

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING EXPERIENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY IN TOURISM

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Abstract

This research presents the main considerations regarding the experiential psychotherapy in tourism and the beneficial effects for tourists, especially for pilgrims, resulting from each soul journey. As an increasing number of people turn to psychotherapists to find that much-coveted inner peace, experiential psychotherapy in tourism is a way of human transformation for body and soul but also a way to gain many benefits from tourism experiences. The concept and the approach are holistic, the emphasis being on living the emotion and the present experience, which allows people to become aware of their own perceptions, emotions, thoughts and feelings.

The research was carried out for three months, on a sample of 62 tourists who participated in cultural and religious trips. The research objective is to exemplify the personal transformation of each tourist as a continuous personal development. The research methodology of this study was observation, descriptive method and experimental method using a quantitative research tool, the questionnaire. The main results refer to beneficial and multiplying effects that can be achieved by each tourist following participation in cultural and religious trips and programs through the practice of psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and curative theology with a major therapeutic role in improving people's health.

The importance of the study is far-reaching. Concerned with the healing and well-being of every human, religion, medicine and tourism can constitute an exceptional scientific sum for healing, development and soul enrichment of any human, through the use of various therapeutic means for the purpose of human recovery.

Keywords: Cultural and religious tourism, experiential psychotherapy in tourism, health, spirituality, pilgrimage

Clasificare JEL : L83, Z32

1. Introduction and context of the study

Burdened and overwhelmed by the multitude of pressing problems, every human feels that there is an unspoken and hidden pain inside, every human feels the need for rest and relaxation. Because nowadays the people go through different mental tensions during their life, what each human seeks is the healing of the soul. Each person is a unique individual and has a latent potential that must be harnessed. The mental condition can be seen as an expression of the decrease of human potential by blocking its possibilities of manifestation. The role of the therapeutic journey is to create experiential situations for human to discover his own availability and put them into action for the purpose of his personal development (Siebert, 2011).

Zlate (2007) and Mitrofan (2000) consider that over time, many forms of humanistic psychotherapy have emerged. In the beginning, psychology tried to separate itself from religion, acting as a therapeutic science specialized in the treatment of mental disorders. Later was developed the 'experiential-existentialist psychotherapy' which sought a reconciliation with religion taking into account the spiritual needs of any man, overlooked until then. The same thing can be said also about theology: it is not a philosophy but it is a psychotherapeutic system (Vlachos, 1998).

When they travel, people seek to rest both their body and soul in each of the trips they undertake. Emilian et al. (2003) consider that the tourist service provider has the obligation to respect a set of procedures, moral and behavioral rules. It is necessary for the personnel who come into contact with tourists to prove a pleasant presence, self-control, tact, patience, understanding and a good mood. Nickson (2007) highlighted in his paper that the quality and the behavior of the human must not offend or make the tourist indisposed.

The spiritual life is a dynamic journey. The spiritual energy of a praying soul is a beneficial physiological mechanism for each of us who are looking for soul and body healing (Anagnostopoulos, 2011). Many studies in the field have highlighted the beneficial and curative psychological effects of

cultural and religious tourism. Knowing that the activity of tourism produces multiple beneficial effects on the tourist's physical and mental health, the soul trembles when he receives the spiritual food that he is often unconsciously deprived of (Albu et al., 2013). Although it is outside the scope of this study to define wellbeing, this study understands that wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that embraces all aspects of human life. This study, therefore, looked broadly at the various dimensions of human life that, in various combinations, are said to enhance quality of life and capacities to contribute to wellbeing: social, mental, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual and cultural (Clissold et al., 2022).

In this study, I approached in an interdisciplinary manner the variety of effects and benefits that participants can acquire on their body, mind and soul during cultural and religious programs.

