This paper reports some preliminary research on women and holidays carried out in the summer of 1994 in Lancaster, a city in the north west of England. The research, which involved interviewing an opportunity sample of 54 women visitors and residents on the streets of Lancaster, attempted to explore holidays as an aspect of engendered leisure. The analysis makes use of theories about space, place and time as well as ideas about the tourist gaze and deindustrialized and restructured cities. It is suggested that the issue of women and holidays raises important questions about gender relations in households, but it is also argued that theories about tourism and places which ignore gender cannot offer a satisfactory account of how women consume places and regard time and space. In conclusion, the paper sketches ideas about how future research on women and holidays might be conducted.

Introduction

The paper describes some recently conducted preliminary research which provided both a contextualized analysis of some aspects of the gendering of the consumption and perception of urban space and place, and also permitted an exploration of women’s holiday time, practices and experiences, including the extent to which tourism and the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990) are gendered. The research, which was intended as pilot research for a larger project at a future date, was based on short interviews with an opportunity sample of women visitors and residents in the small city of Lancaster in north western England.

No particular claims are made for the research findings themselves, some of which, in empirical terms, merely confirm what is already known, particularly about tourism as a sociological concept, and in relation to some of the parameters of different women’s leisure experiences in particular socio-cultural contexts (Deem, 1986; Krippendorf, 1987; Enloe, 1989; Green et al., 1990; Urry, 1990; Le Feuvre, 1994; Kinnaird and Hall, 1994a). Rather, the intentions of both the pilot research reported here and the paper itself, are twofold. First there is an exploration of some still developing theoretical ideas about the ways in which use of space, time, and consumption of place, may be affected by gender relations. This exploration is intentionally empirically grounded. Abstract theorizing without reference to empirical research is a feature of much current social theory, whilst here, there is a concerted endeavour to move away from such a position. Second, a tentative analysis is
offered about the kinds of holidays taken by a small group of women in respect of location, quality of time, activities undertaken, risk-taking, boundaries between unpaid and paid work and holidays, and perceptions of different kinds of holidays, including holidays at home and away, holidays as an escape from a hectic pace of life, and holidays as disruptions of usual routines and responsibilities. Exploration of these issues through preliminary research provides the possibility of the establishment of an agenda for future research on the theme of women and holidays.

Although there has been a considerable amount of research on holidays, much of it focusing on multi-faceted aspects of tourism and consumption of holidays and places, (Krippendorf, 1987; Shields, 1991; Urry, 1990, 1992, 1995), most of such research has failed to take gender relations seriously; at best this has received a token mention. Where gender and tourism have explicitly been considered, this has often been either in a very specific way, focusing on the sexual exploitation of local people in tourist areas by both male and female tourists (Truong, 1990; Lee, 1991; Momsen, 1994) which is important research but not the theme adopted here, or the work itself is still at a early stage of development, with some exciting ideas forthcoming but lacking, as yet, a substantial empirical base (Kinnaird and Hall, 1994a). Furthermore, the conception of holidays that is advanced in this paper goes beyond tourism, however defined, and suggests that it is not necessary for holidays to take place in unfamiliar locations, provide contrasts between the ordinary and the extraordinary, or involve either the tourist industry or travel. Though other theorists have developed the concept of a post-tourism which subsumes some of these features (Rojek, 1993; Lash and Urry, 1994), this idea has not yet been firmly placed in a gender framework and hence does not offer sufficient scope for interpretation of the evidence outlined here. Research and theorizing on women and space/place has also begun to develop in a promising way, but has not yet given serious consideration to either engendered leisure or holidays (Massey, 1984, 1994; Watson and Gibson, 1994; Hanson and Pratt, 1995).

