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Stone, Matthew J. and Petrick, James F., "Reflections on Learning from Domestic Travel" (2015). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 18.
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REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING FROM DOMESTIC TRAVEL

by

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Visual Presentation

2015 Travel and Tourism Research Association Conference

July 2015

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INTRODUCTION

“We travel to have enlightening experiences, to meet inspirational people, to be stimulated, to learn, and to grow,” stated travel writer Rick Steves (2009, p. vii). Yet, many of the learning benefits of travel have not been empirically demonstrated. Pearce and Packer (2013) recently asked researchers to determine “what new skills and competencies” people gain from tourism (p. 401). It is believed that the determination of what knowledge and skills can be learned outside the classroom (in particular through travel experiences) could enhance individuals’ overall education and assist them in becoming better citizens.

Understanding of the educative outcomes of travel would thus likely be useful for educational institutions, travelers, families, destinations, and tourism businesses. Schools may elect to dedicate more resources to travel learning and to improve offerings like class trips, while tourism providers and marketers may be able to better plan and sell experiences resulting in visitor learning. Thus, this study seeks to investigate what and how individuals have learned from their domestic travel experiences. The following questions guide this study:

- What types of learning (if any) do people express from domestic travel experiences?
- What learning outcomes (if any) have they seen in their children from travel?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Travel for educational purposes is often traced to the Grand Tour of the 17th to 19th centuries (Brodsky-Porges, 1981). Today, educational travel is one realm where travel learning occurs, and study abroad has been shown to result in skills like inter-cultural competence, communication, and personal and intellectual development (See Forum on Education Abroad, 2012; Wilson & Richards, 2003). Yet, only a few scholars have studied out-of-class learning. Some considered out-of-class experiences that students had while traveling abroad (e.g. Coryell, 2011; Lamet & Lamet, 1982; Langley & Breese, 2005; Laubscher, 1994). Others found learning to have resulted from long-term, international travel (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Inkson & Myers, 2003; O’Reilly, 2006; Pearce & Foster, 2007), but learning outcomes from short-term or domestic travel is lacking (Stone & Petrick, 2013). In one of the few studies of domestic travel, Mouton (2002) conducted a qualitative study of adults, finding that much of the learning was built from reflection. She found that interactions and encounters, self-understanding, and reflection helped the respondents to derive meaning from their travel experiences.

Other authors have hypothesized ways in which learning can occur from travel. LaTorre (2011) expressed how she learned about a variety of topics, including geography, history, art, religion, and food through travel. Byrnes (2001) used the term “travel schooling” in describing how parents can help their children learn through family travel. She suggested that travel can provide opportunities to learn life skills, like problem solving and patience. While researchers have begun to empirically show learning from travel, there is much that is not known.

METHODS

The primary objective of this study is to learn more in-depth about life experiences related to travel. Because a goal was to identify themes and insights, rather than generalizable conclusions, interviews with a non-probability sample were deemed appropriate. Because previous researchers (e.g. Scarinci & Pearce, 2012) focused on international travel, this research

sought Americans who have traveled primarily within the United States. This study used in-depth semi-structured interviews of women (n=7) with children who did not have extensive travel experiences. It has been suggested that the voices of significant others (including family members) is beneficial for tourism research (Pocock et al, 2013), so parents were also asked to reflect on their children's travel learning. Three interviewees were friends of the researcher, and four were referrals. This purposive sampling resulted in a variety of residences, educational backgrounds, and jobs. The women ranged in age from 32 to 43 ($\mu=37.9$) with one to three children (mean=2). Children ranged from 2 to 19 ($\mu=8.7$). They lived in four different states, and mentioned traveling to an average of five different states each, although they may have also visited other states. Pseudonyms are used for anonymity.

After getting information about the individuals' travel experiences, questions were asked about travel and learning, including: Please tell me about any trips where you feel like you learned? What was it about this trip that you feel led to learning? When did you realize you learned from this trip? All of the interviewees had traveled with their children, and they were asked to talk about what and when they think their children learned from traveling. Thus, the intent was to discover parents' perceptions of their children's learning. Data was approaching saturation, as a majority of Pearce and Foster's (2007) generic skills had been addressed. A content analysis was conducted, and the categories and audit trail were peer reviewed by another tourism researcher. Resulting categories were also compared to Pearce and Foster's (2007) generic skills and La Torre's (2011) proposed methods of travel learning for triangulation. The portions of the paper regarding each individual were shared with the respondents for accuracy.