2. Review of the scientific literature

In ancient times, the healing of mental and physical illnesses suffered by people was the responsibility of 'priests' who attributed a religious and a spiritual dimension to illnesses and curing them through purification rituals, exorcisms and magical incantations. In the West, especially during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, medicine was separated from metaphysics and religion, so that medicine acquired a mechanistic character. The human body came to be studied like a machine that needs to be maintained, ignoring the great importance of the spiritual factor both in terms of illness and health (Zlate and Mitrofan, 2007).

Psychology, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis tried to fill the void created so that psychotherapists took the place of priests, assuming the religious role of the priest. Psychology and psychotherapy from the Western space represent the expression of man's search to find out the cure and the solution of his inner existential problems. According to Zlate and Mitrofan (2007), today the specialists talk about experiential psychotherapy which includes three distinct but collaborating directions: the philosophical direction whose foundation is the existentialist philosophy and is called 'existentialist psychotherapy'. The second direction is called 'psychosomatic psychotherapy' and is based on the holistic theory that emphasizes the close connection between the soul and the body. The third direction is the spiritual one, also called 'transpersonal or mystical psychotherapy' and which encourages mystical experience and spiritual meditation.

Abrudan, Forosigan and Demian (2007) emphasize the benefits of trips and pilgrimages for tourists, starting from the concrete improvement of health to personal and professional development accompanied by a permanent orientation to new. Basically, those who make time to travel invest in their own health. The physical, mental and social benefits of cultural and religious trips bring a substantial contribution of inner peace to each participant, the desire to be better with those around you, solidarity and even healing from certain pains or sufferings. Traveling is also a unique stimulus for development of cognitive abilities as well as a good supplement for brain health. This effect is due to the new situations and experiences in which travelers participate as well as due to the activities that set their brain "wheels" in motion, from discovery the need to manage in an unknown environment to prospecting maps or visiting cultural and religious attractions.

The tourist, known as a pilgrim when he is on physical and spiritual rest journeys, is visiting cultural and spiritual tourist attractions like Churches, Monasteries and Cathedrals and experiences different conscious and beneficial states with a high psychotherapeutic role. The complexity of understanding and analyzing touristic and interpersonal experiences are widely debated and recognized in the specialized literature (Filep and Laing, 2019).

According to Dorde and Kalmic (2015), in a holistic approach and a coherent understanding, there are six different approaches to studying the tourist experience: the cognitive psychology of the tourist experience (this approach deals with the tourist's perceptions and how they affect their experience), tourism and spiritual activities (provides the tourist a valuable gain of experiences and inner healings), mental state and depth of logical experience (targets the sensitivity, the intensity of emotions and the feeling of transcendence), approach to logical phenomena (points to the description of immediate personal experiences, the range of personal experiences that lead to escape from boredom, the valorization of the aesthetic sense and of an alternative lifestyle), the relationship

between locals and tourists (experiences are generated by local culture and intercultural communication between tourists and locals) and, the sixth, the experiential stage (this approach uses dramaturgical metaphor to support the fact that the tourist experience depends on the degree that each person interacts with the tourist product).

In his paper, Firoiu (2005) believes that travel is like a good medicine. It challenges the brain with new and different experiences and environments; this important behavior supports brain health and stabilizes its resilience throughout life. Likewise, travel changes our perceptions and offers us new perspectives about humanity, perspectives that restore our trust in humans especially when they involve intercultural exchanges and experiences. Scientific research has shown that when people have experienced traveling to other countries, their general trust or general faith in humanity has increased. When we get involved in other cultures, we begin to have experiences with different people and then we gain the belief that most people treat us in similar ways. This produces an increase in personal confidence and an openness to humanity (State, 2004).

Therefore, the research shows the beneficial and multiplying effects that can be obtained by each individual tourist or pilgrim by participating in specific tourist programs. All these observed beneficial effects are to be described and analyzed below.

