Abstract: Tourists now routinely travel with cell phones, have ready access to Internet cafes, and use low-cost fixed telephone services to remain in contact with people at home. Using the guiding ideas of the intersubjective construction of space and location, the meanings of “home” and being “away” were explored in relation to the regular contact made possible by these new communication services. It was found that the easy and frequent contact with friends and family members was associated with a feeling of being simultaneously at “home”, with continued participation in pre-existing social networks, while also being “away”.

Keywords: home, email, internet, cell phone, mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary relationships are increasingly conducted between people separated by significant geographical distance. One instance of temporary separation is that between tourists and their families, friends, and colleagues “back home”. In earlier times, this separation was managed with telegrams, letters, and postcards. Distance affected the speed and reliability of contact. Today cell phones, the Internet, and the reduced cost of landline telephones have significantly changed the ease and timing of keeping in touch. The ubiquity and accessibility of these communication services enable tourists to remain in contact.
with the people from whom they are geographically distant. The new communication services have particular significance for tourists. For instance, by providing immediate access to individuals wherever they are located, cell phones expand the “symbolic world that may be little related to the immediate practical surroundings of either speaker” (Gergen 2002:239) and “intensify the domain of (tourists’) social connection” (Gergen 2000:136). In other words, one can be socially present while physically absent (Lury 1997:89; Short, Williams and Christie 1976; Urry 2002).

Phenomenologists have written about the independence of social proximity from physical or corporeal proximity in their discussions of “life worlds” (that is, intersubjectively constructed shared social environments). From this view, space and location are constructed intersubjectively and coincide with social worlds rather than with particular geographical sites. Schutz wrote about this phenomenon by distinguishing between life worlds that are within actual, as opposed to potential, reach (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). The former are accessible to immediate experience at a given moment. The worlds within potential reach are of two kinds: those within restorable reach or attainable reach. The former refers to past first-hand experience and the latter has a future orientation, referring to that which has the potential to be experienced. Schutz’s focus on the intersubjectively constructed experience of time, space, and distance provides a way of thinking about tourists’ experience of deterritorialized relationships mediated by communication technologies (Zhao 2003). Through the use of personal communication services tourists can retain relationships as part of the world within actual reach.

The continuity of physically distant yet socially proximate mediated relationships is also captured by the notion of copresence and in the related idea of “absent presence” (Gergen 2002:227). Copresence refers to a situation in which individuals become “accessible, available and subject to one another” (Goffman 1963:22). Scholars have elaborated this, extending it to refer to experiences that include awareness of others, a sense of colocation despite geographic separation, or a sense of relationship continuity and salience (Biocca, Burgoon, Harms and Stoner 2001). The role of personal communication services in maintaining a sense of continuing copresence has been explored by a range of scholars (Biocca and Nowak 2001; Urry 2002). For instance, according to Urry, mobile electronic devices make it possible for people “to leave traces of their selves in informational space” (2002:266). The geographical location of the communicating participants who leave and retrieve these informational traces becomes irrelevant, while the domain of possible social connections is both expanded and intensified (Gergen 2000).

Furthermore, scholars have sought to develop and refine the notion of copresence by creating a vocabulary that encompasses some of the transformed perceptions and possibilities resulting from widespread use of the new communications services. Terms such as “virtual presence” which refers to the sense of being present in a simulated virtual environment (Sheridan 1992; Steuer 1992) or to a person’s
mediated presence in a distant environment (Zhao 2001), “telepresence”—the sense of being present in a remote environment (Durlach and Slater 2000)—and “telecopresence” whereby people are linked in reciprocal interaction by an electronic communications network (Zhao 2001) are now entering the discourse.

The deterritorialization of relationships made possible by communication services has implications for the salience and meaning of “home”:

...in an ever more globalized world, the question of where one lives or dwells ... is not a simple matter of residential geography. It is also a matter of emotional geography. Where does one’s heart, one’s identity, reside? Where is one’s emotional home (Williams and McIntyre 2001:392)?

This “emotional home” can be distinguished from “house” and “household”, though its meanings overlap in some respects (Mallett 2004). House refers to a material, spatial entity and household to the coresidence of people who constitute a social and economic unit not normally (nor necessarily) based on traditional kinship relationships (Saunders and Williams 1988). In contrast, the meanings of home range from a physical entity to a place of emotional and physical well-being where one experiences loving and caring social relations as well as where one has control and privacy (Watson and Austerberry 1985).

