Ethics of Chinese & Western tourists in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The potential for tension between tourists and residents due to tourist behaviour is rising. In such environment, understanding tourists' ethical judgments of different scenarios is important. This study asks tourists and residents to ethically evaluate five different scenarios, using a multidimensional ethics scale and rate the likelihood they are to engage in these scenarios while at home and on vacation. An intercept survey of 1827 questionnaires were collected from Hong Kong residents, Mainland Chinese and Western tourists. Teleological ethical theories may justify actions that are deemed ethically inappropriate by deontology or ethics of justice. Western tourists are more likely to engage in unethical behaviour on holidays than at home. For Mainland Chinese visitors, the opposite is true.

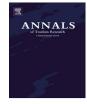© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Tourism's role in enhancing the quality of lives of both tourists and the host community has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Due to the continuous growth of tourism, concerns regarding the social responsibility of individuals and organizations involved in tourism have been raised. A proliferation of codes of ethics, sustainability toolkits and certification schemes have been designed to direct tourism organizations towards a more ethical operation (for examples see European Commission., 2016; UNWTO, 2001). However, there has been less attention given to the role of tourists as agents of ethical judgment and decision making. Indeed, tourism has been discussed as a predominantly hedonistic and liminal experience which reveals hidden values and deviant behaviours that are repressed in the usual place of residence (McKercher, 2015; Selanniemi, 2003). It is argued that tourists are more likely to exhibit unethical and deviant behaviour during travel than at home. Tourists are also likely to employ various neutralisation tactics to justify such behaviour (McKercher, Weber, & du Cros, 2008).

Ethics is one of the fundamental areas of research and ethical questions have been raised by philosophers since ancient times. In recent decades, most notably in 1980s (Rest, 1986), there has been a growth of body of knowledge related to ethical judgments. The topic has been approached from various angles employing different ethical theories. Normative ethical theories of teleology, deontology, virtue ethics and ethics of justice are often employed to determine what actions may be deemed ethical (Fennell, 2006b). Ethical questions started to be addressed by tourism researchers only in the 1990s with major works published in 2000s (Fennell, 2015). Research on ethics in tourism setting is especially interesting from a relativist perspective, due to tourism's inter-cultural nature (Smith & Duffy, 2003). In contrast with moral absolutism, which states that ethics originate from unquestioned principles and certain actions are intrinsically right or wrong, ethical relativism stipulates that there is no universal truth regarding what is right or what is wrong. This is because different societies and cultures have different understandings about what constitutes an ethical action (Fennell, 2006b). Different ethical

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perspectives may clash within a destination. In recent years this has led to resident protests, for example, in Barcelona (Colau, 2014) and Hong Kong (Lai & Lam, 2015). Being rude to service staff, urinating in public and disorderly queuing are some of the behaviours that Mainland Chinese tourists are accused of that stir protests in Hong Kong (Li, 2014).

This study contributes to the important, but somewhat under-researched area of ethical decision-making in tourism, in particular to the understanding of tourist ethical evaluation. The study employs various ethical theories in order to explain tourist ethical judgments in five different scenarios. The research addresses the question of the relativist nature of ethics and tests what behaviour tourists and residents perceive as ethically inappropriate in their usual place of residence or during travel. In the context of Hong Kong, the research investigates ethical judgments, using the multidimensional ethics scale (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990), of five different scenarios across three segments: Mainland Chinese tourists, Hong Kong residents and Western tourists. While similar research has been undertaken in cross-cultural settings to explore ethical attitudes (e.g. Bucar, Glas, & Hisrich, 2003; Rountree, O'Keefe & Chadraba, 2014) to the authors' best knowledge, this is the first attempt to conduct this type of research among tourists. The present study explores why tourists may exhibit socially deviant behaviour. Understanding ethical differences between the cohorts of tourists and the likelihood of people to behave inappropriately on vacation provide valuable information for academics, policymakers and industry practitioners for further development of mitigation strategies to reduce anti-tourism sentiment among residents of Hong Kong and other popular tourist destinations. The following section reviews various ethical decision-making theories and previous research of ethical evaluations.

