Thanatopsis and Mortality Mediation within 'Lightest' Dark Tourism

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper is an empirical investigation of the visitor experience at a 'lightest' dark tourism attraction, focusing on issues of thanatopsis and mortality mediation.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 visitors to a 'Dungeon'-style attraction in the UK (a site of 'lightest' dark tourism). The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis; 4 themes were identified.

Findings: Reflection on, and contemplation of, issues of life and death was a common (but not universal) component of the visitor experience. Four forms of such reflection were apparent: considering absent/present death; thanatopsis (reflection on the self's inevitable mortality); reflecting on the nature of death and dying in the past; and enjoyment of the opportunity to engage with death without fear in the safe setting of a visitor attraction. Some visitors also reflected on issues of individual and collective morality, in both past and present.

Originality: The mortality mediation model is widely accepted as a way of explaining the experience of visiting places of death but has rarely been subject to empirical scrutiny. This is one of few studies to explore in detail issues of mortality mediation and thanatopsis in the context of 'lightest' dark tourism.

Research Implications: 'Lightest' dark tourism is not necessarily about shallow experiences. Instead, many visitors are active agents, engaged in acts of making meaning about issues of death and life. This calls for a more sophisticated conceptualisation of such visitors.

Keywords: Lightest dark tourism, visitor experience, thanatopsis, mortality mediation,

Introduction

Dark tourism has been a popular research topic for the past 25 years and is now a clearly identifiable research "brand" (Stone, 2013, p.307). However, the focus of such research has shifted markedly over the past decade. Early research focused on the supply or production of dark tourism, with an emphasis on identifying and classifying the activity. More recently, the focus has shifted to demand and consumption which has foregrounded issues of visitors' motivations and experiences (Biran and Hyde, 2013; Light, 2017). Although motivations for visiting places of death and suffering appear to be little different from heritage tourism (Light, 2017), recent research has focussed on identifying the distinctive experiences associated with dark tourism (Nawijn et al., 2016; Yan et al., 2016; Oren et al., 2019; Sharma and Rickly, 2019; Prayag et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020; Sigala and Steriopoulos 2021).

In this context there have been innovative attempts to theorise the dark tourism experience. One of the most influential is the theory of mortality mediation (Stone and Sharpley, 2008; Stone 2011; Stone, 2012a, 2018). This proposes that, in societies where death has largely been sequestered, dark tourism is one mechanism for engaging with death in a safe context, free from terror or dread. Dark tourism is therefore a means of mediating between the living and the dead. A related concept is "thanatopsis", defined by Stone (2012b, p.75) as "the reflection and contemplation of death and dying" (see also Seaton, 1996) although it should be noted that this understanding of the term is contested by some authors (Korstanje and George, 2015). Subsequent research has further developed the mortality mediation model through integrating concepts such as mortality salience (Oren et al., 2019; Prayag et al., 2020) and Terror Management Theory (Biran and Buda, 2018). Yet, while the mortality mediation model is widely accepted, empirical research which explores or develops the model is limited (Stone, 2009a, 2012b; Biran and Buda, 2018).

This paper contributes to the debate by focussing on issues of thanatopsis and mortality mediation within the context of 'lightest' dark tourism, itself one of the least-researched forms of dark tourism (Stone, 2009c; Ivanova and Light, 2018; Wyatt et al., 2021). Lightest dark tourism is characterised by an emphasis on entertainment, commercialisation, and less concern for authenticity (Stone, 2006). Using interviews with visitors to a 'Dungeon'-style attraction in the UK this paper explores how the visit experience included various forms of reflection on, and contemplation of, death, dying, and associated moral issues. It argues that such reflection is a commonplace (but by no means universal) component of the lightest dark tourism experience.

