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'Spirituality in practice' in sustainability tourism research

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More critical and engaging tourism sustainability research is needed, and this research note argues that a valuable contribution can come from scholars' engagement with their spirituality. The main argument here is that spirituality and sustainability are strictly interrelated, and that such a link should be an integral part of the methodology of studies on sustainability and tourism. Elaborating on the concept of reflexivity, this note coins the expression 'spirituality in practice', which is explained using an example based on the author's experience. This note challenges tourism scholars to reflect on and make explicit how their position in terms of spirituality influences their choices regarding sustainability research.

Keywords: *methodology, reflexivity, sustainability, spirituality, tourism*

1 INTRODUCTION

A shift towards sustainability in tourism is urgently needed, but solutions are difficult to find and implement (Jovicic 2014; Sharpley 2020). Some studies suggest that researchers engaging with sustainability and tourism should strive to be more critical and practical because limitations in critical and practical thinking can lead to a loss of enthusiasm for the sustainability concept (Budeanu et al. 2016; Boluk et al. 2019). The risk of apathy towards sustainability leads to a certain resignation that is irreconcilable with the significant efforts required to make radical changes for sustainability. These considerations highlight an opportunity to explore alternative ways of approaching sustainability in tourism research.

This research note proposes to approach sustainability in tourism research by integrating spirituality in the researchers' reflexivity process – that is, the process of reflecting on how the self influences the knowledge processes used for doing research. Spirituality embraces a view of humans as individuals connected to all other beings in a relationship that transcends time, space and bodily senses (Nandram/Borden 2010), and involves an inner tension in the search for values and meanings (Sheldrake 2017). An increasing number of scholars are investigating the link between spirituality and sustainability (for example Carroll 2012; Zsolnai 2015; Dhiman/Marques 2016). Still, the potential effects of such a link on research practices has received scant attention, and only few studies within the sustainable science literature comment on it (for example Ives et al. 2020).

This note argues for the opportunity for tourism scholars investigating sustainability to engage with their own spirituality as part of their commitment to research quality in terms of reflexivity (Ateljevic et al. 2005; Xin et al. 2013). Although the researchers'

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spiritual worldview can determine what kind of questions are asked and what theories and methodologies are employed, spirituality has a marginalised position in academia, which tends to prefer the conventional Western understanding of knowledge production (Shahjahan 2005). Ignoring or dismissing the role of spirituality in sustainability research practice is a missed opportunity for more inclusive and potentially novel research that can avoid the shortcomings of apathy and resignation.

The link between spirituality and sustainability is explained in the next section. The extent and the way spirituality is discussed in the tourism literature, in particular with regard to sustainability, is then presented and commented on in relation to the opportunity to apply this concept to the researchers' reflexivity process. The concept of 'spirituality in practice' is then introduced and exemplified, referring to the author's own experience. This note closes with an invitation to tourism scholars researching sustainability.

2 THE LINK BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The core of spirituality aligns with thinking on sustainability through the concepts of transcendence, interconnectedness and oneness (Dhiman/Marques 2016). Transcendence of place and time relates to the sustainability dimensions of equity and inter-/intra-generational justice, which is associated with the spiritual aspects of interconnectedness and oneness, highlighting the human capacity to 'see others', connect with them and overcome egoism. 'Others' include nature: from a spiritual perspective, the natural and human worlds merge in a symbiosis that relates well to the vision of strong sustainability.

Spirituality is sometimes associated with religion but, unlike the latter, spirituality does not imply an institutionalised system of beliefs; it rejects dogma and is based on a reflection on the human experience and the connection with all beings (Zsolnai 2015). It implies an understanding of human life characterised by introspection and openness to change – two factors that are crucial for the deep learning usually associated with sustainability (Warburton 2003). Critical thinking is at the heart of spirituality conceived as an endeavour to acquire and live by a vision of transcendence, interconnectedness and oneness (Gary 2006). Such a vision, as mentioned above, aligns with sustainability and is therefore suitable for approaching sustainability in a critical way.

