ELSEVIER

Transformative travel: Transformative learning through education abroad in a niche tourism destination

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A B S T R A C T

This study answers the call for the increased use of hermeneutic phenomenology in tourism studies. Specifically, this research seeks to uncover the meaning and key aspects of transformative travel through an in-depth study of the lived experience of 17 students who traveled to the niche tourism destination of Ikaria, Greece as part of a 10-day education abroad program. Pursuant to hermeneutic phenomenology, the researchers, who were also the course instructors, were active participants in the co-creation of meaning of the phenomenon (i.e., transformative travel). Mezirow's transformative learning process served as the theoretical framework for this research and guided the development of program activities and the written assignments that served as data for the interpretative analysis. The results are presented as the YEP Framework of Transformative Travel, which includes three overarching themes and nine sub-themes. This study provides a foundation for further investigation of how travel can be transformative for the traveler and has theoretical and pedagogical implications that can inform future research.

1. Introduction

This study seeks to uncover the meaning and key aspects of transformative travel through an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of 17 college students in a short-term education program. The students traveled to the niche tourism destination of Ikaria, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, in spring 2017. The focus of the senior-level, three-credit elective course titled, *Transformative Travel*, was for students to learn how travel can be transformative for the traveler from a conceptual perspective (i.e., what is the meaning of transformative travel) and from an individual perspective (i.e., how they were impacted by the experience). This research also answers the call for the increased use of hermeneutic phenomenology in tourism studies by applying the approach to the present study (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Pursuant to hermeneutic phenomenology and best practices for fostering transformative learning, the researchers, who were also the course instructors, were active participants in the co-creation of meaning of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., transformative travel; Laverty, 2003).

In Ikaria, tourism is grounded in the natural environment, the island's cultural heritage, and the lifestyle of residents. Ikarian tourism offers visitors the opportunity to travel slower by communing with nature and hosts while hiking, meditating, or strolling through a village square. Visitors interested in drilling to the heart of a destination can dive deep into the place. Unlike the more popular nearby islands of Mykonos and Santorini, Ikaria is a sparsely-developed network of villages without nightclubs, commercialized beaches, or cable cars. Tourism on the island is managed through a small network of local purveyors (e.g., family-run hotels

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and restaurants, tour operators). International media coverage has increased in recent years due to Ikaria's classification as one of the world's five Blue Zones, areas where residents live ten years longer than average Americans (Buettner, 2005). This classification has resulted in the island becoming more well-known and attracting more visitors. However, the residents' approach to tourism development and preservation of their natural environment still suggests that niche tourism, the antithesis of mass tourism, is likely the only kind of tourism that can be sustainable in Ikaria.

A range of research has documented use of the transformative learning process in formal education, but has acknowledged the need for its application in settings that employ less formal pedagogical approaches (e.g., experiential learning, participatory learning), such as education abroad programs (Jones, 2015; Taylor, 2007). The limited research exploring the potential for transformative learning through education abroad has suggested that instructors assess the program location and program type to develop pedagogical strategies that foster transformation in that context (Bell, Gibson, Tarrant, Perry, & Stoner, 2014; Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012; Stone & Petrick, 2013). Because the present study was conducted in a transformative learning destination (i.e., Ikaria), the program utilized the available niche activities to create opportunities for transformative learning. These destinations offer immersion in select activities rather than brief exposure to a larger array of activities, which is typical of mass tourism (Novelli, 2005). The researchers perceived many of these activities as having the potential to prompt the *disorienting dilemmas* that mark the start of transformative learning. In addition, the available activities were conducive to the types of group-oriented, interactive, and participatory approaches that facilitate transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997). Novelli (2005) explicated the five components of niche tourism: cultural, environmental, rural, urban, and others. Each of these macro-niches can be further divided into micro-niches that encompass all of the offerings that are available in a destination. Due to its comprehensive niche offerings that allow for immersive experiences, the researchers perceived Ikaria as a location that would offer the student travelers many opportunities for transformative learning, making it an ideal location to observe the phenomenon of transformative travel in practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundation: transformative learning theory

Transformative learning theory (TLT), an "educational approach concerned with understanding and facilitating profound change at both individual and societal levels," provides the theoretical foundation for the present study (Jones, 2015, p. 268). Over forty years after its introduction, TLT remains a viable framework for exploring the meaning making process of adult learners, and specifically the learning process associated with epistemological change, or changes in learners' ways of knowing and understanding their *being in the world* (Fleming, 2018; Taylor, 2007). This research defines transformative learning as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 58–59).

Mezirow (1978) first developed TLT while researching the learning experiences of women enrolled in collegiate and workforce re-entry programs, with participants reporting the factors that hindered or aided their progress. Data analysis revealed that successful program participants had undergone personal transformations, which Mezirow concluded had occurred through ten phases of learning. Mezirow (1981) offered a definitive distinction between learning and transformative learning, proposing that for a learning experience to be transformative, a fundamental change in perspective must occur and result in transformative action. Perspective transformation occurs through "the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6). Critical awareness occurs when learners encounter a problem with their well-established ways of making meaning, which can result in emotional disturbance (Fleming, 2018). These disorienting dilemmas, as Mezirow (1994) calls them, or instances of perplexity, as Dewey (1933) describes them, are the impetus for transformation. Critical reflection and rational discourse then become integral to the process of reconstituting frames of reference and acting upon these new understandings in the real world (Mezirow, 2003).

To demonstrate how perspective transformation occurs in practice, Mezirow (1994) developed the following ten-stage transformative learning process:

[1] A disorienting dilemma, [2] self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, [3] A critical assessment of assumptions, [4] recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change, [5] exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, [6] planning a course of action, [7] acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, [8] provisionally trying out new roles, [9] building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, [10] a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 225).

This process results in one of four types of transformative learning: learners elaborating their frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, altering their frames of reference to include aspects of their initial and revised points of view, or revising their cognitive habits through ongoing critical review of their assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). Importantly, during this process, learners can "try on" another's point of view (i.e., objective reframing) as a means of elaborating or altering their own frames of reference (i.e., subjective reframing; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2000).

