

ENCOUNTERS AND THE GUIDED GROUP TRIP: GOING "ON THE SCENE" TO EXAMINE THE SITUATIONAL INTERPRETATION OF ENCOUNTERS

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Abstract: The disconnection between reported encounter norms and the number of encounters visitors can tolerate has disturbed recreation researchers for a number of years. Recent research suggests that visitors, specifically white water rafters on a guided group trip, make sense of encounters not normatively, but through a process of situational negotiation at the moment of the encounter (Jonas, Stewart, & Larkin, 2000). This research suggests that encounters are not evaluated positively or negatively, but are treated as "part of the experience." This study extends this research into other settings (lakes and rivers) and modes of travel (canoe and kayak). Much of Jonas et al.'s findings were supported: trip guides play a crucial role in the negotiation process; and encounters affirm group identity, often one that is superior to the encountered group. Setting and mode of travel differences were noted: encounters were more selectively interpreted on lake trips, where encounters were more often anonymous; and there was less of a "witnessing audience" effect on canoe and kayak trips (subdued activities) than white water rafting (risky activity).

Introduction

The disconnection between what visitors report as their encounter norms and the number of encounters they will actually tolerate during their outdoor recreation trip has troubled recreation researchers for a number of years (e.g., Hall & Shelby, 1996; Patterson & Hammitt, 1990; Roggenbuck, Williams, Bange, & Dean, 1991). Because encounter norms, or the number of encounters a visitor can tolerate in a given area or specified length of time without feeling as though their recreational experience is being compromised, is the operational variable of many of the major research areas in recreation resource management, including conflict, solitude, crowding, and social carrying capacity research, this disconnect is a serious research and managerial problem. The lack of understanding about how people make sense of encounters during their outdoor recreation trip has led to contradictory research findings and given resource managers little direction for how to establish visitor limits or manage for visitor enjoyment.

Some of the weaknesses in encounter research have been linked to the methods of encounter research. Most often, encounter researchers use pre- or post- surveys that ask visitors about the number of encounters they would like to have during their visit (e.g., Hall & Shelby, 1996; Lewis, Lime, & Anderson, 1996; Patterson & Hammitt, 1990). The main criticism of this method is whether visitors are able to

decontextualize their encounters and report on them in numerical form. Roggenbuck et al. (1991) suggest that encounter norms may simply be numbers that visitors manufactured for a survey and not meaningful indicators of how many encounters a visitor can tolerate. They have suggested that surveys provide respondents with an option to respond that they "care [about encounters], but cannot give a number" (p. 151). Although this suggestion reduces the potential for respondent error, it is debatable as to whether it moves the level of understanding of encounters any further along. Indeed, even studies which acknowledge that encounters "involve much more than numbers and size of parties encountered" (Patterson & Hammitt, 1990, p. 263) seem hard pressed to find alternative ways to investigate encounters.

A second concern with encounter research is its focus on evaluating encounters as either "positive" (the visitor liked the encounter) or "negative" (the visitor disliked the encounter). Although some researchers have reported successes with this approach, (e.g., Lewis et al., 1996), other researchers have had difficulty finding a congruent relationship between reported encounter norms and subsequent evaluations of encounters. Patterson and Hammitt (1990), for example, reported that 61 per cent of respondents whose personal encounter norms were exceeded at one or more of three encounter sites (trailhead, trail, campsite) reported that the encounters were not "negative" and did not detract from the experience. The lack of congruence between reported norms and evaluations of encounters has led Patterson and Hammitt and others (e.g., Jonas, Stewart, & Larkin, 2000) to question the emphasis researchers place on "negative" encounters without considering how encounters may be "positive" experiences. However, a larger concern with this approach is that it is quite possible that visitors do not evaluate encounters in a way that can be made sense of in the simple and dichotomous categories of "positive" or "negative." Indeed, in the study by Lewis et al. (1996), respondents were more likely to give a neutral (didn't like or dislike) rating than either a positive or negative rating to an encounter. Thus, it is possible that methods which ask visitors to interpret encounters in this evaluative context may poorly capture the meaning of these encounters. Indeed, these categories can easily become complicated on occasions when a "positive" encounter has "negative" repercussions, or a "negative" encounter may lead to serendipitous or "positive" outcomes further along in the trip.

