REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF (OBJECTIVE) AUTHENTICITY

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ABSTRACT
The concept of authenticity has been a hallmark in the sociology of tourism literature since it was first used by Dean MacCannell in his seminal works on tourism studies (1973; 1976). Authenticity has come to be defined in many ways, but has now evolved into a concept some would argue has become passé (Olsen 2007). This paper discusses the background to authenticity, its beginnings and foundations and provides various definitions of the idea from the 1970s to current, twenty-first century thinking. The background and arguments from noted authors on the subject, such as MacCannell (1973; 1976), Urry (1995), Pearce and Moscardo (1985), Littrell, Anderson and Brown (1993) and Sharpley (1994) have all been reviewed in this paper. These authors’ arguments are counter-balanced by the current theorising on authenticity, where authors such as Wang (1999), Cohen (2007), Olsen (2007) and Pearce (2007) are examined. I believe however, that objective authenticity still has a place within the sociology of tourism theories. It will continue to be an enduring concept that will emerge and evolve alongside more postmodern concepts. I, for one, will continue to use and embrace the original ideas as suggested by MacCannell (1973; 1976).

1 INTRODUCTION
As tourism has now become a central element of western economies, it is now recognised that people need travel in order to seek out new experiences and ways of life for themselves. Travel is seen as a mark of affluence and status, and only people with little money, the old and infirm, and very young children do not travel. The status and experience of travel, particularly to ‘exotic’ destinations, gives a ‘value’ and worth to those who have achieved this level of western prosperity. The following paper concerning authenticity within the scope of tourism brings together some highly interesting and salient issues relevant to the canon of sociology. I have based much of my paper on the work of Dean MacCannell (1976) and his book, The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class.

According to the many of the early tourism scholars of the 1970-1990s, the most salient concept at the centre of any research investigating the experience of tourists is that of authenticity or verisimilitude. Urry amplifies this by arguing

A particular issue is that of authenticity. It is argued especially by MacCannell that what tourists seek is the ‘authentic’, but that this is necessarily unsuccessful since those being gazed upon come to construct artificial sites which keep the inquisitive tourist away ... Tourist spaces are thus organised around what he calls ‘staged authenticity’ (Urry 1995: 140).

Many other writers and researchers have argued that the prominent issue is the fact that many tourists are indifferent to authenticity and that this may explain their perceptions of their experiences (Pearce and Moscardo 1985: 158). MacCannell suggests that contemporary tourists who experience alienation through their daily working lives, pursue authenticity, through their journeys and holidays, to return home with an experience of a
more 'primitive' or alternative lifestyle connected with history (Littrell, Anderson and Brown 1993: 211). As Sharpley argues

Tourists, even those on a quest for authenticity, are trying to escape, albeit temporarily, from the pressures and problems of the modern world and, therefore, the marketing of a destination and the tourism system within it tends to shield visitors from the realities of the country (Sharpley 1994: 147).

This paper seeks to make a modest contribution to the debate surrounding the concept of authenticity and to add some insights to this concept. First, the paper discusses definitions of authenticity. Second, the paper looks at the theorists who have contributed to the foundational work on authenticity itself. Third, the paper discusses the current state of thinking about authenticity. Last, the paper concludes with some thoughts about the future of authenticity and its current value in touristic research.

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 SOME DEFINITIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

With regards to defining the concept of authenticity, Spooner believes that 'authenticity is a conceptualisation of elusive, inadequately defined, other cultural, socially ordered genuineness' (Spooner 1986: 225). But, Cohen suggests that "[a]uthenticity" is an eminently modern value ... whose emergence is closely related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence ...' (Cohen 1988: 373-374). Further, as maintained by Sharpley

Authenticity then, is not a given, measurable quality that can be applied to a particular event or product, nor does it provide a simple scale against which a tourist experience may be judged (Sharpley 1994: 135).

Moreover, Rushdie believes that


And, according to Theobald

Authenticity means genuine, unadulterated, or the real thing (Theobald 1998: 411 as cited in Reisinger and Steiner 2006: 68).

However, there are many problems with obtaining an overarching definition of authenticity. I believe that objective authenticity can be defined as an experience which genuinely samples the culture of the other, that is, of the host society and the host people.

2.1.1 FOUNDATIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

Dean MacCannell, in his article, 'Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings' (1973), believes that the contemporary tourist is not just on a mission to uncover gratification for itself, but, rather, that the tourist is searching for 'authenticity'. This could be likened to a quest for a holy place, therefore, a religious act. The outcome of this is that the tourist only occasionally achieves the goal of authenticity. This apparently does not stem from the quality of the search, but from the way in which tourists are influenced by tourism operators, guides, staff, advertising and marketing. In areas developed for the use of tourists, they are trapped in a disguised, but encircling 'tourist space'. This has been constructed for them by the tourist enterprise and industry where forms of authenticity are staged for the unsuspecting and enthusiastic pursuer. As Birch and Dayton emphasise
Spaces are typically organised by out-of-scale landscapes while distances are portrayed to create convenient tourist itineraries. Just as the tourist attractions are commodified and made part of a tourist industry, so too the maps which guide the way for those tourists commodify and colonise space (Birch and Dayton 1994: 1).