Home also connotes “the process of dwelling” and the social and emotional relationships it entails. A study of apartment dwellers illustrated how a sense of home and place is tied to creating a sense of community established and maintained through communication and, particularly, through engagement in mediated interactions. For the apartment block residents, “home ... had primarily a social meaning: telephone, taxi, and mail kept these residents happily involved in their non-place-based networks” (Buttimer 1980:171, 181). Place is shown to be constituted by the particular social relations and as such, must be constructed and negotiated: “Home brings together memory and longing, the ideational, the affective and the physical, the spatial and the temporal, the local and global, the positively evaluated and the negatively (evaluated)” (Rapport and Dawson 1998:8). It is the symbolic or actual place from which people venture and to which they return.

In contrast, “away” is conventionally understood to mean absence and distance from designated places and relationships. Travel is one way of giving this distance concrete and literal meaning. However, scholars have highlighted the complexity of the experience of distance and absence. Some regard travel as a spatial phenomenon, as well as one that involves an interplay between a deeply familiar home and a totally alien away:

Travel can be conceptualized as a move from the mundane everyday routines of the home with its routines and sameness, to experience the excitement of being away from home and experiencing the Other. Travel can be thought of as a dialectic which involves leaving
home, being in contact with the Other and then returning home. (Suvantola 2002:81)

Continuing this line of argument, McCabe states that home figures in people’s construction of what it means to be away. That is, even though tourists are away from home, they constantly refer to the oppositional or essential elements of life “back home” (McCabe 2002).

A different approach is offered by Urry (2002), who argues that there are now countless mobilities: physical, imaginative and virtual, voluntary and coerced. Integral to these are changes in communications services, which affect understandings of place and the meaning of copresence in relationships (these multiple mobilities have implications for the meanings of home and away). With the ubiquity of mobility and ready access to personal communications services, the distinction between these two concepts loses its analytical power (Sorensen 2003; Urry 2002). Just as the nomad has no stable point of reference from which to perceive or measure movement, in the postmodern world, home can arguably be understood to be “located” primarily in relationships between self and others, rather than being a geographic site. From this view, the meaning of home changes from that of a fixed location in time and place to a world constructed by the interpretive acts of tourists in their relationships with others (Jamal and Hill 2000). As Massey argues, “what gives place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations articulated together at a particular locus” (1993:6).

TOURISTS IN A CONNECTED WORLD

The span of social affiliations and their maintenance through the use of personal communication services by tourists are the focus of the present study, as is the issue of how they experience social connection. The question that guided the study was whether frequent communication between tourists, their families, and friends creates a sense that they are simultaneously “home and away”. In other words, in using communication services, do tourists experience a continuing sense of embeddedness in social networks back home, thereby giving particular meanings to the experience of being away?

To assist exploration of these questions, a purposive sample (Baker 1999:138) of interviewees was selected for inclusion in the study. They were screened on the basis of whether they were tourists normally resident in countries other than New Zealand, and whether they were using either the Internet or mobile phones to contact their family, friends, and work colleagues in their countries of origin. People who used landline phones were also included. For this, 27 persons were interviewed (14 men and 13 women). In this group, 19 were traveling with partners or spouses, three were traveling with spouses and children, four were traveling with friends, and one was traveling alone. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 76, and came from countries including Australia, Israel, Germany, the Netherlands, the
United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. All were traveling in campervans or caravans, or were camping for extended periods. The shortest period traveling was six weeks. However, most of the interviewees were engaged in long-term traveling for periods of between three months and two years. Therefore, they comprised a group different from short-term tourists who, for instance, might travel to a known destination for a week or two, stay at a hotel, and then return to their places of origin. Respondents were interviewed using a semistructured schedule of topics including the meaning of home and being away, the use and significance of communication via the Internet, mobile and/or landline phones. The interviews were transcribed and then thematically coded with respect to regularly articulated points of view. The principal themes were the meanings of home and being away, with a particular focus on the various ways in which copresence was experienced by the interviewees.