Since its introduction, Mezirow has proposed multiple revisions (e.g., Mezirow, 1981; 1985a; 1991; 1995; Mezirow, 2000; 2003; 2006) to TLT to strengthen its explanatory value and applicability for educational practice. At the same time, scholars in a range of disciplines (e.g., medical education, educational technology, business, communication), both in the United States and internationally, have employed TLT as a pedagogical approach, with little consensus on operationalization (Jones, 2015; Taylor, 2007). Theorists have also engaged in robust debate about the theoretical underpinnings of TLT (Brookfield, 2012; Daloz, 2000; Dirkx, 2006; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Fleming, 2018; Gunnlaugson, 2005; Kegan, 2000; Kitchenham, 2008; Newman, 2012; Taylor, 1998,

2007; Taylor & Cranton, 2013) and their associated approaches (e.g., rational-cognitive, affective-emotional, integrally informed, developmental). However, a review of the extant literature does confirm the essentiality of disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection and rational discourse to transformative learning, along with many of the phases in Mezirow's (1994) ten-stage process (Taylor, 1998; 2007).

The two lynchpins of transformative learning, critical reflection on assumptions and rational discourse, are "generally seen as crucial aspects of the transformative process, even while the specific understanding of what these concepts mean and how they might be enacted remains open for debate" (Jones, 2015, p. 274). Critical reflection requires learners to intentionally assess previous actions (i.e., content reflection), consider how those actions originated (i.e., process reflection), and most importantly, examine how their deeply held assumptions, values, and beliefs informed those actions (i.e., premise reflection; Mezirow, 1995; 2000). Premise reflection, or critical self-reflection about one's own worldview, alerts learners to distortions or limitations in their existing frames of reference (Kitchenham, 2008). This type of reflection is essential for experiencing profound perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1994; 1995) and requires a capacity for dialectical thinking, including acceptance of the existence of alternative truths, different worldviews, and the contradictions inherent in ones' ways of knowing (Merriam, 2004). In other words, critical self-reflection necessitates learners be of a high cognitive level. Similarly, a dialectical approach is central to the discursive phase of transformative learning. Learners engage in rational discourse, or the "specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 230). Mezirow (1985a; 1985b; 1995) explains that through this critical-dialectical discourse, participants learn to value others' perspectives and input through consensual validation and arrive at a better understanding of the dilemma and its potential solutions. Although consensus building is not always feasible, preconditions for successful rational discourse do exist, including objectivity, emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-awareness (Fleming, 2018; Mezirow, 2000).

2.2. Education abroad as a transformative learning experience

Students in postsecondary programs are participating in education abroad experiences at an increasing rate. Open Doors, an annual report published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), indicates that roughly 332,727 U.S. students studied abroad in the 2016-2017 academic year, marking a 2.3 percent increase from the 2015-2016 academic year (Institute for International Education, 2018). The literature documents a range of benefits that students derive from education abroad experiences. Mulvaney (2017) found that those who studied abroad were more likely to have careers in education, pursue graduate and/or professional degrees, be interested or participate in civic life, maintain contact with friends from college, and advocate informally and financially for their college. In a sample of 170 participants, approximately half reported that their education abroad experience helped them stand out in job interviews and 30 respondents reported that their time abroad taught them how to reflect on their experiences so they could improve their professional practice (Shiveley & Misco, 2015). College students who study abroad are more likely to travel internationally again, and these individuals often express interest in traveling with their families and future children to expose them to different cultures and ways of thinking (Mulvaney, 2017; Shiveley & Misco, 2015). The intention to pursue future international travel underscores the potential long-term significance for collegiate education abroad participants. Further, their desire to travel with loved ones suggests a belief that international travel will be a similarly transformative experience for others. Additional studies document the benefits of education abroad for increasing intercultural proficiency and global engagement (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Doyle, 2009; Gaia, 2015; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012).

Roughly 65 percent of students who studied abroad during 2016-2017 were in short-term programs (Institute for International Education, 2018). While long-term education abroad options are considered optimal for the greatest development in undergraduate students, short-term experiences led by faculty can be extremely effective in instilling change and facilitating learning. In a study by Gaia (2015), p. 136 undergraduate students who participated in short and long-term education abroad courses were tested for cultural exchange and self-awareness. The researchers found that short-term participants achieved proficiency at a similar rate as long-term participants (Gaia, 2015). The results also demonstrated that students who had studied abroad were more likely to take an active interest in other cultures and engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds than students who had never studied abroad. Similar results were found in a longitudinal study by Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, and Hubbard (2006) in that the cultural sensitivity of students who participated in a short-term education abroad program increased immediately following the program. Students' increase in cultural sensitivity was still evident months after the program's completion. Lightfoot and Lee (2015) documented the benefits of short-term education abroad programs for graduate and professional students. Bell et al. (2014) found that, for students on short-term education abroad programs, the learning curve "is extremely sharp as they are taken out of their comfort zones on various levels" (p. 5) such as through exposure to unfamiliar surroundings and cultural contexts, and the participatory and experiential learning opportunities that are typical of instruction in these programs.

Cranton (2002) observed that an environment of challenge, similar to those afforded by education abroad experiences, "may be the common feature that underlies teaching for transformation" (p. 71). It is evident that Mezirow's (1981) TLT can easily serve as the theoretical base for education abroad courses as travel, by nature, yields experiences that can be memorable, personal, and transformative (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, & Benckendorff, 2011; Lee, Agarwal, & Kim, 2012; Roberson, 2018). In addition, travel in a foreign country may precipitate the disorienting dilemmas that initiate the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1994; 2000). However, "[j]ust showing up in another country is not sufficient; purposefully designed curriculum and field experiences are important ingredients in creating the greatest impact" for learners (Bell et al., 2014, p. 15).

2.3. Fostering transformative learning through education abroad

Although scholars differ in their interpretation of TLT, including that which transforms (e.g., world view, inner self) and the processes involved (e.g., rational, extra-rational) in fostering such transformation, they support the overarching goal of transformative learning being self-directed, autonomous thinking (Mezirow, 1985a; 1985b; 1994; 1997). While this goal may seem simplistic, it is important to acknowledge that transformative learning is more than just an outcome, but the process through which individuals gain the capacity for emancipatory thinking. This objective also aligns with the "[d]evelopment of consciousness, awareness, and control of one's thoughts [which] is the ultimate aim of education" (Dirkx et al., 2006, p. 134). Educators who are interested in fostering transformative learning can consider their discipline, the educational context, the pedagogical approach, the participants, and the desired learning outcomes to determine which conceptualization of transformative learning is best suited to the situation.

