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Exploring Youth Perspectives on Quality of Life and Tourism: Policy and planning implications

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Introduction

The concept of Quality of Life (QoL) is implicit in conceptualisations of tourism, especially those used to develop and guide tourism policy and planning. At the individual level it is assumed that travel offers a number of different ways to improve the QoL of the tourist, through contributions to physical health, stress release, learning and skills building. At the community level tourism development is typically presented as a tool to improve or enhance the QoL of destination residents. More recent analyses of the actual contributions that tourism makes to the QoL of destination communities have demonstrated both the complexity of the concept and suggested that tourism may not always make the assumed QoL contributions. Research to date on the links between travel and individual QoL has focussed mostly on describing the range of contributions, especially for younger travellers and specific forms of tourism such as volunteering, backpacking and educational tourism, often associated with youth tourists. This research does have, however, a number of issues including problems with survivor bias and a reliance on inferring the QoL contributions from descriptions of travel experiences. This paper seeks to contribute to improving our understanding of the linkages between QoL and tourism through an exploratory study of young people's social representations of QoL in general.

By studying representations of Qol outside of the tourism context it is possible to more critically examine the role that tourism might play at both an individual and a community level. At the individual level it allows for an analysis of how important travel is, if at all, in QoL, while at the community level it provides insights into how tourism impacts could affect younger destination residents. Improving our understanding of the relationship between tourism and QoL has implications for several aspects of tourism policy and planning related

to product development, choices about directions for destination development, and the provision of access to travel opportunities for citizens.

QoL, Well-Being and Happiness

Growing public awareness of and concern about sustainability is linked to measurement of aspects of life and society beyond indicators of economic growth (Aspinall et al., 2011; UNDP, 2013). Recent discussions of sustainability have increasingly used the concepts of QoL and wellbeing as core elements to explain the range of factors that need to be considered in moving to more sustainable practices (Costanza et al., 2007). While there is generally consensus about the factors that make up QoL, it is often used interchangeably with the term wellbeing and there is considerable confusion and inconsistency in the use of these and other related terms such as happiness and life satisfaction. A more detailed examination of the literature suggests that QoL should be seen as an umbrella or overarching term that relates to an "overall assessment of human experience" (Costanza et al., 2007, p. 268). It refers to the degree to which basic needs are met (Barwais, 2011). These needs include; physiological needs (water, food, health, protection), security (a safe and stable place to live and work, and the opportunity to earn an income), belongingness (access to social networks, opportunities to be part of social, cultural and political activities), and self-esteem (the ability to have the confidence and knowledge to make decisions) (Sirgy, 2002; Clarke et al., 2006; Costanza et al., 2007; Malkina-Pykh & Pykh, 2008). Wellbeing results from the positive evaluation of QoL combined with overall life satisfaction and positive affect such as happiness (Camfield & Skevington, 2008; Diener, Scollon & Lucas, 2003).

QoL, Tourism and Destination Residents

Recently, a number of tourism researchers have begun to study in some detail the contributions that tourism makes to various aspects of the QoL of destination residents (Moscardo, 2012; Aref, 2010; Guo et al., 2013). Common to these studies has been the use of different forms of capital to organise and examine the processes that determine the nature of tourism impacts on the places and peoples visited. This research has examined the connections between tourism and the stocks of:-
- Social capital, including levels of trust, cooperation, and reciprocity and the number and nature of networks;
- Cultural capital, including opportunities to engage in traditional rituals and activities and stores of arts, crafts and heritage places;
- Human capital, including the health, knowledge, experience and skills of the people who make up a community;
- Natural capital, including the goods and services provided by the ecosystems and processes in the natural environment;

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- Political capital, the opportunities to access and influence political decisions; and
- The more traditional forms of capital related to wealth, and economic assets (Andereck & Nyuapane, 2010; Macbeth, Carson & Northcote, 2004; McGehee, Lee, O'Bannon & Perdue, 2010; Moscardo, 2009).