3. Research methodology

The objective of the pilot research is to show that tourists receive many and varied benefits for their physical and emotional health when they participate in a relaxing cultural and religious vacation. These trips are beneficial for relationships and socializing. Practicing experiential psychotherapy helps people unlock and use their own resources creatively in a process of conscious evolution based on freedom of choice and responsibility. This pilot research will be developed by following the specific research objectives.

These specific objectives of the research were: identifying the relationship between well-being and participation in cultural and religious programs, identifying and evaluating the benefits resulting from cultural and religious trips and identifying the cultural, social, religious and medical advantages that the participants can obtain in cultural and religious trips, analysis of the scientific literature regarding the multiple advantages and implications of travel on the tourists; analysis of data collected through the quantitative research tool, the questionnaire; presentation of socio-medical and economic benefits resulting from tourists' participation in cultural and religious trips; dissemination of research results and the final conclusions.

As part of the research, I used the questionnaire to collect information about the socio-medical and economic benefits resulting from participation of tourists in religious cultural trips and programs. The questionnaire was created in Google Forms from the Google Docs ePlatform. Compliance with the legal provisions on the protection of personal data was insured. The research was carried out between February the 1st 2024 and March the 1st 2024.

The questions of the questionnaire were formulated in accordance with the mentioned objectives. In developing the questionnaire, I paid special attention to both the general rules recommended by theory for the realization of questionnaires, as well as those aimed at the form of presentation: formulation of questions, their sequence, balance between closed and open questions. The questions included in the questionnaire were of two types: closed questions with precoded answers options, dichotomous (yes/no type) or multiple (with ordinal scale in 5 steps with the following meanings: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = rather disagree, 4 = rather agree, 5 = totally agree) and an open question and an open question with the role of identifying research attributes.

The questionnaire was structured in such a way as to lead to obtaining relevant, correct and complete information to identify the beneficial and multiplying effects that can be achieved by each tourist following participation in cultural and religious trips and programs.

4. Results and discussion

From the data collected on the tourists' responses to the questionnaire, it appears that 62 tourists participated in the study, including 56 women (90,3%) and 6 men (9,7%). The larger number of women shows the greater inclination of the female gender towards spirituality. The respondents included in the study are aged between 18 and 75 years. 87,1% of the respondents who participated in this study are aged between 18 and 30 years old.

Among the respondents, 51,6% increased high school education, 33,9% increased graduate education and 14,5% increased master education. The largest number of respondents included in the study is represented by tourists with higher education (51,6%). 69,4% represent tourists from the urban environment and 30,6% represent tourists from the rural environment. Most of the respondents, namely 67,7% are still students while 19,4% are employed, 6,5% are self-employed, 4,8% are unemployed and only 1,6% are entrepreneurs.

Regarding the monthly income, 50% of the respondents obtain incomes below 2500 ron, 22,6% obtain incomes between 2501-3500 ron, 9,7% obtain incomes over 5500 ron, 9,7% obtain incomes between 4501-5500 ron and only 8,1% obtain incomes between 3501-4500 ron.

Related to the question: How much do you like to travel, where 1 represents very little and 5 very much? 62,9% of respondents gave the maximum value 5, 17,7% gave the value 4, 14,5% gave the value 3 while only 3,2% of respondents gave the value 2 and another 1,6% gave the minimum value 1 (Figure 1).