The pilot research

The research was carried out in a setting which was convenient for the researchers concerned, as befits the early stages of unfunded, exploratory research. Lancaster itself, the location for the research, while not a tourist honeypot, is an example of a deindustrialized, but somewhat restructured city (Lash and Urry, 1994), which has attempted to capitalize on its historical and industrial past in order to attract visitors. Located near the coast and in close proximity to the English Lake District, it attracts many day visitors, and some tourists seeking a longer stay. It has a relatively small population (under 50 000) but the local government district of which it forms part brings the total population to around 130 000. One in ten of the population is

1 The work was carried out by the author and Dr Penny Tinkler (Manchester University). Wendy Langford, a doctoral student at Lancaster University, gave assistance with the interviewing.
unemployed, one in eight is on social security benefits and one in three households have no car (Wilson and Sandford, 1994).

The interviews reported upon in the paper were conducted in the summer of 1994, between mid-August and mid-September, by three different experienced women interviewers. Women were stopped more or less at random in the city centre, at a variety of locations, ranging from the pedestrianized shopping precincts and bus station where it was guessed local women might be found, to Lancaster Castle, other historic buildings and museums, where we hoped to encounter women visitors. Different days of the week and different times of day were used to conduct the interviews and there were very few refusals. The total number of interviews comprised 25 women visitors to the city and 29 women who were local residents. These 54 women covered quite a good cross section of social backgrounds and ages, although mothers of small children, young women under 20 years, and women aged 66 or over, were probably under-represented. The majority of our interviewees were white. This was not a deliberate choice but reflected both the ethnic composition of Lancaster (where the proportion of black and Asian people is well below that existing nationally), and that of female visitors to the city.

After fieldwork was completed, the notes from the interviews were read through several times in order to pick out themes and issues, especially those arising from the more unstructured questions. Use was also made of File Maker Pro computer software, in order to summarize and compare the main details of each interview.

The reason for choosing to interview both women visitors and residents may need some explanation. This strategy enabled us to examine particular aspects of space/place and holidays in a way not possible had we only interviewed visitors. The idea was to analyze the uses of Lancaster as an urban space, and examine the perceptions of it as a place, from the perspectives of both women visitors and residents, including the latter when holidaying at home. Considering tourism as a separate social, economic and cultural sphere was not thought likely to be very helpful. The second reason for the dual interviewing strategy was to provide a comparison of the experiences of different women when holidaying, regardless of location. It should not be assumed a priori that taking holidays in a particular location is the preserve only of visitors to that area.

The nature of the opportunity sample appeared to offer more potential in understanding women’s experiences of holidays than if the pilot had been confined to those women visiting Lancaster as tourists. It is a destination whose visitors often tend to have rather restricted age and social class characteristics. Whilst it would have been feasible, even within the scope of an entirely unfunded project, to have gone a little further afield for data collection purpose, perhaps to a nearby seaside resort, this would not necessarily have been any more helpful in providing a variety of ideas and insights into women’s holidays and use of space, place and time. Indeed such a location for the study might have resulted in a concentration only on the pre-occupations of those women visiting a seaside town. This is a perfectly
valid phenomenon to study but it was not the principal interest underlying the research.

In choosing holidays as a research focus, it was not anticipated that holidays would necessarily be separated from the everyday. Urry (1990) suggests that the ‘tourist gaze’, though dependent on cultural context, implies anticipated pleasures and desires, a distancing from familiar sights and activities such as work, a collection of signs and a taking up of temporary residence somewhere else. However, Urry also claims that the line between tourism in particular, and cultural practices in general, is becoming blurred (Urry, 1994b). The intention of the research was to examine this proposition from the viewpoint of gender relations, since as Kinnaird and Hall (1994b, p. 5) note, ‘tourism is a process that is constructed out of gendered societies’. The theoretical frame used in the research also draws on theories about gender, time, place and space (Adam, 1990, 1995; Massey, 1994; Watson and Gibson, 1994; Hanson and Pratt, 1995), and notions of deindustrialized and restructured cities (Lash and Urry, 1994).

Women consuming places: the engendered gaze?

