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Judith Mair

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Vern Biaett

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FESTIVITY AND ATTENDEE EXPERIENCE
A confessional tale of discovery

Vern Biaett

Introduction
To best echo its ethnographic nature, the details of a socially constructed grounded theory method investigation of attendee behaviour at community festivals are presented as a confessional tale. A preliminary project suggested social capital bridging between disparate visitors at community festivals does not always occur (Biaett 2012). From primary exploration a substantive theme emerged, indicating lower levels of attendee social capital bonding and bridging corresponded to passive activity at community festivals. Supplementary inquiry saturated this theme, allowed it to evolve to a point of trustworthiness, and led to the conceptualisation of organic festivity theory. This neoteric hypothesis asserts that the combination of physical collaborative creative activities, stimulation of senses, and cyclically aroused emotions at community festivals creates a highly festive atmosphere giving rise to increased social capital bonding and bridging, peak liminal experience, communitas, and feelings of well-being for attendees.

The tale begins
What is happening? This unpretentious research question launched a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba 1985) into on-site attendee behaviour at community festivals in 2009 and the subsequent emergence of Organic Festivity Theory in early 2017. To best convey this journey I chose to present it as a confessional tale (Van Maanen 1988), an ethnographical reporting style allowing me to discuss the research design, methods, and findings of the project and insightfully reflect on the process. While ethnography in general, and a confessional tale writing style in particular, are unusual for event management studies, both address appeals to advance beyond post-positivistic research orientations with innovative methods to provide contextual understandings of visitor experience (Dixon, Igo & McGuire 2011; Holloway, Brown & Shipway 2010; Jaimangal-Jones 2014; Mair & Whitford 2013).

After three years of instructing college leisure courses following thirty years as an event practitioner, in 2008 I elected to pursue a doctorate. Festivals were not my intended focus as I considered myself an expert in the field. That assumption changed in a qualitative research methods course in 2009 when I became aware although that visitor experience had surfaced as the nucleus of event studies, research on participant behaviour remained almost
exclusively a quantitative examination of pre-event motivations and post-event satisfactions (Getz 2007; Pettersson & Getz 2009). To complete a research project I opted to attend community festivals as an ethnographer and study on-site attendee behaviour. Field notes taken as an embedded participant observer were enlarged and expanded into a thick description. Short action statements extracted from these narratives were categorised. Employing reflective memo writing, peer consultations, literature review, data re-examinations, and category re-evaluations, the project concluded that social capital bridging between disparate visitor groups does not always occur at festivals. The assignment report included recommendation for future research, expressed within a required reflective poem:

People at a Festival: Experiences?
Uncovering the truth, protecting the truth
People are warm, yet cold
Bridging social capital?
I wonder if it is going on, if anybody cares, if it is and I can’t see
Sponsors, community organizers, event producers
They want to know, don’t they?
All I know is that I’m not sure
Communitas?
One day we will know more

As a festival practitioner I suffered from ‘inattentional blindness’ (Mack & Rock 2000). I conducted marketing research generating informative facts and figures but never saw what on-site attendees were doing around me or wrote poems about my findings. Findings were presented at a graduate symposium and international conference, but follow-up was delayed as other doctoral obligations took precedence.

Primary exploration

My search for contextual understandings of on-site festival attendee behaviour resumed in 2011 with a dissertation on participant experiences at community festivals using a social constructivist epistemology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and ethnographic participant observation and grounded theory method strategies. Social constructivism envisions the generation of meaning and value arising from physical, social, and emotional interaction (Charmaz 2006). Recognised as an epistemology suitable for tourism curriculums, including event tourism (Tribe 2001), it was deemed an excellent fit to study attendee behaviour. Hermeneutic phenomenology which subjectively interprets individual experiences and contextual relationships was reasoned an appropriate foundational approach. Ethnographic participation observation meshed with ideas of an ‘immediate conscious experience approach’ to observe actual leisure behaviour (Mannell & Kleiber 1997, p. 83). Finally, grounded theory method addressed the dilemma that behavioural experiences in event studies remained a mystery due to virtually non-existent examination and theory building (Getz 2007).