Mortality Mediation and the Dark Tourism Experience

The mortality mediation model was elaborated in a series of papers by Philip Stone (Stone and Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; 2011; 2012a, 2012b; 2018). This theory is founded on the premise that, during the twentieth century, death and dying were increasingly medicalised and professionalised within 'Western' societies so that death was 'sequestered' (removed from the public sphere). Consequently, individuals have become increasingly divorced from the realities of death, while increasing secularisation has eroded the broader framework through which individuals and societies understand (and deal with) death and dying. In circumstances where death is increasingly 'absent' from the public sphere many individuals may regard death and dying with fear, uncertainty and dread: death is, for many, a source of existential anxiety (Sharma and Rickly, 2019). A related concept is 'mortality salience', that is, "awareness of the inevitability of one's own death" (Gordillo et al., 2017, p.286; see also Oren et al., 2019; Prayag et al., 2020). In short, "death becomes a psychological and problematic issue for both the collective and individual self" (Stone and Sharpley, 2008, p.582).

At the same time, there has been a notable increase in the representation and re-creation of death within popular culture (particularly film and television, cyberspace, and the mass media). Consequently, death has become visible in new ways: paradoxically, absent death has become 'present'. In particular, the death of Others is turned into spectacle in a context where "many of our traditions, practices and beliefs are reinterpreted to fit new socio-cultural circumstances" (Stone, 2018, p.200). Dark tourism is proposed as one such form of the representation and re-creation of the death of Others. Visits to places of (or associated with) death create opportunities for individuals to encounter (and confront) death in contexts that are free from terror or fear. Visitor attractions are socially acceptable spaces at which visitors can address their curiosity and fascination about death, inform themselves, and come to terms with the inevitability of death (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). Dark tourism is, therefore, a mediating institution between the living and the dead. Consequently, "dark tourism may have more to do with life and living, rather than the dead and dying" (Stone and Sharpley, 2008, p.590)

The mortality mediation model (along with the related concept of mortality salience) is significant in shifting the focus of attention in dark tourism research from motivations for visiting to *experiences* during the visit (Light, 2017). In particular, mortality mediation is a particular form of visitor experience which is grounded in thanatopsis. It is an introspective (Packer and Ballantyne, 2016) or

spiritual (Zheng et al., 2020) facet of the visitor experience. However, thanatopsis may not be something planned or intended by visitors. Instead, it can arise spontaneously or incidentally during a visit, and will probably not be experienced by all visitors (Light, 2017). Visiting places associated with death can create opportunities for visitors to contemplate issues of life and death, but such experiences are not universal or inevitable. What is also important is that the mortality mediation model allows us to think of dark tourism, not as something deviant or voyeuristic, but instead as about acceptable and meaningful ways to engage with death and dying (Biran and Buda, 2018).

Subsequent research has sought to develop the mortality mediation model. Some researchers have drawn on Terror Management Theory (Goulding et al., 2013; Biran and Buda, 2018; Oren et al., 2019) which states that human beings are uniquely aware of their own mortality leading, in turn, to fear or terror of death. Consequently, various strategies are employed within everyday lives to manage such terror (Biran and Buda, 2018). Dark tourism can be one such strategy, allowing individuals "to confront and contemplate mortality moments from a safe distance and in a safe environment" (Goulding et al., 2013, p.316). Visiting places of death therefore operates as a form of "meaningful entertainment" which enable individuals to mitigate fears of death and dying (Biran and Buda, 2018, p.523).

Although there is increasing attention to issues of reflection and contemplation within the dark tourism experience (Mowatt and Chancellor, 2011; Tang, 2019; Chen and Xu, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021) there has been much less attention specifically to thanatopsis and mediating between life and death. Indeed, while the mortality mediation model has been widely accepted it has been subject to only limited empirical investigation (Biran and Buda, 2018) and its complex nature means that it has been largely sidestepped by many researchers (Light, 2017). The limited previous research has found evidence of thanatopsis and mortality mediation in diverse contexts including sites of natural disasters (Biran et al., 2014; Prayag et al., 2020); sites of terrorist attacks (Stone, 2012b); Body World exhibitions (Stone, 2011; Goulding et al., 2013); cemeteries (Raine, 2013); and lightest dark tourism attractions (Stone, 2009c). The role of thanatopsis within the dark tourism experience is, therefore, an issue which merits further scrutiny.

