

Thoughts on Experience: Introduction to the Special Issue

Special Issue Guest Editors

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We are pleased to present this special issue on the Experience Phenomenon. As we stated in the call for papers, experience is ubiquitous. It seems everyone wants to provide experiences these days including retail businesses, tourism agencies, event planners, sport managers, leisure providers, marketers, arts managers, and museum curators. These seemingly diverse organizations share a common goal, an intention to provide experiences, preferably memorable experiences, and sometimes experiences that serve to transform people's lives.

The frequent use of the word *experience* could cause one to assume it has a clear meaning that is shared by most people. But experience has many meanings, and research and theory development about the phenomenon are lacking. *Experience* is often used as or with a modifier to add worth to an endeavor. We refer to customer experiences, purchasing experiences, dining experiences, tourist experiences, leisure experiences, and many others the reader has likely seen.

But the meaning of *experience* is far from universal. In fact, it is commonly and appropriately used as two different parts of speech. Experience can be either a noun or a verb. In the instances of customer experience, purchasing experience, dining experience, tourist experience, and leisure experience, *experience* may be intended to serve as a transitive verb. (Technically, this usage would be phrased, "I experienced being a customer," "I experienced leisure," "I experienced fine dining," etc.). In this case, "experience" modifies an activity or encounter, suggesting something about the flow of consciousness during the activity or encounter. Participant experience may thus be characterized as embracing satisfaction, delight, disgust, disappointment, or other related states or sequences of motivation, cognition, attention, and emotion.

But *experience* can also be used as a noun. "I gained work experience," and "I have international travel experience" are examples. In these cases, *experience* describes

an objective set of circumstances (i.e., work or international travel), but it does not communicate anything about the flow of emotion, motivation, cognition, or attention during that activity. Was the activity fun? Were we delighted? Terrified? Disgusted? Spiritually moved? Did the activity facilitate our growth or learning? Was it transformational?

This ambiguity is not a problem in daily conversation. It is easy for people engaged in a conversation to elaborate. The ambiguity does, though, become pivotal when scholars endeavor to study experience and when service providers craft missions, objectives, and offerings around the experience concept. In performance-based budgeting, for example, the intended meaning of *experience* in a goal determines whether the metrics used to gauge performance are as simple as participation counts or whether more complex measures of satisfaction, delight, and similar experiential outcomes must be included. Much more important, our intended meaning is that circumstance determines whether our goal is to deliver a recreation service or to stage the more rich and complex challenge of a memorable recreation experience.

Given this ambiguity, we were not certain about the types of papers we would receive as a result of our published call for papers. We found that a focus on experience led to very diverse submissions. We are grateful to all who contributed, as all works submitted added to the discussion about experience and this overview piece. Six papers were submitted, and three were accepted for this issue. The papers published provide three diverse perspectives on experience, and they suggest some innovative approaches to studying park, recreation, and leisure experiences.

Graham Berridge accepted our invitation to contribute the lead paper for this issue. He is a senior lecturer and teaching fellow at University of West London, UK, and the Course Leader for Events Management. His book, *Events Design and Experience* (2007), is a major contribution in collecting applicable theory about experience and testing its application with a series of case studies of a variety of events. His contribution to this issue demonstrates how *in situ* participation of experience might be investigated. It is a welcome additional method that moves beyond post hoc surveys that only investigate summary judgments, not changes in perception of one's experience as it develops *in situ*.

Graham's work includes attention to a key issue in the development of a social science about recreation experiences: the need for developing innovative techniques to investigate the dynamic and emerging qualities of experience. The innovative method that he used adds to the research and evaluation toolkit of event providers and scholars. Graham's goal was to "...understand the experiences of individuals attending a themed entertainment event and the changes in those experiences over time." He used a "two-pronged qualitative data collection process" in a natural setting, blending the well-known experience sampling method with interviews and qualitative methods. Data collection occurred in two phases. First, a semistructured interview was conducted with the event organizer to determine the organizer's intentions with respect to guest experiences. Subsequently, guests' motivational states were assessed at five preselected occasions during the event. This procedure allowed Graham to quantify guest experiences, measure change over the course of the event, evaluate individual differences in the flow of experience over the course of the event, and relate guest experiences to the experience design intentions of the event provider.

