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The lived experience of long-term overland travel

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the lived experience of “overlanding”, defined as a form of self-reliant long-term adventure travel by vehicle in which the journey is perceived to be more important than the destination. The study builds on recent research into “lifestyle travel”, “voluntary simplicity” and “transformative tourism”, and travelling cohorts from backpackers to campervan users to ocean-going adventurers. Given the under-researched nature of long-term overlanding as a lifestyle, the methodology used is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), enabling the capture of rich idiographic data from a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Four overall themes emerge: the simple life, freedom, development of self, and positive relationships. The five participant couples are in mid-life, also allowing for focus on matters of life-choice and purpose.

1. Introduction

Overlanding is a form of self-reliant adventure travel widely understood to refer to exploring by vehicle, from bicycle to truck, often to remote destinations, often crossing international boundaries, for periods as long as months or years. The publisher of the Overland Journal describes overlanding as a travel “niche”, defining it as “vehicle-supported travel whereby the journey is more important than the final destination and the vehicle is a means to an end” (Brailey, 2021). A recent motor industry article on “the Rise of the Overlanders” (Imlay, 2021) notes that “overlanding is evolving into its own market space” although “defining the phenomenon isn’t so easy”. Independent overlanding differs conceptually from shorter “road trip” or “car camping” tourist experiences; from expeditionary travel in which a destination is the goal; and from most adventure tourism with its focus on often commercialized activities (Weber, 2001). A recent comprehensive study of twenty-two dimensions of adventure tourism (Janowski, Gardiner, & Kwek, 2021) includes relevant dimensions such as “exploration”, “novelty” and “physical activity” but contains no reference to the overland travel or overlanding lifestyle that is the subject of this paper.

As can be seen with adventure tourism, however, interest in independent overlanding is growing fast. The world’s largest overlanding convention, the Abentaur and Allrad Expo in Germany, reported fifty thousand visitors at its 2019 gathering (Camping and 4WD magazine, 2019). America’s Overland Expo West reported twenty-eight thousand attendees (Overland Expo, 2021) from as far afield as Japan and Brazil in 2021, continuing several years of annual attendance growth over 20%

(Overland Expo, 2019) despite the interruption of pandemic lockdown in 2020. The campervan travel industry in the UK (Out and About Live, 2021a, 2021b) and the US (Kersting, 2022; McColloch, 2021) have reported a similar upsurge in post-pandemic consumer interest. McColloch notes that the popularity of overlanding in North America in particular has “exploded” in the last fifteen years and been further boosted by pandemic restrictions on traditional modes of travel and concern about coronavirus exposure in group settings. Osti and Nava (2020) note that “in times of respiratory disease-related risk perception, tourists tend to shift destination categories”; this recent data may also suggest changing approaches to transportation categories.

This paper aims to offer new empirical insight in three areas. First, the study investigates the appeal of vehicular overlanding travel as a long-term lifestyle, as distinct from more frequently researched forms of travel such as backpacking or car camping. Second, it aims to illustrate this unusual lifestyle by using the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to convey the lived experience of overlanding through the language of its participants: readers are offered rich idiographic data based on a small number of in-depth interviews. As described below, IPA favours a highly homogenous sample in order to better illuminate participants’ experiences of a common phenomenon (King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2019, p. 57) and a choice has been made to sample overland travellers in mid-life, a discrete demographic seen within the industry as a growing market. Third, given the themes which emerge of valuing the simple life, relishing freedom, developing the self, and experiencing positive relationships, this study explores the value to be gained from viewing the phenomenon of overlanding travel through

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the lens of positive psychology.

In essence, the paper aims to illuminate the experiences of overland travellers in their own words, to analyse their meaning-making with reference to positive psychology, and to consider how these findings may contribute to current trends in tourism literature. It is offered as an initial study into overlanding as a lifestyle which could be described as “the road less travelled” but which is becoming a road more frequently taken. It concludes with a number of suggestions for further research across a range of academic disciplines.

1.1. Literature review

In terms of popular literature, the overlanding phenomenon is reflected in a growing number of books, blogs and video diaries, following early classics like Ted Simon’s round-the-world on a motorbike chronicle “Jupiter’s Travels” (Simon, 1979) and Che Guevara’s “The Motorcycle Diaries” (Guevara & Guevara, 2003, first in English in 2003). Reference books like Chris Scott’s “Overlanders’ Handbook” (Scott, 2017) are complemented by substantial online specialist representation including journals and social media accounts. In the academic sphere, Karin Weber (Weber, 2001) highlights “the overland tourist” as a viable market segment which focuses on physical movement along the transit route rather than any particular travel destination. In referring to a series of classic journeys such as the Asian Overland Route and the “Gringo Trail” in Latin America, Weber references earlier research including Pearce (1979).

