

# **Tourist Vulnerability: Proposing an emic perspective**

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**Abstract** Most tourism-scholars have taken an etic perspective on vulnerability, defining the concept as risk for - and largely confined to - vulnerable populations. An emic perspective, defining vulnerability as an experiential state inherent to the human condition, is anyhow largely absent. This study adopts a phenomenological stance and proposes to approach vulnerability in tourism from an emic perspective, transcending conceptualization equating it with risk management.

**Key words:** vulnerability, risk, tourist experience, phenomenology

## **1 Literature Review**

Generally, human vulnerability goes through a virtue of embodiment (e.g. illness, death), human nature as social and affective beings (e.g. emotions, rejection), human nature as socio-political beings (e.g. manipulation, oppression) and last, a relationship with the natural environment (dependency and influence) (Mackenzie et al., 2014). While contextual factors are relatively clear, whether to approach this phenomenon from an etic or emic perspective is still debated in academic circles.

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The etic (externally evaluated risk; confined to vulnerable populations) approach takes an “objective” perspective, where the level of vulnerability is judged by external observers, such as healthcare practitioners or the general society (Spiers, 2000). Through a social and relational lens, the focus is frequently placed on the susceptibility of certain persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others (Mackenzie et al., 2014). Demi and Warren (1995) add that the etic perspective also heavily relies on demographics, meaning that certain individuals or groups are more susceptible to certain issues, such as concern and risk for health problems among the elderly. Consequently, people who are less able to function according to the values of a certain society are described and identified as vulnerable (Ferguson, 1978; Kipnis, 2001; Schroeder & Gefenas, 2009). Following this approach, groups such as the homeless, mentally ill, poor, disabled, elderly people and refugees might not be able to up live to western society standards of independence and self-sufficiency, and socially sanctioned intervention is considered desired and necessary. This highlights a range of issues, including power inequality, dependency and exploitation (Mackenzie et al., 2014). Often this evaluation takes form of risk assessment, where vulnerability is equalled to “relative risk” and related to “endangerment”, “functional capacity”, “external recognition to the increased susceptibility to harm”, “observable and measurable behaviour”, and “universality” (Lessick, Woodring, Naber, & Halstead, 1992; Rose & Killien, 1983). The etic approach has also been adopted in natural sciences, where vulnerability often refers to “the probability that a given product may be misused, not meet its function effectively, become broken in use, may damage the environment; or that a service may occasionally become ineffective” (Cipolla, 2004, p. 109). In this case, vulnerability denotes product weakness, which is to be avoided or overcome, and leads to a somewhat exclusive dichotomy – being vulnerable or not. From an etic perspective, vulnerability can thus be considered the passing of a threshold of factors, beyond which harm is likely (Spiers, 2000).

The emic perspective, on the other hand, defines vulnerability by lived experience, typically through concepts such as individual self-

perception and discernment of challenges to the self and resources to withstand those (Spiers, 2000). Spiers (2000, p. 719) highlights that “the individual’s perceptions of self and challenges to the self, and of resources to withstand such challenges define (emic) vulnerability. These perceptions may have origins in socially determined values of performance and function, but those are always filtered through personal values and realities. Other scholars in ethics, bioethics and feminist philosophy, among others, have re-conceptualised vulnerability as an ontological feature of the human condition in order to dissociate the concept from negative connotations such as victimhood, helplessness, neediness and pathology. The new conceptualisation presents vulnerability as a universal, enduring and inevitable aspect of the human condition (Fineman, 2008; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Hence, vulnerability is defined through its universality, inevitability and enduring entanglement with human nature (Fineman, 2008; Ricoeur, 2007; Turner, 2006). Two human conditions are usually linked to universal vulnerability: human embodiment, which exposes us to affliction and injury (MacIntyre, 1999; Nussbaum, 2006), and the inherent sociality of human life, which makes us both vulnerable to and dependent on other people (Butler, 2009; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Vulnerability comes to light when a person’s sense of soundness in the various dimensions of his/her life gets disrupted by a challenge to which he/she is unable to respond.

## **2 Method and empirical findings**

This study proposes a method embedded in the philosophical principles of descriptive phenomenology. Giorgi’s (2009) four steps of data analysis will be followed at the analysis stage. Step one is a detailed reading of the transcripts for the “sense of a whole”. At this stage, researchers carefully re-read through the obtained data to gain an overall understanding of the phenomenon at hand. This has been done separately by the researchers and outcomes have been discussed informally afterwards. Step two refers to a determination of relevant phenomenological meaning units, which was done following Giorgi’s

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(2009) suggestions of marking places in transcripts where a shift in meaning occurs. This will be done separately on different transcripts, with several samples being “double-marked” by the researchers to check for coherence in the units identified. Step three transforms the identified meaning units into phenomenologically meaningful statements, changing them from a first-person to a third-person, intersubjective expressions. This will be done on separate meaning units by the researchers. Finally, step four identifies a general structure of the phenomenon based on the meaning units most commonly found across transcripts. Following Wassler and Schuckert (2017), this will also be based on the intuition of the researchers and not based on communality of the units only.

### **3 Conclusions and Implications**

The study proposes an emic perspective to phenomenologically describe and interpret the essence of lived travel vulnerability. As such, this paper makes several contributions to existing theory. First, although this study will not be the first to problematize travel vulnerability, findings will show a more holistic and complex picture of the phenomenon. Subsequently, it is acknowledged that vulnerability is a concern not only for “risky” forms of travel, but that lived vulnerability permeates the travel experience as a fluctuating, but inherent part. The findings of this study will also extend the concept of travel vulnerability to diverse types of travel and tourism. This opens the door for a wide range of research investigating sources and states of lived vulnerability throughout diverse segments of travelers and types of travel.

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