Encounter Research: An Alternative Approach

Encounter research would benefit from employing techniques that approach the study of encounters from alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives. In particular, encounter research would benefit from using methods that can contextualize encounters and be able to analyze them beyond numerical and evaluative criteria. One method that may be very useful for this stream of research is participant observation. Participant observation allows researchers to be "on the scene," or present at the time of the encounter itself, to see what happens as visitors actually encounter one another.

Being "on the scene" for encounters is particularly important in light of recent research which has suggested that the meaning of encounters is situationally negotiated and based on the nature of the social interaction at the moment of the encounter (Jonas et al., 2000). In other words, visitors make sense of encounters as they happen. Together, encountering parties endow certain features of the encounter with meaning, make them significant, and establish a "definition of the encounter." Thus, if encounters are situationally negotiated, what is less important for understanding encounters are the variables associated with particular characteristics of the visitor, the group being encountered, or the setting, and what is more important is the process by which visitors work together to make sense of their encounter.

Participant observation research also provides an opportunity to use alternative sampling strategies to investigate encounters. Most of the past encounter studies have begun by taking a random sample of visitors, then trying to account for differences in encounter norms by relating the norms to a host of visitor characteristics, including age, residence, level of experience, trip length, and activity (e.g., Hall & Shelby, 1996). However, an alternative strategy would be to sample based on a particular characteristic, such as trip context or modality, and explore how encounters relate to this characteristic. This was the approach taken in this study. Encounters for one type of visitor group was explored in this study: the guided group trip.

The Guided Group Trip

The guided group trips of this study have three main characteristics. First, the trip is run by a trip leading organization that provides all of the necessary gear, food, and logistical support, for a fee. Second, participants sign up for a trip according to their desired trip destination. Often people sign up with a companion, but most of the participants are strangers to each other. Finally, and most importantly, guided groups have a trip leader, who literally guides the participants through the trip. Trip guides have a specific purpose: to create an overall enjoyable, fun, exciting, and interesting trip for the participants. Doing anything less is both bad for guiding and bad for business.

Guided group trips are an important segment of the visitor population for encounter researchers to study. Guiding organizations are serving a rising number and proportion of visitors to outdoor recreation areas (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000). According to Friese, Hendee, and Kinziger (1998), there were more than 700 group guiding organizations operating in the United States, serving an estimated 70,000 clients per year. Additionally, findings by Gager, Hendee, Kinziger, and Krumpke (1998) indicate that the number of these types of programs is increasing yearly. More importantly, because people who have never camped or participated in a certain outdoor recreation activity often take their first trip with a guided group, a large proportion of participants on guided group trips are first time visitors to an area and often first time campers. As a result, how encounters are experienced and interpreted in a guided group context may have major implications for establishing how the group participants make sense of encounters on

future outdoor recreation trips, including those they may take without a guided group.

Past Research on Guided Group Encounters

Of all of the types of visitor encounters to study with participant-observation methods, guided group trips are likely the easiest to access. Compared to groups of friends or solo hikers, researchers can easily join guided groups by contacting a guiding organization and signing up for one of their trips. As a result, there have been a few participant-observation studies of guided group trips that have explored the nature of encounters. Neumann (1993), for example, joined an "alternative" bus traveling group to the Grand Canyon, and noted what happened when the group encountered other bus groups, particularly the mainstream or "mass" bus tourists, at attractions or rest areas. He found that encounters with other groups made certain group values explicit and relevant, which worked to facilitate solidarity and solidify group identity (in their case, an identity of being "unconventional" and "counter-culture").

Jonas et al. (2000) collected participant observation data on commercial, research, and private river rafting trips in the Grand Canyon. The authors reported three major themes. First, most encounters between groups were evaluated positively by rafters, and seen less as an interference or disturbance and more as *part of* the river-rafting experience. The trip guides were found to have a significant influence as facilitators of the meaning of the encounters. Because it is in the guide's best interest if their passengers have a good trip, the guides made efforts to facilitate a positive interpretation of encounters. Second, as with Neumann's (1993) tour bus study, river rafting encounters had important consequences for group identity. Encountered groups played the role of "witnessing audience," in front of which groups acted out and confirmed identities. For example, an encounter between a river running group and a helicopter group in the Grand Canyon gave the river running group an opportunity to define themselves as superior to and more "authentic" than that of the helicopter group. Finally, encounters on river rafting trips helped to facilitate individual river rafting identities. Encounters gave individuals the opportunities to come together and co-create an "adventurer" identity through exchanging stories, bearing witness, and creating narratives of situational danger.

