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RESEARCH NOTE



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APPLYING SOCIAL DISTANCE TO VOLUNTOURISM RESEARCH

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Voluntourism is generally considered reciprocally beneficial for both tourists (e.g., gaining cultural experiences) and host community residents (e.g., receiving assistance to repair or construct structures or preserve vital resources). However, the symbiotic relationship has been recently criticized, especially in the context of cross-cultural interactions. Raymond and Hall (2008) claim that voluntourism does not always result in an increase in cross-cultural understanding for those involved. In some instances, voluntourism can serve to strengthen rather than reduce national or cultural stereotypes (Simpson, 2005). Despite voluntourists establishing amiable relationships with local residents, Raymond and Hall (2008) found such voluntourists did not change their perception toward nationalities or the culture of host residents. Lack of altruism on the part of tourists has also been a criticism of voluntourism. Sin (2009) concluded that many voluntourists are more interested in achieving personal goals rather than interacting or helping residents in need. Like Raymond and Hall, Sin also criticizes cross-cultural voluntourism as reinforcing negative perceptions of local residents, arguing that many voluntourists consider local recipients as “inferior” or “less-able” (2009, p. 497). According to Reisinger (1994), potential perceived misunderstandings between tourists and host residents from diverse cultures can take the form of negative attitudes, perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices. In essence, the probability that tourist-host encounters will lead to friction and misunderstanding is high when dissimilarities in cultural background exist (Sutton, 1967).

The existing research surrounding voluntourism falls short of assessing the degree of differences and cultural divide between voluntourists and residents. Very

little empirical work has been conducted that examines why potential perceived misunderstandings can occur between the host and guest in this context, which is largely a function of the novelty of voluntourism research as the phenomenon of voluntourism has only become an interest to academics since 2000 (McGehee & Andereck, 2009). To date the focus of voluntourism research has been on voluntourists themselves and not host residents or the cultural differences and understanding between representatives of each group. One way to operationalize and measure perceived differences between voluntourists and host residents is to employ the social distance scale. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to offer the social distance scale as a viable measurement tool to assess such differences between voluntourists and local residents and provide potential research opportunities to explore.

First introduced by Park (1924), social distance was defined as “the grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations generally” (p. 339). Responding to the call of measuring social distance, Bogardus (1929, 1933) created the social distance scale to empirically measure individuals’ willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups. Within the scale, respondents are asked to indicate how accepting they are of each group of individuals (i.e., from various nationalities or ethnic groups) on a seven-point scale (ranging from 1 = as close relatives by marriage to 7 = would exclude from my country). A score of 1.00 is interpreted as no social distance perceived between the responder and the group in question (Bogardus, 1929). Except for minor modification of items such as abbreviating number of items used (Hagendoorn & Kleinpenning, 1991) and altering wording based on context of study sampling (Thyne and Zins, 2004), the Bogardus (1929) scale has remained relatively unchanged. To date, the scale has been used in research surrounding racism, nationality conflicts, cross-cultural interaction, and perceptions of individuals with serious mental disabilities (Corrigan, Green, Lundin, Kubiak, & Penn, 2001; Crull & Bruton, 1979; Hagendoorn & Kleinpenning, 1991; Thyne & Zins, 2004). However, the scale has been minimally applied in a tourism context by researchers (Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008; Sinkovics & Penz, 2009; Tasci, 2009; Thyne, Lawson, & Todd, 2006; Thyne & Zins, 2004) and never in the context of voluntourism.

Nyaupane et al. (2008) evaluated pre-trip and post-trip attitudes of students participating in a study abroad program toward host residents and found that, “social distance plays a more important role in forming attitudes prior to the trip than attitude change after the trip” (p. 662). Interestingly enough, Nyaupane et al. did not utilize the social distance scale (even though they claimed to measure social distance) and only collected data from tourists, not residents. This is a point of concern in voluntourism research as McGehee and Andereck (2009) claim, “most of the research in this area has concentrated on the volunteer tourist, as opposed to people in the local community who host volunteers” (p. 39–40). Tasci (2009) also focuses on students (considered potential tourists) in assessing how familiarity through visual information affects social distance toward Turkish people. Employing the Bogardus (1929) scale, Tasci found social distance toward residents decreases as individuals become more familiar with a nation and its culture through visual information.

The social distance scale has been minimally used among residents. Thyne et al. (2006) examined nationality, age, and type of tourist to determine which factor was most important to residents in determining tolerance of tourists. In every instance, nationality was the most important. In addition, Thyne et al. claim, “residents showed less acceptance/tolerance of tourists more physically/culturally different to themselves” (p. 210). In essence, residents indicated they feel closer to tourists with whom they perceive a low degree of social distance. As an exception to social distance findings, Sinkovics and Penz (2009) found that an increase in social dis-

tance reported by residents aids in reducing conflicts and serves to avoid damaging interactions and malfunctioning relationships with tourists. However, as Reisinger (1994) points out, “social contact between two different ethnic groups results in changing the attitudes and relations of the interacting members (p. 743). This “change in attitudes and relations, in most cases, is a favorable one” (Reisinger, 1994, p. 743). Ultimately, social distance, stereotypes, and perceived misunderstandings cannot be minimized by avoiding interactions with someone who is culturally different as Nyaupane et al. (2008) found among tourists who has drastically improved their attitudes of residents in Europe and the South Pacific after interacting with them.

