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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM

Literature
Review

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JEL Classification

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Abstract

Communication is involved in all social life acts, being the constituent factor of creation and of cultural processes. Cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are intensely discussed topics in today's society which is marked by globalization. Cultural differences are the core subject for studies addressing intercultural communication. Good knowledge of other cultures is a necessary step to get to recognize the nature of these differences and to relate to others through attitudes of understanding and tolerance which are premises for genuine intercultural dialogue, especially in the tourism industry. While communication is an act of human relationships, culture is the motive of this act. In tourism, quality of communication is related to the level of the culture involved and to the degree of improvement of the means of which is done. Intercultural communication experiences help tourists to know and to appreciate other cultures, but also help them to a better understanding of their own culture.

Introduction

Tourism is a nowadays phenomenon, based on increased need for health recovery and for changing environment, as well as for “the birth and the development of a sense of openness for beauties of nature” (Ionescu, 2000). People always have focused on widening spatial and temporal horizon of knowledge of their existence. One of the main means of achieving that objective was travels (Ferenț, 2007). Somehow involuntarily travels are marked by communication in many ways in which this can occur: between tourist and tourism service provider, among tourists from different cultures, between employees of different nationalities of travel agencies etc.

Good communication is not just transmitting information, but also a mutual understanding of each other's wishes and needs. Communication may be difficult if one of the parties is dominant and rejects intercultural dialogue, this fact influencing negatively the forms of tourism taking place in a particular destination. Sometimes, it may appear negative aspects of communication, from the rejection of the idea of dialogue, up to violent manifestation of its own position. In the tourism industry, this event can appear especially when tourists interact with local population, which, in this case, would consider tourists some intruders in their own culture.

Communicative behaviours of individuals are the result of complex interactions between cultural factors, contextual factors, knowledge and emotion. The way we communicate is anchored culturally, shaped by attitudes, values, practices and specific expectations of an ethnic group, which are created and circulated in the communication process. Communication situations involving individuals from different cultures are called intercultural communication situations. In the process of intercultural communication, tourists from different cultural backgrounds “negotiate their cultural identities, rules of meaning, perception, effects which may occur in the interaction process” (Șerbănescu, 2007).

In intercultural communication situations within tourism can arise communication barriers, misunderstandings caused by differences in behaviour, perceptual or of meaning, that exist between tourists coming from different cultures as well as negative stereotypes activation. Communication barriers may exist between tourists and staff from a specific tourism company (hotel, restaurant, travel agency, etc.). Misunderstandings, wrong interpretations, communication gaps are an inherent feature of intercultural communication. The experiences of intercultural communication help the individual to know and to appreciate other cultures, but also to better understand its own culture.

1. Culture

In an anthropological sense, culture is “the collective programming of the mind by which members of a group or social categories are distinguished from others” (Hofstede, 2012). Intercultural communication operates with this anthropological concept of culture defined by Geert Hofstede as the “software of the mind”. If you have forgotten everything you learned, if all the information gathered was deleted from your memory, what remains is just this software that represents culture.

Culture influences communication: the study of intercultural communication focuses not only on language use; the study of intercultural communication recognizes how culture outlines who we are, how we behave, how we think, how we speak (Dodd, 1995). We recognize and respect the way which cultural footprint justify differences in communication style, vision and personality of everyone.

Cultural features were often attributed to heredity because philosophers and other scholars from past did not know how else to explain the remarkable stability of the differences between cultural patterns of human groups. They underestimated the impact of learning from previous generations and the transmission to the next generation of what we ourselves have learned. Ethnic conflicts are often justified by unfounded arguments of “superiority or inferiority of culture” (Hofstede, 2012).

The cultural differences act in different ways. From the multitude of terms used to describe the manifestations of culture, the next four types cover well enough the whole concept: symbols, heroes, rituals, values and practices (as shown in Figure 1):

- *symbols*: are words, gestures, pictures or objects that have a specific meaning that cannot be recognized as such only by those who share that culture. The words of a language or of slang belong to this category, as well as clothing, hairstyle, flags and symbols that define a social status. This is the reason why the symbols have been placed towards the outside - the surface layer.
- *heroes*: they are people, living or dead, real or imaginary, endowed with the qualities esteemed in a culture, and therefore serve as patterns of behaviour.
- *rituals*: they are collective activities, even if it does not help in practical terms to achieve desired goals, within a culture are considered essential within social plan. Therefore, their fulfillment has a value in itself.
- *values*: the core of culture consists of values: these are general tendencies to prefer certain situations than others. Values are bipolar feelings: they have a positive and a negative dimension.