The “trustworthiness” of the data and interpretation was ensured as far as is possible through implementation of several of the processes specified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and elaborated by Cresswell (1998). The researchers were touring in circumstances similar to those of the interviewees. This shared situation permitted prolonged engagement and persistent observation. It also meant that recruitment could occur after engagement in one or more conversations. Establishment of pre-interview rapport and trust between researcher and interviewee were facilitated by this knowledge of common situation (Graburn 2002). The coding process included negative case analysis through the noting of distinctive points of view as contrasting instances, and a preliminary testing of the “credibility” or truth value (Lincoln and Guba 985:296) of the potential range of findings conducted during the post-interview debriefing. Furthermore, peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 308) to encourage reflexive examination of both data collection and its interpretation occurred by means of discussions between the coresearchers at various points of the research process (Finlay 2003). This was done in order to articulate the interdependence of values, theory, and the interview process (Guba 1990).

The Meaning and Significance of Home

Home for the participants in this study was found to connote interwoven elements of social relationships, dwelling, and place. It was also constitutive of their personal identity. It was the place where one could be oneself (Male, 22, “not partnered”, traveling alone). For another tourist home was

...where the heart is. It’s my village where I live. I was born there. I have lived my whole life there. I’ve grown up there and all my friends and family live there. I was born in the house I now live in and I want to die there (male, 56, traveling with wife).

The meaning of away was referenced to home by some tourists. Sometimes, this referencing was expressed through an appreciation of the conditions and benefits of life at home:
Because we are so bound to our home it’s very nice to go away and know you can always go back. For me it is being happy being away and knowing everything will be great when I get back (male, 35, traveling with wife).

In other instances, the referencing of being away to the meaning of home was suggested in an awareness of being temporarily spared the hardships associated with life in their countries of origin. This was particularly evident in the remarks of the several Israelis interviewed. For them, traveling offered a period of respite:

Children [in Israel] know the meaning of “death” from a very early age. For the last two years [while traveling] we didn’t read newspapers or watch TV news. We tried to live in our own space (female, 39, traveling with husband and children).

The emotional importance of home, and the support and sense of security with which it can be associated, were reported by many of the interviewees as being made possible by regular and easy communication, further suggesting the close link between home and being away: “We both need that security and contact through being in touch with people back home” (Male, 32, traveling with wife). This need for support was more often expressed by both the younger male and female tourists:

It makes me feel stronger that I will have someone to turn to if I need to. Even though I am thousands of miles away, I can still have a solution for a problem (male, 32, not partnered, traveling alone).

While there was clear sense of home as a mentally constructed and physical “site”, several of the interviewees spoke about their traveling companions and dwelling arrangements while on the road as home. As mentioned earlier, most of the people interviewed for this study were traveling in campervans or caravans, and were traveling for periods ranging between six weeks and two years. Therefore, like nomads, their dwellings moved with them. Further, most were traveling with partners or with partners and children. These circumstances contributed to their experience of being home while away.

We had our own home which was a caravan. When we were traveling without the caravan our children used to say, “Let’s go home” and they meant the caravan. That was home for us for six months (male, 39, traveling with wife and children). My family is my home. In fact I am at home now (while traveling). Family is home (male, 46, traveling with wife and children).

The continuation of everyday routines normally associated with home was also evident in tourists’ remarks. Some of these routines were domestic: setting up camp, the purchase and preparation of food, doing laundry, or having “time off” by spending an afternoon reading. There was also a sense for some that the “new” or “alien” offered by traveling was itself becoming “routine”:

We are into such a mode of living...When you are at home you go away for the weekend and you feel a great release and you have this wonderful feeling just standing at the top of a hill looking at the view.
I’m not getting that here. Life here is almost becoming a routine (male, 40, traveling with partner).

In other words, everyday routines were preserved while traveling. Much as posited by McCabe (2002), these tourists’ days consisted of the mundane events that constitute daily life for nontourists, including routines associated with domesticity, work, and leisure. The continuation of everyday life while traveling suggests the applicability of the metaphor of nomadism to the experience and structure of travel, and by extension, the use of the idea of nomad to describe the tourist (Van den Abbeele (1980) cited in Jamal and Hill 2000). The nomad metaphor offers a different way of understanding the meaning of home, for tourists may take home with them by recreating and re-establishing the routines of everyday home life while away. “Tourist activity reflects a microcosm of everyday life as seen though a prism, concentrated, magnified and fused back into the home setting” (McCabe 2002:61). As a consequence, the distinctions between work and leisure, of the escape from and participation in everyday life blur.