Multiple studies have acknowledged that in short-term programs, the condensed schedules, communal living, and unfamiliar assessment styles create the disorienting dilemmas that initiate the process of transformative learning (Bell et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2012; Stone & Petrick, 2013). Furthermore, due to their constant and close proximity to their peers and instructors, students are more cognizant of their discomfort being a shared experience. For many participants, these relationships positively influence their acceptance of change, ability to adapt to their new surroundings, and openness to interrogating their existing beliefs (Bell et al., 2014; Perry, 2011). Integrating the transformative learning process into curricular development for short-term education abroad programs encourages participants "to change the way in which they understand themselves, their worldview and the relationship between the two" (Bell et al., 2014, p. 13). In this way, transformative theory underscores a central goal of education abroad— to foster global citizenship among participants (Perry et al., 2012, 2013; Tarrant, 2010; Tarrant et al., 2013). The authors of the present study consider Mezirow's interpretation of transformative learning to be most useful for fostering transformative learning in an education abroad program comprised of college-aged students who have not previously been exposed to this pedagogical practice. The researchers drew upon the available literature to identify best practices for fostering transformative learning in this context.

Ritz (2011) interviewed participants about their experiences in a short-term education abroad course partially based on TLT. The finding revealed that by building in time for students to evaluate their beliefs and presuppositions, facilitating dilemmas between what students' past experiences taught them and what they experienced abroad, and encouraging rational discourse with peers, the instructor had created a unique opportunity for students to make lasting transformative changes in their learning and perspectives (Ritz, 2011). From the onset of the *Transformative Travel* course, both on campus and in Ikaria, the instructors engaged "with the students as colearners in critical reflection, critical thinking, framing questions, deconstructing issues, and dialogue and discourse" (Jones, 2015, p. 272). Taylor (2007) emphasizes that instructors must develop an "acute awareness of student attitudes, personalities and preferences over time, and as signs of change and instability begin to emerge," adapt their pedagogical strategies accordingly and provide support as learners work through the discomfort (p. 187). Lange (2004) suggests that instructors can assess students' readiness for transformation by paying careful attention to their discourse in group discussions and informal interactions. She found this awareness to be especially important when learners are exploring ontological, rather than epistemological, issues as these are more personal and may cause increased discomfort (Lange, 2004). The optimal conditions for rational discourse are facilitated through an interpersonal process of "support and recognition that builds self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem" (Fleming, 2018, p. 4). By participating as colearners in the transformative learning process, the instructors both facilitated and engaged in interactions centered on mutual respect and recognition (Fleming, 2018). This process allowed the instructors to better leverage pedagogical entry points and guide students' learning when they were observed to be "on the edge of meaning," or on the cusp of accepting the limitations of their knowing and beginning to explore and stretch those limits (Berger, 2004, p. 338). As students gain experience and a sense of trust in the transformation process, instructors should give them more control over their learning, allowing them to live with some discomfort "while on the edge of knowing, in the process of gaining new insights and understandings" (Taylor, 2007, p. 187).

Roberson (2003; 2018) sought to understand more about learning during travel among senior and college-aged travelers. Seniors who were frequent travelers throughout their adult lives reported that each travel experience presented an opportunity for personal change (i.e., transformation) and that learning how to travel in foreign countries is its own educational experience (Roberson, 2003). Older travelers also conceptualized their travel experiences as a means of self-directed learning and continued personal growth, and adopted a purposeful approach when selecting travel activities/excursions and subsequently reflecting on those experiences (Roberson, 2003). Older adults who are self-directed learners also tend to be more adept at negotiating life's transitions (e.g., changes in work, family, health; Roberson & Merriam, 2005). Roberson (2003; 2018) confirmed that travel experiences have the potential to be transformative for both older and younger individuals, influencing their views of the world, the home, and the self. Furthermore, it is the "mundane aspects of travel, such as negotiating the details of how to travel, gaining information about different cultures, seeing places for the first time, and interacting with other travelers" that often yield transformative outcomes (Roberson, 2018, p. 14).

Roberson's (2003; 2018) research underscores two important aspects of the pedagogical strategy employed by the instructors in the present study to foster students' transformative learning during their education abroad course. The instructors assumed that because the students had enrolled in an education abroad program focused on transformative learning, that they were open to transformation and would consciously embrace the disorienting dilemmas they encountered as potentially transformative opportunities (Lange, 2004). However, transformative learning requires a high level of cognitive development (Merriam, 2004). Mezirow (1991) himself suggested that the capacities for dialectical thinking and discourse are age dependent, stating that, "transformations likely to produce developmentally advanced meaning perspectives usually appear to occur after the age of thirty" (p. 193). Therefore, it is the role of the adult educator to create "the conditions for and the skills of effective adult reasoning and the disposition for transformative learning" (Jones, 2015, p. 271). To that end, the instructors designed the *Transformative Travel* course to not only

include the opportunity for communicative (i.e., reflection, discourse) and instrumental (i.e., experiential, task-oriented) learning, but also to equip students with the necessary skills (i.e., specific steps, direction) to navigate Mezirow's transformative learning process in a purposeful way (Mezirow, 1994; Taylor, 2007). This instruction began during the pre-departure meetings on campus. Perry et al. (2012) addresses the importance of students' preparation for future experiences. By the time they departed for Ikaria, the travelers were familiar with the transformative learning process and had already experienced their first disorienting dilemma in the form of meeting their fellow travelers and instructors for the first time. They had also engaged in critical reflection by contemplating their desired transformations and rational discourse through discussing their different backgrounds, levels of travel experience, life experiences, and pre-trip expectations as a group. This purposeful pre-trip preparation was a useful tool for encouraging transformations (e.g., perspectives, points of view) during and following the trip.

