 2006; Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006; Kent, 2006). The undiscovered deaths were attributed to a lack of a sense of community and the reluctance of neighbours to look out for each other (Kent, 2006).

While theoretical debate continues on how to remedy the situation, urban sociologists have long recognised that cities have not been planned with a sense of community in mind (Grant, 2006; Parker, 2004). Urbanism as a way of life “with its impersonality, anonymity and world of strangers” has been developed with the interests of business and industry in mind, not the sociable interests of its citizens (Wearing, 1998, p.128). Critical theorists argue that this situation is a result of an imbalance in power relations between big business and the rest of the community (Bessant & Watts, 2002; Parker, 2004).

The above view is manifested in the design and use of the typical urban streetscape. The current generation of children growing up in urban Australia generally do not play with their child neighbours in the street as their parents and grandparents may have done during their own childhood years. Nor do our children ride their bicycles around their local suburb unless they are accompanied by a responsible adult. It is not considered safe for them to do so. The combination of the dangers of traffic and “stranger danger” keep children isolated inside their own homes. Our homes provide refuge as well as revealing our deep need for security, image and identity (Grant, 2006). The design of our communities and the availability of public space do not encourage casual socialising with our friends and neighbours (Putnam, 2000,
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(p.408) and under these conditions there is reduced scope for the development of a sense of community (Parker, 2004; Grant, 2006).

APPROACHING THE DATA

In this paper we explore the notion of community in the context of McMillan’s (1996) conceptualisation. This exploration arose in a grounded way from the narrative of the two groups of participants in the study. One group reported that a sense of community was a special and attractive feature of caravan park holidays; a feature they believed to be missing in other types of holidays. The second group appeared to have a less developed sense of community, despite the reports of the importance of the friendships among the group members. We attempt to describe, in the first instance, ways in which a sense of community was manifested for the participants in the first group, and to determine the factors that contribute to the experience of community. Secondly, we aim to develop an understanding of the reasons that the second group had a less developed sense of community. Through this analysis we hope to provide some insight into the ways in which this form of tourist experience can contribute to the production of social capital.

METHODOLOGY

The Study Sites

The study took place at two caravan parks; one on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia, and the other in far north Queensland.

The New South Wales park is situated at the mouth of a river that provides caravan park patrons with direct access to the water. Boat launching ramps, swimming areas on the lagoon and the nearby beaches provide substantial opportunities for water-based recreation including swimming, enclosed water and deep-sea fishing, SCUBA diving and surfing. The park’s locality also provides relatively easy access to national parks, state forests and smaller towns and villages in the coastal hinterland. In addition to these natural attributes, the caravan park is adjacent to a commercial area containing a range of tourist related services and infrastructure including local fast food outlets, restaurants and cafes, a small cinema, a bowling and returned servicemen’s club, and a branch of a national supermarket chain. At peak periods, typically during the school holidays, up to seven hundred and fifty people will reside in the park.

While the management has changed many times, the site itself has been used for camping holidays for more than 60 years. (Indeed, some of the participants in the study have been visiting the park for that length of time.) The park has evolved from a local government controlled camping ground to a modern ‘resort style’ establishment with a mixture of camping and caravan sites, cabins and ‘villas’, a recreation hall, swimming pool, a ‘jumping pillow’ and programmed children’s activities. It is clean, clearly laid out and appears to be well maintained. Peak season for this park is the southern hemisphere summer, particularly the December-January school holiday period.
The Queensland park is somewhat larger, holding over one thousand visitors during peak holiday periods. It has been in operation under the same manager for about 20 years. It is also a well maintained, modern ‘resort style’ establishment with manicured grounds, three swimming pools, two jumping pillows, and a variety of other recreational facilities including a tennis court, mini golf course, adventure playground for toddlers to teens, pool tables, bicycle paths, basketball court and outdoor movie facilities. A series of ‘free’ social events are facilitated/provided by the park management each week including pancake breakfasts, outdoor movies, dance performances, aquarobics classes and bocce games. This park is located on the fringes of an international tourist destination city. It is surrounded by a high fence and patrolled by security each night. Entry to the park is restricted to residents and registered visitors. The park’s locality provides easy access to a plethora of tourist activities including reef and rainforest tours, markets, beaches and day trips to tropical islands. Peak season for this park is the southern hemisphere winter, referred to in this tropical climate as the ‘dry’ season, where maximum daily temperatures remain fairly constant at a comfortable 25 degrees celsius.