How program design and staging may be used to achieve intended outcomes is demonstrated by the contribution of Mark F. Roark, Ann Gillard, Faith Evans, Mary Sara Wells, and Marissa Mikami Blauer. The piece is a continuation of work Roark and Evans pioneered in youth development with the publication of their book, *Play It, Measure It* (2010). Although their published work and this piece focus on programming practices in youth development, their techniques are widely applicable.

Roark et al.'s contribution is an exemplary piece for *JPRA*, as it demonstrates how programming and operations research are interconnected. This is especially true for programming that is expected to provide and document accomplishment of transformational (growth and development) outcomes. Clearly their programming efforts (i.e., development of activities they designed for participants) are outcome driven. They

are truly programming, designing, and staging engagements to achieve *a priori* ends. Programmers take note! Their work deserves more attention and adoption in program design and staging.

Finally, Katharine Jefferies and Andrew Lepp contributed a piece that investigates the meaning of recent extraordinary experiences. Some of their findings are what one would expect, while others are counterintuitive. They found that, although extraordinary experiences are rare, they occur in both familiar and novel settings. Two important facilitators of extraordinary experiences in familiar settings are personally achieving truly challenging goals and building social bonds. Novel settings that were important facilitators of extraordinary experiences included outdoor recreation challenges and cross-cultural experiences. Extraordinary experiences were accompanied by a wide range of emotions that were not setting specific. The method of investigation they used ensured access to meaningful experiences because all reported incidents met the test of an experience that was significant enough to warrant recall and reporting by their respondents. Additionally, they found regularities in their data that confirm that some experiences are indeed different than others. Their piece is a well-written and particularly interesting read.

Publication of this collection of papers is certainly not the final word on the Experience Phenomenon. Many unresolved issues are ripe for further inquiry. In the following paragraphs we reflect on a selection of these.

One of these issues is the unresolved question of whether experience should be treated as a fourth type of economic activity (in addition to commodity, product, and service), or should it continue to be regarded as a subcategory of the service industry? This argument has been continuing since Pine and Gilmore published their seminal book, *The Experience Economy* (1999). We firmly believe that experience, when defined as activities intended to influence the flow of conscious experiences before, during, and after an activity or encounter, should be treated as being different from service. In a nutshell, providers deliver service to customers in a service encounter, but they engage participants in cocreation in an experience encounter. The execution and participation modalities are different. Part of the confusion about this lies with the marketing desire to include the word *experience* in as much advertising copy as possible and with the difference between entertainment and engaged experience, both of which are loosely called experience. We deal with this latter issue in a different section.

Service is providing a useful function or instrumental outcome for hire. The efficacy of the provider is judged mostly by improved function of an object that was the focus of the work. We are satisfied with dental service, for example, if our cavity is filled, and we are satisfied with our automobile repair if our engine starts after the mechanic has completed the work. Often, individuals could perform these services themselves, but for a variety of reasons they hire someone else to do them. For example, people can clean their own windows, or they can hire someone else to do it for them. Leisure examples would include hiring a wedding planner or a trip planner. The logical progression of the service economy is the vendor providing more and more for the customer, resulting in the customer doing less and less. The hotel and resort industry provide an example of how the service encounter may progress as they now speak of *pampering* their guests, lavishly caring for their every need so the customer need do little except show up and pay the bill at the end of their stay. All of this is designed to create more functions for the provider to offer and charge the customer for serving them. When one's experience is delivered in a service modality, we hypothesize that there is little personal satisfaction to be had in the long run. The satisfaction acquired, although perhaps immediately intense, is fleeting.

