

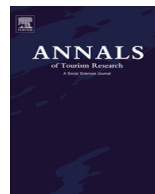


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# Empathy and tourism: Limits and possibilities



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### ABSTRACT

Promoted as an emotional pre-requisite for cross-cultural understanding, the notion of empathy connects with tourism in a variety of ways. This article explores this connection by considering the current and potential role of empathy in tourism encounters and tourism studies. The discussion develops a critical understanding of the positioning of empathy in tourism, highlighting the importance of examining empathy's limitations and risks. It is argued that important differences lay between an unquestioned or non-reflective empathy and a more 'unsettled' empathy, which is reflective and renders possible a productive sense of shame. The article concludes by considering the possibilities of and for empathy within tourism and tourism studies, and by suggesting questions to take the links between tourism and empathy forward.

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## Introduction

Without tourism, the world would be dull—and, more pointedly, tourism's only alternative, immobility, is an invitation to xenophobia. For this reason tourism encounters warrant further analysis and reflection (Gibson, 2010, p. 525).

This notion that tourism might act as a countering force to xenophobia reminds us of the importance of attending to tourism's relational qualities, and particularly to the ways in which tourism might meet its promise of being 'a force for cross-cultural understanding, empathy and peace' (Caton, 2012, p. 122). Indeed, tourism's potential to promote world peace through being a conduit for the development of 'knowledge of other places' and 'empathy with other peoples' is a key rhetoric of such organisations

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as the United Nations and the World Tourism Organization (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003, p. 35). In the face of a situation wherein 'bullying, racism, neo-liberal capitalism, neo-colonialism, fundamentalism and militarism are but a few of the symptoms of our lack of empathy' (Schwarzin, 2012, p. 135), tourism becomes a potential 'dwelling place *par excellence* for explorations of our relationships to ourselves and others, and of the responsibilities we may hold on each front' (Caton, 2014, p. 196). Indeed, this is arguably more poignant now than ever with Europe's "Refugee Crisis" playing out right alongside tourism on the islands and coastlines of southern Europe where northern Europeans go to 'holiday'. Within this context, this paper is intended to further our understanding of the limitations and possibilities of empathy within tourism. It aims to do so by considering the role of empathy in tourism encounters and also by looking at how empathy is, and might be further, positioned within tourism studies. Whilst an explanation of what is meant by 'empathy' is developed more fully in the next section, in lay terms the concept is generally taken to refer to an emotional capacity to 'put oneself into the shoes of another' in order to understand their experiences. As such, the notion of empathy would appear to connect with tourism in a variety of ways, including but not limited to; the idea of tourism being a 'moral encounter' (Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014a); tourism and/as social justice (Aitchison, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006); issues of cross-cultural understanding (Tomljenovic, 2010) and the links with the notion of 'peace through tourism' (Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010).

It is surprising, therefore, that the concept of empathy has not been more prominent in tourism studies and particularly in relation to research that focuses on tourism encounters. That said, there has until recently been a dearth of attention paid to the emotional sides of tourism more generally. As Robinson (2012) explains in his introductory chapter to *Emotion in Motion* (Picard & Robinson, 2012), a volume intended to launch an 'emotional turn' in tourism studies, 'whilst tourism is predicated on our 'human-ness' and our capacities to imagine, play, pretend and subjectively experience the world' (p. 23), tourism scholarship has tended overall to be dominated by post-enlightenment rationality and positivism. This 'emotional turn' is therefore linked, ontologically, to the 'critical turn' in tourism studies (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007), since it is the more 'critical' tourism scholars who have attempted to 'redirect the focus away from tourism as an instrumental economic activity and toward tourism as a profoundly social space where fundamental issues of Self and Other appear in stark relief' (Caton, 2014, p. 193). Indeed, such a redirecting of focus is the overall purpose also of another recent edited volume: *Moral Encounters in Tourism* (Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014a), in which the focus is explicitly on the tourism 'encounter' because the notion of encounter 'enables closer dissection of the moments and spaces in which power is exercised, and relations of care extended' (Gibson, 2010, p. 521, cited in Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014b, p. 2).

Nonetheless, the word 'empathy' still makes only a limited appearance in both the *Moral Encounters in Tourism* and the *Emotion in Motion* volumes. Likewise, the concept of empathy does not feature prominently in literature on the 'critical turn in tourism studies'. This too is surprising given that the level of intersubjective understanding achieved through empathy is believed to be 'an important ingredient of affirmative social transformation which recognises and respects the subjectivity and agency of others and interrogates oppressive hierarchies of power across geopolitical boundaries' (Pedwell, 2012b, pp. 165–166). As such, empathy surely is highly relevant to the field of 'critical tourism studies', which Tribe (2007, p. 38) argues is ultimately about prompting 'critical action and practice' in tourism so as to achieve 'a better outcome [for those without power] in the wider production and consumption of tourism'. The purpose of this article is thus to draw attention to the concept of empathy in relation to tourism, and to consider how empathy might more strongly, and more 'critically', be engaged in tourism studies.

After initially providing a brief background of definitions and theorisations about empathy, the article will then present an overview of the extant links made between empathy and tourism by outlining where and how empathy has thus far been considered in the tourism studies and related literature. The discussion will then turn to questioning empathy, and to considering its limitations and contingencies. Indeed, where empathy has thus far been discussed in relation to tourism, it has tended to be, unquestioningly, assumed to be a 'good' thing whereby tourism and empathy mutually, and instrumentally perhaps, engender each other's positive growth. However, rather than assuming empathy to be something which should be cultivated without questioning its import, the intention here is to look behind assumptions made and to develop a more critical understanding of both the limitations

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