Both women’s use of space and their holiday practices necessarily involve consumption. Furthermore the notion of ‘place’ is central to both leisure and holidays. Ideas about the consumption of places are now at the forefront of social theory. However, whilst some of the ideas put forward are both novel and interesting, much of the analysis has failed to be gender-sensitive. Urry suggests that the notion of place is a complex theoretical and empirical endeavour which has not received the attention it deserves from social scientists (Urry, 1995). The explanation of place is, he suggests, concerned with the experience of social relations, ‘relationships between the social environment and the physical environment, and the interdependencies between the consumption of material objects and of the natural and built environments’ (Urry, 1995, p. 1). Furthermore, he claims, places are increasingly established as centres of consumption: places are visually consumed; important aspects of what people think is significant about a place may disappear, such as buildings or a particular environment, as has happened in countries which have engaged in mass tourism; finally, places may become consuming of the identity of individuals. Thus, in terms of the pilot research already described, Lancaster might be seen as a place to be consumed by women visitors and residents and perhaps consuming of their identities too. But do women always consume places in the same way as men? Because social relations are seen as so central to ideas of consuming places, one might anticipate the possibility that they do not, since many social relationships have a gender dimension. Yet the concept of gender is not even an index category in Urry’s book.

Feminist analyses of place comparable to Urry’s work, analyses of place which are sensitive to gender, do exist. Massey (1994) argues that we need to rethink space, place and time, paying particular attention to their inter-relations, rather than assuming that space and time are dichotomous. Unlike
Urry, Massey is cognisant of the need for this rethinking to incorporate gender and gender relations (Massey, 1994). She writes: ‘The construction of gender relations is also strongly implicated in the debate over the conceptualization of place. The view of place advocated here, where localities can in a sense be present in one another, both inside and outside at the same time, is a view which stresses the construction of specificities through interrelations rather than through the imposition of boundaries’ (Massey, 1994, p. 7). This clearly affects the way in which places are consumed. Thus Massey directs our attention to the extent to which, for example, domestic notions of place influenced by gender relations and divisions of labour in the home, are important in other notions of place, such as places of employment. This is demonstrated in the pilot data by women’s frequent reference to the intrusion or inseparability of domestic labour and caring from holidays and leisure activities, wherever the latter are located.

Massey’s insightful ideas also offer other fruitful avenues for those interested in engendered consumption of space. Thus her critique of malestream analyses of the city, modernity and women painters, suggests, for example, that in the nineteenth century it was impossible for women to be flâneurs. This debate is not without contemporary relevance. The flâneur, a stroller in the crowd who observes but is not observed, also plays a central role in recent writings about cities and urban space, though it was a term first used widely by 19th century writers, including the poet Baudelaire. As Massey notes, in Baudelaire’s terms, a woman could not be a flâneuse. Not only her respectability and safety were compromised by this; a flâneuse was ‘impossible precisely because of the one-way-ness and the directionality of the gaze. Flâneurs observed others; they were not observed themselves. And, for reasons which link together the debate on perspective and the social organization of painting, and most women’s exclusion from the public sphere, the modern gaze belonged (belongs?) to men . . . moreover . . . the flâneur’s gaze was frequently erotic. And woman was, and was only, the object of this gaze’ (Massey, 1994, p. 234). The point of Massey’s argument here is to emphasize just how much conceptions of modernity and the structuring and experience of space are ‘constructed on and are constructive of particular forms of gender relations’ (p. 235), even when their protagonists recognize only modes of production and class formation as constitutive of the power relations articulated in modernity. Of course, some of the nineteenth century restrictions on women now no longer apply and in more contemporary times, women’s eye, and their gaze, may have more cultural and socially sanctioned scope than in the nineteenth century. This is evident in Momsen’s article discussing the ways in which some women tourists visiting the Caribbean are anxious to sexually exploit local men (Momsen, 1994). However, given the continuing centrality of gender relations to social and cultural life, both the eye and the gaze may still retain gendered dimensions. The female tourist or holiday-taker may not, depending on other characteristics such as her ethnic group membership, her age and her social class, see the urban landscape or indeed the rural landscape or seascape in the same way as men, even those men who otherwise share similar characteristics in respect of class, age or
ethnic group membership. Later it will be seen that the research revealed, as other investigations have also done, that some women feel vulnerable when they become urban gazers, in ways not usually shared by men. There is also another dimension of the engendered gaze. Urry’s (1990) argument that the tourist gaze often averts itself from industrial areas may not be so important for those women whose main work lies outside such settings. By contrast, domestic work and caring, and predominant forms of female employment in the West, including the service sector and leisure industries, are less easy to exclude from the female tourist gaze, since they may well be a feature of precisely those sights and services arranged for the tourist and the traveller wherever they are (Breathnach et al., 1994; Kinnaird et al., 1994; Leontidou, 1994; Adkins, 1995).

