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# A Moment in Time: Autobiographical Memories of Nature-based Tourists

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## A Moment in Time: Autobiographical Memories of Nature-based Tourists

### **Context and justification of issue:**

This study was conducted for the primary purpose of investigating the visitor experience using the autobiographical memories of nature-based tourists. Nature-based tourism (NBT) is a broadly defined concept that refers to visiting undisturbed, natural areas specifically for enjoying, admiring, or studying its wild plants, animals, and cultural resources (Boo 1990; Ceballos-Lascurain 1987). In the U.S., NBT is most visible at national parks and protected areas managed by entities such as the National Park Service (NPS). Therefore, Yellowstone National Park was selected as the destination to best conduct this research.

Recently a call was made to provide *transformative visitor experiences* that enrich the lives of travelers in order to connect more visitors to national parks and encourage revisitation (National Park Service Advisory Board Science Committee 2012). These experiences are “considered to be those events, either planned or unplanned, that lead to a change in an individual, either behaviorally, psychologically, or emotionally (Ewert, Overholt, Voight, and Wang 2011: 140).” Visitor experience research within tourism has been ongoing for decades (Prentice, Witt, and Hamer 1998). However, little research has been done to understand what makes an experience transformative. Thus, this study used the psychological construct of autobiographical memory to evaluate and explore the experiences travelers have at the destination. This approach is still in the early stages of tourism and outdoor recreation research, but has the potential to provide new insights into the visitor’s mental framework.

### **Theoretical contributions:**

Autobiographical memory (AM) has been researched in cognitive and social psychology as well as neurology for some time now. This form of personal, long-term memory is defined as that “uniquely human form of memory that moves beyond recall of experienced events to integrate perspective, interpretation, and evaluation across self, other, and time to create a personal history (Fivush 2011).” AM goes beyond simple event recall by including the “thoughts, emotions and evaluations of what happened, and provides explanatory frameworks replete with human intentions and motivations (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, and Zaman 2011: 322).” Autobiographical memory helps build an individual’s personal history through recall of past events contained in one’s ‘self-memory system’ (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000).

Previous studies have used AMs to understand how people remember their college experiences, traumatic events, and childhood experiences. AM contains four main constructs: impact, rehearsal, recollection, and belief. These constructs are used to clarify how impactful the memory is in one’s life, the frequency they think about or share their remembrance, their ability to recall specific details of the event, and their belief about the event (Fitzgerald and Broadbridge 2013). Furthermore, there are three functional uses of AMs, which explain the ways in which people actively use AMs in daily life: directive (AMs influencing behavior), self (continuity of self through past experiences), and social (bonding with others through sharing) (Bluck 2003).

Recently, Pearce and Packer (2013) cited memory as a topic that deserves more research in the tourism realm. While some studies directly or indirectly touch on the topic including Tung and Ritchie (2011), Braasch (2008), Kim, Ritchie and McCormick (2012) and Marschall (2012), there is much to be learned about memory’s role in tourism. Researching AMs of past tourism experiences allows for an in-depth look into how people recall their travels, the impact it has on

their life, and the frequency they share or think about their past travels. Essentially it is an evaluation of what a traveler takes away from a tourism experience through their own subjective lens. Therefore, the contribution of this work lies in the novel approach of using AM in a tourism context to explore the visitor experience.

### **Methodology:**

The target population for this study was previous Yellowstone National Park visitors. To capture this sample, four sources were used to distribute an online questionnaire: 1) members of the Yellowstone Association, 2) contributors of the Yellowstone Park Foundation, 3) Xanterra Resorts and Lodges guest reservations, 4) and online panel members of a regional research institute. This sample was selected because of their likelihood of being previous visitors to Yellowstone National Park.

Using an online panel software program, a quantitative questionnaire was sent to participants. Each of the four organizations sent the link to the online survey to a sample of their email member list, therefore the number of respondents who received the survey could not be calculated. In total 2,854 completed questionnaires were returned via the online panel software. We estimate a 15-20% response rate based on conversations with each organization's contact person. When respondents began the questionnaire they were prompted to state whether they had been to Yellowstone in their lifetime. Only those who had previously visited the park were used for this analysis. Contained within the survey were open-ended comments for visitors to describe the first memory that comes to mind of an experience or event in Yellowstone National Park and to describe what made it memorable. Furthermore, two quantitative statements on the impact of one's AM in their life were adapted from Fitzgerald and Broadbridge (2013). These statements were on a 7-point scale where 1 = 'not at all' to 7 = 'more than any memory' and served as a way to evaluate the overall importance of their Yellowstone National Park memorable experience. However, this analysis primarily covers the open-ended memories provided by visitors. A deeper analysis of the quantitative evaluations will occur at a later date.

