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RE-VISITING RISK PERCEPTION THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF TRAVEL

The present paper is aimed at discussing critically the contributions and limitations of risk perception theory in tourism as well as the relationship between threat, risk, fear and anxiety in a context wherein methodological and conceptual boundaries are blurred. Complementarily, I will provide a short but deep examination of attachment theory, emphasizing the potential contributions to the study of travel risk perceptions. For that reason, goals of this piece are two-fold: a) re-considering the limitations of risk perception theory in tourism, and b) providing a well-explained argument to apply attachment theory findings to travel decision-making processes.

Kew Words: Risk Perception, Tourism, Attachment – Secure Base Theory.

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Introduction

Even though risk perception theory has gained considerable acceptance within cognitive psychology and has been developed for more than 40 years, it was only after September 11, 2001 that scholars in the tourism field have shown increased interest in the topic. Defining risk as an exposure to certain threats or dangers (Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005), considering safety in travel is enrooted in the belief that decision-making-processes at the time of choosing a destination are manifold. Seven different types of risks can be identified: a) financial, b) social, c) psychological, d) physical, e) functional, f) situational and finally g) travel risks. Risks associated with travel are often related to health concerns, terrorism, crime, or natural disasters at tourist destinations (Weber, 1998; Hall, 2002; Dominguez, Burquette & Bernard, 2003; Kuto & Groves, 2004; Aziz, 1995; Castaño, 2005; Robson, 2008; McCartney, 2008; Schluter, 2008; Floyd & Pennington-Gray, 2004; Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007; Sackett & Botterill, 2006; Essner, 2003; Araña & León, 2008; Bhattarai, Conway & Shrestha, 2005; Dolnicar, 2005; Goldblatt & Hu, 2005; Tarlow, 2003; Grosspietsch, 2005; Reichel, Fuchs & Uriely, 2007; Floyd, Gibson, Pennington-Gray & Thapa, 2003; Yun & Maclaurin, 2006; Hall, 2003; Prideaux, 2005; Kozak, Crotts & Law, 2007; Yuan, 2005; Lee, 2008).

Initial Discussion

At a first glance, there is a conceptual confusion with the term risk used in tourism studies. From my point of view, risk should be considered as the cognitive probabilities to be injured partially or totally or to feel unexpected negative consequences (Tierney, 1994) while fear takes on an emotional nature based on reactions to a specific object (Quarantelli, 1975; Saurí, 1984; Dupuy, 1999; Quarantelli, 2001). Risks do not have any valuation; at least not

before emotions appear. Most importantly, fear and risk perception work in response to a direct stimulus. At the time of perceiving a risk, the involved person can instinctively adopt two positions: confront the hazards at hand or escape. In sharp contrast to this, anxiety is a more-elaborated secondary emotion. Anxiety is indirectly associated with risks since it is experienced before concreteness emerges. The object of anxiety is fuzzy, potential or diffuse and generally emerges from fantasy, news or rumors. Given that, studies of risk perception and fear before a trip are actually an exploration of anxiety. This is a main limitation of risk perception theory applied to tourism. A person should not experience fright prior to traveling because as a primary emotion, fright can be only triggered by a direct stimulus (Quarantelli, 1975; 2001; Saurí, 1986; Dupuy, 1999; Heidegger, 1997; Sartre, 1997; Kierkegaard, 2003; 2005).

Travel Risk Perception Studies

A pioneer in the study of personality associated with travel has been Stanley Plog. For this scholar, travelers experience fear or attraction depending upon their personality. By means of a continuum, Plog classifies travelers along with their motivation into three types: a) people who had been socialized in contexts of security comprise allocentric types and seek adventure and contact with strangers, b) psycho-centric travelers (at the other extreme) only travel the beaten paths, organize their journeys in follow up of extreme security concerns and often avoid personal contact with hosts and local communities; finally, c) mid-centric is a combination of both typologies and represents the largest segment of travelers (Plog, 1973; 1971; Castaño, 2005). Even if this theory looks to be illustrative, Plog appeared not to be rigorous in the construction of his scales. Other studies suggest that Plog's findings are

contradictive and do not correspond to a previous classification that he presents (Hoxter-Lee and Lester, 1988; Castaño, 2005).