A priori knowledge of literature

Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocate literature review following grounded theory method data collection and analysis to prevent outside influences. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 48) recognise that ‘we all bring to the inquiry a considerable background in professional and disciplinary literature.’ Prior to starting my fieldwork I did not conduct a literature review, but I possessed a priori knowledge that informed my research.
A concise definition of festival is non-existent. Getz (1989) spoke of linked perspectives but believed a universal definition of festivals not possible. Others reached similar conclusions (Hall 1989; Jago & Shaw 1998), and when Getz (2010) revisited the topic he concluded a definition of festival remained only a spectrum of esoteric ideas. I was aware celebration existed since the earliest cultural hearths (Kraus 1971). As civilisation progressed and celebration became evermore structured by authorities, it continued to provide societal fabric. Following World War II, emphasis on public relations and revenue generation led to pseudo-events (Boorstin 1961) with ritualistic and profane festivity surpassed by marketing and mercantile activity. As festivals increased in numbers (Janiskee 1994) they also became strategies for rural redevelopment (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier & Van Es 2001), urban regeneration (Jackson, Houghton, Russell & Triandos 2005), and place branding (Derrett 2003; Jamieson 2004). During this same period, Putnam (2000) observed and reported decreases in social capital.

Authentic experience is a term of knowledge, occurrence, and emotion. Van Gennep (1960[1909]) categorised religious rituals and profane festivals as pre-liminal ventures away from ordinary routine, liminal participation in the unusual, and post-liminal returns to normalcy. Turner (1982) combined these liminal phases into a single concept of liminality, defined as periods of autonomy and freedom imparting feelings of pleasure and communitas. He also used the term liminoid to differentiate between profane and religious experiences. Research has associated authentic festival experience with communitas (Gilmore 2010; King 2010), visitor feelings of inner-self (Wang 1999), and desires for pleasure outside of everyday life (Timothy 2011).

Knowledge of what brings meaning to experience included Neulinger’s (1981) paradigm of meaningful leisure with its variables of freedom of choice and intrinsic reward. Explaining leisure time, Nash (1953) created a pyramid where meaningful experience builds from a passive base, to emotional and active engagement, to a capstone of creativity. In flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) meaningful experience arises from a loss of self-consciousness, the merging of action and awareness, a sense of self-control, and an altered sense of time. Intangible places are created through authentic experience (Tuan 1977); short-term, flashpoint experiences connect people (Manzo 2008); and ‘events without authenticity, local meaning, and culture provide only spectacular experiences in placelessness’ (MacLeod 2006, p. 232).

Data collection and analysis

In the absence of a definition of community festival, the term was delimited to include temporary events, open to the public, with a single location, and a theme of celebration or festivity. Primary data about attendee behaviour emerged from participant observation at seven purposively and conveniently selected community festivals near Phoenix, Arizona including holiday celebrations, fiestas, cowboy days, and art festivals. Handwritten notes from these festivals were enlarged within 12 hours and expanded into typewritten narratives within 72 hours of collection to ensure thick descriptions of attendee behaviour. Initial coding, a meticulous process of word-by-word, line-by-line, sentence-by-sentence analysis, extracted over 1,200 behavioural action codes (Charmaz 2006). These included short statements such as people surround the dancers, man on cell phone looks bored, people hold hands over ears when guns fire, kids crowd closer to the performer, family camps out near the stage, woman stops three men dressed in kilts, dad makes sure kids are safe on ride, and shoppers pay little attention to others.
Saturation was reached when no new codes arose from the seventh festival.

Leaving the field, with plans to add theoretical sampling to strengthen my study, I struggled when beginning to write about my journey of discovery. A qualitative research mentor suggested I consider a confessional tale. To practice this format I wrote an auto-ethnographic reflection (Biaett 2012) that provides additional detail on my dissertation research design and method, summarised earlier.

