

## Regenerating Tourism with an Ethic of Care and Empathy

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# Regenerating Tourism with an Ethic of Care and Empathy

## Introduction

Tourism is a phenomenon occurring in highly complex social-ecological systems that are interrelated with other systems, and with numerous stakeholders from the local to the global that affect destinations and places. In addition to the immense social impacts and economic hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, plastics pollution, are among global threats affecting communities and the well-being of human and non-human others worldwide. Climate and economic refugees join global migrations in search of a fair and good life. Resilience is being sought along with 'regenerative tourism.' However, the discourse of 'sustainable development' and SDGs while valuable in principle have been severely criticized as neoliberal and modernist values that have exploited the global and local commons, exacerbating injustices and inequities—a living wage is rarely accomplished for many employed in the service industry (Bianchi and de Mans, 2021). As this paper illustrates, better understanding of the complexity of social-ecological systems and active engagement with the ethical principles that can facilitate resilience, justice and well-being is needed. Here, we call for an ethic of care and empathy, and argue for greater research and engagement with *conative* empathy, which facilitates action and *praxis* (change).

## Literature Review

### *Complexity*

Tourism studies clearly recognizes the value of complex systems and systems thinking. A search on complexity in relation to tourism reveals 326 articles have been published since 2020 and are on SSCI. Complex systems thinking is also gaining in popularity, with 793 articles published since 2020 and found on SSCI. For instance, Neely, Bortz, & Bice (2021) apply systems thinking to address complex problems across disciplines (2021). They used collaborative concept modelling and noted that it was a valuable tool for addressing complex 'wicked' problems. As Farrell and Twining-Ward's (2004) early work on complex adaptive systems explains, tourism systems, like natural ecosystems, are dynamic, operational realities, being changeable, largely unpredictable, and only minimally explainable by linear cause and effect science (see also Roxas, Riviera, & Gutierrez, 2018). The components are themselves mini-systems, each with their own unique emergent properties which as they interact create higher level systems with new emergent properties, quite different from those of their constituents. Wicked problems such as those related to climate change, arise and may appear almost intractable, for these issues are emergent and create dynamic change. Linear solutions do not apply as all living complex adaptive systems, including tourism, are non-linear, uncertain, and generally unpredictable (Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004).

Such complex systems require concerted, collaborative efforts and an integrative approach that can adapt to the uncertainty and emergence. Lv et al's (2021) study of rural tourism in Wuhan from a complex adaptive system perspective show how the social-ecological system morphed and adapted as tourism shaped the rural areas of Wuhan. Managing for uncertainty through collaborative adaptive management, where the destination's multiple stakeholders are engaged actively to co-create solutions, allow for rapid adjustment to change and working towards resilience. Joint engagement is crucial to bring diverse stakeholder perspectives and knowledges to inform emergent issues and wicked problems. Not surprisingly, Wu, Barbrook-Johnson and

Font (2021) argue that participatory complexity approaches can provide a more holistic understanding of the contexts and interactions of tourism policy.

A relational perspective is therefore a key principle in the complex adaptive tourism systems approach. Phenomena emerge over time and space in relations, through dialogue, actions, and interactions among people, and between people, events, and things. Some actions and relationships may be just and equitable, as when destinations care for their vulnerable populations, support women's empowerment, gender equity, and fair wages in tourism services, etc. Injustices can arise through unethical actions and behaviors, such as unethical procuring of organs for transplant patients in medical tourism, sexual abuse in the workplace, violation of labor rights, etc. The key point here is relationality, to think of impacts as phenomena arising over time and space (an interrelated local–global pace as noted above), in relations among people and between people and other living and non-living things (Jamal, 2019).

The good of tourism in such a complex system is guided by principles of justice, responsibility, sustainability, and an ethic of care, among other principles. It is an action-oriented good, i.e., praxis driven, where participants strive for “just,” democratic, and ethical tourism, contributing actively to the conservation and sustainability of planet Earth, and to the well-being of its human and nonhuman inhabitants (Jamal, 2019). These are also key principles of regenerative tourism as described by various writers (e.g., Dredge, 2020). According to complex conceptual systems theory (Donaldson, 2020; Donaldson & Allen-Handy, 2020), actions and practices are emergent from conceptualizations. How ideas such as fairness, justice, ecology, sustainability, and responsibility are conceptualized will determine the practices emergent in any given context. Similarly, efforts to change practices will fail unless the relevant conceptualizations change. However, making one's way through the complexity, the emergence and dynamism, the wicked problems that arise, requires understanding them from the perspective of key stakeholders in the system, with care and attentiveness to those who are least able to speak for themselves and most vulnerable to emergent issues and threats like climate change. As shown below, an ethic of care and empathy nurtures relational understanding and inclusiveness. Vulnerable groups, communities and Nature, too, are acknowledged as key stakeholders, along with diverse knowledges and perspectives for critical action and change (praxis).

