



Tourists' perceived safety through emotional solidarity with residents in two Mexico–United States border regions



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tourists' *emotional solidarity* with residents in two border regions found different.
- Tourists' *perceived safety* in two Mexico–U.S. border regions found to be different.
- *Emotional solidarity* significantly predicted *perceived safety* among tourists.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 April 2014

Accepted 30 June 2014

Available online

Keywords:

International borders

Confirmatory factor analysis

Emotional solidarity

Feeling welcomed

Emotional closeness

Sympathetic understanding

Perceived safety

ABSTRACT

Security and safety are extremely important for travelers and the tourism industry. One construct that has remained largely unexplored in explaining visitors' perceived safety while at the destination is their level of emotional solidarity (positive sentiments one feels for another) with destination residents. The purpose of this paper is to examine tourists' perceived safety in two popular tourism destinations in Texas along the Mexico–U.S. border (i.e., the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the Big Bend area) and investigate the extent to which tourists' emotional solidarity with residents predicts their perceptions of safety. Perceptions of safety were higher among visitors to the Big Bend area than they were among visitors to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Also, visitors high in emotional solidarity (particularly to a dimension pertaining to feeling welcomed) also perceived the tourism destination as relatively safe. Theoretical and practical implications are provided.

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1. Introduction

If average Americans were asked to give their honest impressions of the Mexico–U.S. border, they would arguably provide a less than positive response. Whether this is objectively right or wrong is less relevant than the fact that people's perceptions are real to them much like children's fear of the dark is real even though nothing may very well hurt them when the lights are off. Truth be told, the most frequently crossed international border (Golson & Golson, 2008) has a history shaped by drug and human trafficking, illegal immigration, gang violence, and other forms of lawlessness (Morales, Morales, Menchaca, & Sebastian, 2013; Rosenblum, Bjelopera, & Finklea, 2013; Volkmann et al., 2013). That is not to

say that all areas of the border are home to such activity or that this behavior takes place most of the time. What can be said, however, is that some of the criminal activity is presented by media outlets and can have a lasting impression on potential travelers as they formulate decisions to travel (or not to travel) to key border destinations (Canally & Timothy, 2007; Hall, Timothy, & Duval, 2004; Lo, 2009). While many stories are indisputable, the approach taken to convey news by some outlets can, at times, seem suspect, disingenuous or even as if it is part of a political agenda set out to intimidate travelers or negatively affect destinations (Hammett, 2013).

The implications such media pocan have on potential travel to a destination can be profound and actually beg the question “is the place safe enough to visit?” Of course, implicit within notions of safety are the interactions occurring between individuals. As Boakye (2012) and George (2010) have alluded to in their work, the way in which tourists perceive residents (and resulting interactions occurring at the destination) may serve to explain how safe the former feels while visiting. To date, however, a dearth of research exists on the relationship between tourists and residents in shaping

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perceived safety within the destination. One way this relationship can be examined is through the construct of emotional solidarity (Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2013), which has most recently been utilized in numerous contexts within the tourism literature. Considering that Texas, which shares the largest portion of the U.S. border with Mexico (1241 miles of the total 1933.4 miles, or 62.4% of the entire Mexico–U.S. border) (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2006) is home to numerous tourist destinations, and heavily influenced by what goes on south of the border, including concerns about safety and violence spilling across the line from Mexico, the purpose of this work is threefold: 1) to examine how tourists in two key Texas regions (the Lower Rio Grande Valley region and the Big Bend region) perceive residents in those areas (by comparing emotional solidarities reported); 2) to assess such tourists' perceived safety in the two regions (by comparing perceived safety reported); and 3) to examine the relationship of emotional solidarity predicting tourists' reported safety in each region.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotional solidarity

Solidarity is by no means a new phenomenon, with its roots in classical sociology, based on the theoretical writings of Emile Durkheim. While various definitions exist of the concept (Hechter, 1988; Wallace & Wolf, 2006), solidarity can be thought of as the ties within society that bind people together as one, whether that be through feelings or actions. Merz, Schuengel, and Schulze (2007), argue that Durkheim considered solidarity to be the social tie that contributes to the general integration of society, which prevents society from anomy (that can result from individualization and autonomy). In his seminal work on solidarity, *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1997[1893]) conceived of the concept in two main forms: mechanical and organic. The former was most readily found in primitive societies where the “collective conscience” was strong, whereas the latter could be most visible in more contemporary societies with a weakened collective conscience contributing to greater individualism (Wallace & Wolf, 2006, pp. 30). Retreating from this distinction somewhat, Durkheim (1995[1915]), in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, put forth the concept that solidarity (within the context of the religion of Australia's Aboriginals at the close of the 19th century) is a function of rituals and deeply-held beliefs among those within the group.