In more recent academic literature, however, the phenomenon of independent vehicle overlanding has received comparatively little attention. Backpacker studies range from ground-breaking insights into motivation (Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, 2002), the construction of “identity stories” (Noy, 2004), and the concept of “lifestyle travellers” (Cohen, 2011), to contemporary efforts to redefine the genre (Dayour, Kimbu, & Park, 2017). Studies of vehicular lifestyle travel or “dwelling on the move” (Light & Brown, 2020) are more unusual. They include ocean cruising (Lusby & Anderson, 2010), lifestyle climbing (Rickly, 2016) and the related pursuits of caravanning and campervan excursions (Fjestul, 2014; White & White, 2004; Wilson & Hannam, 2017).

In exploring the experiences of current overland travellers, this study will present original data before offering analysis in the context of three strands of existing academic literature: sociological frameworks for understanding tourist experience; recent literature relating to changing attitudes to travel opportunities in the mid-life years; and positive psychology studies relating to autonomy, self-determination and the transformative potential of travel.

1.1.1. Understanding the tourist experience

Five “phenomenologically distinct modes of tourist experiences” are offered in Erik Cohen’s much-cited 1979 model which “set the theoretical foundation” for the field of tourism studies according to analysis (Koseoglu, Mehraliyev, & Xiao, 2019) of connections between 1393 academic articles from 1998 to 2017. Cohen’s five modes range from “recreational” and “diversionary” adventures to the “experiential”, “experimental” and “existential” modes perhaps more relevant to long-term travel. The experiential mode is described as a “renewed quest for meaning, outside the confines of one’s own society”, an attempt to discover more “authentic” experiences (Cohen, 1979, p. 186); the experimental traveller is always “in search of himself”, “experimenting with alternative lifeways” (p. 189); existential travel is “phenomenologically akin to a pilgrimage” (p. 190) in which the traveller finds a spiritual centre away from the workaday home. The modes of travel may be combined by any one traveller or within a single trip; crucially for this study, they relate to the individual’s own perception of the meaning of

their travel experience rather than external definitions of travel market segmentation. This paper seeks to offer new empirical insight by relating Cohen’s model to the pursuit of independent long-term overlanding travel as a lifestyle.

In terms of the motivation to travel, many studies specifically document the urge to escape. Erik Cohen (1973) identified the counter-cultural “drifter” as a new tourist trend in the seventies; more recently, Scott Cohen (2011) identified “escape” and “alienation” among the differing motivations for backpacker travel, while Hirschorn and Hef-feron (2013) describe a sense in ‘career-break’ travel of “jumping off the ledge”.

There is also growing emphasis on the positive potential of cross-cultural travel. Koseoglu et al. (2019) analyse the shift in recent tourism literature toward more relativist thinking about society and sociocultural change; while Cohen, Prayag, and Moital (2014), pp. 891–2) note a rise in travel projects “in growing resistance to consumer cultures, such as anti-consumption, voluntary simplicity, slow living and down-shifting”. New concepts gaining currency include “slow travel”, “sustainable tourism”, “hopeful tourism”, and “transformative tourism”. “Slow travel” is seen (Gardner, 2009; Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011) as a state of mind in which the journey is intrinsic, air travel to be avoided, and engagement with local communities to be commended. Slow travel is in turn connected to “sustainable tourism”, with its focus on reducing carbon emissions, and the “hopeful tourism” agenda (Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011) which explicitly pursues knowledge related to sustainable living. Finally, a vigorous strand of recent research into “transformative tourism” refers both to travel that is conscious of its impact on the planet (Ateljevic, 2020) and the psychological development and wellbeing of the individual traveller (Brown, 2009; Farkić, Filep, & Taylor, 2020; Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017; Lean, 2009; Light & Brown, 2020; Sheldon, 2020).

1.1.2. Understanding the tourist experience in mid-life

Views of middle age are changing. It has been conventionally viewed by many psychologists in terms of “crisis” or existential dread (Jaques, 1965); there is now doubt that evidence actually exists for “mid-life crisis” (Donaldson-Feilder & Panchal, 2011; Rauch, 2018); and this period is increasingly seen as an age of opportunity (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Hagerty, 2017). Rauch (2018, p. 18) writes of “the post-midlife upturn” in terms of “a change in our values and sources of satisfaction”. One way in which this may be reflected is in evidence of a growing market for challenging mid-life travels, at least in relatively affluent societies. For example, Naidoo, Ramseook-Munhurrin, Seebaluck, and Janvier (2015) argue that the attraction of adventure tourism for baby boomers is under-reported; the Adventure Travel Trade Association in North America has estimated that more than 40% of adventure travellers are over 50 (Economist, 2017); and in Australia, Pearce, Oktadiana, Pearce, Oktadiana, Pearce, and Chen (2021) have explored the phenomenon of the “grey nomad”.

In 2011, Sedgley, Pritchard and Morgan noted that the study of tourism in later life tends to be quantitative, aimed at commercial definitions of market segments, and called for more participatory, humanistic, qualitative research. A few examples can be found in the academic literature, including a study (White & White, 2004) of 85 older Australian outback travellers which found participants motivated to adventure as they reflected on reaching “life-stage endings”; the current Australian study by Pearce et al. (2021) also enquires into “the common concerns of grey nomads”. This paper is offered as an illustrative study of tourism in later life, using IPA methodology to consider the specific experiences of mid-life travellers – of British, American, Canadian and Australian nationalities - who have chosen to adopt an overlanding lifestyle.

