The sociogenesis of leisure travel

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ABSTRACT

Tourism literature explored tourist-related phenomena from a micro- or individual-level perspective, investigating behavior in the context of one's preferences and without considering the larger societal forces that shape these tendencies at a macro level. Drawing on Elias' figurational sociology, Russia's contemporary history (1955–2016) and biographical-grid interviews with 27 Russian citizens, this research provides a figurational analysis of the meaning and practices of leisure travel. Based on nine identified themes arranged chronologically across three periods (Soviet Russia, transitional period, modern Russia), the sociogenesis of leisure travel is explained. Results provides insights into factors that underlie the reality for tourists, based on which they form their motivations, preferences, and behaviors. Tourism research needs to move beyond sedentarist theories and the West/East dichotomy.

Introduction

In recent decades, tourism researchers have advanced our understanding of tourists regarding their motivations, preferences of destinations and travel products, satisfaction, loyalty, and other aspects of tourist behavior. In general, these studies have approached tourist-related phenomena at the micro-or individual-level, treating a tourist as a unit of analysis and investigating tourism behavior in the context of one's personality and preferences (Crouch, Perdue, Timmermans, & Uysal, 2004; Pearce & Packer, 2013). Although valuable, this stream of literature tends to establish propositions pertaining to behavioral patterns without considering the larger societal forces that may shape these tendencies at a macro level.

MacCannell (1976) calls for the examination of society as a way to investigate the tourist, as leisure has become an essential component of modern societies. It has been also argued that leisure and travel must be viewed in terms of specific functions that they perform for individuals in a society, in which the patterns of leisure activities conform to a historically specific economy, balances and restraints of power (Elias & Dunning, 1986). In this sense, the knowledge of tourists and their experiences is incomplete without accounting for the larger environment in which their life experiences are situated and the historical trajectory of the society in which the practice of leisure and travel is enacted.

One scholarly approach to situate a tourist within the macro or societal context is found in the line of research that considers a tourist in relation to his/her cultural or religious background (e.g., Battour, Ismail, Battor, & Awais, 2017; Kirillova, Gilmetdinova, & Lehto, 2014; Fu, Cai, & Lehto, 2017). For example, Fu et al. (2017) investigate Chinese tourists' motivations in relation to Confucianism, while Battour et al. (2017) consider how religion informs travel motivation and satisfaction. These efforts are a useful approach to understanding how individual behavioral patterns can be better understood when couched in broader social and cultural contexts. Largely relying on cross-sectional evidence, this line of research takes a rather static view in that it treats the tourist as embedded in stable social structures.

The current study joins the research dialog that examines tourists in light of larger societal forces. We are motivated by the need to incorporate the developmental perspective in our understanding of the tourist. We do so through the lens of Elias's figurational, or process, sociology. Elias (1978) contends that societies consist of figurations, or historically produced and reproduced "structures of mutually oriented and dependent people," which are connected by various political, economic, and emotional bonds (p. 261). The historical evolution of these fluid social figurations constitutes the sociogenesis in various forms. Elias' process sociology is concerned with dynamic patterns of meaning making, particularly as manifested during the periods of epistemological disruptions when figurations are likely to transform and the sociogenesis is to change its course.

The current inquiry is situated in the context of the Russian society. Russia is a suitable setting to study the dynamics of figurations and therefore the sociogenesis of leisure travel, given the nation's history of epistemological disruptions resulting from its tumultuous political and economic past. Drawing on Russia's contemporary history and biographical-grid interviews with 27 Russian citizens, this research offers a figurational analysis of the meaning and practices of leisure travel.

Conceptual background

Figurational sociology

Figurational, or process, sociology is better understood in the context of the structure-and-agency debate in social theory. This debate involves a number of theories concerning whether individuals' actions are determined and limited by social institutions or whether social agents have the capacity to make free choices. On one side are functionalists and structuralists who see social structure as primary; on the other are interactionists and ethnomethodologists who grant individuals the full capacity to construct their realities. Contemporary social theorists attempt to balance these perspectives, as in Giddens's (1984) structuration theory. Elias's figurational sociology also contends that social reality is jointly formed by sociogenesis and psychogenesis. In terms of the former, Elias is interested in the evolution of communities and social units, while the latter refers to transformations in individuals' psyche, social behavior, and attitudes (Rojek, 1985).

A figuration, or the web of interdependence that simultaneously links, constrains, and enables individuals, is a prime unit of analysis in Elias's (1978) process sociology. Figurations are linked by rules, norms, and/or values; they constitute irreducible social units whose dynamics and integration cannot be explained by properties of their composing parts. This means that although individuals could plan social interactions within a figuration, the whole interdependency cannot be planned or willed by individuals who compose the figuration (Rojek, 1985). For this reason, long-term within-figurational developments and developments in relation to other figurations are unforeseen. Figurations can be more or less complex, stable, harmonious, or regulated; they can be understood in terms of their size, level of integration, dominance and subordination, and many other aspects (Quintaneiro, 2006).

Unlike other sociological perspectives, figurational sociology studies figurations processually with respect to macro historical forces. Elias prefers the concept of development (as opposed to "change") to track the movements of figurations over time and to explain how social formations arise out of earlier ones. Social figurations, however, can be slow to develop and may go undetected during the course of an individual's life. Because the figuration acts as a framework for groups and individuals to regulate and orient their behavior and communication (Baur & Ernst, 2011), it is necessary to know how individuals perceive and make sense of their positions within a figuration and how and why they change their positions. Although interdependencies within a figuration are reciprocal, they are not equal, as power becomes the central aspect of social relationships within a figuration (Green, 2002). In this way, figurations can be understood as a multitude of types of power balances (Elias, 2006) that can play out in formal (e.g., government hierarchy) or informal (e.g., family) settings.

Figurations are characterized by socially and historically specific types of habitus (Elias, 1991). A common term in pre-Nazi German sociology, habitus is understood by Elias as "second nature" or "embodied social learning," and it describes the development of predominant personality structures that represent the collective foundation of individual human conduct (Dunning, 2002). Formation of habitus begins at birth and continues throughout one's life. It is argued that nation-states foster the development of habitus in different ways contingent on their unique cultural, political, economic, and other aspects of societal development (Kuipers, 2013). One example of Eliasian habitus is national habitus, seen as individuals' culturally and socially shaped second nature (Elias, 1991). The national habitus becomes so much a part of an individual that it is self-evident and natural. It functions as an undetectable mechanism regulating one's behavior to comply with socially accepted norms within a specific national context (Kuipers, 2013).

Figurational analysis is applied in sociology of leisure and sports (Rojek, 1985), in which leisure is examined in terms of the specific functions it performs for individuals in figurations amidst a historically specific economy, balances and restraints of power. Elias and Dunning (1986) famously argue that in modern societies, the balance has shifted from external control to self-control and self-censorship, causing the behavior of most people to be routinized and self-restrained. Leisure provides a setting in which the decontrolling of restraints and de-routinization is permitted; therefore, forms of leisure prevalent in society depend on the balance between external and self-control, as determined by the stage of societal development (Dunning, 1996). In sociology, these arguments have been applied to analyze the development of rugby (Dunning & Sheard, 2005) and the roots of football hooliganism (Williams, Dunning, & Murphy, 1989). More recently, the figurational approach has been borrowed to study organizational change in sport development (Bloyce, Smith, Mead, & Morris, 2008) and transitions in the ideological orientations of physical education teachers (Green, 2002).