These works provide a useful foundation for further exploration in the situational negotiation of encounters. However, it is worth exploring if and how these themes appear in other settings or using other modes of travel. Clearly, a river rafting trip in the Grand Canyon is an extraordinary outdoor recreation experience when compared to the typical range of recreational experiences. For most participants, rafting trips in the Grand Canyon are "once in a lifetime" trips, and it is possible that the themes discussed by Jonas et al. (2000) may be unique to the particular setting and/or activity. Thus, it is important to investigate how encounters on other types of outdoor recreation trips and to other locations also make sense of encounters. As such, the research questions for this study are:

How do groups make sense of encounters...

...in other settings?

...with other modes of travel?

Specifically, what similarities or differences are there in how canoeists and kayakers in regions of northern Minnesota and how river rafters in the Grand Canyon make sense of encounters?

Methods

For this study, I worked with a trip-leading organization based out of Minneapolis, called Outdoor Adventures (a pseudonym). I accompanied seven group trips with this organization in the summer of 2000. The trips varied according to length, number of participants, number of guides, mode of travel, and location. The shortest trips were three days long, and the longest trips were seven days long (for a total of 36 observation days). Groups ranged in size from seven to 13 participants, with two or three guides. Three trips were kayak trips and four of the trips traveled by canoe. All trips took place in recreational areas within a day's drive of Minneapolis (Table 1).

My role also varied across the trips. On four of the trips I went along as a registered group participant. On the other three trips, I was an assistant guide (Table 1). As an assistant guide, I worked for the guiding organization and as such I was responsible for the well-being of the participants. However, I was not the main decision-maker; this job was left for the "head guide." Although my ability to take notes was more limited on the trips I worked as a guide, the opportunity to be an "insider" with the trip leading organization proved to be very fruitful, and I gained a better understanding of the role of the trip guide in defining encounters.

I collected observations throughout the day in the form of jottings (abbreviated sentences, key words, phrases). Three times daily – at lunch, in the late afternoon, and late evening – I expanded the jottings into field notes. Within 48 hours upon return home from the trip, I typed my field notes into a computer. At the end of the summer, all of the typed field notes were loaded into NUD*IST (Version 4.0), a computer data coding and retrieval system. I also conducted open-ended interviews with all of the head guides for the guided trips I observed, and transcribed and

entered this data into NUD*IST, where it was also coded. I coded and retrieved all of my observations and interview transcriptions that involved or referred to interactions with other visitors, then analyzed this data for themes.

Findings

The following themes emerged from an analysis of the data:

Theme 1: Potential Encounters Are Selectively Interpreted as Encounters

When participants in guided groups come upon other visitors, they can choose one of two courses of action. They can choose to make meaning of the encounter, such as by talking to the visitors or by talking amongst themselves about the visitors. The term for this route of action is "doing interest." Alternatively, trip participants can try to make the encounter as meaningless as possible, or "do disinterest," by avoiding sustained interactions with and conversations about the visitors. Guided groups tend to "do interest" and "do disinterest" at different locations and times throughout a trip. In general, guided groups "did disinterest" while they were at their campsite and during the beginning and middle of the trips. They were more likely to "do interest" while they were traveling and were approaching the end of the trip.