This paper aims to contribute to this debate in the context of 'lightest' dark tourism (Stone, 2006). This form of tourism is often assumed to be about rather superficial visitor experiences (Wanhill, 2008; Raine, 2013; Dale and Robinson 2011) but one of the few studies to consider mortality mediation in such contexts (Stone, 2009c) has tantalisingly suggested that there is much more

meaning-making going on during visits that might at first appear. In a study of Dungeon attractions (based on observations, short interviews with visitors, and a focus group of undergraduate students) Stone suggested that such attractions create opportunities for some visitors to engage in reflection about issues of mortality and morality (see also Stone, 2012a). This paper aims to build upon this study by exploring in more detail the nature of thanatopsis in the context of lightest dark tourism.

Methodology

Following Stone (2009c) this paper focuses on a 'dungeon'-style attraction located in a major British city. Like similar attractions, it presents the death and suffering of unknown Others in the past, presented with a focus on entertainment (Stone, 2006; 2018). The attraction features a number of live shows which recreate scenes from the city's history (from the medieval period to the 19th century). Visitors are guided in groups through the site by actors who narrate individual stories. The shows (and connecting corridors) are dimly-lit and on several occasions the lights are suddenly turned out, plunging visitors into darkness. Various other techniques – such as strobe lighting, smells, air sprays, water jets, heat, and moving furniture - are used to give visitors an immersive multi-sensory, embodied experience.

With the permission of the site's management, interviews were undertaken with visitors as they left the attraction. Interviewing took place in Spring 2016. A systematic non-probability sampling strategy was adopted. Following the completion of an interview, the next visitor to pass the interviewer was approached and invited to participate. Participants were asked 3 questions about their reason for visiting; their views about the appropriateness of presenting death at a tourist attraction; and their views about the behaviour of other visitors during their visit. Visitors were not specifically asked about their contemplation of mortality but, unprompted, some visitors raised such issues. In these cases, the interviewer asked unscripted follow-up questions but was sensitive to the responses of visitors and did not pursue the issue if the interviewee was obviously reluctant to talk about it. The interviews ranged in length from 10 to 20 minutes.

The issue of sample size is important in qualitative enquiry (Boddy, 2016). It is important to ensure that the sample obtained is large enough to capture all or most of the issues occurring in the data (Mason, 2010) but not so large as to be unwieldly to analyse (Boddy 2016). A common criterion for determining sample size is data saturation, defined as "the point in which no new information or

themes are obtained from the data" (Hussey, 2010, p.923). The point at which data saturation will be achieved is not known at the start of the interviewing process but many qualitative researchers accept that "saturation is achieved at a comparatively low level" (Mason, 2010, p.13). In this case, 24 interviews were undertaken, at which point which the interviewer determined that no new issues were being raised and saturation had been achieved. A summary of the characteristics of interviewees is presented in Table 1. The sample is considered to be broadly representative of the attraction's visitors, although international visitors may be under-represented since the interviews were undertaken in Spring.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample:

Age		Sex		Country of Residence	
20-29	10	Male	13	UK	22
30-39	8	Female	11	Elsewhere in Europe	2
40-49	4				
50-59	2				

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used, versatile, and reputable method for analysing qualitative data (Terry et al., 2017). As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Terry et al. (2017) thematic analysis starts with repeated reading of interview transcripts to ensure familiarisation with the data. This is followed by systematic coding of important or interesting features in the data. Codes are then collated in order to construct potential themes. These 'candidate' themes are then reviewed (and if necessary, refined), and subsequently allocated a name or title.

Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between 'inductive' and 'theoretical' approaches to thematic analysis. The inductive approach is data-driven so that the data is coded and themes identified but without seeking to fit them into any pre-conceived theoretical framework. Conversely, a theoretical approach is "driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area" (p. 84). This second approach was initially adopted in this study. The interview data was coded only on the basis of evidence of thanatopsis during the visit. The resulting subset of the data was subsequently coded a second time in an inductive (that is, data driven) manner (*ibid*) in order to identify themes which indicated different aspects of reflection on mortality. All coding was undertaken by the first author.

