Pre-trip and En-route Characteristics of Transformative Tourism Experiences

Andrea Insch
University of Otago
Nicky Richardson
International Office, University of Otago

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Abstract:

This study aimed to identify the features of transformative tourism experiences at the pre-trip and en-route stages, providing further insights into an individual's existential transformation through tourism. Adopting the transformative tourism framework (Kirrilova, Lehto & Cai, 2017a), this study focused on the first four of this nine-step framework. Using the guidelines prescribed by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989), data was collected through face-to-face phenomenological interviews with tourists at the Orokonui Ecosanctuary – Te Korowai o Mihiwaka - in Dunedin, New Zealand. In contrast to previous research (Kirrilova et al. 2017a), findings demonstrate that the post-trip evaluation (deemed to be pivotal) need not be post-trip, but previous similar experiences can be recalled and act as a trigger for evaluation while en-route. Evidence from this research suggests that the personal state of being is a vital element in transformative predictions and outcomes. Further research is needed to confirm the findings of this study.

Keywords: transformative experiences, existential transformation, eco-tourism

Track: Tourism

1. Introduction

Existential authenticity through travel due to an individual's existential transformation is an increasingly popular topic of tourism research (Brown, 2013; Kirrilova et al. 2016, 2017a, 2017b). A review of the literature on tourism experiences and existential transformation shows a lack of consensus on the meaning of the word experience in a consumer context (Andrews, 2009; Caru & Cova, 2003). Cohen (1979) contributed to understanding of the term and recognised that not all tourists sought the same experience. Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982, cited in Caru & Cova 2003, p.270) state that: "For researchers of consumer behaviour, an experience is above all a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli which are the products or services consumed".

Arnould & Price (1993) delve into extraordinary experiences and find that these moments of being, of enlightenment, are associated with cultural, romantic and narrative scripts associated with the experience, also being in harmony with nature, feeling a sense of community and an appropriate level of challenge. Caru & Cova (2003) suggest that extraordinary experiences may lead to a transformation within the individual, and as mankind has now entered the third experience economy, consumers have changed and now seek to be transformed through tourism consumption in a meaningful way (Kirillova et al. 2017a).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997) "two main dimensions differentiate the types of experience: the skills and the challenge" (as cited in Caru & Cova, 2003, p.274). Further, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggests that if the appropriate skills for each individual are met with the appropriate challenge, then this leads to a 'flow experience', or a moment of enlightenment, or complete loss of oneself in the experience, thus opening the door for transformation to occur. What may be challenging for one person may be boring for another, so understanding individual experiences whilst at the same time potentially discovering underlying and linking themes between individual experiences is key. For the purpose of this research, 'experience' is understood to be: "A continuous interactive process of doing and undergoing, of action and reflection, of cause and effect…an experience causes the individual to change his perspectives on the world and/or himself" (Kirillova, Lehto & Cai, 2016, p.13).

Hills, Argyle & Reeves (2000) suggest that Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) theory of flow, Apter's (1982) theory of telic and paratelic activity, and a general theory of social motivation, all contribute towards understanding this motivation and subsequent enjoyment or satisfaction from an experience. The tourist's mindset plays a role in the opportunity for transformation to occur, as explained by Apter's reversal theory (Hills et al., 2000). This theory explains

how mindset – telic or paratelic - can influence experience. The telic state refers to the individual being focused on more serious goal focused activities - the enjoyment of the experience comes from the realisation of a long-term goal. The paratelic state is described as more playful and 'in the moment' - a paratelic state of mind is one open to the experience and the pleasure that specific activity brings. Both states of mind provide enjoyment but it is the nature of the enjoyment that is key. This study suggests that for transformation to occur the visitor is required to be in a paratelic mind set as opposed to a telic mindset.

One context that has the potential for a tourist to experience transformation and have pivotal 'moments of vision' (Brown, 2013) is evident from the literature - the natural world and wildlife. Kirillova et al. (2017b) further elaborates that transformative experiences are more likely to be realised when tourists are placed in an environment that includes beautiful scenery. Farber & Hall (2007), among others noted that wildlife was mentioned by over half of respondents in their study – with themes such as being able to be close to rare animals in their natural environment. The surprise and unexpected behaviour of the wild animal encounters was also found to be a theme when recounting special experiences: "While seeing wildlife is special in and of itself, opportunities to be close to animals and observe natural behaviours are extra special" (Farber & Hall, 2007, p.265).