Consistent with similar caravan park developments along both the north and south coast of eastern Australia, the cost of hiring a caravan or camping site has increased significantly in both parks over the past decade. However, despite price rises, demand remains strong, particularly in seasonal peak periods. The park managers allow hirers of cabins and sites the first option on booking their cabin or site for the same period the following year. All of the participants in this study had taken advantage of that option. The managers of both parks enjoy high levels of peak period business from a stable and loyal base of repeat visitors.

Research Objective
The research project was guided by one overall objective, viz:

- To identify the ways in which caravan park holidays can contribute to the production of sense of community.

Data for this objective were generated in the specific context of the interview and data interpretation process.

Participants
Forty two caravan park holiday residents participated in the on-site studies during January 2006 and July 2007. Those interviewed ranged in age from the 30-39 years to 70-79 years and were fairly evenly divided in terms of gender (22 male, 20 female). All of the participants were repeat visitors. For the purposes of this study, repeat visitation was defined as returning to the same site on an annual basis for at least three years in succession. All but one of the participants was of anglo-celtic background.
Method
In order to explore the experience of the caravan park holiday with long term participants, we sought to elicit rich information in the form of stories, descriptions and personal analysis from the informants. The primary technique for data collection employed in this study was the in-depth interview.

The purpose of the interviews was to identify the ‘attraction’ of a caravan park holiday that kept people coming back to the same holiday park year after year. To this extent, the interview process was open-ended. However, given the objective of the study, the overall framework sought responses to the following general themes:

• personal histories of caravanning and camping and memories of these earlier experiences;
• benefits derived from the contemporary experience, the reasons they return to the same location on a sustained basis; and
• the impact of the holiday on relationships with family and fellow caravan park users, changes in gender roles, parent-child relationships.

At least one of the researchers stayed on-site for the duration of the interviewing periods. The managers of the caravan parks assisted with access, introducing the researchers and the purpose of the study to the participants. The interviews took place in the caravans, tents and cabins of the participants and were recorded with their permission. Following the interviews, each of the tapes was then transcribed. The data were analysed with the assistance of NVIVO qualitative analysis software.

Analysis
The first level of analysis undertaken was thematic utilising McMillan’s (1996) four contributing elements – spirit, trust, trade and art - as the principal textual groupings. As with any qualitative study, thematic analysis helps to give a degree of order and control to the task. This first ‘work’ of the data also established some broad groupings of experience beyond those emerging within the McMillan’s (1996) framework. Precise definitions of each theme were then established and the data once again examined. At this stage, codes were applied to the data and further reviewed. In order to enhance reliability, each of the coded themes (with data attached) was then reviewed independently and then jointly by the research team. Recoding and multiple coding was undertaken to ensure that the nuances of the language and the context of the data were not lost. Where points of difference arose, the original text was reviewed and ‘worked’ until there was agreement on its thematic placement. Throughout the process, categories (sub-themes or elements) were also developed to reflect the nuances of language inherent within the more ‘global’ themes.

The development of themes inevitably involves data reduction – the thematic construct is filtered, disconnected and then reconstructed from the text. The processes of data reduction notwithstanding, the themes as developed are interpretive mechanisms, not mutually exclusive...
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pieces of data. Reflecting on themes and ‘working’ the text is a dialectical process between the text, the researcher and the act of writing.

In the following text pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to McMillan (1996) a sense of community is created from a coming together of four critical elements noted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Building a Sense of Community – Contributing Elements (source: McMillan, 1996)

SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY

McMillan (1996) contends that the first element, spirit of community, is built around a number of important and interrelated characteristics – friendship, emotional safety, boundaries and a sense of belonging. The first of these, friendship, evolves in situations where we have a “setting and an audience to express unique aspects of our personality” (p.315).