The spiritual purpose of leading a meaningful life that goes beyond self-interest relates to ethics, which explores the nature of good and, in particular, to virtue ethics, which focuses on moral identity and the character traits for a 'good life' in harmony with others (Roberts/Crossman 2018). However, ethics lacks something that spirituality has: the tremendous strength of a narrative about a non-materialistic dimension of life that is worth exploring, as it is in this dimension that we can fully realise ourselves (Spohn 1997). As argued in an increasing number of studies on education (for example Coates 2012; Molthan-Hill et al. 2020) and sustainable development (for example Luks 2014; Lowery et al. 2020), narratives are essential for a shift towards sustainability. Typically, narratives create a link between values and actions, especially in relation to complex situations such as sustainable shifts, and include main characters often depicted as agents of internal and/or external change (Fisher 1987; Wall et al. 2019). More than norms and rules about what is right and what is wrong, spiritual narratives can move people to act: they can be 'the tools of hope' (Bathurst 2017: 87) to face possible doubts and challenges about sustainable futures. Thus, more than ethics, spirituality is the foundation for an exceptionally engaging approach to sustainability (Zsolnai 2015).

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3 SPIRITUALITY IN TOURISM

Numerous studies investigate spirituality in tourism with reference to spiritual tourism experiences (for example Sharpley 2009; 2016; Willson et al. 2013; Cheer et al. 2017; Roknodin Eftekhari et al. 2018). Some studies investigate other themes related to spirituality, such as the spirituality of tourism entrepreneurs (for example Fonneland 2013) and the spiritual practices of employees and leaders (for example Milliman et al. 2018; Usman et al. 2021). Few studies explore the link between spirituality and sustainability (for example Dwyer 2016; Kasim 2016; Mat Som 2019). However the latter theme is central to some articles in the *International Journal of Tourism and Spirituality*, founded after the first international conference on tourism and spirituality in 2016. Among these articles, particularly valuable is the study by Dwyer (2016), who discusses the need for a change in the mindset of the stakeholders involved in sustainable tourism. Interestingly, the author specifies that such a need also concerns tourism researchers.

In the broader tourism literature, the relevance of spirituality to sustainability is seldom investigated, and then usually with regard to specific managerial aspects, such as hotel employee wellbeing (Ghaedi et al. 2020) and pro-environmental behaviours (Rezapouraghdam et al. 2018). The potential of adopting a spiritual perspective on tourism research in a more holistic way and as a means to understand sustainability deeply and critically has received little attention from scholars. Two tourism studies stand out in the consideration of spirituality as a particularly fruitful approach to sustainability. First, Rahmawati and colleagues (2019) investigate corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Bali's tourism system, and discuss spirituality as a powerful framework for sustainability-related actions at different levels. The second study highlighting the potential of spirituality for sustainability in tourism is by Barkathunnisha and colleagues (2017). These authors argue for a spirituality-based educational philosophy as a valuable pedagogical approach for dealing with global sustainability-related challenges. They state that spiritual engagement is a crucial channel for creating the knowledge and constructing relevant meanings for sustainability.

Some observations presented in the two aforementioned studies cause some concern about tourism academia in general and in relation to how it frames and discusses sustainability challenges. Rahmawati et al. observe that the CSR literature is dominated by Western philosophies. In addition to being a clear sign of the unbalanced representation of different voices in academia, this situation implies the exclusion of the contributions to sustainability by Eastern philosophies that, typically, reject human mastery over nature and highlight the pursuit of harmony in daily life to a greater extent than do Western philosophies. With regard to the call by Barkathunnisha et al. to include spirituality in tourism education, the concern is about the need to focus on today's academics and not only on the possibility of including spirituality in the formation of future practitioners and scholars. In addition to considering the inclusion of spirituality in their practice as teachers and tutors, academics should look inward and reflect on their own attitudes towards spirituality, their spiritual position and how this influences the way they understand sustainability.