What did the gaze of women residents and tourists make of Lancaster? Despite the issue of a city charter to Lancaster in 1937, as an urban area it is so unlike many popular cultural conceptions of a city, which, as Massey (1994) notes, have been strongly influenced by the male gaze and male power relations, that six of our 54 respondents were unable even to voice an opinion as to whether or not it was a city. A further 20 said it was not a city. Others struggled to provide legitimation for it in terms of buildings (‘it has a cathedral’, ‘there’s a university’), history (‘it’s got historic buildings’) or plucked wildly at random clues (‘it’s called one’, ‘it says city on the dustcarts’). Even some of those who answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Is Lancaster somewhere you think of as a city?’ might not spontaneously have called it a city without our intervention. The visitors interviewed were only slightly more likely to think of it as a city than the residents and found it no easier to explain why it was or was not one. Whether this is symptomatic of the emptying out of meaning which various theorists have argued is central to post-industrial societies is debatable. However, the responses were almost certainly gendered. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate this. First, some of the men who accompanied a number of the women interviewed tried to ‘correct’ or interrupt their female companion’s attempts at definition of Lancaster as a city. They intervened to offer exactly the kinds of definitions Massey (1994) criticises malestream theorists of modernity for holding: these pose as exclusive definitions of urban space linked to capital and male political power and exclude women’s perspectives completely. Second, several women’s definitions spoke of phenomena related to the sphere of consumption of goods and services in which women are major consumers – the presence or absence of department stores, city council services to householders, education, local public facilities – and of course most of these are also major employers of women. Many of the women to whom we spoke did indeed have gendered notions of space and place and an engendered gaze.

Holidays at home and away

Uncertainty, difference and ambiguity were not confined to conceptions of cities as places but also expressed in some of the ideas about holidays held by some pilot study respondents. This is consistent with the arguments made by
Urry that tourism is becoming less and less separable from other cultural practices (Urry, 1994b). Certainly the compression of time and space in recent years have made for greater definitional problems, as have increased frequencies of journeys and travel. The latter may include many journeys which are unconnected with tourism or holidays. Although our respondents did see holidays as related to travel, leisure, and a break from routine, leisure itself is a highly contested and gendered concept. Non-work activities and interests in general, including sport and holidays, are a significant site for power struggles over gender relations (Deem, 1986; Green et al., 1990; Hargreaves, 1994). Unlike sport, where women have had either to create their own sports or find a way of participating in male sport on their own terms, often playing quite separately from men (Hargreaves, 1994), holidays for heterosexual women often involve going on holiday with male companions, or expecting to find new male companions on arrival. This has no real parallels in the world of women’s sport, and is not the norm in Western women’s leisure in general, although it does have parallels with some forms of heterosexual women’s leisure, including dancing and going to nightclubs (Deem, 1986; Wimbush and Talbot, 1988; Green et al., 1990).

The boundaries separating holidays from other forms of travel, and from all time spent away from home, appeared very unclear to many of the women interviewed. Weekends away with friends and day trips were distinctions some respondents made to exclude themselves from the category of tourist or holiday-taker. Whether this was part of the enhanced reflexivity of actors in post-industrial society remains to be further investigated. It was not self-evident that the issue was the amount of time spent away or the length of a journey so much as the cultural context, preparation and expectations surrounding a particular visit or journey. The idea espoused in the notion of the tourist gaze, that a holiday often involves travel or taking up residence in temporary accommodation (Urry, 1990), was also questioned by our data and is an issue well worth addressing in future research. Several respondents, including both Lancaster residents and visitors, had taken what they described as ‘a holiday at home’ in the last two years. Quite a few of these women said that a holiday at home, despite involving familiar surroundings and no travel or temporary accommodation, was in some respects like any other holiday. The key distinguishing factor of such holidays from other time spent at home seemed to be the absence of paid work and regular routines (though domestic responsibilities usually remained), which might be interpreted as meaning different quality time and space and perhaps a different sense of place.