Research on existential transformation through tourism aims to understand the variables involved in the transformational process. The framework created by Kirillova et al. (2017a), as shown in Figure 1 below, is the first structure of transformative tourism to be introduced to the literature and reveals nine chronological steps that lead to a transformative outcome. A call to study not only the post-trip evaluation of the framework of Kirillova et al. (2017a) but the pre-trip and en route aspects of the transformative process has been made, hence the need for this study (Brown, 2013; Fu et al., 2015; Kirillova et al., 2016; Kirillova et al., 2017b).
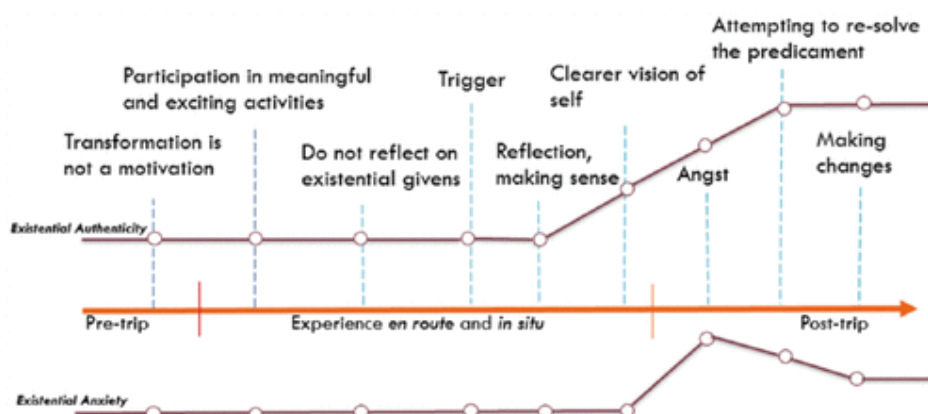

Figure 1. The transformative tourism framework (Kirrilova et al. 2017a).

Designing tourism experiences that enable existential transformation requires understanding of how the tourist interacts with the experience along given points of a pathway. The literature on existential transformation and tourism service design would benefit from further research to identify the characteristics of individual experiences along the transformative framework, particularly the pre-trip and en-route portions. Thus, the research question at the heart of this research is: What are the features and characteristics of pre-trip and en-route transformative tourism experiences?

The setting chosen to address this question was the 'Orokonui Ecosanctuary in Dunedin, New Zealand. Orokonui is a picturesque, fully fenced, predator-free area of New Zealand bush - home to many rare and endangered bird and reptile species. Orokonui was chosen as beautiful natural surroundings and encounters with wildlife are documented as special experiences that may lead to transformative outcomes (Arnould & Price, 1993; Kirillova, Farber & Hall, 2007; Kirrilova, Lehto & Cai, 2017b; Mcdonald, Wearing & Ponting 2009).

2.0 Methodology

Collection of the data was via a face-to-face phenomenological interview as part of the paradigm of existential-phenomenology using the guidelines prescribed by Thompson, Locander & Pollio (1989). The phenomenological interview context is one that encourages the respondent to feel comfortable and at ease in order for their discussion of experiences to flow – the interviewer listens and encourages rather than leads the interview. The aim of this style of interviewing technique is to hear the subjective, first person viewpoint of the person. Understanding the meaning of what the respondent is communicating without putting the interviewers' preconceived ideas or thoughts into the conversation is crucial. The interviewer is not the expert and is purely there to help the respondent feel they can recount their experience openly and freely.

A review of empirical articles revealed that phenomenological studies collected data from one to six participants (Kirrilova et al. 2017a, p. 642). Criteria for participation in the research meant respondents could not be locals, they needed to be visiting Orokonui for the first time, they must purchase an entry pass to the Ecosanctuary and due to ethical requirements be over 18 years of age. In total 8 interviews were conducted with a total of 14 participants.

Consent was obtained from each interviewee and the interviews were held on site immediately following the tour of the Ecosanctuary. The researcher asked interviewees to meet when they had returned and a complimentary drink was provided. Interviews were conducted

either in the café on site or in an adjacent meeting room and digitally recorded using a protocol. Ethical approval was obtained from the Departmental ethics committee prior to undertaking the research. The interviews were not structured, although a list of five questions was developed to guide the discussion that aligned with the study's research questions. These questions were:

1. What made you come to New Zealand?
2. How did you find out about Orokonui and why did you choose to come here?
3. Describe what wildlife you encountered and how did it make you feel?
4. Do you think you will reflect upon this experience when you return home?
5. Has this experience altered your worldview or do you think that it will when you return home?

