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UNDERSTANDING CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
IN THE CONTEXT OF TOURISM

BY

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ABSTRACT

One of the primary problems in better understanding through the tourism experience is perceptual differences between the tourist and the host country. These differences are influenced by the environment, organization, and individual. It is in the manipulation of these constructs that relationships and better understanding can be achieved.

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INTRODUCTION

Estimates by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) indicate an increasing trend of international travel. In 1988, 390 million international arrivals were recorded, an increase of 8.7% over the 1987 figures. (16)

Furthermore, the last few years have marked important changes in world politics and consequently on international travel. Many governments have been involved in foreign policies aiming at removing barriers to the free movement of people, goods, and services across borders. In North America, the Canadian and U.S. governments have recently reached a free trade agreement that has an enormous economic and social significance to both nations. In Western Europe, the European Community nations have agreed to the creation of a single European market by 1992. Likewise, a common market is also being organized in the South Pacific where Australia and New Zealand are the major participants.

Another important development was the impact of Glasnost. The Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries have loosened their travel restrictions and are permitting more travel to and from their countries.

These changes have already made a major impact on international travel. In the past few years, arrivals of U.S. residents have increased to "classical" destinations like Western Europe and the Caribbean despite unfavorable exchange rate.(16) Recent statistics provided by the Soviet tourist agency, Intourist, indicated that in 1988, about two million foreign visitors arrived in the Soviet Union, 75,000 of which were from the U.S. This figure was expected to reach 110,000 in 1989.

International travel to "exotic destinations" was also up in the last few years. The demand was mainly generated by "allocentric" tourists whose interest patterns are focused by varied activities, some of which include cultural exchange and interaction with local populations.(14)

For example, despite recent terrorist activities in Peru, in the first six months of 1988, U.S. visitors were up by a strong 167% to 41,838 from the respective period in 1987.(16) Another example is Turkey, which exhibited in the last few years the world's fastest growing international tourism industry. Receipts from foreign visitors increased by 127% in 1988 on top of an 80% increase in 1987.(16)

These trends have played an important role not only in terms of economic and social benefits to both generating and hosting destinations, but also in the promotion of international understanding through cultural exchange.

The latter impact was recently formalized by a few international agencies. The moral values of international tourism were made clear in the Declaration on World Tourism, which was unanimously approved by 107 states. The Declaration acknowledged the role of international tourism in "promoting the reduction of international tension and in developing international cooperation."

Furthermore, the First Global Conference on Tourism--A Vital Force for Peace held in Vancouver in 1988, led to the adoption of the Columbia Charter. The adoption expressed the "urgent reality that peace is an essential precondition for tourism and all other aspects of sustainable human growth and cultural development."

The conference was a first attempt to study, exchange ideas, and suggest some solutions to increase world understanding through tourism. The major debate focused on the question whether diverse sectors of the tourism industry can indeed facilitate and contribute further to the goal of global peace through tourism.

THE CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF INCREASED INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

The goal of increased world understanding through tourism cultural exchange may not always be successful. Milman, Pizam and Reichel's (13) study of Israelis traveling to Egypt for the first time, revealed that the tourist experience may not necessarily change tourists' attitude about a previously hostile country. Some scholars also suggest that in order to develop world harmony from tourism, it is necessary first to

develop and promote domestic tourism in order to strengthen internal bridges of communications and understanding.(8)

Most discussion of resident-visitor relations was focused on the difficulties experienced by Third World countries where the contrasts between visitors and local residents can be extreme.(1, 3, 2, 7) Nevertheless, it is also important to note that cultural differences may also affect visitors who reside in developing countries and generate a large demand for world international travel.

Recently, a series of focus groups of U.S. travelers to international destinations was conducted by the Dick Pope Sr. Institute for Tourism Studies at the University of Central Florida. The focus groups were held in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and San Francisco and indicated perceptual cultural differences between U.S. travelers and hosting communities around the world. Some of the following participant quotes may sum up these differences:

"...You appreciate the things you have in America...we take for granted necessities that we are used to...ice for drinks, toilet paper, toiletries...you don't always get them in other countries..."

or

"...The French people are rude...in Japan people are more gracious and helpful...in London, a bank manager gave me money to have breakfast because the bank was not opened yet and I didn't have local currency..."

Destinations around the world may provide a different "cultural environment" for tourists. In some cases, tourists may perceive the environment they visit quite welcoming and consequently, would have a great experience:

"...If you go to India and Africa it's a different world...you see different life style, the food is interesting...always like to see what the natives are like..."

