Social tourism participation: The role of tourism inexperience and uncertainty

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Abstract
Social tourism initiatives tend to facilitate access to tourism for groups who would otherwise be financially unable to participate in holidays. The tourism products offered in social tourism vary between individual and group holidays, and day trips. This paper presents the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study with social tourism beneficiaries and social support workers, which explores via interviews and focus groups how these different tourism products can be tailored most effectively to the needs to the beneficiaries. The findings of the study highlight the important role of travel inexperience, and associated uncertainty, in travel decisions made by this target group. The findings show that (public sector or charitable) providers of social tourism can offer the most tailored and potentially most cost-effective tourism product to each beneficiary by closely considering previous travel experience and uncertainty levels before departure.

1. Introduction

Leisure tourism is often seen as ‘gratuitous’ and ‘hedonistic’ (Urry, 1990), and participation in tourism is considered by many to be a luxury, a discretionary activity. There is however also an alternative view of tourism: as a transformative power, or a social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). Charities, and in some countries national or regional governments, subscribe to this latter view of tourism when they aim to facilitate participation in tourism by low-income groups, because of the perceived social (and in some cases, economic) benefits attached to holiday making. This aspect of tourism, also referred to as social tourism, was long relatively neglected by the academic literature in English, but has become the focus of an increasing number of studies in recent years (e.g. McCabe, 2009; McCabe, Minnaert, & Diekmann, 2011; Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller, 2009; Sedgley, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2012). Although the body of research concerning social tourism has grown, little attention has been paid so far to the tourism products that are offered to achieve these perceived benefits. These vary widely, ranging from all-inclusive group holidays (e.g. IMSERSO in Spain), over independent holidays for individual families (e.g. the main type offered by the Family Holiday Association in the UK) to day trips for individuals or groups (e.g. offered as a choice by the Tourism Participation Centre in Flanders, Belgium). The question arises how it can be determined which tourism product is likely to most suited to which beneficiaries – this question is important as it may have important cost implications. (Day trips for example are likely to be less expensive than longer holidays involving accommodation.)

This paper presents the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study with social tourism beneficiaries and social support workers. In interviews and focus groups, both groups explored if there were any particular characteristics of a number of tourism products (day trips, group holidays, individual holidays), that make them more or less appropriate for certain social tourism users. The findings of the study highlight the important role of travel inexperience,
and associated uncertainty, in the travel preferences of many beneficiaries. These findings have several implication for (public sector or charitable) providers of social tourism.

2. Social tourism

Social tourism refers to initiatives that aim to include groups into tourism that would otherwise be excluded from it. In the English-language tourism literature, social tourism has developed from a subject that was addressed but sporadically, to an area of increased research interest. The earliest definition of social tourism by Hunzicker (1951) defined social tourism as “the relationships and phenomena in the field of tourism resulting from participation in travel by economically weak or otherwise disadvantaged elements in society” (1951:1). Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller (2007), Minnaert et al. (2009) and Minnaert, Maitland, and Miller (2011) define social tourism as tourism with an added moral value, of which the primary objective is to benefit the host or the visitor in the tourism exchange. In practice, social tourism usually refers to budget-friendly holidays in the own country, either individual or as part of a group, or in some cases day trips to theme parks, museums and attractions, that are funded or made available at highly reduced rates, by charities or agencies in the public sector.

Beneficiaries of social tourism are people who would like to travel but cannot due to a certain disadvantage: this could be the lack of money for example, or a health problem or disability that inhibits participation in tourism. In several countries of the European Union, social tourism is provided at either very limited cost to the state, or in ways which simultaneously stimulate the local economy and increase the income of the state via taxation and a reduction of unemployment benefits (Minnaert et al., 2011). Social tourism is often used as both an economic and a social regeneration measure. In terms of social benefits, Minnaert et al. (2009, 2010) and McCabe (2009) have conducted research into the social impacts of participation in social tourism by low-income beneficiaries, and have found evidence of benefits ranging from increases in self-esteem, improvement in family relations and widening of travel horizons to more pro-active attitudes to life and participation in education and employment. Sedgley et al. (2012) also highlighted the role of tourism participation as a factor in social inclusion: their study of London families living in poverty indicates that exclusion from tourism makes a clear contribution to their children’s exclusion from everyday norms as holidays are regarded as part of contemporary British family life. In times of austerity, which has led to a number of governments reassessing their welfare programmes, the potential economic benefits of social tourism however have received increased levels of attention.