Experience, on the other hand, implies that the vendor will provide the participant with things to do to keep them engaged in coproducing the experience. Performance is judged according to the success of the provider in facilitating cocreated experiences before, during, and after the activity or event. The end of experience offerings is not to progressively remove the participant from engagement, but to figure out how to get and

keep him or her engaged. It is interesting to note that the linguistic origin of experience is the Latin *experientia*, which means to experiment, to try, to test, to see, or to act on one's environment (www.dictionary.com). Its original referent was to an individual acting on her or his environment, not the modern day interpretation of experience referring to one's past engagements or to one being a passive, unengaged recipient.

Thus, the role and function of the provider and participant and the nature of an experience are different from a service encounter. Allowing the participant this role has its risks for the provider. As Simon (2010) expresses it discussing museums creating participatory experience, "This means the institution cannot guarantee the consistency of visitor experiences. Instead, the institution provides opportunities for diverse visitor co-produced experiences" (p. 2). Businesses that offer opportunities to the public prefer the service rather than the experience modality because the provider keeps more control of participation, thus assuring a more consistent outcome for the paying customer. And businesses deeply want to be positioned in the market as a provider of the more highly sought and valued *experience*, thus their frequent use of the word. But experiences delivered this way are void of the joy of coproducing an event and fail to provide personal opportunity and personal growth for participants. Government recreation agencies and not-for-profit providers have a unique opportunity and role for providing experiences rather than services. Calls for government recreation and not-for-profit organizations to emulate such experience offerings are misdirected and lack an understanding of the experience phenomena.

Another continuing issue related to experience is the role and function of entertainment in individuals' leisure repertoires. Entertainment might be defined as experience offerings that are directed at engaging one or more senses in pleasing ways for a defined period of time. Entertainment, of course, includes television viewing and a wide spectrum of presentations in the performing arts, sports, music, and drama. Many entertainment activities that are legally acceptable yet morally questionable would also be included. Pornography is an example, and some forms of gambling may be another. Entertainment industries are many, and the economic value of them is immense. They are here to stay. The unresolved issue is how entertainment relates to human growth and development. What role should entertainment play in peoples' leisure repertoires?

Leisure is regarded as opportunity for growth and development that benefits the individual as well as society. Growth and development require engagement of our attention, thoughts, and behaviors. In order to develop skills in attending, thinking, or movement, we must become actively involved, responding to interactions with people, objects, and concepts in our physical and social environments. Entertainment opportunities tend to be spectator events that require little in terms of responding. Ordinarily, they involve customers paying to watch others perform. Although entertainment participants can choose to cocreate personal experiences through interactions with others who are also attending, little to no opportunity exists for the participants to actually influence the flow or outcome of the overall essence of the event. A given fan attending a professional baseball game, for example, has little opportunity to affect its outcome. In fact, prohibitions exist for such actions. Remember Steve Bartman, the Chicago Cubs fan who caught the foul ball that prevented the Cubs from winning the game and entering the World Series? Simply watching others perform requires minimal investment of skill, action, or even attention, and precious little opportunity to grow through learning or skill development.

Entertainment offerings afford opportunities for meaningful engagement if participants choose, on their own initiative, to be "active spectators." Spectators who have attended an engaging play, for example, may choose to reflect on or discuss issues of culture, ethics, or societal norms or mores that are depicted in the story. A sporting event may serve as a basis for an engaging discussion about the effectiveness of strategies used by opposing competitors. A parent may animate an amusement park ride for her or his young son or daughter by incorporating that ride into a fantasy that is an imaginary adventure. Or, novice players in a sport may learn how to improve their own performance from observing

professionals play the game. On their own initiative, *active spectators* may coproduce their own individual, unique outcomes apart from the focus of the event attended.

Elite performance is another dimension of entertainment that warrants consideration. Some events require performance levels so high that most individuals cannot readily access the activity as a performer. Opera is an example from the arts, and ski jumping is an example among sport events. In these cases, participant involvement centers on understanding the event, interpreting it, and the emotional engagement of the spectator with the performer who is achieving a very demanding and difficult skill. Attending these events can add to life's enjoyment. But many performances do not involve demonstrations of such sophisticated skills, and the process of becoming an elite performer almost always begins with a participant in a spectator role.