▪ *practices*: these include symbols, heroes and rituals. These are visible per se for an outside observer; their cultural significance remains invisible and depends only on how these practices are interpreted by those within the group.

Culture offers tourists the opportunity to get in touch with the history, traditions and customs of other nations, that contributes to the development of self, to accommodate with the lifestyle of the population from certain tourist destination.

2. Stereotype – part of the culture

A stereotype is a cognitive generalization about a particular social group which brings together members of a group through a specific attribute. These cognitive associations can appear anytime and it is not necessary “to be based on a specific culture” (Miller et al., 2012). “In tourism, stereotypes are used to describe tourists and locals. Stereotypes can influence the perceptions of tourists and hosts that they have about each others.” Positive stereotypes can attract tourists, while negative ones can drive them away (Reisinger, 2009).

From social point of view, “building-up of stereotypes depends on” (Cernat, 2005):

- status of observed groups (high-status group members perceived as effective and competent);
- nature of relations between groups (group members which we are in conflict are perceived as unsociable and immoral);
- social roles that are mostly played by group members (female roles lead to communal stereotypes and masculine roles lead to agentic stereotypes);
- Conversational eloquence and communicability features which constitute stereotypes.

Once formed, stereotypes are activated and applied to individuals belonging to social groups, often in an automatic way (the time required for activation of stereotypes is very short, a few hundredths of a second). They affect us both impressions and behaviours (through the mechanism of stereotypical threat or through direct link mechanism of perception-behaviour). In order that these processes not to become automatically, we should have sufficient cognitive resources available to be motivated enough or to have weaker stereotypes, conditions that are not easily accomplished in everyday life.

In tourism, the use of stereotypes can be benign, but often it has negative social consequences. Stereotypes can function as prophecies that are self-fulfilled. When interacting with a person who belongs to a group perceived as aggressive, group stereotype is activated in our mind and unconsciously affects our behaviour. This aggressive behaviour generates, in turn, aggressive

reactions from one we interact, which confirms the stereotype group. When we try to inhibit activated stereotypes in our minds, the processes involved in the inhibition of stereotypical material lead to its increased accessibility, which makes those stereotypes to return later in our mind with greater intensity than if we had not tried to suppress them. Our psychological processes analyze in such a way the stereotypical information or counter-stereotypical information, that very often contribute to maintain stereotypes rather than to change them.

Stereotypes have an important role in tourism since some ungrounded information can influence a tourist to visit or not a certain place. Therefore, it is ideal for tourists to inquire in advance about destination that they plan to visit, for getting familiar to specific cultural aspects of that area, in order not to experience a cultural shock. Often, this informing clarifies many stereotypes in the mind of tourist and can permanently change its perception on certain features of a tourist destination, of the local population, of how should behave in public in countries that are totally different from that of the tourist (for example, this difference may be reflected under the aspect of religion, customs, behaviour towards tourists: their acceptance or rejection by the host population).

3. Cultural Shock

Intercultural encounters are often accompanied by similar psychological and social processes. The simplest form of intercultural encounter is that between a stranger and a new cultural environment, which is quite common in the tourism industry. Usually, “the foreigner goes through a form of cultural shock” (Hofstede, 2012). Uninformed foreigner may struggle to learn a few symbols and rituals of the new environment (words to use, how to welcome, when to offer gifts), but it is unlikely to recognize and much less to feel the values from deeper layer. Somehow, a visitor in a foreign country returns to the newborn stage where he has to learn from the beginning the simplest things. This usually generates disconcerted feelings, helplessness and hostility to the new environment.

”People who spend much time in a foreign cultural environment manifest mood changes that follow more or less strict the acculturation curve” (as shown in Figure 2). Positive or negative feelings are represented on the vertical axis and time on the horizontal axis:

- Phase One: ”is a period of euphoria (usually short): honeymoon, excitement of travelling and seeing new lands.”
- Phase Two: is a period of cultural shock when the tourist comes in contact with the new environment.
- Phase Three: ”called acculturation; this occurs when the visitor gradually learned how to work in

new conditions, has adopted some of the local values, has more self-confidence and begins to integrate into a new social environment.”

