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Transformational tourism as a hero's journey

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Transformational tourism is an emerging form of tourism that deserves better attention from researchers and reviewers. This article provides a better understanding of the phenomenon, its varieties and its different stages, drawing on the metaphor of Campbell's archetypical journey of transformation: hero's journey. Using a phenomenological approach, the article tries to shed some light upon the conditions of the touristic experiences that foster transformation. Eight factors were identified: personal situation, being away doing unfamiliar activities, interaction with people, live the moment, difficulty, setting, reflection and integration. The three stages of the hero's journey (departure, initiation and return) are subsequently applied to describe the transformative travel process. The paper concludes with implications for research and professional practice.

Keywords: transformational tourism; hero's journey; IPA; spiritual tourism

Introduction

Once upon a time, a formerly prosperous land was devastated by a crisis. The king was corrupt and only cared about the perpetuation of his power. One hero took on a journey full of obstacles and perils. He found wisdom and enlightenment and he came back home deeply transformed. He became the new king, sharing his new-found treasures with all his people.

That is the structure of many classical stories and myths usually referred to as the hero's journey, a narrative pattern identified by Campbell (1949). He extensively researched and compared ancient mythology from every culture and found that all of them had major similarities. They all described the same "monomyth": the typical adventure of the archetype known as The Hero, a person who goes out and achieves great deeds on behalf of the group, tribe or civilization. He considered it as a metaphor for the transformational experience that everyone goes through towards becoming a whole and contributing member of society. The hero's journey is the adventure of living and we are the hero destined to take journeys, defeat dragons (i.e. problems) and find the treasure of our True Self.

This pattern can be perfectly applied to travel. The transformative potential of travel is widely recognized. Some tourists intentionally use tourism to undertake their personal hero's journeys. However, most experts agree that the transformational dimension of tourism remains underresearched (Lean, 2009; Wilson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013).

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The purpose of this article is to explore tourism as a means of personal transformation, using the umbrella term of transformational tourism (TT). We will conceptualize TT and analyse some of its varieties, through a review of literature from a broad range of disciplines, and then using a phenomenological approach, we will identify conditions of the touristic experiences that foster transformation. The paper concludes with implications for future research and professional practice.

Transformational tourism

Personal transformation is a change in the way we feel about ourselves and the world. It is a non-linear process involving self-reflection and the adoption of new and broader self-definitions. Ross (2010, p. 54) defines personal transformation as

... a dynamic sociocultural and uniquely individual process that (a) begins with a disorienting dilemma and involves choice, healing, and experience(s) of expanding consciousness towards the divine; (b) initiates a permanent change in identity structures through cognitive, psychological, physiological, affective, or spiritual experiences; and (c) renders a sustained shift in the form of one's thinking, doing, believing, or sensing due to the novelty of the intersection between the experiencer, the experience, and the experiencer's location in time.

The pioneer on the subject of transformation is Mezirow (1978), who defines it as the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of the basic worldview and specific capacities of the self. He developed the transformational learning theory based on the recognition that everyone possesses the emancipating potential to break free from their own situation to transform their life.

Transformation has long been associated with travel. Ross (2010, p. 54) considers that travel, "when approached in a conscious way, can be a widely available, individually tailored, and enjoyable way to gain self-awareness, spiritual experience, and an expansion of consciousness". Kottler (1998, p. 14) claims that there is "no other human activity that has greater potential to alter your perceptions or the ways you choose your life". According to Kottler (1997), travel often takes people into unfamiliar situations, allowing them to experiment with new ways of living, and to readjust their lives to meet their needs.

Kottler (1997) first introduced the term transformative travel into scholarly discourse. He defines it as a process that involves the actualization of "something missing" driven by "intellectual curiosity, emotional need, or physical challenge" (Kottler, 1998, p. 26). Robertson (2002, p. 4) also refers to it as the "result of a process that begins with some type of experience that does not fit within the boundaries of the traveller's assumptions, expectations, worldviews, or cultural paradigms". Ross (2010, p. 55) provides an interesting and more recent conceptualization: "sustainable travel embarked upon by the traveller for the primary and intentional purpose of creating conditions conducive for one or more fundamental structures of the self to transform". In her opinion, to be considered transformative travel, the transformation must be intentional on the part of the traveller.