The irrelevance of specific physical sites signifying home was further evident in the de-territorialization that accompanies the use of communication services. As one tourist said, “You could be in Manhattan Beach or here (in New Zealand). It’s all the same when you’re on your email” (Male, 57, traveling with partner). The diminished significance of the distinction between the sites of home and away is experienced by both tourists and those with whom they are communicating:

I thought I was going to be so far from everybody. [With email] I never felt disconnected. . . . [As for the phone] because the communications are so clear here, they talk about really mundane things and I have to cut them off all the time. I keep saying “it’s getting a little expensive to hear about how you tied your shoe today”. I know they forget [we are so far away] (female, 34, traveling with partner).

While physical distance is rendered irrelevant by communication services, the psychological or emotional dimensions of distance are not as simply dealt with. People reported feeling both far and near. The contradictory experience of being simultaneously proximate and distant are captured in their remarks: With phone calls, “you felt close . . . but if anything it made you more aware of actually how far away you were (male, 40, traveling with partner).

When we started the trip each phone call showed us how easy it is to be in contact and to be so close when you can have the phone and email and digital photos. When we were homesick each phone call reminded us how far were from our family and friends. So it depends on the mood that you are in (male, 39, traveling with wife and children). You see your cousins, you see your brothers and sisters [in Internet photos] in a situation that you know, but you are not there (male, 46, traveling with wife and children).

As these remarks suggest, the meaning of home (and by implication away) is constructed through interactions between those who remain and those who leave (Ahmed 1999). The emotional and social under-
pinnings of what home signifies, with its intersection of memory and longing, were articulated by many of the people interviewed. Their remarks evoke a copresence in life worlds in which particular meanings are given to physical separation and emotional proximity.

**Being Kept in Mind**

Most of the interviewees reported a desire to maintain regular levels of contact with people back home. The desire to connect appeared to be equally and similarly expressed by men and women. The act of communicating meant relationships were being affirmed and enacted. Keeping in touch showed both tourists and their correspondents that they were being kept in mind:

[Without email I would feel that] I had purposely detached myself from my environment, my friends and the life that I had led. It would not be a good feeling (female, 42, traveling with partner). You feel that you belong to something. I think that feeling that you belong to a family and a group of friends is something that you need, even when you are traveling. Because all the time that you are traveling you know that you have a place to go back to. If you cut all your roots you might feel lost. We need to feel connected to something, to belong to something (female, 39, traveling with husband and children).

The participants spoke about how important it was for them to feel that despite their physical absence, they were still socially and emotionally integrated into their home relationships and that they continued to be participants in events that marked these relationships. This integration or copresence was signified in three principal and interdependent ways. First, ongoing integration into home events and relationships was signaled by messages from friends, family members, and work colleagues. These messages included tourists as participants in distant social interactions and events. Second, tourists’ sense of integration was forged through receipt of information about events and people at home. Third, they gained a sense of integration by initiating messages, particularly those describing their touristic experiences. These descriptions had the effect of creating “virtual” travel companions.

The receipt from family and friends of communications that included tourists in events back home was one important way in which interviewees felt they were being kept in mind. These communications offered reassurance that those who had temporarily physically separated themselves continued to have a presence and salience in the lives of those with whom they were communicating. This sense of inclusion was established as a consequence of family members and friends sending (and tourists receiving) information about events either in synchronous communications (voice phone contact, texting, and sending pictures by phone) or asynchronously using email messages or postings on Internet sites. For younger tourists, being remembered occurred in relation to parties, gossip about relationships, and the events associated with new marriages and babies. For older tourists the focus of communications was family, children, and friends.
The importance of not being forgotten was articulated time and again by interviewees:

You feel that you’re still with them because they share their experience with you. They make you a part of it. You are still a part of their group or our group (male, 27, traveling with wife). Some friends, they actually feel worried for me. They ask if I’m OK, if I need help, when I’ll come back and all other kinds of stuff. Its good to know that someone is still caring about you back home (male, 32, not partnered, traveling alone).

I want to know … if [my mother is] missing me and her feelings about our traveling. I want to know that (our friends) do not forget us (female, 28, traveling with husband). When my friends called [unexpectedly] it really made me feel appreciated and that they missed me. So when someone is making an effort to call long distance and pays so many cents a minute it shows that you’re worth it (female, 21, not partnered, traveling alone).