▪ Phase Four: it is then stable mood is finally acquired. ”It could remain negative compared to home mood (4c), if, for example, the visitor continues to feel himself stranger and discriminated; could be as good as before (4b) - in which case it can be considered that the visitor is bicultural adapted, or may be even better (4a) - in this case, the visitor has become indigenous” (Hoftede, 2012).

In the tourism industry this culture shock takes place especially when tourists choose as a holiday destination a country totally different from its own in terms of religion as it was pointed before (for instance, an Romanian orthodox tourist will remain extremely surprised if he will travel to an Arab country like Egypt, where 95% of the population is Muslims and therefore, this is why women cover their face, head, sometimes whole body with traditional Muslim clothes; at first glance, Romanian tourist would see this as a restriction of women's freedom - thus are born also cultural stereotypes).

Thus, the tourist spends more time in a new environment, it is more likely for him to adapt and accept the traditions and customs from that area; in time, what appeared to be unacceptable, can enter in the normal category. There is also the opposite situation, when the tourist cannot accept the lifestyle of the population in a certain tourist destination, which could shorten its stay. But in the current economic and informational environment, all should be based on the acceptance of the other, no matter how different he might be in terms of the culture from which he comes.

4. Cultural Learning

The human being is not just a biological being, but first of all a sociocultural one, as it was proven by its ability to acquire skills, to formulate its interests and to promote social values. The best known cultural learning processes are enculturation and acculturation. First defined in 1945 by American anthropologist Herskovitz, enculturation was explained as ”the sum of direct acquisitions which do not involve a deliberate learning, articulating a sensitivity intellect which is social assumed” (Gavreliuc, 2011). Therefore, enculturation becomes everything acquired during a lifetime because it is available and socially valued. Also, enculturation can be considered a process by which the individual, born with significant behavioural potentialities, is led by groups to which it belongs to develop a wished behaviour, according to their standards. Enculturation means the process by which a “cultural group incorporates specific valued

elements by their offspring in order to optimal integrate in community life” (Cucoş, 2000).

Unlike enculturation, acculturation designates "the process by which an integrative culture imposes less influential representatives of a culture, through socialization agents, its defining patterns". Being a fundamental cultural exchange, born from the encounter between two cultures, acculturation “produces lasting and profound changes on individual and collective personality” (Rudmin, 2008). The assimilation of engulfing cultural patterns is done willingly or not, being accompanied by distinct ways of acculturation: integration, assimilation, etc. According to the way of organizing contacts between communities (presence or absence of manipulation of cultural and social realities), “acculturation can be spontaneous, forced or imposed” (Abou, 2009):

▪ *spontaneous acculturation* (free, natural) is crystallizing when there is a permanent contact between the populations involved (for example, a tourist destination where foreign tourists are permanently present), but there are influential mediators which make it possible (welcoming local population); the change is simply resulting from this encounter.

▪ *forced acculturation*: when the power of social and political context imposes it, but the methods of acculturation are negotiated silently by the groups involved; (this is when a certain tourist destination is promoted at governmental level to the tourists from a particular country - basically, it is recommended to the tourists of a certain nationality to visit a specific country; thus, with the same category of tourists for a long time, the destination population takes characteristics from the tourists’ culture, losing gradually, its own traditions).

▪ *imposed acculturation*: it is the case of colonization, where the rhythm and manner of cultural assimilation is acquired by force; (strongly promoted tourist destination, where foreign tourists come constantly, although the local population does not agree with their presence in that area and adopts a hostile behaviour towards them). The effects generated by these types of acculturation differ depending on their degree of flexibility.

The distance, greater or less, between cultures being in contact will influence the acculturation process and, of course, the degree of prestige that these cultures have; stressed or permissive history of mutual relations, their higher or lower homogeneity plays an important role on the impact of acculturation phenomena that can permanently change tourism in a specific destination.

5. Intercultural Communication

Between communication and culture exists and operates a circular relation, hard to define and decipher. Culture and communication

form an odd couple. Neither is explained without the other. The two phenomena are not perfectly insulated, “do not contain each other or cannot be located in the parallel plane of reflections through analogue correspondence” (Caune, 2000). Communication enters in the definition of culture and culture enters in the definition of communication. They contain each other in part, through their common element, symbolic language (considered to be the common root of communication and culture) (Georgiu, 2010).

