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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Psychological Importance of Traveling and the Role of Psycho- Educational Programs in Tourism Development: An Iranian Counsellor's Experience

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Abstract

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The psycho-educational aspect of tourism is an important issue if tourism is to be developed. In the present article, the author who has been the manageress and the counsellor of a university counselling centre in Tehran-Iran has a perspective on some psychological issues in tourism. In this perspective, at first the effects of travelling and tourism on human's well-being will be addressed. Then, some issues around the psycho-educational aspects of tourism development will be discussed. In conclusion, by providing adequate information and education in both, guest visitors and people of host countries, acculturation of tourists and their hosts would be fostered.

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Introduction

Despite substantial growth of tourism in the world, it is a neglected topic of study for the psychologists (Berno & Ward, 2005). For instance, Pols and Kroon (2007) have pointed out the negligence of mental health research in the investigating the influence of holiday trips on the mental health of individuals with psychiatric problems. Also, according to Goeldner and Ritchie (2006), there are some other areas that have not received much research attention. For example, benefits occurring to the traveler such as the contribution of pleasure travel to rest and relaxation, the educational benefits, the understanding of other people and cultures, and the physical and mental well-being of the traveler.

Nonetheless, the author of the present article who was the manageress of the counselling centre of Kharazmi University in Tehran-Iran for more than eight years, and also experienced counselling in the same centre for more than thirteen years, is interested in addressing psycho-educational issues in tourism development. The main reason is the multi-dimensional importance of tourism, especially its psychological aspect.

Although it was not the responsibility of the Counselling Centre for incorporating student tours, but on the one hand, by maintaining permanent relationship between the Counselling Centre and student body; welfare services; and academic and non-academic staff (Najafi, 1997), the author stressed the positive role of traveling on the students' mental health. The university, by incorporating different tour programs, provided opportunities for students to go on places. On the other hand, counselors of the centre encouraged students to go on tours. Therefore, students used these opportunities in order to observe new places, become familiar with different cultures, and eventually gain new insights in their lives. After coming back, the students reported that they felt much better than before going on tour.

Having religious motivation, students were very interested in religious tours to Saudi Arabia and Syria for pilgrimage. These tours had significant spiritual effects on students. Of course, students were highly interested in going to Iraq for pilgrimage as well, but at that time because of political problems between Iran and Iraq it was impossible to send tours to Iraq. In addition to foreign tours, some other tours were incorporated inside the country.

Due to the importance of the multi-dimensional aspect of the university counselling centre (Najafi, 2001), services were also offered to non-students (Najafi, 2009). Therefore, the importance of traveling was mentioned to these clients as well. They also reported almost similar experiences to those of our students.

The present article aims to introduce some theoretical issues around the importance of traveling and tourism. In addition, the need for psycho-educational programs in tourism development will be discussed. In this article, at

first definition of tourism, recent status of tourism, and the effects of tourism on human being's well-being will be addressed. Then some issues around the psycho-educational aspects of tourism development will be discussed.

Definition of Tourism

According to Goeldner and Ritchie (2006, p. 50), “tourism may be defined as the processes, activities, and outcomes arising from the relationships and the interactions among tourists, tourism suppliers, host governments, host communities, and surrounding environments that are involved in the attracting and hosting of visitors”.

Recent Status of Tourism

According to the World Tourism Organisation (2010), “the substantial growth of the tourism activity clearly marks tourism as one of the most remarkable economic and social phenomena of the past century”. Also, an evolution can be seen in the number of international arrivals in the world. “The number of international arrivals shows from a mere 25 million international arrivals in 1950 to an estimated 806 million in 2005 corresponding to an average annual growth rate of 6.5%” (World Tourism Organisation, 2010). As cited in Berger (2008), the five most popular international tourist destinations in 2007 were as follows:

Country	Number of Visitors (million)
France	75
Spain	52
U.S	46
China	41
Italy	37

The Effects of Tourism on Humans' Well-Being

Tourism can have cultural, social, environmental and economic positive and negative impacts (Van Winkle & MacKay, 2008; Mill & Morrison, 2002). In other words, tourism has costs and benefits which can have effects on humans' well-being. In this section, socio-cultural, economic and environmental benefits and costs of tourism will be addressed briefly.

Benefits of Tourism

From socio-cultural point of view, tourism builds cross-cultural relations, and it is a vital force for peace (Mill & Morrison, 2002; Satani, 2004; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). Moreover, “tourism can be a means of reducing tension and promoting harmonious relations. It brings people into contact with each other and provides cultural exchange between hosts and guests” (Satani, 2004).

