



Interpretation of hospitality across religions



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ABSTRACT

Given the inter-religious locus of modern tourism and importance of host–guest interaction, current study explores how religion is involved in constructing hosts' understanding of hospitality and hospitable behavior in private, public, and commercial settings. Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological framework, we resorted to in-depth interviews with 30 participants representing Buddhist, Christian and Muslim faiths and did document analysis of respective holy texts. Regardless of religious beliefs, hosts in this study understand hospitality first as their relations to their own communities and only then as associations with outsiders. This communal understanding of hospitality is supported by religious teachings. Findings reveal that interpretation of hospitality and hospitable behavior in private and public domains vary according to religious values while commercial hospitality, somewhat influenced by religion, is mostly understood as a money-making venture. The results are discussed in respect to definitional characteristics of hospitality, the host–guest paradigm, and global processes.

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1. Introduction

Modern tourism has encompassed all the continents and the majority of countries in the world with developing countries gaining the lead in tourism growth (World Tourism Organization, 2013). The internationalization of tourism has brought attention not only to the cross-cultural peculiarities that arise from traveling internationally, but also to the inter-religious locus of modern tourism. Tourists from predominantly Christian countries visit Buddhist or Muslim countries and vice versa. Moreover, people from secular countries travel to countries where government is ruled by religious law, like in Saudi Arabia or Vatican. Holding particular religion's beliefs influences travel behavior and tourists–local people interactions (e.g. Cohen, 1998). Poria et al. (2003) recognize two main sources of such influence. First, taboos and obligations affect individuals' behavior and understanding of the world. Another source of religious influence is related to the fact that religion “contributes to the formation of culture, attitudes, and values in society” (Poria et al., 2003, p. 340; McClain, 1979), affecting even those who do not practice any particular religion or do not believe in the existence of god. Therefore, the specificities of a religion could also influence the interactions between tourists (guests) and the local community (hosts).

In a tourism setting, hospitality, conceptualized through interaction between hosts and guests (Smith, 1978), implies that local people welcome tourists and “make them feel at home.” While in some forms of tourism this interactional exchange might not be a goal (e.g. business travel) or be subtle (e.g. enclave resort setting), in others, it plays a significant role in both tourists' experience and residents' well-being (e.g. volunteer tourism, ethnic tourism). Some scholars, however, find this definition of hospitality too narrow, and suggest that hospitality is perceived differently in cases when people travel to not feel at home and where tourists seek to experience novel situations and see new places (Brotherton, 1999). Surprisingly, there is no agreed-upon definition of hospitality in hospitality and tourism research. Moreover, the very understanding of this notion have been rarely explored (Lashay, 2000).

Hospitality on the part of hosts leads to the feeling of welcome on the guest side and acts as a fundamental prerequisite for an enjoyable vacation (Mill and Morrison, 2009). For this reason tourism research has largely focused on tourists' experience of hospitality while the perspectives of the host communities were left in periphery. Additionally, if the scholarship identifies the differences in tourism experience based on various tourists' characteristics including religious beliefs (Poria et al., 2003), the other perspective of host–guest relationships, that of hosts, is missing. With a few exceptions (e.g. Maoz, 2006; Mofakkir and Reisinger, 2013), there is a lack of analysis of hosts' gaze on tourism experience, their behavior, understanding and engaging with the human world during these interactions. Understanding of hosts' perspectives

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could help locate the aspects of host–guest relationships that contribute to locals' quality of life and overall well-being. Analysis of hosts' perspectives can also shed light on the origins of host–guest relationships and explain a number of factors that create favorable conditions for successful tourism experience on both sides of the dyad. This understanding is especially critical in the inter-religious context as people from different religious backgrounds may understand and interpret hospitality differently, which can hinder or facilitate cross-religious interaction and thus, influence the host–guest relationship. Hence, the purpose of this research is to explore how religion informs the constructed meaning of hospitality and its enactment by various religious groups.

A hospitality industry focus is not the goal of this study; rather, we aim to explore hosts' organic interpretations of hospitality as affixed to various religions and not influenced by professional exposure to commercial hospitality. The decision to emphasize the perspective of non-professional hosts was based on two considerations. First, the significance of host population to the ultimate success of tourism cannot be over-estimated as the way travelers are treated by local residents largely determines pleasure and enjoyment in travel (Easterling, 2005). The organic understanding of hospitality on the part of hosts could also serve as a foundation from which commercial hospitality is derived. Second, existing research reports that hosts who rely on tourism for economic benefits tend to perceive the presence of tourists in the area more favorably than other residents (e.g. Látková and Vogt, 2012; Madrigal, 1995; McGehee and Andereck, 2004; Snaith and Haley, 1999). Therefore, authentic interpretations of hospitality as influenced by one's religion rather than professional hospitality experience were of interest in this research. Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological framework, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: What does hospitality mean to people from three religions – Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam? How is hospitality enacted by these people? How do the meanings and enactment of hospitality differ among the representatives of these religions? It should be noted that the study focuses on hosts' individual interpretation of hospitality and hospitable behavior rather than enactment of hospitality and actual attitudes. Three religions (Buddhist, Christianity, and Islam) are selected for the analysis because they represent the largest religions that are not limited to a particular nation or an ethnic group (Flier, 1998).