Sometimes, however, tourists may perceive the local culture to be quite alien:

"...I couldn't read the road signs in Spanish...they put the EXIT signs after the actual exit...I had to calculate the exit locations from a map...there were no pay phones on the road and I was going to leave my car on the highway..."

or

"...Their national airline has wonderful uniforms for their flight attendants...the whole focus of this airline is on the uniform...the service

was horrible...the stewardesses were sitting talking...I had trouble with them before..."

It is important to note, however, that the tourism industry has adopted some mechanism to facilitate the process of visitor-resident interaction. Tourist facilities financed and operated by multinational corporations are an example of such strategy developed both by industry and host communities.

As a result, tourists originating in affluent western countries may not feel alienated in the destination countries due to the constant contact with their own culture. Nevertheless, the payoff results in the destruction of the indigenous culture and lack of communication with the local community.

A visit to the lobby of the Istanbul Sheraton would prove this argument. The export of an "American culture" environment into a city with a strong indigenous heritage and culture, has been criticized both by sociologists and tourism experts. Likewise, fish and chips shops along the Costa del Sol are a major indication of British influence in the Spanish resort.

If tourism is to become a force for world understanding and global peace, the creation of conducive setting is necessary in order to minimize the gap between visitors and hosting communities. In order to comprehend better the cultural consequences of international tourism, it would be imperative to understand the concept of culture within the context of tourism.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

The term "culture" has been used in different contexts that its exact meaning is often unclear. Tylor (15) was the first to use this term in its present day scientific sense, which is still the basis of most modern anthropological theories of culture. He described culture as:

Kluckhohn and Kelly (11) suggested a further elaboration of the term. Their discussion concluded that "culture" has a descriptive concept--"A culture is a historically derived system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designated members of a group." (p. 98)--as well as explanatory concept--"By culture we mean those historically creative selective processes which channel men's reaction both to internal and external stimuli" (p. 84).

Kaplan (10) has reviewed four theoretical subsystems that explain cultural variation. They are ideology, social structure, technoeconomics, and personality. All are anthropological, although the latter also encompass social and psychological dimensions.

Relevant to cultural understanding through tourism would be the

concept of Culture Area The first attempt at a formal theoretical definition of the term was made by C. Wissler (17) and reflected the empirical origin of the concept:

A Culture Area, is a unit of geographic space in which a similar culture or cultures are found. This spatial concept of culture was developed by North American Ethnologists as a device for the classification of museum collections.

A Culture Area was simply some region, defined by a map, whose cultures were considered a significant group in contrast to those of neighboring regions. The anthropologist O.T. Mason had devised eleven culture areas for North America, designating them in part by location (North Pacific Coast, California, Oregon), climate (Arctic), physiography and drainage (Interior Basin, Columbia Drainage) and language. (Encyclopedia Britannica-Macropedia, Vol. 5, pp. 366-367).

The Culture Area is an example of what human geographers call uniform or homogeneous regions. Several problems should be taken into consideration before defining related groups or cultures throughout the world. The first problem would be to decide which of the several criteria to choose as the basis for cultural relationships. The second problem would be to determine the border where one Culture Area integrates with adjacent Culture Areas. In order to overcome these problems, the Encyclopedia of Anthropology (1976) defined Culture Area as an adaptive mechanism that allows people to adapt easily to environmental changes. A Culture Area is defined as:

According to this source, the major Culture Areas of the world are The Middle East, Europe, Africa, North Asia, South Asia, Oceania, North America, and South America.

The major concern of this context of culture is not how much visitors from different culture areas differ from one another, but what are some of the reasons behind the divergence in perception about ways of life and thought.

By understanding these reasons, we may identify some controllable variables that may be responsible for these differences. Constructive control of these variables may reduce international tourism's visitor-host tension.

A MODEL FOR TOURISM CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

It is suggested that three major constructs may account for the variation among tourists and host communities: Environmental, Organizational and Individual. They are called constructs, since they are built or constructed from many elements by which they can be operationally defined and measured.

The first construct is the Environmental construct, which

incorporates all "external constraints" (5) that may influence organizational and individual behavior in a specific cultural area.

These constraints may be religious domination in a country, education system, family structure (9) or class consciousness and aristocratic or feudalistic social structure.(13) Other constraints may include elements such as the relative health of the economy, political and legal system, sociological characteristics of the society, and so on.

