

“How come you are here?” –

Considering the context in research on travel decisions

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Abstract

Travel decision research still struggles to explain a large portion of the variance in travel choices. We argue that advances in this domain must originate from a shift in the kinds of questions we ask travelers to understand what triggers their decisions. The proposed shift from “Why did you ...?” to “How come ...?” changes the emphasis from retrospective sense giving to a contextual understanding of travel choice, focusing in particular on the constellations that produce actual travel behavior. This shift opens research avenues of a new theoretical and methodological nature and has fundamental implications for consumer research as well as destination marketing practices.

Keywords: travel decision, decision context, decision heuristics, “how come?”, social embeddedness

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“My way toward the truth is to ask the right questions.” (Socrates)

1. A long-standing and still current challenge

Do we really know what happens when individuals or groups make travel choices prior to and during their travels? The quest for the travel research ‘holy grail’ started more than twenty-five years ago with a seminal contribution on trip choice. Woodside and Lysonski (1989) suggested a general model of travel choice. The authors found that in some destinations there was a significant relationship between preference and intention to revisit – even if only to a small extent (approx. 28%). The causality between intention to revisit and actual trip choice (cf. hypothesis 9 of the aforementioned study) remained untested, as did the influence of situational variables (cf. hypothesis 8) (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989).

Since then, research on the causalities between previous experiences, preferences, intentions, and (hypothetical, i.e. ‘would you, if...?’) choice has been searching for the most suitable model of decision making in travel (for a good overview, see Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005).

Recent studies disconfirm some often taken-for-granted causalities and connections. For instance, McKercher and Tse (2012) demonstrate that the intention to revisit does not lead to actual behavior. Even satisfaction does not seem to hold up as a reliable predictor of intention to revisit (Dolnicar, Coltman, & Sharma, 2013).

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In addition to problems surrounding causality, much travel decision research still focuses on the individual traveler and his supposedly purposeful and rational behavior. Despite the recognition of contextual variables as relevant, they remain an unexplored and neglected domain. This is a problem because, "...tourists are confronted with a range of choices and may employ different types of strategies in each specific context... [but]... much further research is required to explore which types of decision strategies are used by different tourists in specific decision contexts" (McCabe, Li, & Chen, 2016, p. 7; 11). There is an urgent need for contextualizing research on travel decision making because travel takes place under different conditions, in different constellations of travel groups, in different forms, and is manifested through different behaviors. Thus, to systematically operationalize the context, we must not only revisit quantitative and qualitative research methods but also question basic assumptions of tourists' decision making.

2. Choices in travel: From a rational and individual phenomenon to a contextual and socially embedded one

Travel choices take place in a large world¹ (Savage, 1954; Simon, 1979), full of known and unknown options, alternatives, and outcomes. Individuals and groups with limited information rely on bounded rationality for their choices (Simon, 1989). The following four factors are key to understanding why choices in travel are embedded in a wider context:

¹ A small world is "...a situation in which all relevant alternatives, their consequences, and probabilities are known, and where the future is certain, so that the optimal solution to a problem can be determined." A large world is "...a situation in which some relevant information is unknown or must be estimated from samples, and the future is uncertain, violating the conditions for rational decision theory" (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011, p. 453).

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- 1) Trip choices are in most cases taken in/ among groups. Trips by single travelers from single households traveling alone amount to about 1%, at best (e.g. Laesser, Beritelli, & Bieger, 2009). Hence, decisions are made under complex social contingencies.
- 2) Choices are made at different stages and hierarchical levels of importance. Pre-trip choices refer to primary attributes such as the destination, the place of accommodation, budget, and the like. On-trip choices are secondary and relate, for example, to day programs, places to see, and where to eat (Choi, Lehto, Morrison, & Jang, 2011; DiPietro, Wang, Rompf, & Severt, 2007; Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000). Thus, travel experiences originate from several contingent choices in time and at different hierarchical levels.
- 3) The context at the destination further affects trip choices, such that decisions are a result of time contingencies or transportation systems (e.g. Lau & McKercher, 2006), or they are an outcome of (in)flexibility, social composition, and a decision's timing or location (Moore, Smallman, Wilson, & Simmons, 2012). Travelers are in constant exchange with the place they are visiting. Their choices reflect the complex environment that surrounds them.
- 4) Decisions are binary, reflecting moments in time. Both individuals and groups decide for or against an option. Alternatively, they also decide by not choosing/ not acting. Whatever its specific outcome, a decision is not scalable. However, most research on intended choices, involving for example the likelihood of revisiting places, traditionally uses scaled choice items. To capture the "real effect" of dimensions and variables influencing choice, research must build on binary choices (for a more basic discussion, see also Dolnicar, 2013).

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Decisions are real, specific events; they are verifiable. Hence, research in this field must focus on explaining what is specifically happening in reality and then deriving, as necessary, a rule or even a model. This paper proposes reconstructing contextually embedded choice heuristics as the most promising way to increase validity in trip choice research.

Heuristics are strategies "...that ignore[s] part of the information, with the goal of making decisions more quickly, frugally, and/or accurately than more complex methods" (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011, p. 454). Two questions guide the study of such heuristics: First, "...what heuristics are in the adaptive toolbox and what are their building blocks? [And second,]... in which environments does a given heuristic work, and in which would another heuristic be better?" (Kurz-Milcke & Gigerenzer, 2007, p. 55). We need to understand the production logic of heuristics at play in real life travel situations (e.g. context *zeta* requires travelers Stacy and Bob choosing from a set of heuristics A, B, C..., the selected and applied heuristic A produces behavior *a*). While ambitious by working with a much lower degree of simplification for real-world complexities, the approach allows research to better serve practice and society, because it delivers specific insights for specific situations. To be relevant for practice and avoid spurious implications and meaningless recommendations, travel choice research must represent the closest and most valid approximation of what happens when travelers make decisions. A first crucial step forward is asking the right question: "how come" instead of "why," as the next section will elucidate.

