

Commentary

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Interpretation and tourism: holy grail or emperor's robes

Moscardo's (2014) latest review and critique of interpretation and interpretation research is a must read for both seasoned and aspiring researchers in the field, and we highly commend her for the timeliness, breadth and depth of her review paper. Her review draws on much of the central research in interpretation, particularly from a tourism perspective, and does an excellent job of extracting key themes and issues across a disparate body of work. More importantly, she makes a concerted effort to critically assess the limitations of current interpretation research and present a way forward.

Moscardo asks whether interpretation is meeting or ever can meet its goals, particularly as a tool for tourism and ultimately for sustainable tourism. Part of our response is to explore what are the desired outcomes of interpretation (e.g. tourist satisfaction and sustainability) and, by extension, what is "effective" heritage interpretation in the context of tourism. Additionally, we seek to provide critical commentary on Moscardo's important review in the spirit of further advancing these and other ideas she presents.

Moscardo's paper begins by asking a number of thought-provoking questions that would behoove any research-related discipline to answer, including whether interpretation research is rigorous (i.e. replicable and valid) and relevant (i.e. beneficial to end-users). To answer these questions, she presents a balanced and well-written review of studies on heritage (including nature) interpretation that is wide ranging and insightful.

We agree with Moscardo that challenging the status quo by questioning whether there is evidence to support the rhetoric that heritage interpretation is good for tourism is fruitful discourse for researchers, scholars and practitioners. Moscardo's review is thoughtful and well supported by the literature, and critical without being overly antagonistic and iconoclastic. Her approach is effective, in that it seriously engages and advances the development and implementation of fundamental disciplinary tenets and constructs. This is compared to scholars who set about to attack and discredit entire bodies of work such as sustainable tourism, pro-poor tourism or volunteer tourism, thereby "throwing the baby out with the bathwater", with little appeal to constructive dialog.

Like sustainable tourism and pro-poor tourism, "effective interpretation" is as much an aspiration as it is a phenomenon that can be observed and measured. That said, there is merit in seeking to define effective interpretation, which many have begun to refer to collectively as "best practice" principles. As such, the meta-analysis published by Skibins *et al.* (2012) provides an important watershed piece, the omission of which is an unfortunate oversight by Moscardo. Meta-analyses attempt to capture the findings of published research that has sought to link input with output variables across a body of work. Skibins *et al.* assess the links between interpretation principles and visitor outcomes to provide a platform for both future research and practice. In the absence of a universally accepted set of best practice principles for interpretation, the authors draw on widely used texts and manuals acknowledged by interpretation professionals as appropriate sources for identifying a common set of interpretation principles. This is consistent with Moscardo's

criterion that research needs to be relevant (beneficial to end-users). The 18 sources used by Skibins *et al.* are largely North American, but include two non-American sources one of which is the study by Moscardo (1999). Based collectively on these 18 sources, they identify 17 best practices, such as “actively engaging audiences”, “using cognitive and affective messaging”, “multisensory interpretation” and “interpretation, that is relevant to the audience”. Skibins *et al.* then review interpretive research designed to measure six visitor outcomes that emerged from a content analysis of the articles they examined: attitudes, awareness, behaviour, behavioural intention, knowledge and satisfaction.

There are, of course, many other outcomes that could be of interest to both researchers and end-users, such as the relative impact of interpretation on environmental, social and economic indicators. Some of these, such as increasing repeat visitation, length of stay, destination or tourism operators’ “bottom line” and enhancing host communities’ quality of life, are discussed by Moscardo. Skibins *et al.* then conduct a meta-analysis of 70 published studies, each selected on the basis it included a clear assessment of the outcomes of interpretation, empirically assessed at least one of the six visitor outcomes, and contained sufficient detail in the publication to identify relevant interpretation principles. This seems to be consistent with Moscardo’s criterion that research needs to be rigorous (replicable and valid). Skibins *et al.* do acknowledge, however, that their meta-analysis primarily consisted of North American or Western studies. This shortcoming is symptomatic of interpretation research as a whole and speaks to Moscardo’s point of biases in journal publications.

We concur with Skibins *et al.* (2012) and Moscardo (2014) that there are a number of issues with the current body of interpretation research that limits the conclusions that can be drawn from any one study and, to some extent, the generalisability of this body of research as a whole. Many of these issues are methodological, such as the inadequacy of the research designs. The majority of studies are cross-sectional with very few repeated measures that could speak to the longitudinal or multiple-intervention outcomes from one or more interpretation best practices. Another design issue is the emphasis on correlational rather than experimental design. This often limits studies to only conclude that more (or better) interpretation is *positively related* to desired tourism outcomes (e.g. satisfaction, knowledge gain and responsible behaviour), *not* that interpretation actually is *the cause* of this outcome (Weiler and Ham, 2010).

Moscardo notes that to experimentally manipulate interpretation in the field, so that some visitors get “good” interpretation and others do not, is almost never an option. What is left unsaid is how researchers are to respond to this issue. Multivariate statistical analyses, such as structural regression modelling and hierarchical linear modelling, can compensate, to an extent, for the lack of experimental design. A recent example of this is Huang *et al.* (2015) study reporting the mediating effect of satisfaction on behavioural intention. One of the advantages these techniques provide is the ability to simultaneously incorporate multiple experiential variables (e.g. visitor motivations/attitudes, presence of wildlife and group dynamics), which may well produce positive outcomes regardless of the quality of the interpretation. Additionally, multivariate statistics allow for a wider inclusion of behavioural models. Moscardo’s review addresses mainly well-known behavioural change models (i.e. theory of planned behaviour) and dual processing models (e.g. elaboration likelihood model). While these are well supported in the literature, the exploration of contextual behaviour models, such as interaction theory, is providing more a more holistic understanding of the heritage tourism experience.