It has long been recognized in encounter research that visitors are more sensitive to crowding at campsites and trails (Burch & Wenger, 1967). For trip leaders of guided groups, encounters at campsites are especially risky because they have very serious repercussions on the trip leader's ability to deliver a good trip if they turn sour. Of particular concern is the trip leader's ability to maintain an atmosphere of fun and intimacy during and after encounters. As one TL put it, "I'm always afraid when people come into our camps that it's going to screw up the mojo." Leaders generally prefer camping away from other groups because they are able to have "better control over the social [interaction] and less distractions." As a result, the trip leaders prefer not to make a big deal out of encounters with groups at campsites. In the following field note, Rick, the TL of the Voyageurs canoe trip, minimizes the disruption caused by an encounter with some motor boaters, quickly changing the subject when the group asked him about it:

Table 1. Characteristics of Trips Observed in Summer of 2000

Location	Mode of Travel	Trip Length	No. of Participants	No. of Guides	Role of Researcher
St. Croix	Small canoe ^a	3 days	8	2	Participant
Isle Royale	Kayak	7 days	8	2	Asst. Guide
Apostle Islands	Kayak	5 days	12	2	Participant
Isle Royale	Kayak	7 days	8	2	Asst. Guide
St. Croix	Small canoe	3 days	11	3	Participant
Voyageurs	Voyageur canoe ^b	5 days	8	2	Participant
White Otter	Small canoe	6 days	10	3	Asst. Guide

^aSmall canoes are 16-foot, two-person canoes.

^bVoyageur canoes are 22-foot, five- or six-person canoes.

We were sitting around the campfire, and Rick (TL) was having us go around and tell everyone why we decided to come on the canoe trip. Midway through the round, some noisy boaters came by our island. It sounded like they had slowed down their boat and were close to shore, but we couldn't see them because it was too dark. Rick said why don't we take a break so people can go put on warm clothes. He then disappeared down toward the noise. A few minutes later, we reconvened at the fire. Someone asked Rick what the noise was, and he said that it was nothing, just some people out doing some night fishing. He then asked who hadn't had their turn to talk yet. (Field note, Voyageurs canoe trip)

Encounters while traveling and near the end of a trip, however, are less of a risk simply because they are short, and with less potential for disruption. Trip guides are more willing to "do interest" while traveling, and permit their group to interact with other visitors:

The paddling was slow as the group enjoyed their last day of kayaking on Lake Superior. We paddled close to the island so we could look at the activity along the shore. We passed by a group of three women who were sitting on an outcrop, taking a break from their hike. We waved our paddles to them, and they waved back. As Sandie [group member] passed them by, she asked them if they'd be at Rock Harbor tonight, and they said yes. Sandie replied, great, we'll see you there and we can all have a beer together. (Field notes, Isle Royale kayak trip)

These findings are similar to what Neumann (1993) and Jonas et al. (2000) found for tour bus and river rafting trips, where the trip leader also played a key role in establishing deciding where and when participants should interact with other visitors.

Theme 2: Encounters Affirm Group Identity

Both Neumann (1993) and Jonas et al. (2000) have suggested that encounters help solidify group identity through a process of "identification through comparison." When groups come into contact with other visitors, they are provided an opportunity to affirm their identity, and often they establish an identity that is superior in some way to the visitors they came in contact with. Typically, the superior identity is one of being a more "authentic" camper who is camping the "right" way. This same phenomenon was seen on the canoe and kayak trips, where the "right" way to camp involved traveling in a human-powered craft, which is better for the environment and a more interesting way to see the area:

We were paddling away from our campsite and toward the main boat channel. Ellerie points toward one of the motorboats in the channel that was fairly close to the canoe - a small aluminum

boat with an outboard motor on it. Three people were sitting in the boat, all facing into the wind caused by the boat's movement. "Look at them," Ellerie said "They don't look like they're having any fun." Amy, Ellerie, and I talk about how noisy those boats are and how cold the wind must feel on the faces of those boaters. (Voyageurs canoe trip)

The encounter need not be face-to-face for it to be used as a vehicle for identity-making. Indeed, all that is sometimes required is a visual or physical encounter, and a group will interpret it in such a way as to develop a sense of superiority or authenticity over other visitors. In the following example, an encounter with a "phantom" motor boating group affirms the group's identity as environmentally conscious saviors of the Apostle Islands:

