Research Note / Report

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Volunteer Tourism: Evidence of Cathartic Tourist Experiences

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Introduction

Ryan (1997: 1) commented, 'Holidays are important periods in people's lives. They possess the potential for cathartic experiences'. Increasingly, studies have reported the personal and experiential nature of tourism (McIntosh 1999; Schanzel and McIntosh 2000), or have considered societal change in leisure and holiday experiences (Rojek 1993; Urry 1990). However, it is argued that cathartic experiences through tourism, that is experiences on holiday that are life-changing are not the norm (Ryan 1997). This may be largely due to the hedonistic and escapist nature of traditional holidays, rather than travel for altruistic motives. Catharsis is related to emotional release following the witness of tragic event(s) that lead to a moral influence on the person that is later transferred into virtuous action (Aristotle 1963). Catharsis can also be defined as psychological relief through the expression of strong emotions (Soanes and Stevenson 2005). The term 'cathartic' is more readily referred to in studies related to psychology, counselling and art-therapy to denote life-affirming experiences, a change in behaviour or emotional release resulting in improved well-being, self-efficacy, or a more enriched lifestyle and meaningful engagement with life (see for example, Cutcliffe 2004; Durana 1996; Reynolds and Prior 2003; Russell *et al.* 1995; Turner *et al.* 2000). Catharsis, since the time of Aristotle, has also been linked to dramatic tragedies as a medium of self-discovery and the discovery of the person's role in the universe and society (Howatson and Chivers 1996). As such, cathartic experiences are encounters or activities that facilitate positive change and make a positive difference to an individual's relationship and purpose in life.

Whilst previous tourism studies have not considered the cathartic nature of tourists' experiences explicitly, there is evidence of a growing interest being shown by researchers in the positive impacts of travel on individual's and the communities they visit. This interest has predominantly fallen within the discourse on 'alternative' tourism and, more specifically, the growing interest in the meaningful experiences gained by volunteer tourists (Wearing 2001). Volunteer tourists are, 'those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment' (Wearing 2001: 1). Volunteer tourists are typically distinct in profile from other 'mainstream' tourists as they tend to be younger, are primarily motivated by altruistic motives (Brown and Morrison 2003; Simpson 2004; Callanan and Thomas 2005; Brown and Lehto 2005) rather than escapist travel motives, and do not generally pursue the typical international tourist itinerary (Stoddart and Rogerson 2004). The volunteering usually takes place in developing nations and involves a variety of environmental, welfare and community development projects. The volunteer tourism literature remains somewhat silent on the negative aspects of the volunteer tourist experience, although one notable exception is the study by Lyons (2003) who evaluated a cultural exchange programme for Australians visiting the US. More broadly, scholarly literature does highlight some problematic elements of volunteering generally, although previous studies predominantly report issues of frustration experienced within volunteer organizations (for example, Arai 2000; Ellis 1997), rather than concerning the volunteer

experience *per se.*

For travellers, volunteer tourism is shown to have intrinsic rewards; the potential to change a participant's perceptions about society, self-identity, values, and their everyday lives. Indeed, previous volunteer tourism studies have reported how, from their volunteer tourism encounter, volunteers experience self-reflection, increased social awareness and support, and experience a subsequent change to their daily lives and belief systems (Arai 2000; Broad 2003; Brown and Lehto 2005; McGehee and Santos 2005; Simpson 2004; Singh and Singh 2004; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004; Wearing 2001, 2002). As such, we argue that the nature of the volunteer tourism experience may be viewed as *cathartic* in nature. In contrast, the broader tourism literature suggests that holidays do not usually have a tremendous impact on the way individuals see themselves (Wearing 2002), although notable examples exist (**see** Noy 2004). In volunteer tourism, the nature of interaction between host and tourist is different; more profound; volunteers often become 'non-tourists' (Broad 2003). Whilst certain holiday experiences have the potential to impact an individual, cathartic experiences may be more enduring. As such, this note purports that despite increased scholarly attention to the nature of volunteer tourism, the cathartic nature of the volunteer tourism experience has not been considered from a longer-term perspective. As such, the present research note aims to proffer a longitudinal perspective of the volunteer tourist experience in order to contribute to current discourse about individuals' experiences in the context of tourism, and to raise reflections on the role of tourism research in this regard.

