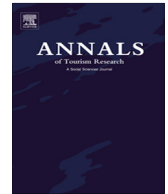




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## PARTicipative inquiry for tourist experience



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## ABSTRACT

Despite a wealth of research on the tourist experience, empirical evidence remains weak due to difficulties in data collection during people's holidays. Tourist experience has thus primarily been analysed from a *fixed* point, such as prior motivations to travel or retrospective accounts. However, this obscures important information on tourists as they transition *through* the total experience. This paper presents participative inquiry as a novel methodology for the acquisition of data before, during and after the holiday; facilitating 'prospective', 'active' and 'reflective' triangulation (PART). We provide an empirical example of PARTICipative inquiry in practice, highlighting the benefits and challenges of this approach alongside the (otherwise) hidden insights it reveals into the responsible tourist experience.

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## Introduction

The tourist experience continues to beguile and confound researchers in equal measure. It is acknowledged that the experiential dimensions of consumer engagement with brands or tourism destinations is becoming more important to customers, encompassing subjective, emotional and expressive behaviours. Tourists play an active, co-creative role in determining and constituting value-in-use through resource inputs in their experiences in destinations (Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013). Hence, firms and destinations have sought to understand goals underpinning tourist experience and to identify ways to incorporate customers' resources into experience design (Fesenmaier & Zheng, 2017). Showing that the topic is becoming increasingly holistic, Adhikari and Bhattacharya (2016) categorise experience research into four strands: definitional aspects of customer experience, formation of customer experience, consumer psychology in the creation of experience and its consumption, and effects of customer experience.

As our knowledge on the conceptualisation of the dimensions, determinants and consequences of tourist experience develops, so does the need for improved methods and approaches. However, while there has been a growth in conceptualisations of the tourism experience, and an increasing recognition that tourist experiences are complex, there has been relatively less progress on the methods used to investigate these new theorisations. In a recent analysis of the literature on tourism experience, Ritchie, Tung, and Ritchie (2011) found that only 3.3% of studies focus on methodological development in five leading tourism journals between the years 2000 and 2009, the lowest percentage across the five strands of experiential research examined.

The majority of tourism experience research has adopted 'single-point' methods yet, while useful, these can inhibit a fuller understanding of respondents' life worlds. By contrast, several studies have employed multiple methods to actively engage subjects in the research process. For instance, Cederholm (2004: 231) used tourist-generated photography during

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interviews to 'put the informant in charge of the situation and the story [they] wanted to tell', while Scarles (2010: 906) combined autoethnography and photo-elicitation within interviews to engender 'an embodied connection and understanding between researcher and respondent'. Another body of research has determined aspects of the tourism experience at two or more points in time in order to afford a fuller subjective understanding: examining tourists *before* and *on* holiday (e.g. Gyimóthy, 2000); *on* and *after* the holiday (e.g. Markwell, 1997), and, more rarely, *before*, *on* and *after* (e.g. Heimtun, 2012). It is this last, rarer type that offers the most scope for obtaining deeper insights into lived experiences across the total tourism encounter.

This paper contributes to debates on the theory-methods imbalance by presenting participative inquiry as a means of investigating consumers across the 'prospective', 'active' and 'reflective' phases of tourist experience. More specifically, we develop a comprehensive, collaborative and representative approach for examining the complete tourism experience. Not only does participative inquiry enable *emic triangulation* of the three key phases of the experience (i.e. Prospective, Active and Reflective Triangulation (PART)) – hence the term, 'PARTicipative inquiry' – but, more importantly, it is a much-needed approach for working with participants to explore their experiences in depth. It allows closer examination of 'in the moment' experiences of and by participants themselves as reflective co-researchers, allowing them to contribute their own data relatively free from researcher input. Put simply, it provides three unique yet interrelated datasets and responds to calls for innovative methodologies that 'encourage participant engagement and involvement, individual, subjective expression, and that minimise prior outcome constraints and researcher interference' (Westwood, 2007: 294).

This paper describes the practice and implications of participative inquiry, shows how it maps onto the 'prospective', 'active' and 'reflective' phases of the tourism experience, and delineates the different types of research questions, study methods and researcher–researched relationships pertinent to each. To facilitate this, we demonstrate how PARTicipative inquiry has been specifically employed in a study into consumers' ethical agency within the responsible tourism experience.

Goodwin and Pender (2005: 303) describe responsible tourism as 'a business and consumer response to some of the major economic, social and environmental issues which affect our world' by 'taking responsibility for the impacts that our actions have'. The Responsible Tourist and Traveller (2005) brochure, advocated by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, maintains that tourists can 'make a difference' by being open to host cultures and traditions, respecting human rights, preserving natural environments and eco-systems, purchasing local goods, and being attuned to local laws, norms and customs.

Although research has examined the ways in which the tourism industry constructs the responsible experience and choice-sets of consumers (Caruana & Crane, 2008), a comparatively small segment has explored tourists' understandings of responsible tourism (Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010), what it means to be, and behave as, an 'exceptional' visitor (Stanford, 2008), and how the responsible self is constructed in relation to the industry's 'ideal type' (Caruana, Glozer, Crane, & McCabe, 2014: 127). To this end, Tolkach, Pratt, and Zeng (2017: 83) emphasise that little attention has been afforded to 'the role of tourists as agents of ethical judgement and decision making'. This is problematic as, firstly, Weeden (2011: 215) contends that responsible tourists are motivated by a 'range of priorities' and are not immune from engaging in a 'trade-off behaviour [with ethics] for reasons of convenience, price and quality'. This suggests that ethical dilemmas may arise prior to and during the holiday which consequently lead to post-trip dissonance for any unresolved, or partly resolved, moral anxieties. Secondly, McKercher, Weber, and Du Cros (2008) find that tourists deploy multiple post-hoc neutralisation techniques to justify their purportedly socially inappropriate behaviours at contested sites. This intimates that responsible tourists are prime subjects for highlighting how actual ('active') behaviour may conform to, or deviate from, initial ('prospective') moral projections in a way which necessitates subsequent ('reflective') rationalisations and resolutions to be ascribed. It is clear that due to the above conceptual issues, responsible tourism is an exemplary context for studying consumers across their complete experience; and that PARTicipative inquiry stands to advance method-theory gaps in (responsible) tourism experience research and broader social science methodology.

## Participative inquiry

Participative inquiry is defined as 'a process of sequential reflection and action, carried out with and by' participants (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995: 1667). Participants are actively encouraged to be involved in decision-making and agenda-setting throughout the research process, addressing the typical imbalance of power between the researcher and *subject* (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) by amplifying their voice (Bowd, Özerdem, & Kassa, 2010: 4). Sohng argues that this increased attention to researcher–subject dialogue ultimately results in 'entirely new ways of thinking about issues' (2005: 77). Put simply, researchers and respondents become 'co-producers of knowledge' (Phillips, Kristiansen, Vehviläinen, & Gunnarsson, 2013: 1).

Reason (1994) outlines three types of participative inquiry: participatory action research, action inquiry and co-operative inquiry. A key principle of *participatory action research* is its orientation towards social improvement (McTaggart, 1997). Here researchers and participants collaborate at the group level to identify a research problem, collect data and accrue knowledge that will be of direct benefit or pertinence to the – traditionally disempowered – population studied (Reason, 1994). *Action inquiry* requires individual participants to self-observe their 'moment to moment' actions so as to expose potential perspective shifts or deviations from intended behaviour(s) (Torbert, 2001: 208). *Co-operative inquiry* lends itself to the study of the

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