2. Background literature

2.1. Hospitality in tourism

The host–guest paradigm, first developed in the renowned seminal collection edited by Smith (1978), is one of the fundamental theoretical accomplishments in tourism studies (McNaughton, 2006). Although not unproblematic (McNaughton, 2006; Aramberri, 2001), the host–guest framework generates valuable insights into heterogeneous social interactions in a tourism setting, which allows for systematic examination of these phenomena. For instance, Doxey (1975) attempts to explain host–guest interactions by constructing the irritation index (irridex) that includes four stages: euphoria, apathy, irritation, and antagonism. Within the host–guest paradigm, it is generally acknowledged that hosts as well as guests are not homogeneous populations and their distinct characteristics influence their attitudes; and thus, the way they carry out the interactions (Zhang et al., 2006). While originally the host–guest framework considered mainly Western guests and non-Western hosts, recent studies extended it to the interactions between both Western guests and Western hosts (Di Domenico and Lynch, 2007) and non-Western

guests and non-Western hosts (Chan, 2006; Shani and Uriely, 2012), reflecting the modern patterns of international tourism.

The English word *hospitality* derived from the Latin *hospes*, which is a compound word made of *hostis*, which is either a guest or a host, and *pet-* or *pot-*, which is a master (McNauly, 2006). *Hospes* later evolved into *hospitale* to mean a guest house or inn. Modern *hospitality* as well as *hospital* are the results of further etymological development as they both imply the notion of care of a host for a stranger, or a guest. Hospitality conceptualized as a fairly vague and yet monolithic concept by the existing literature, does not seem to be fully capable of encompassing the nuances of host and guest relationships found in cross-cultural interactional setting (Reisinger and Turner, 1998). Despite the fact that hospitality is an underlying dimension of host–guest interactions in the tourism context (Heuman, 2005), neither tourism nor hospitality studies have a definite answer to what is meant by hospitality (Brotherton, 1999). Consulting the most primary source of definitions – a dictionary – one will find that hospitality is defined as “kindness in welcoming strangers or guests” (Collins English Dictionary, 2013) and “cordial and generous disposition toward guests” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). Brotherton (1999) argues, however, that the notions of kindness and generosity imply a narrow and one-way process. Furthermore, these dictionary definitions of hospitality “tend to be relatively loose and unstructured in nature, and consequently too imprecise” for research purposes; therefore, he calls for further research in this area (Brotherton, 1999, p. 166). The lack of consensus among scholars might create a number of difficulties, including but not limited to the differential (mis)use of the term, confusion among readers, and undefined conceptual boundaries that might bias the scope, depth, and breadth of some studies (Harvey, 1989). In an attempt to address these needs while acknowledging the issues present at defining any term, one of the aims of the paper is to shed light on some prevalent features of the definition of hospitality.

Given the fact that definitional distinctions of hospitality are tendencies and not iron clad absolutes, the notion of hospitality should not be confused with hospitable behavior, which could be conceptualized as enacted hospitality. Burgess' (1982) and Lashay (2000) look at hospitable behavior in three realms – private, public (social), and institutional (commercial) – and the interactions between hosts and tourists occur on all the three dimensions of hospitable behavior. Taking into consideration Di Domenico and Lynch's (2007) claim on the blurriness of these rigid boundaries, this study adopts Lashay's (2000) framework and defines private hospitality as provision of hospitality in one's home as well as highly personalized mode of host–guest interactions. The public domain of hospitality implies dealing with strangers in one's enactment of hospitality, attesting to more generic tourist and host gazes (Urry, 2002; Moufakkir and Reisinger, 2013). Commercial hospitable behavior is based on money exchange and limited to giving pleasure to guests without further reciprocity (Lashay, 2000).

Despite the differences in conceptualization of hospitable behavior across domains, they exhibit certain commonalities under the host–guest paradigm. Aramberri (2001) suggests three underlying characteristics of hospitable behavior under this paradigm, which are protection of the guest by the host, reciprocity, and a batch of “duties for both sides.” The provision of protection is “extended by the host to the guests on the grounds of their common humanity” as soon as a stranger enters the host's dwelling (Aramberri, 2001, p. 741). Reciprocity involves the guest's return of host's protection during future encounters when the roles are reversed. Lastly, a batch of “duties for both sides” prescribes the host to exercise care not only over the guest's well being but also his or her material possession while the guest becomes a temporal member of the host family. In exchange, the guest must respect the rules of the household and endure whatever he or she is asked

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