Two key themes are emerging from this research. The first is that the nature of both the relationships between tourism and these different forms of capital and between the capitals themselves are complex. It is clear that in many situations the economic benefits of tourism, if they exist, do not always lead to improvements in the other forms of capital (Michalko, Bakucz & Ratz, 2013) and it is these other forms of capital that are often more important to destination residents (Moscardo, 2012). The second key theme is that different styles of tourism and different characteristics of the tourism development process can be linked to different impacts on the various capitals that make up QoL (Moscardo, Konovalov, Murphy & McGehee, 2013). In particular volunteer tourism, educational tourism and slow tourism have been identified as likely to produce better overall outcomes (Moscardo et al., 2013; Weaver, 2012).

Qol and Youth Tourists

Alternative forms of tourism such as educational tourism and volunteer tourism have been linked to youth travel and younger tourists have been the focus of a number of studies examining the benefits of travel for their QoL, although not all studies have explicitly used the QoL concept (Pearce et al., 2011). Pearce (2012), for example, reviews research into young people as volunteers and studies of learning and self-development associated with backpacking, concluding that positive tourist experiences make a contribution to several aspects of individual QoL including health, skills development and the creation and enhancement of relationships. Similar results are reported by Sin (2009), Bagnoli, (2009), Coghlan and Gooch (2011), and Brown (2009).

Collectively these studies seem to suggest that young tourists, or at least a significant portion of them, gain considerable QoL benefits from travel. Unfortunately the research as a whole suffers from three major issues – a tendency to downplay or ignore evidence of negative QoL impacts from travel, survivor bias, and inference from descriptions of travel or descriptions of benefits in other domains rather than direct examination of what QoL means to the individuals. Pearce (2012), for example, reviews a series of studies by one research group that has demonstrated a link between positive emotional states and enhanced immune systems. He then argues that this supports a link between the role of travel in developing relationships that contribute to positive emotions and improvements to health in backpackers. Not only are the links inferred rather than demonstrated directly, the argument ignores the substantial literature that directly studies tourists and has identified a wide range of negative health impacts of travel in general (WTO, 2010) and specifically for

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younger tourists (cf., Piyaphanee, et al., 2010; Vivancos, Abubakar & Hunter, 2010). The inference of travel benefits from descriptions of travel experiences is a common technique in this area, with many authors then going further to infer QoL improvements from these benefits. There are two problems with the extensive use of this approach. Firstly it assumes that travellers are sufficiently self-aware to report on their cognitions and that the way they describe their travel experiences to others directly mirrors their internal cognitive and affective processes. This assumption is difficult to sustain in the light of psychological investigations into what people can and cannot accurately report (Custers & Aarts, 2010). It is highly likely that the way people talk about their travel is, at least in part, a reflection of their representations of what they perceive is socially desirable travel behaviour (Sripada & Konrath, 2011). Lyons, Hanley, Wearing and Neil (2012) note that a heavy reliance on this type of qualitative research technique limits our ability to more critically and systematically analyse the topic. Finally there are issues with survivor bias in that all the conclusions are based on research with individuals who have travelled (see Gelman, 2013, for a discussion of this form of selection bias). Tourism research in general has ignored both those that want to travel and cannot, and those who can travel and choose not to (McKercher, 2009). Moscardo's (2009) netnographic analysis of people who have travelled and make a conscious decision not to do again, highlights a range of ways in which tourism has negative impacts on the QoL of these individuals.

In order to better understand the connections between tourism and QoL it is necessary to examine it in a wider context and to directly assess individual perceptions of QoL and the possible role that tourism might play. The present study sought to attempt this type of analysis by exploring in a non-tourism context the social representations that young people have about QoL and related concepts.