The importance to tourists of being kept in mind by those at home was one aspect of copresence. Another aspect was keeping those at home in mind. This was facilitated by receipt of information about events at home. Many of the employed younger and older tourists spoke about being interested in, keeping abreast of, and participating in the politics of the workplace. These communications enabled them to feel that they were still players in events back home. They were keen to share in the minutiae structuring the daily domestic and social life of those back home in order to prevent a hiatus that might drive a wedge into their relationships. This updating of information was facilitated in various ways:

We were here [in New Zealand] for the holidays and in my family Christmas is a really special time. . . . My sister got one of those cell phones with a camera and she emailed me the whole Christmas. . . . There they were opening presents. There they were eating. It was really, really nice. If it hadn’t happened I would have felt much more disconnected (female, 34, traveling with partner).

Some of our friends are getting married, having babies and changing jobs. So there’s quite a bit going on and it’s fun to hear what’s happening. You know, who the best man will be, what they are going to do on the stag weekend, when the wedding’s on. I feel almost involved, included (male, 40, traveling with partner).

I would like to hear how they are doing. News from home. What’s in their mind at the moment. . . . We sometimes hear that our friends are going to a party and we can imagine the party. . . . You hear that the party was fun, so you actually become part of the party in your mind. You can imagine how it was...We now live a different life. It’s totally different from home. When you hear things like that it’s like you’re home a little. It’s good to feel a little home (male, 27, traveling with wife).

The ongoing receipt of information about the details of domestic and workplace events was understood by tourists to offer confirmation that despite physical separation and absence, those at home and at
work had not cut ties with them. This information also preserved their sense of connection with these distant friends, family and colleagues.

Schutz’s account of worlds within actual and potential reach becomes relevant here. A consequence of the capability of personal communication services to convey instant pictorial and verbal messages is that tourists are able to gain real-time access to the events and ongoing relationships that constitute the relevant social worlds within their restorable reach:

With information [about events at home] coming through on email, it marries together with what we are doing. It is integrated with day-to-day life (female, 42, traveling with partner).

The boundaries between being separated and “away” and being actively involved in social networks “back home” dissolve (Sorensen 2003). Space and distance are shown to have a distinctive subjectivity expressed in systems of links and functional networks (Buttimer 1976). People separated by geographical distance are accessible and available to each other.

Some interviewees also spoke about the importance of letting people at home know that they were being kept in mind by their touring friends or family. This could be facilitated by frequent contact:

I SMS with my girlfriend quite a lot. She sends me about five each day and I send her maybe two back. When she goes to bed she sends me an SMS. “Goodnight I hope you have a nice day”. Because it’s morning for me. . . . She wants to make contact. Her life is bit boring and for me, my life is just one big adventure right now. She wants to know that I’m thinking about her (male, 22, partnered, traveling alone).

The interactions here served a ritual function similar to that of the small talk engaged in during routine telephone calls between family members or friends (Drew and Chilton 2000). The act of keeping in touch was as, if not more, important than what was said (Licoppe 2003).

Keeping in touch was also designed to bring those at home on the journey. The tourists’ remarks suggest that through correspondence and conversation they try to draw the recipients of their communications into their world, thereby replicating for those at home the experience of being simultaneously home and away:

It’s important because I can bring somebody else into what I’m doing. It’s a bit like “wish you were here” (female, 34, traveling with partner)/ I use the emails to expand on the text messages and tell them about my adventures mainly describing what we have been doing and what we’ve seen so that they can imagine what I’m doing... (female, 58, traveling with partner). They want to live vicariously through us, especially my mother who was so glad that I’m doing this because she feels that she can’t do it on her own. She says “Give me some feedback. I’m funding part of this trip. I want to see the sights and sounds.” (female, 21, partnered, traveling alone).

Urry distinguishes between four kinds of travel, the first of which is “corporeal” (2002: 256). This is the only form that entails actually being physically absent. The other three forms of travel do not involve
physical movement by the subject. These latter are experienced either by the “physical” movement of objects brought to consumers, through images of places and peoples encountered via radio and TV (“imaginative travel”) and the Internet (“virtual travel”) (2002:256). The tourists’ remarks suggest that communication via the Internet, voice, and text telephone conversations engages both tourists and their correspondents in reciprocal “virtual” and “imaginative” travel.