A much cited example of the economic benefits of social tourism is the IMSERSO programme in Spain, which offers domestic holidays for senior citizens in coastal areas during the shoulder season. The holidays are financed through contributions by beneficiaries (70 per cent) and the public sector (30 per cent). The public sector investment however yields cost savings and earnings: the scheme allows for longer seasons and increased employment in the coastal regions; and the tourist expenditure may lead to higher tax income. Around 300 hotels participate in the scheme, which has benefited around 1 million participants in the 2008–2009 season and has been estimated to generate or maintain 79,300 jobs. The Spanish government has allocated €105 million for the 2009–2010 season, and it claims that every Euro invested yields 4 Euro’s in tax, spend and reduction in benefit payments (www.imserso.es). To stimulate similar initiatives throughout Europe, the European Commission for Enterprise and Industry launched the Calypso programme in 2008, which aims to produce social tourism exchanges between different European countries (Minnaert et al., 2011).

The concept of social tourism has been implemented in different ways to suit national contexts: several countries operate holiday voucher schemes (for example France and Hungary), other countries have established public—private partnerships (for example Spain, Portugal and Flanders, Belgium) (McCabe et al., 2011). In the UK and the USA social tourism is traditionally not part of public policy, and is mostly provided via charitable bodies. In 2011 however, a report was published by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Tourism, which explored the potential social and economic benefits of social tourism for the UK. The goals and moral justification for the provision of social tourism can also vary greatly. The development of the working classes, better health for inner city children, wider access to the benefits of tourism, loyalty to unions or companies, and economic development of regions have all been, and in some cases are still, seen as valid reasons for provision (Minnaert et al., 2011).

Another difference between social tourism initiatives, that has received limited attention so far, concerns the type of tourism experience that is offered to the beneficiaries. Some schemes offer only one tourism product, whereas others have a range of products to choose from. The IMSERSO programme in Spain for example has only one product: the scheme offers group holidays exclusively for senior citizens, including coach transport, accommodation, meals and activities (www.imserso.es). In contrast, the Family Holiday Association in the UK offers more holiday choices: it funds week-long holidays for individual families (usually in domestic caravan parks), and group holidays which may be shorter (www.fhaonline.org.uk). The Tourism Participation Centre in Flanders (Belgium) also offers individual and group holidays, but has an additional range of affordable day trips. The social tourism literature so far has tended to make little distinctions between these tourism products, and their respective suitability and attractiveness to different types of beneficiaries. This exploratory study aimed to uncover whether it is useful to offer a range of different holiday options, and whether the choice of tourism product can somehow be tailored to certain characteristics of the beneficiaries.

3. Initial data: focus groups with support workers

As this is an exploratory study, the decision was taken to ground the direction for the research in primary data — as a consequence, this paper will discuss the findings of a first round of fieldwork at this stage. The structure of this paper is thus slightly untraditional: whereas in most papers the literature review is followed by methodology and findings, in this study the literature search emanated from the first round of focus groups. A model was then developed and tested in a case study. This structure follows the principles proposed in grounded theory, which is ‘based on the systematic generating of theory from data, that itself is systematically obtained from social research. Thus the grounded theory method offers a rigorous, orderly guide to theory development that at each stage is closely integrated with a methodology of social research. Generating theory and doing social research are two parts of the same process’ (Glaser, 1978, 2). Grounded theory is ‘based on comparative analysis as a strategic method for generating theory. In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept. The evidence may not necessarily be without a doubt [...] but the concept is undoubtedly a relevant theoretical abstraction about what is going on in the area studied’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 23).

For the initial data collection, a series of nine focus groups with support workers of social tourism users was carried out in Flanders, Belgium. The focus groups took place between January and March 2010. Flanders is the Northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, and social tourism is part of tourism legislation in this region via the
Tourism For all decree (introduced in 2001). The central organisation in social tourism provision is the Tourism Participation Centre (TPC), a publicly funded team within Tourism Flanders, the regional Tourist Board. This organisation liaises between the public, private and social sectors. The private sector partners (such as hotels, guesthouses, attractions) voluntarily offer discounts to socially excluded groups, to promote their product to a new target group or within the framework of corporate social responsibility. The TPC then communicates the reduced tariffs available to social support organisations (Social Services, charities, voluntary organisations). The social organizations provide support for the holiday-makers and approve the holiday applications of their users – this is to avoid abuse of the system by non-social tourism users. The system operates with minimal expense for the government, and is based on voluntary cooperation and goodwill of the private and social sector. In 2012, around 90,000 low-income persons used this discount for a day trip; and around 15,000 persons for an individual or group holiday (www.vakantieparticipatie.be). This initiative was deemed especially useful for this study as it allows users to choose from a wide range of tourism options – there is thus an opportunity for users to display changes in their travel decisions.

