



Opinion Piece

New approaches to dark tourism inquiry: A response to Isaac

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The role of emotions is likely to be more complex in dystopian dark tourism than is often proposed.
- Tourism benefits from a deeper integration of perspective—especially those found in the fast growing CCT tradition.
- Dark tourism theory development will result from an increase in novel insights.

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ABSTRACT

Dark tourism has become a rather unique realm in the tourism literature and is growing in practice. In order to fully and properly comprehend the phenomena, scholars need to more fervently embrace methods of inquiry beyond narrow positivist approaches. Dark tourism scholars can benefit by integrating techniques and approaches from the realm of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and its related realms of semiotics and aesthetics. Additionally, this paper clarifies the understanding of emotions in dark tourism and dystopian dark tourism experiences and explicates further distinctions between utopia and dystopia.

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1. Approaches to dark tourism inquiry

Utilizing approaches from the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), we can begin to answer questions and build theoretical insights that researchers ordinarily could not answer. While dark tourism and its production and consumption have seen an increase in exploration over the past number years, the layered dynamics, multifaceted nature and intersection of motivational constructs of the phenomena generally indicates that understanding cannot be reduced to convenient or structured analysis – often nested in the positivist paradigm. As the CCT tradition rose to seek introspection on consumption practices that couldn't be adequately examined through traditional economic inquiry or the positivist lens, dark tourism (and much of heritage tourism) ontology and epistemology yearns for advocacy

of interpretative approaches that follow ideas from phenomenology that emphasizes the lived experience as the basis of human behavior. As Sandberg (2005) and Prasad and Prasad (2002) mention, these interpretative approaches lead not only to new forms of knowledge but also help flesh out debates on the limitations, intersections and criticisms of both the knowledge produced and its generalizability. Dark tourism and tourism research in general has more recently found itself at the center of this meta-level debate that has been long ongoing in fields such as Marketing, Organizational Studies and Consumer Studies.

Isaac (2015) suggests that “emotions exist on two spectra viz. from light to dark and from weak to strong,” and that respondents cannot answer a question such as “how is a visitor feeling?” in our study (Podoshen et al., 2015) because we have “no systematic structure allowing such emotions to be distinguished and labeled, let alone measured.” This critique suggests a reversion to a rather antiquated and narrow model of affective range. In our original paper we examine the notion of intensity as qualities of being affected – thus looking at varying levels of affectation amongst participants. Further, Giorgi (1994) and Sandberg (2005) warn us that interpretative researchers

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often fallback on positivistic approaches (as suggested and advocated by Isaac, 2015) when justifying results. This becomes problematic when researchers seeking to integrate post-modern, semiotic or even aesthetic-centered (see Biehl-Missal, 2013; Fillis, 2014) approaches find themselves pigeon-holed in a scholarly realm that is very much dominated by the positivist disposition (Askegaard, 2014). To this we have to ask, what is systematic ... and what is structure? Further we have to ask if critiques based on positivist integration lead dark tourism scholarship down an inevitable field of narrow positivism and normative centeredness with a crowding out of alternative techniques and traditions? While the field of tourism is ripe with positivist influence and perspective and integrated with theory and inquiry from management science and related disciplines that rely on experiments, measurement and a quest for objective truth, it is welcoming to see debate and discussion about scholarly methods that search for alternative insights and perspectives. The pages of *Tourism Management* are no stranger to these controversies (see Ryan & Gu, 2010; 2011; Shepherd, 2011) and the editorship should be applauded for seeking articles that embrace post-modernism, constructivism and interpretative research. Unfortunately, *Tourism Management* is in the minority of tourism journals, and adding to the problem is that qualified reviewers with expert knowledge of interpretativism and non-“normal science” are few and far between. Often times, the review process for interpretative pieces is steered toward positivist objectivity – which results in a rather untenable situation for researcher, reviewer and the greater field of tourism. Thankfully, interested scholars can borrow theory building techniques, insights and novel approaches from related disciplines and traditions (such as CCT) that have already paved a path.