A related issue with much interpretation research is sampling bias, part of which may be because of the researcher’s background and access to research contexts and respondents. As Moscardo (2014), Huang *et al.* (2015) and others have noted, to date the vast majority of published research on interpretation has been undertaken in Western contexts by Western researchers and with self-selected respondents (e.g. individuals who choose to join a tour or visit an interpretive centre). The former may overlook the effects of

cultural background on tourism outcomes, and the latter may overstate the effect that an interpretation principle can have on specific outcomes (such as on satisfaction – the sample is already predisposed to being satisfied by having chosen an experience to their liking) or alternatively may understate the effect (such as on pro-conservation attitudes – the sample already has highly pro-environmental views). As Moscardo notes, individuals who choose not to engage with interpretation are often excluded from such research. Thus, the potential or actual effects of applying specific interpretive principles to elicit specific tourism outcomes from this wider audience are largely unstudied.

Measurement issues are acknowledged by many who do research on the phenomenon of interpretation (Moscardo, 2014; Skibins *et al.*, 2012; Weiler and Ham, 2010). As Moscardo and many other authors flag, the extensive use of post-visit self-reporting measures of understanding, knowledge gain, emotional connection and behaviour, especially without complementary data sources such as comprehension tests, physiological measures of emotional response and behavioural observation, can reduce the *validity* of the findings. Moreover, replication of field methods, instruments or measurement scales is very rare in interpretation, often leaving the reader with no clear confirmation of a study's *reliability*. Finally, given the limited understanding of interpretation effectiveness across diverse cultures, settings and environments, there continues to be a need for case studies underpinned by the application of rigorous qualitative methods.

Although we seem to be on the same wavelength with much of Moscardo's thinking, one criticism we do have of her review is that readers may be tempted to seek overly simplistic or linear solutions to the problems she poses. For example, she states "positive experiences result in learning and through learning contribute to attitude change which then leads to behaviour change which is [a] key function of interpretation, visitor impact management" (Moscardo, 2009, p. 467). While we fully support the intent of Moscardo's (2014: 467) Figure 1, there is a danger that it will be misinterpreted by readers as saying that with more engagement with relevant theory, these causal relationships can be confirmed in research. We would argue that the relationship is not as linear or as simple as Figure 1 suggests, with many other variables that may play confounding or moderating effects on tourism outcomes. In other words, no amount of application of theory to the operationalisation of constructs and the modelling of relationships, which is something we completely support, is going to result in the specification of interpretation principles that will *a/ways* lead to an increase in knowledge, a change in attitudes, or more positive visitor behaviour. We would also argue that not all interpretation needs to do all these things all of the time, nor are the relationships always in the directions of the arrows shown. Readers need to be cautioned about taking leaps of logic along these lines.

Moscardo makes the very good point that it may not always be appropriate that interpretive content and key take-home messages be selected by interpreters or interpretive planners. She notes the importance of host communities in having a stake in what is communicated and the appropriateness of their input into interpretation. We would take this a step further, suggesting that many tourists themselves, rather than being empty vessels into which information is poured, should be viewed as co-creators of interpretive experiences and we are pleased to see this notion being embraced in the tourism literature. As Weiler and Black (2015) suggest in their typology of guided tourist experiences, this may be particularly the case for tourists at the experienced and "mindful" (to use Moscardo's term) end of the continuum, with novice and less engaged tourists being comfortable with more traditional forms of interpretation. In cases where the end game is to enhance the visitor experience, it will be important to co-create the interpretation with these types of target audiences. From a research perspective, this seems to imply the active involvement of tourists, as end-users of interpretation, in identifying both the inputs and the outputs of interpretive experiences.

At the same time, however, we should not lose sight of the fact that tourism providers also need to be viewed as end-users and thus need to continue to have input into specifying the desired tourism outcomes of interpretation. Thus, as suggested at the outset to our

commentary, the desired outcomes of tourism can be expected to differ for each destination, each tourism manager and even each visitor. Is the end-game sustainable tourism, one particular dimension of sustainability, attitude or behaviour change or simply a quality visitor experience? (Ham, 2013) Only after managers settle on what outcomes they want to achieve with their interpretation can researchers be called upon to assist with assessing to what extent, how and why the desired outcomes are or are not being achieved.

A related comment about Moscardo's Figure 1 and the text associated with it is the implication that "a molar level of analysis" (Moscardo, p. 471) is the main way forward and the lines of enquiry she points to for achieving that end. Clearly, meta-analyses (Skibins *et al.*, 2012) are an additional tool that can help build the big picture, as are more qualitative, holistic approaches to investigating interpretation phenomena at a case study level. While we are very supportive of more of all of these kinds of research, it should be stressed that there is merit in studies using the "molecular" approach as well, including replication studies that can feed into future meta-analyses. At the risk of stating the obvious, a diversity of types and scales of research is required if we are going to capture the collective learnings of the field, including macro-level lessons within and across generational cohorts and cultures, within and across tourism contexts (e.g. guided tours, wildlife attractions and museums) and in different tourism environments and at different scales.

In summary, if there is one single overarching criticism we have of the paper, it is that the questions posed by the author and sometimes the answers are a little too black and white. Rather than asking if interpretation is what it claims to be and achieves what it seeks to achieve, might it not be better to ask to what extent interpretation is achieving desirable tourism outcomes, which outcomes, in which circumstances (when and where), and to ask how, why and why not? Like Moscardo, we see her review and our commentary as catalysts for more critical research. We look forward to seeing a continuation of Moscardo's past record of research excellence in this field along with the work of many others as we continue to strive to collectively find answers to these questions.

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