THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY AND TOURISM EXPERIENCES.

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Abstract

A number of scholars have acknowledged the power of tourism to assist individuals in finding meaning and purpose in their lives. More recently, studies have proffered that tourism experiences may be imbued with personal spiritual significance. Indeed, transcendence and connectedness are considered to be at the heart of most definitions of religious and spiritual tourism. Less scholarly attention has been focused specifically on the concepts of transcendence and connectedness through tourism, excluding from the niche of religious pilgrimage. Through applying phenomenological principles, in-depth relationships were built with eleven individuals who, through engagement in travel with Hands up Holidays, a luxury tour provider, experienced transcendence, connectedness, and personal healing. The paper concludes by arguing that even amongst individuals that are non-religious, transcendence and connectedness are potentially powerful experiences that can be gained through tourism activities.

Key words: Connectedness, transcendence, spirituality, tourism, religion.

Introduction

A number of scholars have acknowledged that tourism can significantly assist people in finding meaning and purpose in their lives, and is imbued with personal significance (for example, Noy, 2004; Uriely, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006). Tourism experiences are often deeply spiritual, but the concept of transcendence in particular, has been explored to a limited extent in previous tourism studies (see for example, Willson, McIntosh & Zahra, 2013). This paper explores how individuals engaging with travel through Hands up Holidays, a luxury tour operator, experienced personal transcendence and connectedness, which led

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to personal healing. This paper addresses a gap in the scholarly literature by considering how an individual’s everyday experiences of transcendence and connectedness impacts their tourism experiences.

**Connectedness**

Many people find meaning and purpose within their life and the answers to their personal spiritual questions through experiencing connectedness. Connectedness can be seen as being a harmonious relationship or ‘oneness’ with self, ‘other’ (including other people, animals, the earth, nature e.t.c.) and/or God/Higher Power (Piedmont, 2001; Schultz, 2005; Zinnbauer et al., 1999). A significant proportion of literature across a wide range of disciplines acknowledges connectedness as being an integral part of any conceptualisation of spirituality and religion. Connectedness has been widely cited in, amongst others, the nursing (for example, Miner-Williams, 2006; Schultz, 2005), theology (for example, Bridger, 2001; Zinnbauer et al., 1999), psychology (for example, Piedmont, 1999; Vaughan, 1991) and management literature (for example, Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Burack, 1999; McCormick, 1994). Some scholars contend that connectedness represents the very core of spirituality. For example, management scholars Mitroff and Denton (1999) argued that if one word represented the meaning of spirituality, and its importance to one’s life, it is ‘interconnectedness’. Connectedness is certainly a core component of spirituality in the health literature; Schultz (2005, p.4) purported that, “Based upon a review of literature from occupational therapy and other health professions, spirituality was defined as, “Experiencing a meaningful connection to our core selves, other humans, the world and/or a greater power as expressed through our reflections, narratives and actions”.

A number of authors have evidenced that people can find connectedness with self (for example, Beeho & Prentice, 1997; Bruner, 1991; Daniel, 1996; Howe, 2001; Noy, 2004), God, (Cohen, 1979; Harris, 1996; Rinschede, 1992; Watts, 2003) or ‘others’ through tourism (Curtin, 2005; Harrison, 2003; McCain & Ray, 2003; Relph, 1976; Schanzel & McIntosh, 2000; Trauer & Ryan, 2005). Some authors have contended that tourism presents an ideal situation for connectedness to occur. For instance, Craib (1997, p.160) argued that touristic connections can “reach across gender, age, race, class and other social realities if need be”. Further, Harrison (2003) suggested that tourists encounter much of what Simmel (1910) calls the ‘social ideal’ while travelling; these are situations that meet the human need for connection, but the temporary nature of the association frees people from the need to seek ongoing attachment. Indeed, Harrison (2003) suggested that ‘social ideals’, such as
travelling on a bus with people can in fact be deeply meaningful and memorable to people, and meet their needs for connection.