3. Operationalization and implications

Reconstructing the sequence of events along the travel process allows researchers to identify specific moments of choices (e.g. Decrop, 2006; Smallman & Moore, 2010). Beyond that, embedded in the sequence of travel, the several choices must be contextualized in the situational circumstances in which they have been made. Occasionally, perhaps

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unintentionally, researchers have followed this approach in prior research. Here, for instance, is a pertinent excerpt of an in-depth interview from Moore et al. (2012):

Interviewer: Could you describe to me once again how you came to make that decision?

Female: (Laughing) No, well I've just always wanted to do that, a bungy in New Zealand because, I don't know, and then I went to Taupo, [...] and then I saw the place where you can do the bungy with the Waikato River and I thought 'oh I'll have to go and do that', it looked so beautiful. [...] I just thought let's go there and maybe look, and then I decide to do that because it was so beautiful, the area" (Moore, et al., 2012, pp. 641-642).

In the question, "how come...?" the respondent is not asked to reconstruct alleged needs or motives linked to behavior. Instead, she is required to describe the situation in which she made the decision. Casually passing by the place, having the occasion to do something new, and finding the environment beautiful were all necessary and sufficient contextual conditions for triggering her decision. Making constitutive trip choices, i.e. deciding where to go, for how long, by which means of travel as well as where to stay, poses the same problems for travelers as in the *en route* example. These problems are continuously solved with the help of heuristics. Figure 1 illustrates the advantage of decision heuristics research over one of the most popular approaches, motives research. Space limitations preclude a detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses linked to travel motives research. In short, we agree with Iso-Ahola (1982) and his constructive critique of motives research. He argues that motives are (1) psychological, not sociological constructs and (2) cognitive representations. In addition, he points out that (3) reasons can be benefits and vice versa, producing a dialectical-optimizing process. The latter forces both researcher and respondent to engage in an explanatory mode of sense-giving because – arguing rationally – we all assume that motives give behavior a reason. Trip research based on travel motives is bound to construct meaning. Yet, for research

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on travel choice, this produces a chain of potential methodological problems and fallacious implications.

Figure 1 about here

In asking “how come...?” we reconstruct our knowledge of reality by focusing on specific events in context to identify the underlying heuristics that produce their occurrence. This approach in a critically realist tradition (Bhaskar, 1978) is a more promising method to ensure validity in travel decision research. In fact, the question “How come... you are here, today, with... etc. (instead of somewhere else at another time with someone else, etc.)?” does not aim at building a rationality for choices and behavior. The question assumes that things occur, people (re-)act, and that contextualized behavior is an objectively observable event. In contrast, constructing meaning and assigning it to actions, and therefore building or assigning motives or reasons (“Why?”) is interesting to study in terms of sense making and sense giving processes for human behavior. However, they lack the direct connection to the dependent variable of travel choice that is currently implied in many travel choice research designs. Approaches based on (1) asking single individuals about (2) their alleged motives or needs that supposedly (3) explain decisions and actions usually performed by several people in addition to the respondent do not lead to purposeful implications for travel behavior. Table 1 presents the results of an exploratory application of the two contrasting approaches.

Table 1 about here

The trips and the respondents' answers in Table 1 are real; the implications are, even if slightly exaggerated, a logical consequence derived from these answers. Discussing what these different outcomes could mean for destination marketing and management, consumer behavior and market communication goes beyond the scope of this contribution. However, we maintain the following insights:

1. Asking single individuals about their travel motives produces random results because other individuals in their travel group assign different meanings and reasons to their actions and recollections. In other words, one activity or action can be assigned several different meanings and reasons. This is why – oddly – the sum of trips of alleged tourism forms resulting from reasons or activities exceeds the volume of travel itself (McKercher & Prideaux, 2014).
2. Decisions are made by different individuals and groups at different moments. For instance, choosing one place instead of another is the result of a specific context that produces that specific outcome. Thus, asking one respondent about her intentions to revisit a particular place is a methodological oversimplification of a future state that the respondent can barely foresee or imagine.
3. Nonetheless, travelers revisit places. However, the outcome appears to be more a result of consumer inertia (Gal, 2006; Thaler, 1980) owing to muddling through (1) the multitude of options and (2) the particular travel constraints. In the end, choosing where to travel, where to stay, what to do, etc. constitutes a problem that must be solved with simple, easily applicable rules (i.e. heuristics).

Based on this simple and explorative analysis and on the conceptual considerations outlined, we propose analyzing travel decisions embedded in a social context with given boundaries in which rules help traveling groups reach a mutually acceptable outcome.

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4 Conclusion

We are aware that the presented insights might sound trivial and obtainable merely with the help of a common understanding of travel behavior combined with a little critical reasoning. However, these insights have yet to enter the discussion in travel decision research. Perhaps we have been too attached to the bounded rational model of human behavior; perhaps asking ‘why?’-questions is more peculiar to human nature and attuned to the mental processes that strive to assign meaning to our environment; perhaps technology for information and data collection and processing has been insufficiently advanced; perhaps the quest for a universal model has tempted us to oversimplify what seemed too tedious to observe and reconstruct. If we are to produce practically relevant insights, we must be ready to ask “how come...?”, even if this points to the futility of many current practices (e.g. in destination marketing) or seriously challenges currently favored methodological approaches.

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