Communication is a process that involves the following items (Șerbănescu, 2007):

- transmitter (speaker);
- receiver (listener);
- channel of communication (written or oral, direct or mediated by telephone, radio, computer, etc.);
- code (symbols and rules for combining symbols, particularly in the language in which communication takes place);
- context (wide range situation where communication occurs);
- referent (“the facts of the real world described in communication”) (Șerbănescu, 2007).

Each of these elements is influencing the way we communicate. To the six components of the communication process it is added “the noise” as a whole of psychophysical elements, that may affect the transmission of the message which can be thus distorted.

Communication establishes a path of influencing human individuals, or groups of individuals, by other individuals or groups, and through this influence, the influenced one is brought to a close level of the influential factor, but never to the same level. Communication is therefore based on cooperation, meaning both the influential agent and influenced agent must be directly related and act, first one by offering or imposing, and the other one by receiving. If cooperation is interrupted, then the communication process is interrupted too, “therefore, the two agents do not make the transfer from one to another” (Oprea, 2008).

Explicit thematic of intercultural communication was made for the first time by American ethnologist and semiotician Edward T. Hall. The concept of “intercultural communication” appeared for the first time in his work “The Silent Language”, published in 1959. In the analysis of culture that he makes, the American researcher starts from a semiotic model. In his view, dialogue partners are using not only the language, but also a number of non-verbal expressions such as tone, facial expressions and gestures. In every culture, negation, affirmation, permission, prohibition, astonishment etc., are accompanied by specific gestures, facial expressions and tones. If these are not properly interpreted, communication will fail and will not achieve its goal. Therefore, one of the

key issues of intercultural communication represents incorrect communication or even misunderstanding.

Intercultural communication refers to a process of interpersonal communication, direct, unmediated, which takes place between people aware of their cultural differences. Intercultural communication was born “due to the interaction of several common notions such as: cross-cultural communication, international communication, intercultural relations” (Jandt, 2004).

“The contact with other cultures changes the way the tourist perceives, contributing to its spiritual enrichment.” In tourism, intercultural communication regards the interaction between tourists of different nationalities, between tourists and the local population where they spend their stay, between tourists and specialized personnel with whom they meet, between employees of different nationalities or from different cultures which operates in different units of tourist accommodation: hotels, restaurants, leisure centers, travel agencies etc. With the risk of wrongly perceiving the message, staff working in the tourism industry must ensure constantly that the information provided is understood correctly by the tourist, and vice versa: the tourist must clearly state its preferences, so there will be no confusions or doubts regarding enjoyment of the services requested.

6. The tourist: the ultimate recipient of the communication

Participants in tourist communication can be grouped into the following categories:

- institutional actors (governmental organizations involved in the tourism industry);
- associative actors (agents that connect tourism associations and public authorities);
- individual actors (companies and individuals).

Among them there are performed at different levels and at different times, exchanges of information leading to mutual understanding, to establishing business connections or competitive relationships, to cooperation in designing plans, developing strategies and development of projects, all subordinated to a common goal: “the expansion of the tourism phenomenon, one of the most important factors of economic, social and cultural development” (Rotar, 2006).

For a sustainable development of the tourism industry, communication in all sense and levels, between all emitters and receivers of tourism messages and tourists, has become a key element. Communication in tourism goes beyond the strict framework of relationship between professional worker and tourist. Apart from the providers and the intermediaries of tourism services (hotel, transport company, travel agency, etc.) there are a variety of partners that must be

taken into account. The whole system of tourist communicators has the main recipient the tourist – the reason of this complex mechanism composed of actors above aforesaid, most of which are performing actions that directly concern him.

In tourism, the criteria that differentiate potential tourists are:

- *socio-demographics*: age, sex, socio-professional category, household income, family composition, family cycle.

- *geographical*: place of origin (behavioural differences according to region or country), proximity destinations (determines the way of travelling and influences transport costs), places of stay (climate, traditions).

- *psychographic*: tourist personality (psychological profile, cultural and ideological values), lifestyle (types of activities, centers of interest, opinions and reactions), motivations (physical, cultural, relational or related to self-image).

Taking into account the criteria for segmentation of the tourists, the companies operating in the tourism sector can create individual and customized offers, can change their way of addressing in relationship with the tourist and can achieve a high quality intercultural communication.