Roberson (2003) found that frequent senior travelers continue to derive transformative outcomes from their experiences and that they demonstrate high levels of self-direction. This underscores the idea that travel can continue to be transformative for the traveler over time, and that the possibility for transformation does not diminish with age or with the number of travel experiences one has had. The instructors share Kegan's (2000) view that we are engaged in a continuous developmental process throughout our lives (i.e., life-span development). Therefore, providing students with an understanding of the transformative learning process during an educational experience, such as study abroad, prepares them to navigate this meaning and perspective making process as socialized adults and continue their personal growth in new learning environments for the rest of their lives. In addition, Dirkx et al. (2006) suggests that once equipped with an understanding of the transformative learning process, learners are able to explore their frames of reference on a deeper level to gain an enhanced awareness and consciousness of the self and their *being in the world* (Dirkx et al., 2006). In other words, in addition to exploring the rational-cognitive dimension of understanding (i.e., Mezirow's approach), learners are able to "go deeper" by exploring the affective-emotional dimensions (e.g., moral, spiritual) that are central to Dirkx's theoretical approach to transformative learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Explicating the hermeneutic phenomenological approach

Phenomenology, which allows qualitative researchers to glean a "deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals," offers rich possibilities for addressing tourism-related research questions (Creswell, 2013, p. 62). All phenomenological inquiry concerns the exploration of human experience as it is lived in the *lifeworld,* or the world we live in (van Manen, 1997). It aims to illuminate "details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding" related to the phenomenon of interest (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). However, an array of approaches to arriving at this understanding are evident in the literature because phenomenological investigations are underpinned by the philosophical, theoretical, and paradigmatic assumptions of the researcher (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Many groupings have been proposed to classify the various types of phenomenology, with little consensus, which adds further confusion for researchers wishing to utilize this approach (Dowling, 2007; Kalfe, 2011; Laverty, 2003). What follows is a simplified grouping of phenomenological approaches that is necessary to justify the selected methodology for the present study.

In a comprehensive review of tourism-related phenomenological research, Pernecky and Jamal (2010) found that many studies appear "to have sought the essence of a phenomenon while disregarding the particulars of context and interpretation" (p. 1063). The empirical, transcendental and psychological phenomenological approaches all seek to uncover this essence, or the essential structure of the phenomenon of interest, through a rigid and descriptive procedure (Creswell, 2013). These schools of thought propose that all conscious experiences have an underlying, commonly shared structure (Creswell, 2013). Often referred to as *traditional phenomenology*, these approaches are situated within a positivist paradigm, which supports the existence of one reality (i.e., ontological view) and human's objective acquisition of knowledge (i.e., epistemological view; Dowling, 2007; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

In *Being and Time*, first published in 1927, Martin Heidegger argued that existential matters are also central to phenomenology. Instead of viewing humans as *knowers* as in traditional phenomenology, Heidegger viewed humans as *beings* who are mainly concerned with interpreting and understanding their existence in relation to other people, objects, and things (Dowling, 2007; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Heidegger (1996) coined the term *being-in-the-world* and proposed a framework for *hermeneutic phenomenology*. This research adopts Pernecky and Jamal (2010) interpretation, which assumes that "[a]ll understanding of our *being-in-the-world* is perspectival and shaped by preunderstanding, historicity, culture, practice, background, language, etc." (p. 1067). Unlike traditional phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and does not offer a step-by-step methodical guide beyond highlighting the processual role of interpretation (Heidegger, 1996). However, the hermeneutic circle does direct the researcher through a cyclical process of reading, reflective writing, and interpretation in the analysis of data (Gadamer, 1998). The hermeneutic circle facilitates an iterative process of referring back to the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the research to inform the concepts that emerge from the analysis (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). In the present study, this process constituted continued reference to Mezirow's (1981) transformation theory to guide in the interpretation of data.

While traditional phenomenology claims to produce accurate, objective descriptions of phenomena, hermeneutic phenomenologists interpret and reflect on the data (i.e., written, oral, nonverbal communication), arriving at an understanding of a phenomena at one point in time (Cohen & Daniels, 2001; Kalfe, 2011). Researchers in traditional phenomenology employ bracketing to identify and set aside their preunderstandings and biases (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1997). In contrast, hermeneutic phenomenologists propose that bracketing is an impossibility because "[m]eaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). Researchers should aim to "[s]ituate

themselves and their biases in the study such that the reader and reviewer can interpret for themselves what these mean in the given context" (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1070). Participants in hermeneutic phenomenological research negotiate the subjective meanings of objects they come in contact with, interactions with other people, and lived experiences through the lens of their own sociocultural norms and historical settings and relay this information to the researchers through written or oral narratives (Creswell, 2013). In turn, the investigators position themselves in the research to acknowledge that their own personal, sociocultural, and historical experiences are an inextricable part of the interpretation of the data (Dowling, 2007). What results is an interactive and reflexive co-construction of meaning between the researchers and participants, allowing for deeper insight into tourist phenomena than is feasible with traditional phenomenological approaches (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

Pernecky and Jamal (2010) acknowledge that hermeneutic phenomenology lends itself to the study of the *being-in-the-world* experiences related to tourism (e.g., residents, tourists, tour operators) and call for further application of this approach; the present study answers this call. In addition, it follows scholars' assertion that a more robust methodological approach to phenomenological research is necessary. Namely, researchers should distinguish which school of phenomenology (e.g., transcendental, hermeneutic, existential) guides their exploration, clarify their philosophical views (i.e., ontological, axiological, epistemological), and articulate the role of the researcher in the interpretation process (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010; Szarycz, 2009). These steps enhance a phenomenological study's methodological rigor (Creswell, 2013).

Thus, the present study is situated within an interpretive social science paradigm and follows Heidegger's (1971; 1996) methodological insights on hermeneutic phenomenology. It is grounded in an ontological view that realities consist of multiple mental constructions and an epistemology that emphasizes the role of language and context in the interpretation of the data. The congruence between the features of transformative learning, the role of the instructors as facilitators and active participants in the process, and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach support a more comprehensive examination of a transformative travel experience in practice. The researchers' roles in the study are discussed below.

3.2. Pedagogical approach and course design

This purpose of this research was to investigate transformative learning in a 10-day, faculty-led education abroad program to the niche tourism destination, Ikaria, Greece. The curriculum for the program, titled *Transformative Travel,* was developed by the lead course instructor, who had previously led other education abroad trips to Ikaria. The assistant course instructor had led prior education abroad programs, but like the students, was a first time traveler to Ikaria.

The program activities and assignments were structured with Mezirow's (1994) ten stage process in mind and aimed to facilitate students' transformative learning during their course experience. The lead and assistant course instructor held one class meeting per month in the semester prior to the trip (four total meetings). The meetings included travel preparation, presentations about life in Ikaria, a visit from our host in Ikaria, and discussions about students' expectations and desired outcomes from participating in the trip.