Four themes were identified: absent/present death; reflecting on death and life; being disturbed by past death; and the importance of the attraction as a setting.

Research Findings

Twelve of the 24 interviewees indicated that they had engaged in the sort of meaning-making related to death and dying that is proposed by the mortality mediation thesis. This initially indicates that thanatopsis may be commonplace within a visit to a dark attraction. However, it is clearly not a universal experience since some participants made no mention at all of such reflection in their interviews. Consequently, the contemplation of life and death at a lightest dark tourism site appears to be an a more incidental (even serendipitous) experience, rather than an inevitable outcome of the visit (see Walter, 2009; Stone, 2012b). As Stone and Sharpley (2008, p.588) argue, tourists may "take away meanings of mortality from their visit, rather than explicitly seek to contemplate death and dying".

Absent/Present Death

The paradox of death being both absent and present in contemporary societies is central to the mortality mediation model (Stone, 2012a). Several of the interviewees explicitly recognised this paradox. Some highlighted the absence (or sequestration) of death:

> "Western societies are wrapped in cotton wool and are protected from the suffering that goes on in the world around them on a daily basis… I don't feel that we can fully understand this as we live in such a sheltered environment and the media also shelters us in a way by not disclosing the full images, for example of dead bodies" (male, 50-59, from UK).

Another stated:

> "Well I think death is something that is scary for us, consequently… you know, we are all born and we all die. We can't sort of keep denying it, and I think in a historical context it's good to show it" (male, 20-29, from UK).

This first quotation with its reference to "cotton wool" indicates a recognition of the ways that death is hidden in contemporary societies, so that individuals are isolated from the realities of death. Consequently, it becomes a source of alarm and anxiety (something "scary" in the words of the second interviewee), and something to be feared and denied (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). However, absent death can generate curiosity and a desire to know more about the inevitability of death and dying. The second interviewee indicates the importance of not denying death and argues that lightest dark tourism attractions are a way of bringing death out into the open, directly mediating between the living and the dead (*ibid*).

However, while individual death has been sequestered, the recreated death of Others is increasingly present (Stone, 2012a; 2018). One interviewee specifically highlighted the prevalence of representations of death within contemporary societies:

> "I suppose my generation has become slightly desensitised to the portrayal of death and suffering, maybe because of all the gruesome and disgusting movies that are out there… I just feel like it [the attraction] can't be any worse than some of the movies I have seen" (female, 30-39, from UK).

The 'presence' of death within popular culture is central to the mortality mediation model and Stone and Sharpley (2008) argue that individuals increasingly consume (whether willingly or unwillingly) numerous representations of "spectacular death" (Stone, 2018, p.200) through popular culture and the media. This interviewee explicitly recognises this de-sequestration of death (Stone and Sharpley 2008) and positions lightest dark tourism attractions alongside cinema as a contemporary medium of representing death in the context of entertainment. Through (dark) tourism the absent death of Others becomes visible and present in a way which enables the living to encounter and contemplate death and dying.

Reflecting on Death (and Life)

Some interviewees indicated that they had experienced a degree of thanatopsis during their visit. This is illustrated by the quotes below:

> "A part of life is death. We all - if we are living, we are living, we all die… Death is like - a fear for many people. Many people are scared of death, so actually, kind of depicting

how we used to die compared to how we die now, should actually put people more at ease, rather than scare them" (male, 20-29, from UK).

"it [death] is something that we unfortunately all have to go through, although it may not be in the same way. We need to see the true story, there is no point in living a sheltered life and not see the gores of the past" (female, 20-29, from UK).

Such "pondering of mortality" (Stone, 2011, p.693) indicates mortality salience within the tourist experience (Oren et al. 2019). In other words, the encounter with the death of Others had stimulated reflection on the Self's inevitable death (Prayag et al., 2020). These visitors appear to have experienced (in different ways) what Stone (2011, p.694) terms "mortality moments". The visit to the attraction had acted as a reminder of the Self's mortality (Stone, 2012a) and a realisation of *momento mori* ('remember that you will die') (Walter, 2009). There was no evidence that visitors arrived at the attraction desiring such experiences. Instead, most visitors appeared to be expecting an entertaining and slightly scary experience (see Ivanova and Light 2018) and in this they resembled what McKercher (2020, p.127) terms "incidental cultural tourists". Consequently, engaging in thanatopsis was an unintended outcome of the visit (see Stone and Sharpley, 2008).