Other people may hold a particularly strong connection to the Earth, nature or certain geographical locations. Finkel (2007), for example, noted that in Bethlehem, many Christians feel unsafe amidst the violence in the region; Finkel (2007, p.72) told the story of Seth Mandell, a Christian whose child had been stoned to death; his murderers were never found. However, “His connection to this land is spiritually, emotionally, and culturally profound. “Leaving,” he says, “would be like leaving a part of myself behind”. One’s culture is also likely to influence the type of spiritual connectedness they hold. New Zealand Maori, for instance, find deep connection with certain geographical locations because, “The physical and spiritual well-being of Maori is linked to the land that you belong to and relate to” (Pere, 1982, p.18). Many Maori also feel ancestral spirits are connected to landforms and they can feel, hear and see the wairua (spirit) from them (Furbish & Reid, 2003). Others will find strong connection to God or self through nature. For example, one Catholic man interviewed by Rosser (1992, p.130) commented, “The closest I felt to God was with a certain configuration of clouds with the sun shining through and at a particular place on our farm”. This illustrates that connections, like spirituality generally, are highly personal.

Connectedness may be physical or mental (Goldberg, 1998), and thus, one can feel connection with someone who has passed away, or is far away; thus someone’s love, or the memory of someone’s love can provide strong spiritual support to people (Schultz, 2005). The management literature also stresses the importance of connecting with others; for many people, the workplace provides their only consistent link to people, and therefore, to their needs of connection and contribution (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Indeed, ‘belonging’ is an important part of workplace spirituality (Burack, 1999); people need to feel that they are contributing to a higher good, share a common purpose with others, and belong to part of a community (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004).

The notion of connectedness is considered particularly important in the health and disability literature. For example, Spaniol (2001, p.321) argued that the onset of a psychiatric disability is often experienced by, “A person as a profound disconnection from him or herself, from others, from living, learning and working environments, and from a larger sense of meaning and purpose”, and thus, an important part of recovery from psychiatric illness is reconnecting with oneself, others, “To our living, learning, and working environments, and to larger meaning and purpose” (p.322-323). Writing from a nursing perspective, Taylor (2002) noted that patients often have needs related to connection with self (for example, the need for personal dignity, hope, meaning and purpose, to express feelings), others (for example,
the need to forgive others, or for community), and a Higher Power (for example, the need to experience God as loving and present). Indeed it is argued that reconnecting with oneself, and having a new focus in life are important factors in many rehabilitative programs, as people that are not connected to anything often feel deplete of energy and powerless (Kinjerski & Skrypnek, 2004).

Transcendence

Further to the above discussion, a number of scholars have argued that individuals experience personal growth through transcendence. This transcendence, (or self-transcendence; spiritual transcendence), is therefore seen by many scholars as being an integral part of any conceptual discussion of spirituality and religion (Butts, 1999; Emmons, 2000; Freeman, 1998; McCormick, 1994; Miner-Williams, 2006; Piedmont, 2001; Tanyi, 2002). Freeman (1998, p.7), a Christian theorist, argued that spirituality, “Represents concern with the transcendent dimensions of life”, and psychologist Piedmont (1999, p.988) comments that spiritual transcendence concerns, “The capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place to view life from a larger, more objective perspective”. Christian educator Fisher (2001, p.48) also proffered that spiritual transcendence involves, “Faith toward, adoration and worship of the source of Mystery of the universe”. From a psychological viewpoint transcendence also involves going past the ordinary confines of the body (Emmons, 2000).

The transcendent dimension of a person can be seen through Abraham Maslow’s self-actualising person, who seeks to improve him or herself and increase knowledge of themselves and people around them (Piedmont, 1999). Indeed, Maslow’s work is closely paralleled to the study of spirituality, and has been cited by a number of authors, particularly from the management and psychology disciplines who have explored spirituality. For example, management scholars Ashmos and Duchon (2000), Burack (1999), Butts (1999), and Mitroff and Denton (1999) argue that spirituality concerns the higher levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs; thus, self-actualisation is regarded as being the level at which one seeks meaning and purpose in life.