In its own way, tourism is a search for the absolutely real, or as MacCannell prefers, 'for the authentic in human experience'. MacCannell (1976) places tourist locations along a scale of authenticity. Some locales are only a front, constructed with the single purpose of attracting tourists. Other locales are only back, not delineated for tourists at all, but happened upon by chance or pure perseverance. These are the attractions that are considered to be unnoticeable lures. In the middle of these, there are situated, the fronts that are arranged to appear like backs, backs that are open to the public (or the tourists), and, backs that are groomed to be acceptable for tourists and travellers. The vast majority of fascinations exploit the contemporary infatuation for undergoing an experience in reality and engaging in the authentic. MacCannell makes the most of this argument by highlighting the fact that the tourist who wishes to detour from the well trodden route, who abhors exploitation and the obvious tourist traps, is the superlative tourist (Schudson 1979: 1251). As MacCannell highlights

[T]ouristic shame is not based on being a tourist but on not being tourist enough, on a failure to see everything the way it 'ought' to be seen. The touristic critique of tourism is based on a desire to go beyond the other 'mere' tourists to a more profound appreciation of society and culture, and it is by no means limited to intellectual statements. All tourists desire this deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree; it is a basic component of their motivation to travel (MacCannell 1976: 10).

An underlying feature that needs to be considered is the degree to which any tourist attraction or participation can be deemed authentic once it is assembled and offered as a segment of the complete tourist concoction. That is, once an objective, an occurrence or even a cultural artifact becomes ensnared in the tourist frame of reference it becomes an exchangeable unit of economic wealth. In becoming an article of quid pro quo the destination, event or artifact is assigned a value. This value is normally gauged by a monetary worth, and without hesitation, this devalues the meaning and significance for indigenous populations and possibly its authentic value for tourists (Sharpley 1994: 128). Boorstin (1961) declares that there is something about the tourist attraction in itself that is not quite mentally gratifying

These attractions offer an elaborately contrived indirect experience, an artificial product to be consumed in the very place where the real thing is as free as air. There are ways for the traveller to remain out of contact with foreign peoples in the very act of sight-seeing them. They keep the natives in quarantine while the tourist in air-conditioned comfort views them through a picture window. They are the cultural mirages now found at tourist oases everywhere (Boorstin 1961: 99).

Doubtlessly, most of the work undertaken by MacCannell is meant to demonstrate, on the one side, how the travel organisations triumph in staging authenticity, and conversely, how the tourists themselves strive to advance through the 'front' so authenticated, to the 'back', the true experience at the chosen objective (MacCannell 1973). As MacCannell states

The variety of understanding held out before tourists as an ideal is an authentic and demystified experience of an aspect of some society or person (MacCannell 1976: 94).
More precisely, MacCannell interweaves his work on authenticity with the ideas developed by Goffman on frontstage and backstage (Goffman 1959). In this undertaking, Goffman’s frontstage and backstage polarities are amplified into six regions which MacCannell declares are theoretically discernible (Pearce and Moscardo 1986: 123). These six regions are: Stage One - This is Goffman’s front region; the type socially constructed area tourists attempt to conquer or advance behind. Stage Two - This is a front region, set up for tourists that has been embellished to seem, in certain ways, as a back region. Operationally, this stage is an absolute front region, but is superficially enhanced with prompts of back area actions: tokens, not tolerated insincerely, labelled ‘atmosphere’. Stage Three - This takes the form of a front region that is fully arranged to appear as a back region. This is a questionable phase: the more comprehensive the pretense, the harder it is to separate from stage four. Stage Four - This is a back region that is unobstructed to newcomers. It is the accessible trait that separates these particularly touristic areas (three and four) from other back regions. Stage Five - This is a back region that has been tidied up or changed around so as to allow tourists an infrequent perusal. Stage Six - This is Erving Goffman’s back region, the type of societal space that arouses touristic awareness (see Goffman 1959). Further to this, MacCannell claims that

Just having a back region generates the belief that there is something more than meets the eye; even where no secrets are actually kept, back regions are still the places where it is popularly believed the secrets are (MacCannell 1973: 591).

Such places where the ‘real’ action is happening would be considered to be ‘backstage’ at a rock concert, or the availability of press passes to the chosen few to gain behind the scenes access to sporting events. That is, gaining access to something or someone others cannot hope to encounter.