However, not all meaning-making was centred on death: some visitors had reflected upon their own lives as much as issues of death. For example, one stated: "it has made me feel appreciative of my own life and that it [the past as presented at the attraction] was only staged for us to see" (male, 30-39, from UK). Another suggested: "it has to do with our lives, we have to deal with this topic [death], we have to know about it and talk to people about it. Our families die, we die" [female, 40-49, from UK). A third argued: "people need to understand that life is not all roses; sometimes we all need reminding there are upsetting things in life" (male, 30-39, from UK). In various ways, these visitors had been prompted to reflect on issues of life and living through the encounter with death and suffering presented at the attraction (Prayag et al 2020). Their responses indicated both an appreciation of life and also the need to recognise death as a part of life. Other research at Body Worlds exhibitions has similarly indicated that visitors contemplate life and living alongside issues of death (Stone, 2011; Goulding et al., 2013). Although not apparent from these interviews, in some cases the encounter with death through dark tourism can have transformative potential which Stone (2012b, p.90) argues "can crystallise and invigorate the Self's own life pathway".

Being Disturbed by Past Death

Walter (2009, p.49) talks about "haunting" as one form of the relationship between the living and the dead (see also Stone 2012a). Modern ideas about death are underpinned by the hope for a "death with dignity" (or a "good death") (Stone, 2011, p.696). Conversely, death in the historical times represented in the attraction was notably violent and lacking in dignity. Consequently, unquiet deaths and dying from the past can disturb the living, in the present. Some visitors appeared to be haunted in this way by what they had experienced. In particular, witnessing the shows which featured torture had stimulated reflection on differences between the past and the present, and on changing approaches to living and dying. For example, one visitor stated: "I like… destinations which make you think about how hard was the life for people before and how much better it is now" (female, 40-49, from UK). Another argued:

> "I think the idea that human beings could go to such lengths and be so cruel when torturing fellow human beings is pretty astounding. It's horrible, but it's a spectacle because it gives you an insight into the reality of how they lived!" (male, 50-59, from UK).

The encounter with suffering in the past also stimulated awareness of how the circumstances of the present were different from the past: as such, the attraction also mediates between past and present (Stone, 2012b). In particular, some visitors had reflected on societal progress and evolution (Stone, 2009c), particularly with regard to judicial punishment of the human body. One visitor stated: "I just think people do need to know how things have changed… sometimes you just have to go, and…see what a better life we live" (male, 20-29, from UK). Such a response again illustrates how visitors to dark tourism places can make psychosocial connections between their own lives and those of people in the past (Stone, 2009c; Biran and Buda, 2018). Furthermore, this form of dark tourism does not so much raise doubts and anxieties about the project of modernity – as was proposed by Lennon and Foley (2000) – but instead recognises the achievements of modernity and its underlying narrative of progress.

The spectacle of the death of Others also generated various emotional responses. Some expressed sorrow, the emotion most closely associated with dark tourism experiences (Light 2017). One visitor said: "it's still sad to think that it used to happen, here or there" (male, aged 20-29, from UK). Others spoke of feeling empathy or sympathy for those who had experienced torture and suffering. One

stated: “I would say [I felt] maybe a little bit of sympathy towards those who have been put through these tortures” (male, aged 30-39, from UK). Empathy is central to the dark tourism experience (Roberts, 2018) and has been reported in a range of dark tourism settings (Stone, 2009c; Isaac and Çakmak, 2014; Yan et al., 2016; Dresler and Fuchs, 2021). Visitors also spoke of relief that they did not live in times when torture was commonplace. For example: “I would say I feel relief that I don’t live in that time anymore” (female, 20-29, from Germany). Another said: “you feel a sense of relief and look at it and feel just thankful this is not the present” (male, 40-49, from UK). Others also spoke of gratitude: one described himself as “definitely grateful that we live in the 21st century” (30-39, from UK). Appreciation has been identified as an emotional response in other dark tourism contexts (see also Zhang et al., 2016; Tang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2020; Jordan and Prayag, 2021), illustrating that not all emotions associated with dark tourism are negative (Nawijn et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2020).