Study Method

The study involved in-depth interviews with participants of an Australian non-government organization (NGO) that organizes projects in which young volunteers aged between 17 and 26 years from Australia and New Zealand participate in welfare projects with partner NGOs in developing countries. The welfare projects provide on the ground assistance to communities; these may not lead to longer-term sustainable development through longer-term skills training but engage the volunteers and community in a mutual exchange. Typically, participants will be engaged in short term courses in health and hygiene, micro-enterprise management skills, assisting in community health projects, community service with children with disabilities or orphans, painting, construction of school playgrounds and classrooms, guest teaching in schools, cultural exchange and disaster relief. The Australian NGO provides no financial assistance for participants; it primarily organizes and facilitates the travel, project and community work. Each

project lasts between two and four weeks and are thus typically short-term in duration. As such, participants can be considered 'shallow volunteer tourists' (Callanan and Thomas 2005).

Five volunteer workers working on projects between 1989 and 2000 in the Philippines, India, Fiji and Tonga were selected for the ethnographic study in February 2005. In-depth interviews with the five volunteers were conducted face-to-face where possible, else over the telephone. Each interview lasted between one and three hours. The participants were known to the primary researcher as the primary researcher was either a participant or an organizer of the volunteer tourism project at the time. It was necessary to select and interview volunteers with whom trust and rapport had been established so that the longer term and potentially deeper impacts of the volunteer tourist experience on their lives could be explored. This was achieved as the researcher lived, worked and developed a relationship with them during the volunteer experiences, as well as continuing this relationship with them in the subsequent years. The five participants were all female, now aged between 23 and 40 years, and of Australian, New Zealand or Canadian nationalities.

In-depth interviews focused on the nature of the experiences the volunteers had gained; events, experiences, cultural differences that had had an impact on them; things they found the most difficult and also the most personally rewarding. Participants were asked if they were enriched by their experiences overall and if they felt they had changed personally in their outlook on life. They were asked to reflect on the years since they had participated in the volunteer projects and to explain what the lasting impact has been, if at all. The nature of the interviews was also shaped by the recounting of shared experiences and memories between the participants and the primary researcher. Each interview was transcribed or thorough notes taken. The transcripts were inductively analysed using content analysis to elicit the common themes emerging from the data; thus, the themes that emerged were grounded in the nature of what respondents themselves described (Patton 2002). It can be argued that a limitation of the research methodology was that the primary researcher was too close to the interviewees, but grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) assumes that the researcher becomes immersed in the data to enable embedded meanings and relationships to emerge (Patton 2002). The transcripts were read separately by the two researchers, to limit biases of the primary researcher, and then the findings compared. Once common key themes from the data had been established, the findings were further discussed with the participants themselves to ensure validity and reliability of the interpretation and conclusions drawn.

Study Findings

The volunteer tourists expressed a range of both enjoyable and challenging experiences and emotions in recounting their experiences of volunteer projects abroad. Their memories and recollection of events were clear and vivid. Comparing the volunteering experience to their present life, their experiences were reported to have left a deep and lasting impression. Frequently, participants recalled the difficulties they encountered in volunteering, as the following quotes demonstrate:

> The hardest thing was getting out of bed and I was told I was obnoxious. I did find things gruelling and, therefore, I did not have that much enthusiasm when I was cleaning garbage. I also found the organized timetable hard, it was hot, dirty and you had to get out and do hard work. The food was revolting; the traditional Philippino breakfast was whole fried fish, (fish head and all) and garlic rice. You can see what my attitude was like.

