RISK-TAKING FACTORS IN BACKPACKER TOURISM

INTRODUCTION

Traveling is inextricably linked to risk. Voluntary traveling to places which are distant geographically or culturally is always characterized by a probability of occurrence of risky situations, be it random incidents, or events of medical, environmental, political, or social nature. In ancient Greece, the word “rhize” (adopted from the vocabulary of sailing and commerce, where it denoted “circumnavigating around a steep slope or a promontory”) was used to describe a “bold deed” (Bernstein, 1997). One word contained the semantics of many notions, such as chance, luck, bravery, fear, danger, adventure (Luhmann, 1993). Etymologically, the word risk derives from Italian “risicare” and means “to dare,” “to face,” “to venture,” “to attempt,” “to have the audacity to transgress traditional limitations” (Bernstein, 1995, p. 8 and passim). Risk is thus a kind of action connected with choice (and not inevitable fate), and it is to a smaller or larger extent marked with the calculation of uncertainty (gains or losses) while realizing particular intents*** (Dake, 1992; Renn, 1992; Jaeger, Webler, Rosa & Renn, 2001).

In backpacking, risk plays a special role. Backpackers travel to different regions of the world, away from popular locations visited by mass tourists. They seem to see danger or instability as elements proper to their preferred form of traveling. Mathlein states that it is precisely the approach to risk that is one of the criteria distinguishing backpackers from mass tourists (Mathlein, 1998). What for an average tourist would be an unwanted reminder or an unpleasant holiday experience (e.g. contracting tropical diseases, scars, loss of property due to theft, being harmed, terrorist attacks), for a backpacker is a travel trophy, a symbol of victory over weakness, a testimony of bravery, and a proof that their journeys are marked by authenticity of experience and not tourist consumerism. What deters the institutionalized tourists, attracts the backpackers; what makes the mass tourist anxious, for the backpacker becomes the

---

* Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego we Wrocławiu.
** The notion of “risk,” which in numerous studies is labeled as ambiguous, has been described and classified in detail by Michalak (Michalak, 2001).
*** In accordance with the “concept of rational choice,” a man facing risk becomes a creative director/actor and not a passive marionette, he is conscious of his capabilities and in the face of risk he moderates his reality while taking into account the antinomy of gains and losses.
source of excitement (Lepp & Gibson, 2008). In other words, the higher the perception of risk, the more probable it is that a tourist will cancel the expedition, while a backpacker will be all the more willing to travel (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006; Kozak, Crotts & Law, 2007).

Many studies on risk involved in backpacking have already been conducted. Not only was the backpackers' attitude towards risk analyzed (Leggat & Shaw, 2003), but also the scale of their engagement in risky behaviors and the reasons for it (cf. Beck, 1992; Clift & Grabowski, 1997; Elsrud, 2001; Ryan, 2003; Lepp & Gibson, 2003, 2008; Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007; Reichel, Fuchs & Uriely, 2007; Kozak, Crotts & Law, 2007; Hillman & Radel 2012; Fuchs, 2013). In the following study, study results from various academic centers in the world have been analyzed with the aim of focusing on the essence of risk in backpacking, and providing answers to two, so far imprecise, questions: how to define the notion of risk in backpacking? and what is the role of risk factors in backpacking?

DEFINING THE NATURE OF RISK IN BACKPACKING

According to Giddens, there is no definition which would allow to fully identify the risk involved in the type of traveling known as backpacking (Giddens, 1991). The backpackers themselves find it problematic. It is certainly not a consequence of events or personal choices which may potentially lead to losses. Backpackers approach risky behaviors within the aspect of searching for their own identity or social advancement through the acquired experiences (Beck, 1992; Dake, 1992; Douglas, 1992; Wickens, 1997; Issahaku, 2015). The stories told after the journeys, the dangers they faced and the risks they had to undertake allow them to form their own life history, and make it individual and meaningful (Wang, 1999). The fruit of the risk inscribed into their travels is experience. A backpacker becomes an actor on the stage of their own life, directing emotions and sensations. It is up to them to break with the daily routine, sometimes at the cost of dramatic or tragic experiences (rapes or murders).

In the literature of the subject, it is often pointed out that the difficulty in defining the risk in backpacking stems from the fact that it concerns various spheres of traveling. Numerous aspects of the backpackers’ risky behaviors have been analyzed. Among others, the researchers focused on risk taking as an element of constructing self-narratives (Elsrud, 2011); as a social construct inscribed in Generation Y (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007); risk as dependent on the cultural structure of journey (Douglas, 1992; Renn, 1992); causes of the readiness to engage in risky behaviors during travels to faraway places (Ryan, 2003); searching for satisfaction in risky behaviors (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002); comparison of the risk-taking tendencies of backpackers with the attitudes observed in institutionalized tourists (Uriely & Belhassen, 2005; Lepp & Gibson, 2008).
In the results of the current research, a certain regularity can be observed: the risk, which in its basic meaning entails two main attitudes: positive (risk as a chance) or negative (risk as the cause of adverse effects or dangerous situations) (cf. Pałubicka, 1990), for the backpackers it takes the expected value and, next to adventure and otherness, it becomes an almost inherent feature of this type of traveling (Riley, 1988; Elsrud, 2001).