The support workers apply for the day trip or holiday on behalf of their clients, and therefore can offer prime insights into the travel decisions of social tourism users. They often provide advice or answer questions, and thus witness first-hand how travel choices are made. The respondents for the focus groups were approached via the TPC, who sent out invitations to all support workers on their database. (The researcher thus identified a group of suitable respondents prior to data collection, which made the sampling selective rather than purely theoretical (Draucker, Martsof, Ross, & Rusk, 2007)). A total number of 77 support workers participated in one of nine focus groups, held in six locations in the region. The smallest focus group had four participants, the largest 12. The focus groups lasted between 1 and 1.5 h. The respondents were asked about how their clients make travel decisions, the factors which influence their decisions, and the help they request of their social support workers. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed in full. The data were then coded inductively and analysed thematically. Some codes were attributed on the basis of the literature review, but new codes were also prompted by the interviewees. Coleman and O’Connor (2007) describe how semi-structured methods often lead to the allocation of axial and selective codes later in the study cycle. Quotes will be used extensively to maximise the respondents’ ‘voice’ in the research, to answer the research question as much as possible from the respondents’ point of view, and to make a clear distinction between the researchers’ and the respondents’ interpretations (Holloway, 2007).

The main limitation of this study is the specific Flemish setting: a region with a strong social tourism tradition and relatively widespread collaborations between the social and tourism sectors. As such, the findings of this study are not generalizable for other areas. Moreover, all respondents were involved in social tourism provision, and the findings cannot be applied to all social support workers in the region.

3.1. Findings

During the focus groups, the support workers were asked which factors played a role when social tourism beneficiaries made their travel decisions. Although other considerations were also mentioned (namely age and family size of beneficiary), the factor that was consistently highlighted as playing a key role was travel inexperience. The findings show that complete inexperience with holidays, even in adulthood, was not uncommon among the beneficiaries of social tourism, as the following responses illustrate:

“They have financial difficulties; their family was in the same situation and often did not travel.”

“Their network is also made up entirely of people who never go on holiday. So you have no point of reference.”

Indeed, the last available data show that 13% of the users of the TPC have never travelled before – the following teenage mother is an example:

“Financially it is sometimes hard, we have had lots of medical costs with the baby. We have been to the seaside, or out for a walk, but never away for the week (Young mother Flanders).”

For 19.5% of users, the last holiday experience was more than five years ago (Tourism Flanders, 2008, 34). The respondents highlighted that the majority of the beneficiaries have very limited travel experience: they may have taken day trips in the past five years for example, but have rarely or never been on residential holidays. It is important to highlight here that this level of inexperience does not apply to all social tourism users, and that a minority of beneficiaries were experienced travellers, as this support worker emphasises:

“Our clients are usually people who once had enough money, but who landed in poverty due to circumstances. The divorced, independent contractors who go bankrupt, these types of people. Most of our clients do not come from poor backgrounds, on the contrary, some are quite familiar with luxury.”

In all nine focus groups, it was emphasised how for inexperienced tourists, the preparations for the holiday can be a cause for anxiety and stress:

“What should I take with me? What will happen when I arrive? Where should I go? All things that are somewhat unknown and that I think are the cause of considerable stress.”

Fourteen support organisations, that have many clients affected by generational poverty who have no experience with holiday taking at all, reported to have developed extensive support mechanisms to reduce this anxiety, as they have found that it can lead to their clients refusing to go.

“If we have to, we pack the suitcase for them. Because some people are unable to do this and they would forget to pack underwear and the like. We do make a list, but it is not because it is on paper that it necessarily ends up in the suitcase. The suitcase, or something to put the items in, is also a problem. It wouldn’t be the first time that someone shows up with plastic bags.”

“For example, a few have booked a holiday over the summer and then around May/June they begin to have second thoughts. We find that it is especially ‘not daring to’, even if they have finally saved up the spending money.”