The subsequent discussion relates participants' reflections to concepts from the field of positive psychology, which inquires among other things into what it takes to develop the sense of a meaningful life and to age successfully. As [Biswas-Diener \(2010\)](#) notes (p. 127) "middle age is a period when people naturally 'check in with themselves', rediscovering or reaffirming their values and dreams". It is hoped that the psychological lens adopted in this paper will provide useful insights into a participant cohort travelling at a time of life when existential questions about meaning come more naturally into focus.

1.1.3. Positive psychology and long-term travel

Positive psychology is defined as the "scientific study of optimal human functioning" ([Alex Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006](#)). A growing number of tourism studies include references to positive psychology concepts like self-efficacy, self-determination and the flourishing or transformed self: many of these studies employ the participatory, humanistic approach called for by [Sedgley, Pritchard, and Morgan \(2011\)](#) as noted above.

On the sense of self, for example, [Noy \(2004\)](#) reports feelings of "profound self-change" among back-packers; [White and White \(2004\)](#) find a search for a "revitalised sense of self" in Australian outback travellers; [Lyons \(2010\)](#) theorises that a travelling state of Autonomous Cross-Cultural Hardship or ACCH will stimulate a deeper, more healthy sense of self. On the search for self-determination, [Lusby and Anderson \(2010\)](#) find experiences of "flow" ([Csikszentmihalyi, 2009](#)) in 25 ocean-going cruisers who have consciously chosen a more self-determined lifestyle; and [Hirschorn and Hefferon \(2013\)](#) find "a new-found faith in intrinsically-motivated activity" in 10 career-break subjects undertaking extensive foreign travel. On the potential for personal transformation through travel, a study of 25 long-distance Australian walkers by [Saunders, Laing, and Weiler \(2013\)](#) finds evidence of "enduring self-efficacy and growth", specifically referencing the PERMA theory of a flourishing life ([Seligman, 2012](#)). [Anderson and Erskine \(2014\)](#) find tropophilia or the "love of mobility, change and transformation" replacing a need for physical roots among lifestyle travellers. [Canavan \(2018\)](#) notes an existential search for "meaning, fulfilment and freedom" among some backpacking travellers. [Reid and Kampman \(2020\)](#) observe in 7 extended-period expeditionary adventurers "the expansion of their geographical, physical and psychological worlds." Finally, an overview by [Sheldon \(2020\)](#) details "the deeper purposes of self-realization and self-exploration that motivate transformational travel."

These studies share an openness to the significance of lifestyle travel as "movement imbued with purpose and meaning" ([Cohen, 2011](#)), experiences that are not just about hedonism but the eudaimonic conception of well-being ([Filep & Pearce, 2013](#)). Recently, [Filep, Laing, and Csikszentmihalyi \(2016\)](#) have called for a new academic sub-field of "Positive Tourism" to analyse further the conditions for, and consequences of, "human flourishing in tourism contexts". [Houge Mackenzie and Hodge \(2020\)](#) also make the case for paying greater attention to psychological concepts like eudaimonia in the field of tourism studies, noting that "subjective well-being (SWB) frameworks have been largely absent" from discourse and analysis. Currently there is little academic literature specifically applying positive psychology concepts to lifestyles that involve sustained international travel, and even fewer studies using phenomenological methodologies that allow rich detail to emerge in the words of the travellers themselves.

2. The lived experience of long-term overland travel

2.1. Study design

2.1.1. Methodology

This qualitative study uses phenomenological methodology ([Husserl,](#)

[1975; Heidegger, 1962/1927](#)) which seeks to explore existence in its own terms. The aim is to understand the lived experience of a cohort of overland travellers: motivations, expectations and felt experiences as participants themselves describe and understand them. Investigating the traveller experience from the "inside out" in this way involves more emphasis on individual meaning than social theory, working to "describe the essence of a lived phenomenon" rather than "ground a theory in the views of participants" ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#), p. 67). It seems to this research team an appropriate methodology for an initial paper exploring relatively untrodden ground.

Engaging in research in this way also involves a choice – put broadly – between two schools of "descriptive" and "hermeneutical" (or interpretative) phenomenology, the former inspired primarily by [Husserl \(1975\)](#), the latter by [Heidegger, 1962/1927](#). As [Kirillova](#) notes in her explanatory overview ([Kirillova, 2018](#)), the phenomenological approach can be especially useful for tourism studies which require thorough understanding of an experience, but its ground rules are often misunderstood; it is important to acknowledge the methodological diversity within the overarching approach, informed by different ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality and of what we can know.