Dirkx et al. (2006), students must be aware of the transformative learning process in order to successfully engage in it. To that end, the instructors introduced the concept during the first course meeting and explained that the program, *Transformative Travel*, was purposefully designed to provide opportunities for instrumental and communicative learning, both of which are necessary for willing students to derive transformative outcomes (i.e., changes in perspective) from their travel experiences (Mezirow, 1981; 1985b).

Table 1 demonstrates the scope of activities that the program participants experienced in Ikaria. The activities are grouped according to the five macro-niches of niche tourism, highlighting Ikaria's positioning as a destination with comprehensive niche tourism offerings (Novelli, 2005). The program activities saturated the macro-niches of niche tourism and were designed as immersive experiences that allowed the student travelers to engage with all facets (i.e., culture, food, local residents, way of life) of the place (i.e., Ikaria, Greece) in a purposeful way.

Table 1
Activities included in Ikaria education abroad experience.

NICHE TOURISM				
MACRO-NICHES				
Cultural	Environmental	Rural	Urban	Others
• Attended a day-long panigiria (village festival) • Interviewing island residents (e.g., tourism provider, vice mayor, young residents, older residents) • Lunch in a private home • Communal meals	• Guided hike w/ ecological focus • Hiking up a mountain on primitive trails • Visit to beekeeper and honey factory • Free time at two beaches	• Slaughtering a goat (2 students) • Foraging for wild vegetation • Working on small family farms • Prepared/served communal meals • Visit to a local winery • Cooking class • Stargazing • Visit to historic grain mill	• Observing an interview with an elected official • Free time in four villages	• Mindfulness and meditation session • Small group discussions w/instructors • Large group discussions w/instructors

Table 2
Course assignments for Ikaria education abroad experience.

Trip Stage	Course Assignments	Associated Steps in Meizrow's (1994) Transformative Learning Process
Pre-trip	• 4 class meetings (i.e., discussions, travel prep, learning about Ikaria) • 2 journal entries (i.e., after 4th class meeting, on departure day)	• 1. A disorienting dilemma • 2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame • 3. A critical assessment of assumptions
During Trip	• 6 journal entries • 4 instructor-led large group discussions • Small group discussions (i.e., 3–5 students with instructors	• 4. Recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change • 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions • 6. Planning a course of action • 7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans • 8. Provisionally trying out new roles • 9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Post-Trip	• 1 Final Essay	• 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

Many of the activities occurred in group settings. For example, all meals during the ten-day expedition were communal, with preparation and clean-up responsibilities being rotated among the group. The students also participated in many small-group activities (e.g., work and lunch on family farms) to facilitate meaningful interactions with locals, the place, and each other. In addition to the scheduled activities (see Table 1), the program was designed with daily blocks of free time. This time allowed the travelers to pursue their own interests (e.g. visit town), spend time with the locals, and reflect and think critically about their experiences by working on course assignments. In accordance with Mezirow (1981; 1996), the course instructors ensured that program activities provided opportunities for both instrumental learning (e.g., cooking classes) and communicative learning (e.g., group discussions).

3.3. Data collection

The program's design was supported by assignments that prompted students to reflect, critically assess, and discuss the perceived impact of their travel experience, both in the present and in the future. Meizrow's (1994) transformative learning process, which provided the theoretical framework for the study, was employed to develop course assignments that would strategically guide students through the transformative learning process prior to departure (i.e., pre-trip), during the trip, and after the trip's conclusion (i.e., post-trip). Table 2 illustrates the course assignments and their associated stage in Meizrow's (1994) transformative learning process.

The writing-intensive component of the course (i.e., journals, essay) required students to record detailed responses to open-ended questions posed by the instructor prior to the travel experience, during the experience, and after the experience. Responses were recorded in journals that students kept in their possession for the duration of the course, thereby encouraging them to revisit and critically reflect on their entries as the trip progressed. One week after the trip's conclusion, students submitted their final written assignment, an essay, in which they were asked to draw on their journal entries and their time in Ikaria to explain if/how their perspectives had changed or evolved (i.e., transformed) as a result of the experience. Students' responses to these writing prompts served as data for this research.

Students responded to written course assignments through the lens of their own socio-cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Four large, guided group discussions were also held in Ikaria. In addition, all students participated in one small group discussion (i.e., 3–5) with the instructors. Through these group discussions, students were able to discuss their common experiences and reconcile the divergent perspectives within the group, thereby facilitating the rational discourse that is a precursor to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1981, 1994). Audio from these sessions was recorded and detailed notes were taken, providing important supplemental data that guided the researchers in their analysis. The program's two instructors were also the primary investigators for this research. As hermeneutic phenomenologists, the researchers situated themselves as "passionate participants" in the field by journaling their own experiences, recording meaningful observations, and leading group discussions with the travelers to delve deeper into the meaning of transformative travel (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Laverty, 2003).

3.4. Data analysis

This research explored the phenomenon of *transformative travel* through the lived experiences of college students who participated in an education abroad program. Using the following research questions as a guide, the investigators sought to uncover key aspects, that when combined, reflect the essential themes of transformative travel: 'what is it that makes transformative travel what it is' and 'what is unique about transformative travel' (Thomé, Esbensen, Dykes, & Hallberg, 2004; van Manen, 1997). Data collection followed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which suggests that a phenomenon is best understood through participants' rich narrative accounts (e.g., written, oral) that tell the story of their lived experiences (Heidegger, 1971, 1996; Kalfe, 2011). The 17 students submitted their final essays one week after the trip's conclusion, generating a total of 44,000 words for the written assignments (i.e., journals, essay) that would serve as data for the study.

Data were then analyzed individually by three researchers using thematic analysis (van Manen, 1997). The hermeneutic circle, or cycle of reading, reflective writing and interpretation, was entered into as the researchers sought to uncover essential themes, acknowledging that the individual parts of the narrative could only be understood in concert with the whole narrative, and vice-versa. This approach yielded a holistic understanding of the data (Gadamer, 1998; Laing & Frost, 2017; Laverty, 2003). The audio recordings from the group discussions in the field served as supplemental data, and provided clarification about the context of participants' written responses. The two researchers who were in Greece with the students also utilized their field notes in the analysis and employed reflexivity to elucidate the transformative experiences that students conveyed through their narratives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By purposefully considering how students' meaningful learning experiences came about, the researchers' achieved the interpretative understanding that is the cornerstone of hermeneutic research (Heidegger, 1996; Szarycz, 2009). The third researcher, who was not in the field with the students, is an expert on transformative learning and brought a nuanced perspective to the analysis.