The response above is an example of a second type of anxiety affecting the inexperienced tourists: not only the tourism experience is profoundly unfamiliar; they also need to cope with financial uncertainty which may lead to stress:

“If they book a trip now, they cannot afford for anything unforeseen to happen in the coming six months, for anyone to become seriously ill or anything like that, because then they will no longer be able to pay. Nor can they afford to receive a large utility bill. They may bank on the tax refund arriving on time.”

When asked which aspects of the tourism experience cause the most anxiety, the respondents mentioned ‘transport issues’, ‘packing the bags’, ‘financial worries’, ‘not knowing the destinations’ and ‘not knowing what there is to do’. A particularly anxious moment,
mentioned in all focus groups, is the ‘accommodation check-in’. The support workers explained that their clients were worried about being treated as inferior because they booked via the TPC:

“We are sometimes asked: ‘Can’t you come along?’ Not on holiday, but just to the door. Help with the hotel check-in, and then you can leave. The fear of checking into the hotel is deep.”

In eight focus groups, support workers highlighted that managing anxiety was a key concern, particularly if the beneficiary is a first-time participant in social tourism. They reported that their clients often preferred a day trip, preferably in group, as a first social tourism experience:

“People must feel safe. And a day trip […], that’s only one day, you return home in the evening, you’re back with the dog.”

“I think the barrier is often higher for a holiday. Having never taken a train before, they may now need to change trains. They do not know what they need to pack in their suitcases. This is much simpler in the case of a day trip.”

Nine organisations reported to mainly choosing local day trips, so that their clients could make the leap to going back on their own:

“We see it that a day trip is always local because we try to keep the costs as low as possible. If it is here in the neighbourhood, there is also the chance that they would perhaps pay a visit on their own sometime.”

When inexperienced tourists choose a holiday rather than a day trip, there is often a preference for a group holiday, supported by support workers they are familiar with, and in the company of other clients they may already know. Even this can often lead to great levels of anxiety:

“They are still afraid: “What are we doing? Where are we going?” They ask us all these questions while they already have the programme. “What do we need to bring with us? What is already available? What things can we do? Who will also be there?”

“They are already used to coming to our centre. So they come to me or a colleague, and we organise it. They do not need to be afraid of unexpected challenges and the like. […] They have someone to fall back on. They are not in it alone.”

“A lot of our clients are single. These people opt more readily for group travel organised by a leisure organisation specifically focused on people with a disability, where they usually already know a number of people. […] This lowers the barrier, and many of our people cling onto a certain structure and familiarity. Once they experience something that is good, they stick with it.”

A higher level of anxiety is usually encountered on group holidays that are organised by third parties or volunteers, where the tourists may not know the support workers and fellow tourists. Although this format offers support in terms of transport and activities, the associated stress may be too high for some inexperienced tourists:

“It prevents many from taking part. Without our support, not many would depart. Once, we tried to organise a holiday using volunteers as support workers, but no one showed up.”

The highest level of anxiety is presented by the individual holiday:

“There is one person at our organisation who has already taken an independent holiday. We truly try to promote and offer this possibility, but no one dares take this step, because it is all so unknown, e.g. the transport, even the luggage. It is all a major step for our clients.”

Not only are there practical and financial implications of going on holiday which can result in anxiety, some single mothers also worry about the emotional implications of being surrounded by nuclear families, as exemplified by this quote:

“Although I will go on holiday with my children, I am less enthused about doing so as it can be quite a stressful experience and very mixed emotionally: it is lovely to enjoy time with the children doing new things but quite depressing to be surrounded by traditional family units.

The support workers thus argued that different tourism products may be associated with different levels of anxiety for inexperienced tourists. They added that this was usually the most important consideration in determining which tourism product would be most suited to which beneficiary: some preferred to stick to ‘low anxiety’ holiday products, others ‘moved up’ to more complex holiday types after initial ‘low anxiety’ experiences, whereas others still did not suffer from anxiety and were confident to take individual holidays. Inexperienced social tourism participants may thus move towards more complex travel decisions as their level of experience increases.

4. Tourism inexperience

On the basis of the initial findings outlined above, it transpires that the suitability of certain tourism products for groups of social tourism users may be linked to levels of prior tourism experience, whereby inexperience is suggested as a source of anxiety. The findings suggest that if the levels of anxiety in social tourism participants become overly high, this reduces the suitability of certain tourism products to facilitate tourism participation. On the basis of these initial findings, the tourism literature was consulted to explore the topic of tourism inexperience further.

In this process, it has transpired that inexperienced tourists are a rather under-researched group in the tourism literature, and where data about inexperienced tourists area available, this group is defined in a variety of ways.