Friendship was particularly important to the south coast participants. Hunter commented that he’d been coming here for 12 years and have probably got some of the best mates here. Yep, I talk to locals as well as people that camp in the park [and] apart from family [they are] some of the closest people to me. Barry echoed these sentiments and those of his wife for whom their holiday was about friendship. 100 per cent friendship. I believe once you’ve made a friend you’ve always got a friend and this is what its all about, coming, the friendships.
The people from the far north coast park spoke about friendship too, but with less intensity of feeling than the south coast folk. Edward reported that friendship is a key factor. We meet 8-12 couples from all parts of Australia. I imagine we’ll lose some of the ones we’ve got and gain new ones. We’ve come here for 9 of the 11 years I’ve been retired, but some of this group have been coming here for 16 years straight. Diana also enjoyed the friendliness of the lifestyle - We’ve been going about 10 years. We don’t come with anyone but we’re very busy from the time we get here. We have lovely people behind us and beside us. We love the lifestyle. We come here for four months but if we took a unit we wouldn’t see anyone. As much as we love each other’s company we love being able to talk to the world, and you too. Paul contrasted the friendly lifestyle he enjoyed at the park with his home life. You get to meet your neighbours if you want to. Sometimes you exchange pleasantries and that’s all, sometimes you click with a couple and you end up having morning tea together, or lunch, or dinner, and you end up exchanging Christmas cards. Particularly for me it’s friendly because I live on my own in a high-rise apartment, a vertical community, but not one where you get to know people too well. I’ve been there 18 years but have never been to other residents’ apartments for morning tea and they’ve never been to mine. So yes, I enjoy my five months away. It’s the friendliness that matters.

Within this context a number of the participants from both parks expressed a belief that a caravan park style of holiday is more conducive to the spirit of friendship than other types of holidays because it attracts friendly people. They expressed a sense of faith that other holiday makers at the caravan park would be interested in their friendship. Edward from the far north coast park commented that caravan parks are far more friendly than motels or high rises. A five minute trip to the toilet can take an hour because you stop and talk to so many people along the way.

Emotional safety is concerned with the ability of group members to be themselves, to speak ‘the truth’. If “community members are willing to look inside themselves and honestly represent their feelings to others, then they are speaking The Truth (emphasis in text) as they know it” McMillan, 1996, p. 316). This ‘truth speaking’ environment evolves through mutual feelings of empathy, understanding and caring. The truth is also about being yourself, without feeling bound to convention.

There is also a sense that within the interactions, people are free to be themselves – this is an environment with limited ‘pressure’. Arai and Pedlar (2003, p.194) argue that ‘communities of choice’, like caravan parks, allow individuals to develop their “social and political identity beyond the confines of traditional structures of gender, race, class and age” (p.195).

By way of example to the above, Peggy, from the south coast park, is in her sixties and comes from a hard-working farming background and is staying in the caravan with her husband. She had a television with the tennis on in the background as the interview was being conducted. In the following extract, Peggy comments upon her social freedom to watch videos and tennis
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while holidaying at the caravan park – activities that might be considered ‘time-wasting’ in other contexts.

This is still the best way to have a holiday. This is what we call our holiday. The others are trips, you’re going places to see things. We’ve seen things we wanted to see, well not everything, there’s always something new to see if you want to but we’re not seeking to find new things when we come here. We can relax, and I love watching the tennis. I watch a lot of tennis and I watch a lot of videos ‘cause I never watch videos at home. I don’t think I’ve ever been to the video shop at home, so it’s just a different lifestyle you have here. When you’re home you feel you’ve got to be doing things, you haven’t got time to be sitting around watching videos. All right, that’s me anyway. Down here I don’t feel I owe anybody anything, I’m not responsible for anything.

In another example, Alan from the north coast park is renowned at home for being a quiet man who tends to keep to himself, however, at the caravan park his persona alters somewhat and he becomes more outgoing. His wife, Diana, told a story of the surprise their daughter and son-in-law received when visiting them at the caravan park to find Alan behaving differently. They’d never seen him like this – he talks to the world.