Economically, tourism is important for development (Kemperman, Borgers & Timmermans, 2009). Tourism provides both, direct and indirect employment. In the year 2002, travel and tourism directly generated nearly 7.2 million jobs in the U.S economy (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). It can create new jobs. Therefore, “tourism leads to significant employment creation” (Satani, 2004, p. 30). Also it, “facilitates the process of poverty alleviation” (Satani, 2004, p. 30).

From a psychological point of view, poverty is a major obstacle to optimal development. In other words, “poverty has powerful and potentially pervasive effects on the biological and psychological systems across the life span” (Newman & Newman, 2009, p. 10). Unemployment which may lead to poverty has mental health consequences that are negative (Fryer & Fagan, 2003). By development of tourism new jobs would be created to tackle unemployment and poverty.

As tourism can be developed in a short-time span, and with only moderate levels of investment, it can have a rapid and even instantaneous impact on regional economy (Soukiazis & Proenca, 2008). According to Mohamed (2005), tourism is seen as a potential to revitalize areas suffering economic depression and depopulation due to the migration of youths to the big cities. This can be seen in Japan that a small town (Yufuin village) revived its cultural traditions, and now with a population of 12000 people attracts over three million visitors a year (Mohamed, 2005). According to Van Winkle and MacKay (2008, p. 71), “there appears to be general consensus among researchers that certain socio-cultural impacts are consistently associated with tourism development”.

From environmental point of view, as cited in Satani (2004), tourism can contribute to protection and management of environmentally sensitive areas and heritages. Visitors and local people become more conscious of environmental problems and the value of nature. Therefore, residents become familiar with their properties, identify them as valuable, and confirm the necessity to keep the attraction alive.

According to Mill and Morrison (2002, p. 140), “the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) report recommends that tourism needs to be developed to satisfy three broad principles: (1) to improve the quality of life of the host community; (2) to provide a high-quality experience for visitors; and (3) to maintain the quality of the environment on which both the host community and the visitors depend.” Here, the proper management is an important factor in the prosperity of host countries.

According to Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006, p. 428), “local populations should be associated with tourism activities and share equitably in the economic, social, and cultural benefits they generate and particularly in the creation of direct and indirect jobs resulting from them”.

Costs of Tourism

If tourism is not properly planned and implemented, it may have costs. From psycho-cultural point of view, tourism can cause change or loss of identity and values. Also, because of differences in cultures, cultural clashes can take place. The presence of a mass of tourists with a lot of money to spend causes crimes such as robbery in host countries (Satani, 2004). Therefore, tourism can create social problems (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006).

Economically, tourism may cause some problems if it is not properly planned and implemented. For instance, increasing demand for tourists for basic services and goods will often cause the price run ups though the income of local residents is not proportionately increased. Another problem is the risk of excessive reliance on tourism. In many developing countries tourism is the only way to boost the economy. (Satani, 2004).

Environmentally, tourism may degrade the natural physical environment and create pollution (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). Development of tourism facilities may cause deforestation and land degradation. On the other hand, tourism increases the consumption of natural resources in the area (Satani, 2004). From the environmental psychologists' point of view, environmental problems such as pollutions and wasted resources are based on human behaviour. They can only be solved by changing individual behaviour patterns (Coon & Mittere, 2009).

From the author's point of view, paying attention to the benefits of tourism, there are some elements which contribute to reducing costs of tourism and increasing its benefits. Among these elements are proper *management* and *education*. If tourism is properly managed and implemented; and if proper education is conducted among guest visitors and host residents, then tourism could be a source of help. It would have “the power to enhance the environment, to provide funds for conservation, to preserve culture and history, to set sustainable use limits, and to protect natural attractions (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006, p. 462).

Psychological Benefits of Travelling and Taking Vacations

According to Scott (2008), the psychological benefits of vacations lead to increased quality of life. Therefore, vacations can help human beings in several ways. Some of them are as follows: (1) by reducing the amount of stress, vacations can keep us healthy. Stress can be defined as any type of change that causes physical, emotional or psychological strain. However, not all types of stress are harmful or even negative; (2) Vacations can strengthen bonds. Spending time enjoying life with loved ones can keep relationships strong; (3) vacations promote creativity. A good vacation can help us to reconnect with ourselves, operating as a vehicle for self-discovery, and helping us get back to feeling our best; (4) vacations stave off burnout. Vacations make workers more creative and productive.