Aspects or qualities of the phenomenon (i.e., transformative travel) were recorded as essential themes (Thomé et al., 2004). The authors engaged in a process of rereading and reorganizing, remaining in the hermeneutic circle until the evolving themes "reached a place of sensible meaning, free of inner contradictions, for the moment" (Laverty, 2003, p. 25). Finally, the three researchers discussed and reconciled variations in their findings, arriving at three overarching themes, each with three sub-themes, which represent the participants' joint, unique lived experience of transformative travel (Brett, 2004).

Guba and Lincoln's (1989) criteria for establishing rigor and trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability) in qualitative inquiry may not be suitable for hermeneutical phenomenology. Instead, van Manen (1997) suggests using orientation, strength, richness, and depth to demonstrate the quality of this type of research (Kalfe, 2011). Langdridge (2007) offered a similar strategy, which was employed in the present study, and consisted of establishing analytical rigor (i.e., reducing researcher bias), presenting persuasive accounts (i.e., convincing the reader of the veracity of the themes by including rich exemplars from participant narratives), and eliciting participant feedback. Participant feedback in the present study was obtained through instructor-led large and small group discussions in the field. The fact that the three researchers negotiated and converged on one conclusion also strengthens the rigor of this research.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. YEP Framework of Transformative Travel

The essential themes that emerged from the analysis are presented as the YEP Framework of Transformative Travel (see Table 3). The three overarching themes refer to where travelers direct their energy to elicit transformative outcomes, in this case, to themselves, their experiences and the people and places they encounter along the way. Each essential theme has three sub-themes that provide a step-by-step guide for pursuing transformation in each of the three areas of the YEP Framework. The sub-themes are action verbs, each with an associated directive, meant to facilitate the purposeful approach to travel that is necessary for transformative outcomes to occur (Dirkx et al., 2006). The three essential themes can be considered jointly or individually yet are highly interdependent as part of the total transformative travel experience.

Although this merits further investigation, the researchers propose that the YEP Framework is applicable to a traveler's singular travel experience at one point in time, and that it can also be applied as a broad approach to travel over the course of a lifetime as people's understanding of their *being-in-the-world* evolves (Heidegger, 1996; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). In this regard, the framework is dynamic as travelers are engaged in an ever changing "transaction between the individual and the world as they constitute and are constituted by each other" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). What follows is a brief discussion of the three essential themes, with participant quotes serving as exemplars.

4.1.1. Yourself

The first theme in the YEP Framework of Transformative Travel requires the traveler to direct attention inward to themselves. The

Table 3
YEP framework of transformative travel.

Can travel be transformative for the traveler? YEP – If you direct energy toward yourself, your travel experiences, and the people and places you encounter.	
(Y)ourself	
1. Accept	Allow yourself to be affected (be open-minded to new perspectives)
2. Design	Experiment intentionally (purposefully put yourself in new situations)
3. Inspire	Let your mind wander (think about yourself and the world around you)
(E)xperiences	
1. Challenge	Chase difficult experiences (stretch yourself by pushing your limits)
2. Document	Record your experience (create evidence of what you did)
3. Reflect	Understand your experience (consider how you have been affected)
(P)eople and Places	
1. Explore	Travel deep into a place (spend time getting to know the destination)
2. Learn	Inquire about a place's people (investigate local lifestyles)
3. Care	Benefit people and places you come across (leave something good behind)

coding frequency report indicated that codes leading to the development of this theme comprised 25.1 percent of the data.

As was also the case with the two other themes (i.e., experiences, people and places), the data suggested that the travelers thought about themselves and their *being-in-the-world* prior to, during, and after the trip's completion. The sub-theme, *accept*, revealed itself through students' uncertainty and apprehension prior to departure. These feelings were tempered with a willingness to be-open-minded, which the instructors emphasized was extremely important to the course theme of *Transformative Travel*. For example, students expressed concerns about the dietary options, their inability to speak the local language, and the extent to which they would be able to connect with the other travelers and island locals. Because the students' comfort levels with group travel and international travel varied, it was not surprising that a range of manifestations of *acceptance* were observed. For some, *acceptance* revealed itself as an excitement and willingness to embrace even the most unfamiliar experiences (*"Nudity on a beach. I am incredibly inspired by a culture that allows an unapologetic atmosphere for nudity"*). For others, *acceptance* meant a hesitant acquiescence to embrace the uncertain (*"As I am getting ready to board the plane for one of the most beautiful countries in the world, I have some nerves. The world today is tense due to terrorism and other world tensions…It can be scary not knowing if something bad is going to happen"*).

The sub-theme, *design*, is explicated through the students' commitment to put themselves in situations that were outside of their comfort zones, and their resulting experiences. Interestingly, a number of students spoke about the same activities or encounters, yet in different ways. For example, one student wrote about a rigorous group hike, stating, *"today we climbed a mountain…I don't think I've ever felt more accomplished in my life…I couldn't have done it without the encouragement of everyone else while also having intense internal perseverance."* When describing the same hike, another student discussed a different reason why the hike was outside of her comfort zone: *"My competitiveness made me really want to be at the front of the pack, but I knew that others needed help and motivation to keep going so I told myself to hang back and get to know other people in the group so that they could make it to the top…I'm glad I took the time to think about others and their feelings with the hike because it made it 10x better for me. Oftentimes I find it difficult to put myself in other people's shoes, so it was a humbling experience for me."* This example of two students' approach to the same experience reiterates the per-spectival nature of our *being-in-the-world*, and underscores the subjectivity of this essential theme (i.e., yourself; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

The third sub-theme, *inspire*, facilitates the critical reflection that is necessary for transformative learning to occur (Mezirow, 1981, 1994). This sub-theme was documented through students' reflections about their *being-in-the-world*. For example, several students discussed how their world view is shaped by those in their immediate proximity (e.g., friends, family) and how their travel experience changed how they view themselves in relation to the world around them (*"the most inspiring would be when I realized just how small I really am"*). *Inspire* was also evidenced by students' discussion of their fast-paced lives back home and their desire to remain mindful of themselves (e.g., emotions, behaviors), others, and their surroundings after returning home (*"One thing I think I am going to try and incorporate more in my life after this experience is to take time out of my day to really look at my surroundings and take a breath;" "I want to live in the moment more than to over plan my next moments…Even though I may think that I'm too busy, I'm going to be taking a moment anyways to reflect on my days and myself"*).