For example, the widely accepted siesta in Spain, the avoidance of handshake by Indian women, and the alcohol prohibition in Saudi Arabia are some "environmental" cultural traits that may have had an impact on tourists visiting these countries.

This particular construct is rarely controllable and is often identified as a major contributor to misunderstanding between tourists and local residents. For example, it is very unlikely that the Spanish will change their late eating habits and would open their restaurants to satisfy foreign tourists.

The second construct is Organizational, in that every tourism organization is unique and has special elements not shared by organizations functioning in the same or in different environments. Among these elements are structure and size, task environment agent, and organizational culture.

For example, many foreign tourists who arrive in the United States are quite surprised to learn that many U.S. airports adopted a policy of charging a small fee for the usage of baggage carts--abundantly available free in many airports around the world. On the other hand, American tourists are quite surprised to learn that many European restaurants already include a service charge in their menu prices and additional tipping is not expected.

This particular construct may be controllable through the adoption of organizational policies or the inducement of multinational corporations like airlines, hotel chains, or fast food companies.

The third construct is composed of elements dealing with the individual such as demographics, job-related characteristics, or value system and personal traits. England, for example, (1975) defined personal values as "a relatively permanent perceptual framework which shapes and influences the general nature of individual behavior" (p. 1).

It is quite accepted among tourists that certain nationals are "rude," "lazy," "unhelpful," or "never on time." However, tourists may realize that an individual experience may represent, in most cases, an expression of an individual rather than a whole "cultural area."

This construct is also quite difficult to control since no official or business organization may be able to change individual traits. For example, it would be quite difficult to avoid raised eyebrows (or sometimes meaningful looks) of a top restaurant French waiter who is asked by a tourist for some ketchup. However, some control may be applied through extensive training of the tourism and hospitality

industry, especially in areas where the ratio between international and domestic tourists is high.

Please note that the model calls for a hierarchical structure for the different levels of analysis. Environment is the broadest level, followed by Organizational and Individual. However, these constructs are interrelated and have a recursive effect on each other. This view is illustrated in Figure 1.

LIMITATIONS

The conceptual framework of understanding culture in the context of tourism has a few limitations: First, a major culture, might contain minor cultures, or subcultures that have different characteristics. This could be apparent in countries which possess large geographical areas like the United States, the Soviet Union or China, as well as small countries such as Belgium, Sri Lanka, and Israel.

Second, due to the vague definition of the term "culture," it is unclear which variables ought to be considered when defining the concept. Boundaries of the definition cause some methodological problems mainly dealing with the inclusion of elements in the concept: level of industrialization?; level of tourist facility automation?; education system?; historical development or patterns of thoughts? This may indicate a need to develop a comprehensive or universal definition of "culture" that would reflect the dynamic development of a society, as well as its patterns of widely shared thoughts and manners.

Finally, a few cross-cultural studies have shown that similar ways of life and patterns of behavior are shared in geographical areas that do not have proximity to each other. Haire, Ghiselli, and Porter (6) have identified four clusters of nations (each nation within each cluster correlates about 0.57 with others in the same culture): The Nordic-European countries, the Latin-European, the Anglo-American pair, and the developing countries (Argentina, Chile and India). Japan was the only country that did not correlate with any other country.

CONCLUSIONS

The model presented may assist in understanding better "cultural differences" between tourists and host communities. The perceptual differences between tourists and hosts may be found in three different levels: environmental, organizational, and individual. In most cases these three dimensions may overlap and consequently, the "cultural differences" may intensify.

The model allows a working framework for both industry, government, and local communities to assess and plan tourism strategies that will facilitate the communication process between visitors and residents.

Government and business organizations that have a stake in the

tourism and travel industry should aim at controlling some of the variables hypothesized to cause divergence in perception between tourists and local communities.

Additional empirical research is necessary to understand better why some tourists may not feel comfortable with hosting communities. Some hypotheses should be developed within the context of these three dimensions.

The lack of international studies are probably due to two major dilemmas impeding cross-cultural international research. First, is the problem of funding. International studies are more expensive than domestic studies, especially when the geographical disparity is greater among countries or cultures under investigation.

Second, there is methodological complexity. Issues requiring access to representative samples, translations, equivalence of concepts, administration, analysis and interpretation seem to be great obstacles to the growth of research in the field.

It is hoped that additional studies will be sponsored by all parties concerned with international tourism in order to reduce world tension and promote a better understanding between and among nations.

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Figure 1

Constructs Accounting for Divergence in
Perception of International Cultural Tourism