RESULTS & CONCLUSION

This paper identified ways in which travel is perceived to have resulted in learning. When asked to reflect on past trips, a majority of respondents found it difficult to describe exactly how they learned from travel, but every individual recounted stories demonstrating travel learning. Learning did not seem to be immediate, following the lifetime learning principle that knowledge is gained from an accumulation of experiences (see Falk et al, 2012). Denise stated, "I guess unless you're really forced back to think. . .you really don't know that you learned something until much later in life." A key finding is that it was often easier for the respondents to speak of the learning they observed in their children than on their own learning. This learning was demonstrated through behavioral change, observation, or interaction. Thus learning outcomes included those within themselves and observed in their children.

One of the easiest learning outcomes to recount was cognitive knowledge gain, often from visiting historic sites, museums, or natural attractions. For example, respondents learned about geology at a cavern, Mark Twain's literary history at Hannibal, Missouri, and history from Martin Luther King, Jr. historic sites and the Alamo (four respondents). Although educational experiences were part of many vacations, none mentioned traveling solely to learn.

Respondents also expressed practical skill, interpersonal skill, and individual growth outcomes from traveling. Many of these correlate with Pearce and Foster's (2007) generic skills learned from international travel. Thus, it appears domestic travel may have similar learning outcomes. Practical knowledge learned included planning and organizational skills. Traveling taught Kathy's children the importance of planning ("If you don't pack a drink you don't have one.") and patience ("It will just happen when it happens. It doesn't revolve around what they want when they want it.") Jill also learned patience from long car trips as a child, and she has noticed her kids learning patience from long flights to visit grandparents.

Vacations have also resulted in acquisition of inter-personal skills, like manners and etiquette. Tara said that her daughter has learned hotel etiquette, including how to behave in a hotel room, and Pamela mentioned that the act of staying together in a confined space made her learn to get along with others. Every respondent also mentioned an experience that could be considered as the expanding of the mind and seeing new perspectives. Kathy reflected on seeing much more diversity by traveling than in the small town where she grew up. This exposure to different situations and locations allowed individuals to experience eye-opening situations that they likely would not have experienced at home. "I think [travel] makes you worldly. . .to learn from different people [and] different regions" (Denise).

Overall, a theme evolved that travel is necessary for a full education, and some perceived it to be superior to classroom learning. Michelle stated, "I think [travel] should be a part of the basic curriculum. . .there's only so much you can learn from books, I think." Sandra felt travel learning lasted longer: "I think it sticks in our minds and even the kids' minds a lot better if they were actually at a place and saw it and learned about it instead of reading about it." Denise agreed that "anything hands on is always better than a textbook." Pamela also found it easier to learn through experience: "I think you pick it up more quickly living it."

Travel experiences were said to lead to an increased quest for knowledge. Just as classroom education can be enhanced by hands-on activities, so may it be enhanced by travel. Learning from travel had extended beyond the visit into daily lives, as respondents spoke of situations where travel learning was recounted in daily life and magnified in impact. "I think the kids . . .come home talking about it, reminding you of it, and talking to their friends about it. And I think that sparked their interest a little more than, you know, just sitting in the classroom and reading a book about it or listening to a teacher" (Sandra). Classroom learning can also impact travel learning, as when Michelle noticed how her son was able to connect classroom learning about the Alamo with a visit to the site. Overall, the respondents felt that travel was beneficial to their learning as well as their children's.

There are implications of this research to tourism providers. Because individuals perceive that travel can result in learning from many types of travel experiences providers may call upon this knowledge to learn how to provide more in-depth, impactful, and meaningful learning experiences, whether at a museum, a natural attraction, or even a hotel. This would further cement the role of travel as a potential educator. Once schools and educators understand the value of travel, they may follow Byrnes (2001) ideas to encourage "travel learning" and provide better resources for parents to help their children learn. Travel may help create better students by helping them learn attributes that will help them excel in a classroom. As Petrick and Huether (2013) suggested, educators may "prescribe" travel to their students in order to enhance their education. There is a great opportunity for further study by comparing the results with learning from other demographic groups and cultures. Building on the insights gained from the current study, different travel experiences or travel environments could also be explored.

There are limitations to the current research. In particular, it utilizes a small sample, no quantitative results of learning were measured, and it is difficult to subscribe learning outcomes to one singular cause. Additionally, there may be differences based on type of transportation, travel companions, and distance traveled. Finally, it asked parents to describe learning in others. However, a qualitative research paradigm allows participants to tell stories which supported their own conclusions that their children learned from travel. Overall, this research begins to shed light on understanding ways in which individuals learn from travel.

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