4.1.2. Experiences

The second theme in the YEP Framework of Transformative Travel requires travelers to direct attention toward their *experiences*. The coding frequency report indicated that codes leading to the development of this theme comprised 19.5 percent of the data.

This theme can manifest in several ways, as evidenced by students' discussions of the activities that they participated in. The students embarked on their trip with presuppositions about what to expect in Ikaria, which were informed by their previous travel experiences, research they conducted prior to departure, and anecdotal stories that they heard from the instructor who had led prior trips to the island. As they faced uncertainty about their upcoming trip, several students also made assumptions based on their understanding of *being-in-the-world* (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). For example, the woman (i.e., Thea) who would be hosting our group in Ikaria came to campus for one of the pre-departure class meetings. During the session, Thea discussed life in Ikaria and the instructors facilitated a discussion about the sociocultural differences between Americans and Greeks. Many students were surprised in learning about these distinctions (e.g., individualistic vs. collectivistic orientation, time orientation, diet). One memorable student comment was that she might have trouble adjusting to the Greek way of life, as it seemed *lazy* compared to the time-conscious and efficiency-oriented way of life in America. The instructors followed her comment with a discussion of the fundamentally different understanding of and relationship to time in the two countries, with neither orientation being "better," only different. The instructors used this discussion and many others during the pre-departure meetings, to encourage students to suspend their presuppositions and judgments and to fully immerse themselves in their experiences in Ikaria. The data revealed that *experience* in this context related to specific niche tourism activities that the students participated in and also referred to the actual act of experiencing something (e.g., being engaged, being present). For example, in discussing her experience working on the island (e.g., family farm, preparing meals) and her conversations with locals about the concept of work, one student observed Ikarians' appreciation of life, whether they are working or pursuing leisure activities. She stated, *"Most people are stress-free and live their life to the fullest extent possible. No one is in a rush, yet they always get their stuff done efficiently and easily. I did notice how much they appreciate every part of their life."*

The three sub-themes associated with *experiences* are *challenge, document,* and *reflect*. First, travelers must *challenge* themselves by seeking out experiences that are difficult or outside of their comfort zones, with the challenging experience being subjective to each individual. Students often referenced a sense of accomplishment that they had attempted such an activity. One student stated, *"I've always wanted to try planting my own garden, but have been intimidated by the idea of it. After helping with Lefteris's garden, I'm almost sure I can do it now and hope to start my own."* Even when students discussed an experience that they did not enjoy, most still acknowledged deriving a sense of accomplishment or appreciation from the experience. For example, one student discussed how the group that was assigned kitchen detail experienced a setback one morning while preparing breakfast for the group. She stated, *"In Ikaria, they are*

growing, killing and gathering all of their food. It was really apparent when one morning breakfast was pushed back 30 min because the eggs and bread had not yet been dropped off…I am going to try and remember that convenience really is such a luxury." Although this experience resulted in the "breakfast service team" having to explain to the student group and the other restaurant patrons that breakfast would be delayed and then having to rush their meal prep and service once the supplies had arrived, the student still derived a meaningful outcome from the experience. She concluded, *"I am going to make sure I don't take the convenience for granted anymore and also remember the beauty and feeling of simplicity."*

The second and third sub-themes involved the travelers *document[ing]* their experiences so they could *reflect* on them as part of their total travel experience in Ikaria, or even their cumulative travel experiences over the course of their lives. One student compared a previous travel experience to her time in Ikaria. She wrote, *"A memory just flashed into my head. I was sitting on a similar bus, staring out at a forest, but this time I was making a promise to come back to Chang Rai in Thailand. I had just spent 2 weeks at a center for abandoned and abused hill tribe kids. It struck me that this remained engraved in my memory bank from three summers before. What is it that made these two places so different from others? For one, both trips were outside of the comforts of home and the people of home. Transformation comes at its best through uncomfortable internal or external experiences. These two experiences also forced me to become engrained with people, with a culture."* Through the process of *document[ing]* and *reflecting*, this student was able to relate a current and past travel experience and contemplate how the two had provided her with distinct, yet interwoven transformative outcomes.

Another student shared her experience of growing up in the country with a plot of farmable land. Although she did not enjoy farming at home, she still participated in the day of farming with a local family in Ikaria. She wrote, *"Their farm is very different than what we would see in southern Illinois or Indiana, but it's the same thing on a small scale…Its hard work and I hated it when I was younger, but after being reminded of how important it is, I now have a better appreciation."* The student then explained how her perspective about gardening and farming changed and how she gained a renewed appreciation for these activities through her experience. She continued, *"I learned that gardening doesn't have to be a daunting task. Next time at home I am going to try making conversation the task, and gardening the activity that fills the silence instead of the other way around."* By participating in an activity that she previously did not enjoy, this student learned how people from a different culture approach farming (i.e., group activity, conversation) and committed to adopting this new outlook when she returned home.

4.1.3. People and places

The third theme in the YEP Framework of Transformative Travel requires travelers to direct attention toward the surrounding *people and places*. The coding frequency report indicated that codes leading to the development of this theme comprised 55.5 percent of the data. *People and places* revealed itself in the following ways: students experiencing the place, interactions between the student travelers, interactions between the Ikarian locals and the students, and students observing the Ikarian locals' interactions with each other and the environment.

The three sub-themes associated with *people and places* are *explore*, *learn* and *care*. The students engaged in active *learning* (i.e., second sub-theme) to gain a stronger understanding of the culture, the place, and its people and challenged themselves to be conscious of their role as travelers by considering the impact of tourism on the island and its residents (Swanson & Cavender, 2019). The travelers also approached the experience with *care* (i.e., third sub-theme) by leaving the place better than they found it. In this way, students were able to give something in return for the experience and hospitality that was afforded to them on the island.