Filep and Greenacre (2007) critique that several studies have used age as a proxy for travel experience. In countries with high participation in youth travel however, one cannot make the assumption that young people are necessarily less experienced tourists than some older people. This critique seems indeed justified, and using age as a proxy for experience may lead to untested assumptions: Anckar and Walden (2002) for example choose students as a group of inexperienced travellers to measure online booking behaviour, whereas it could be argued that this group is probably much more computer-literate than older tourists, and thus can be described as more (not less) experienced, at least in online booking. To address this, Filep and Greenacre (2007) use three criteria to determine travel experience: the number of times a person has travelled, the number of destinations visited, and the duration of the trip.

In other studies (for example Chen, 2001) only international tourism experiences are considered as tourism experience — it is however likely that many tourists without international tourism experience, may have domestic tourism experience. McKercher and Wong (2004) allow respondents to self-assess tourism (in)experience: this however results in the group with the lowest level of experience having a mean of 5.9 countries visited. Pearce and Kang (2009, 176) emphasise this challenge in measuring tourism experience: There are issues of what scale or geographical level at which to work, there are issues of how many questions to use, there are concerns about what level of detail is required to assess thoroughly the previous experience’.
When applying the concept of the travel career to social tourism users, it is important to discern which definition of ‘inexperienced tourist’ can be of use. The use of age as a proxy has been discouraged above: indeed, social tourism users span all age groups. The great majority of social tourism initiatives are domestic: as such the participation in international tourism is not helpful either. Although Filep and Greenacre (2007) argue that the number of holidays taken may have limitations as a proxy for travel experience (as it does not take into account the destination and length of stay), this argument may be less important for social tourism users, as this group is much less likely to have engaged in long, multi-destination trips. The number of previous holidays can be a potential proxy, which leads to two further considerations: from how many holidays is a tourist no longer ‘inexperienced’, and can there be a role for the time lapse since that holiday? Pearce and Lee (2005) apply the number of trips as a proxy for tourism experience, and describe the most inexperienced travellers as (i) for international tourists: having no prior experience, (ii) for domestic tourists: having engaged in less than 10 domestic holidays. It is the category of the domestic tourists that is of particular importance here. It can be argued that from a travel decision perspective, there is a considerable difference between having no experience with domestic holidays at all, and having had nine previous experiences. Social tourism users are usually a group displaying particularly low levels of travel experience – as such the number of holidays in the ‘inexperienced’ category is considerably lower. A second argument that is not raised in prior research is the role of time lapse since the last holiday. It can be argued that an adult who has experienced holidays in early childhood, but due to financial or health circumstances is no longer able to participate in tourism in adulthood, can still be seen as an inexperienced tourist.

From the above, it becomes clear that the current definitions of tourism inexperience are of limited use in the discussion of social tourism beneficiaries. The anxiety resulting from the travel inexperience however is captured well by the concept of uncertainty (with its associated concept of risk), which will be explored below.

5. Inexperience and uncertainty

Inexperience and a lack of knowledge can be linked to increased levels of uncertainty in making (travel) decisions. The term ‘uncertainty’ is used here as opposed to ‘risk’; Williams and Baláž (2012) highlight that these are fundamentally different concepts that can respectively be seen as ‘unknown’ and ‘known’ uncertainties. Risk, from this perspective, refers to an action with a range of possible outcomes, of which the probabilities are known. Playing the lottery for example can be seen as taking a risk. Uncertainty refers to actions with many possible outcomes, of which the parameters and probabilities are unknown — uncertainty entails a limitation of knowledge which makes the outcome of an action impossible to predict. Individuals display different levels of risk tolerance and risk aversion, depending on socio-economic factors, gender, age, culture (Williams and Baláž, 2012). Fox and Tversky (1995) however argue that humans generally show a preference for the known over the unknown, for risk over uncertainty, also referred to as ‘ambiguity aversion’.

