Residents' attitude towards domestic tourists explained by contact, emotional solidarity and social distance

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A negative relationship was observed between emotional solidarity and social distance.
- Different activities resulted in varying levels of emotional solidarity and social distance.
- The contact theory was found valid in a domestic tourism setting.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that emotional solidarity, social distance, and contact theory have been widely used to explain resident tourist interaction, these three concepts were never considered in tandem in investigating the intergroup attitude within a domestic tourism setting. To understand what type of interaction improves emotional solidarity and reduces social distance, and how emotional solidarity affects social distance, this study sought to measure the factors explaining emotional solidarity and social distance by focusing on the frequency and the nature of interaction in domestic tourism. Study hypotheses proposed that frequency of interaction and different types of activities that residents engage in with visitors explain both emotional solidarity and social distance, and emotional solidarity in return explains social distance. All hypotheses were partially supported with the findings, confirming the validity of the contact theory in a domestic tourism setting and underscoring the importance of interaction in residents' attitudes toward tourists.

1. Introduction

"'Fudgies' Muttered our crew chief disdainfully. A grin crossed my face with the sudden revelation … 'fudgies' is the northern Michigan slang for tourists! As I eventually learned, they are so named because they frequent the innumerable fudge shops found in the various resort communities. … They did look rather pretentious. Somehow it was a lot easier to prejudge people that I'd never met …" (Havitz, 1991, p. 42, p. 42)

Group attitudes have long been an interest for researchers, especially in a tourism context where people from different backgrounds come into contact with one another. Both negative and positive sociocultural phenomena have been the subject of such scientific inquiry. Negative sociocultural phenomena such as stereotyping, prejudice, bias, and social distance have been considered in international tourism contexts where residents and tourists from different cultural backgrounds view and treat each other with predispositions (e.g., Pi-Sunyer, 1989) as well as domestic tourism contexts where residents and tourists share the same culture and ethnicity (e.g., Var, Kendall, & Tarakcioglu, 1985). Results of such

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work reveal a human tendency to hold biases of others in both tourism contexts.

Contact theory suggests that interaction under proper conditions can reduce such negative social phenomena (Allport, 1954). Therefore, researchers have used contact theory to explain the reduction of negative sociocultural phenomena between residents and tourists of different cultural backgrounds (e.g., Anastasopoulos, 1992; Milman, Reichel, & Pizam, 1990; Monterrubio, 2016; Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008; Pizam, Jafari, & Milman, 1991; Yilmaz & Tasci, 2015). Among these negative sociocultural phenomena, social distance was studied in relation to different types of contact or information sources in tourism setting, and findings revealed that different levels of knowledge gained by varying information sources reduce social distance in a cross-cultural tourism context (e.g., Tasci, 2009; Yilmaz & Tasci, 2013; 2015).

A positive sociocultural phenomenon, emotional solidarity, has also been studied in both international and domestic tourism contexts. Several researchers identified the determinants and effects of emotional solidarity in both domestic and international tourism setting (e.g., Joo, Woosnam, Shafer, Scott, & An, 2017; Woosnam, 2012; Woosnam, Norman, & Ying, 2009; Woosnam, Shafer, Scott, & Timothy, 2015). Even though emotional solidarity is also an intergroup emotional concept likely to be explained by the frequency and the nature of interaction, this natural link has not been investigated to date.

Also, the potential relationship between positive and negative intergroup emotions such as social distance and emotional solidarity has also been a void in the literature. It is logical to assume that both concepts would be affected by interaction through contact, specifically frequency and the nature of interaction, between residents and tourists, along with an inherent negative relationship between emotional solidarity and social distance. The current study investigates these relationships as displayed in Fig. 1 within a domestic tourism setting in a booming Texas Hill Country (U.S.) destination.

Social distance, emotional solidarity, and contact theory have been used to explain different phenomena related to domestic or international tourism; however, these three concepts have never been considered together in measuring intergroup attitudes within a domestic tourism setting. Understanding residents' emotional solidarity with and social distance towards tourists in relation to their contact with tourists is of utmost importance in ensuring sustainable destination management. Defining the types of activities that positively or negatively contributes to emotional solidarity and/or social distance would enable destination management organizations as well as individual industry stakeholders to effectively design optimum tourist activities in order to enhance positive attitudes and circumvent negative attitudes of residents.

2. Literature review

Early studies in tourism have frequently noted the negative attitudes that international tourists can possess in regards to community residents of places they visit (e.g., Pi-Sunyer, 1989), or negative attitudes of residents towards tourists (e.g., Evans-Pritchard, 1989; Pi-Sunyer, 1989; Var et al., 1985). Pi-Sunyer (1989), for example, described international tourists' prejudices about Catalans' culture in terms of food and sense of time as opposed to Catalan residents' stereotypes of tourists based on their ethnicities (e.g., French, German, or Italian) and thus the tendency to maintain a distance from them. Researchers identified Christian pilgrims' uneasiness among Arab residents in the Holy Land (Kaell, 2014), and Cancun residents' anxiety with spring breakers (Monterrubio, 2016). Although resident-tourist prejudice may be more salient in cross-cultural settings, negative attitudes can exist between residents and tourists who share a culture and ethnicity (see Havitz, 1991). In fact, researchers reported unfavorable views toward tourists in domestic tourism settings as well. For example, Evans-Pritchard (1989) noted that native Americans considered white tourists as ignorant and materialistic. Var et al. (1985) reported Turkish residents' lesser favor of Turkish tourists. Literature thus far has substantiated that negative sociocultural phenomena are inevitable in resident-tourist interactions, both in international and domestic tourism contexts.

2.1. Contact and interaction

Contact theory has been primarily used to explain the negative sociocultural phenomena such as stereotyping, prejudice and social distance (Allport, 1954). The theory suggests that intergroup contact causes positive change in attitude towards the members of the 'other' group when the contact occurs under favorable conditions, such as perceived equality in status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support for contact (Manstead & Hewstone, 1996; Pettigrew, 1998).

In a tourism setting, some determinants of positive attitude change from as a result of contact have been identified. For example, based on the assumptions of the contact theory, some antecedents of social distance were identified. Tasci (2009) examined the relationship between social distance and visual information within a quasi-experimental research setting where three groups of undergraduate students at a university in the United States received different experimental treatments and rated their social students towards Turkish people. She found that even though visual stimuli helped to reduce the social distance when the country name was unknown to the respondents, they were not enough to eliminate biases when the country name was provided
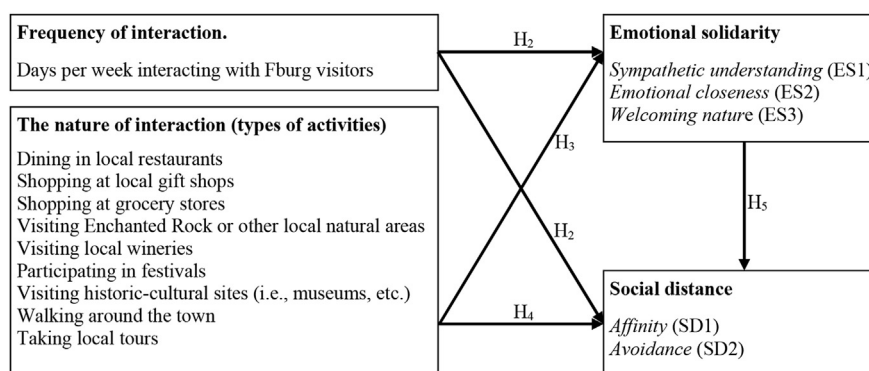

Fig. 1. The relationships tested in the study.