

4th World Conference on Psychology, Counselling and Guidance WCPCG-2013
Psychology and its application in tourism

Eva Šimková *

^aUniversity of Hradec Králové, Rokitanského 62, Hradec Králové 500 03, Czech Republic

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe the importance of application of psychological and sociologic know-how in tourism practice. Primarily, it is the understanding of clients' motivation to visit particular destination, use available services, clients' needs and satisfaction. The paper describes relations between individual levels of human needs (using Maslow's hierarchy of needs). At the end of the paper the author notes that despite of the all benefits of psychology to tourism, in practice it is used primarily by large companies, or by regional institutions. Entrepreneurs, who make majority of business subjects in tourism, prefer practical information and instructions.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: Psychology, tourism, motivation, Maslow's hierarchy;

1. Introduction

Subjects involved in tourism (such as entrepreneurs, agencies, state organizations, public administration, non-profit organizations etc.) tend to perceive tourism purely from the economic (profit maximization) or management (destination management issues) perspectives. Very often they neglect social aspects of tourism, e.g. fact that travelling gives some kind of a picture about the tourist, his/her personality, attitude, values and life style. They also tend to forget that tourism is about meeting other people, which quite naturally may bring along risks of conflicts between tourists themselves, as well as between tourists and local inhabitants (residents). Conflicts usually start between people with different attitudes, customs and traditions. There may be even situations when conflicts overshadow most of tourism benefits.

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2. Psychology of tourism and theory

Psychology studies clients' behaviour, their experience and relationship. Social psychology then deals with an individual influenced by a group of people, while environmental psychology „considers the influences of the physical setting on human behaviour“ (see more at <http://hotelmule.com/wiki/Psychology>).

In tourism, findings of environmental and social psychology are used to understand tourists' behaviour, attitudes and their motivations. But not only that, as more emphasis is laid on “broad topic of cognition which refers to

*Corresponding name: Eva Šimková. Tel.: +420-493-331-346
E-mail address: eva.simkova@uhk.cz

human thinking and information processing, that provided important conceptual tools for tourism research and analysis“ (see more at <http://hotelmule.com/wiki/Psychology>). For example socio environmental processes are discussed in the Fridgen research (1984).

Note: Human behaviour is in focus of many tourism researchers. To name just few, it can be found in research on economic psychology of tourism of Crofts and Raaij (1994), modelling of tourism impacts of Dyer et al. (2007), tourists' leisure activities, consumption systems, decision and choice of Crouch et al. (2004), or Jakubíková (2012), tourist motivation of Ross (1994), tourist motivation in relation to the market segmentation of Dolnicar and Leisch (2004), or Pearce and Jafari (2011), and also in residents' attitudes towards tourism impacts of Aref (2010), or Stoeckl et al. (2006), tourism and quality of life of Uysal et al. (2012), etc.

The above indicates that tourism is not only about economic aspects, but also social, psychological and cultural (e.g. Villamira, 2001). Psychology in tourism is based on general psychology, while it looks for answers to these questions: How to define tourism? Who is a tourist? What kind of driver there is that makes a tourist to travel? What are his needs in respect of his age or personal status? How does the decision making process of tourists look like?

As Villamira also stated (2001), psychology in tourism studies individuals who act as tourists. Therefore it is necessary to analyse tourism not only from the economic-geographical point of view, but also analyse behaviour of tourists when exposed to emotional factors to protect their health and well-being. Tourists very often want to escape everyday routine and stress, to find new dimensions of life, new experience, and uniqueness or unconventional situations.

Virdi and Traini (1990) state, that every tourist's action not only reflects personal and social aspects of his free time, but also motivation. Additionally, any such action is not only economic investment, but also personal emotional investment.

Considering the fact that a tourist, in general, spends his free time in the environment which he has chosen, and which is somehow different to which he is used to in everyday life, tourism psychology describes tourist's profile upon an analysis of his behaviour and actions in such “alternative” environment. Tourist's behaviour is based on social, emotional, motivation and cognitive aspects, which opens wide space for psychological monitoring (e.g. Ryglová et al., 2011). Key elements from tourism psychology perspective are motivation (needs), expectation, decision making, satisfaction and experience, including analysis of relations (see Figure 1).