Today, legions of tourists travel to India for instruction in the various ways of Eastern meditation, test their limits practicing extreme sports such as bodyboarding or canoeing, undertake pilgrimages to Compostela or Mount Kailash, backpack around the world, attend courses or conferences on Kabbalah or integral theory, experiment with shamanism and sacred plants in Peru or Mexico, participate in voluntary or missionary tourism, visit power places such as Stonehenge, experience special events such as full solar eclipses or winter solstices, or attend Buddhist or Christian retreats.

But, as Gallagher (2012) points out, TT is not really a new concept. Early pilgrims can be considered as the first transformational travellers and the Grand Tour or the spiritual travels of the hippies are clear predecessors of this emerging trend. The difference is that much of what they looked for then is now easily available. So why is this type of tourism increasing? Social reasons are certainly important. Consumer society has convinced us that we have material desires and aspirations upon whose satisfaction depends our happiness. That is why many people confuse true happiness with substitutes such as pleasure, satisfaction and the euphoria that material consumption and entertainment provide. The result is often existential emptiness, a common disease of the consumer society.

As Pearson (1989, xii) puts it:

Underneath the frantic absorption in the pursuit of money, status, power, and pleasure (...) are, we all know, a sense of emptiness and a common human hunger to go deeper (...) each of us wants and needs to learn, if not “the meaning of life”, then the meaning of our individual lives, so that we can find ways of living and being that are rich, empowered and authentic.

That human urge towards meaning and fulfilment acts as a catalyst towards TT experiences. Theories that reduce tourism to “travelling for pleasure” are simplifying this complex human behaviour. Iso-Ahola (1997) suggested that the two fundamental dimensions of motivation for leisure are seeking and escaping. Many forms of mainstream tourism have an important component of escapism while TT is very much related to seeking. As Cohen (1979, 1996) points out, some people use traditional tourism as the great escape mechanism from the growing pressures of everyday life (i.e. tourism as escape from reality). But people cannot escape eternally, and the spiritual vacuum produced by the lack of meaning of our lives needs to be addressed. MacCannell (1976) argues that tourists seek change because they feel alienated and unable to find satisfaction in their own society. In this context, TT is used by some people as an escape from the fiction of their lives. This illusionary life has to be unveiled in order to seek for and eventually discover their true self and find liberation (cf. Cohen, 1979, 1996).

An authentic experience is one in which individuals feel themselves to be in touch with a real world and with their real selves (Handler & Saxton, 1988, p. 243). So, transformational tourists are, in effect, looking for existential authenticity, a special state of being in which one is true to oneself (Wang, 1999). Wang (1999) suggested that existential authenticity, as an activity-related situation, provides an explanation of a greater variety of tourist experiences than object-related notions (i.e. objective and constructive authenticity), and it is certainly central for TT. Travel becomes truly transformative when it reveals our true self, a self that may never have existed before the travel. TT challenges preconceived notions about the world and oneself serving as a rite of passage from the old self to a new self. It is all about the inner journey, a journey into oneself, a voyage of discovery where the object discovered is a new transformed self. The outer journey is a vehicle for an inner journey. The physical trip is the expression of an existential journey that brings maturity, wisdom and completeness to those who undertake it. Externally the tourist may be looking for Shangri-La, but actually what he or she is really looking for is his or her True Self. The individual uses the tourist experience to increase inner awareness, and foster change and spiritual growth (Reisinger, 2013, p. 27).

Method

The research methodology we used is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004). It is distinct from other phenomenological approaches because of its combination of psychological, interpretative, and ideographic components. It was developed specifically for the investigation of how people make sense of their experiences. Its central concern is the subjective experiences of the individuals.

The purpose of IPA is to attempt to gain an insider perspective of the phenomenon being studied (Smith, 1994). IPA acknowledges that it is not possible to access an individual's lifeworld directly; so the interpretative activity of the researcher is the primary analytical instrument.

Data collection

We gathered qualitative data from research participants using a combination of in-depth individual interviews, and two group interviews.