There was also evidence in the interviews of what Zhang et al (2018) term “depersonalisation”. This refers to a process in which senses of individual/personal identity can (in particular contexts) be supplemented by a strong sense of identification with larger social units and groupings. Such depersonalisation has been identified in other dark tourism contexts. For example, Zhang et al (*ibid)* noted that visitors to the site of a natural disaster in China expressed various collective identities, including an awareness of being a human being and an identification with wider humanity. Similar responses are apparent in this study. Some visitors spoke of identification with other human beings in other historical periods, through encountering the ways in which they had suffered in contexts when a different value was placed on human life. In so doing they were expressing a shared human identity. This led, in turn, to expressing appreciation of (and gratitude for) the present time.

The emotions provoked by the visit had also stimulated moral reflection among some visitors. Research undertaken in ‘darker’ contexts has established that visitors to places of death and suffering frequently form moral judgements in response to what they have experienced (Dresler and Fuchs, 2021; Chen and Xu, 2020). However, such responses are not confined to darkest sites since a number of visitors at this attraction similarly expressed moral judgements (usually concerning how people were punished in the past). For example:

> “It teaches us and warns us about the past evils and that is beneficial to all ages. We all learn from our mistakes” (male, aged 30-39, from UK).

> "it doesn't really happen like that anymore. We are now more safe … But I think they didn't have it too good back then. There were other rules and other judgements" (female, 20-29, from Germany).

Stone (2012a, p.1580) argues that dark tourism can provide "moral instruction" and an opportunity for the reconfiguration and revitalisation of morality in contemporary societies (Stone, 2009c; Stone and Sharpley, 2014). This argument (like the mortality mediation model) is grounded in the increasing secularisation and individualisation of contemporary (Western) societies, meaning that individuals are increasingly detached from the religious frameworks which traditionally provided moral guidance. This can leave individuals feeling disorientated or confused about sources of moral instruction, and about the norms and values which should guide their lives. In turn, this can lead (some) people to seek moral meanings and guidance from non-traditional institutions and settings which can include tourism sites, and places of death and suffering in particular. In such settings individuals can negotiate moral issues (Sharma, 2020). Consequently, Stone (2009c, p.71) argues that dark tourism "may provide new spaces in which not only is immorality (re)presented for contemporary consumption, but also in which morality is communicated, reconfigured and revitalised". The nature of this such revitalisation of moral meanings will vary in intensity in particular contexts, but it appears to be a characteristic of all types of dark tourism, rather than only the darkest forms (see also Stone, 2009c).

The Importance of the Setting (a Visitor Attraction)

The attraction provides experiences centred around 'edutainment', something commonplace within lighter dark tourism (Stone, 2012a; Wyatt et al., 2020). While some scholars (Lennon and Foley, 2000; Dale and Robinson, 2011; Hooper, 2017) have expressed concern that places of (or associated with) death are increasingly linked with entertainment, Walter (2009) argues that entertainment constitutes a long-standing form of relationship between the living and the dead. Furthermore, visitor attractions are a safe and socially acceptable setting in which the living can engage with the dead (Stone 2012a; Goulding et al., 2013). Certainly, several interviewees highlighted – sometimes with enthusiasm - how the specific setting of the attraction had stimulated them to engage with issues of death and life in a light-hearted and non-threatening way. For example:

> "I believe that it's a fun and entertaining way to consider the concept of death. If it's done in an entertaining but also educational way – as [name of attraction] does – then I

> think it's actually an ethical way for people to accept and be comfortable with the idea of death, since it's something that people naturally don't usually want to consider" (female, 30-39, from UK).
>
> "I think it's good to have places like [name of attraction]. Although it is addressing a serious matter and the activity itself is not fun, I think it is a good way for us to face it all, and maybe stop worrying about our own death so much" (male, 20-29, from UK).