Boundaries make emotional safety possible. Caravan parks are ‘bounded’ communities – temporally, spatially and historically. The boundaries are both defined and labile. Colleen from the south coast parks comments that:

The people who intend to camp and who are prepared to live close to each other are friendly. You’re outside cooking and eating and you don’t have a phobia of being close to a whole lot of people. I guess it’s not as private as it would be in an apartment. [Caravan parks] attract those sort of people; friendly people who like other people.

Karen from the north coast park commented upon the emotional safety aspect with reference to her children. In real life we tend to be very cautious of people. People are here because they care about kids, and everyone looks after everyone else’s kids. There seems to be a confidence amongst the kids that this is their place. They connect so well with one another and I enjoy that.

The feeling of a sense of belonging or sharing some sense of personal relatedness within a community is the third element. In the context of the caravan park, a sense of belonging to a community is integral to the holiday. For Richard, a long term visitor to the south coast park, it’s almost for us now after this many years like a sense of homecoming when you pull in the gate. And that’s the part I was saying about its being easy. You don’t have to learn the ropes all the time. It’s knowing how things go. And it’s that sense of homecoming. Dallas from the north coast park expressed a similar sentiment in the following succinct statement - when we come around the corner and see the park we go ‘You beaut’.
McMillan (1996) claims that when we believe that we will be welcome, that we fit or belong in a community, we have a stronger attraction to that community. This resonates with Marles’ (2002) finding that repeat visitation elicits a positive emotional response to the community within the caravan park. The participants in this study chose to revisit the caravan park each year for a holiday and one of the main reasons that brought them back year after year was the community of friendship they found there.

You meet people here that you’ve met all the years. When you come here it’s like old home week. You arrive here and walk around and catch up with all the people that you see from year to year and they’re all on holidays (Nancy, south coast park)

The sense of belonging also extended outside the boundaries of the caravan park into the local community. Nancy also noted that

People recognise you, the locals you know. The guy at the butchers, soon as you arrive, “Hi, how are you going?” It’s like you just saw him yesterday. Sometimes you get a better reception here than at home where you do your shopping every week.

The evidence indicates that the spirit of friendship, emotional safety and sense of belonging are strong among both of the communities of caravan park visitors interviewed for this study. The social space allows them to relax, to let go of some of the demands of their usual lives, to be themselves, and to forge important friendships. They also perceive that other people staying in the park are likely to be interested in making friends and consequently the participants are comfortable about approaching their “neighbours” with friendly overtures – a type of mutual reciprocity.

The evidence from the interviews suggests that friendships are more established for the south coast participants than for those on the north coast. This is possibly due to differences in the length of time that these friendships have been developing. Participants had been regularly visiting the south coast park for up to sixty years. Their stories about friendships span life stages. In one example Keith, in his early forties at the time of the interview spoke of his memories of holidays at the south coast park - as a kid, like twelve, thirteen year old boy meeting the same kids, same boys and going fishing or surfing whatever we were doing at the time, so you’d come back to the place and meet the same people who camped, and you made friends that you’d had for a long time. More so as I’ve grown a bit older. Judy, also from the south coast park, spoke of long term friendships - we’ve watched their kids grow up and we’ve being to their 21st and 18ths and to their weddings. That aspect of it is very gratifying. You make really good friends.

In contrast, the far north coast park has been in operation for about twenty years. While friendships are clearly blossoming at the north coast park they have had less time to develop. This finding adds a potentially new theoretical dimension to the concept of sense of community
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in respect of the temporal dimension. From a management perspective, an understanding of the timing of community development may help in planning for this aspect.

TRUST

According to McMillan (1996) the spirit of friendship is the foundation on which the sense of community is built. Trust on the other hand is an important building block. According to him, trust is about the informal and formal rules that guide and bind a community. This idea also resonates with those of Putnam (2000) who contends that a sense of community is closely related to that of social capital and, according to Arai and Pedlar (2003, p.193), social capital predisposes people to trust each other, and to treat each other as friends, “rather than as strangers, competitors or potential enemies”. The following extract from a south coast interview suggests that caravan parks engender a sense of trust in ways that other types of holidays fail to do.