The boundaries of the group were defined by the research question, that is, individuals who had participated and had an interest in transformative travel. We tried to find relevant and varied exemplars within the otherwise fairly heterogeneous group of TT.

IPA studies are conducted on small sample sizes. IPA is committed to a detailed interpretative account of the cases included and this can only be done on a very small sample. Five or six has been recommended as a reasonable sample size, and even the developer of the methodology has been arguing the case for the single case study (Smith, 2004). So, for the individual interviews, nine participants, all of them Spanish, were purposively selected (see Table 1). They consented to confidential semi-structured interviews that lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour each.

There was a script of questions to be covered but the interview process was flexible, more like a conversation, because in this type of interviewing the intention is to encourage the participant to speak about the topic without as little prompting as possible (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 57), allowing them to cover anything they felt appropriate, and convey their experiences with minimal direction. The idea is to get as close as possible to what the respondent thinks about the topic, without being led too much by the questions. Focusing down was achieved by a combination of empathic playback (e.g. paraphrasing), interpretative playback (e.g. checking an interpretation) and gentle probes to tell more, clarifying and venturing more deeply into an experience.

Interviews began with questions about the participant (demographics and psychographics) and their travel experiences. Subsequent questions focused in the transformative

Table 1. Interview participants.

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Type of tourist
P1	Male	46	Spiritual (shamanic)
P2	Male	24	Educational (study-abroad)
P3	Male	47	Spiritual (retreat)
P4	Female	35	Spiritual (pilgrimage)
P5	Male	34	Adventure
P6	Male	51	Therapeutic (constellations)
P7	Female	28	Volunteer
P8	Female	25	Backpacking
P9	Female	47	Dark tourism

travel experience of choice, and were open ended, allowing participants to discuss their thoughts and feelings about TT, and to raise their own issues. The interview schedule included questions concerning motivation; process of the trip; positive and negative experiences of travel; overall perception and issues about transformation achieved. Interviews were taped and full verbatim transcripts obtained (Smith, 1994).

In order to supplement further information, two group interviews were conducted: one related to a Zen retreat (seshin) and the other to an ayahuasca ceremony organized by a rural tourism company. In the first one, there were 51 participants, while in the second one 18. Two of the participants were later selected for in-depth individual interviews (P1 and P3). In both cases, there was a pre-experience (focused in motivations and initial feelings) and a post-experience discussion (focused on the experience itself and integration and evaluation).

Data analysis

The aim of the analytical process is to create depth by revealing certain truths while retaining the complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence of participants' experiences.

In the first stage, each interview was analysed in detail from scratch, recording anything that appeared significant and of interest. Potential meanings were identified and recorded using key words (strongly grounded in participants' own words). Other cases were similarly analysed and compared in order to identify recurring themes and to examine ways in which participants' responses differed. When "unique" themes were found in individual transcripts, all other transcripts were checked for evidence of these themes. In the second stage, provisional meanings of the first case are tested within the next and so on using a process of analytic induction (see Johnson, 2004) where the participant's account can bring to light issues unanticipated by the researcher and their questions, and the researcher, taking a theoretically sensitive stance, begins to think about how they can be conceptualized. Meanings are then integrated into a coherent thematically organized theoretical narrative that represent all cases without losing sight of their fundamentally idiographic origin. As the analysis progresses, existing theory can be endorsed, modified and/or challenged. The third stage consists of further reducing the data by establishing connections between the preliminary themes and clustering them appropriately into superordinate or master themes, which conveys the conceptual nature of the themes therein (Smith, 2004).

Results

Eight themes were identified related to factors or conditions that contribute to transformative experiences. All of those themes were subsequently grouped in three superordinate themes. The rationale for those master themes was the stages of the Hero's Journey. In terms of structure, the hero's journey normally follows a model consisting of a departure from the known world, initiation to some source of power and a return to live life more meaningfully:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell, 1949, p. 30)

Stage 1: departure

The hero's journey begins in the everyday world. "The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds . . ." (Campbell, 1949, p. 78). So, often when the call is given, the hero first refuses to heed it. This may be from a sense of duty or obligation, fear, insecurity, a sense of inadequacy, or any of a range of reasons that work to hold the person in his or her current circumstances.

Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture", the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless. (Campbell, 1949, p. 23)

Finally, the hero decides to make a booking (what Campbell calls "The Crossing of the First Threshold") expressing his or her commitment to undergo the metamorphosis.

A special personal situation (theme 1) such as a life crisis or major life transition is a common trigger that initiates the stage of departure. It provokes what Mezirow (1995, p. 50) calls a "disorienting dilemma" that immerses the individual in a process of self-examination and critical assessment that ends up in discontent and recognition that others have travelled the same path:

The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there is something lacking in the normal experience available or permitted to the members of society. The person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. (Campbell, 1949, p. 152)

- Theme 1: Personal situation: According to the literature, it is an important factor in two different ways: as a motivator to travel and as a catalyst for change. The influence of personal life events may change how an individual derives personal meaning and life purpose from or through tourism (Wilson et al., 2013). Many of the study participants talked about their life situations as catalysts of the decision to change. There were divorces or sentimental breakdowns, illnesses, deaths in the family and dissatisfaction with their lives (work, lifestyle, environment, family, etc.). "I just needed to get away," "my current circumstances pushed me here", and "I was in a dead end and this trip was the only exit I could find" are examples of statements that reflect the kind of limit situation some participants had reached. Other participants were in a moment of their lives where they were ready to experiment with new things. P1 experienced a sort of serendipity feeling: "After knowing for many years about sacred plants, and refused to experiment with them in this opportunity I knew that the time had come. It was like a call." For P3 it was his lifestyle: "I'm a curious person. I'm always trying new things: rebirthing, family constellations, Bach flowers, reiki, yoga . . . I'm always looking for the next big thing. That's the way I am."

Stage 2: the journey

The second stage is the journey itself. The tourist leaves the known limits of his or her world and ventures into a new place (theme 6) where the rules and limits are not known. The traveller confronts a series of tests and trials that start the process of transformation, as a result of seeing and doing unfamiliar things (theme 2), or interact with other people (theme 3).

Dragons have to be slain and difficult barriers have to be overcome (theme 5) that demand full attention (theme 4) and reflection (theme 7).

- Theme 2: Unfamiliar places and activities: As Reisinger (2013, p. 28) puts it “transformation takes place where one can engage with the unknown: with unfamiliar places, people and their activities”. An anti-structural activity such as tourism, marked by the separation and the absence of the known structures of the home/the known makes more feasible the possibility of experiencing new and different ways of being (Wang, 1999). Being away was an important factor for many participants. P6, enrolled in a family-constellations therapy, clearly stated that he would have never done something like that at home:

“Anonymity was an important issue for me. If I had found people that I knew that would have conditioned me enormously. Probably I wouldn’t even have participated in an activity like that at home. Being away allowed me to be myself and do whatever I wanted to, without any further thoughts.”

While away, tourists enter a state of liminality that frees them from the social structures that encumber their normal lives (Graburn, 1989). As tourists take advantage of the relative anonymity and freedom from community scrutiny, they are more ready to embrace change (Harrison, 2003). P2 identified being away from familiar settings as a result of his study abroad as one of the primary reasons for his personal evolution: “It was the first time I was really on my own. I was free to make my own decisions and everything was a learning experience, from the moment you woke up in the morning: the language, the people, the food (. . .) Certainly, the absence of the usual influences of parents, family, friends, etc. gave me freedom to experiment with new behaviors (. . .) In my life there is a before and after that trip.”

Tourism provides a suspension of social norms. The result of being apparently freed of the constraints of the everyday social context can be illuminating in itself even if they are substituted by other norms as in the case of P3:

“The norms during the retreat were very strict, and very different from the norms you normally follow. For example, not being able to talk was a limitation but at the same time was liberating, because you did not have to engage in casual pointless conversations, just for protocol . . . You had all this time for yourself (. . .) And then the rituals you had to follow like oriyoki (the eating ceremony) and samu (mindful work) seemed stupid at the beginning, but they served to break your thought structures, to question your usual ways of doing things, and to immerse in the activity forgetting everything else.”