These visitors had identified various issues of mortality salience: of accepting and facing death; being comfortable with the idea of death; and acknowledging the inevitability of death. The setting of a visitor attraction enabled them to do this without anxiety or fear, a premise central to the mortality mediation model (Stone and Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2009a, 2012a). For these visitors, the attraction represented "meaningful entertainment" that allowed them to confront and negotiate fears of death (Biran and Buda 2018, p.523; see also Prayag et al., 2020). Such encounters are an occasion when visitors can accumulate "death capital" (Stone, 2011, p.698) or "mortality capital" (Stone, 2012b, p.72): understanding and acceptance of death and dying obtained through encounters with the dead in spaces of dark tourism.

Furthermore, some interviewees highlighted how the attraction had stimulated them to consider broader moral issues which went beyond the comparisons between past and present discussed above. Some made connections between what they had experienced at the attraction and moral issues relating to the contemporary world (sometimes in a way which indicated unease or uncertainty). For example, one visitor argued:

> "if an attraction can be used to educate future generations, this will discourage dark acts and therefore the crimes we see today will not be growing. Especially in countries where war is taking place. By seeing it I think is the only way we can truly understand what is happening" (female, aged 20-29, from UK).

This visitor identifies that the attraction is about much more than entertainment (see Ivanova and Light, 2018; Wyatt et al., 2021) and explicitly evokes the educational potential of dark heritage (Roberts, 2018) as a means to raise moral awareness among visitors. Once again, the interviewee was making a connection between the attraction and unknown Others (future visitors and future generations) who, she argues, have the potential to contribute to social

change through what they encounter. In this claim she was acknowledging the moral agency of dark/heritage tourists (see Sharma, 2020).

The encounter with torture and suffering had also led some visitors to contemplate similar practices in the present day. For example:

> "Any kind of attraction that sheds light on that [suffering] forces people out of their comfort zone and forces them to think about what humans are capable of and, hopefully, what they can personally do to put a stop to it. It may be uncomfortable to look at, but the fact that people don't like to look at it is the exact reason why attractions like that are important – because people would rather ignore it." (male, 50-59, from UK).

> "Well, you know… in other countries this type of torture goes on…I do wonder what it would take for us to go back to being aggressive, almost like what would stimulate us to become aggressive towards each other again just like we see here" (male, 20-29 from UK).

Such responses indicate how visitors had again made a connection to unknown Others (Stone 2009c). Indeed, Oren et al. (2019) argue that mortality salience experienced in dark tourism settings can awaken awareness of, or tolerance for, the situation of Others outside one's own culture. This case does not appear to be an isolated instance since both Holloway (2008) and Stone (2009c) report how participants in lighter forms of dark tourism had made comparisons between what they had experienced and alleged instances of torture at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. It illustrates again, how visits to dark tourism places can be an occasion for the revitalisation of particular moral meanings (Stone, 2009c). In particular sites of dark tourism have the potential to act as "a communicative channel of morality warning against our excesses" (Stone, 2018, 192; see also Stone, 2009c). However, while all visitors experienced the same presentations, they made meaning from them in a wide range of ways. Reflection on issues of morality is (like reflection upon death and dying) not inevitable or determined, and does not appear to be something experienced by all visitors.

Conclusions

Issues of thanatopsis and mediating between life and death are an important component of the dark tourism experience, but relatively little research has explored these practices through empirical research with visitors. This paper has sought to advance understanding of such forms of meaning-making among visitors to a lightest dark tourism attraction. Visitors had engaged with a range of issues central to the mortality mediation model. These included the paradox of death being absent and but also present (in the setting of a visitor attraction); various forms of thanatopsis and contemplation of the Self's inevitable mortality; and appreciation of the Self's own life. Furthermore, some visitors had reflected on the differences between death and dying in the past and in the present day. Visitors also showed a range of emotional responses to the death and suffering of Others including empathy, gratitude and depersonalisation. Some highlighted the importance of edutainment as a context in which they could engage with death and dying without fear. In addition, many visitors had reflected on individual and collective morality relating to death and suffering (in both the past and in the contemporary world).