A substantial number of empirical studies in tourism discuss the effect of levels of risk on tourism decisions. Mawby (2000), Reisinger and Mavondo (2005), Dolnicar (2005) and Law (2006) for example investigated the role of the perceived risk of factors such as terrorist attacks, infectious diseases and natural disasters on tourists’ travel decision. Maser and Weiermair (1998) studied the role of the decision-making process on mitigating risk. Lepp and Gibson (2003) linked tourist motivations (in terms of familiarity versus novelty) to levels of risk aversion. The tourism literature however does not contain many studies that investigate the role of uncertainty in travel decisions. An exception is Quintal, Lee, and Soutar (2010): this study compares the impact of risk versus the impact of uncertainty on travel decisions. One of its findings is that higher travel experience often results in a reduction in the role of uncertainty factors. This finding in particular seems to resonate with the experiences of social tourism participants as described above: after engagement with tourism products that are deemed as ‘low anxiety’ (for example day trips), beneficiaries may decide to participate in tourism products with higher anxiety attached to them (for example residential holidays). The level of uncertainty associated with a day trip, particularly if it takes place in a group, can be deemed fairly low: because the night is spent in the own home, because no luggage needs to be taken, because the length of the day trip is shorter, because the financial implications are easier to predict. A group holiday can similarly be deemed as lower in uncertainty than an individual holiday, as the transport is likely to be arranged, and someone is at hand to help when problems arise. The findings of the focus groups with support workers indicate however that after initial engagement with ‘low uncertainty’ tourism products, some of the perceived uncertainty has become a risk instead, because the participants are more familiar with the potential outcomes, parameters and probabilities holidays may bring.

There is some indication that the choice of a tourism product with a suitable level of uncertainty may affect the likelihood of social benefits to materialise as a result of tourism participation. Minaert et al. (2009) highlight that an adequate level of support for the beneficiary is needed before, during and after the holiday to produce benefits such as increased self-esteem, better family relations, improved well-being and more pro-active attitudes to life. Their semi-longitudinal study showed that if this support is absent, and the holiday becomes a source of stress and anxiety, these benefits were unlikely to develop. This would indicate that the choice of the appropriate tourism product for a social tourism beneficiary is of the utmost importance — not only so that the holiday is enjoyable, but also so that it fulfils its transformative social role.

On the basis of the fieldwork described above and the existing theory about tourism inexperience, risk and uncertainty, the following visual representation can be proposed for uncertainty and its impact on social tourism participation. It aims to correlate the levels of uncertainty a social tourism beneficiary finds acceptable or desirable with the tourism product that would be most suitable (Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1. Tourism products offered in social tourism vs. potential uncertainty.](image-url)
6. Case study: teenage mothers

As grounded theory is based on continuous comparative analysis, it was decided this proposed correlation between tourism inexperience, uncertainty and suitability of tourism products needed to be explored further on the basis of fieldwork with social tourism participants. The aim of this fieldwork was to explore if levels of tourism experience, identified in the focus groups, do indeed influence travel choices made by social tourism participants.

The sample for this qualitative study was a group of teenage mothers (aged 18–19) and their support workers, preparing for a social tourism exchange project between Belgium and the UK, of whom 34 agreed to be interviewed (26 teenage mothers and 8 support workers). Some teenage mothers (11) had no previous travel experience, whereas others (15) had had (domestic) holidays in the past five years. Some had also had a further travel experience as children. The group was not homogeneous: some respondents lived in temporary accommodation or a shelter, whereas others lived independently. Equally some mothers were in a relationship (either with the father of the child or with someone else), whereas others were single. These differences allow for an assessment of the role of previous travel experience, but also the potential role of other factors when making tourism decisions. The support workers were included in the interviews so that the teenage mothers would feel at ease and comfortable. None of the support workers in this study had been part of the focus groups described earlier. The respondents were asked about their travel decisions and preferences during in-depth semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 20 and 65 min. The data collection took place between December 2010 and June 2011.

Ethical considerations are of paramount importance when conducting research with vulnerable social groups. The social tourism exchange was prepared by the TPC in Flanders and the Family Holiday Association, a social tourism charity in the UK, and both organisations supported the researcher by facilitating contact with the support workers and allowing the use of their logo on the information letters and consent forms. The support workers were first approached for help when selecting participants for the research. They were telephoned and provided with an information letter. They were then asked to give their clients an invitation letter when they next met, and to explain the aims and procedures of the project. This ensured that the respondents could discuss the research with their support workers before participating, should they wish to do so. The support worker was also welcome to be present during the interview to build a relationship of trust. All interviews and focus groups took place in the offices of the support organisation, and the informed consent form provided was discussed at length with each respondent before the start of the interview. All interviews were recorded (with consent of the respondents) and transcribed in full. The analysis of the data followed the same procedure as outlined for the first study.