Women who took holidays at home did not necessarily fit the idea of a ‘post tourist’, who according to Lash and Urry (1994), does not need to leave their house in order to ‘see most of the typical objects of the tourist gaze. With TV and the VCR most such objects can be gazed upon, compared, contextualized and gazed upon again’ (Lash and Urry, 1994, p. 275). This presupposes that people have a choice of being a post-tourist or not, whereas there might be a suspicion (which will need to be followed up in future research) that some women who take holidays at home may not choose so to
do freely. Those interviewed in the pilot study hinted that their childcare and other household work responsibilities remained high during holidays at home, though paid work was usually absent and routines of household work loosened. The extent of such household responsibilities might partially preclude women from gazing upon tourist objects on TV and video, or prevent them doing so in a non-simultaneous sequence of other activities. Being at home to look after children during school vacations was clearly one reason why mothers found themselves ‘holidaying’ at home. Other reasons for women taking holidays at home included lack of money to go elsewhere, absence of a holiday companion, and the need to use leave from paid work to catch up on household chores and DIY.

According to Urry, the ‘tourist gaze’ of those who leave their own homes is constructed by various signs, including separation or seclusion from work activities and routine, as well as ideas of desire, pleasure and anticipation (Urry, 1990). This is a useful opening up of the concept of tourism, since it could apply both to actual and anticipated holidays, but it was not one which fitted the responses of all the women interviewed. Thus those Lancaster residents who had not had a holiday in the last two years found it difficult to conceptualize what their ideal holiday was, despite being surrounded by multi-media signs all over Lancaster city centre constructing tourist imagery of various kinds, whether of sunny foreign climes or the heritage industry of reconstructed and restructured Lancaster. Poverty, or old fashioned social and economic structure, may play as much of a role in this failure to take advantage of the tourist gaze, as the absence of appropriate information structures, something which Lash and Urry (1994) see as having replaced social structures. The internet and e.mail have little meaning to an unemployed woman waiting for a bus at Lancaster bus station; poverty, poor housing and the domestic responsibilities of women in low income families weigh rather more heavily and affect the possibility of engaging in the gaze itself. As Scraton has noted, the discovery of ‘difference’ amongst women does not eliminate material disadvantage (Scraton, 1994).

Opening up the holiday experience

The notion of particular perceptions of place and space are central to many attempts to define holidays and tourism. According to Urry, the ‘tourist gaze’ does not immediately encompass all aspects of cities, especially the less attractive parts and those associated with industry or commerce: ‘The places gazed upon ... normally offer some distinctive contrasts with work ... Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through day dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures ... the tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience’ (Urry, 1990, p. 3). From the pilot research it was not at all clear which aspects of holidays separated women off from their everyday experience. It seemed that this separation, however partial, might be as much about time as about contrasts with work or aesthetically appealing
town or countryscapes. Certainly only some of the images of holidays conjured up by the women interviewed fitted this latter description.

Kinnaird and Hall (1994) make a distinction between women as travellers ‘those people who have specifically chosen, or who have had no option but, to travel on their own (or with small number of people – not a “group”) and to do that in an individual, “basic” or even “eccentric” manner’ (p. 189) and women tourists, who by implication choose to travel in a more organised way in a group (Kinnaird and Hall, 1994b). However, whilst for some purposes this is a helpful distinction, it is not necessarily so useful when the focus of attention is holidaying women. Such women may be travellers in Kinnaird and Hall’s sense, they may be ‘package’ tourists, they may be travellers in self-catered and self-propelled accommodation (camping and caravanning) or they may holiday without engaging in either travel or tourism, simply by staying in their own homes. Thus holidays for the women interviewed in the pilot study might involve either being a traveller or a tourist or neither of these.