To sum up, while there are numerous tourism studies concerning spiritual experiences, there are some limitations in the investigation of the link between spirituality and sustainability. One limitation is that when spirituality is related to sustainability, this is done mainly in relation to specific aspects, such as employee wellbeing and behaviours. Another limitation is that the potential of spirituality in terms of sustainability is discussed in relation to tourism operators and students, while tourism

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scholars seem to resist engaging in the investigation of their own spirituality and how this influences their understanding of sustainability. This second limitation is particularly severe. Scholars' lack of discourse on the link between their spirituality and the way they study sustainability can compromise how sustainable challenges are framed and discussed. This research note addresses such gaps concerning the limitation of spirituality considerations to specific cases and with reference to tourists, operators and students, but not to scholars.

Responding to the call to move towards the 'disruption and creation of new ways of doing tourism research' (Ivanova et al. 2020: 5) and expanding on the suggestion by Dwyer (2016) about the need for a more spiritual mindset, the next section focuses on spirituality awareness and relates it to reflexivity. Reflexivity can be described as the process through which 'researchers turn a critical gaze upon themselves' (Finlay 2003: 3). Social scientists, especially those employing qualitative methodologies, engage with reflexivity when researching and describing the methodology of their work (Denzin/Lincoln 2000). Although reflexivity is encouraged and linked by some scholars to radical changes for personal and wider transformations (Maxey 1999; Lumsden 2019), research practices vary considerably. This is also the case with tourism studies (Jamal/Everett 2004; Ateljevic et al. 2005), where some aspects (among which this note includes the scholars' spirituality) seem to be perceived as too private to be shared publicly (Hall 2004; Crossley 2020).

4 'SPIRITUALITY IN PRACTICE': THE INCLUSION OF SPIRITUALITY IN REFLEXIVITY

This research note proposes the concept of 'spirituality in practice' to emphasise the importance of reflexivity in terms of spirituality in sustainability research in tourism. Some sustainability scholars consider reflexivity to be a valuable opportunity for the necessary questioning of the values, background assumptions and normative orientations shaping sustainability research (Popa et al. 2015; Knaggård et al. 2018; Susur/Karakaya 2021). In the approach to science advocated by these scholars, reflexivity is a key feature in the analysis of wicked problems as typical of sustainability issues (Popa et al. 2015; Susur/Karakaya 2021). Echoing Guillemin and Gillam (2004), who discuss reflexivity in terms of ethics and use the expression 'ethics in practice', this note introduces the expression 'spirituality in practice' to indicate scholars' conscious and explicit confrontation with their spirituality and the day-to-day spiritual issues that arise in conducting research. To illustrate the 'spirituality in practice' concept and its relevance to sustainability – in particular the link between the spirituality awareness process of the researchers and their choices in terms of framing and discussing sustainability – an example based on the author's own experience is presented in Figure 1.

The text in the left part of the figure indicates the researcher's (in this case the present author's) spiritual position. This is possibly – but not necessarily – linked to religion and ethics. In this specific case, Buddhism and Ecofeminism are the major influences on the author's spiritual position. From this position, more precisely from the concepts of interconnectedness, oneness and *ahimsa* (nonviolence), derives the author's choice of research area – namely a more inclusive and less anthropocentric way to understand sustainability in relation to nonhuman animals (Bertella 2019). To exemplify further, Figure 1 shows a topic within such an area. This concerns the methodology to apply when conducting research about, for and with animals (Bertella 2022). This particular topic is relevant to the creation of knowledge for a type of sustainability that is less

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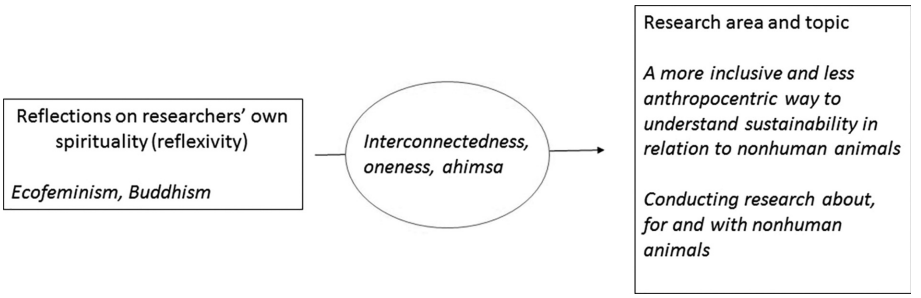