The main limitation of this approach lies in the specificity of the case study: teenage mothers are a niche segment in social tourism, and as such their views may not be representative for other types of beneficiaries. The relatively small number of respondents is also a limitation: the findings in this study can thus not claim to be generalizable.

6.1. Findings

For the beneficiaries of this exchange project, holidays were often impossible because of financial or child care constraints. Even for those beneficiaries who had travelled before, holidays were no longer seen as an expected part of their lifestyle. One of the support workers highlights how this affects the way they think about holidays:

“I think all young people think about holidays, but maybe many of our young mothers just do not see it as an option for them. This could mean that they think about holidays in less concrete terms. But that is because they don’t have the opportunity, because for example they are socially excluded, because they have never had the opportunity at home, or because they are in care” (Support worker).

Similar to study 1, the tourists with no prior holiday experience (11 out of 26) are reported to experience the highest levels of uncertainty, whereas those who had travelled at least once before experienced lower levels.

“We have a mother who is very young, and when the other girls talk about the holidays, she is less excited. She is worried, because she never had a holiday. For the others, it’s being able to reconnect to a previous positive experience, and she cannot do that. One of the mums for example found out she was pregnant on holiday, but there are many girls who have never been. So she may want to go on holiday again, because she had the fun experience. She can reconnect to it and add to it. But many young mothers do not have this opportunity” (Support worker).

From the responses of the young mothers, it became clear that those with no prior tourism experience reported considerable levels of uncertainty. This caused them to feel anxious about the holiday. One respondent for example felt worried about staying in a caravan:

“I think it’s a bit scary, you have to live in that little thing all by yourself. What if something happens, where would you go?”

(Young mother)

Another mother felt uneasy about the safety of her child:

“I would not mind going on holiday, but then I think about all those kids being taken, especially in a foreign country.”

(Young mother)

For some mothers, going on holiday with their baby caused anxiety because they would lack the support of family and friends. In many cases, the father of the baby is not seen as a source of help, as exemplified by the responses of these two mothers:

“I would never leave her alone with her dad, her dad has not got a clue.”

“He can’t do her nappy properly. It’s always squashed in the middle and I always have to re-do it. He has a child already. It irritates me because every time she wets herself I am the one who has to change her.”

For some mothers however, spending time alone with their child was a motivation to go on holiday, and not a source of anxiety:

“There will be nobody to distract you and your baby. When you are here, you have family members or their dad always around.”

As a result of these concerns, none of the respondents with no prior tourism experience declared themselves willing to go on an individual holiday — they only agreed to the exchange because it was a group holiday accompanied by known support workers. This can be contrasted with the views of some respondents who had prior travel experience (15 out of 26), even though that experience was often limited or a long time ago. About half of the respondents in this group said they would like to go on an individual holiday, either with their partner or alone with their child.

‘For me and my partner holidays are very important. Just to relax, if you have young children... we can do things together with the children, because he is often out to work, and has no time for such things. He works every day, and by the time he gets home they are already in bed’ (Young mother).
Although fifteen respondents had limited prior tourism experience, none of them had ever travelled with their child before. As such, even the respondents who had been on holiday before reported anxiety about this aspect. The group holiday they were planning to go on included activities for mothers only, with qualified support staff looking after the children, so that the mothers would have a moment to relax:

“Mums cannot have a good holiday without some time for themselves, otherwise they are simply caring for their children in a different place without all the comforts of home and it becomes stressful. A holiday should not just be focused on the needs of the child” (Support worker).

It is important to see them as young people, and also as parents (Support worker).

Being away from their children was something most mothers were not accustomed to at home, and was a cause of uncertainty and anxiety:

“Because they are so little, you just get paranoid every little thing that someone does. So you are watching everyone, making sure they wash their hands. So the way they handle them, I just watch them, and they go ‘oh you are so annoying’” (Young mother).

“We have a lot of mums who since their baby has been born, have not been more than 10 m away from them. Having to part with their children on holiday, that is a massive step for them. They learn from each other, if one thinks it is OK to do something without the child, the other might as well” (Support worker).

Because of this new element of uncertainty, seven of the respondents who had prior travel experience still strongly preferred a group holiday with a known support worker:

“I think this is why they can sometimes come across as negative or demanding: they don’t have the experience and that is frightening. If they cannot recreate the prefect world they have built around the child at home at another place, they may not want to participate. That is why a group holiday can lower these thresholds” (Support worker).