Social Representations Theory

Social representations theory evolved in the intersection between social psychology and sociology and seeks to describe the everyday explanations that people use to help them understand the world they inhabit and to make decisions and take actions. Social representations can be defined as "mental constructs which guide us [and] define reality. The world is organized, understood and mediated through these basic cognitive units. Social representations consist of both concrete images and abstract concepts, organized around figurative nuclei which are a complex of images" (Halfacree, 1993, p. 29). They are the link between the psychological constructs of attitudes and cognitive schemata that individuals develop from their experiences and social learning, and the concept of representations used in sociology and anthropology to describe how groups create shared social realities (Moscovici, 2001). Social representations theory has four key elements:-

- Social representations are built around images which summarise key elements;

- Social representations are created from social interactions and the sharing of experience and information;
- While social representations may begin within individuals and are often modified by individuals, once established they exist independently of any one individual and are strengthened through repetition in the media and expression in popular culture; and
- There are three types of social representation, hegemonic representations that are often widespread and endorsed by powerful groups, emancipated representations that exist within specific and well-defined groups and polemical representations which arise from social conflict (Moscovici, 2001; Philogene & Deaux, 2001; Howarth, 2006).

Research Aims

Social representations theory has been used to explore a number of aspects of tourism (cf., Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Deery & Jaogo, 2010; Dickenson & Robbins, 2009). The focus of social representations theory on linking individual and social aspects of everyday theories makes it potentially relevant to exploring the ways in which tourism is linked to Qol and its related concepts in social realities. This study focusses on young people because their voice is not often heard in academic accounts of tourism development, management or policy. Checkoway (2011) notes that this is a problem in the wider community development policy and planning field, although there is growing recognition of the need to address this issue. Young people or youth are typically defined as being aged between 15 and 24 (UNESCO, 2013). Currently this age group includes two cohorts, Gen Y or Millenials and Generation Z. While much has been claimed about the characteristics, values and behaviours of these cohorts, what is of relevance to the present discussion is the fact that this segment of the population are a critical group of contemporary and future tourists and destination residents. Most of the discussion of youth in tourism has been about them as travellers or as workers (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010) with little discussion of QoL from the perspective of young people. This paper reports on a study conducted with youth to identify the meanings associated with the terms of QoL/ Wellbeing/ happiness and their relationship to tourism in an Australian context.

Methodology

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted with a sample of young people to identify dimensions of Quality of Life, personal wellbeing and happiness and their relationship to tourism. The study participants were students in an undergraduate business degree at a regional Australian university. Students agreed to participate as part of an exercise to demonstrate qualitative research methods in action. The study was conducted in three stages. In the first stage participants were organised into groups of 5 to 8 people. A total of 15 groups were created with 93 students ranging in age from 18 to 25 years, with 54 female

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and 39 male participants. The group was relatively culturally homogenous with most having a white Euro-Australian background.

Each individual was asked to write down their definition of wellbeing, happiness and quality of life. The research examined all three of the concepts in recognition of the close linkages between them. Then the groups discussed their individual definitions and worked on developing a single definition for each group. These group definitions were then recorded. In the second stage individuals were given 15 pages with multiple images selected at random from a pool of magazine pages. The overall pool was created by randomly removing 10 pages from a variety of popular magazines including the categories of entertainment, lifestyle, fashion, health and fitness, those targeted at women and men, sports, recreation, vehicles, gardens, crafts and homes. To be included in the pool at least half of each page had to contain images. Participants were asked to browse through the pages and identify those images that they associated with each of the three concepts under study – QoL, wellbeing, and happiness. Again the group then discussed these choices before deciding on one image for each concept. In the third stage the groups were asked to provide a detailed explanation of their image choice. This explanation was guided by a variation of means-end analysis with the first question asking them to identify the important attributes in the image. The second asked what the image represented or symbolized as a way of understanding the benefits attached to the images. The third question sought to identify underlying values and asked why these symbols were important seeking.   The study thus combined three qualitative research elements, the exploration of individual and group interactions to generate social representations through the use of images to support a semiotic and means-end analysis.