One of the hallmarks of a post-modern economy is argued to be the ‘emptying out’ of time and space, which according to some commentators become ever more abstract (Giddens, 1990). It was not evident that such abstraction was a feature of the social and cultural time, space and ‘consumed places’ of all the women interviewed. For some holidays were replete with meaning and for others they were not. There were also, as might be expected, some marked differences between the frequency of the holidays experienced by the women interviewed. While half of the visitors interviewed took at least two holidays a year, only a third of the local residents interviewed took holidays as frequently and another third did not have an annual holiday at all. However we need to be aware that these responses in themselves are culturally constrained by popular discourses about what constitutes a holiday, which themselves may incorporate many gender elements. Thus some older women said that on leaving paid work, the idea of having a holiday had ceased to be applicable to them. ‘I’m always on holiday now’ responded one woman. Yet from the rest of her interview it was evident that she had not ceased unpaid housework nor had she discontinued travel and visits for leisure purposes.

While some women’s leisure may involve solitary pursuits fitted in around employment and the needs of other household members, often being carried out in a multi-tasking mode, combining work and non work tasks (Deem, 1986), holidays were regarded by many of our respondents as forms of sociable leisure activities. Such responses do not, however, tell us much about what actually happens within the envelope of the holiday itself, as opposed to what is desired and hoped for, or carefully reconstructed afterwards. Although Rojek suggests that tourists are perfectly capable of irony whilst on holiday, especially at the expense of tour operators (Rojek, 1993), such irony often deserts people when they return and they then have recourse to more optimistic accounts of their experiences. In a research context this presents a problem, if there is a wish to hear both positive and negative accounts of holidays. How can this be overcome? It will clearly be necessary to consider
ethnographic work for this purpose, although the use of holiday photographs as a means of encouraging women to talk about holiday experiences also offers some promising avenues for future research (Deem, 1996).

Age, social class and ethnicity, as well as the absence or presence of dependent children and adults, are likely to have a considerable effect upon women’s holiday experiences, from where their holidays take place, when and with whom, through to the extent to which domestic work is a ‘normal’ part of their holiday practices. The latter depends not only on the presence of others for whom women feel responsible but also on simple economics – those kinds of holidays where all domestic work is taken care of do not usually come cheap and are less likely to be available to mothers of young children regardless of income. Ethnicity may influence holiday patterns, including whether, as is the custom in Greece, mothers and children holiday together, leaving fathers at work (Leontidou, 1994). Those who are part of diaspora may use holidays to return either in person or symbolically to their homeland. Age also has a significant effect on holiday practices: the young single woman and the older single woman are unlikely to seek out the same places or experiences (and the former may also be more affluent). The presence of elderly dependents during holidays may impose constraints but also provide opportunities different from those experienced by women who holiday with dependent children. Furthermore, older women may have a greater stock of holiday narratives upon which to draw and therefore not only their ideas of holiday place and space but also their perceptions of these may vary considerably from those of younger women. All of these features of women’s differences and the ways in which they may be relevant to a study of holidays will need to be taken into account in future research.

Not only place, space and tourist gaze vary amongst holidaying women. Holiday time too may come to have particular characteristics which mark it off from everyday experience, not only the obvious ones of being, for most women, relatively short in linear terms, but also in relation to intensity and pace of holiday experiences. If as Shaw suggests, women in western societies are more likely than men to express concern about hectic pace of life (Shaw, 1996), then holidays can be a means of counterposing ‘own time’ and ‘household time’ to that of clock time (Deem, 1996). This emerged implicitly in some of the pilot interviews but would need more intensive, open-ended questioning in order to gain more understanding of what, far from being a truism, is a complex issue about multiple times and holiday experiences/practices. There is already a strong indication from feminist theorists that time hierarchies are important in shaping how households use time (Adam 1995), which includes the suggestion that gender relations are a crucial influence on family time hierarchies and the shaping of household time priorities.