The particular appeal of IPA for this study lies in its nature as a hermeneutic or interpretative phenomenology ([Heidegger \(1962/1927\)](#)), in which the researcher acknowledges that data is inevitably filtered through his or her own preconceptions. The researcher works with the "double hermeneutic" ([Smith & Osborn, 2003](#)) that he or she is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their own situation. This is further acknowledged in the Reflexivity section, below. Such interpretative phenomenology is conceptually distinct from the descriptive phenomenological approach drawn from [Husserl \(1975\)](#) and [Merleau-Ponty \(1962\)](#) and developed by [Giorgi \(2009\)](#) which seeks the "reduction" of meanings to "essences" representative of reality, and so can be seen as (post-) positivist in nature. IPA is more consistent with the epistemological assumptions underlying this study, the worldview of social constructivism which holds that as individuals seek to understand their world, the meanings they find are subjective, complex and multiple. Such an approach is described by [Koseoglu et al. \(2019\)](#) in their wide-ranging review as more in line with the recent academic evolution of tourism studies.

The further benefit of IPA is that it is strongly idiographic in nature: involving detailed, nuanced analysis of each participant as an individual in his or her own right before themes are collated across the cohort as a whole ([Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009](#), pp. 34–37; [Howitt & Cramer, 2017](#), p. 465). In order to facilitate such close study, very small sample sizes – usually in single figures - are the norm ([Smith et al., 2009](#), p. 49). By analysing case studies in this manner, this study aims to contribute relevant insights from a novel context to the body of nomothetic research aligned with [Cohen's](#) definition (1979) of phenomenologically distinct tourist types, and to follow this up with suggestions for further and more broad-based research upon which theory may be built.

To sum up, the methodological aim of this paper is not to define the true essences of the phenomenon of the overlanding lifestyle, nor to establish a set of facts about overlanding, but to gain valuable psychological insights into how five overlanding couples make sense of their own lived experience in their own socio-cultural context. It is acknowledged that all ten participants are of culturally similar origin and all are in mid-life, and that these are traits shared by the principal researcher.

2.1.2. Reflexivity

The principal researcher has personal experience of overlanding travel on three continents and professional experience of applied positive psychology. She acknowledges prior interest in concepts such as

personal wellbeing, positive experiences such as “savoring” (Bryant & Veroff, 2017) and positive outcomes such as the experience of self-reliant travel being able to boost one’s sense of self-efficacy, enhance one’s sense of authenticity and even fulfil a deeper existential need. The methodology used acknowledges that (Gadamer, 1990/1960, p.267) “a person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting”. In order to make sure that personal interests, beliefs and perspectives did not get in the way of representing the lived experience of participants, this study included methodological guards against bias such as reflexive journal writing and regular liaison with an academic supervisor and peer research group about project design and data analysis.

2.1.3. Participants

The aim was to find participants who qualified as “overlanders” rather than holiday makers. The researcher followed IPA recommendations for purposive homogenous sampling to create a small cohort more likely to yield “rich and particular” phenomenological data (Smith et al., 2009):

By making the groups as uniform as possible according to obvious social factors or other theoretical factors relevant to the study, one can then examine in detail psychological variability within the group... the logic is similar to that employed by anthropologists conducting ethnographic research in one particular community. (pp. 49–51).

Five English-speaking couples were interviewed during online video calls (Table 1). The decision was taken to speak to the participants as couples for the practical reason that they were living in small shared spaces, and that during a time of pandemic lockdown these private spaces were the safest areas for them to be. Everyone spoke at length and quotations are clearly assigned to individuals. The participants were of British, American, Canadian and Australian nationality, interviewed in locations ranging from the Canadian Yukon to Colombia. They had been travelling continuously for periods of between one and six years, largely in North and South America, but also Africa and Asia. They became known to the researcher largely through their social media posts. A specific age range was chosen in line with the quest for a homogenous sample, with all participants in mid-life. The aim was also to increase the potential for collecting rich reflective data by sampling individuals who have made a conscious choice of lifestyle after several decades of life experience. Identities remain confidential, with all participants referred to by a number and pseudonym.

Table 1 Demographic markers of participant cohort.

Number and pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Years overlanding
1 Jennifer	57	Female	American	5
2 John	68	Male	American	5
3 Julia	54	Female	British	6
4 Mike	52	Male	British	6
5 Connie	44	Female	British	2
6 Jim	47	Male	British	2
7 Louise	56	Female	Canadian	1
8 Josh	58	Male	Australian	1
9 Sally	63	Female	British	4
10 Theo	64	Male	British	4

2.1.4. Procedure

Approval for the research study was granted from the University of East London. The first researcher conducted online interviews for forty to sixty minutes, following the same semi-structured interview framework based on a series of open questions which allowed individual participants to shape their own data, presenting their own interpretations of situations and reactions. Topics included “what led you to overlanding”, what the experience “feels like” and what is “most important” about it, whether overlanding “has affected the way you think about yourself” and “think about other people”, if there is “anything to say” about overlanding in mid-life and “how you would describe the purpose (if any) of your overlanding”.