- Theme 3: Interaction with people. Most of the participants talked about the social value of the experience. P4 emphasized that what rendered her pilgrimage to Santiago transformational (“The Way”) was sacrifice, solitude, connection to nature, and communion with others. About this last topic she said:

“The Way is also about the relationship with the other. It is sharing and solidarity. Suddenly people you don’t know become like brothers and sisters. It is an experience of communion and fraternity, a realization that we are all One.”

Even in the case of the Zen retreat, where silence was a requisite, many of the participants talked about the interaction with others. A female participant (aged 25–35) thanked the group “for the positive energy I felt from the others. It really gave me strength to get through the retreat. I could feel the energy and the love of the group when I was meditating.” Those findings are totally in line with Wang’s (1999) who maintains that tourism can give access to authentically experienced

communitas. When it comes to intercultural experiences, the basic premise of the transformational power of interaction is the “contact hypothesis”, that is, that social contact between two different ethnic groups will result in a change of attitudes, preconceived stereotypes, and prejudices (Amir, 1969). The hypothesis was confirmed by P2, the student, who said “the element that influenced him most was meeting people from so many different countries”. For P8 it was exactly the same: “Backpacking on your own gives you plenty of opportunities to meet new people. You are more open to that than if you are traveling with others. You get to know people of all kinds and of all places, and that is something that necessarily opens your mind.”

According to Reisinger (2013, p. 28) the encounter with an “other” can provoke, using Mezirow’s terminology, a “disorienting dilemma” through which a person’s “orienting frames” and “habits of mind” are questioned driving the transformational process. For example, P7 worked as a volunteer in mapuche communities of Peru: “You come from a Western world where you have everything in the palm of your hand and you get to a world where everything is difficult, even the most basic things, and you have to get used to it. What is really shocking is to see how this people living in the most extreme conditions of poverty maintain an attitude of great generosity and altruism . . . I was hosted by a volunteer girl who was poorer than most of the people there . . . Imagine that”.

She concluded: “It changed my life and my career path. Since then I was determined to work helping others and being socially active.”

- Theme 4: Presence. During the holidays there is a temporal discontinuity that allows you to abolish the sense of time and live the present, not thinking about the past and not worrying about the future (Eliade, 1971, pp. 54–55). All the world’s religions recommend living in the moment with full awareness. Zen Buddhism is especially known for its emphasis on “nowness”, on being present and enjoying the moment. Mindfulness was an intrinsic part of the experience of the participants in the Zen retreat. As P3 explained: “Everything we did was intended at focusing in the activity we were doing, be it meditating, eating, working or strolling. The Master told us that meditation is nothing esoteric; it is only about focusing on your breathing. That is a very powerful message if you are able to understand it: forget about anitya, satori, nirvana and all that. The main teaching of the Buddha is breathe. Everything comes as a result of focusing on breathing” Other participants also described the importance of being present, as P8 (“I hate those tourists that are all the time taking pictures, or seeing videos or talking to the phone. Can’t they just do one thing at a time? They are just seeing reality through a screen and they are missing the real thing”) or P4 (“When you are concentrated on just walking you are able to connect to Mother Earth, perceive the smells, the heat of the sun and feel all those things that normally go unnoticed and you only sense when you are on your own”) noted.
- Theme 5: Difficulty. The road to the self is never easy for the seeker (Eliade, 1971, p. 40): “The road is arduous, fraught with perils, because it is in fact, a rite of passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to divinity”. All of the transformational trips included moments of hardship. For some it was surprising, as for one of the participants in the sesshin, who said jokingly: “I thought a retreat was quiet and relaxing, but at the end of the first day I felt as if I had been working in a mine.” For others, suffering and sacrifice was part of the experience as was asserted by P4, and P5 stated that “if

there is no suffering, then you are not pushing yourself enough. You have to challenge yourself; you have to test your limits to know how far you can go with fear or pain.” However, this was accepted by all of them as a necessary condition of the trip. As P1 expressed it in this epic way:

“Obviously I was very afraid (shit-scared is the word) of possible bad trips or negative effects of the drug. But despite my fears, I knew by intuition that it was going to be a very powerful and revealing experience. I knew the hour of death and rebirth had arrived.”