### *An Ethic of Care and Empathy*

Research on the ethic of care and care ethics are growing in popularity across disciplines, with 3461 and 4100 articles published since 2020 and found on SSCI, respectively. When relating the ethic of care to empathy, the number of articles drops to 14 on SSCI since 2020. Care Ethics in relation to other keywords like feminist theory (7 articles), feminism (11) and empathy (17) also show a drastic drop in published articles since 2020 on SSCI.

Ethics of care is a feminist philosophical perspective that moral action centers on interpersonal relationships and care or benevolence as a virtue (Noddings, 2002; 2003). Nel Noddings, a feminist philosopher, argues that caring is the foundation of morality, and is why she is a proponent for ethics of care (Nodding, 2003). She also asserts that a caring relationship is ethically basic to humans and is key to individual identity (Noddings 2002; 2003). Ethics of care stems from a feminist perspective, with the relationship based on emotion, feelings, interactions, relationships, and responsibility. A relationship based on affective dimensions like feelings, emotions, and care must be created for there to be moral responsibilities.

Carol Gilligan (1982) also spoke on this relational aspect of care ethics. Gilligan argues that people should frame their caring and responsibility based on the reciprocal and deeply imbedded personal connections we make with others (Gilligan 1982). Such a relational ethic of care is illustrated well in the case of Street Voices, a social enterprise that works toward capacity building and rehabilitating vulnerable groups (many of whom have experienced substance addiction, homelessness, and prostitution), as well as combating social prejudices against this marginalized segment of Danish society (Dredge and Meehan, 2019). It provides training to become street

guides and offers collaborative opportunities for vulnerable groups to participate directly in the development and delivery of walking tours. Psychological and social recognition is enabled as well as empowerment as empathy, trust, awareness and understanding arise in the interactions with tour participants about the challenges that they have previously faced, or currently confront (Dredge and Meehan, 2019). As the authors express, responsibility is enacted through the nurturing of caring relationships, performed in the practices and relationships between, guides, visitors and managers, among others.

Such social spaces are embodied, situated, and pluralistic, a “being together of strangers in openness to group differences” (Young 2011, p. 256). Vorobjovas-Pinta (2018) similarly discusses resisting homogenized portrayals of LGBT people in academic inquiry or other cultural spheres. Research drawing on virtue ethics and feminist ethics shows, too, that resisting stereotyping and discrimination, and facilitating equal dignity and equal respect (Nussbaum, 2011), can be greatly facilitated by empathy. We explore this dimension further below.

### *Empathy*

Three main types of empathy can be identified: cognitive (mind) empathy, affective (feeling) empathy, and conative (active) empathy. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand the emotions of others (Sakr, Jewitt, & Price, 2016; Vortherms, 2016). This is that mental ability to note how others may feel, without necessarily feeling those emotions yourself. Articles on SSCI since 2020 on cognitive empathy total at 865, with 3 of those relating specifically to tourism. Affective (feeling) empathy refers to the ability to understand and actually feel empathy towards others (Sakr, Jewitt, & Price, 2016; Vortherms, 2016). This includes responding to their emotions in an appropriate manner to how they are feeling. Articles on SSCI since 2020 on affective empathy total at 594, with 8 of those relating specifically to tourism.

Conative empathy is the ability to take cognitive and affective empathy and utilize those feelings and thoughts to create action (praxis) (Jamal, Kircher, & Donaldson, 2021; Sakr, Jewitt, & Price, 2016; Vortherms, 2016). Conative empathy is action based on empathy. As Jamal, Kircher and Donaldson (2021) emphasize, relationality is an important aspect. The three forms are not isolated steps, but interconnected forms that are necessary for a person to not only understand others, but feel and respond to those emotions, and act upon those feelings and understandings in order to make change. The conative, being able to understand the experience of the other by being able to put oneself in their place, “see” the world from their perspective, is what makes a person act and create change. It is perhaps this that Tucker (2016, p. 31) is pointing towards when she says that “important differences lay between an unquestioned or nonreflective empathy and a more ‘unsettled’ empathy, which is reflective and renders possible a productive sense of shame.” Action must still follow, and Tucker implies this without using the term ‘conative’ when stating that

“[e]mpathy is considered to be the emotional pre-requisite for engaging in positive dialogue with ‘the other’, and is generally linked with ‘social healing’ and justice” (2016, p. 40).