As with tourists’ receipt of information about events from those at home, their descriptions of their experiences to distant friends, family, and colleagues served to maintain a sense of reciprocal connection: “It’s nice for them to know that we are thinking about them and for us to know that they are thinking about us” (female, 32, traveling with husband). Reciprocity was seen by interviewees as central to the preservation and maintenance of copresence. The integrative processes of inclusion and exchange of information were characterized by a reciprocal and simultaneous interactive process through which all correspondents affirmed a sense of connection and copresence both for themselves and for the others with whom they were communicating. As Urry puts it, with this inclusion, physical presence “cedes to the socialities involved in occasional copresence, imagined copresence, and virtual copresence” (2002:256-7). Travel with mobile communication services enabled a continuation of links with “home base and normal routines” (COST269 Mobility Workgroup 2002: 25; Murphy 2001; Richards and Wilson 2004; Sorensen 2003), blurring the boundaries between being separated and away on the one hand, and continuing to be actively involved in social networks back home on the other.

Some Negative Consequences of Copresence

The discussion thus far has focused on how communication results in a positive and sought after sense of integration. However, being simultaneously home and away is not always experienced in a positive light. Occasionally the ease and regularity of contact, and resultant interactions, were experienced as emotionally disruptive:

When we started traveling I used to be very careful about what I ate. It was only healthy stuff. But after the first two calls with my mum, I started eating. The first time it was candy and another time it was a Big Mac (male, 31, traveling with wife).

Some tourists reported being jolted by unpleasant and unwelcome reminders of a situation that had been self-consciously and deliberately left behind. This situation may be work-related:

It’s the same old story [at work] and it always will be. I did want to hear it. But it was scary. For that split second I was back in the office. It took me back there. I felt as if I were back in my environment where it is all taking place. It wasn’t a good feeling. They were the feelings that I didn’t like when I was there (female, 42, traveling with partner). With all the change in my work organization things have changed so that age and longevity in a job is no longer respected. Now [the view is] that you need new and creative minds and this creates anxiety for
me. A little part of me still hangs on to that part of my life. It doesn’t
go completely. ... It’s about insecurity of picking things up, feeling
that I will still be OK when I get back. It’s around that insecurity.
...I keep in touch so that I feel that I can still contribute valuably
rather than being a burnt out old sod (male, 58, traveling with wife).

Continuing interactions with family sometimes created a sense of
unease. A few of the younger tourists spoke about difficulties in their
relationships with either one or both parents, and how contact (or its
absence) brought these difficulties into the foreground. An older tour-
ist spoke about a child who was experiencing difficulties, and how con-
tact with this child brought the ongoing situation back into mind. The
frequency and ease of contact made possible by communications ser-
ices meant still having to deal with problems at home, even when away:

People expect too much of traveling because they think that the
farther you go away the more you forget your problems that are wait-
ing for you [at home]. This is not true. You are traveling with your
problems. You carry them with you... The regular contact. It reduces
the feeling of being away. Because you get involved in [family mem-
bers’] problems, you are aware of the fact that you still belong to them
and that you will go back to them... (female, 64, traveling with
husband).

As a consequence, tourists in all age groups expressed ambivalence
about family contact. As their remarks show, home is sometimes
reluctantly carried by the tourist as part of his or her life world, despite
geographic distance (Schutz 1967).

Finally, ongoing contact could result in the re-evaluation of relation-
ships. Mediated copresence displayed many of the dynamics evident in
face-to-face physically proximate relationships. An element of any ongo-
ing relationship is reflection on its significance to the parties involved.
This process of re-evaluation was evident in tourists’ comments. They re-
flexed on and (re)-assessed the meaning of their various friendships
and relationships. Re-evaluations rested in part on the regularity and
content of communications received from family and friends:

Sometimes I think we are in closer contact [with friends] now than we
would have been if we were in Berlin because we write a lot more per-
sonally with them. ... you don’t even have this type of close contact.
... When we were able to call [my parents] they expected us to call
once a week. But now we can’t call, but they can call us. They haven’t
called for two weeks. ... I got sad and upset that they wouldn’t call me
once a week when they are in charge. ... Then you start to think
about what kind of relationship I have with my parents (male, 31, trav-
eling with wife).

Sometimes (the helicopter view you get when you travel) is not good
because you realize who are your real friends and how the contact is
with the friends and the family. Sometimes that’s not a good feeling.
It is confronting sometimes (female, 28, traveling with husband).