Traveling and taking vacations can improve mental health in human beings. Chikani, Reding, Gunderson and McCarty (2005) in a study found that vacation has an impact on psychological health and overall quality of family life of women. The results of this study confirmed the hypothesis that women who take vacations frequently are less likely to become tense, depressed or tired; and are more satisfied with their marriage compared to those who do not take vacations regularly.

Vacation and traveling not only may improve mental health, but also they can contribute to *rehabilitation*. For instance, Pols and Kroon (2007) in a research found that group holiday trips helped people with chronic psychiatric problems towards rehabilitation. The trips helped these people establish and maintain social relationship. The trips also had a positive influence on the travelers' self-esteem, and helped them to maintain balance in everyday life.

Based on this study and the experiences of the author of the present article, tourists who go on holidays in groups, participate in activities. Therefore, this would provide a unique opportunity for cultivating *creativity* (especially in children), improving social skills, finding new friends and even becoming reconnected.

Touring people with special problems such as those who suffer from some kinds of mental illnesses or physical disabilities, provides a unique opportunity for them to gain insights. Also, they become convinced that they are not alone in having these kinds of problems. On the other hand, they may share their experiences in coping with their illnesses or disabilities. In general, if the vacation is designed and conducted in a proper way, traveling can improve mental health in human beings. Here, the emphasis is on prevention (Najafi, 2009). Preventing problems and illnesses is better than spending time and resources for treatment.

Some Psycho-Educational Aspects of Tourism Development

If tourism is to be developed specially in developing countries; if tourists and people of host countries are to be satisfied with tourism activities; and if they are supposed to take part in developing the tourism, some psycho-educational aspects involved in tourism development need to be addressed. These are as follows:

Providing Psycho-Educational Programs among People in Host countries

Providing psycho-educational programs among host residents on the importance of their countries would increase awareness. Awareness of the advantages of tourism and seeing the development created by tourism encourages national pride in host residents. Also, local people take a more relaxed view of guests and become friendlier to them (Satani, 2004). This would welcome the provision of education on *hospitality* and *respecting* guest visitors. All these contribute to working towards promoting mental health in host residents and guest visitors; and having more functional tourism.

Another important issue is decreasing costs of tourism by education. As an example, for decreasing different kinds of pollutions which needs enough consideration, education can play a significant role. Education contributes to learning. Learning means “a relatively permanent change in behaviour or potential behaviour that results from experience” (Nairne, 2009, p. 213). Here, an important issue concerning environmental pollution is that “the way people think about the environment, greatly affects their behaviour” (Coon & Mitterer, 2009, p. 691).

What do psychologists suggest in order to reduce environmental pollutions? According to Coon and Mitterer (2009), psychologists suggest *reducing* consumption, *reducing* products and materials and also *recycling*. Among different strategies that could promote recycling, psychologists suggest *learning*. “learning about environmental problems and pro-environmental values at schools, has been one of the most effective ways to encourage pro-environmental behaviour” (Coon & Mitterer, 2009, p. 690).

Tourism has the potential of contaminating the values of native people. Therefore, from the author’s point of view, one important way of decreasing the cultural costs of tourism such as change, or loss of identity and values is *assertiveness training*. According to Karagozoglu, Kahve, Koc and Adamisoglu (2008), assertiveness includes taking advantage of one’s own rights without abusing others’ rights. Assertive individuals can act for themselves and can reveal their true feelings without experiencing excessive anxiety. Assertive individuals claim their own rights, make requests of others, can say no to things they do not want, accept praise and can easily verbalise their feelings. All of these make individuals’ lives easier, and by increasing self-esteem, ensure that they are satisfied with their lives.

Assertiveness is an expression of self-esteem. “Self esteem is how much we like ourselves and how much we value our self worth, importance, attractiveness, and social competence” (Plotnik, 2005, p. 416). Having high self-esteem is associated with positive outcomes, such as being cheerful and happy, having healthy social relationships, and promoting personal adjustment. Low self-esteem is associated with negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, anti-social behaviour and poor personal adjustment (Plotnik, 2005).

Assertiveness is different from aggressiveness. Aggression involves hurting another person or achieving one’s goals at the expense of another. Aggression does not take into account the feelings or rights of others” (Coon & Mitterer, 2009, p. 638). Assertiveness is also different from passivity. Passivity occurs when a person submits to another person’s dominance play, putting their own wishes and desires aside so as to pay attention to fulfilling the wishes and desires of their dominant partner. Passivity is about submission and being invaded (Dombeck & Well-Moran, 2006).