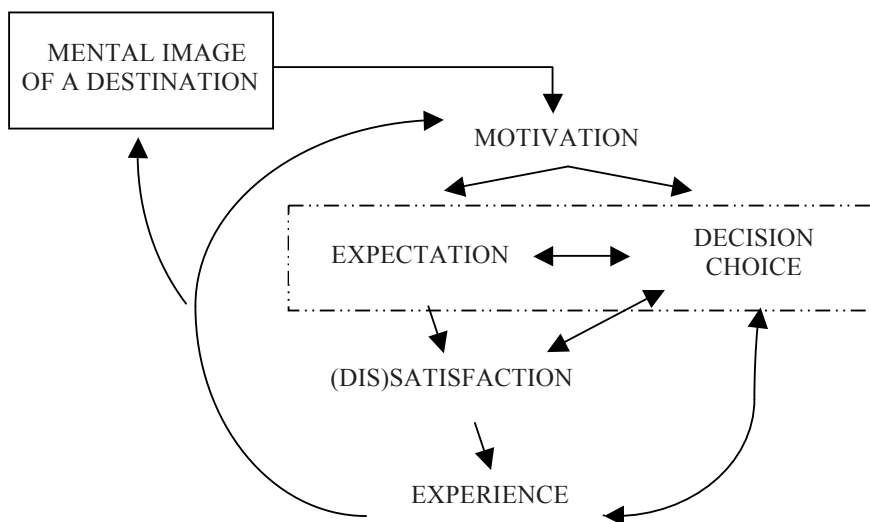


Figure 1: Network of relationships forming a mental image of a tourism destination

Source: Authors' own compilation

The chart above indicates that it is crucial to understand human needs in respect of experience, which the client gains from particular information (such as from a press or internet advertisement) on one hand, an actual implication towards tourism services on the other (i.e. practical use of tourism services).

It is not only the issue of motivation, but primarily interconnection of individual features where satisfaction and dissatisfaction retrospectively form the mental picture of a destination, which subsequently drives the client's needs and affect his further motivation and action.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Kotler, 2000), which suggests that people are motivated to fulfil basic needs before moving on to other, more advanced needs, can be applied in tourism as well (see key features of psychology in tourism in Figure 1). But how individual levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs relate to key elements analysed from psychology of tourism?

A. Satisfaction of the physiological and safety needs (Levels 1 and 2 of the Maslow's pyramid)

It is widely understood that every tourism destination must meet the following two basic needs – physiological needs and safety.

Basic physiological needs:

- *Gastronomy* – variety and quality level corresponding to local gastronomy. Regional brands are often attached to products to highlight uniqueness of a product and location.
- *Accommodation* – quality guaranties that tourist's health is not endangered.

Safety needs – this is a reflection of location's character, social life, risk of undesired pathological characters (such as crime /theft, assault/, alcohol or drug abuse, cultural and ecological vandalism etc.).

Other levels of the Maslow's hierarchy of needs differ according to situations which a tourist may appear in. These may be culture (tourist searching for local history, traditions, or art), active experience (sport activities), adventure (nowadays called adrenalin), conformism (looking for activities he is used to), relax and healthcare (wellness), or social prestige (V.I.P. holidays in luxury destinations).

B. Satisfaction of social needs (Level 3 of the Maslow's pyramid)

Social needs – such as being a part of a particular group (not merely a group of tourists, but perhaps also of local residents). If a local community is involved in tourism business, tourism psychology monitors hospitality, or rather how to effectively promote itself, yet not pandering, how to solve (or rather prevent) potential conflicts between individuals or groups. It can also be feeling of belonging to a particular residential community, local traditions, habits, or relations.

In case of tourists (this applies especially when there is a group of people travelling together on a special occasion, such as holidays), it is temporary feeling of being part of a group, i.e. part of a group of tourists. The core idea of tourism, and sometimes also main driver for travelling, is based on meeting other people from various countries, places, or cultures, and exchanging own experience, attitudes, or personal values. On the other hand, such organized trips, with perfectly designed time schedules (exact times must be met, or the opportunity is lost), may end up by undesired stress, which can become a trigger for antisocial behaviour. Similarly negative action, and also in case of group trips, may arise if individuals are required to accommodate to others (such as to less physically active people, or handicapped individuals).

C. Satisfaction of self-appreciation needs and self-realization (Level 4 and 5 of Maslow's pyramid)

This level analyses client's satisfaction in relation to fourth and fifth level of the Maslow's pyramid. The relation between a supplier/provider of tourist services on one hand, and a client on the other is very specific. It is because the subject of the service is the client itself, and not that he is using. Therefore client's satisfaction is basic condition for his loyalty to a certain product, service, locality, or the service provider. This satisfaction then triggers feeling of self-realization, according to his needs and desires. Such satisfaction eventually leads to what we also call positive experience. Dissatisfaction, on the other hand, leads to internal personal disharmony from the product or services used.