2.1.5. Data analysis

The interviews were manually transcribed and analysed by the first researcher, with each conversation exhaustively considered in its own right before the overall data was brought together. In line with standard IPA procedure (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 79–99), rigorous textual analysis began by recording a high number of exploratory comments, both descriptive and conceptual. Emerging themes were identified, clustered, and then subsumed under broader interpretive codes. Subsequent comparative analysis across all interviews identified four key themes for the study as a whole. The final set of super-ordinate and subordinate themes can be seen in Table 2 below. The Findings section which follows aims to present “the understanding of the essence of the experience in written form” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 81), connecting each key theme to extracts from the transcripts. Full interview data continues to be held online in accordance with GDPR regulations and can be accessed by reference to the principal researcher.

Table 2 Master table of themes for the group.

Theme	Short illustrative quotations with participant and transcript line numbers
A) Simple life:	
Material simplicity	“It really makes you feel that you can have a very simple life and be very fulfilled” (7: 619–20)
Slowing and savoring	“Just concentrate on what’s around me” (2: 614–5)
B) Freedom:	
Freedom in mid-life	“We kind of came to the point...There’s no point being the richest person in the graveyard” (4: 145–7)
Physical freedom, control of your time	“I love the fact that we get up every day and we make our decisions as we make them” (5: 760–1)
Financial freedom	“It’s generally very inexpensive. And the longer you go the cheaper it gets” (8: 816–7)
C) Developing self:	
Overlanding identity	“The lifestyle is more important than where you’re going and it’s definitely a lifestyle rather than a trip” (3: 34–38)
Learning and perspective	“Sitting looking at Everest or in the middle of the Sahara or whatever, you just suddenly realise how small you are, how insignificant” (10: 156–8)
Changed self	“If you haven’t experienced it, you don’t know how you can feel by doing this lifestyle. But it has changed us totally” (1: 246–8)
D) Positive relationships:	
Trusting strangers	“Different religions, different culture completely, and yet there’s that common bond of humanity where you [emphasis] connect” (7: 550–4)
Comaraderie with travellers	“The overland community is really our extended family now” (1: 690–1)

2.1.6. Limitations

Three potential limitations have been identified; none appear to impact on the substance of the research. One technical factor was the varying audio quality of the call with participants 3 and 4, which led to their interview concluding earlier, but all questions were answered in detail. One design factor already addressed was the decision to interview participants as couples. The researchers acknowledge that this could in theory have inhibited an individual from expressing a contrary view; however, each participant appeared to be enthusiastically engaged with no detectable differences over the key themes that emerged. Future research could include specific inquiry into how experiences differ within couples. Another contextual factor is timing. The interviews took place in April and May 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic; however, these were the very early weeks of lockdown and the experience was not cited as a significant factor by any of the interviewees assessing their overlanding lifestyles.

2.2. Results

The participants in this study were asked about the lived experience of “overlanding”, defined as a form of self-reliant long-term adventure travel by vehicle. The overarching themes which emerged from their interviews were: the simple life; freedom; developing self; and positive relationships. These are divided into subordinate themes in the Master Table below (Table 2).

2.2.1. Simple life

Enjoying a “simple life” was frequently volunteered as a valuable aspect of overlanding. This was described both in terms of fewer physical belongings and greater ability to appreciate what remains. Josh said that “we live in a very small space, cook on a two-burner stove... have a nice comfortable bed and a toilet, and we are happy as a clam”. He summed it up as being about “the needs and wants”, saying that the “sacrifice” of wants is “worth it for the quality of life, for the quality of experiences that you have”. Louise agreed: “you realise, you know, clothes or makeup or haircuts... It’s not always the important thing. It really makes you feel that you can have a very simple life and be very fulfilled.” Julia, leaving a “high-powered professional job”, described herself as equally happy “going from big multi-billion pound project meetings to sitting in a truck and eating local food”. Connie concluded that “I don’t wanna earn lots of money, I don’t wanna have a big bank account, I don’t want to have lots of things, I just want what makes me happy”; while Jennifer observed that “it [overlanding] has changed our whole way of looking at life and what’s important and what do we need to be happy and it comes down to very simple things”, whereas “before it was based on things and accumulation of things”. During Theo’s extensive travels in Asia and Africa, meanwhile, he had thought about “how little ‘stuff’ we actually need... we realise that we carry a lot of surplus in our lives”.

Different couples travelled at different speeds, and for some the simple life also manifested as a less busy or frenetic life. A few participants were emphatic in ascribing significance to their decision to slow down the pace of travel. Jennifer describes herself as a “slow overlander”; John adds “if we like the place we stay a week, two weeks, a month...slow down our lifestyle totally”. After setting off with ambitions to travel the world in three years, Jim and Connie also decided to slow down in order to “understand the people and the culture”. They have changed from almost “wanting to see every single town, every single country in the world” to planning to “live how we want to live at any given moment”.