If you’re in a unit you don’t know whether [your neighbour] is a banker or plumber or labourer or not … There’s a lack of trust there … You think oh no he might just want to be left alone. You’ve got to shut your door whereas the caravans and the cabins are always open (Rod).

Trust is also concerned with the ‘formal’ authority that exists within the community. In the context of the caravan park experience, it is both the trust that exists between close and near neighbours and also the relationship with management who act as the formal authority. The holidaymakers of both parks trust that management will enforce the ‘rules’. The interviewees felt that the rules were fair, appropriately enforced, and they were well served by management staff.

It seems to me all the staff are really friendly. They drive past and they know our names and all that, and that’s really nice. That sort of relational stuff is really nice and its all part of the service and everything. They look after us really well and all our friends so we’re really thankful for that because that’s part of helping us to have this community within a community and that’s allowed to happen, and they really do look after long-termers (Alice, south coast park).

The girls at the front desk are wonderful, the guys are good blokes, it’s very safe and clean. This has more of a family feel about it, they take a personal interest in you (Mark, north coast park).

The staff are excellent, nothing’s too much trouble for them. Everything’s spotless all the time. You feel very safe. They’re very friendly. Last year I fractured an arm just before we came up – and there were flowers for me when we got here. To be able to still remember people and their birthdays when there’s over 1000 people staying here a night makes you feel special (Diana, north coast park).
The participants of the south coast park also expressed a sense of mutual care and responsibility for each other. Kirk and Angela commented that:

*I feel safe with the kids here. It may be a false sense of security but I think while I’m here I’ve never had any trouble. You feel safe; we’ve been coming here a long time. People in the park all know the kids and where they should belong and if something happened someone will come and say “I saw your kids over there, they should be there”* (Kirk).

*It’s great for the kids. It’s all safety and just really there’s so much to do. They’ve got the trampoline. They’ve got the rec room now. They have the movies; they can ride their bikes up and down. You’ve got the lake here. They go fishing in there or they just go play in the water in there and you know it’s safe, there’s not any tides coming in or out. They can go for walks up and down. They just have a whole big range of freedom and they can just do a lot of things* (Angela).

While the respondents from both parks has a strong sense of trust in their relationships with park management, the north coast respondents were a little more reserved about the extent to which they trusted the other residents. At one end of the spectrum Jane commented that *you still put your things away at night, I never let my kids go out without me*. However most respondents had begun to develop this sense of trust. Raymond commented that *most people leave things out and hope no one takes anything. I’ve found it pretty safe. People are always watching. Our kids are getting a bit older so we tend to make them stick together. They’ve been pretty good and won’t go and do something unless they ask us first*.

Leisure theorists (Arai and Pedlar 2003, Rojek 2005) have begun to explore the notion of social capital in the context of leisure practices that contribute to a sense of community. Social capital is defined as the communal networks and the sense of trust that help to bind people together, transforming individuals from self seeking and egocentric calculators, with little social conscience or sense of mutual obligation into members of a community with shared interests and a sense of common good (Arai and Pedlar 2003:192). There was evidence of a contrast between the two parks in terms of a sense of the common good. Marie from the north coast park claimed that *some of us are pensioners, some have a lot of money but we all get on together. People mix well here in a park like this*. However, the following comments from north coast respondents suggest a distrust of people from lower socioeconomic strata that is more in line with a community that is low on social capital (Arai and Pedlar 2003).

*Because it’s an expensive park you generally get nicer people and it’s very safe, secure, relaxed. There are parks in the outback where people are on welfare, running away from jail, where you have to keep everything locked up (Paul, north coast park).*

*We’ve found in the more expensive parks, the more civilised the people are likely to be. In the cheaper ones you can get a lot of yobbos and drinking if you get some lax management (Beatrice, north coast park).*
In contrast, a number of respondents from the south coast park lamented that the increasing cost of hiring a site in their caravan park was excluding single income families, blue collar workers and pensioners.