Methodology

Deep personal connections were made with eleven research participants over a period of 18 months. Most research participants participated in at least four semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes. In addition, most research participants would continue their
communication with the primary researcher through the form of e-mail or phone call. Conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed by the primary researcher for accuracy and to familiarise himself with the data. Where possible, all conversations were conducted face-to-face, although three research participants lived abroad and thus could not be met personally. Conversations with these research participants were held by telephone and email and recorded and transcribed in the same way. Generally, conversations were held within the homes of research participants, but on certain occasions research participants asked, to meet at, for example, a café for convenience. During the initial conversations, very few prepared questions were used; rather, the primary researcher attempted to let conversation arise naturally, and without presupposition. Questions asked during these conversations sought to provide the primary researcher with an introductory understanding of each research participant and to begin to understand the positioning of their travel with Hands Up Holidays within their lives. Questions that were asked during these first conversations included, ‘Can you describe yourself to me? ‘What has your travel with Hands up Holidays meant to you?’ and ‘What gives you meaning within your life?’ These broad questions would often result in a number of follow-up questions to further understanding, such as, ‘Can you tell me a story about the event you’ve described?’ or ‘What did that experience mean to you?’ The approach of asking very few questions mirrors many phenomenological studies (for example, Ingram, 2002; Pernecky, 2006; Schmidt, 2005). Crotty (1996, p.21), for example, observed that in the phenomenological pieces of research he studied, “Beyond the opening question or two, further questions are asked only to gain clarification or encourage the respondent to keep talking”. However, there are questions that are common to most conversations, and Crotty (1996) suggested that questions such as, ‘What does something mean to you? and, ‘What was something like for you? can be considered the phenomenological questions as they attempt to reach the essence of what a particular phenomenon means to the lives of individuals. Probing questions were used throughout all conversations with research participants to enrich responses.

Immediately after each conversation, entries were written in a diary containing thoughts about the conversation, and the consideration of questions such as was rapport established with this person? How did the researcher project himself? What was the research participant’s body language telling us? After each transcription the transcript was read through to look for issues that could be explored further or areas it was felt there needed to find greater understanding before the next meeting. The primary researcher asked himself whether he truly understood the story of each research participant and how transcendence and connectedness was experienced in their everyday life, and on tour. If this was not achieved, deeper clarification was sought during the next conversation with the research participant.
The tour operator:

Research participants had travelled with one tour operator, Hands Up Holidays, within the previous 12 months. The operator seeks to offer a diverse range of tour options and travel experiences within their tours (Hands Up Holidays, 2016).

Christopher Hill, a New Zealander, created Hands Up Holidays because he saw an increasing market for travel that was ‘enriching’; travel where tourists could ‘give something back’ to the world through voluntary activities, seek personal growth and development through adventure, cultural, and/or heritage-based activities and interact with locals. Hands up Holidays offer ‘a taste of volunteering’ blended with ‘luxury sight-seeing’; tours generally take between two to four weeks, and contain approximately three to six days of ‘voluntary activities’ (Hands Up Holidays, 2016). The aim is to promote ethical, environmentally friendly, meaningful travel that is beneficial to everyone involved, including tourists and host communities (ibid). The business offers tours to more than thirty countries, many of those Third World or developing nations throughout Africa, Asia, Europe, The Pacific and South America. The tour operator is marketed towards the ‘high-end market’; key words such as ‘luxury’ are used within their marketing package (Hands Up Holidays, 2016).