... [E]xposure of back regions is a casual part of their touristic experience. What they see in the back is only another show: it does not shock, trick, or anger them, and they do not express any feelings of having been made less pure by their discovery (MacCannell 1973: 601).

The practical activity in tourist areas is generally restricted to progression between spots constructed to appear as back regions, and back regions where tourists are permitted to peer. Awareness is what is gained from one of these glimpses into a back region (MacCannell 1976: 101-102). Chalfen (1979) also uses MacCannell’s description of stages and, applying it to an examination of photography done by tourists, exposes varied occurrences of tourists endeavouring to penetrate into back regions (Pearce and Moscardo 1986: 124). As MacCannell states, quite succinctly, ‘[w]hat they see in the back is only another show’ (MacCannell 1976: 105). Moreover, tourists frequently do catch a glimpse of the mundane facets of daily life as it is truly lived in the locales they journey to, but small numbers ever reveal much significance in this (MacCannell 1976: 106).

2.1.2 CURRENT THEORISING ON AUTHENTICITY

In the late 1990s, authors such as Wang (1999) described authenticity as being able to be approached in three separate ways. These approaches are through the theoretical foundations of objectivism, constructivism and postmodernism. Wang (1999) also discusses the limits to objective authenticity. He believes that existential authenticity is an alternative way to perceive tourism and that the objects or places that are toured need not be classified as authentic. Wang (1999) further classifies the idea of existential authenticity into two subcategories of interpersonal and intrapersonal, where he believes that this newly developed concept can help to explain more tourism experiences then previously and also enhance the illustrative strength of the ‘authenticity quest’ representation in tourism.
More recently (Cohen 2007; Olsen 2007), authenticity has been theorised as having progressed forward from the foundations of the objective authentic to it being passé, or even untenable for use in tourism studies. For example, Cohen (2007) argues that multiple meanings and definitions of authenticity now exist. Cohen (2007) believes that the idea of a 'simple of physical material quality to authenticity is no longer viable' (as cited in Pearce 2007: 86). Cohen (2007) further suggests that most authenticity theorists have come to define authenticity through other, different definitions, in order to explain the sites they investigate. Cohen (2007) lists six alternative definitions, which are: ‘authenticity as customary practice or long usage; authenticity as genuineness in the sense of an unaltered product; authenticity as sincerity when applied to relationships; authenticity as creativity with special relevance to cultural performances including dance and music; and, authenticity as the flow of life in the sense that there is no interference with the setting by the tourism industry or other managers’ (as cited in Pearce 2007: 86). These definitions of the term authenticity can be identified as components of objective authenticity because they can all be understood to include the idea that any of the situations tourists experience can be judged using external measurements (Pearce 2007: 86). Cohen utilises the ‘uninterrupted flow of life approach to authenticity’ where the toured or the tourist sites are not structured for tourism (as cited in Pearce 2007: 86). Cohen (2007) argues that this definition of authenticity correlates well with MacCannell’s (1976) original concept and further argues that this way of looking at the ‘true’ or ‘real’ is appropriate to the unexpected and serendipitous sites of tourism frequently described as authentic (Pearce 2007: 86).

Olsen (2007) also believes that the original idea of authenticity, or the authentic, is now out of date, and that researchers of tourism should no longer use the concept in their work (as cited in Pearce 2007: 86). Pearce (2007), however, argues that new approaches and directions in tourism research and authenticity are imminent. The usage of improved definitions and separation of the concept, by connecting it to numerous consumers and employers of the word, and through linking it to other themes in tourism with innovative approaches will give authenticity a possible enduring existence in and outside of tourism analysis (Pearce 2007: 89).

3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper discusses the concept of objective authenticity. The paper establishes the foundations of the concept as first described in Dean MacCannell’s seminal work *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976). The paper traces the emergence of authenticity as a central concept in tourism research and discusses current touristic research and thinking in this area.

Authenticity has progressed from the initial days of being a concept related to objective authenticity and has developed into a concept that can be linked to at least three other descriptions and evaluations of the notion of authenticity. Currently, some authors in the tourism research field believe that authenticity has become a totally outdated concept and should be left behind as a modern idea that does not fit with the postmodern schemas and representations of tourism and tourists.

The idea that that authenticity should no longer be used as a theoretical stance in tourism research seems outdated itself and stifling. Placing boundaries around the idea of authenticity appears to be creating a frontstage – backstage dichotomy of its own. Authenticity will continue to be a contested concept within the field of tourism research. I agree with Pearce (2007), who states that ‘authenticity still matters’ (Pearce 2007: 86), and will continue to use this important concept within tourism research, and hopefully, the notions and ideas surrounding authenticity will continue to emerge and evolve as the work on tourism expands and develops into the twenty-first century.
4 REFERENCES