2.2.2. Freedom

The appreciation of the overlanding lifestyle as something to be savored was intensified, for some, by reaching the stage of life when health and energy cannot be taken for granted. Several participants expressed that realization in terms of exercising choice and gaining

freedom in mid-life. Mike and Julia had left work in their fifties to travel the world: “we went early” and “made sacrifices” they said, repeating the phrase that “life’s too short”. Mike observed: “there’s no point being the richest person in the graveyard”. Josh and Louise also spoke about their timing: “we wanted to retire a little early and go open-ended”, “do it while we’re young and able”. Connie described her decision to overland in her forties as prompted by “life events”, the early death and near-fatal early illness of two close family members. Now she says that “at the end of my life I want to have an image of the world in my mind because I’ve seen it for myself”.

The positive experience of freedom had different aspects. Mike highlighted the feeling of literal physical freedom: “you just get in your vehicle and you drive and you change the environment to suit how you feel”. Theo and Sally pointed to the social freedom they experienced in leaving conventional family and work obligations, choosing midlife as a “time for us” when there was “a window of opportunity” between having to care for others. Julia pointed to the financial freedom involved in being able to adopt a lifestyle of extensive travel: “it’s not just an age thing, it’s a financial thing”. Others emphasised that the overlanding option provides greater freedom than they would have enjoyed otherwise, finding this “self-reliant” life “affordable” and “low cost” compared to the cost of living in more developed countries. Jennifer and John described it as cheaper “than owning a house and everything that comes with it”. Josh also saw it as a financially liberating option: “there is no way for all but the wealthiest that you could afford a sustained multi-month, multi-year continuous trip across multiple international boundaries without a vehicle in which you can cook and sleep”. The feelings associated with freedom in all these forms included feeling “happy”, “joyful” and “grateful”, “loving the flexibility”, enjoying “a permanent holiday”, and finding it “very very rewarding”.

Freedom was also described in terms of liberation from the expectations of others. Connie remarked that “we’ve always avoided getting ourselves stuck”, “never wanted kids” and “have always tried to avoid big ties” so that “we were completely completely free”. In her words, mid-life “is the stable part of life and we’ve chosen not to be stable”. Even on the road, however, Jim described the two of them still struggling to be free from others’ expectations:

It is to a degree because of social media blah blah blah here’s overlanding, here’s the Instagram feed, this is what you should be doing and enjoying, this is how you travel, you need to get to a faraway campsite and you need to sit around in the campsite on your chair outside take a picture and say this is the best thing ever... it took for me to go home and come back and say [as if in quotes] ‘right we’re not doing that any more, get the rule book, throw it out of the window, all preconceived ideas, get rid of them all.’ Just do whatever you want to...And I think erm that’s when I got most out of travelling... All of a sudden it was like, ping, great, no-one’s forcing me to do anything. Then I just felt happier. (Jim, 668–73, 676–80, 793–95).

2.2.3. Developing self

Every participant had well defined views of their identity as an “overlanding” traveller. When asked whether there was a sense of purpose involved, participants spoke about wanting “challenge” and “adventure”, “change” and “excitement”. When asked whether they had been changed by their travels, the many positive answers included greater optimism, more understanding and trust of others, and a new perspective on life.

A common theme was the acknowledged contribution of this form of travel to the participants’ sense of identity, most choosing to describe themselves as “overlanders”. Explanations included Julia’s statement that “the lifestyle is more important than where you’re going”. Expressions of lifestyle purpose varied. For some, the motivation was self-evident. Josh said “They asked Hillary, why did you climb Everest?

We all know the answer, right, 'because it was there'. Put that down if you like. 'Because it's there.'" Others spoke explicitly about needing change. Josh and Louise desired a "permanent holiday", in which "it's always new" and they are "never ever bored." Jennifer said that "it's just the love of travel and adventure and freedom".

Some participants explicitly described experiencing change within themselves. John and Jennifer said overlanding "has taught us so many things along the way", making it possible "for us to be considered adventurers" who "take every opportunity", becoming more patient and optimistic "no matter what happens". She observed that "John had a lot of anxiety before and the lifestyle has really helped with the level of anxiety". He added that "we change our whole outlook on life when we use the term 'overlanding'".

Other participants also described changing their outlook. After 27 months on the road, Connie said "for sure, one hundred per cent, it's changed me, and there's no going back". She elaborated that "my values are completely changed. I mean this morning we sat down talking about [pause] never living in a house again". Theo and Sally also concluded, "it's probably changed our view of the world".

2.2.4. Positive relationships

All participants valued experiences of appreciating the kindness of strangers; some had also found an intense camaraderie in the community of overland travellers. Mike's discovery that "the world is a much nicer place and a much safer place than is often portrayed in the media" was widely echoed. Connie's experience in Latin America was that "I feel a lot more open toward the people because it feels like they're a lot more open to you". Josh reflected on the disparity of wealth between most overland travellers and the communities they visit: "people look at you and think you're as rich as a king... Yet still were very generous to us and kind and helpful". After five years of overlanding, Jennifer remembered that "at first we were so nervous" but "all of that changed as time progressed", and the biggest change of all is "the outlook on how we see the society in general". Theo and Sally concluded that their many years of travel have given them "great faith in human nature".