Results and Discussion

Experiences of Connectedness in Everyday Life. Each of the eleven research participants experienced connectedness within their everyday life; personal connections were found to drive what one finds meaning from and how they derive life purpose. Specifically, the importance of personal relationships to individuals; relationships with family, friends, animals, nature, oneself and/or one’s faith were consistently stated to form the most important aspects of one’s life. Every individual purported a personal connection that was outside of oneself; it was apparent that each individual needed a type of external relationship to derive meaning and life purpose. To illustrate, each of the Christian research participants reported that their values, meaning, and life-purpose are primarily driven by their personal relationships with God. Amy, for example, commented that, “My relationship with God is so comforting and is central to all aspects of
my life”. Laura said, “Faith and family are what is important to me” and Rhys explained, “My relationship with God is a two way thing… It’s my life, my values, everything”. Non-Christian research participants also discussed the importance of personal relationships within their life. Charlotte explained, “I feel very much at home in nature”, and similarly, Lana commented, “When you are one with the critters, being in their environment, that is something really amazing to me”. Amber discussed the personal importance of her relationship with her granddaughter Sally by saying, “Sally means the world to me”, and Brendon expressed the important relationship he has with his grandmother by stating, “I ring my Grandma up every day”. Personal connections were found to be particularly important during times of personal difficulties. For example, Nyla explained how, when living through her breast cancer treatment, her grandson, “Was my lifeline… I was really there to hug him. You know what it’s like; you have a special bond with a new life”. She also expressed that, “During that time, my work colleagues were so good, it is really important to have them there to talk to”. Charlotte similarly explained that during times of duress her, “Family support is so important”. Connectedness was found to be an intangible as well as tangible aspect of spirituality; for example, Laura and Sharen discussed how they derived significant meaning from the memories of loved ones or friends who had passed away. Sharen explained, “Peter’s memory is strong; we know he is still with us”. Laura similarly explained, “I know my sister is still with me”. Other research participants explained the important connection they held with a particular cause. To illustrate, Karen commented, “I strongly connect to feminism and what women stand for” and Charlotte discussed her involvement in drug prevention, and commented, “I am so anti-drugs it’s not funny”. Other individuals held a strong connection with certain countries or people. To illustrate, Laura stated, “New Zealand is my home but Peru is too really” and Brendon explained, “The kids of Morocco, I always remember them and with our interactions I think we still share a special bond”. Lana’s discussion illustrated her strong connection to her ‘comrades’ in India and despite living in the U.S.A., she explained, “I have a deep relationship with India, I really feel it is my home”. Certain individuals suggested a link between connectedness and well-being. This supports the literature that proffers that individuals must hold a meaningful relationship to be ‘well’ (for example, Marra, 2000; Miner-Williams, 2006). To illustrate, Laura discussed how, based upon her medical expertise, she felt many individuals would improve their well-being by forming meaningful connections. She commented, “A lot of people that come in, I think why have you come to see me? But it’s because they know I’ll listen… Lots of people would be happier if they baked a cake and took it to their neighbour”.
**Connectedness through tourism experiences**

Each individual illustrated that one’s meaningful connections influenced all aspects of their travel experience. For example, each Christian individual noted that they filtered their travel experiences through their personal beliefs and life purpose. Illustrative quotes included, “I just broke down at the airport because this was what my life was for” (Laura); “The most meaningful part of my trip was being able to help with the truck… I thought that God had created that opportunity for me” (Sharen) and, “Being with the nuns and sharing our faith was a real highlight for me” (Rhys). Other individuals filtered one’s experiences through connections to a cause beyond oneself. For example, Karen, who connected with feminist values, filtered all her travel experiences through the connection she had with her feminist ideals. To illustrate, she commented that, “My trip was all about women’s rights really… As a feminist, seeing the way the men treated their wives troubled me”. She also commented, “A really memorable part of my holiday was talking with that man about his gay friend because I could then share my views on that”. Lana similarly explained that, “A memorable experience was when we were attacked by a swarm of bees… I said to my daughter, just lay down and they will leave us alone and that was a really good lesson I could teach her”.

Other individuals found that they derived the most significant personal connections from travel experiences that were imbued with personal meaning. Amber, for example, discussed in detail the personal importance of her relationship with her granddaughter. The moment that held the deepest personal meaning to Amber was purchasing a painting by the Peruvian girl who shares the same name as her granddaughter. She commented, “My mind keeps coming back to the little girl Sally... Fancy meeting a Sally there!” Amber also described how “Building mudhuts was really special because I used to do that with my Dad when I was young”. Additional illustrative quotes included, “What was special was being able to really make a difference and we knew that through doing that we were able to honour Peter” (Sharen); “Something really meaningful and memorable to me was teaching the kids our secret handshake because to me that shows we have developed a special bond” (Brendon) and, “Spending time with the women meant a lot to me because we opened up each others eyes... I realised how damn small minded I was” (Karen discussing her feminist values).

