

Crossing Boundaries – Intercultural Interaction in Tourism

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Abstract

In recent years, international tourism has proven to be one of the most fertile areas of cultural contacts, imposing itself as a context which presents both advantages (easier access to culturally and geographically distant spaces) and disadvantages (threats to cultural integrity due to potentially damaging influences) of globalization. One of the main axes which define tourism refers to the interaction between travellers and local communities, which automatically raises the issue of intercultural understanding. This paper addresses intercultural communication, aiming to outline the coordinates of tourism as a contact zone and the intricate relations between the interacting parties. In this light, it looks into some of the challenges that might impede successful communication in an intercultural context such as language, differences in values, relationship patterns, attitudes to time and interpersonal exchanges. At the same time, it analyzes concepts such as stereotyping and ethnocentrism, which impose a revaluation of identity paradigms when the self is confronted with alterity, as is the case of tourism exchanges.

Keywords

tourism, intercultural communication, social interaction, identity, cultural differences

Travelling has been one of the main coordinates of humankind history, ensuring commercial, cultural and economic exchanges that kept the world moving and developing. Given the fact that travel, and its by-product, tourism, is a phenomenon which involves communities worldwide, it is a genuinely global human activity. “Travel [...] has often done more to create bonds and mutual understanding between various peoples of the world than any other single force throughout civilization’s long existence” [3: 288].

Whether travel has been undertaken for religious reasons or for self-discovery purposes, as an extension of ordinary consumption patterns or as an initiative to admire the wonders of the world, tourism, although promoting sameness and continuity, also has the potential to emphasize difference and dissimilarity. The immediate outcomes are issues related to intercultural understanding, confrontations between the self and the other and possible crises triggered by the gap between distinct perspectives on the world which become most visible in tourist-host interaction.

Interaction in tourism mirrors a very intricate web of relations between the parties involved in this communication act. In this field as well, interaction mainly

observes the same rules that apply to general social interaction. Each contact between the parties involved is a potential success or failure. It all depends on the interaction motivations of the parties, their awareness of the environment where the contact occurs, their familiarity with and willingness to abide by generally accepted conventions of behaviour and knowledge of the language code governing the interaction context.

In tourism, interaction is present every time the tourist is involved in the life of a given community, whether when shopping, clubbing, visiting tourist attractions, or when speaking to tour guides, natives or service providers. The particularities of social exchanges in tourism are also dictated by the identity of the parties, and one of them is always the tourist. Thus, tourists may come into contact with service providers (often called professional hosts), local residents, imported workers, investors and other tourists, either domestic or international. Similarly, these interactions take the form of personal meetings when hosts and travellers visit the same objectives or are engaged in common activities such as inquiries at tourist information centres when the parties exchange information and during various types of business transactions [5: 205-206].

Most of the time, the contact between hosts and guests is only temporary. Therefore, there is no time and opportunity to develop lasting and meaningful relations. This is further enhanced by their different social status, purposes and motivations. Whereas guests are at leisure and seek social interaction only as a form of entertainment, hosts are at work and are mainly motivated by economic gains. In *Noi si ceilalti*, Todorov draws up a classification of travellers, in which he includes, among others, the expatriate, the philosopher, the opportunist, etc. He suggests that the relationship between tourists and hosts is generally kept at a minimum for reasons of psychological comfort: "Not meeting different persons is much more comforting, because it never brings our identity into discussion; it is a lot less dangerous to see camels than men" [7: 466]. This almost alienating attitude towards potential interactions with local residents is supported by the individualistic orientation which, Todorov claims, defines our modern existence: "Without necessarily despising the others (we all enjoy the same rights), I am interested in them as long as they become part of some project I have designed" [7: 467].

For all the superficial nature of these relations, successful interaction is fostered by positive attitudes on both sides, such as appreciation of their distinct cultures, a sense of tolerance, the desire for mutual understanding, awareness of differences and friendliness. On the other hand, interaction has little if any chance of success when there is resentment, intolerance, display of a patronizing attitude and lack of mutual respect.