_They should encourage a lot more families to do more in off-peak times, offering better value for money. We have friends with 4 kids on one income and they can’t afford a holiday even in a tent (Wayne, south coast park)._ 

_The permanents, mainly pensioners and old people, are the ones getting kicked out for the cabins … I think we’re going to go through another phase where the blue-collar bloke is going to find it hard to go on holidays to the coast (Tim, south coast park)._ 

The tendency to trust the broader ‘potential’ caravan park community indicates the existence of social capital in the south coast park. The respondents show strong signs of a community contributing to social cohesion and the common good in the broader Australian society.

**TRADE**

_Trade_ in the context used by McMillan (1996) refers to the development of a social economy where positive feelings are shared between members of the community. Feelings and behaviour are ‘traded’ in the circumstances of building a sense of community.

While many of the south coast participants talked about community, the following examples typify the developing social economy of the caravan park:

_It’s friendly, relaxed, co-operative – everyone helps each other. It’s a community with lots of community meals and all that sort of thing, its really good (Colin)._ 

_And they look out for you and its nice to know if something goes wrong with the car or whatever, everyone pitches in to help out or if someone gets flooded out everyone goes to help with drying out their bedding. So that kind of sense of community. If we catch heaps of fish we give it a way. That’s the kind of community thing that builds up (Sally)._ 

_It’s just the community atmosphere, and the kids, when they were little, they always had someone to play with. A community game of cricket, or fishing, or golfing, and we’d often go to the beach and we’d take kids from 4 or 5 different families, that was really good too. (Colin)._ 

A final example is that discussed by Michael. His experience captures the essence of the trading relationship that exists within the park. Michael was away from the site when his son, Tim, broke his arm. His wife Denise has:
gone to the next door neighbour who took Tim and Denise to the ambulance – the ambulance took them to Moruya. By the time I come back they’ve gone to Moruya, worked out they can’t fix his arm there so they’ve gone to Bega. On the way past I’ve come back and told everyone what’s happened, and I kept on following the ambulance. After we come back the whole thing was all packed up ‘cause I knew I was going the next day, so everyone’s come, packed up all our clothes, pulled everything apart, dropped the tent and packed it all into the trailer. They didn’t have to do that – I just said ‘yep we’ll be going tomorrow, I’ll have to come back tonight and start packing up’. Twenty people did it. They just come, pulled it all apart and packed it up. It happens here. There’s a good community of people here. You do look after each other.

North coast participants made comments about the positive feelings shared by the community.

Keith commented that once you get to know people you can solve the problems of the world. People walk around the park too for exercise and to check out everyone else’s vans or units. And just to say hello. You could go to anyone and they’d be willing to help you.

Diana made note of the need to be accepting of others living in close proximity.

You must be prepared to go to a caravan park, people might have a few drinks at night, a baby might be crying, kids will get up early and run around.

Karen and Paul provided examples of the social economy in action at the north coast park.

When you get here your own life stops for a small period of time and you get to enjoy a combined family life. Not just your family but other families that you would connect with. There’s a real camaraderie. Some complete stranger walked up yesterday afternoon and said ‘I’ve forgotten my air bed pump’. You just don’t do that in the real world, only here where everyone’s comfortable and here for the same purpose (Karen, north coast park).

The day that I arrived here they rang me on the road and said ‘You are coming for lunchtime aren’t you?’ and I said ‘I’ll be there in half an hour.’ I pulled in here, Keith gave me a hand to put the van on the site, we had lunch, and then I got established (Paul, north coast park).

Trade is an aspect that was evident in the communities of both parks. As with friendship, it appeared to be better established at the time of interviewing in the older of the two parks. The south coast respondents offered more stories along these lines. Whether it was about sharing a good catch of fish with another family, fixing up someone’s annex or tent which had blown down while they were away from the site, or pulling in someone’s washing when it was about to rain, the south coast respondents were very aware of their strength in this aspect of community and the benefits it brings.
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ART

The final element of McMillan’s conceptualisation is that of Art. Art in this sense is the combined stories and history that shape a community. However, it is not necessarily a history that one must have participated in but one whose ideas they embrace. The historicity of their experience in the south coast caravan park comes from the annual recasting of community engagement.