Figure 1 'Spirituality in practice': making explicit the author's spirituality and linking it to her research choices

anthropocentric. The studies conducted within such an area and topic show how the author's spiritual position has clear consequences on her way to frame and discuss sustainability. The link between the spiritual values of interconnectedness, oneness and *ahimsa* and the reflections presented in these studies is evident.

While the author engaged in a process of reflexivity in terms of 'spirituality in practice' when planning and conducting the aforementioned studies, these reflections were made explicit to the readers only partially, and never referring to spirituality. This is due to the author's decision to follow the mainstream trend to consider such issues as private (Hall 2004; Crossley 2020), and to the lack of any requirement by the editors and reviewers for such a type of reflexivity. It is the author's experience that, while scholars researching animal ethics in tourism are often required to make their ethical position explicit, this is not the case for scholars writing about sustainability. This can be explained by a relatively shared recognition that conflictual positions about animal ethics exist and by the lack of similar recognition in relation to sustainability and, in particular, its link to spirituality. When reporting their understanding of sustainability, most scholars (included the present author) tend to define this concept not only without referring to any spiritual value, but also by adhering to a specific view (that is, the one deriving from the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission report) and, more recently, to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Telfer 2012). This can be related to the criticism expressed by some scholars about the existence of dominant ideologies in the tourism academia and the consequent barriers to the emergence of alternative views (Ateljevic et al. 2005).

The aforementioned dominant view on sustainability can have some limitations, and 'spirituality in practice' is a valuable contribution to explore possible alternative views. The dominant understanding of sustainability can lead to considerable limitations, as noted by some tourism scholars with regard to the impellent needs deriving from the climate change crisis as well as global socio-political challenges (Macbeth 2005; Gren/Huijbens 2014). The problematic aspect is that such understanding perpetuates the instrumental view of nature as capital, and is likely to lead to the reproduction of the fallacy of modernity, which is the belief in the possibility of combining economic growth on a finite planet with social justice and environmental protection (Adelman 2018). Integrating spirituality in scholars' reflexivity process can contribute to overcoming these limitations. It can be reasonably assumed that the inclusion of the core elements of spirituality – which are transcendence, interconnectedness and oneness (Dhiman/Marques 2016) – can contribute to a renewed way to understand and

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study sustainability. In the reported example, a more inclusive and less anthropocentric understanding of sustainability was the result of such a process. 'Spirituality in practice' can be the process supporting scholars in engaging more critically when researching sustainability and tourism.

5 CONCLUSION

The starting points of this note were the important spiritual dimension to sustainability and the consequent potential in terms of more critical and engaging research into sustainability and tourism. After identifying some limitations in the way spirituality enters the tourism literature, this note focused on reflexivity. The concept of 'spirituality in practice' was proposed and illustrated using the author's own experience of conducting research into a more inclusive and less anthropocentric way to understand sustainability. This example illustrated how spirituality can be at the root of our engagement in specific sustainability-related research areas and topics, and highlighted how conformity can act as a powerful barrier to the reflexivity process that is necessary for innovative, critical and trustworthy research.

The major contribution of this note is the discussion and exemplification of the link between spirituality and sustainability, and the related effect on research practices. Future studies are needed to explore and discuss the inclusion of spiritual considerations in sustainable tourism research, and valuable insights can come from sustainability science studies discussing knowledge production in terms of transformations.

To conclude, this note invites scholars to reflect on and make explicit the link between their spirituality and their research choices to develop a more critical and engaging scholarship. More generally, it points to the opportunity to dare to challenge established methodological practices and, importantly, to re-think what is desirable in tourism research and to what extent diversity of perspectives is encouraged and promoted.

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