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Angela M. Durko PhD Candidate

Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University

James F. Petrick PhD

Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University

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Hunting Cabins and Health Spas: Examining the Potential Benefits of Leisure Travel With, and Independent of, Significant Other

Angela M. Durko
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University- USA
angeladurko@hotmail.com

and

James F. Petrick, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University- USA
jpetrick@tamu.edu

INTRODUCTION

With many adults working longer hours and taking on multiple jobs, relationship dynamics are also changing, and ultimately the amount of time couples spend together is changing (Hellerstein and Morill, 2011; Bianchi, 2011; Amato, Booth, Johnson, and Rogers, 2009). Thus, resources which foster positive relationships, provide a break from routine obligations and daily stressors, help increase relationship and overall life satisfaction levels, and explain relationship dissatisfaction, are likely becoming increasingly more important. These issues have resulted in a recent surge in research related to marital satisfaction, and the variables that can enhance relationships, to include leisure activities.

Existent research has cited leisure as a contributing factor to increased well-being and satisfaction in adults, a factor which has been found to reduce stress and increase relationship satisfaction (Sirgy, Kruger, Lee and Yu, 2011; de Bloom et al, 2010; Gilbert and Abdullah, 2004; Strauss-Blasche et al, 2002; Neal, Sirgy and Uysal, 1999). Research in this domain has typically considered the effects for married couples, but has not considered the role joint leisure activities play over various stages and lengths of relationships. Thus, the present study will examine the effects leisure (specifically travel) has on relationship commitment throughout the relationship lifecycle and include couples who are in varying stages of a relationship, from dating, cohabitating, and married.

Several research studies have found that shared leisure leads to increases in relationship satisfaction (Canary, Stafford, Hause and Wallace, 1993; Baldwin, Ellis and Baldwin, 1999;

Strauss-Blasche and Marktl, 2000; Johnson, Zabriskie, and Hill, 2006). However, past research has not investigated the motives for joint leisure related to the appeasement of others (i.e., beyond personal motives) and how appeasement of others' motives affects overall leisure and relationship satisfaction. It may be suggested that sacrifices made in leisure choices may negatively affect both relationship and leisure satisfaction. Traveling for appeasement of a spouse to a sporting event, or accompanying the significant other on the hypothetical spa and shopping weekend, may actually be detrimental to, rather than supportive of, the current relationship. Practitioners in the field of travel have recently begun to examine the trend of couples traveling (as a means of leisure) without their significant other on girlfriend's getaways or "mancations," as a means to potentially increase satisfaction with their leisure choices and their relationships (Bond, 2012, Cavallari, 2008). As the great Nat King Cole's "Where Can I Go Without You?" suggests, traveling the world without your significant other could possibly make you value your relationship and time spent together that much more. This study will hopefully build on this emerging trend of travel with friends and others, who are not the significant other, by examining relationship satisfaction and commitment levels of adults whose last vacation was taken independent of their significant other compared to those whose last vacation was with their significant other. Thus, the main objective of this proposed research will be to develop an initial understanding leading to an explanation of the potential benefits travel may contribute to relationship commitment. With an increase in divorce rates (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, and Mosher, 2012) and the working adult population reluctant to use vacation days (Expedia, 2012), an understanding of whether travel provides physical and mental benefits leading to increases in relationship commitment and thus overall well-being, may be the push people need to travel more.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leisure satisfaction has been defined as "the positive perceptions or feelings which an individual forms, elicits, or gains as a result of engaging in leisure activities and choices" (Beard & Ragheb, 1980, p. 22). According to Wang, Chen, Lin, and Wang (2008), leisure satisfaction is a significant predictor of life satisfaction, and satisfaction with leisure experiences typically changes during all life stages. Further, research on the relationship between leisure activities and marital satisfaction has found that increases in shared leisure activities contribute to increases in relationship satisfaction (Newman and Newman, 2008; Presser, 2000; Holman and Jacquart, 1988; Hill, 1988). Several studies have cited "travel" as a leisure activity which provides a break from the mundane, fast-paced routine way of life, which can lead to increases in quality of life and relationship satisfaction (Dolnicar, Yanamandram, and Cliff, 2012; de Bloom, Geurts, Taris, Sonnentag, de Weerth, and Kompier, 2010; Fritz and Sonnentag, 2006; Strauss-Blasche and Marktl, 2000; Crompton, 1979).

Marital happiness has been found to decline over the course of a marriage, with the decline steepest in the early years, often slowing but never recovering from the early years of happiness, (VanLaningham, Johnson, Amato, 2001; Bramlett and Mosher, 2002). Research conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention has consistently found that the first years of marriage often have the least chance of divorce. Typically only 7 percent of marriages end in divorce within the first two years, compared to 20 percent in years three through five and 30 percent in years six through ten, increasing to 50 percent for those married 20 years or more (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, and Mosher, 2012).

A longitudinal study of marriages in America conducted in 1980 and again in 2000, found a significant decrease in the amount of time couples spent together over the course of the 20 year study. This was attributed to demanding career responsibilities for both partners and an increasing need for independence over the course of a relationship (Amato, Johnson, Booth and Rogers, 2003). Couples who claimed they were satisfied in their relationship also cited the importance of time apart as a contributing factor to the satisfaction of their relationship. AAA Worldwide Travel recently reported research on the girlfriend getaway market and revealed this emerging trend has developed into a \$6 billion dollar segment, which represents 4 percent of US travel industry sales (Cavallari, 2008) Of the 1,529 women they interviewed, 73 percent were married, and 88 percent had children less than 18 years old. This trend, up 230 percent in the past seven years, has been attributed to women and men needing time to partake in leisure activities they enjoy which are activities their significant other may not enjoy (Bond, 2009). According to a recent survey, nearly a quarter of respondents were planning to take a trip with female or males friends, up 22 percent from 2011 (Long, 2012). The present study will attempt to build on these findings to investigate if individuals in a relationship who maintain a level of individualism are more or less likely to achieve positive relationships and overall increased quality of life levels.