Intercultural interaction in tourism has been encouraged by the most prominent vehicles of globalization, leading to what Boia calls a “psychosis of holidays” [1: 136]. Tourism development has been the result of technological progress (more effective reservation systems, complex websites marketing destinations and services), transportation (accessible prices due to the reduction of air travel expenses) and communication means (information is nowadays more easily disseminated and accessed than ever before). While it is obvious that the tourism industry has benefited greatly from the advantages of globalization, the drawbacks match, if not outnumber, these benefits because of the negative impact on local communities, delocalization and outsourcing, imitation of Western culture, homogenization of tourism products, environmental damage and a decline in civic community [5: 7-8].

The current general context of global tourism has assisted the emergence of a new tourist profile. Readily available information exposes tourists to distinct cultures, which greatly influence their demands in terms of service quality, readiness and availability. At the same time, they are increasingly interested in customized products to meet their particular needs and expectations. The latest trend in tourist behaviour is the so-called *experiential traveller*. He is mainly interested in unique cultural experiences, authenticity and difference. The intrinsic motivations for embarking on a travel adventure also reflect a shifting paradigm; nowadays, more and more tourists travel in search of experiences that resemble a quest of identity rather than mere relaxation, recreation and entertainment.

This brings to the fore the complex dialogue self-other involved in any form of communication. As Boia claims, “The world has never been more united, the world has never been more fragmented” [1: 137]). This applies very much to the world seen through the lens of the tourist. The dialectic identity-alterity is probably nowhere more visible as when we travel. The circle of *us* is automatically and subconsciously narrowed and placed in an antagonistic relation with the circle of *them*. When we travel, especially to foreign countries, we have to cross physical and mental boundaries and we are faced with having to admit there are many alternatives to our own perspective on the world. As Gavin and Phipps claim, tourism could be a site for the tactics of otherness. Tourists live their everyday lives ‘in-between’ these two possibilities, shifting between one and the other, and finding emotional comforts and discomforts in these moves. It is in this realisation of the in-between, the continuing transgression of cultural categories and its manifestation in the material, historical and emotional life of tourism that we detect a clue as to why it is that tourism matters. In short, it can bring to light the very

provisionality of our world, its articulation in our everyday social relations and a vision for a more abundant everyday locked in the principle of alterity [4: 166].

Being confronted with this plurality of realities and worlds, we are forced into becoming aware of the relativism of all things around us. It is a challenging, sometimes surprisingly nice, often uncomfortable and, why not, frustrating experience. There is a whole range of emotions that accompany the encounter with the other. When considering the relationship between the self and the other, the concept of “centre” and the mechanisms which relate it to the periphery should be taken into account as well [1:117]. The centre (which can be wherever we want to locate it) will always represent the epitome of normality, the reference against which everything else is judged and assessed. In tourists’ case, distance from home almost automatically triggers and promotes comparisons with their travel destination in terms of lifestyle, food, religion, customs.

In this framework of reference, the tourist will always see himself as the centre of his universe. In doing so, he displays a double representation of the self. On the one hand, he represents himself, his own identity, forced in a way to redefine the coordinates of his being by taking into consideration the variable accounted for by a geographically/linguistically/socially distinct other. On the other hand, in this relation, the self is also the expression of the tourist’s culture; he stands for the country/group to which he belongs and, as such, he feels the subconscious need to emphasize the qualities of the place he originates from. Equipped with the lucidity and objectivity which the locals lack, it is easier for the tourist to perceive the minuses of the host culture which, somehow, encourages this potentially superior attitude.

The complex relationships between hosts and guests involve a certain degree of compromise, which is necessary for a successful interaction. In this particular case, compromise can be seen as a form of respect embodied in the adjustment of one’s behaviour so as to observe the rules governing the interaction place and context. Usually, tourists are expected to respect their guests by proving they are familiar with the rules and conventions of the destination. The same applies to local residents, who honour their guests mainly by catering to their needs and respecting their culture. The question of ethics here is to what extent they should conform to the others and renounce their own identity. Which is the line that separates self-annihilation from the attempts to satisfy the other’s physical and mental needs? The issue is very complex and could possibly be settled through awareness of and, most of all, acceptance and acknowledgement of the interacting cultures’ commonalities and dissimilarities.