Some participants had experienced greater degrees of challenge and loneliness, especially those driving across Africa and Asia rather than the well-trodden North and South America routes, but there were also several references to challenges enhancing travellers' appreciation of positive relationships. In Josh's words, "you're somewhere remote and at times, even a little dangerous, you meet up with someone with a shared interest, shared background, shared passion, and you become pretty fast friends." Interviewees spoke about feeling "an instant bond" and "camaraderie" with "like-minded" travellers, such that Jennifer declared "the overland community is really our extended family now".

2.3. Discussion

2.3.1. Ideas of freedom, autonomy and well-being

In this section, interpretation of the participants' words is both linked to the interview data and moves beyond it in the light of the existing academic literature. The overarching idea which emerges from these interviews - from initial transcription to emergent themes for individuals to master themes drawn from the group as a whole - is that of freedom. Participants' descriptions of the freedom they feel during overlanding travel fall into two broad categories: freedom from previous lifestyles and ties and expectations, and the freedom to live simply, to travel as and when they like and to be true to themselves. The distinction aligns to philosopher Isaiah Berlin's classic double concept of liberty: the negative "freedom from" and the positive "freedom to", the former marking the absence of external constraint or interference, the latter a freedom "to do, or be, this rather than that" (Berlin, 1969, pp. 121-122) which involves the presence of something like self-determination.

The value this study's participants placed on a simple or simpler life can be seen both as a freedom from material accumulation, and a sense of free time and space gained to appreciate what remains. It is variously

described in terms of enjoying the practical minimalism of overland camping and expressing some pride in the achievement of such self-reliant living. This also connects to recent studies into what it means to create a home on the move: so, for example, Light and Brown (2020) question the perceived incompatibility between life on the road and "a peaceful and authentic home life". Some participants also reported a sense of savoring or living in the moment and more broadly, consciously reassessing what really matters in life. Bryant and Veroff (2017) describe "savoring" as "the capacity to attend to, appreciate and enhance the positive experiences in one's life"; it is a psychological concept key to ideas of "slow travel" and "transformative travel" which are gaining currency in the academic literature, as described above.

The values endorsed by these overland travellers may connect to other strands of current thought including voluntary simplicity, anti-consumerism and a drive to more sustainable living. In themselves, these interviews support ideas about the benefits of a less material and more experiential life, without any theoretical overtones. The research may offer points for further investigation; what clearly emerges from this data is the notion of a simple life being connected to a sense of freedom from conventional living.

The study's emerging themes of 'freedom' and the 'development of self' also relate to the classic psychological concepts of self-determination theory or SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in which the more individuals are intrinsically rather than externally motivated, the more they move along the self-determination continuum and enjoy a greater sense of autonomy. Actions - in this case perhaps an entire lifestyle - are seen as personally meaningful, rather than arising from external pressures or internalised moral codes or guilt. Jim's description of struggling with what he felt he "should" be doing as an overland traveller demonstrates, however, that achieving a sense of self-determination is not simple or necessarily linear.

The concept of self-determination links to definitions of "wellbeing" both within this study and within the literature. For example, Sheldon and Elliot describe life goals as "self-concordant" when they represent a person's authentic values and note that such goals create a greater sense of wellbeing (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). This can be seen in Jim's particular experience of psychological emancipation, one of several examples in which what might be termed the "negative" freedom from peer pressure connected to a "positive" expression of the freedom to be oneself. Furthermore, the way in which these overlanders characterise their experiences relates both to the traditional notions of wellbeing as "hedonic" and "eudaimonic" - centred on positive affect and life fulfilment - and also to a third wellbeing concept of "psychological richness", defined (Oishi, Choi, Liu, & Kurtz, 2020) as "a life characterised by varied, interesting experiences that result in a change in one's perspective".

A final psychological concept relevant to this data - which may stand in tension with the idea of freedom - is the idea of being connected. It is notable that the academic literature of positive psychology has developed in recent years from an early emphasis on individual happiness to a new spotlight on the importance of positive relationships as a key component of a "flourishing" life (Seligman, 2012). Every interviewee spoke positively and spontaneously about their enjoyment of positive encounters with new people and how much that enriched their overlanding life, introducing ideas like the "kindness of strangers" and "trusting strangers", which are found (Filep, Macnaughton, & Glover, 2017) to be especially significant in the tourism context.

However, there was occasional ambivalence expressed in descriptions of the lifestyle as both "completely free" and sometimes "lonely". Challenges were sometimes described in terms of the absence of relationships: asked for his thoughts about overlanding and a sense of wellbeing, Josh said "it was hardest when it was hard going, and you didn't meet anybody else and you were just stuck together". Sally said she had just retired from a caring profession and hadn't realised how important it was to her to be helpful to others. Jim commented on the tension he felt that "I like to have some roots. Which sounds weird

because we overland and the idea is you don't have any. But for the mental wellbeing that was a really difficult thing".