**Experiences of Transcendence in Everyday Life**

Further to the above discussion, seeking transcendence to derive life meaning and purpose was also evidenced by each of the 11 research participants. Transcendence was illustrated
through each individual’s search to improve his or her capabilities through, for example, education, travel and/or reading. To illustrate, Charlotte explained, “I’m a big reader because I always like to push myself to know more”; Nyla discussed how taking night educational classes, “Was important because they keep your mind interested and occupied” and Lachlan explained, “University was a good fit for me because I want to learn about things and push myself”. Laura, Brendon and Nyla illustrated that self-growth and deriving meaning and life purpose was a never-ending process. Laura commented, “I get cross when people say they know everything because there’s always something to learn”. Brendon stated, “Do you ever really know who you are? I don’t know”. Nyla commented, “I went back to school because I was interested in doing something I didn’t know much about”.

Each research participant sought to extend his or her capabilities in a manner that held personal meaning. Each research participant identifying as Christian discussed the need to ‘grow’ in his or her faith, through, for example, studying the Bible, attending church, or attending ‘spiritual correction’. Rhys commented, “I can read The Bible more because I’m a bit periodic”; Laura discussed how she attends, “Spiritual correction each month where I discuss with others and we think about things and see whether my life is still on the right track”. Sharen explained how she seeks to grow in her relationship with God through, “Quiet reflection, and listening to Him”. Non-religious individuals sought to expand their capabilities through, for example, seeking to learn more about themselves or the world, or improving their physical capabilities through activities such as walking, cycling and yoga. For these research participants, physical exercise was equated to clearer thinking and the ability to view one’s life from an objective perspective; a conceptual characteristic of transcendence as described earlier. Charlotte explained, “I used to go to the gym a lot because it allows me to think clearer….. I’m into yoga and meditation because again that takes me to a place where I can think about things in a different light”. Nyla said, “Mental and physical well-being goes hand-in-hand. Going for a bike-ride gets me ready and alert for the day”. Amber similarly commented, “I do like to get moving and maybe dancing because it gets you energised and gets your mind ready for tasks to do”.

Certain individuals also evidenced that transcendence was experienced through a feeling of something greater than oneself. Amy, for example, explained how being close to a volcano in Vanuatu allowed her to be, “Particularly close to God because I realised how insignificant we are as people”. Lana similarly explained that, “Being in the jungle and realising there could be a tiger around anywhere makes you aware of how small you are”. Certain Christian research participants discussed how feeling a presence from God reinforced that there was a ‘greater force’ in life. Laura commented, “I do feel God’s presence and know He is real and that Earth is not the be all and end all”. Sharen explained,
“You do feel God particularly strongly once in a while and it is a reminder that faith is important”. Other individuals explained that they felt a higher presence through experiencing “intuition”, through feeling a “monkey on the shoulder” (Amber), or they have “possible psychic abilities” (Charlotte). Charlotte explained how her psychic intuition prevented a potential mugging while on tour; “I just felt this presence, and I knew if I went through that part of town at that time, I would be facing trouble from a man”.

Transcendence was also evidenced through travel via the ability to reflect upon one’s life from an objective viewpoint. In particular, a number of individuals explained how they derived personal meaning with Hands up Holidays because through being physically separated from their home surroundings, they were afforded time to consider important aspects of their life. For example, Amy, Sharen, Rhys, Charlotte, Amber, Brendon, Nyla and Karen all discussed how through travel, they were able to reflect upon their life from a different, broader perspective. To illustrate, Charlotte explained, “I was alone at my tent at night and I could meditate; I had time for myself to really reflect”. Sharen commented, “When you are so far away and encounter extraordinary things, it really makes you look at your own life in a different light”. Rhys said, “Being in Vanuatu gave me time just to spend with God”. Brendon explained, “Being in Egypt and Morocco and all these places opens your eyes to your own life”.

Further to the above, certain research participants also discussed seeking to improve themselves through engaging in a personal challenge. Sharen, Nyla, Amber, Laura, Karen and Lana explained that travel with Hands Up Holidays was a personal challenge and was undertaken partly to gain a greater understanding of one’s personal capabilities. To illustrate, Amber commented, “Doing the Inca Trail, that was always a challenge I wanted to achieve and I learnt, Amber you’re a bit stronger than you think”. Sharen explained, “We knew it would be a total shock sleeping on the floor of the longhouse, and you couldn’t just walk out! But we wanted to do it as a challenge” and Lana said, “I knew certain parts of my travel to India would be challenging but I needed to experience it to get myself away from the American way of thinking”.