Actually, the narratives of the ayahuasca psychonauts were really scary. The potion typically produces dramatic physical, mental, and emotional changes but, surprisingly all the participants in the retreat considered the suffering they went through a part of their physical and spiritual cleansing so all of them qualified the experience as extremely satisfactory and transformative.

- Theme 6: Setting. Setting had an influence on most of the participants. P4 and P5 experienced powerful feelings of connection to nature and a desire to be less destructive to the planet. Many of the participants talked about the “energy” of the place. P4 felt it when she visited Machu Pichu. P8, in his visit to an ancient sacrificial place in Mexico (he could not remember the name), felt that he was in a “power place”. In his visit to Auschwitz, P9 was very impressed by the place itself:

“That was the place where millions of people had been massacred. It had an atmosphere that made you feel the pain and the suffering of the victims of the biggest atrocity in European history. You could feel what happened in a way that no book, documentary or movie could convey.”

- Theme 7: Reflection. Kottler (1997) notes that personal change through travel is the result of acknowledging and labelling an experience as meaningful through reflection. Most participants supported the notion that reflection during and after the experience is key to transformation. P4 was looking for solitude in her pilgrimage because she needed time to reflect about herself:

“That was a main motivation in my trip. Time to scrutinize yourself and have a deep dialog ... You are alone with yourself and the challenge. At those moments you can be yourself, let yourself be and feel the mystery you are.”

The numerous meditation sessions gave participants of the Zen retreat plenty of opportunities for reflection. One participant stated it beautifully: “Total isolation from the outside gives you the chance to connect with the inside.” Methods of reflection used by the participants were varied: Meditation was intrinsic to P1, P3 and P4’s activity; P1, P3 and P6 attended during their experiences group sessions facilitated by guides and teachers; P1 “had the urge” to write about his ayahuasca experience, and also P2 and P7 engaged in reflective writing in journals; P2, P4, P5 and P8 shared their journeys in social networks; and P5 had a travel blog; most of them wrote emails where they reflected upon the experiences; and all of them had numerous conversations during and after; photos and videos were considered important to trigger post-travel memories of the journey.

Hopefully, at the end of the journey, transformation is achieved as P1 expressed:

I knew that nothing would be the same again, and that I would return transformed by this powerful experience. Everything that is in the spiritual books, the Tao, the Kabbalah, all the lessons from the great spiritual teachers, Jesus, Buddha, were true. Now not only I knew the way. I have walked the way.

With the heuristic methodology used, it is impossible to classify the different experiences according to their transformative power, but the accounts of the ayahuasca participants were probably the ones that emphasized more the powerful transformative effects of their experiences. In the case of the zen retreat, the transformational results were also very relevant, but it appeared to be more profound for the less advanced participants. Other interviewees who said the activity marked a before and after in their lives were the pilgrim and the student. Then, we could say that spiritual tourism is the most transformational one. This is not surprising since transformation is often its central objective, whereas in those belonging to the body and mind dimension, transformation is more likely to be a side or unintended effect.

Stage 3: return

The last stage is the Return. When the quest has been accomplished, the hero must return with his life-transmuting trophy. This responsibility is sometimes refused because the tourist feels much more at ease with this new life he/she considers more authentic than the old life (Cohen, 1979). But the full round of the monomyth requires that the hero does not go far enough to abandon social order, and social responsibilities altogether.

Adapting to home society again, with its order and responsibilities, may cause a regression to the old inauthentic self, the most common danger of this stage. The authentic self has been only experienced for a relatively short period of time, within the “liminal zone” that holidays create (Graburn, 1989), where one keeps a distance from societal constraints (prescriptions, obligations, work ethic, etc.) and inverts, suspends, or alters routine order and norms just because of their non-ordinary nature (Wang, 1999). In this case, tourism would be a gateway to transformation only in appearance, but in actual form it would serve merely as an escape mechanism that restores the order of everyday life (Robledo, 2015, p. 78).