*Its primarily the people that we’ve met and have remained friends with [that keeps us coming back to this caravan park]. The kids my boys used to play with when they were small are still here, they’re still coming. Even if I can only get down here for a week or a weekend they’ve still got to come here in January. We know people from all over Australia, from Newcastle, from Wollongong, Melbourne, Goulburn – its one of the key things – we know people from all those areas from this. It’s very important to the kids. They get invited to each other’s 21sts, weddings and all that sort of stuff* (Colin).

Indeed, the sense of long lasting and valued relationships was the theme of many stories. There was more than one mention of couples who met at the caravan park as children and went on to marry.

*She was saying she used to come down here when they were children and then she met her husband here and so you hear the stories about one’s who have come on holidays, grown, and then their children have come and they’ve met the ones who live next door, because you see all the young ones get together, and then they come back every year and they become friends, then they become girlfriends and boyfriends* (Nancy).

A poignant story was told of one elderly man’s final visit to the caravan park. The theme of this story seemed to be a celebration of a life full of rich holidays at this particular caravan park.

*When we first arrived there was an old couple in the caravan up the back. He came from The Entrance up near Newcastle to here every year for about 45 years. The last time he come he said “I don’t think you’ll see me again because the son’s coming to drive me back”, but he said “I’ve enjoyed every minute I’ve ever come here”* (Rod).

While the historicity was less developed in the stories of the north coast park, their stories celebrated the friendly and relaxed atmosphere and the freedom from time constraints which left space for building and maintaining relationships. This celebration was a feature of both parks.

*My boys do swimming, I see the same parents when I drop them off but I’d only have a 2-3 minute conversation, maximum, with any of them. I’ve made better friends in 2 days at a caravan park which is kind of sad. I heard someone say we’re not human ‘beings’*
any more, we’re human ‘doings’. And I agree. This place helps you connect (Karen, north coast park).

The people I meet in caravan parks are either of my age group or young families, a mixture of people. They’ve all got time on their hands and are fairly relaxed. It’s friendly, you meet people by walking up the road (Paul, north coast park).

We’re on the foreshore right at the water and the kids can just swim there. You can watch them, just sit in front of our tent, we don’t have to move, don’t have to go anywhere, just sit still. For our family in particular that’s really good because we’re really busy (Anne, south coast park).

Just relaxing, sitting out watching the kids play, having a few drinks with your partner, wife, girlfriend. Everyone’s happy, no stress – when you come to places like this you don’t have any expectations of doing anything. We had breakfast at 11am, lunch at 4pm and dinner at 9pm. Take it as it comes (Warren, south coast park).

The theme of relaxation of time constraints was central to the stories and reminisces of the majority of respondents at both parks.

CONCLUSION

I actually used to scoff at people who came back to the same place all the time … I couldn’t understand what the attraction was. But now I do … It’s a community of friendship. (Richard, south coast park)

This study has explored the experiences of 22 repeat visitors to a caravan park on the south coast of New South Wales and 20 repeat visitors to a caravan park on the far north coast of Queensland from the perspective of the literature on sense of community and the associated concept of social capital. We have sought to understand and compare the elements of the experiences of the participants that contribute to a sense of community within the caravan park. The sense of community that exists among regular repeat visitors to the south coast caravan park appears to be a major source of the park’s attraction and arguably keeps people coming back to the same site, at the same time each year, for their annual holiday experience. While the foundations have been laid for the development of a sense of community at the north coast park, the findings indicate that it is less well developed. One of the factors contributing to the difference between the two parks is the amount of time they have been in operation. The south coast park has been operating for about sixty years, three times as long as the north coast park. This indicates that holiday communities may need several decades to fully develop in the areas of trust, trade and art.