As we reached the lee side of the island the wind died down and the kayaking was calm. We passed a point on shore where smoke was rising but no one was around. We paddled past it and then went back to it, and Angie (TL) got out of her kayak and went up the hill with Sheila's water bottle to put it out. When she returned the group cheered, and Patricia took a picture of Angie squirting water on the fire. Sheila said that she thought Angie should win a hazardous duty award. Angie was asked who she thought started the fire, and she said "probably a motor boater, they tend to be the least environmentally friendly of sailors, motor boaters, and kayakers. This doesn't do much to help my prejudices against motor boaters." Patricia said, "I didn't want to say anything, but that's what I was thinking too." The group resumed paddling back to camp. The last stretch of the paddle back was calm and peaceful. Sheila mentioned to everyone that it was her water bottle that was used for the fire dousing. "Give that woman an Oreol!" Jim replied. (Field notes, Apostle Islands kayak trip)

As mentioned earlier, Jonas et al. (2000) also discussed how encounters are often used to develop a superior identity within a group. However, I suggest that the anonymity of an encounter on a large body of water may lead to a more strategic use of encounters by a guided group trip leader. When encounters are anonymous, it is easier for trip leaders (and participants) to "scapegoat" other visitors or blame them for problems, in the way that Angie did with the motor boaters. We really had no idea how or by whom the fire was started. However, Angie and the group used the encounter to not only make themselves look good but to also make motor-boaters look bad. In a more bounded setting, such as a white water river, trip leaders have less of an option to use encounters strategically because most encounters are face-to-face. Indeed, a more strategic use of encounters may be associated with such features of the setting as visual expanse, probabilities of encountering face-to-face, or variety of trip routes.

Theme 3: Encounters Allow Groups to "Act" as a Group

For many group guiding organizations, "group bonding" is a major component of the experience, and often more meaningful to the trip participants than either the activity or the interaction with nature (Arnould & Price, 1993). Indeed, guided group trip leaders work hard to "facilitate" a feeling of cohesiveness among the participants. A crucial way that individuals come to understand of themselves as a group is through action. In other words, when people act as a group, they start to feel like a group.

Both Neumann (1993) and Jonas et al. (2000) talked of the importance of encounters for providing a "witnessing audience" in front of whom groups can act out their "groupness." For the most part, these authors talked of how the groups they observed used other travelers as witnessing audiences in front of whom they performed a group action, such as going down a set of rapids, or visiting a tourist site. For example, Jonas et al. describe how other rafting groups often wait at the bottom of rapids and watch other groups ride the waves and cheer as they make it down safely. However, on kayak and canoeing trips, which are known much more for their opportunities for serenity than for risk, groups may not have access to as many opportunities for "witnessing audiences" as rafting trips because there simply isn't anything exciting or adventurous enough to witness.

Canoe and kayak trips do use encounters with other visitors as a way to act out their "groupness." However, the encountered visitors tend not to be spectators to the performance. Instead, they often become accomplices to the group's performance, and play a role in the performance itself. One common example of how encountered visitors become accomplices is when groups recruit a fellow visitor to take a group photo:

It was the last full day of the trip. We had kayaked to another island with a beach, and half the group went for a swim while the rest stayed on shore. People were playing in the water and having a really fun time. When the swimmers got out of the water, some people wanted to get some group photos. We organized ourselves into our group pose, front row kneeling, back row standing. Kim (TL) said she'd be the photographer and began to take pictures. After she took one or two, Janet said wait, why don't we ask that man to take them for us so you can be in them? A man had just pulled up to the beach in his motorboat and was walking down the beach in our direction. As he approached, Kim asked him if he wouldn't mind, and he said sure. About five different cameras were handed to the man, and the group posed as he went through all of them. The people who owned the cameras that Kim took pictures with wanted new ones taken with everyone in the picture. (Field notes, Apostle Islands kayak trip)

In this example, the kayak group used the encountered visitor as a way to reinforce that even Kim, the TL, was an important enough member of the group that it was worth disturbing another visitor in order to include her in the group photo.