2.1 Data Analysis

Following data collection, each interview was transcribed verbatim. All of the names used for the respondents in the descriptions of the data are fictitious to preserve their anonymity. The transcript were then analysed following the six-step guideline prescribed by Braun & Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. Four themes were identified were labelled in relation to the pre-trip and en-route features and characteristics of transformative tourist experiences. These themes, discussed in the following section, were: 1) Untouched World; 2) Close Encounters/Interaction with Wildlife; 3) The Nature of the Experience - Authentic vs. Staged; and 4) Personal State of Being.

3.0 Discussion of Findings

3.1. Untouched World: This theme was a core theme, present throughout the data set and reflects an individual's appreciation of the setting of the experience - the aesthetic beauty of the untamed New Zealand bush and its native and endemic animal inhabitants. Respondents recalled feeling as though they were part of a world untouched by humanity, an ancient place where the plants, birds and reptiles of this 'untouched world' could grow, live and exist without the interference of mankind. This theme aligns with Arnould & Price's (1993) discussion of aspects of extraordinary experiences existing alongside the notion of harmony with nature. McDonald, Wearing & Ponting (2009) also suggest that 'wilderness settings' – defined as "large areas of uninhabited land containing native plant and animal communities

relatively unaltered or unaffected by human society" (p.371) contribute to a "mix of aesthetic pleasure and renewal that can lead to a triggering of peak experiences that provides the basis for individual spiritual expression" (p.370).

Awareness of the ecosanctuary being an 'untouched world' was particularly noticeable in interview 3 with Elsa a 27-year-old woman from Sweden who visited the Ecosanctuary with her Australian partner Tim (age unknown, but approx. early thirties) who explained: "We just wanted to find a quiet little place where we could sit down and maybe listen to some bird song. It's quite hard to find a place in the world where humanity's footstep is not obvious… you can walk through the gate and feel as though you may be walking through ancestral NZ…it is like a Galapagos type ecosystem, being on an island that's been separated from Gondwana land for billions of years."

Throughout this theme is the idea that the ecosanctuary is separate from the world outside. Separate worlds – a human world and a bird world - existing alongside each other but distinctly different due to the protection offered by the predator proof fence and locked gate. Also, the different nature of the two environments – wild and untamed bush within the Ecosanctuary, man-made housing settlements and agricultural farmland on the outside.

3.2. Close Encounters/Interaction with Wildlife: The second theme involved 'close encounters' involving interactions with wildlife. Encounters with wildlife are known to create meaning and evoke emotion in people (Farber & Hall, 2007). Therefore, it was no surprise to see this theme in the data set - given that the Ecosanctuary is home to many native and endemic bird and reptile species. Farber & Hall (2007) reported that encounters with wildlife accounted for more than half of the special experiences reported by recreational visitors to the Dalton Highway in Northern Alaska.

The placement of supplementary food at stations around the Ecosanctuary offers visitors the opportunity to view many of the bird species at a very close range. This close proximity and ability to see the wildlife so clearly was often mentioned and came as a surprise to interviewees, as Linda describes: "I mean I was surprised, because you know I must admit I go into these things not expecting to see anything, you know they're often, the wildlife component is often oversold so it was really actually really nice to see anything at all."

Helen talked not only about the close proximity but the enjoyment she felt watching and hearing communication between birds: "Not scared of you, and we're very close but it doesn't walk away so that's nice. The most interesting part I think was the viewing platform and we stayed there about I don't know 15 minutes, maybe 20 minutes… there was the Kaka there and they were making beautiful sounds and calling to each other and that was really nice."

Anthropomorphism was used as a way to try to understand the birds' behaviour alongside the sheer enjoyment and curiosity about the birds in these close encounters. Miriam provided an example of anthropomorphism: "One of the Kakas was eating and birds were flying all around the place like fighting over the water and then all of a sudden this other Kaka (very animated whilst telling this story with her facial expressions and hand gestures) kind of comes in and like is hung upside down…. squawking and like saying you know I'm here! I'm next!"

3.3. The Nature of the Experience - Authentic vs. Staged: As part of the meaning of this theme, comparisons were frequently made between the differences in the way that respondents felt when viewing a wild animal in a cage or a zoo setting compared to the relative wild of Orokonui - there was a sense of appreciation and pleasure. Helen discussed how the 'wild' or 'un-staged' aspect of the experience was the deciding factor on whether they chose to enter an experience or not: "So there are also sanctuaries that we passed by, in the North Island I think, and they were way too much like a petting zoo, so then we just pass by….". She also mentions the perceived lack of containment as being pleasurable for her to observe: "I really liked that it doesn't have an extra enclosure, so that you're just walking there and you hear some rustling in the shrubberies and the bird comes out and drinks."