Maguire et al. (2020) also offer an illustrative example of such a conative dimension. Their study explored relationships between empathy, conservation behaviors, anthropomorphism, connectedness to nature, and experiences of whale watchers and tourists swimming with the whales in Mooloolaba, Queensland, Australia and off the island of Vava’u, Kingdom of Tonga. They found that “the predictions of the dispositional empathy with nature theory were supported as empathy was associated with higher anthropomorphism, connectedness to nature, and greater intention to engage in conservation behavior” (Maguire et al, 2020, p. 105; see also Garcia, 2017).

Laing and Frost (2019) examine museum narratives that are aimed at promoting empathy with historically marginalised voices or stories. Their article explores the planning behind dark commemorative exhibitions during the Centenary of World War One in Australia. The exhibits sought to raise feelings of empathy with the help story-telling, design and technology to heighten emotion and engagement. As they note, empathy should also be differentiated from sympathy, which expresses emotions on the situation of ‘suffering others’ situations or their pain. By contrast, empathy encompasses “a more internalized understanding or identification with such people’s states, seeing things from their point of view or ‘in their shoes’” (Moyne, 2006 p. 399). More is involved here than ‘seeing’ or ‘feeling the perspective of others. As Tucker (2016) warns, some museums and tourist attractions merely seek to evoke lazy empathy, where the individual is not provoked into changing their way of being or doing for the good of the other (see also Cretan et al, 2019). Considering forgotten voices and stories and encouraging visitors to understand and identify with their experiences is a good step, but action and praxis (change) must follow. Conative empathy involves critical consciousness and praxis—a critical pedagogy for action and change (Freire, 1970/2005; Donaldson, 2020), enacted in the being and doing of empathy, living empathetically in relation to human and non-human others, and acting to conserve ecological systems and cultural heritage using diverse knowledge systems and touristic practices (see Santafe and Loring, 2021).

Theories of empathy have had limited application in a tourism setting (Tucker, 2016) and there is a dearth of research on conative empathy despite its potential to facilitate critical action and change (praxis). Studies linking complexity and empathy are even rarer, but Mehran, Hossein and Olya’s (2020) study make a start. Their research applies complexity theory to explain how a cognitive-affective model indicates canal boat tour participants’ desired behaviour. An in-situ survey was administered to collect data from 202 boat tour participants following a tour of the Canal du Faux-Rempart in Strasbourg, France, but only cognitive and affective factors were addressed.

So, why an ethic of care and empathy, specifically conative empathy, relative to complex systems in tourism? Since complex systems are fluid and dynamic, as previously established, they require collaborative efforts to conceptualize actions and practices to create solutions under conditions of emergence, uncertainty and change. An ethic of care and empathy facilitates relational understandings between humans being and with non-human others. Conative empathy paves the way for critical consciousness, inclusivity and collaborative action to resist epistemic violence and enable social justice, communal well-being and a healthy, flourishing planet.

## **Discussion: Toward empathy and care in post-pandemic regeneration**

This paper makes a two-fold contribution to regenerating tourism as destinations and communities emerge from the global pandemic. The first is understanding tourism from a complex systems perspective, taking a relational and integrated approach to collaborative, participatory planning for adaptation and uncertainty, emergence and change. Such a perspective helps to see humans in relations with social-cultural, natural and physical environments. Here, a vital principle arises with respect an ethic of care and empathy for regenerating ecological and human communities towards well-being and flourishing. A virtue ethic enables important principles like equal respect and equal dignity (Nussbaum, 2011; see also Camargo and Vázquez-Maguirre, 2021). But grounding regenerative tourism in an ethic of justice and an ethic of care and empathy enables an action-oriented approach to redress injustices and inequities. It facilitates responsibility, healing and care for the well-being of human and non-human others in the complex adaptive social-ecological systems of travel and tourism.

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