In 1992 Roehl and Fesenmaier published an article in the *Journal of Travel Research* entitled “*risk perception and pleasure travel: an exploratory analysis*”. The goal of this study was to describe how consumers view risks at the time of choosing a tourist destination and what channels they use for alleviating such risks. Based on a sample of 258 volunteers –with a mean age of 37 years- and a 63.9% rate response, Roehl and Fesenmaier group travelers into three clusters based on whether these respondents perceive: 1) place risks, 2) functional risks or are 3) risk neutral. The place risk cluster was created with respondents who indicated that vacations and destinations are often fairly risky, the functional risk type puts emphasis on physical and equipment risk dimensions, while risk neutrals manifest less risk perceptions than the other groups. They found the three risk groups differed in terms of the most recent trip taken and the benefits sought from travel as well as basic demographic characteristics. Further, the authors argued that risk perceptions are situation-dependent. However, their analyses were exploratory in nature and have not been validated in the tourism literature since the appearance of the paper.

Type of Travel and Nationality as Influence Factors

Type of travel as an influence factor has been studied in terms of business versus pleasure travel. For instance, Dominguez, Burguette and Bernard (2007) investigated differences in risk perceptions relating to the impact of the WTC attacks on tourist destinations in Mexico. The study found that business travelers are less sensitive to tragic events than holiday ones. The researchers selected a set of Mexican holiday destinations as Cancun, Puerto Vallarta and Los Cabos and others related to business travel such as Mexico

De and Monterrey. In addition, Dominguez et al. argue that American visitors are prone to perceive more risk than travelers of other nationalities in foreign destinations because of the psychological consequences of September-11. Even though these findings are in accordance with other studies (Somnez, 1998; Reichel, Fuchs, and Uriely, 2007; Kozak, Crotts and Law, 2007; Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005; Dolnicar, 2005; Schluter, 2008), the differences found were not very large.

In a like manner, other research carried out by Sacket and Botterill (2006) revealed risk perceptions increase according to proximity issues and nationality of tourists. Basically, more American tourists (72%) think fears have increased after the WTC attacks in comparison with British tourists (42%). In addition, Americans (28%) perceive more risk in international flights than British (12%) (Sacket and Botterill, 2006). These results conform with those of Schluter (2008) and Dominguez et al. (2007). Similar research was conducted by Floyd, Pennington-Gray (2004) and Floyd, Gibson, Pennington Gray and Thapa (2003). In their first approach in 2003, the researchers examined the immediate reactions after Sept-11 in inhabitants of New York with respect to travels and holiday planning. The study was repeated one year later. In sum, the results show that risk perceptions are lower in business travelers and that international flights are more likely perceived as negative than domestic ones.

Kozak, Crotts and Law (2007) interviewed 1,180 international and domestic travelers from 14 countries at the Hong Kong airport. Applying Hofstede's research, the authors assume that culture conditions and shapes travel risk perceptions by means of uncertainty avoidance differences. The study reveals that: a) 83% of respondents agreed high risks oblige people to cancel or change their destinations, b) all who wish not to change their destination

because of terrorism are males, elderly and have a medium tolerance of risk per Hofstede's scale, c) participants indentified as a major risk infectious illnesses whereas terrorism has been catalogued in a secondary role, d) negative risk perceptions not only affect involved countries but also neighboring ones or broader regions, e) even though risks associated with a terrorist attacks are highly perceived inside industrialized countries, SARS and another diseases are linked to the Third World, f) natural disasters appears not be a reason to cancel a flight, g) the authors suggest that psychological personality theory should be reconsidered and introduced in this discussion to complement the findings (Kozak, Crotts, and Law, 2007).

Other Influence Factors

For instance, Reichel, Fuchs and Uriely (2007) agree that the role tourists play is pivotal in determining how dangerous a destination is perceived, regardless of the nationality of travelers. For example, a backpacker might trivialize terrorism risks in comparison to a consumer who decided to be lodged at a four star hotel or at a lavish resort (Reichel, Fuchs and Uriely, 2007). In accordance with this, empirical research conducted by Reisinger and Mavondo (2005) found that anxiety and excitement are correlated with the degree of motivation put in the arrangement of the trip. This hypothesis was tested by an administration of open and close-ended questionnaires in two randomly selected groups formed by 246 Australians and 336 foreigners in October and December of 2001.

Another limitation of risk perception theory studies is linked to the consideration of risk as a negative attribute which jeopardizes the positive aspects of a trip. This wide-spread idea -enrooted in the belief that risk should be avoided- does not take into account other segments which are attracted to hazards. As empirical

research by Dickson and Dolnicar revealed, adventure tourism as an oppositional concept to this paradigm has not been substantially developed; contributions of their theoretical paper consist in emphasizing desired risks which attract instead of leading to rejection as many other scholars argue (Dickson and Dolnicar, 2004).