The shifts in perceptions of relationships evident in the tourists’
remarks again suggest some of the processes involved in sending post-
cards. Research has shown that the sending of postcards entails
decisions about to whom they should be sent. Integral to this is being reminded of who is important in one’s life (Harrison 2003). However, there is also a crucial difference between sending postcards and mobile communication. That is, with postcards the tourist is in control. With email and mobile phones, the tourist and those at home have equal and reciprocal opportunities (and hence implicit obligations) to communicate. The ways in which these obligations are enacted or performed can lead to revelatory insights about the meaning and significance of previously problematic relationships or those that prior to travel had not been subject to scrutiny.

Moreover, the communications services were differently experienced. Some interviewees reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of email messages to which they felt obliged to respond and they resented the time individual responses took to compose. Younger tourists were at ease with these new media and accustomed to regular email and text messaging. Some older tourists were uncomfortable about using email and text messaging, preferring to use landlines or cell phones. The perceived characteristics of the various services might also have affected their use. In other words, telephones were perceived as most effectively expressing emotion while email enabled more reflective communication (White and White 2005a; 2005b).

CONCLUSION

The tourist experience of being away was referenced to constructions of home. This referencing was signaled either through the replication of domestic routines in the day-to-day management of life on the road or by continued integration or copresence in key relationships with those back home. For most of the people interviewed, the establishment and maintenance of copresence was integral to the travel experience. Apart from the small minority of interviewees for whom travel offered a clear break from contact with parents and friends, most of the interviewees made systematic efforts to keep in touch with friends, family members, and colleagues using the various communications services at their disposal. The benefits of continuing engagement in established relationships, the “sense of feeling together” as one interviewee put it, were key motivating factors in tourists’ use of these services.

But engagement in these relationships was not always rewarding, and displayed many of the dynamics evident in those that are geographically proximate. That is, patterns of contact could lead to reflection on and (re)-assessment of the meaning of particular friendships and relationships. They could also give rise to contradictory feelings of proximity and distance, relationship continuity and discontinuity, disengagement from and engagement with those from whom tourists were physically separated. Overall, their accounts illustrated the independence of the experience of proximity from physical state, showing the complex, intersecting ways in which this proximity or copresence is experienced. Although there were some differences in the meaning given to the contact with home, there was a uniformity of view
regarding the fact that touring with ready access to communications services made it possible for tourists to continue as participants in social networks that extended across physical distance and to continue relationships, be they problematic or sustaining. Recurrent communication and contact reinforced tourists’ sense of connection with those at home. The tourists were both home and away.

These findings are consistent with other work showing that the meanings of distance and being away have been transformed by the ease, immediacy, and frequency of communication between tourists and their families, friends, or colleagues back home. People who are geographically dispersed can now reconstitute and maintain their “small social worlds” through the use of telephones and the Internet (Boden 2002). Tourists use communications services to maintain a “symbolic proximity” with others (Wurtzel and Turner 1977:257) and to promote a sense of being present while absent (Short, Williams and Christie 1976; Gergen 2002; Lury 1997; Fortunati 2002). These services become a part of their taken-for-granted world (Katz 2003; Johnsen 2003), enabling the development and maintenance of communication patterns that can be selected and activated at any moment (Licoppe 2003; Katz 2003).

However, the findings of the present study challenge the notion that tourists can be seen as entering a state of liminality which frees them from the structures which encumber their everyday lives back home (Baranowski and Furlough 2000; Harrison 2003; White and White 2004). It also suggests that research documenting escape as motivation for travel or touring (Harrison 2003; Ateljevic and Doorne 2000) might be usefully reinterpreted in light of more complex patterns of meaning. This way, when tourists have ready access to, and use, mobile and other electronic communication services, the liminal experience is transformed into a continuing engagement with established relationships and an ongoing connection to people back home.

Future research might take up issues that were not considered in the present study. This study was not designed to systematically examine the influence of variables such as gender or age. Upcoming research might address the extent to which age, gender, duration of travels, and accompanied versus unaccompanied touring have a bearing on the construction of being home and away. The extent to which pre-travel involvement or embeddedness in social networks back home is implicated in the experience of being away could also be investigated. Finally, research could consider whether tourists whose personal and working lives back home are heavily reliant on email and telephone communication transfer that expectation to their day-to-day lives as tourists.

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