2.3.2. Connections to recent tourism literature

This IPA study aims to provide fresh illustrations of the lived experience of overland travel – a fast developing market segment in the twenty-first century - which build on Cohen's classic definitions (Cohen, 1979) of experiential, experimental and existential modes of tourism. Examples include the drive for Julie and Connie to understand the cultures they encounter and Mike's urge to live more for the moment. Some of the individual experiences reported here also echo recent studies of "transformative tourism". Ateljevic (2020) refers to individuals who feel "stuck" in a system unearthing through unusual travel experiences a "suppressed sentiment" to live more authentically and with a sense of purpose. Sheldon (2020) specifically investigates tourism experiences which lead to inner transformation: she looks primarily at travellers who are consciously pursuing a sense of "awakening", but her description of individuals' changing ideas about their identity and outlook also resonates with some of the findings described above:

A process of simplification of lifestyle, experiences, behavior, and desires often occurs as individuals progress on their path. There is less interest in accumulation of possessions and outward demonstrations of success, and less interest in other's opinions of how one lives. A desire for authenticity of experience often accompanies the desire for simplicity. (Sheldon, 2020, p. 3).

This relates, for instance, to Josh and Louise talking about their sacrifice of wants, Jennifer and John adopting a self-consciously slow overlander lifestyle, or Jim and Connie's strong expression of their desire to be free of cultural pressures even within the travelling community.

In staying true to this study's data, it is important to note that in most instances, such changing emphasis is not consciously adopted, but rather appears as a valued part of the lived experience of overlanding as participants describe it. However, as Sheldon herself observes, transformation is not always the primary motivation for such travel and for some "the transformative experiences occur serendipitously without intentionality" (Sheldon, 2020, p. 4).

Sheldon also notes the importance of a sense of connection, akin to the joy in positive relationships found by these overland travellers, stating that academic studies tend to find that "transformative" travel comes with a recognition "that at our core we are one and the same" (Sheldon, *ibid.*, p. 2). This links to earlier tourism studies which found "the factor most commonly identified by participants as affecting transformation was social contact." (Lean, 2009, p.16). It provides valuable context for these participants' comments about their sense of camaraderie with other travellers and the experience of generosity from host communities leading to greater faith in human nature.

3. Conclusion

This study has aimed to gain a better understanding of a subgroup of long-distance travellers currently under-represented in academic research. It takes a phenomenological approach, examining the lived experiences of five overlanding couples in depth. The key themes arising from the interview data are those of a simple life, freedom, developing self and positive relationships. The findings create more insight into some of the motivations that drew these participants to undertake long-term independent overland travel and lead to a broader exploration of different understandings of "freedom" on the road. At the same time, this article adds illustrative weight to both classic and developing theories in the academic tourist literature, including the work of Erik Cohen (1979), Scott Cohen (2011), Filep et al. (2016) and Sheldon (2020). By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study adds rich subjective data to support the theoretical body of empirical research into current

tourist trends. The findings demonstrate the value of cross-fertilising perspectives from tourism studies, sociology and applied positive psychology.

As an IPA study, this paper does not presume to offer theories or evidence about the psychology of the overlanding traveller. Its purpose is to offer interpretations of the data with reference to concepts at the core of positive psychology studies, such as self-determination, self-concordant goals, the need for connection, and what contributes to a sense of eudaimonic wellbeing and a flourishing life. In this way, this article contributes to the emerging field of positive tourism. The deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in this study helps to raise further questions about what might motivate twenty-first century overlanders who fit the "experiential", "experimental" and "existential" types offered in Cohen's classic model (1979) of the phenomenological typology of tourism.

Further multidisciplinary research could draw together new inquiries into what motivates such long-term long-distance self-reliant travellers, how they engage with the communities and cultures they meet, and how they are affected by their experiences. In terms of psychology, an approach informed by positive psychology could underpin more qualitative investigation of travellers and wellbeing, the impact of independent travel on the sense of self-determination and the potential for transformative experience. Socio-cultural shifts in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic might also provide observable links between new thinking about identity and purpose in life, and the choices of long-term travellers. Further research could also include separate studies of solo travellers, whether there is a "gendered" approach to the overlanding life, the differing experiences of individuals within overlanding couples or families, and the differing experiences of those who backpack on foot as opposed to those who travel on wheels.

In terms of "slow travel" and "sustainable tourism", the overlanding experience might add fertile ground to current lively debate in the tourism field about ideas of minimalism or voluntary simplicity and living with a "lighter touch" on the planet. In terms of "transformative travel", there are questions about the impact of such a fundamental change of lifestyle on life-course or existential understanding. Finally, a sociological study of very long-term travellers could offer more insight into the ideas of rootedness versus alienation, and the opportunity to compare viewpoints on the potential growth of cross-cultural understanding. Such research could include the authentic voices of the host communities, the peoples and cultures who are more and more likely to receive visiting travellers via "overland" routes as this form of travel continues to gain in popularity.

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