Within the cafeteria-style checklist of elements which could contribute to the definition of risk in backpacking, we can include three evaluative concepts:

- activity, which allows the backpackers to focus their experiences;
- excitement, which gives them the thrill;
- unconventionality, which allows them to abandon the frames of everyday life and the familiar dimension of commonness.

Therefore, if the analyzed issue was approached through the prism of cognitive and axiological judgments as a reality which involves exposure to adversity (Vaughan, 1997) and the resulting change (Ronka-Chmielowiec, 2003), the nature of risk in backpacking might be understood as a probability (factored in the act of traveling)* of the occurrence of events which imply an active attitude which inscribes itself within the ontological correlate of changes (leading to alternative choices).

### FACTORS OF ENGAGING IN RISKY BEHAVIORS

Among the basic risk factors in backpacker tourism, we find individual predispositions of each traveler (Reichel, Fuchs & Uriely, 2007). The risk involved in backpacking is not a homogeneous phenomenon. It is multidimensional and dependent on numerous factors. While performing quantitative measurements on a group of 579 Israeli students who were experienced backpackers, Fuchs signaled that the risk factors in their journeys differ less and less from those which influence the conventional behaviors of mass tourists, because they result from their personality types (Fuchs, 2013). This may suggest that only certain types of personalities commit themselves to backpacking.

According to other authors, a backpacker is a type of audacious, brave, and strong traveler, with a particular mental and physical strength. Since undertaking long-term journeys to distant locations alone or in small groups, on a tight budget, using cheap accommodation and local transportation is in itself quite risky, only people with a propensity for taking risks will decide on such an activity (Leggat & Shaw, 2003). An often cited example is the activity after the events of 9/11, or the 2002 Bali bombings. It seemed that the backpacking traffic in these places should diminish drastically following the dramatic events. A year after the tragedy, there was indeed

---

* The word “probability” is used in the sense of “risk” as a threat and the resulting danger which might, but does not have to, be materialized (cf. The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1999, p. 1602).
a decline in tourist activity, but only in the middle and higher service sectors; the backpackers’ hostels were full (O’Reilly, 2004).

The risk in backpacking is present in virtually every aspect of this traveling activity. Various situations in which backpackers would engage in risky behaviors have been described in literature and were connected with:

• recreational activity, such as extreme sports (between 62% and 82% of backpackers return with diseases or injuries related to traveling to distant corners of the world) (Peach & Bath, 2000);

• traveling alone. As an example of an everyday risk they have to face while traveling, backpackers mention being away from their own community, wandering through lands of unknown strangers whom they do not understand, who might rob or even kill them, where loneliness is their sole traveling companion; there are no tourists, no friends, only “strangers.” This is a great risk (Elsrud, 2001);

• traveling through dangerous regions, away from the standard and frequented tourist routes. They give examples of consciously opting for risky situations. For instance, on one of the most beautiful Thai islands (Ko Chang) on the border with Cambodia, there is a beach with an intriguing recreational area (e.g. one can bathe with elephants), but it is also a place where drug dealers operate; moreover, there is a high risk of contracting a severe form of malaria. The island is also infamous for frequent acts of terror committed by its superstitious inhabitants (in the recent years, 4 travelers were killed). Despite the obvious risk, backpackers continue to travel to this place, accepting the highest level of the risk involved (Elsrud, 2001);

• lack of legal supervision, e.g. renting cheap vehicles (motorcycles or cars), using local means of transportation (which do not meet security norms) (Leggat & Shaw, 2003);

• using cheap accommodation which fails to meet security or sanitary standards (e.g. rooms without fire safety or burglar alarms) (Leggat & Shaw, 2003);

• eating local food in non-safe establishments, which might result in direct exposition to infectious diseases (Leggat & Shaw, 2003). Referring to the risks of eating in random places, one of the backpackers described tasting a local Thai “delicacy” which instead of beef contained fried worms, picked directly from the street and put in the frying pans without being cleaned first (Elsrud, 2001). For many, consuming foods with no concern for hygiene and safety ends in falling ill (from diarrhea to serious complications caused by local virus or bacterial strains typical of a given climate) (Peach & Bath, 2000);
Risk-taking factors in backpaper tourism

- lack of knowledge of culture of the visited community, their language, customs, and habits (Tutenges, 2009);
- lack of knowledge of the atmospheric, geographic, natural or environmental conditions (Watcharapong et al., 2010; Issahaku, 2015);
- disregard for health safety, among others the knowledge, attitudes and practices with regard to the risk of malaria (as it turned out, almost everyone in the studied group (94%) was aware of the risk of contracting malaria during their journey, while only 22% actually opted for malaria prophylaxis (Chatterjee, 1999; Piyaphanee et al., 2009).