> Working in the slums, schools, so much poverty, and kids had no shoes and it was cold. To see the poverty of the families: a family of eight living in a garage. Visiting the slums where the kids in the school lived and to see their living conditions. The streets, had no drainage or sanitation. The kids went to the toilet in the streets. There was no hygiene or sanitation. Huge mounds of garbage, people —rag pickers, go through the garbage to see what they can find that is good to eat or exchanged for food, I was shocked.

A feature of the volunteer tourist experience remembered by the respondents was encountering and confronting suffering. In post-modern western societies, young people can be sheltered from suffering but these volunteers saw mothers with their babies in the streets begging and acknowledged their personal difficulties and discomfort when they had to deal and work with people who had severe disabilities in impoverished circumstances. Suffering provoked emotive reactions including sentimental outbursts of grief, tears, action, giving away money, and even escape. In the following quote, suffering was contextualized and seen in a different, positive light:

> It was hard to see people in hospital suffering, children in appalling conditions but their outlook on life taught me a lot. It is the relationships that one forms in life that count as one village woman told me after I asked her how has she coped with all her hardships: that it is only through embracing suffering in life that you forge your identity as a person.

The opportunity to mix and talk to a range of people in the host community provided opportunities for reflection on a range of issues related to culture, religion and the commodification of the traditional tourism product, as the following quote from one respondent illustrates:

> It was interesting to see how the local people were dealing with the tourists and what was presented to the tourists. It

> seemed like a fake world to me, especially since we had seen the 'other side' of Fiji.

Besides the experience opening up respondents' cultural horizons and helping the volunteers to place religion within a cultural framework, some also underwent a religious or spiritual experience. For respondents, religion had reportedly not been a part of their life prior to the trip. Respondents came from secularized societies in which religion is situated in the realm of the private and is generally not manifested in a significant way in the wider aspects of their culture and society. This attitude to religion was in stark contrast to the host communities where they were doing their volunteer work. Religious symbols were in the homes, in the streets, in shops and in vehicles used for public transport. The people talked freely about the role of God and religion in their life, for example:

> I did change personally, especially my outlook on life and the role of religion in my life. I was so superficial, I only cared about being cool, fitting in with the cool crowd; I was living a life of seeking pleasure.

> The Philippines was a country that was really poor and we did come into contact with some of the poorest of the poor, yet the people were happy and there had to be a reason for that, this reason was their faith. They had something that a lot of people in the West do not have and I wanted to share in what they had.

Their diverse range of experiences, their observations, their personal interactions with the other volunteer tourists and the host communities all led to consequent reflections on their own behaviour and attitudes during the service project and this enabled them to reassess and even identify their core values and assisted in their maturing process. For example:

> I questioned how could I go back to my old habits of drugs and getting drunk and only look out for a good time. I was only thinking about myself I did not gain much except unhappiness. The service project was thinking about the others. My outlook changed, I thought about things and I reflected more.

The interviews also revealed what could be described as a 'rewarding' experiential dimension. The participants experienced a sense of satisfaction and benefits from the volunteer work:

> The most rewarding thing was thinking that you had made a difference. There was this factory that was dumping toxic waste near the slum school and the kids were walking to school with no shoes through this toxic waste. We started digging canals to channel the waste away from the school. This caused such a commotion that the factory owner and the police got involved. The outcome was that the factory owner said he would pave the streets.

Volunteer Tourism: A Long Term Cathartic Experience?

In thinking about the longer-term impact of their volunteer tourism experience, an overriding theme reported by almost all of the participants, was the notion of 'giving to others' or 'the gift of self'. Instead of orientating one's life inwardly around the 'ego' or self, which can be metaphorically described as 'facing the wall', they reportedly experienced a '180 degree turn'. Now with their back to the wall, and having a broader vision and perspective of life, they reported that they see things in 'a completely different light'. The respondents discovered that only by 'going out of oneself' and 'orientating one's life and attitudes in the light of 'others' does one find meaning and purpose in life and ultimately happiness'. This is reflected in comments such as:

> In the service project, you were there to give to others. It definitely had an impact on my life; you were giving yourself, you were working for others. I got more than I gave. Ten years have passed since I went on that service project and again and again in events in my life since then, I realize that in giving you get more than you give.

