

VOLUNTOURIST TRANSFORMATION AND THE THEORY OF INTEGRATIVE CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

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Various definitions of voluntourism exist within the literature (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2009), many of which focus primarily on volunteer work conducted in tourism destinations. For example, the concept is referred to as “regular activity to assist others in need” (McGehee & Santos, 2005, p. 760) and “the aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society” (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Such definitions do not capture the importance of voluntourists communicating and interacting with host community residents. As McGehee and Andereck (2009) have mentioned, research surrounding voluntourism is relatively new (dating back roughly a decade), primarily focusing on the phenomenon as an alternative to mass tourism through descriptive studies. Consequently, cross-cultural experiences among voluntourists have rarely been examined within the field of tourism.

Voluntourists experience cultural exchange through engaging in work to help residents (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007), all the while experiencing and learning about others’ lives and cultures. In this regard, voluntourism is considered an alternative form of tourism (McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Uriely, Reichel, & Ron, 2003), whereby direct personal and cultural communication and mutual understanding between tourists and residents is sought (Wearing, 2001). In some instances, once voluntourists return back to their homes, they are likely to have a better understanding of the life and culture of the residents they helped, which can potentially change their worldviews (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). As McGehee and Santos (2005) and McGehee (2002) suggest, after voluntourists experience cross-cultural volunteer tourism, they may have “global citizenship” and become more involved in a changing world. In this vein, such individuals are considered to have a better comprehension of global matters such as environmental degradation and poverty from directly interacting with less affluent people. Nevertheless, these voluntourists’ transformations and the process by which they occur have received relatively little attention from researchers in the field. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to offer the theory of integrative cross-cultural adaptation as a viable framework to explain the phenomenon of voluntourist transformation and provide potential research opportunities to explore.

Given the emerging nature of voluntourism, few empirical studies have employed theoretical frameworks. The work of McGehee and Andereck (2009) utilized social exchange theory to understand local residents’ personal benefit from voluntourism. In addition to the authors finding mixed support for the framework, the work did not focus on interaction between voluntourists and residents, which Zafirovski (2005) claims is essential in assessing relationships in social exchange theory. Social movement theory has also been utilized in voluntou-

rism research (see McGehee, 2002). Despite McGehee (2002) only focusing on voluntourists (with no mention of interaction with host residents), she alludes to voluntourists being ‘transformed’ through experiences and engaging in social movements once home.

A framework that could potentially better explain the communication and interaction between voluntourists and members of host communities as well as the dynamic process of voluntourists’ transformation is that of the theory of integrative cross-cultural adaptation as proposed by Kim (2001) within the field of communication. Cross-cultural adaptation is defined as the dynamic process that individuals “establish and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments, when they confront unfamiliar cultural environments” (Kim, 2001, p. 31). The theory provides five key constructs explaining each step of the cross-cultural adaptation process. The initial four constructs serve as antecedents of the fifth construct (i.e., personal transformation) as the outcome of the cross-cultural adaptation process.

Central to adaptation are two forms of communication (i.e., personal and social). *Personal communication* (or ‘host communication competence’) refers to “all the internal mental activities that occur in individuals that dispose and prepare them to act and react in certain ways in actual social situations” (Kim, 2001, p. 72). In *personal communication*, three aspects (i.e., cognitive, affective, and behavioral components) of strangers (hereafter referred to as voluntourists) are included. Voluntourists realize that to achieve the success of adaptation, their internal communication systems (i.e., language skills or knowledge about the host culture) should appropriately and sufficiently overlap with internal communication systems of local residents. Building on personal communication, *social communication* is comprised of host social communication and ethnic social communication. The former involves two or more individuals interacting in a cross-cultural context including interpersonal communication (i.e., face-to-face interaction with locals) and mass communication (i.e., experiences obtained through mass media such as radio, television, and newspaper of the host community). Ethnic social communication involves the co-ethnic networks helping voluntourists’ adaptation (Pitts, 2009).

The third construct, *new environment* serves as the cultural context for personal and social communication activities. All voluntourists’ critical interactions with the host community occur in the host environment, which influences the nature of their adaptation process. In the adaptive process, the dimension of predisposition works as the initial parameter. *Predisposition* is defined as “the internal conditions of strangers [voluntourists] themselves (Kim, 2001, p. 82),” which affects the individuals’ adaptation process as a relatively stable factor. Each voluntourist starts the adaptation process with his/her own personality and sensibilities. For example, some may embrace new cultures as others may find it difficult to accept environmental change. Accordingly, predisposition affects the degree of a voluntourist’s “adaptive potential” (p. 82). The last construct, *personal transformation*, is the chief outcome of the adaptation process by which voluntourists experience a transformation of their self-identity. Transformed voluntourists are individuals who are comfortable within the host cultural environment and negotiate everyday activities on-site with ease. In addition, these individuals achieve internal coherence and appropriate relationships with the host community. Finally, the original identity of voluntourists is modified from one rooted in being a voluntourist from another culture (i.e., the ‘other’) to one that encompasses greater interculturalness (i.e., intercultural identity). With intercultural identity, voluntourists can better manage the interaction between their home culture and the new culture, which allows such individuals to better see “the universal aspect of human nature” (Kim, 2001, p. 193). In other words, these voluntourists expe-

rience the oneness and unity of humans and better understand people of different cultures.

Given the novelty of the theory in the tourism field, we propose multiple lines of research surrounding the integrative cross-cultural adaptation framework and personal transformation of voluntourists. First and foremost, how prevalent is cross-cultural adaptation in various contexts? Are contexts involving natural disasters, diametrically opposed cultures, or missionary workers more likely to facilitate greater cross-cultural adaptation among voluntourists? Such questions could best be addressed using qualitative methods (e.g., case studies, grounded theory, etc.) as a means to explore constructs within Kim's (2001) framework. Secondly, as items are developed from the qualitative work, psychometric properties (i.e., reliability and validity) of construct measures can be examined (Netemeyer, Bearden, & Sharma, 2003). Once such studies are conducted, Kim's (2001) model should be tested (using structural equation modeling) to determine: 1) if the proposed antecedents (i.e., personal and social communication, new environment, and predisposition) significantly predict voluntourists' personal transformation, 2) the relationships between the antecedents, and 3) which construct explains the greatest variance in personal transformation. Ultimately, the model may need to be amended (i.e., through the addition of antecedent constructs) to explain a greater degree of variance in personal transformation as Byrne (2006) suggests. For instance, voluntourists' previous travel to the host country, host residents' receptivity to voluntourists and their culture, and length of time voluntourists remain in the host community could all potentially explain variance in voluntourists' personal transformation.

To date, the theory of integrative cross-cultural adaptation has not been utilized within the tourism literature. This is largely due to the fact that the framework is still in its infancy as measures of the construct are scant. In addition, research concerning resident-voluntourist interactions has not focused on communication among individuals and the transformative role that communication plays—which is the basis of the framework. In fact, cross-cultural adaptation has only been minimally alluded to (see Brown, 2009; Hottola, 2004). Utilizing the theory would not only be beneficial for understanding how voluntourists adapt to a new culture and what kinds of internal transformation they have, it would also aid in providing insight into overcoming barriers that may potentially exist between cultures of the host community and voluntourists, in essence fostering greater cultural understanding and global citizenry. In addition, utilizing this theory serves to add greater theoretical examination in the field, which Pearce and Moscardo (2005) say is crucial. **A**

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