Additional data came from event manager interviews and a content analysis of International Festivals & Events Association online newsletters distributed from March 2010 to February 2013, conducted for theoretical sampling to strengthen emerging themes. The interviews with event managers were designed to create conversation regarding planned activity and attendee behaviour. Responses to questions on activity planning fixated on operational issues, not experience design factors. When asked to describe attendee behaviour at events, every event manager non-enthusiastically hemmed, hawed, and spoke only about demographic characteristics. An interesting comment was made by one interviewee of how experience at her festival was about waiting in lines, but this was OK because the festival was free. A total of 1,592 articles from 153 weekly newsletters were dissected to ascertain the prominence of stories concerned with programming of quality experiences for attendees. It was deduced that while 28.4% of articles were on financial and 16.0% marketing topics, only 2.2% concentrated on quality authentic experiences.

As subsequent festival narratives and interview transcripts added to my collective data mix I repeatedly reanalysed it through focused coding, a process that eventually sorted, diagramed, and clustered data codes into 6 main categories and 18 subcategories. I turned to axial coding to move these categories toward stronger themes. This involved fracturing and rebuilding all categories by asking questions of ‘when, where, why, who, how, and what consequences’ (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 125) about the data codes they contained. They were answered by reevaluating what action codes stated, how they originated and were located in narratives, and what had been written about them in reflective memos. This process put in greater context attendees’ reactions to the structural conditions of a festival, what was going on around them, and the consequences of their actions.

Systematically, two broad categories were reconstructed. One posed community festivals are temporary special places where bonding and bridging social capital between attendees can be found and developed. The second construed correlation between quality attendee experiences at community festivals and the programming of physical, emotional, and collaborative activities. To determine if these themes should be developed independently or merged, and to establish a stronger framework for possible substantive theory, more information was needed.

**Literature review**

To expand *a priori* knowledge of Putnam’s (2000) theoretical concept that social capital bonding brings together those with similar social and cultural backgrounds, while social capital bridging jumps across this divide in real-life situations, more research was required. To specifically inform and advance my developing social capital category, literature was reviewed related to the topic of festival social capital. Many articles casually implied a connection between festivals and social capital. Remington (2003) recognised that social capital bonding increased within festival organiser and volunteer networks. This was reported by Arcodia and Whitford (2006) as well, who also acknowledged general senses of cohesion among visitors, increasing social capital for attendees within family and friend groups,
and decreasing social capital if organisers fail to create positive celebration before, during, or after a festival. Both articles focussed on the general landscape of festival experience, not specifically on-site attendee behaviour. Guided by social capital theory, Wilks (2011) investigated attendees at music festivals in real time with critical discourse analysis and found bonding social capital highly present but minimal bridging social capital. A psychology study using structured interviews and mixed modelling analysis reported increased social capital for parents attending community festivals (Molitor, Rossi & Brantan 2011). It was felt that the literature confirmed that varying levels of bonding and bridging social capital exist at festivals.

Labelling my second emerging category as festive activity I also conducted literature review on festival experiences. Tschohl (2002) proclaimed excellence is built by creating incredible experience. A case study about a planner failing to meet guest expectations (Berridge 2012) highlighted the importance of event experience design knowledge. Outlining good festival experiences Morgan (2008) concluded that social interactions, personal experiences, shared value of performance, and a sense of communitas were key elements. Pettersson and Getz (2009) explored festival experiences finding positive experiences related to quality programming. They declared that while guests attend festivals for both generic fun atmospheres and specific experiences, and although festival experience cannot be completely designed, certain design principles enhance social interaction. Van Belle (2009, p. 8) suggests reimagining the word ‘festival,’ a noun, as the word ‘festivalizing,’ a verb. He believed by appreciating festivals as activity that does something, not as a group of activities that are something, festive experience is really a state of constant creation defined by the act of participant attendance. Proclaiming the arts as building blocks of festive experience, Ehrenreich (2006) asserts dance was the first physical manifestation of festivity and, with its accompanying music, crucial to festive experience. I believed literature substantiated the theme that programming festive activity was significant in the provision of quality attendee experiences.