Certainly quality of time is crucial to holidays, though this is already well-known and almost certainly something shared by women and men. Difference from routine was central to definitions of holidays given by the women interviewed. However, women’s routines may sometimes be significantly different from those of men, particularly for mothers, housewives and other
carers. It was clear from the data gathered that routines might be disrupted in a number of ways: different company, a new environment, a more relaxed atmosphere brought about by an absence of paid work, unfamiliar accommodation or an activity not normally undertaken. All these are part of Urry’s notion of the tourist gaze. However, women who holidayed at home were at pains to point out that what characterized such holidays was a different, less intensive and less time-aware experience than being at home at any other time, even though the accommodation that they occupied, their companions, their activities and their environment were not novel or unusual. Housework was a major feature of many women’s lives but for some the ‘break’ from the routine of paid work was more significant than the continuity of domestic obligations, albeit perhaps carried out in a different time frame and ambience. Thus whilst many women eat out when not on holiday (Martens, 1995a), eating out whilst on holiday may carry less guilt about the failure to cook at home as part of ongoing domestic responsibilities, and ready-prepared or take-away food may also be bought more frequently during holidays, whatever the location of the holiday itself. This was not something which we were able to investigate fully in the brief pilot interviews but is clearly an interesting issue to be followed up in future research.

One of the more interesting things that the pilot research revealed about holiday experiences was that holidays are a cultural form about which researchers are much more likely to hear rehearsed and sanitized narratives rather than any account which reveals conflicts, disappointments, difficulties or power struggles emerging from engendered relationships and encounters or indeed from any other source. Though points were made about the continuance of domestic routines during holidays, it was not possible to find out precisely what kinds of power relationships, gendered responsibilities and gender identities lay behind these comments.

Out and about in the city – pleasures and risks

One of the hunches which influenced the pilot research, and the decision to interview both local women and residents, was that women residents and women visitors would have different perceptions of Lancaster as a place. As Urry points out, tourists expect to acquire temporary visual property at which to gaze (Urry, 1990). Massey (1994, p. 7) suggests that ‘localities can in a sense be present in one another’ and one of the aspects of place explored was the extent to which women ‘saw’ Lancaster in different ways by virtue of their different reasons for being there. So far as women visitors were concerned, particularly those who were tourists, it might be imagined that their consumption of Lancaster was not unrelated to where they lived, their social class background and cultural capital, their age and generation, and the gender relations in which they were implicated. When visitors were interviewed therefore, questions were asked about how and in what ways Lancaster differed from where they lived. The range of phenomena for comparison were prestructured, although we offered respondents the chance to add others to the list. In several key respects, women visitors rated
Lancaster no differently from where they lived – in respect of pleasantness, pollution, relaxed atmosphere and safety – and only in relation to its small size and the amount of things to do on holiday did Lancaster appear to compare at all favourably with women visitors’ home locations. Different social characteristics did not seem to be as important as anticipated. Here one begins to suspect that the separation of the every day from the tourist experience may indeed, as speculated earlier, be a gendered one. If it was the case that women visitors viewed Lancaster (or perhaps any other away-from-home holiday location) as not much different from their normal environment, this might be closely related to women’s greater likelihood of being responsible for domestic labour and caring activities, which may act as a filter on the tourist gaze. The separation from paid work, as those women who took holidays at home pointed out, could be achieved without going away. The separation from the domestic is much harder to achieve: as Massey (1994) notes, the sense of domestic place may be part of women’s sense of place wherever they are. Nevertheless, when local women were asked about their perceptions of Lancaster as a place, different responses as compared with the visitors were found. Some of these were predictable and not necessarily related to gender. Many residents interviewed felt the city was lacking in critical respects. It was boring, it was small, it lacked excitement, big department stores and many other facilities of larger cities. However there did appear to be a gendered dimension to some of these differential perceptions. Residents, especially mothers of dependent children, and also older women, showed more signs of unease about using particular parts of the city, including the city centre, river and canal areas and parks, especially at night, than did visitors. Fear of urban areas at night is something which has been noted as a gender specific characteristic in previous studies of women and leisure (Deem, 1986; Green et al., 1990). What those studies have not revealed are the conditions under which such fears may be modified or absent.