Numerous research opportunities exist involving the social distance scale in voluntourism research. For instance, social distance should be examined across multiple contexts involving various groups of volunteers (i.e., construction crews aiding communities post-disaster, missionaries, etc.) and numerous divergent/convergent cultures, ethnic groups, and nationalities of residents and volunteers. Ultimately this examination will indicate where gaps in social distance between volunteers and residents exist so as to provide greater insight into existing relationships and help determine which need addressing. Provided some research calls into question the intent of volunteers, degree of altruism (on the part of the volunteer) should also be measured in conjunction with social distance to determine how altruism relates to distance. This would be crucial provided existing research has rarely examined the relationship between altruism and social distance. The Self-Report Altruism Scale (Ruston, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981) could be one such measure to utilize.

Much research surrounding social distance considers the construct static in nature. Future research measuring social distance between volunteers and residents should be conducted over time to see how the level changes, especially after interaction occurs between representatives of each group. According to Bogardus (1933), “individuals should complete the social distance scale at six months or a year to discover what some of the changes in attitudes are that he/she is undergoing” (p. 270). To this end, a further research opportunity exists examining the relationship between social distance and cross-cultural understanding and how such understanding changes through time.

Research also should be conducted concerning antecedents of social distance. Variables that may predict social distance include degree of contact or interaction between volunteers and residents prior to measuring social distance, the image of the volunteers’ and residents’ culture, as well as the political relationship that exist between volunteers’ and residents’ nations. In addition, some variance in social distance may be explained by examining participants’ satisfaction with life (following Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) as some individuals may have a more positive outlook on life than others. Furthermore, sociodemographic (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, etc.) and socioeconomic (e.g., occupation, employment status, income, education, etc.) variables should be examined as they will likely have an impact on how individuals perceive the social distance with one another.

Social distance can help us explain the perceived misunderstandings that potentially exist between residents and volunteers. With perceived cultural differences and misunderstandings likely apparent within each party, it is crucial to examine the perspectives of residents and volunteers, which have rarely been done. Upon assessing social distance and determining such distance is potentially great between host residents and volunteers, volunteer organizations should utilize educational media to lessen the distance. For instance, guides could share information about volunteers’ cultural backgrounds with immediate host communities as well as have volunteers watch videos about host residents’ culture and ways of life following Tasci’s (2009) work. Ultimately, as Reisinger and Turner (2003)

claim, interaction and exposure to one another can help break down stereotypes and potential misunderstandings so relationships may be improved as voluntourists and residents learn from and appreciate one another's culture. **A**

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TOURISM, LANDSCAPE CHANGE AND CRITICAL THRESHOLDS

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It has become commonplace to identify environmental quality as a key asset for tourism and its loss with shrinking tourist flows. Taking this logic further, environmental discourses have long referred to the idea that coastal resorts in the north of the Mediterranean are reaching or have reached a point beyond which the resilience of ecosystems and their aesthetic appeal for tourists sharply declines (e.g., Greenpeace, 1991). And yet steady increases in the number of domestic and international tourists visiting the region—227 millions in 1984, 292 in 2000, 275 in 2007 and 433 expected for 2025 (UNEP/MAP-Blue Plan, 2009)—ensure that the long awaited turning point remains an elusive reality.

Attempts to explain the paradox of growing numbers of tourists visiting allegedly spoiled places have recurrently pointed to a decrease of tourists' aesthetic sophistication and a desire for, or at least a playful acceptance of, highly predictable, shallow and inauthentic experiences (Greenpeace, 2009, 2010; Ritzer & Liska, 1997). The problem with these accounts is their tendency to focus on specific cases and resorts while silencing tourists' own accounts and frames of understanding. The tendency has been to reproduce media discourses in a way that reflects the lack of enthusiasm or even overt aversion to mass tourism within academia (Obrador, Crang, & Travlou, 2009). This note reports fieldwork in the Spanish Mediterranean that suggests a different storyline to explain why the turning point is proving so elusive.

While some strands of academic enquiry have acknowledged tourists' views (e.g., literature on 'impact perception', Tosun, 2002), their emphasis on 'attitudes' and 'perceptions' excessively simplifies and offers too linear an account of tourists' encounters. Responses to change are rarely just a matter of individual 'choice', 'desire' or 'attitude' and understanding critical thresholds in tolerance to change demands paying attention to more complex material and social dynamics. Research presented here examined tourists' tolerance to change through the perspective of 'tourist performances', that is, stylized ways of encountering place that are both scripted yet open to change (Edensor, 2002), as an explicit way to avoid the reductionist tendencies of other approaches. The notion of tourist performances places the emphasis not on attitudes but on practices and conventions.

Fieldwork was conducted in the Costa Blanca (Valencia region) during the 2000s, a period of extensive real estate development when, at its peak, up to