Yun and Maclaurin (2006) present a scientific scale to measure safety in travels. Needless to say, this sophisticated instrument tries to quantify a multivariable set of concepts and beliefs regarding threats. The existent literature in this matter is abundant and comprises the following topics: safety and security at destinations, travel anxiety, fear of terrorism, safety from natural unexpected disasters, traffic accidents, transportation and facilities and unfamiliarity environment or cultural incompatibility. Yun and Maclaurin designed a questionnaire with 20 categories and more than 27 adjectives related to safety, security and risk in travel. Using Likert scales ranging from 1 as strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree, the scholars tested this device at the University of Guelph with 263 students. Yun and Maclaurin classified the obtained responses into three different disproportionate clusters: a) safety balanced (n=124), b) safety seekers (n= 88) and Risk-takers (n=55). Tautologically, risk takers are in general less likely to experience risks than others while safety seekers exhibit higher coefficients. This led the researchers to affirm *“the results from this study demonstrated that the proposed travel safety attitudinal scale can be very useful in understanding travel behavior even though there may be room for modification of the scale measurement”* (Yun and Maclaurin, 2006: 8).

Secure base and Exploration

Secure base and attachment theory are a result of a combination of experimental psychology and ethology for shedding light on the influence of the Oedipus complex. Attachment is defined as “*a behavior that allows children keep emotional proximity with a stronger care-taker as well as the tendency to consider such a relationship as a secure base at time of exploring unknown environments*” (Vemengo, 2005). In other terms, secure base not only works as a site where children launch to exploration but also as a place wherein the ego feels safer and should return in moments of hazards or uncertainty.

Taking his cue from Ainsworth (1974) and Main (2001), Bowlby (1989) was the first scholar who experimentally proposed an observable emotional liaison between child and care-taker in an early socialization stage (no older than one year of life). That way, bondages between children and care-takers have been consistently found in different cultures beyond the boundaries of time and ethnicity. Attachment theory argues that security or insecurity feelings are shaped depending upon responses and assistance received early on by a child.

These concerns were previously traced by Anderson who in 1972 discovered that children socialized in contexts of violence will develop in adult-hood more probabilities to experience anxiety whenever they are out of their homes than those who grew up in situations of friendship and psychological support. Nowadays, more than 5 decades of research demonstrates that social behavior can be explained following attachment's contributions (Bowlby, 1989; Ainsworth, 1974; Anderson, 1972; Fairbairn, 1962; Bretherton, 1985; Winnicott, 1996; Waters and Hamilton, 2000; Vemengo, 2005; Korstanje, 2008). In perspective, not only diverse pathological conducts can be clinically explained thanks to this body of knowledge but it also permits to re-construct pertinent guidelines to understand why

a person feels anxiety at the time of displacement far-away from home while others may feel excitement.

However, not all attachment is the same. Main (2001) found that there were some correlations between parents early experience in child-hood and ways they treated their children. Our author sets forward three kinds of Attachments: a) Secure-autonomous, b) Insecure-Avoidant, and c) Insecure-concerned. Those who have been classified as insecure showed some problems expressing overtly their feelings against their parents.

However, attachment hypotheses were never tested following a criterion that encompasses a unilateral diachronic perspective. Unless otherwise resolved, studies were carried out in children no older than 3 years or in adults but there is no trace relating to the evolution of a same subject in the continuum of time ranging from child to adulthood. Therefore it is important to note that too far from the facts as they happened in the past, scales and questionnaires administered today on adults asking about maternal attachment is no other thing than the symbolic elaboration of how it is represented in the interviewee's mind. However, additional developments have demonstrated that attachment as it is remembered helps people in perceiving environments and relationships as safer. Regardless how the facts really occurred, the most important point is the way subjects elaborate symbolically the liaison with their early care-takers. This can be measured and observed.

Serious contradictions have been found when testing attachment-related typologies beyond the United States; whereas in this country surveys pulled out universal and all-encompassed conclusions, it is unfortunate that they cannot be replicated in other different countries such as Japan, Germany or even in Italy. Cultural factors appear to play a

fundamental role in the configuration of mass-attachment typology. However, this is a surface manifestation of a much more deep seated concern which merits to be studied in future research. Also questions as to how attachment and secure base studies should be approached remain open and need to be dealt with in future investigations.

Conclusion

The contributions of Attachment theory to understanding travel risk perceptions lie in emphasizing that: a) necessities of security correspond to the ways attachment was developed, b) risk perceptions associated with the socialization process could explain as to why some visitors feel more anxiety than others, c) marketing strategies focused on consumer profiles can be based on these studies for enhancing tourist destination image, and d) cross-cultural comparisons should be done following Secure Base and Attachment contributions.

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