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Loss and Travel: Critically Exploring the Lived Travel Experiences of Senior Tourists

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Abstract:

Traumatic loss in later life can be experienced through, for example, death of loved one, chronic illness and divorce. Such experience may raise questions of one's mortality and reconsideration of life goals and purpose. Researchers, particularly within tourism studies, have often perceived loss negatively; a *dark* time for the individual that can limit their travel. Conversely, by giving voice to senior travellers' experiences of loss, this paper aims to illustrate how travel may open up the *crack for the light* to reach those experiencing loss. Indeed, many of the senior travellers in our phenomenological study used the metaphor of a candle to describe reflections of their travel experiences after and during a time of loss. We used a creative visual method called 'MeBox' in order to understand the experiences of loss and international travel of 12 New Zealand travellers who are above 65 years of age. These 12 participants were recruited to the study using the purposive sampling method. The MeBox is an innovative visual method for data collection that is adept at helping participants to voice their experiences, particularly those that relate to highly sensitive issues. The preliminary results of our study illustrate the reflexive sense-making that participants engaged in as they travelled. With various losses the senior travellers are conscious of their own mortality and limited life span. This consciousness influences them to seek meaning through travel during their last stage of life. Participants described how travel heightened their relationships to people and things, and stimulated observations on which they could develop understandings to help them through their loss. Together, the periods of travel and their participation in the study, prompted deep reflection around the dualities of 'inbetweenness' of being alone/being with themselves and times of in/exclusion. This presentation will discuss the Mebox benefits for tourism research. It will also discuss the wider implications of the preliminary findings of the study in the hope these will engender further critical debate about the lived experiences of loss and travel.
