



Tourism and gratitude: Valuing acts of kindness

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ABSTRACT

Explorations of kindness and gratitude, a felt sense of thankfulness, are missing from tourism studies. Such explorations shed light on psychological value of relationships and social capital. We adopted a positive psychology theoretical lens to explore acts of kindness from strangers towards tourists and to understand how these acts are valued. To meet that aim, we conducted a study with twenty Canadian tourists. Through thematic analysis of semi structured, in-depth interviews, we identified these themes: trust in the other person; a sense of risk or adventurousness; novelty or authenticity of the experience; and eudaimonic growth, that is, receiving kindness from strangers indicated well-being beyond experiencing pleasures. Costs and benefits to benefactors were identified. We developed a model that explains how acts of kindness are personally valued by tourists.

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1. Introduction

Simple phrases like *thank you*, *gracias* and *xièxiè* are commonly uttered by tourists and hosts across different cultures and destinations to express gratitude for random acts of kindness. Most are simply automatic responses to everyday activities that occur in commercial contexts. Perhaps because it seems so obvious, gratitude, or a sense of thankfulness, has been overlooked as a research topic in our field. In tourism, we understand gratitude intuitively. We can all recall moments of unsolicited acts of kindness, such as helping our fellow passengers with bags, letting them catch a cab first, or the unsolicited acts of generosity by hosts towards dire circumstances in which tourists sometimes find themselves. Yet, an empirical exploration of gratitude is missing. Terms like gratitude, generosity or gratuity have been mentioned in the tourism literature (Holloway, 1985; Shamir, 1984), but a detailed social scientific exploration of gratitude in tourism is notably absent.

There are reasons why such an exploration is now needed. Firstly, an investigation of this topic sheds light on our understandings of the psychological value of social interactions in tourism. For some time, it has been established that the need for kinship and relationship enhancement is a key core tourist motive, and presumably a driver of tourist satisfaction. How this need is met and satisfied in specific tourist-tourist and tourist-host contexts is far less understood, especially in relation to interactions among strangers (Leeming, 2016). Tourism research has not looked into the value of social interaction at a *micro* level through acts of kindness. On the contrary, cases of so called *micro aggression*, moments of subtle hostility or belligerence in leisure situations, have been documented through feminist perspectives (Sue, 2010). Secondly, the topic of gratitude sheds light on outcomes of tourist experiences, notably tourist well-being. Interpersonal bonds and acts of kindness are essential to well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). One of the key factors that often discriminates people who experience

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higher subjective well-being from those who experience less subjective well-being, is the strength of people's social relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Compared to unhappy people, happy people are highly social and have stronger, more fulfilling social lives (deBloom, Geurts, & Lohmann, 2016; Hartig, Evans, Jamner, Davis, & Gärling, 2003). A well-established, human flourishing model, PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement,) incorporates eudaimonic and hedonic aspects of tourist well-being (Seligman, 2011). Research on the relationship pillar of flourishing is sparse. We know from positive psychology studies that random acts of kindness help enhance well-being for benefactors and recipients (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & Sheldon, 2004), but the conditions for this to occur in tourism situations are unknown. Positive psychology, the study of what makes life worth living (Seligman, 2011), has emerged as an important area of tourist behaviour research. The work in this field focuses on understanding desirable aspects of human existence, with research on topics such as humour, flow, positive emotions, happiness and well-being, and love (deBloom et al., 2016; Matteucci & Filep, 2017). An exploration of kindness and gratitude in tourism, adds to the growing body of current knowledge on positive psychology and tourist experiences.

Beyond the individual level, there are broader social implications of looking at this topic. Glover and Filep (2015, p. 2) point out: “tourism represents a unique and important context in which to examine temporary social capital, trust, and interactions between strangers, for travellers regularly benefit from the kindness of strangers.” It seems random acts of kindness, and subsequently, experiences of gratitude by tourists or hosts who are strangers, represent the quintessential measure of civic virtue, resulting in a special kind of social capital between strangers, *bridging social capital* (Baron, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital refers to “the links a community or individual has with others that are different, to whatever degree” (Schuller, 2007, p. 15). While such acts of kindness from one stranger to another may be temporary, it seems these situations help build the kind of humane society Putnam (2000) envisioned (Glover & Filep, 2015). In considering these wider individual and social implications, this paper explores acts of kindness from strangers towards tourists, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of how these acts are personally valued by tourists. Ultimately, this approach offers new insights into our understanding of the nature of gratitude in tourism situations.

2. Defining gratitude

There are two distinct ways gratitude has been defined as a concept. It is both considered a virtue—that is, a desirable habit that connotes excellence in personal character—as well as, in positive psychological terms, an emotional response to life (Emmons & Shelton C., 2002). When considered as an emotional response to life, it is best understood as an interpersonal emotion (in other words, it cannot be directed towards oneself). It is implicitly about well-meaning intentions, when one feels loved and esteemed, due to the act of receiving kindness from others (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Heider (1958) further explains that people are grateful when they receive a reward or benefit that deliberately results from another person's actions. In its simplest sense, however, gratitude can be thought of as a sense of “wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life. It can be expressed toward others, as well as toward impersonal (nature) or nonhuman sources (God, animals)” (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 460). In this psychological tradition, Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, and Joseph (2008) distinguish between two types of gratitude: trait and state gratitude. At a *trait* level, gratitude is understood in terms of inherent individual differences in people's capacity to experience a sense of thankfulness, whereas *state gratitude* refers to the nature and the amount of gratitude people experience after receiving aid.

Unlike these emotional, psychological conceptions, philosophical interpretation of gratitude considers gratitude a highly prized human disposition or a virtue. This view is also often adopted in Christian, Hebrew or Greco-Roman writings. In this sense, gratitude is a duty (Berger, 1975) or a moral obligation (Meilaender, 1984) for doing something we feel we owe to others. Therefore, the benefactor is not to demand equal reciprocation, but rather, the donor engages in an altruistic, virtuous act for which the recipient is grateful (Berger, 1975). This interpretation of gratitude is also found in contemporary ethical writings, notably religious ethical works (Camenisch, 1981). In religious ethics, gratitude has been referred to as the expected and appropriate obligatory attitudinal response to the gift which is expected to be manifested in recipient's subsequent behaviour towards the donor, towards the gift, and often towards relevant third parties (Berger, 1975; Camenisch, 1981). In other words, there are assumed beneficial outcomes for the recipient, but also for third parties as the recipient is ready to reciprocate and make someone else grateful. On the contrary, and perhaps for these reasons, non-academic works often see gratitude as a “panacea for insatiable yearnings and life's ills” (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 459). They reflect a very positive view of gratitude, albeit often the view that is not grounded in research or academic scrutiny. For the purposes of our analysis, we adopted the emotional, positive psychological conceptualisation of gratitude with a focus on understanding state gratitude. The positive psychology lens was considered appropriate, as empirical research on gratitude is often based in the positive psychology field (Emmons & Shelton, 2002).

3. Situating gratitude in tourism

Tourism research related explicitly to gratitude has thus far focused mainly on the commercial side of the topic. In the context of wine tourism, Kolyesnikova, Dodd, and Laverie (2007) identified factors that predicted gratuity purchasing at wineries. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the role of gratitude and obligation, along with other consumer characteristics, in purchasing. There is also some attention in tourism research on tipping behaviour, which has been linked to

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