And so what to say about being a spectator at arts, sports, and other events as experiences? Like Nash (1953), who coined the term, *spectatoritis*, we are concerned about developmental consequences that may result from individuals allowing nonactive entertainment to become their dominant form of leisure. Nash speculated that the veneration of highly skilled athletes and performers would turn the United States into a nation of spectators. And that may indeed be a danger. Individuals need to recognize spectator events for what they are. As we consume spectator events, we also should strive to step up to the challenge of cocreating our spectator experiences rather than succumbing to the temptation to simply revel in the immediate sensory pleasures. Sometimes we may engage in entertainment to bring needed relaxation to our minds and bodies. Like Nash, we assume that individuals who are most often passive spectators and rarely participants lead dull, unfulfilling lives.

The remaining recurrent issue that we choose to highlight is the morality of a recreation service provider choosing the contents of designed interaction (i.e., a program, facility, or event) with participants. More concretely, critics argue that to carefully stage a recreation encounter is to rob participants of the freedom to create their own experiences. According to this view, outcomes become the providers' outcomes rather than being the participants' outcomes. Yet, poorly staged events in poorly chosen or poorly maintained environments do not yield engaging, growth-oriented experiences. This dilemma is manifested in several different ways. Individuals calling for more meaningful experiences in youth sports may, for example, argue that parents and park and recreation professionals should be prohibited from entering into the youth sport environment and that facilities should be minimal or nonexistent. According to that position, empty, vacant lots should be sufficient for field sports, and simple hard-surface courts should be sufficient for basketball and the like. Yet, such policies and practices do not eliminate the staging of experiences, they simply transfer the right and opportunity to stage from providers to participants. Any group of participants can, of course, include autonomy supportive participants as well as bullies and individuals committed to their own self-interest. The vacant lot that is often held up as a minimally staged ideal in this scenario may be a hot seat for criminal activity, confidence of lesser talented participants may be undermined by overly aggressive participants with greater talent, and inattention to maintenance can have serious implications to physical safety. Pick-up baseball games on vacant lots may not involve use of batting helmets or catcher's masks, and youths may stage their own tackle football games, sans pads, helmets, and organization that minimize gross discrepancies in age and body mass. Thus, the dilemma: What degree of staging will optimally engage individuals in relatively safe, cocreated experiences and thus facilitate their growth and development without substantially diminishing their freedom?

This call for coproduced experience is one safeguard to ensure participants indeed have choices and affect outcomes. Still, agencies may select outcomes that promote the agency's desires rather than participants' desires. Indeed, it seems reasonable that agencies that sponsor programs do so in part to realize some agency goals. In her book, *The Participatory Museum*, Simon provides the obvious answer to this apparent dilemma. "The goal of participatory techniques is both to meet visitors' expectations for active engagement and to do so in a way that furthers the mission and core values of the institution" (p. iii).

Organizations with integrity who sponsor programs both survey their participants to learn about the ends individual's desire and reveal the intended outcomes of their programs in their advertising and promotional literature. The safeguard against organizations lacking integrity rests with caution that individuals must exercise when choosing to participate in a specific program. One is hardly surprised when attending an event sponsored by Coca Cola to find that Coke is the beverage being exclusively served. So individuals must bear the responsibility for taking care in selecting programs that are designed to fulfill their needs and desires.

We are grateful for the opportunity to receive and review papers addressing the Experience Phenomenon. The papers received and accepted have forced us to further refine our own thinking about the issue. Seligman (2002) pointed out, "Authentic happiness comes from identifying and cultivating your most fundamental strengths and using them every day in work, love, play, and parenting" (p. xiii). The experiences chosen that make up individuals' leisure careers make a difference in their overall life satisfaction. Coproduced, engaged experiences promote authentic happiness. The articles presented in this special collection of papers provide additional evidence about the efficacy of engaged experience and methods for improving programming practices. Although not a final answer, these papers succeed in moving our knowledge and practice forward.

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