Construction of substantive theory

‘Where is the theory in grounded theory?’ (Charmaz 2006, p. 133). Theory comes from a systematic social construction of grounded data. In this research, community festival landscapes have been reduced to observational notes of attendee behaviour and, in turn, rebuilt into thick descriptive. Narratives were dichotomised into action statements with initial coding and reassembled into categories with focussed coding. The data in each category were re-evaluated by axial coding, resulting in two general themes. Literature review confirmed and added substance to themes, and with reflective theorising (Charmaz 2006) substantive theory emerged (Biaett 2013, p. 77):

Social capital bonding is strongly evident and easily recognizable within friend and family groups at all community festivals, but minimal throughout an inflated group of unacquainted peers that share demographic similarities, at community festivals featuring low degrees of programmed festivity. Social capital bridging exists minimally, both heuristically in the form of direct social interaction between strangers with dissimilar demographics, as well as hermeneutically by attendees possessing only a sense of primal subconscious generic communitas, at community festivals featuring low degrees of programmed festivity. Event management possessing both the aspiration and knowledge to program quality festive experience has the ability to increase and accentuate the development of social capital bonding and bridging at community festivals.
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This substantive theory implied it should not be assumed that social capital inherently exists at community festivals and there is a need to better understanding the essence of festive experience.

Supplementary exploration

Qualitative research avalanches. The examination of visitor behaviour that began by asking 'what is happening' spiraled into a paradigm of social capital, festivity, and experience design. Believing there was more surrounding the relationship of festivity and attendee behaviour, I extended my exploration with a prolonged post-dissertation literature review. I inunedated the collected data mix with rhetorical insights from a variety of fields. Continual re-evaluation, peer review of redeveloping themes, and reflective theorising flushed out substantive theory to a point of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Strength between observation and interpretation developed, and findings linked to data could be easily compared and contrasted to other situations. An abridged synopsis of extended literature review, interjected with reflective theorising, provides a look at the ideas and reasoning ultimately leading to the emergence of organic festivity theory.

Antecedents of festivity

People celebrate with festive activity. Because festivity has existed as part of every human experience (Fortes 1936) the 'discussion of the festivals of extinct or remote societies may throw light on those still to be found in ours' (Roy 2005, p. xii). Early humans met their needs of food, water, shelter, and belonging before they satisfied needs of self-actualisation (Maslow 1943). They embraced their mythological spirits (Armstrong 2005) with spontaneous juxtaposed celebrations of ecstasy and transcendence. They rejoiced in their accomplishments and relieved feelings of suffering from killing animals and death of kinfolk. Cave paintings with depictions of Palaeolithic hunters, females, and shamans engaged in celebration provide the first records of this festivity (Burkert 2001). For primitive man there was no separation of the spiritual and secular, and festivity was 'of the whole of the world and of life' (Pieper 1965, p. 3). Clans gathered nightly around bonfires adorned in red body paint (Lewis 1980), chanted, drummed, and danced (Ehrenreich 2006) to celebrate their world. Huzinga (1955) thought the festive activity of ancient celebration synonymous with spontaneous, meaningful unto itself, intrinsic, out of the ordinary, absorbing, communal play. Falassi (1987) described profane festivals as the essence of joyful and hospitable communal play. Additional matter on the antecedents of festivity can be found in my account about the missing ingredients of community festival (Biaett 2015).

Reflecting on this strain of literature I crafted a historical typology of festivity. It characterised mankind’s original primordial, spontaneous, highly physical emotional collaborative celebratory activity as organic. The ritualised, spatial, temporal, and structured festivals of progressing civilisations were typified as organised, and today’s marketing and economic oriented festivals were typified as commercial organisms. My dissertation’s substantive theme evolved temporarily into what I called PX (participant experience) theory, simplified to positively state, ‘Levels of social capital bonding and bridging increase when attendees engage in more organically festive forms of activity’ (Biaett 2015). Although this premise, asserting the physical emotional collaborative activities of organic festivity were critical elements for increasing social capital at community festival, was accepted for publication, peer review following presentations at international conferences indicated more was needed.
Infusion of senses and emotions

Re-evaluating, I realised attendees became active and engaged when their senses were stimulated and emotions aroused. People in lines were bored, on their phones, but as they neared the front, with sights, sounds, and strong smells of food concessions, toilets, and petting zoos, they became interactive with others. At venues with loud music, thumping bass, or flashing lights, people stood, clapped, and danced together. On scary rides, when visiting a dog adoption tent, or when upset by someone cutting in line, people were absorbed. In behavioural momentum theory Nevin and Shahan (2011) outline changes in behaviour as disruptors – stimulated senses that arouse emotions are disruptors of attendee behaviour at community festivals.