Research concerning emotional solidarity began with a focus on the macro-level perspective within classical sociology. In reading the original writings of Durkheim, it is apparent that his intent was to approach solidarity considering social systems as a whole and how the concept supported the notion of structural functionalism. Coser (1956; 1967) work in response to Durkheim's (from a conflict theorist approach), while it also approached solidarity from the macro-level, conceived of solidarity as occurring as a result of inter-group tension or hostility. However, through time, as Merz et al. (2007) contend, the focus from the macro- to the micro-level has taken place where an emphasis is placed on examining solidarity among individuals within particular families and communities. With such a transition, Hammarström (2005, p. 36) defined the construct as “positive sentiments present in relationships” among individuals. The evolution towards the micro may be a function of two things. First, Durkheim's work at the time he wrote was criticized as a byproduct of an extreme case, where he based his understanding of solidarity on a primitive culture in Australia, which he never visited or engaged with as a field researcher (Nisbet, 1974). Additionally, a focus on the micro-level may have come about due

to the practical nature of measuring solidarity among individuals within small groups, most notably within fields such as religious studies, gerontology, and family studies. In fact, numerous forms of solidarity (e.g., affectional, functional, consensual, associational, structural, and normative) have been researched extensively (Bengtson, Giarruso, Mabry & Silverstein, 2002) and measured in various ways (see Lin & Harwood, 2003; Mills, Wakeman, & Fea, 2001) within the aforementioned fields. Most recently solidarity has been examined in regards to a host of social settings, including national identity (Kubow, 2013), kinship relationships (Nauck & Becker, 2013), racial minorities (Stanley, 2014), or the religious (Clements, 2013) among others.

Emotional solidarity has also been examined extensively within the tourism literature to explain the relationships between destination residents and tourists. Woosnam and his colleagues have conducted numerous studies involving both host and guest representatives to determine varying degrees of emotional solidarity with one another. Informed by the work of Durkheim (1995[1915]), Woosnam (2011a) formulated and examined the theoretical framework of emotional solidarity whereby shared beliefs, shared behavior, and interaction were found to predict the construct significantly. While most research on emotional solidarity in tourism involves resident samples (Woosnam, 2011a; 2012; Woosnam & Norman, 2010; Woosnam, Norman, & Ying, 2009), examining the solidarity they experience with tourists, only a few works (e.g. Woosnam, 2011b; Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2013) focus exclusively on tourists' emotional solidarity with residents. Additionally, most extant research only includes data from one destination, making it impossible to compare with other destinations. One final assessment of the work on emotional solidarity is that the construct has been used sparingly to explain other measures (Woosnam, 2012). Oftentimes, solidarity is treated as the outcome of other constructs, which is especially true within current research in gerontology and family studies (see Silverstein, Conroy, & Gans, 2012 for greater discussion of this). Implicit in the work of solidarity is its potential link to safety and security.

Arguably, the closer one perceives a relationship or bond with another, the safer he/she will feel around that person. Such findings have been presented in the context of solidarity among the elderly within the gerontology literature (Dupuis-Blanchard, Neufeld, & Strang, 2009; Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013). To date, however, in tourism studies, emotional solidarity with residents of the destination has not been used to explain tourists' perceived safety. Furthermore, in much recent tourism scholarship, safety and security, are considered highly important in the decision-making process among potential and return tourists (Barker, Page, & Meyer, 2003; George, 2010; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006). Missing in this discourse, however, is a conversation about the role relationships with residents play in helping to shape tourists' perceptions of safety within destinations.

2.2. Perceived safety

Issues of security and safety are of paramount importance for most travelers and the tourism sector as a whole (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Throughout the last decade, security and safety have been consistently ranked one of the top global concerns facing the industry (Edgell, 2013; Edgell & Swanson, 2013). One reason for this is even though it has been roughly 13 years since the 9/11 attacks, the world has been forever changed not only by the threats and actions of terrorists, but also the growing fear of imminent attacks by the same groups (Saha & Yap, 2013). This realization has caused travelers to pause and acknowledge more seriously things such as government travel warnings and alerts as they plan for and engage in travel. Whether consciously or not, as people plan travel, engage

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