Semiotics is a research philosophy that seeks to interpret messages in terms of their signs and patterns of symbolism. A sign can be a word, a sound, or a visual image and has two components, the signifier (the sound, image, or word) and the signified, which is the concept the signifier represents, or its meaning (Deely, 1990). Semiotics now considers a variety of texts, using Eco's (1979) terms, to investigate such diverse areas as movies, art, advertisements, and fashion, as well as visuals. Semiotics has been used extensively in marketing and consumer behaviour research to analyse the rich cultural meanings of products and consumer consumption behaviours as texts. While in tourism we find studies by Uzzell (1984), Cohen (1989), and Dann (1993) are the earliest efforts in the examination of the semiotics of tourism advertising. More recent efforts have been made with work predominantly in the area of tourist marketing (Metro-Roland, 2009; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Pennington et al. 2010; Hunter, 2012). Semiotics does not associate itself with a single method. Deely (1990) writes that semiotics has given rise to a variety of methods and should not be associated with one method but should "establish its theoretical framework with sufficient richness and flexibility to accommodate itself to the full range of signifying phenomena" (1990, p. 9).

The means-end model developed by Gutman (1997) proposes that values are dominant factors in human decision -making. The technique is based on the proposition that people select from different options based on perceived attributes of the choice that provide benefits. The benefits sought can be linked to values. Therefore the means-end theory is a way of systematically conceptualising a hierarchical model of three interconnected levels; attributes, benefits and values. Connections between attributes, benefits and values and how these three levels relate are established and are called ABV chains (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Means-end analysis has been used extensively in consumer behaviour and marketing (McGrath, 2010) and is increasingly being adopted in tourism research to examine tourism behaviour and values. (Klenosky, 2002; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2009; Pike, 2012; Canavan, 2013).

Taken together this methodological approach offered a unique way to examine the key elements of social representations including the interaction between individuals within social groups, the use of images as a central element of the social representations and the linkages between these images and the underlying values of importance to the social groups under investigation. This kind of research strategy that seeks to explicitly examine the outcome of social interactions within groups, rather than using groups as a way to access individuals, has been recognised as a particularly useful approach to understanding everyday realities (Halkier, 2010) and especially appropriate for research with young people (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010).

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 provides a summary of the most common elements included in the definitions of the three concepts and an overview of the linkages between them. The most common themes in the definitions of QoL were balance between all aspects of life, the achievement of goals and aspirations and the meeting of needs. The following examples were typical of the sample overall:
- "Being able to afford to meet your need and have a work life balance"
- "Financial stability, good work-life balance, freedom of choice, simple things that you value, sustainable and happy lifestyle"
- "Balance of work/leisure, a family and friends, material goods to live comfortably, combination of health and well-being, opportunity to grow, develop and achieve"

The most common theme in the definitions of well-being was health with most recognising multiple facets of health. Examples included:
- "State of physical, mental and spiritual fulfilment in one's life"
- "Ensuring physical and mental health through a balanced lifestyle"
- "Physical, mental and emotional health"

The most common elements in the definitions of happiness were positive affective terms. For example:
- "Smiling, laughing, experiencing joy and calmness, no stress"
- "Satisfied with your life, people around who love you, appreciating who you are and what you have in life, enjoying the moment, positive responses"

The definitions shared multiple elements and it was not uncommon to find one term used in the definitions of another, reflecting the close relationships between them. Despite these overlaps the pattern in Figure 1 shows that overall the youth groups organise the three concepts in a similar way to that described in the academic literature with QoL linked to meeting needs and aspirations and resulting from a combination of well-being and happiness.

