

## **A Paradigm Shift in Researching the Event Experience?**

### **Introduction**

There is a growing academic and professional interest in the „experience“ that people „participate“ in. However, “experience itself is a complex and profound concept to explore” (Curtin, 2006, p. 303). The study of experience mainly has its roots in psychology, sociology and philosophy and is now being applied to marketing and management fields of enquiry. More specifically, consumer behaviour researchers have investigated the motivations and behaviour of consumers for some time and both rational (or utilitarian) and emotional (hedonistic) factors have been conceptualised in a variety of contexts (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). How are and can these be applied to events management and more specifically to the event experience? As Getz (2007, p. 170) says, “If we cannot clearly articulate what the event experience is, then how can it be planned or designed? If we do not understand what it means to people, then how can it be important?”

The context for this paper is the growing development of our general understanding of „experience“ (Shaw and Ivens, 2002; O’Sullivan and Spangler, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Jensen, 1999; Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and the use of it in practice by event organisations such as Jack Morton (Ulfers, 2005; Shuler, 2004) who are using „experience“ as their organisational philosophy.

General texts on Events Management (Bowdin et al., 2006; Getz, 2005; Shone and Parry, 2004; Van der Wagen, 2005; Goldblatt, 2008) acknowledge the growing importance of the study of events. These books have started to expand upon the concept development of events. Silvers (2004) expands upon the detail of this strand in her chapters on „Coordinating the environment“, „Staging the entertainment experience“ and „Making event memories“. This importance of the event experience has been further identified (Jackson, 2006) and developed in a book on Events Design and Experience (Berridge, 2007).

However, most interest in the experience of an event is managerially and operationally focused. This is because the environment within which people have their experience is constructed to achieve a variety of managerial objectives from customer satisfaction to maximising the financial yield of the venue or programme provided. As Gyimóthy (2000) recognised when undertaking research on the tourism experience, most research approaches are also supply-led or at best looking at customer satisfaction. “At the consumer level, most studies have employed satisfaction measure, leaving the more complex and difficult experiential and meaning outcomes under-researched.” (Getz, 2007, p. 389).

### **Methods**

To develop a methodology for researching the event experience a review of the literature in the contexts of leisure, tourism and events was undertaken analyzing the understanding of what an „experience“ is and what do we mean by the „event experience“? How is it conceptualized and/or how is it and could it be

researched, methodologically and what methods of collection and interpretation of data?

### **Findings**

As Getz acknowledges, "Personal outcomes, consisting of planned event experiences, resulting transformation of values or attitudes, the meanings attached to events, and event careers, remain the „dark continent“ in Event Studies. Our „phenomenological core“ is weak in terms of theory and research." (Getz, 2007, p. 389). The main finding was that there has been a gradual shift in research paradigms from a more positivist, deductive approach to a more inductive, interpretive research and therefore from more quantitative to qualitative methods.

The predominant research in events is more empirical as the dominant pressure is still to justify the reasons for providing events and so „measuring“ economic, social-cultural, environmental impacts is the focus. It is very rare that you find research that attempts the „softer“, more difficult areas of research that do not directly get supporting funding or research centre recognition. However, as event research matures and finds its own position, it needs to challenge the „status quo“ and delve deeper to describe, explain and understand the phenomenon of events rather than on trying to predict and measure throughput.

### **Conclusions**

The question raised by this investigation is whether, as event researchers, we should look more to other fields of enquiry that have seen a development from a social science to a human science approach? In the context of the event experience we need to understand the meaning of events and come to know the phenomena that is the different types of events. "Because the core phenomenon of Event Studies is experiential, phenomenological research is essential" (Getz, 2007, p. 391).

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