Lars, expressed appreciation of the authenticity and natural setting of the experience as he described his experience with Kaka: "He acted as if he didn't care, or as if he wasn't aware of us being there so it's really the bird behaving like yeah, going about its normal ways, that was nice. Because you were so close, but it was not confined, that was unusual".

3.4. Personal State of Being: This theme incorporates the interviewees' personal state of being, or their mindset, including their ability to be willing and open to the experience. This open state enables them to see the experience through fresh, unbiased eyes and allows

transformative steps to occur. How different tourists experience is discussed in the literature and attempts have been made to understand the differing mindsets that will lead to decisions pre-trip, en-route and eventually post-trip (Cohen, 1979; Hill et al. 2000).

Helen, who was travelling around Australia and New Zealand with her husband, was able to relate her state of being as allowing her to learn in a peaceful state: "Kind of a peaceful feeling maybe, yeah? Like its ok to sit there for a while and you don't have to go anywhere… you're learning something about it, it's nice to learn something new without having a headache doing it – it's not very hard to learn if you're experiencing like that…Well because it makes walking around in nature more interesting, so if you can make it more challenging for yourself then the walking is easier, and it is nicer to stay out for a few hours".

A peaceful state of mind was apparent to Brian: "It made me feel more attuned to where we were, more part of it because we are thinking of moving here… I was thinking as we were walking around, I wonder how this came to be? It was nice being in the forest…Yeah, being in like all the vegetation and… it felt nice and soothing to me." As with Helen, Brian was thoughtful and aware during his time in the ecosanctuary and felt that he wanted to learn and expand his knowledge: "Yeah, I mean I learned about the birds and stuff, and we took some time to read the signs… more consolidated we bought a book a couple of days ago about what trees – a NZ book. So, we will probably sit down and consolidate all that knowledge."

Julia was in a mindset that allowed her to not only appreciate the experience but it also enabled her to confirm how what she already felt about nature and the natural world: "I think for me it is more of a confirmation of the way I feel about nature, and how it should be… being appreciative of wildlife in general and that we should take care of what is precious to us, in terms of nature in general… And birds in particular, but um, yeah, there are so many different species out there, that is so wonderful to experience."

3.5 Steps in the Framework of Transformative Tourism Experiences

This study focused on the first four steps of the nine-step framework of Kirillova et al. (2017a) and the data fitted this framework. In addition, two respondents predicted a form of personal transformation upon returning home as a response to their experience at Orokonui and New Zealand as a whole – Helen and Brian. Helen explains: "I think in general from

going to Australia and going to NZ and being in nature, for two and a half months now that I really decided to…more time in getting to know the Dutch birds. I am already contemplating ways in which I could better remember which types of birds there are, and expand my knowledge about it." Brian was also vocal about his wish to further expand his knowledge on subjects of interest: "I mean I learned about the birds and stuff, and we took some time to read the signs and more consolidated we bought a book a couple of days ago about what trees, a NZ book. So, we will probably sit down and consolidate all that knowledge. We recorded some bird song, it was really just to try and play it on the guitar later. It was a little song, I heard it in the car park when we got out and I thought what's that? And then there was another one here so Linda recorded some of it for me."

This is a prediction of change and the only way to confirm if Helen and Brian experienced transformation would be interview them upon their return home, but post-trip evaluations was not a part of this study. Furthermore, two participants – Elsa and Jenna - experienced 'moments of vision' during the experience. The predominant difference for these four interviewees was the fourth theme - their personal state of being – they were all open to the experience in a 'paratelic' way. The two transformative outcomes had been previously triggered or primed due to being immersed in a similar experience only weeks before.

4.0 Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

This study focused on the pre-trip and en-route characteristics of transformative tourist experiences. Unexpectedly, two interviewees were triggered by a similar prior experience and were therefore further along the path of the nine-step framework (Kirrilova et al. 2017a) than expected. Time was also an important influence in this sequence of events. Participants who were not on strict time schedules were rich in time and this appeared to assist their state of mind in being open to transformation. They were able to experience in a paratelic way.

Future research into the pre-trip and en-route features and characteristics of transformative tourism experiences would be useful in broadening the scope of the current research. Due to the time limitations, this research was focused on one particular type of transformative experience in one site. Conducting research in situ around a variety of experiences known to have transformative qualities, other than wildlife encounters, and following the framework by Kirrilova et al. (2017a) could provide a deeper and more robust understanding of the current findings.

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