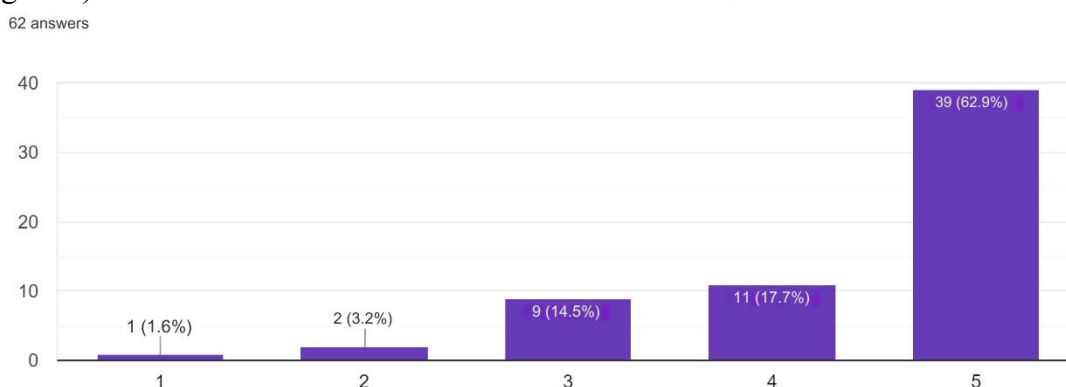


Figure no 1. The respondent's percentage answers to the question: How much do you like to travel?

Source: Created by the author

Therefore, we can consider that the most participants of this study love to travel whatever the destination visited, or the tourist attractions are included in the travel program.

Another representative question of my study asked to the respondents was: How often do you travel on cultural-religious tours and / or programs? where 35,5% of tourists answered *several times a year*, 30,6% of respondents answered *once a year or less*, 22,6% of respondents answered *never*, 4,8% of respondents answered *once or twice a month* and also 4,8% of respondents answered *once a month* and finally and only 1,6% of young respondents travel on cultural and religious tours *once a week or more often* (Figure 2).

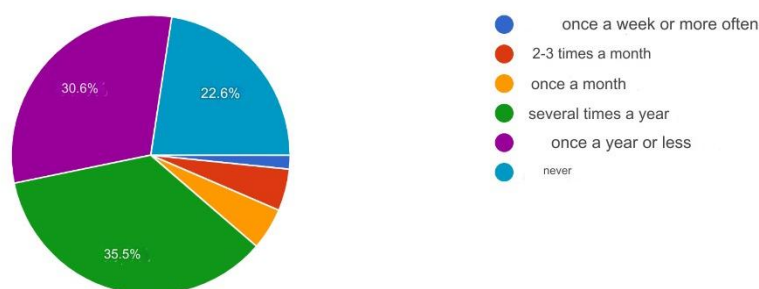


Figure no 2. The respondent's percentage answers to the question: How often do you travel on cultural-religious programs?

Source: Created by the author

The obtained results demonstrate that young people travel at least once a year on religious and cultural programs or excursions (66,1%) and a significant percentage of respondents, namely 22,6% never travel on cultural and religious excursions and programs. If we consider the fact that most of respondents of this pilot study are young and they are still students, with low incomes and life experience, who have not gone through the hardships and different problems of life, we can conclude that the tendency to travel in this specific type of programs is oriented towards people aged between 45 and 75 years or older.

At the question: Do you feel better when you participate in cultural-religious trips and/or programs? 58,1% of respondents answered *yes, every time I participate*, 30,6% of respondents answered *I don't know / I don't answer* and only 11,3% of respondents answered *no I don't feel better* (Figure 3).

62 answers

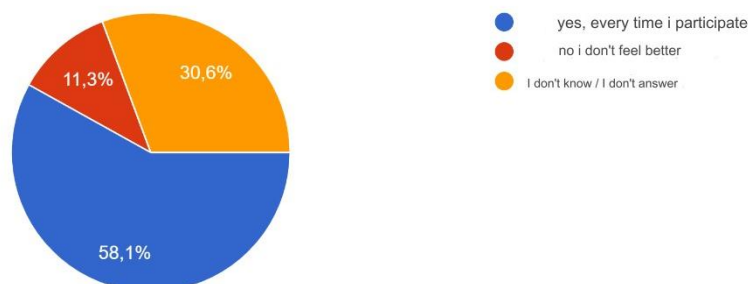


Figure no 3. The respondent's percentage answers to the question: Do you feel better when you participate in cultural and religious programs?