The program activities provided students with an immersive exploration of all facets of Ikaria (e.g., culture, people, environment, food), yet the substantial amount of free time allowed the students to continue getting to know the destination in small groups, or individually. The students cited a range of significant interactions in their writing. For example, the Ikarians impressed upon the students the importance of community, caring for the environment, helping others, and family when the students would visit their homes. One student explained that, after her group worked on a family's farm for the day, they were given a meal and then sat with the family for hours engaged in conversation. When the family's children came home from school, they joined the group to tell them about their day, and they even wanted to practice their English with the students. The student commented, *"In the States, the kids most likely would have been inside or on their phones, instead, they were talking as a family and really interacting with one another. It was really neat."* When discussing the impact of this experience, another student explained, *"When I come home for breaks I tend to get distracted on my phone or hang out with my friends and I forget that time with my parents and sister is what is truly important. After this summer I'm sure I'll appreciate a lot of other things as well, but I'll be sure to give my family a lot of my time before I go back to school."*

Many students valued the Ikarians' welcoming dispositions compared to how cautious people are of others in the United States. One student shared a story of a group going to a store at closing time to buy a bottle of wine stating, *"I got there as they were closing and they opened back up sold it to me happily and then insisted on driving me up to my hotel. I was honestly so shocked at how kind they were to me. When in America if someone came in at closing like that you'd either say 'sorry closed' or serve them and be rude or annoyed. And, there is no way they'd offer a stranger a ride like that."*

Several students acknowledged that their interactions in Ikaria changed their approach to travel itself. One student commented, *"I loved when [our tour guide] started talking about 'travel deep, travel slow.' It inspired me to go into further detail and travel to see more when I visit new places. My family is the type to go to one spot if we like it and we'll just go over and over again. So he inspired me to travel to new places and when I go to old places to see what is there and how the culture is."* As a result of their interactions with the Ikarians, many of the students also expressed a desire to unplug from technology more frequently (especially while traveling), to go off the beaten path in their travels to experience the true nature of the place, and to be understanding and open to the unfamiliar (e.g., ways of life, places).

In addition to the instructor-led small and large group discussions, the students also engaged in rational discourse in informal conversations, with many writing about the communicative learning that transpired (Mezirow, 1981, 1994). *"Most people in our group*

come from different situations and I love hearing everyone's take on big topics. I didn't agree with everyone's opinions, but I loved hearing why they had their opinions. It's neat to see people open up during discussions, or close up and how people formulate their thoughts…it really goes to show how going deeper with conversations really isn't as hard as society makes it."

The impact of the students' interactions with the place was also apparent, with many students discussing the ethical production and harvesting methods (e.g., wine, meat, vegetables), the preservation of the natural environment, and the locals' commitment to minimizing their waste. One traveler observed "*In America, we don't understand the importance of food and therefore waste it without a thought of what that really means, but here they know the effort it takes to grow the food and value it more and I thought that was amazing to see.*" A number of students also made observations about the interactions between Ikarians and their environment. For example, in one of the interviews with a small group of students and Ikarian residents, the locals emphasized the importance of preserving the environment, especially during high season. They discussed it being common for locals to walk the beaches and the towns and pick up trash, which was something the students indicated that they would not be inclined to do back home. During a visit to the mayor's office, the students met with the vice-mayor, who spoke at length about the environment. He stated that Ikaria's approach to tourism development does not compromise the natural environment and that there is only so much development that island residents would allow. Although the size of the island makes it suitable to grow into a much larger tourist destination (e.g., more hotels, restaurants, shopping), which would yield more economic growth, this growth would inevitably affect the local surroundings. The vice-mayor provided another interesting example about the eastern part of the island being rich in marble. Over the years, mining companies have contacted his office with offers to mine this resource, at a great profit for Ikaria. However, these offers are never accepted because Ikaria does not want to mine near their water sources or disrupt the natural balance of the island. In the informal discussion on the bus back to our hotel, the students talked about how commendable it is that Ikarians value environmental preservation over commercial development, while most tourist destinations around the world have not adopted this type of approach to tourism development. In writing about this experience, one student opined, "*It makes me feel great that halfway across the world there are some people who actually care about the environment we live in and are always trying to make a better experience for their guests*."

Similar to the first two themes, *people and places* also reflected how students' strived to become more autonomous people as a result of their experience, which is a benchmark of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1985b, 1994, 1997). One student reflected, "*All of that inspired me to be more simplistic in my everyday life and less materialistic. It inspired me to want to rely more on myself to get things done instead of paying someone to do it for me or buying some electronic/machine to make things easier for me.*"

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Using Mezirow's (1997; 2004) transformative learning process as a theoretical foundation, this research sought to uncover the meaning and key aspects of transformative travel. A range of research exists that reinforces the transformative nature of education abroad (e.g., Bell et al., 2014; Mulvaney, 2017; Perry et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2013; Ritz, 2011; Roberson, 2018; Stone & Petrick, 2013). However, to the authors' knowledge, this study was the first to investigate the lived experience of travelers on a program that was purposefully designed to facilitate transformative learning. This is an important distinction because, while transformation can occur without participants being aware of the change process, research suggests that purposeful approaches to transformative learning produce outcomes that are more meaningful for learners (Lange, 2004). In addition, gaining knowledge of the transformative learning process gives learners the tools to derive transformative outcomes from future experiences (Dirkx et al., 2006). The resulting YEP Framework of Transformative Travel provides initial support for how transformative travel is experienced by the traveler.

This research utilized an education abroad program in a niche tourism destination to explore the phenomenon of interest, with the researchers serving as hermeneutic phenomenologists (i.e., active participants). A limitation of this approach is the interpretative nature of the results. On the other hand, it also allows for meaningful insights to be revealed. Although hermeneutic phenomenology is not generalizable (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), the researchers perceive the emergent themes to have universal application for travelers interested in deriving transformative outcomes from their travel experiences. Thus, this research has practical implications for the development and implementation of education abroad programs, other types of group travel programs in which transformative learning is a desired outcome (e.g., Road Scholar), and for individual travelers. Every travel experience has its own dynamic (e.g., participants, activities/scope, location, desired outcomes) and participants' personal characteristics influence whether they perceive their experience to be transformative. Therefore, future research may test the YEP Framework in any of the aforementioned settings, to discover additional factors that explicate transformative travel. The researchers also support the value of hermeneutic phenomenology in tourism studies and encourage scholars to consider adopting the approach when studying the experiences of actors in the tourism infrastructure (e.g., residents, tour operators).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

RayeCarol Cavender: Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Jason R. Swanson:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Kendall Wright:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Software, Investigation.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2020.100245.

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