A community of friendship is something that is valued by all the participants in this study. The findings of this study support those of two similar studies located in the tourism literature.
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Marles’ (2002) quantitative study of Australian caravanners found that the sense of community increases as an attraction as the number of visits increases over time. Kyle and Chick (2004) concluded that relationships with family and friends were the most important and meaningful elements of the experience for annual repeat visitors to an agricultural fair and encampment in the United States.

A sense of community and social capital can be thought about as public goods. They offer members a full social existence of intimate, close connections to others – social nurture (Arai & Pedlar, 2003). Social capital enables members to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 2000). A sense of community mitigates against feelings of alienation. A sense of community and social capital are, arguably, elements of social life that have been eroded over recent decades in urban communities. Arguably a domicile-based community in an urban environment is something more substantial to people’s lives in general than a community with the kind of time horizon of a holiday community. However, a holiday community seems to fit under the banner of communities based around “focal leisure activities” referred to by Arai and Pedlar (2003). It is clear the people interviewed for this study gain a great deal of pleasure, sense of identity and ongoing benefit from their membership of the holiday community.

Arai and Pedlar (2003) are interested in the exploration of the role of focal leisure activities in providing spaces for the social self and civic engagement to occur – spaces where community structures and their potential contribution to social cohesion, trust, mutuality, co-operation and openness can emerge and thrive. They argue that tourism and leisure studies can reaffirm their practical and theoretical roots by focusing on the community building aspects of focal leisure activities. Leisure studies has neglected the concept of community and the common good in recent decades where the focus of both research and practice has been on leisure as consumption and individualism (Arai & Pedlar, 2003, p. 185).

For many decades caravan park holidays have been providing a sense of community and important avenues of friendship for many of the people interviewed for this study. McMillan’s (1996) conceptualisation of the four critical elements - spirit, trust, trade and art – for creating a sense of community have proved useful for understanding these experiences, and may offer insights for tourism and leisure theorists and practitioners. It is the purpose of theory to help us think clearly and to make connections across particular cases. This purpose accomplished, clearer pathways of personal and professional action should emerge. Theory that is adequate in explaining something also suggests effective pathways of action.

Missing from both McMillan’s (1996) theory of sense of community, and Arai and Pedlar’s (2003) understanding of building social capital through focal leisure activities, is the aspect of a relaxed social space, where people have the time and conducive social environment to ‘connect’ with others. As one respondent noted, in the usual social spaces of every day life we seem to be constantly busy - we have become human ‘doings’ instead of human ‘beings’.
The success the respondents in this study had with the building of friendships and a sense of community was very much linked to taking time out from ‘doing’ to just ‘being’ which gave them the space to reconnect with family and friends.

In the management and marketing context, there are also implications from this study. Caravan park (and other leisure service) marketing may benefit from including notions of friendship and community in their marketing campaigns rather than the usual narrow focus upon facilities and services. It may be useful, for example, to use quotes from past customers that refer to these notions in the promotional material. From a management perspective it may be worthwhile to consider programming and providing amenities that facilitate social engagement and communal activity. An example of this might be barbecue areas and picnic tables that cater to larger groups where multiple family groups can share a meal or an afternoon and evening.

There are many questions that still need to be answered. For example, to what extent is it possible for tourist operators and other leisure service providers to ‘manipulate’ conditions that support the creation of a sense of community? Are the benefits accrued through being part of a community in a holiday setting only temporary or are they substantial enough to permeate aspects of people’s lives once the holiday is over? Are the integral elements for creating a sense of community in holiday communities transferable to other tourist settings? Further research into the needs and motivations of repeat visitors to caravan parks may provide marketing and service delivery insights to practitioners in the field and, hence, improve the economic and social sustainability of their enterprises. Further research into holiday communities may contribute to theoretical understandings about sociality and social capital in the context of focal leisure activities. Such research could contribute to a fledgling body of literature in the area of tourism, leisure and social capital that offers potential for reframing the social relevance of tourist experiences.

REFERENCES


A TALE OF TWO CARAVAN PARKS: FRIENDSHIP, COMMUNITY AND THE FREEDOM THING