When tourists and hosts engage in an act of communication, this is not only the meeting of distinct individual personalities, but also of different cultures. The cultural gap between the interacting cultures influences the success or failure of this exchange. The bigger the cultural distance between tourists and hosts, the higher the possibility that difficulties in communication will occur. Professor Reisinger [5:112] distinguishes between three categories of cultural distance: when the cultures of hosts and guests are much the same or similar, the cultural distance is insignificant or inexistent; when the two cultures are different, but such differences are small, the cultural distance is also small; and finally, when the two cultures are incongruously different, the cultural distance is very large, leading to misunderstanding, friction and anxiety.

Cultural identity defines an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group, his adherence to the group's norms, rules and conventions. In recent years, the regularizing orientation imposed by globalization has given rise to a movement of resistance against uniformity and the desire to hold on to one's inherited traditions and values. This is also encouraged by the fact that people migrate more than they have ever done before (for personal or professional reasons), they are exposed to culturally distinct experiences and feel a growing need to endorse their own origins, where they come from. Asserting one's identity is best achieved by indicating differences, not similarities with the others. A strong cultural identity ensures uniqueness and specificity in the cultural puzzle of the planet.

Unfortunately, in tourism, as in any other area which involves interaction of people belonging to distinct cultural spaces, this need to preserve one's identity may lead to conflicts and misunderstanding. According to Scollon and Scollon [6: 26], the main cultural differences that potentially create negative outcomes of tourist-host interaction are as follows: ideology, history, religion, beliefs; socialization, including education, acculturation, learning; verbal communication including information, negotiation, welfare, group harmony, and non verbal communication, including proxemics (the use of space), kinesics (body language); social organization including the system of relatives, the concept of self, the relationships within and outside the group.

Besides the cultural differences, there are also other causes of distress, mainly within local communities, which derive from the attitudes of local residents towards their exchanges with tourists. One such cause could be the degradation of indigenous art form representations, which tend to be replaced by inauthentic expressions. Another negative result is the adjustment of mother tongues to comply with the need to communicate in English or in the tourists' own language.

The so-called “demonstration effect” [2: 308] is the local residents’ desire to imitate the tourists’ lifestyle, disparaging thus inherited traditions and mores. The extreme manifestation of the demonstration effect is the envy and resentment resulting from the residents’ awareness that the material goods displayed by tourists, and the comfort they help obtain, are beyond reach.

Problems of intercultural communication in tourism often arise from a distorted image of the other created by ethnocentrism, racism and stereotyping, all of which are conducive to tensions and antagonism between tourists and host. “Ethnocentrism is a belief that the customs, traditions, beliefs and behavioural practices of one’s own culture are better than those of other cultures or at least ought to be” [5: 192]. The greatest damage of ethnocentrism is an exaggerated consideration of differences and the lack of willingness to accept the other’s uniqueness.

Stereotyping “is the attribution of certain traits, labelling and perceptions of people on the basis of common characteristics or judgments about others on the basis of their specific characteristics or group membership” [5: 192]. Stereotypes usually rely on categories such as race, religion, sex, profession, sexual orientation etc. Usually, tourists are believed to be well-off and ignorant of the natives’ needs and specifics; host-related stereotypes suggest that they are disadvantaged and inferior. Although stereotyping limits the understanding of the other, it sometimes assists in influencing a certain behaviour that helps satisfy the expectations of the two communicating parties.

Given the multiple and complex aspects of the tourist-host relationship, intercultural communication in tourism seems to be a challenging enterprise. However, difficulties can be overcome and a common ground of understanding can be reached through the parties’ mutual cooperation. Tourist-native encounters can be successful and pleasant experiences if the two actors are aware of the differences that make them unique and, paradoxically, bring them together. But to this end, minimum efforts are to be made; not to adjust one’s personality and lifestyle to suit the other’s preferences, but to keep an open mind and embrace diversity and otherness which, in a way, complete the self (by providing a term of comparison, a companion, on the journey towards discovery of one’s deepest self). The key is to fully acknowledge that we need the Other, the Stranger precisely because of his alterity. Travelling is not always a trip to the physical world; it is also an inward expedition at the end of which, if we really know to make the most of the experience, we remain with much more than hundreds of pictures.

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