Traditional senses include sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, but there are other stimuli including temperature, vibration, and balance (Pediaopolis 2017). Addressing transformational experience at an event innovation forum, Rinehart (2015) informed the audience when senses are stimulated, synapses in the brain are affected by neurotransmitters that create emotional responses. Dasu and Chase (2013, p. 24) allege that ‘emotions define the importance of an experience,’ and Hosany and Gilbert (2010, p. 522) allege that one should ‘engineer positive emotions to create enjoyable and memorable experiences.’ Research recapped by Brown and Hutton (2013) found emotional festival experiences linked to atmospherics, loyal behaviour, motivation, and satisfaction. Amarante (2011), interviewing the Los Angeles Lakers’ CEO, was told the team manufactures messages of anger prior, during, and after games to excite and engage fans, which paralleled literature emphasising emotional intensity as important to festival experience (Collins 2004). In the psycho-evolutionary theory of emotion Plutchik (2002) identifies eight biologically primitive primary emotions with four juxtaposed pairs (joy/sadness, trust/disgust, fear/anger, and surprise/anticipation) and notes that these, and derivative combinations, exist in varying levels of intensity.

It became obvious that stimulating senses and emotions equalled better experiences. Attendees with stimulated senses were seen to be social and creative, not passive spectators. Action statements attested, ‘people stomped in unison to loud music, girls take selfie with Irish food, drunk lady gets upset and yells, and couple shows cowboy mannequin with red eyes to others.’ With constant comparison of data and literature, it appeared organic festivity was best expressed as the combination of physical collaborative creative activity, stimulated senses, and aroused emotions.

Well-being and happiness

Mannell and Kleiber (1997, p. 86) believe that ‘good leisure experiences may better contribute to well-being’ viewed in three paradigms: 1) happiness, delineated as short-term present feelings of experience; 2) morale, viewed as personal assessment of the future; and 3) satisfaction, described as appraisal of past experiences. Russell (2013) describes well-being in physical, emotional, intellectual, and social terms, similar to the physical collaborative creative activity of organic festivity. In flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) participants engaged in performance and competitive activities achieve optimal experience and a sense of well-being when the factors of skill level and challenge are matched and maximised. I envisioned that the three combined attributes of organic festivity should be considered as the factors which lead to flow, a sense of liminality, and feelings of well-being for attendees at community festivals.
Organic festivity theory

This neoteric theory, emerging from socially constructed grounded theory method research, converges on three constructs. The first, with primordial roots, is the importance of having attendees engaged in physical, collaborative, and creative activity, for instance immersion in dance activity, as opposed to being simply entertained by passive spectator amusement and shopping. The second construct, sensually infused crowd enthusiasm, emphasises dynamically stimulating the basic senses and additional sensual modalities, for example strong smells and pounding deep bass beats. The third construct centres around arousing attendee emotions prior to, during, and after an event. With this foundation organic festivity theory asserts,

At community festivals, the maximized interrelated factors of physical collaborative creative activity, stimulated senses, and cyclically aroused emotions, give rise to highly festive atmospheres during which social capital bonding and bridging flourishes and attendees attain peak levels of liminality with feelings of well-being.

And one day I knew a little more. I believe this is just the beginning of the story of festivity and attendee experience. My research concentrated on community festivals, but it has implications for future research into multiple aspects of event management and other fields. What activities, senses, and emotions best increase social capital, liminality, and feeling of well-being? Can ethnography find a home in festival research? Only tomorrow will tell.

References


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