In the literature of the subject, bravado is named as one of the essential risk-taking factors – a combination of pride (of being different than others) (O’Reilly, 2004) and seeking sensations (Fuchs, 2013). Risk can then be viewed as a specific state of mind which can be addictive just like gambling. Elsrud also points to the personality factor: on the one hand, the possibility of testing oneself while confronted with one’s own weaknesses (e.g. fear), on the other hand, in the relation with a group, the “me versus others” antinomy (Elsrud, 2001).

It can be assumed that the risk factors in backpacking are found in the character of this type of traveling, as well as in the backpackers’ motivations for traveling. Richard and Wilson argue that backpackers travel for self-development, to know themselves and their own limitations. Each and every experience, especially one where risk is involved, becomes a source of acquiring social habitus and reinforcing the qualities necessary to effectively function in a postmodern society. Unlike those who choose safety, it is easier for the backpackers, who confront various risks and dangers during their journeys, to achieve success in their professional and social lives (Desforges, 2000; Richards & Wilson, 2004). It seems that two new risk factors are of importance here:

- the need of self-fulfillment (expressed through struggling with the experienced risk which nonetheless allows to gain knowledge and skills; enriches one’s identity with authentic and unique experiences);
- the longing for freedom (understood as a new dimension of the experienced variety, far away from home, in a foreign environment of nature and culture).

Thus the period of backpacking travel, along with the risk and risky behaviors inscribed within it, allow the backpacker to qualitatively distinguish a selected fragment of his or her own existence, and give it the expected values (in the aspect of self-realization and newness/otherness).
CONCLUSIONS

Risk is involved in backpacking as its attribute. It is a part of the way which backpackers have to travel, a part of their traveling life. They actually do live through these experiences, without pretending or faking. The situations marked by danger and risk support them in shaping their individuality, their own story, their personality formed with tenacity, both as a traveler, and as a person. Here is where the courage to travel is found, along with the focus on conquering, discovering, exploring, experiencing, and finally the need for self-fulfillment and social advancement. Their risky behaviors (balancing on the edge of life and death, sickness and health, common sense and insanity) become a conscious manifestation of their strong independence from the world, dissociation from the massified forms of existence in the globalized world, transgressing the boundaries, overcoming limitations.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that activeness, excitement, unconventionality, which all inscribe the risk of backpacking within the cognitive dimension, create a community of values which opens a new dimension of experience for the backpackers. They allow the dreams of liberty and freedom to come true (even if those are phantasmagoric). This readiness to face extreme challenges becomes a banner in the procession of non-conformists expressing their opposition to the dominant way of life present in the contemporary mainstream culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Leggat, P.A. & Shaw M.T. (2003). Travel Health Advice for Backpackers. *Journal of Travel Medicine, 6 (10)*.


**RISK-TAKING FACTORS IN BACKPACKER TOURISM**

**Keywords:** backpacking, risk, risky behaviors, tourism

**Abstract:** Risk is an inseparable attribute of backpacking travels and their distinguishing feature against forms of mass tourism. The risk typical of this type of traveling includes, among others, risky behaviors resulting from traveling to regions which are distant geographically, culturally, climatically, and environmentally; engaging in extreme and dangerous behaviors. Numerous academic centers carry out research allowing not only to know the backpackers’ approach to risk, but also the scale of their engagement in risky behaviors and the reasons for it. In the following article, the results of such research have been presented. A thorough analysis thereof allowed to identify more fully the risk involved in backpacking, and to define more precisely the factors governing the risks undertaken by backpackers on their long journeys.

---

**CZYNNIKI PODEJMOWANIA ZACHOWAŃ RYZYKOWNYCH W TURYSTYCE BACKPACKERSKIEJ**

**Słowa kluczowe:** backpacking, ryzyko, zachowania ryzykowne, turystyka

**Streszczenie:** Ryzyko jest nieodłącznym atrybutem podróży backpackerskich i wyróżnikiem wobec turystyki masowej. Do grupy ryzyka, charakterystycznego dla tego typu podróży, zalicza się m.in. ryzykowne zachowania wynikające m.in. z podróżowania po odległych geograficznie, kulturowo, klimatycznie i przyrodniczo rejonach świata, podejmowanie ekstremalnych i niebezpiecznych zachowań. W różnorodnych ośrodkach naukowych na świecie prowadzone są badania pozwalające poznać nie tylko stosunek backpackerów do ryzyka, lecz także skalę ich zaangażowania w działania ryzykowne oraz przyczyny podejmowania zachowań ryzykownych. W niniejszym artykule zostały przedstawione wyniki tych badań zostały. Ich szczegółowa analiza pozwoliła na pełniejszą identyfikację ryzyka w backpackingu oraz na dookreślenie czynników podejmowania przez backpackerów zachowań ryzykownych w trakcie odbywania przez nich dalekich podróży.