According to Fischer (2004, p. 85), “Assertiveness training was introduced by Andrew Salted, developed by Joseph Wolpe, and popularized by Wolpe and Lazarus”. As Line, Shiah, Chang, Lai, Wang And Chou (2004) have cited, an assertiveness training program is designed to improve an individual’s assertive beliefs and behaviours

which can help the individual change how they view themselves and establish self-confidence and interpersonal communication. The major objective of assertiveness training is to help the individual change how they view themselves, improve their assertiveness, properly express their individual moods and thoughts, and further establish self-confidence. The training is focused on how to react to difficult interactions in daily life.

The goals of Assertiveness Training are as follows: “(1) increased awareness of personal rights; (2) differentiating between non-assertiveness, assertiveness, aggressiveness and passive-aggressiveness; and (3) learning both verbal and nonverbal assertiveness skills” (Fischer, 2004, p. 85). Learning verbal and nonverbal assertiveness skills can help people in having better relationships with others. “Assertiveness skills involve saying ‘no’; asking for favors or making requests; expressing positive and negative feelings; and initiating, continuing, and terminating conversations” (Fischer, 2004, p. 85).

Providing Information for Tourists

According to the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, “tourists and visitors have the responsibility to acquaint themselves, even before their departure with the characteristics of the countries they are preparing to visit” (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006, p. 427). Nonetheless, providing adequate information for tourists about the importance of historical-cultural-environmental and economic attractions of the host countries plays an important role in making guest visitors acquainted with host countries. Also, providing information on cultural values of host countries is of immense importance.

The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism has emphasised the importance of respecting laws and customs of host countries: “Tourism activities should be conducted in harmony with the attributes and traditions of the host regions and countries and in respect for their laws, practices and customs” (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006, p. 427). Also, respecting the tourists is emphasised in this code of ethics: “The host communities on the one hand, and local professionals, on the other hand, should acquaint themselves with, and respect the tourists who visit them and find out about their life style, tastes and expectations. The education and training imparted to professionals contribute to hospitable welcome” (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006, p. 427). In addition to providing adequate information for tourists about the multi-dimensional importance of places of destination, the same educational and training programs on reducing different costs of tourism is suggested for them. This may help tourists to take more advantages from their traveling to host countries.

Benefits of Awareness

As Goeldner and Ritchie (2006, p. 264) have cited, “the highest purpose of tourism is to become better acquainted with people in other places and countries, because this furthers the understanding and appreciation that builds a better world for all”. Nonetheless, according to some studies, individuals in host countries manifest symptoms of *acculturative stress* including anxiety, depression and irritation with tourists (Berno & Ward, 2005).

Through awareness in guest visitors and host residents, a sense of understanding would be provided. Therefore, the people of host countries may act as better hosts, and visitors may act as better guests. Awareness in people also can prevent or at least minimise *culture shock* and misunderstanding in tourists and people of host countries. Culture shock has been used to describe a range of negative emotions, including frustration, anxiety, anger, and disorientation (Berno & Ward, 2005).

An Educational Program in the Education System

Tourism is a phenomenon which “affects everyone in a community, and all people involved in tourism should participate in the tourism planning process” (Mill & Morrison, 2002, p. 116). Therefore, as Berno and Ward (2005) have cited, tourism is more than just sun, sea, and sand. Rather, tourism is a significant context for investigating the process and outcome of intercultural contact.

In general, a knowledge-based tourism would enhance benefits in this important industry, and would also decrease its costs especially in cultural and psychological aspects. Therefore, based on the issues discussed in this article, if tourism is going to be developed, it is necessary that the education on tourism goes beyond just providing booklets. It is suggested that this becomes an educational program in the education system from school to university.

Conclusion

By improving tourism in countries, a unique way of promoting mental health would be provided. This

provision would be useful for both, people of host countries and tourists. Tourism by having benefits and positive effects can be a very useful way of promoting well-being in humans.

After addressing effects of tourism on human's well-being, two psycho-educational issues which are of the most importance were discussed in this article. The first was providing education among people of host countries on the importance of historical-cultural-environmental and economic attractions of their countries; and also, providing education on hospitality and respecting guest visitors. The second was providing adequate information for tourists about the importance of historical-cultural-environmental and economic attractions of host countries.

Through tourism awareness and education, people of host countries may act as better hosts and visitors may act as better tourists. Also, culture shock and misunderstanding in tourists and people of host countries would be prevented. By providing adequate information and education in both guest visitors and people of host countries, acculturation of tourists and their hosts would be fostered. On the other hand, empirical research on tourism and human being's behaviour would provide a better understanding of psychological aspect of tourism.

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