Figure 1: Key Elements of, and Connections between QoL, Wellbeing and Happiness Definitions
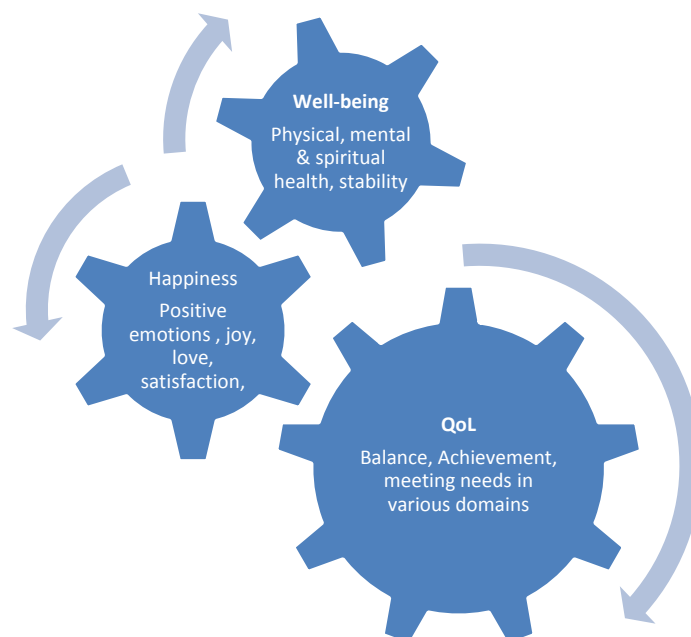
In the second stage the groups chose a single image to represent their definitions of QoL, wellbeing and happiness. They were asked to describe what the image symbolized and to explain why that was important. The images were grouped together in broad categories that shared not only common pictorial elements but that also shared similar meanings. Table 1 contains the results for definitions of happiness. The groups chose three main types of images to represent happiness. The first and most common were pictures of people, often families, socialising and enjoying time together which were reported as symbolising family and relationships and connected to love and contentment. A second category of houses, cars and material goods was also identified signifying success, status, wealth and freedom

which in turn were seen as characteristics of comfort. The third category, making up seven out of the fifteen images, included pictures linked to tourism. These images included umbrellas on a beach and people on holidays in various locations. These tourism images were linked to leisure, relaxation, good relationships and the ability to travel and through these to release from stress, exploration and escape from reality.

Table 1: Images of Happiness

Image	What the image means	The values associated with these meaning
People/families socialising	Family, relationships	Love, contentment
Houses/cars/ material goods	Success, wealth, status, freedom	Comfort
Tourism/holidays	Relaxation, good relationships, ability to travel	Exploring the world, release from stress, escape from reality

Table 2: Images of Wellbeing

Image	What the image means	The values associated with these meaning
Exercise/sport	Fitness, physical activity, physical health	Health
Healthy food	Physical health	Health
Being in natural environment	Natural goodness	Health
Tourism/holidays	Relaxation, balancing life and work, reward	Relaxation/escape from stress

Table 2 summarises the data for social representations of wellbeing. In this case four types of images were selected – exercise/sport, healthy food, being in natural environments and being on holiday.   The images for the most part were simply linked to physical health through exercise, fitness, good food and clean, natural environments. There were only three tourism related images and these were connected to health through relaxation, and as a mechanism to balance life and work and escape from stress. Table 3 contains the relevant details for the images selected for QoL. The four types of images here were people spending time together, houses/boat/material goods, nature/sustainability, and tourism. As might be expected the images of people spending time together were described as symbolising togetherness which in turn lead to connectedness. The house/boat category symbolised wealth which was connected to achievement and self-esteem. The nature/sustainability images symbolised the need to improve the environment reflecting concerns about the health of the natural environment. Finally the four tourism related images were seen as

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symbols of fun and reward for hard work and connected to financial security, freedom and new adventure experiences.

Table 3: Images of QoL

Image	What the image means	The values associated with these meaning
People spending time together	Togetherness, work-life balance	Connectedness, happy families
House/boat	Wealth	Achievement, self-esteem
Sustainability/nature	Improving the environment	Healthy environment
Tourism	Reward for hard work, fun	New experience, adventure, financial security, freedom

Overall the young research participants described a social representation of happiness as being positive emotions resulting from being with others, having freedom, relaxing and escaping from stress. Their social representation of wellbeing was focussed on physical and mental health resulting from exercise, healthy food, clean environments and escape from stress. Their social representation of Qol was one that stressed balance, achievement and the meeting of needs in the areas of relationships, achievement, adventure, security and freedom. This is consistent with the academic conceptualisation of these concepts.