PURPOSE

The primary purpose of the current study will be to investigate a causal link between relationship satisfaction, perceived investment and commitment between those who travel more with a significant other compared to those who travel independent of significant other. The study may also reveal links between relationship commitment levels across relationship life stages, (from dating couples through couples cohabitating and married) with travel as a moderating variable.

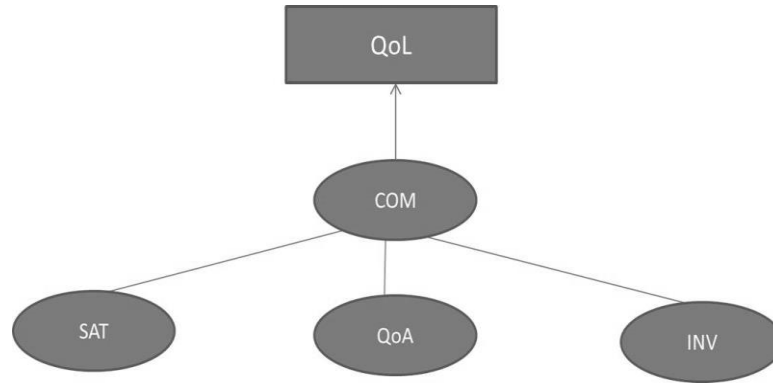
PROPOSED MODEL

As the underlying investigative factor in this research is commitment to relationship, the Investment Model may logically serve as a research model to explain commitment. The Investment Model postulates one's commitment to a relationship (romantic, product, or service) is a function of satisfaction with the relationship, consideration of alternatives to the relationship, and perceived investment in the relationship (Rusbult, 1998). Satisfaction, Investment Size, and Quality of Alternatives are thus used to evaluate commitment level to a service, relationship, brand or product. While it may seem obvious, if someone is happy (satisfaction), they may not be fully committed as they are not heavily invested (monetarily, time wise, or emotional), or if they feel they have multiple quality alternatives.

Satisfaction refers to the positive versus negative affect experienced in a relationship. It is a measure of how well a partner fulfills a variety of individual's needs. While a predictor of commitment, satisfaction alone does not typically determine commitment level. Quality of alternatives refers to perceived desirability of the best available alternative to the current relationship. It is a measure of how and if an individual's needs could be met without the current partner, whether by friends, other romantic partners or others. Investment size refers to the importance of resources that are attached to the current relationship. It assumes the resources would decrease if the relationship were terminated. Finally, commitment is assumed to be the intent to continue a relationship based on internal and external factors. The theory is uses to

show the need to research all three contributing factors to determine and influence commitment level. It is postulated, that as these factors increase, so too will commitment to relationship and therefore, overall quality of life, thus potentially lowering divorce rates and increasing relationship satisfaction of those married, cohabitating or dating.

Figure 1 Proposed Model of Quality of Life and Relationship Commitment Determinants



PROPOSED METHOD

As this is a new area of study in the field of tourism, a large, generalizable sample will be needed to explore the possible phenomena. To ensure validity and reliability, the variables of interest in this study will be measured using existing scales. A survey will be drafted and administered through a reputable national panel company. By utilizing a national panel for research data collection, researchers are able to impose limitations on survey respondents, declare length of survey, request specific demographics (adults, currently in a relationship, who have traveled in the past 6 months) be represented in the respondent pool, and require all surveys to be completed in full. This should allow for a more targeted sample representative of the population.

IMPLICATIONS

It is believed that the value of the present study is it may provide a new understanding of the role travel can facilitate in relationship commitment as well as how this affects overall quality of life. Findings from the present research could provide further explanation of existent research which claims individualism (for the current study expressed through independent travel) in a relationship assists in achieving high levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Amato, et al, 2007)

This study will build on the idea that individuals who travel, either jointly or independent of their significant other, during varying stages of their relationship may improve or harm their relationship satisfaction. This may also lead to an increase or decrease in their overall quality of life. The findings of this study have the potential to add to the existing research which states leisure can increase quality of life, (Sirgy, et. al, 2011, Strauss et al, 2002) while also investigating if independent travel could supplement unmet needs joint or no travel cause for an individual.

Since travel without one's spouse is an emerging trend, and one in two marriages continue to fail (Copen et al, 2012), it is believed to be important to garner a better understanding

of whether independent travel affects relationship commitment and quality of life differently than travel with one's significant other. If evidence is found to show individuals who travel independent of their significant other have increased satisfaction levels, practitioners in the fields of psychology, relationship therapy and tourism could use these findings to generate interest in, and promote vacations with, friends and family members independent of their significant other. Conversely, if this study reveals those who travel independent of their significant other have decreased commitment and well-being levels, or their significant other's satisfaction levels are diminished due to independent travel, a strong case for increased travel together could be made. Finally, marketing implications could be generated to assist in development of new campaigns targeting girlfriend getaways, mancations and further travel without significant others. Findings either indicating independent travel as a positive or negative factor in a relationship may be used to "sell" an additional travel motive to increase travel frequency, thus providing a boost to tourism industry service providers and the industry as a whole.

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