Conclusions

A quality communication is not just a simple transmission of information, but also a mutual understanding of each other's wishes and needs. Specialized staff in the tourism industry has the responsibility to ensure consistently that the information provided is correct perceived by the different perceptions of stimuli received from outside.

Subjective interpretations and perceptions are stored by tourists in the form of beliefs that are tourist but at the same time, the tourist must clearly state their preferences to avoid confusion or ambiguities in receiving requested services.

The experiences of intercultural communication help tourists to understand and appreciate other cultures and, at the same time, to better understand their own culture. In the process of intercultural communication, tourists from different cultural backgrounds express their cultural identities, perceptions, all coming to surface as a result of interaction. In situations of intercultural communication, could arise communication barriers, caused by the differences in behaviour or perception, that exist between tourists coming from different cultures as well as negative stereotypes activation. The contact with other cultures changes the tourist's perceiving way, thus contributing to its cultural and spiritual development.

There are similarities between cultures, but also differences and mutual influences. The similarities are represented by the objective reality

of the world we live in, by the existence of universal truths, by inherent similarities between people, by the universal activities in which all men are getting involved, by the answers they give to stimuli received from the environment. The differences between cultures are not random. On one hand, these differences are the result of the geographical, social, cultural, economic, political, religious, historical environment from which tourists are coming. On the other hand, differences are the result of subjective interpretation by the tourists of various elements and relationships from the outer world and of shaped by thoughts and actions, in the form of attitudes, of values, as a system of rules that guide their choices in life.

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Figures

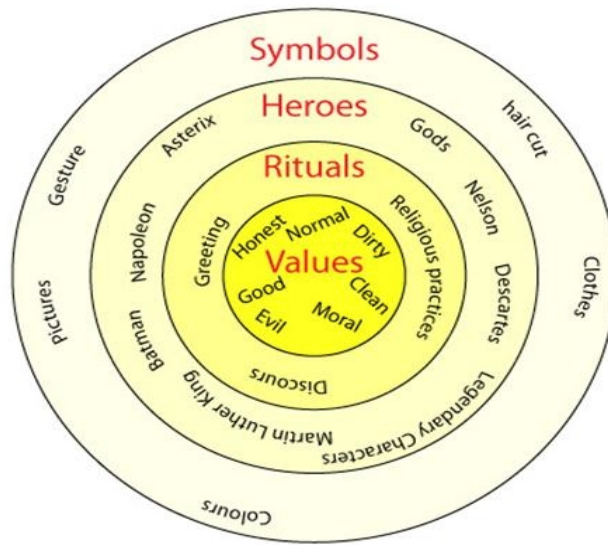


Figure 1. The Onion Diagram of Geert Hofstede (Source: <http://www.slideshare.net/iigreencandyii/cultural-onion>)

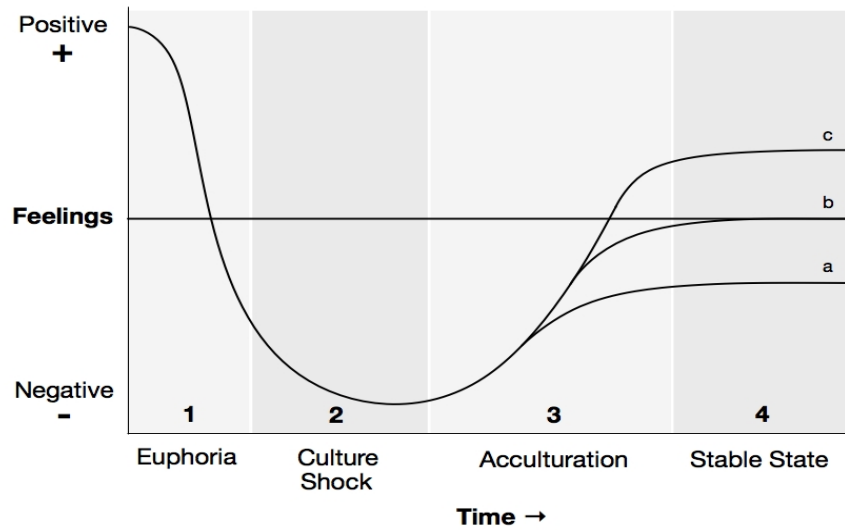


Figure 2. The Acculturation Curve (Source: <http://hyraxllc.com/content/leading-and-management/is-culture-shock-ruining-your-chances-overseas/>)