In terms of understanding dark tourism and its trajectory through the modern consumption milieu, Foley and Lennon (1996), Lennon and Foley (1999), Stone (2006; 2009), and Stone and Sharpley (2008) have paved a path of introspection and reflection that have offered incredible insight into the human condition. This path of introspection, however, is only going to move forward with a richer and deeper understanding from a blending and bridging of disciplinary techniques and knowledge. Levy's recent work (2015) amplifies the discourse about research methodology that is much more wide sweeping than narrow methods such as survey deployment and experimentation. Harkening back to Mead (1934), Levy (in press) explains that consumption (such as the consumption of death) research needs to focus on integration from a variety of sources and that the researchers need to immerse themselves in all aspects of the environment and not over rely on “scales of economy and aggregate behaviors.” To us, such a call favours triangulation of data sources, adoption of both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives in description of phenomena; as well as a willingness to consider humanist perspectives in the analysis of consumption rituals in the context of dark tourism. This follows Park (2012) call for an increase in acceptance of alternative research methods, and an uptick in participant-observation based methods in some of the top tourism journals (see Lugosi, 2014; Reijnders, 2011).

2. Emotions – a closer look

Isaac (2015) adds some valuable thoughts to emotion in tourism experiences. We, however, want to delve a bit deeper on the role of emotion in dark tourism and dystopian dark tourism. Specially, Isaac (2015) mentions that hedonic sites are the converse to dark sites. In our conceptualization of emotion we view the hedonic dimension of emotion as ranging from extremely positive to extremely negative. In short, we are not suggesting that tourists are only experiencing “dark” emotions. Instead, the DDT model suggests that emotional contagion among consumers may also center on shared (not necessarily negative) emotions/simulation (e.g., sharing the experience of the

excitement of fleeing a crime scene, etc.). Similarly, Isaac (2015) suggests that feelings are “short-lived, immediate reactions, or a more long-term mind-set changing emotion.” In our conceptualization of emotion, emotion refers to states that last a relatively short period of time, whereas moods may last hours/days/weeks, and anything lasting longer probably refers to emotional disorders or personality traits (Oatley, Keltner, & Jenkins, 2006) and are not specifically included in the scope of our model.

We take the position that emotions are short-lived reactions that come about because of exposure to stimuli (i.e., dark aesthetics/making absent death present). We would welcome dark tourism study that specifically examined personality traits and emotional disorders. Isaac (2015) claims that it is “too difficult if not impossible” for tourists to self report how they are feeling because the respondent has no systematic structure for allowing such emotions to be distinguished, labeled or measured. We believe this lies in direct contrast to much of what we know about emotion. Fehr and Russell (1984) first suggested that people think about emotions in terms of prototypes, which suggests that the experience of emotion shares a common script that allows one to label their emotion.

In a similar vein, Ekman and Friesen (1971) demonstrated that the expression of the six basic emotions is universal across cultures. Both lines of research support the idea that tourists can self-identify the emotions they experience, and many of the emotions we viewed, via nonverbal behavior, also convey felt emotion (e.g., grimacing to display disgust, etc.).

Most certainly, emotion, in general, has been defined differently by individual theorists; however, most agree that emotions serve important social functions and that they help individuals to attain their goals (Oatley et al., 2006). The emotions in our DDT model serve a social function of bringing people together in response to shared experience and allow people to pursue their goals by making sense of the dystopia through that experience. More recently, Gross and Feldman Barrett (2011) argue that all theories of emotion agree that emotion includes a collection of psychological states that encompass subjective experience, expressive behavior (e.g., nonverbal and verbal behavior), and peripheral physiological responses (e.g., heart rate, breathing, etc.). Again, this further supports our conceptualization as we discuss subjective experience in DDT (as reported by the tourists), expressive behavior (which we note), and the peripheral physiological responses are also included in the text (e.g., grimacing, gagging, etc.).

3. Utopia, dystopia and “Isolation”

We appreciate the additional insight that Isaac (2015) has offered about utopia and dystopia in “Every Utopia Turns Into Dystopia.” Where we disagree is regarding the implied isolation of dystopia as a concept. Referring to our model in Podoshen et al. (2015), we present the “cultural fascination with utopia/dystopia” as a construct on the outer layer of model – encompassing the model's process and acting as a relational bridge between “death and society” and “dystopian dark tourism consumption.” This, for us, was a deliberate attempt to explicate dystopia and utopia as enveloping curiosity present in the human condition that underlies a larger process – not an isolated variable, nor simply a rejection of utopias, since dystopian dark tourism may involve seeking out aspects of reality that rejoin a broader potential for expression and enunciation. In the model we have this fascination with utopia/dystopia dovetail with a cultural fascination of death in general, which, we believe is entirely appropriate in an increasingly violent world. While we agree with Isaac (2015) that the Holocaust was a major (if not THE major) catastrophic event in modern history, recent events surrounding ISIS, the never ending (and increasingly barbaric) wars in the Middle East and the global ugliness

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