**Implications**

The case for conceptually considering all travel as ‘spiritual’ is illustrated through the above discussion; all of which revealed that one does not ‘abandon’ their ‘spirituality’ (or, specifically, how they derive transcendence and connectedness) when travelling. Rather, every aspect of one’s travel is filtered through what is personally meaningful to them; all choices an individual makes, such as the choice of where to travel to, how to travel, and
what activities to engage are influenced by one’s ‘spirituality’. This discussion supports and adds further considerations towards the findings of Wilson & Harris (2006) who purported that what is happening within an individual’s life, their relationships and state of mind influence how he or she interprets his or her travel experiences. To illustrate, Laura, Sharen, Lachlan and Rhys, as devout Christians, chose to travel with Hands up Holidays because they viewed the tour operator as fitting with their personal Christian ethics and values. Laura, Sharen and Rhys selected their destinations because God had called them to travel there, and the most personally meaningful experiences gained through travel were those that fitted in with their Christian-derived meaning and purpose in life. Supporting comments include, “I strongly feel that it wasn’t a coincidence that Chris came to the church that Sunday and talked about the need for electrical help in Vanuatu” (Rhys); “I really felt that Hands Up Holidays was a good fit for my values and the quote ‘to whom much is given, much will be required’” (Laura); “Travel with Hands Up Holidays fitted with my purpose perfectly” (Laura); “I felt God calling me to travel to honour Peter” (Sharen), and “I think being able to help others resonated with me as a Christian” (Lachlan). Other individuals similarly noted that they selected Hands Up Holidays because it ‘fitted’ with what they found personally meaningful in life. Illustrative quotes included, “I saw that Hands Up Holidays was big about protecting the environment so that was important” (Charlotte); “I didn’t know anything about Hands Up Holidays but heard they were a responsible company who were doing good in the world” (Nyla) and, “If I was going to show my daughter the wrong-thinking in our society, I needed to travel with someone that believed some of the same things that I did” (Lana).

Conclusion

This paper has evidenced that individuals do not separate their experiences of transcendence and connectedness from their travel experiences. This holds considerations for how scholars conceptualise travel. Through evidencing that one’s travel experiences are influenced by how one personally experiences transcendence, and connectedness, this paper challenges the predominant discourse in tourism research which, according to Larsen, Urry & Axhausen (2007), “Still treats tourism as a predominantly exotic set of specialized consumer products that occur at specific places and times” (p.245). Tourism scholars should instead seek to elucidate a more ‘complete’ account of the personal meaning of travel to individuals by viewing travel experiences within the context of the wider lives of individuals. Specifically, this paper illustrates that one’s travel experiences often last much longer than simply the time of consumption; this supports the notion that individuals are able to transfer the meaning and benefits from their travel experiences upon their return home, and integrate them within everyday, changing lives (Wilson & Harris, 2006).
That travel experiences continue long after one arrives home from their destination was illustrated by Laing and Crouch (2006) who proffered that individuals will often derive further personal meaning from their travel experiences through discussing them with others, educating and motivating them to engage in similar travel, and in essence, being a travel ‘preacher’ (Laing & Crouch, 2006). Nyla illustrated how she acted as a travel ‘preacher’ and continued to derive personal meaning from her travel experiences after she had arrived home. She commented, “I came home just buzzing and I have been telling everyone about it, and they are saying, can you just shut up!”

The above discussion also illustrated that one does not realise the benefits they have gained from travel immediately. Sharen commented that “I think there’s a processing time afterwards where you think, ok what does this all mean” and Laura commented, “This travel really changed me and I’m sure I haven’t realised yet quite how much it has changed me”. These conceptualisations of tourist experiences are in contrast to many traditional conceptualisations which view the tourist experience as happening when one leaves home and finishes when one returns again (Ryan, 1997). The ontological conceptualisation of tourists’ experiences are developing (Uriely, 2005) but the potentiality of tourist’ experiences to be ‘spiritual’, or rather, to constitute part of one’s search for life meaning and purpose is, arguably, still yet to be accepted by all scholars.

References