The theoretical contributions of this paper are as follows. These findings provide additional empirical support for the mortality mediation model and in particular, Stone's claim that dark tourism "provides a potential opportunity to contemplate death of the Self through gazing upon the Significant Other dead" (2011, p.697). Furthermore, reflection upon, and contemplation of, the 'spectacular death' of Others (Stone 2018) enables (some) individuals to engage with mortality in a ludic context, free from dread or terror (Stone 2009a). These findings also illustrate the importance of entertainment as a contemporary context which mediates between the living and the dead (Walter, 2009; Stone 2012a). Sites of lightest dark tourism stand alongside other forms of popular culture as a safe way for individuals to encounter and engage with death and dying. This paper has also highlighted the importance of thanatopsis within the dark tourism experience. Rather than being a rare practice as is claimed by Iliev (2020) this paper suggests that thanatopsis is a common (but by no means universal) component of the dark tourism experience. Building on Stone's preliminary study (2009c) this paper has established that thanatopsis and reflection upon the meanings of life and death are not practices confined to the 'darkest' sites, but are also an important element of the experience of lightest dark tourism. In particular, while the context is very different, reflection upon life and death appears to be broadly similar in nature to that reported at darker sites. These findings also affirm the argument that thanatopsis is a serendipitous outcome of the visit rather than a motivation for visiting (Stone and Sharpley, 2008).

This paper has also illuminated other aspects of the dark tourism experience. As in other contexts, visitors to lightest dark tourism sites can experience positive emotions (which go beyond mere enjoyment). Furthermore, this study supports previous research (Stone 2009b, 2009c, 2011, 2012b) which established that an encounter with death is also an occasion for a reflection on morality and the negotiation of moral meanings. Such reflection is not confined to the darkest contexts, but is also evident in lightest dark tourism. This raises the possibility that thanatopsis and moral reflection may be inseparable within the dark tourism experience. Finally, while lightest dark tourism is often assumed to be about rather shallow experiences, this study stresses that visitors are active agents who are engaged in "a construction of meaning in the face of death" (Biran and Buda, 2018, p.527). There is clearly much more 'going on' in lightest dark tourism than might at first appear.

These findings also have practical implications. In particular, the commercialisation of death and suffering (Stone, 2018) which characterises lightest dark tourism does not, of itself, imply shallow or superficial experiences among visitors. Instead, managers should be aware that such attractions can be conceptualised as 'enabling' institutions which create opportunities and possibilities for (some) visitors to make connections between the history that they encounter and wider issues of mortality and morality. Visitors to sites of lightest dark tourism are almost certainly not anticipating or requiring experiences of thanatopsis and reflection upon life and death. Instead, such experiences appear to be a more spontaneous outcome of the visit. In short, some visitors may have a 'deeper' encounter than they had probably anticipated, in ways which appear to enhance the visitor experience.

Future research could continue to explore thanatopsis and the mortality mediation model in dark tourism contexts. Further studies are needed of visitors' responses to (and negotiation of) death and dying in the context of tourism; qualitative methodologies are ideally suited to such in-depth research. This will contribute to a fuller understanding of how dark tourism sites mediate between life and death for their visitors. It will also illuminate how the nature of such meaning-making varies among sites with different forms of association with death or suffering. In addition, future research could examine thanatopsis and mortality mediation in other lightest dark tourism contexts, including ghost tours, fright tourism (Bristow, 2020) and haunted attractions (Hoedt, 2009). This would again illustrate how edutainment provides a context for different forms of reflection on mortality and morality. Finally, although thanatopsis appears to be a fairly commonplace component of the dark tourism experience, it is clear that not every visitor engages in it. Therefore, future research might

also focus on visitors who do *not* engage in such reflection. While methodologically challenging, this might start to illuminate how the nature of the site, the background and personality of the visitor, and the social context of the visit shape how tourists respond to death and suffering.

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