The level of self-realization is dependent on a particular locality, structure and quality of tourism services. Too intense experience may be risky. We may recall a question that we often hear "Is everything fine?" which may eventually have contra productive effect. Psychology should therefore contribute to experience, that is closest to client's needs and desires, all in respect to his perception of "perfect holidays".

3. Psychology in tourism in practice

Tourist's motivation, his role and all factors that may influence his decision making are major factors or inputs for psychologists to define appropriate form of communication with such a client or for making of a desired destination.

Note: Verbal and non-verbal communication, social perception of interpersonal behaviour, as well as intercultural communication, is described in Strnadová (2011).

Besides clients and local inhabitants, tourism psychology also deals with active personal issues. Considering the fact that there is excess of supply over demand in contemporary tourism, the added value of any services is the quality of services and quality of personnel (especially educated personnel /e.g. Ryglová et al., 2011, Hošková-Mayerová, 2011/). The following are primary capabilities of personnel:

- Communication,
- Understanding of others,
- Ability to understand and feeling for client's expectation,
- Loyalty,
- Ability of solving all situations etc.

Good personnel should act as "reporter" or "informant" with profound ability to listen to clients, pays attention to key issues, and quickly reacts to negative indicators. However, it shall be done without any disturbance of clients' privacy and/or comfort. This so called "intelligence approach" additionally requires ability to quickly analyse information and to learn from mistakes. Tourism psychology should therefore define common features of personnel, their typology and capabilities for such work in tourism industry.

In general, psychology research should have its place also in tourism practice. This is understood. Yet, we must ask the following question: Do ordinary tourism entrepreneurs, having specific education and limited financial sources, understand and are able to interpret mostly very specific language of researchers? And if so, do they have enough time for practical application of psychologists' advice?

Most of tourism-related businesses are small or medium size. Their management, however, is focused on running their business in frequently changing business environment and legislation, rather than on the development of sophisticated strategies towards clients. SMEs thus learn from real life (and can be thus called "self-learning businesses"), while new managerial models and research findings are out of their reach. We therefore cannot expect that SMEs would effectively benefit from tourism psychology. The reasons are following:

- Data gathering on clients' behaviour and attitude is not only time consuming, but also expensive.
- Tourism psychology findings are difficult to generalize and put into practice.
- Models are difficult to use in practice because of their glamorization and user-unfriendliness. Common practice, on the other hand, requires simple procedures and guidelines – something like a cookbook, i.e. with simple, but defined steps.

Despite of all these difficulties, psychology finds its place in tourism, because when appropriately applied, it is able to provide information on "hidden" clients' needs. It can therefore contribute to the following:

- Definition of "psychological portrait" of a locality from various aspects.
- Research on tourists' quality requirements.
- Relation between quality and existing prices of products.
- Research on clients' satisfaction in a particular destination.
- Research on life cycle of a locality from tourism perception.
- Research on attractiveness of particular destinations.

Note: To define motivation and decision making processes during the process of tourism destination selection.

The question therefore is where there is a space for tourism psychologists, and where they should be active. Considering the fact that SMEs are not really the place, it should definitely be at larger companies, municipalities or regions. It should be also noted that primary difficulty will be data gathering; therefore any psychologist should tightly cooperate with tourism-related information management experts.

4. Conclusion

This article explores the practical application of psychology methods and findings in tourism practice. Based on own experience and also upon an analysis of information from publicly available sources the author concludes that psychology has very specific place in tourism, and that it shall be respected. It is quite interesting to note that currently it is still marketing which is seen as the most important issue of contemporary tourism (e.g. Palatková, 2006). However, it is often neglected that marketing without deep understanding of tourists' attitudes and motivation, can very rarely contribute to tourists' desire to travel. Without profound knowledge and understanding of tourists it is impossible to effectively promote tourism. In addition, marketing can't contribute to prevention or mitigation of environmental damages. Even in this area it is necessary to incorporate psychology to define programs that initiate environment-friendly tourism. Systematic approach to solution of interrelations between all components of tourism can create mental picture of particular destinations.

Despite of all benefits of psychology to tourism, in practice it is used primarily by large companies, or regional institutions. Entrepreneurs, who make majority of business subjects in tourism, rather require practical information and instructions. Besides information on tourists' satisfaction, it is necessary to deal with potential sources of conflicts caused by undesired behaviour of clients. It is also shown that managerial and psychology models are not suitable for SMEs because of their complexity, and for that reason are used very rarely.

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