Source: Created by the author

The results show that the most of respondents 58,1% feel better when they participate in religious and cultural programs. However, a percentage of 30,6% of respondents answered that they don't know what are the benefits of participating in these types of excursions for their body and soul. And finally, only 11,3% of young respondents consider that they don't feel better when they participate in cultural and religious programs. In my opinion, most of respondents being very young, they have no time and desire to feel the various benefits of intercultural, socio-medical, religious and therapeutic advantages from these travel experiences.

At the question with ordinal scale in 5 steps with the following meanings: 1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = rather disagree, 4 = rather agree, 5 = totally agree): Please rate to what extent you

agree with the statements below that refer to the benefits resulting from cultural-religious trips, from Figure 4 we observe that an overwhelming majority of respondents receive major benefits when participating in cultural and religious programs. The majority of the respondents have totally agreed and rather agree with all the six statements: *my well-being visibly improves, it creates unforgettable memories and dream moments, I solve various personal problems by meeting of spiritual priests, it increases my intellectual capacity through the diversity of social and cultural experiences, it brings me inner peace and calms my mind, it encourages human values and positive feelings.*

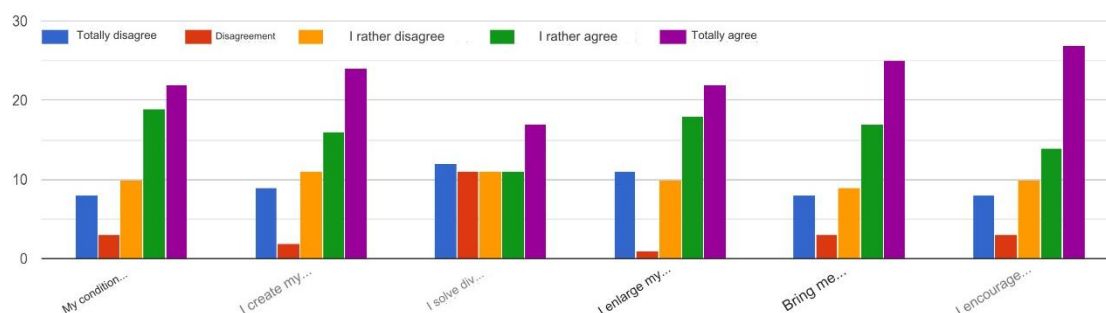


Figure no 4. The respondent's percentage answers to the statements: Please rate to what extent you agree with the statements below that refer to the benefits resulting from cultural-religious trips

Source: Created by the author

We can consider that the study participants receive various benefits by traveling in cultural and religious destinations, every trip being a unique stimulus for the development of cognitive skills but also a good supplement for brain health.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, there are many beneficial and multiplying effects that can be obtained after participating in specific tourist circuits by practicing experiential psychotherapy in cultural and religious trips. Knowing that participating in cultural and religious trips and programs produces multiple beneficial effects on the physical and mental health of the tourist, people increasingly feel the desire and the need to travel to these specific tourist destinations and objectives. However, as mentioned above this is a pilot study, and it must be borne in mind that there is need for further analysis and synthesis of research studies in above disciplines from the perspective of tourism experiences and human benefits (Koc and Boz, 2014).

Most of the participants in this pilot study love to travel whatever the destination visited or the tourist attractions included in the travel program. The obtained results demonstrate that young people travel at least once a year on religious and cultural programs or excursions (66,1%) and a significant percentage of respondents, namely 22,6% never travel on cultural and religious excursions and programs. I can conclude that the tendency to travel in this specific type of programs is oriented towards people aged between 45 and 75 years or older.

Research undertaken in the field can be greatly improved to highlight the beneficial and healing psychological effects of cultural and religious tourism. These effects are transformed into positive and pleasant emotions, hedonistic experiences and feelings, in other words, in a theory of cognitive evaluation of emotions. All these beneficial effects represent elements of social, behavioral and psychoanalytical psychology with a major therapeutic role in improving people's health and also in the development of tourism as the most important economic sector worldwide.

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