The real challenge at the end of the transformational trip is how not to fall prey again of yesterday's profane and illusory existence and substitute it with a new life that is real and meaningful, as a result of the experience learned. The trick in returning is to retain the wisdom gained on the quest, to integrate that wisdom into a human life (theme 8) and then figure out how to share it with the rest of the world. The tourist has to be ready to come back and adapt to home society again and, if possible, bring the runes of wisdom, the treasure found, back into the kingdom of humanity.

In doing so, the transformational tourist may enlighten others by enabling them to appreciate their potential to be authentic too (Smith, 2013, p. 62). We already mentioned in theme 7 that the propensity of the participants in the study to share their experiences with others, and who knows if that would be the call to adventure and transformation for another person.

We identified two subthemes related to the stage of return, theme 7 had elements of the journey and we already analysed it, so the only one left is theme 8:

- Theme 8: Integration. The literature acknowledges that the occurrence of an individual or isolated experience does not guarantee long-lasting transformation (Chandler, Holden, & Kolandar, 1992). While one tourist experience may move a person in the right direction, habit must be incorporated into one's life if transformation is to occur (Heintzman, 2002). In line with the literature, this was the most important factor identified by the participants. As one recognized, that is

the case for zazen: “This is good for nothing if we don’t keep on doing it on a regular basis. Lasting, committed, daily practice is the only way.” P6 talked in the same way: “What you achieve here will disappear if you don’t feel committed to change on a day-to-day basis.” Another participant in the ayahuasca session agreed: “The effects fade away little by little, and then it is only up to you.” At the end of the day, it is a matter of motivation. Participants who were more motivated to engage in those kinds of activities were more likely to experience or use their time for integration. In fact, Heintzman (2002) suggests that it is not necessarily the activity, but the motivation that one brings what influences development and transformation.

Conclusions

The full potential of tourism lies in providing experiences that transform and give meaning to the lives of the people. This article is a contribution to the limited research in TT. Unlike other prominent authors in the TT literature (e.g. Little, 2012; Reisinger, 2013; Ross, 2010), the premise we have adopted is that TT is more an experience than a discrete category of tourism. Transformational opportunities can arise as a result of almost any kind of tourism, although there are typologies where transformation is more likely to occur.

The study highlights the multi-faceted nature of TT and offers some interesting insights into its conditions. Eight factors were identified as conditions contributing to the transformational experience: personal situation, being away doing unfamiliar activities, interaction with people, living in the moment, difficulty, setting, reflection and integration, being integration the most important for the participants. The travel experiences of the subjects interviewed reflect the stages of Campbell’s monomyth (1949). We were able to classify the different themes obtained in the research in three master themes that correspond to the hero’s journey stages of departure, initiation and return. Those stages constitute the structure of the transformational tourist process. The spiritual dimension seemed the one with more potential for transformation, according to the participants in the study.

The arguments presented correspond to and build on previous studies (e.g. Reisinger, 2013; Ross, 2010) and are rather suggestive for further research possibilities. First, quantitative research can test and confirm if the experiences of the participants in this study are representative of such a heterogeneous collective. Our results could be the raw material to generate a survey that could be used to gain an understanding of the degree to which others hold the sample’s views. Secondly, a better understanding of the motivations and profiles of the transformational tourists is necessary for the good design of TT products and services. Marketers and policymakers should also further consider the transformational potential of their tourism products and the suppliers of this kind of tourism need to be analysed in depth since in many instances they are not traditional providers. Also, reviews of marketing material would help analyse how the industry markets its products in terms of their transformative power. If TT is more an experience than a type of tourism, it would also be very interesting to explore the relationship between TT and experience management, a very useful link for practitioners who want to explore how to create transformational experiences. Another interesting avenue of research is to explore TT from the viewpoint of existential authenticity. The article explores in several instances this relationship, but a more thorough analysis would certainly be of interest.

A limitation of the study is that we have no evidence if the transformation of the people was real (there can be a lot of performativity and construction and some self-defeating) and long lasting, and if it was, it is hard to affirm to what extent it was linked predominantly to

the travel experience, as opposed to a complex mix of factors. The only thing we can say is that the participants had the impression of having changed as a result of the experience, and that this change would be long lasting. That is something that could also be investigated in the future using more objective methods of research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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