In the case of the pilot study, some of the differences noted between visitors and residents in respect of perceptions of relative risk and safety may have arisen because residents have a greater knowledge of local conditions. However, it is also possible that the practice of being on holiday and also away from home enables people to take risks of all kinds, including those to do with personal safety as well as culture, which they would not normally take. Although packaged tourism may eliminate some risks, most of the women tourists encountered were not on package tours but were travelling independently. The extent of risk-taking behaviour in women’s holidays is something it does seem worthwhile to pursue in future research, particularly because this would enable a critical examination of ideas about post-industrial societies being risk societies (Beck, 1992) and an investigation of the role played by gender relations in such societies. Again, it is possible to speculate that women’s caring and domestic responsibilities may give them a different set of calculations about and cultural perceptions of what constitutes risk, and that this in some way also influences the female tourist gaze. It would also be useful to know from subsequent research whether holidays
at home involve women (and any holiday companions) taking risks in the same or different respects as compared with holidays which are not based at home.

Conclusion

The preliminary research reported here represents the very early stages of what it is hoped will become a long term project. Some of what was revealed by the empirical study was not either novel or necessarily even gender-related. However, the experiences of analyzing and exploring the data gathered by interviewing women in Lancaster have been helpful in suggesting what theoretical issues might be followed up or developed in future research. By introducing a variety of ideas currently in vogue in social theory into the analysis of the pilot material, it has become evident that some of the post-industrial and post modern analyses of space, place and tourism need to be recontextualized from the perspective of gender relations. For when gender is introduced, it appears to threaten to disrupt some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in malestream theory about de-industrialized, post-industrialized and restructured cities, space, place and time, tourist gazes and flâneurs, post-tourism, and risk societies. Places, both familiar and unfamiliar, are indeed part of consumption but they are not consumed in the same way regardless of gender. Nor are time and space ungendered.

Unless we think that the post-industrial tourist has no gendered identity at all, we cannot explain everything away on the basis of ‘difference’ as a concept which dispels gender as a significant category in social life. Women may consume cities in different ways from men and the experience of gender relations in the context of households on holiday, whether at home or not, may significantly alter some aspects of the tourist gaze, regardless of women’s other social characteristics. Space and time in relation to holidays may be crucially affected by gender relations (not least the when and the where of taking holidays away or at home, the differential perceptions of pace of life and how this might be slowed down, and different conceptions of what constitutes a break from routine). The risks women are prepared to take when on holiday may not be the same as those taken by men. Mothers, in particular, may play a key role in the risk taking of partners and children. There is also a strong possibility that risks taken on holiday where more than one member of the same household is present include risks to the continuance of household relationships.

The interviews conducted in this preliminary study revealed several aspects of taken-for-granted holiday narratives. There are often strong cultural constraints on expressing dissatisfaction with holidays already over, especially if the dissatisfaction relates not to problems with accommodation, food, travel, visual sights and so on but to conflicts and difficulties arising between those holiday participants from the same household. The constraints in themselves are not necessarily gendered, though the contents of holiday narratives are undoubtedly marked by gender in some obvious and perhaps less obvious ways. Undoubtedly, many perceptions of the reasons for
household conflicts on holiday are gendered. In order to uncover this, any future research will need to find ways of going beyond the kinds of holiday narratives which are seen as culturally acceptable. The study also raised a number of methodological dilemmas for any more detailed study of women and holidays. Interviews on the street are clearly not helpful in this regard and ethnographies of those women who go away on holiday, whilst appealing, are unlikely to be attractive to funding agencies or indeed necessarily very practicable in other ways. The selection of those to be studied is going to be a complicated task, as is the task of unlocking some of the secrets of holiday experiences. However, given the theoretical and complex nature of some of the questions raised by the pilot, it is evident that forms of qualitative research, rather than quantitative survey investigations, are likely to yield the kinds of data required.

To conclude, the paper has suggested that conducting small-scale preliminary research can be useful in identifying issues for future research, particularly in an area where there has been rather more theorizing than empirically-based investigation. This discussion of the pilot study findings, linked to existing theories and research, has shown that the topic of women and holidays is one well worth pursuing. It has also become evident that some recent ideas in social theory about post-industrial societies, tourism and space/place may need to be considerably modified in order to take proper account of gender relations and the diversities of women’s lives.

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