Ethical decision making & evaluation

Meta-ethics is a branch of ethical philosophy which discusses the origin of ethics. There are three main streams within meta-ethics: moral absolutism, relativism and subjectivism. Absolutism entails that what is right and wrong is based on universal principles. In contrast, relativism suggest that ethics has cultural origins and the understanding of what is right and wrong varies between cultures. Subjectivism suggests that ethics are personal and each person decides for him/her-self what is right and wrong (Fennell, 2006b). As a cross-cultural study about tourism, which entail interaction of people of various cultures, the paper takes a relativist perspective on the nature of ethics. Nevertheless, this study is predominantly informed by normative ethics rather than a meta-ethical debate. Normative ethics is a branch of ethics that studies moral decision making. Although, cultural relativism can be also applied from a normative ethical perspective as a guiding principle for the moral decision making (Gensler, 2011).

For centuries, ethical theories have evolved separately between the European countries (and later North America, Australia and New Zealand) and Asian countries. Existing academic literature suggests that values and ethics are considered relatively homogenous within the 'West' and could potentially be very different from 'Eastern' values and ethics (Forsyth, O'Boyle, & McDaniel, 2008; Lu, Gilmour, & Kao, 2001; von Weltzien Hoivik, 2007). Hofstede (1984, 2011) demonstrates cultural similarities across various countries of the West and their difference from East Asian countries. The terminology of 'Western' tourists is also applied in tourism ethics related articles (e.g. Font, Garay, & Jones, 2016; Holden, 2003; Lovelock, 2008). Hofstede's (1984) framework has been critiqued as it looks at national cultures and disregards ethnic differences within nations (Baskerville, 2003). While the present study does not suggest that all 'Westerners' have same ethics, following the previous research it appears theoretically coherent to contrast China with the collective 'West' for the purposes of the present research.

Normative ethics include a variety of ethical theories. The two largest groups of conflicting ethical theories are teleology and deontology. Teleology judges an action as moral based on its consequences. Deontology implies that actions are moral or immoral in themselves irrespective of the consequences. There are two branches of teleology: utilitarianism is concerned with consequences of actions, while egoism is concerned with the consequences for the individual him/herself (Clark & Dawson, 1996). During the decision-making process egoism and altruism often oppose each other within the teleological ethics, as one often needs to consider forgoing self-benefits in the interests of others. Egoism may include hedonism; the seeking of pleasure. However, an egoist action is not necessarily hedonic, as such self-directed benefits as gaining financially is not necessarily pleasurable (Fennell, 2006b). Deontology is concerned with the concept of 'doing the right thing' because it is the right thing to do (Fennell, 2006b). Kant (1797) was one of the first theorists of deontology and proposed ethical judgment based on the application of an action as a universal law. Kantian deontology is a basis of contractualism whereby individuals within a society agree to act with respect towards each other and maintain social contract. Another group of normative ethics is the ethics of justice. Ethics of justice are related to fairness, including fair benefit distribution, human rights and positive laws (legal system) (Hansen, 1992). Virtue ethics derive from ancient Greek philosophy, where actions are judged as moral, based on whether they demonstrate that a person undertaking such actions possesses good character traits or virtues (Fennell, 2006a; Gensler, 2011).

Mudrack and Mason (2013) provide a useful review of research into ethical judgment and behaviour in the business literature up until 2012. Mudrack and Mason (2013) focus their review predominantly on Reidenbach and Robin (1988) in developing a multidimensional ethics scale (MES), which employs various normative ethical theories. Capturing pluralistic moral philosophy using Reidenbach and Robin (1990) method forms the basis for this research. Reidenbach and Robin (1990) argue that a single-item measure of ethical behaviour is insufficient to assess someone's ethics. Their multidimensional scale, which has been built on and extended by others, takes into account different philosophies of ethics. These include the