Another way a group is able to "act" as a group in an encounter is through storytelling. Encounters are a crucial opportunity for groups to tell others the stories of their trip. Storytelling as a way of making meaning of a wilderness experience has been explored by Patterson, Williams, Watson, and Roggenbuck (1998), who found that reliving and sharing of an experience through stories was an important phase of the wilderness experience itself. Indeed, Patterson et al. suggest that perhaps "what people are actually seeking from their recreation experiences are stories which ultimately enrich their lives" (p. 449). Whereas Patterson et al. examined the stories told at the end of an experience, encounters with other visitors during a trip provide opportunities for guided groups to tell their stories during the trip itself. In this first field note, the guided group co-creates a story of surviving a torrential rainstorm with some visitors it passes by:

We paddled past a group we saw the day before, right before the storm let loose. One of their group came out onto the point and we paddled over to them so that we could talk. "That was some storm last night, wasn't it?" they called out. Scott (TL) said yes, and asked if they were all ok. They said that they were, and that luckily they had found a low spot out of the wind so they only got wet. "So much for 20% chance of rain!" they yelled. Bill joked that if last night was 20% chance of rain, he'd hate to see 100% chance of rain. He also joked that maybe the guy heard the weather report wrong and that what it really said was to expect a chance of 20 inches of rain. These jokes went around the canoes in a "what did he say?" type of way until everyone had heard them. (Field notes, St. Croix River canoe trip)

Other times, encountered visitors are strictly audience members:

We all got our stuff over to the ferry with plenty of time, and hung out on the dock with the other ferry goers. Nadine began talking to three women hikers, and other people we had seen along the way. Mostly she, and others in our group, talked with other groups about animals, food, and gear. Maureen told them how we saw a total of five moose, a fox, 4 eagles, and lots of birds. One of the food stories was about how we cooked the brownies in the fry pan. We had one of the women take a few last group pictures of us next to a sign that said "Isle Royale National Park." (Field notes, Isle Royale kayak trip)

Storytelling opportunities during the trip itself may be particularly important for the guided group trip. Compared to other visitors who take their trips with friends or family from home, guided group trips are often composed of people who are relative strangers before the trip begins, and who may or may not continue a relationship with after the trip ends. Thus, for these visitors, there may be no opportunity for recounting and retelling the trip with the fellow trip-takers once the group disperses upon return to the city. For this reason, trip leaders like to encounter other visitors near the end of trips:

I remember waiting for the ferry at the end, because we were talking to other people. And to me, that was a positive thing. I like to see them say, "Guess what we did, you should try this, you should come with us next time," or "It would be great, we were complete strangers just like you are with us, and that would be so fun, you'd love it." (Ben, TL, Isle Royale kayak trip)

As such, telling stories during the trip are extremely valuable sense-making opportunities, and may be the only opportunity for the group to collectively interpret their experience.

Discussion

Overall, much of what Neumann (1993) and Jonas et al. (2000) reported in their studies also emerged as themes in this study. Across settings and modes of travel, guided groups use encounters to create and affirm group identity. Similarly, the role of the trip guides in helping groups know when, where, and how use encounters to build group identity also emerged as theme in this study. Compared to many other visitor types, guided group trip leaders are highly motivated to shape a group's experience in a certain way, and will use encounters to assist in this process.

Setting and mode of travel does appear to make a difference in how encounters are used by guided group trips. Wide, expansive settings give trip leaders and participants more opportunities to have encounters that remain anonymous, which can be used more deliberately to create an identity that is superior to the anonymous visitor. However, more subdued forms of travel may have less of the "witnessing audience" effect found in activities with heightened risk and danger, although encountered visitors are still incorporated into the identity-making process, via their participation in photo-taking and storytelling.

Employing alternative methodological approaches often simultaneously opens the door for examining phenomena from new theoretical perspectives. Indeed, this is the case with participant observation. Studying encounters with participant observation methods allows for access to understanding encounters as situationally defined interactions versus normative manifestations, which is more in line with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1967) than structural-functional analysis (e.g., Merton, 1973). As a result, alternative approaches often provide different interpretations to

phenomena, and indeed, this has happened with encounters. Rather than evaluations of encounters being treated as a comparison to an encounter norm, where positive feelings result when the norm is maintained and negative feelings result when the norm is violated, encounters are treated as events that visitors make sense of as they happen. And often visitors enjoy encounters they may not have expected to, or vice versa; even the best of potential encounters can turn out for the worse.

We should not be surprised or disturbed by the disconnection between encounter norms and evaluations of actual encounters. In fact, we should expect it. Many things can happen when people meet in the outdoors. Rather than asking about the before and after, we should investigate the moment of the meeting: the encounter itself.

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