The volunteer experience also reportedly led to a lasting change in respondents' values and behaviour, especially in their attitude towards material possessions and the value given to the human being; for example:

> I was living in Sydney and everything focused around the acquisition of material goods. Your value is determined by what you possess, the suburb you lived in and how you look, you just had to be up with the latest fashions. I was trapped and caught up with this mentality. During the service project I discovered that my value as a person is 'who I am' not how I appear externally. I learnt not to judge people by externals. I am far more detached from material goods. My life does not end if I do not have the latest gadget or fashion accessory.

> Even though people and cultures are different there is something that unites us all and that is the same basic need for love. I was searching for meaning in my life and I found true meaning, therefore I am at peace and no longer searching. I suppose I am still searching but I know what I am looking for. I feel I can help people to find the same true meaning that I have found.

This change in value also encompassed their attitude to family life, as the following quote illustrates:

> After the trip I wrote a letter. In it I said: In India the divorce rate is very low; there are arranged marriages, no social system for single mothers and it was obvious that they have to work hard to keep marriages together. I realized that for a marriage to be successful you had to work at it. The more years that go by in my marriage the happier I am to work hard to make it work.

Another profound impact was reported to be the sense of justice, rights and duties and the responsibilities one has towards society:

> It changed me. I realized that I could contribute a lot to society by being a better person. Starting in my own home, by being a better family member, I was a cow at home, a spoilt little brat. Then with my friends I had to be a better friend. It also goes further I have a responsibility to contribute to my community and my country.

It appears from the above quotes that the volunteer respondents' experiences of culture and religion have not only left a lasting impression but also significantly altered their attitudes to both. These attitudes, behaviour and beliefs appear to be still present many years after the actual volunteer tourist experience.

Conclusion

Wearing (2001: x) argues that volunteer tourism causes 'value change and changed consciousness in the individual that will subsequently influence their lifestyle'. The findings in this note further support this argument but also provide new evidence of the cathartic and long term lasting impacts of the volunteer tourism experience. These experiences were not 'traditional' tourism experiences; they were life changing. What the researchers did not expect to find was how deep and far reaching these changes have been on the participants; how they have coloured many facets of their outlook and views on life. 'Mindless hedonism and pleasure seeking are no longer fashionable' (Singh 2004: 2); the findings support these claims. Volunteer tourism leads one to consider the individual experience versus the tourism experience, and tourism consumption versus consumer society. Can tourism be used as a lens to gain insights into society? Has Western consumer society reached saturation point? Why are the younger generation X and Y seeking alternative volunteer tourism experiences and how will this shape future tourism consumption and other forms of consumption? Addressing these questions posits avenues for further research.

This note will conclude with a reflection on postmodern western society. Postmodernism and the consumer society deny any purpose or meaning to life (O'Donnell 2003); yet this qualitative study shows how the cathartic experiences of young volunteer tourists led to sustained ideals and meaning in life. However, 'for meaning to mean anything, some stable boundaries, fixed structures, shared consensus are assumed' (Lyon 1999:96). Yet the postmodern condition denies the existence of foundations and promotes the transient and contingent nature of both reality and knowledge (Butler 2002). If we consider tourism to be a 'lens' that probes the complex dimensions of wider society we may need to examine the link between the growth in alternative tourism experiences, of which volunteer tourism is just a part, and the search for meaning. As well, we may find constant or

intrinsic values and the transcendent as a consequence of the disillusionment with multiple meanings, truths and realities. 'All forms of social living are a reflection of prevailing times, and tourism is no exception' (Singh and Singh 2004: 119); this research note concludes that tourism is a reflection of the prevailing times.

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