This means that although the respondents looked forward to the holiday, a majority still felt that support was needed. One of the support workers sees the support she offers as a way for the young mothers to continue their development, which can be seen as interrupted by the pregnancy:

“Young people look to broaden their worlds. It is often the pregnancy that interrupts this process. And they don’t always automatically get that process going again” (Support worker).

Although the findings above suggest that levels of travel experience play a role in travel choices and preferences, there were also other factors that were mentioned as leading to lower uncertainty levels. Respondents who lived independently for example were generally more likely to consider an individual holiday. Similarly, respondents who were in a stable relationship were more likely to choose this option than respondents who were single or who were in relationships they did not see as stable. This indicates that travel experience is an important, but not the only determinant in the choice of tourism products for social tourism beneficiaries.

The findings of this study support those of the focus groups, and add a further nuance to them. They emphasise that prior travel experience is only one element in changing uncertainty levels – because the respondents had not travelled with their children before, a new level of uncertainty was added that may affect how inexperienced tourists make travel decisions. This finding supports Filep and Greenacre’s (2007, 25) statement that ‘as travel experience is a component of general experience, the separation of travel experience from other experiences is an artificial distinction’. Travel experience is but one aspect of the factors that influence travel decisions of inexperienced tourists: it is highly likely that those who feel anxious about tourism decisions, feel anxious about other types of decisions too. If their confidence in other areas of life increases, for example because of participation in education, employment, or through the influence of stable relationships or people in their environment, their confidence regarding tourism participation may equally go up — even if they have no or limited tourism experience.

7. Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper indicate that travel experience, and associated levels of uncertainty, play a key role in determining which tourism product may be most suitable for certain groups of social tourism beneficiaries. Reduced levels of uncertainty can be linked to lower levels of anxiety, and subsequently taking part in more ‘challenging’ tourism options (either with regards to length of stay, or with regards to levels of support). The research findings have shown that reducing uncertainty is often a crucial gateway to tourism participation: inexperienced tourists may refuse tourism participation even when financial barriers are overcome, if uncertainty levels are deemed to be too high. Previous research by Minnaert et al. (2009) also indicates that uncertainty levels can be linked to the likelihood that social benefits of the holiday are achieved in terms of confidence, well-being, family relations, social networks and pro-active attitudes to life.

These findings have considerable implications for social tourism providers in the public or charitable sector. If it is indeed so that the management of uncertainty is linked to both the willingness to participate in social tourism, and the potential outcomes of the holiday, then the choice of tourism product becomes of much more central importance in social tourism than has been considered so far. The findings indicate for example that it is desirable to be able to offer different tourism products, so that the tourism product can be tailored to the circumstances of the beneficiary. If an organisation only offers residential holidays, even though for some beneficiaries this is associated with overly elevated uncertainty levels, this may lead to cancellations (often with associated costs) or fewer social benefits compared to those potentially achieved by a day trip (which would come at a substantially lower cost). Similarly, if an organisation only offers day trips, this may not allow for the challenge level and confidence building that may be associated with longer, residential holidays. Currently, it seems very few social tourism providers are aware of the central role the selection of the right tourism product can play — many limit their offer to one holiday type. Although it is probably unrealistic to expect that all providers would offer all holiday types, collaborations between different organisations, each specialising in one type, may be a route towards greater diversification of the product. A professionalization of the social tourism sector thus seems to be in order, which may involve more active collaborations with the private tourism sector. This could result in both social and economic benefit for both the social tourism provider and the private sector partners. Social tourism providers would be able to offer more tailored and cost-effective products to their beneficiaries, whereas the private sector could benefit from additional revenue during the low and shoulder season.

Finally, the research has highlighted a gap in the current tourism literature in the area of inexperienced tourists and travel inexperience. Inexperienced tourists are a group that are but rarely addressed in academic research. Not only is there no generally
accepted definition of what constitutes travel inexperience, the existing definitions vary widely — to the extent that they hardly seem to address the same concept across different studies. A better understanding of this group of tourists however could have management implications for tourism suppliers and intermediaries that may wish to attract them, as they currently represent a group whose tourism demand may be suppressed. There is also a need for further research into the transformative power of tourism and its potential for social policy: longitudinal studies concerning the long-term effects of social tourism participation, particularly in comparison with other types of intervention, are currently lacking.

If, through professionalization of the sector and intensified research, tourism could be shown to play a role in social integration and inclusion, it may perhaps shed its reputation as a ‘gratuitous’ and ‘hedonistic’ activity (Urry, 1990), to become once again accepted as a social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006).

References