### **Key Findings:**

To analyze the AMs of respondent's Yellowstone experience, two researchers independently categorized and analyzed open-ended responses to the questions: 1) "Please describe the first memory that comes to mind about an experience or event in Yellowstone National Park" and 2) "What made that experience or event memorable?" Responses were coded for thematic qualities and followed previous guidelines for evaluating AMs.

For question one, autobiographical memories revolved around a number of key overarching themes with subthemes mixed throughout (Table 1). Wildlife experiences were described most often among respondents, specifically in regards to bear, bison, and wolf encounters. Particular events unique to the individual were the next most recalled memory, spearheaded by 'first time experiences'. These are a series of first time events for that individual revolving around a number of other key aspects such as wildlife or geothermal features. Natural features and scenic beauty comprised the third overarching theme. Visitors tended to remember geothermal features, specifically Old Faithful geyser. Finally, many visitors mentioned social aspects of their memory including family they were with and experiences shared with their social group. Many times the social group was mentioned along with other activities that they remembered doing while at the park.

In regards to question two, the novelty of a 'first time experience' was most memorable to individuals. First time experiences were found to be memorable in all of the overarching

themes. For instance, some visitors experienced wildlife for the first time while others were on their first family vacation. Second, sensory/emotional aspects such as surprise, excitement, or awe were salient to many memories.

**Table 1: Memory themes and example quotes**

<b>Memory Themes:</b>	<b>Respondent's Quotes:</b>
1. Wildlife experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Bear experiences</li> <li>b. Bison Experiences</li> <li>c. Wolf Experiences</li> </ul>	"Seeing the wolf pack in the Lamar valley in the winter. They had an elk down by the river but weren't hungry (at that moment) and were romping and playing as a family group."
2. Specific events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. 'First time' experiences</li> <li>b. First visit to YNP</li> <li>c. Childhood memories</li> </ul>	"I visited Yellowstone when I was around 5 years old. The anticipation of going into the park was sort of like imagining Disneyland. Everything was bigger, more awesome, more amazing through my young eyes. The geysers and landscape made a big impression. Saw my first black bear, which was great too."
3. Natural features/beauty/scenery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Geothermal features</li> <li>b. Old Faithful</li> </ul>	"Seeing the wonderful scenery was most fantastic experience and is what keeps me coming back."
4. Family/Social memories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Shared experiences</li> <li>b. Being with children/parents</li> </ul>	"I took my parents to Yellowstone when they were both alive. It was wonderful to introduce them to new sites."

Finally, the two quantitative statements about the impact of one's Yellowstone National Park memory indicated a multimodal distribution (Table 2). Seventeen and 14 percent of respondents, respectively, stated their memory was not impactful in their life at all. However, an almost equal distribution of respondents stated that it was more impactful than any other memory in their life (13% and 16%, respectively). Thus, this indicates that some Yellowstone experiences are extremely impactful in visitors' lives whereas others do not share those sentiments.

**Table 2: Autobiographical Memory Impact Statements**

<b>Impact Statements</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Mean</b>
This memory has consequences for my life because it influenced my behavior, thoughts, or feelings in noticeable ways.	17%	12%	15%	18%	14%	10%	13%	3.84
This memory is significant in my life because it imparts an important message for me or represents an anchor, critical juncture, or turning point.	14%	11%	13%	19%	16%	12%	16%	4.09

Scale: 1 = 'not at all' to 7 = 'more than any other memory'.

**Implications to applied tourism:**

The findings from this study highlight aspects of the visitor experience that go well beyond national parks to encompass tourism as a whole. Memories, specifically autobiographical memories, represent a new approach towards investigating the tourism experience. Understanding how to create memories that last the test of time is one way to uncover the

*transformative* aspects of a visit. In the case of Yellowstone, wildlife viewings and encounters are frequently recalled by individuals. Thus, focusing on the preservation of a sustainable ecosystem will continue to allow visitors wildlife viewing opportunities that can be transformative. Additionally, the 'first time experience' emerged as a memorable experience for visitors. The first time a visitor experiences an event or participates in an activity fulfills the 'self' function of AM, recording one's personal history. Making a positive impression on the first visit not only provides gratification while at the destination, but lives on in memory. Ensuring a positive first time experience is critical for managers and stakeholders at destinations.

Finally, the impact of tourists' AMs varied between visitors. The multimodal distribution indicates that some visitors felt that their Yellowstone National Park memorable experience influenced their behaviors and had consequences for their life, however, others did not experience any form of change. More research is needed to parse out what types of experiences are impactful and their differences from non-impactful experiences. However, this study is a fitting first step in measuring tourists' memories of their destination experiences. Tourism marketers can benefit from this research by facilitating experiences that are impactful, which then may increase destination loyalty and intention to return. If all visitors can have impactful AMs, it may lead to future visits or word-of-mouth marketing to friends and family. A later analysis will use the quantitative memory evaluations to predict visitors' place attachment and support for the park. Future research should delve into the relationship between AM's impact and destination loyalty.

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