Tourism was most strongly connected to happiness, but was also chosen as a symbol for well-being and Qol, although to a much lesser extent. Although tourism was connected to all three concepts there was considerable consensus in the nature of these connections. Tourism offered happiness and supported well-being through relaxation or escape from stress. It could be argued that this role of tourism as a source of stress escape or release links it indirectly to QoL as QoL is itself partly determined by perceived well-being and happiness. Tourism was also linked directly to QoL through its perceived role as a symbol of reward for hard work and financial security and through these it reflected values linked to adventure, new experiences, financial security and freedom. It is also important to consider what tourism was not linked to. It was not described at all as linked to self-development or learning and it was not strongly associated with families or relationships. In summary there appear to be two main mechanisms that connect tourism to Qol in these social representations. The first, which focusses on the individual, is an escape from work and stress release mechanism that supports physical and mental wellbeing. The second

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mechanism, which focuses on the presentation of self to others, is that tourism is seen as a symbol of the financial security and work achievement.

Conclusions & Implications

Before developing implications it is important to recognise some cautions in the use of the results from this study. The sample is one of university students in an affluent developed western country. Although not necessarily wealthy in comparison to others within Australia, in a global sense as a group they are very affluent, educated and have multiple opportunities for development and learning. Their interpretation of escape is that it is escape from work related stress not from the challenge of everyday living under severe economic and social constraint. So the results of this study are not relevant to understanding the importance of social tourism in wellbeing and QoL (McCabe & Johnson, 2013). The group is, however, typical of those likely to be volunteers, to take a gap year and be backpackers, all forms of youth tourism that have dominated academic discussion in this area.

The social representations of QoL, wellbeing and happiness described by these students were offered without any discussion of tourism at any stage of the research process. Despite this, images of tourism were selected by some groups as the core of their social representations.   These choices indicated that tourism can contribute to QoL through relaxation, escape and stress release or as a symbol of status or wealth. Many tourism policies are based on assumptions about what different types of tourists want, whether or not certain types of tourists are desirable, and how to manage the destination to both attract and satisfy these desirable tourists and manage their negative impacts. Policy based on inaccurate assumptions in these areas is likely to fail. Thus mistaken assumptions about youth travel have implications for the development of policies in the areas of product development and choices made about different tourism development options at destinations.

Based on the current academic literature on the ways in which travel contributes to the QoL of individual tourists, various forms of youth tourism such as gap year travel, volunteering and study abroad programs, for example, are often assumed to be about self-development and learning, especially in the areas of citizenship and cultural awareness. While this might actually happen for some individuals, the present study suggests that the young participants are much more focussed on happiness, escape and stress release than learning and development as global citizens. This is consistent with both academic research into the health problems associated with risky behaviours linked to excessive alcohol consumption and drug taking (cf. Dalman & Stafstrom, 2013) and media coverage of both large and small scale youth tourist partying. Moscardo and colleagues (2013) reported on destination residents in three Australian regional destinations describing green nomads or young conservation volunteers as desirable tourists to attract. The researchers noted that many of

these residents had little direct experience of this form of tourism basing their views on social representations of what these tourists were seeking and how they were likely to act. Such positive views about young people as green nomads and students need to be tempered with recognition that these youth tourists will primarily seek escape and parties.   Policies about these forms of tourism need to explicitly recognise these issues and more proactively manage both safety of young travellers as well as the mitigation of impacts of destination residents.

The results also have implications for thinking about tourism futures and sustainability more broadly.   If young people consider tourism as a symbol of wealth, social status and achievement of financial security then we might expect them to seek more luxury tourism options as they move into employment. With significant growth in the emerging middle classes in countries such as Brazil, China and India it is likely that this social representation of tourism will be adopted putting pressure on destinations to develop luxury tourism, which can be very difficult to manage in terms of high environmental impacts and considerable social costs. A social representation of tourism as contributing to QoL through conspicuous consumption is not one likely to support improvements to the sustainability of tourism in the long term.

The results of the present study offer some suggestions for alternative pathways to Qol including enjoying time in quality natural environments, eating healthy foods and spending time with family and friends.   These are all activities that can be encouraged at home and without conspicuous consumption. Academic and policy analysis of how tourism contributes to QoL is currently focussed on identifying and highlighting all the positive linkages in an attempt to justify tourism as something more than another form of discretionary consumption. These efforts might be better spent in exploring how options other than tourism might make equal and/or better contributions to the QoL and wellbeing of young people.

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