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The Effectiveness of Tour Guide Communication: Measuring the Factors that Contribute to Perceived Communication Competence of Nature-Based Tourism Guides

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Communication is central to human life. It is pervasive, essential, and complex. Since communication is irrevocably entwined with human life, any study involving people should touch on communication (Littlejohn, 2002). The focus of a great deal of communication research has been competent communication, or the ability of a person to communicate effectively and appropriately. Spitzberg and Hurt (1987) contend that it is “axiomatic that interpersonal communication competence is crucial to academic, occupational, personal and social success” (1987: 28). Considering the crucial and ubiquitous nature of communication competence, it is a worthwhile and timely area of study in many contexts.

Studies have shown that face-to-face interaction with tourists is an effective means by which outfitters and guides can educate and inform their clients (Washburn and Cole, 1983; Roggenbuck and Berrier, 1982; Krumpe and Brown, 1982). This may be because guides have extended interaction with their customers and even some interaction with non-guided tourists. Although studies have shown that guided trips involving an educational component can result in positive outcomes, like learning, the specific aspects of the communication event between guides and clients that result in those outcomes are still not understood.

The potential exists for guides to be interpreters and aid in the management of protected areas. But how should the effectiveness of their efforts be evaluated? A limited number of studies have been conducted that have evaluated the effectiveness of education programs in nature based tourism (Beaumont, 1997; Orams, 1997; Tubb, 2003). The focus of these studies has been on the content of the programs and the effects of the programs on tourists. While this is indeed an important aspect of information and education of visitors, these studies have generally failed to look specifically at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of the communication event. Therefore, if an educational program fails, there is no idea of why it failed.

Communication competence is a framework that has been used in various disciplines to understand communication events and their success or failure in achieving objectives.
The model most often used to describe competence is the relational model proposed by Spitzberg & Cupach (1984) which includes three elements: knowledge, knowing what behavior is best suited for a given situation; skill, having the ability to apply that behavior in the given context; and motivation having the desire to communicate in a competent manner.

Questions concerning the components of guide competence can and have been asked from varying perspectives. Some studies have individuals rate their own communicative motivation, knowledge, and skills while others have third party observers rate these components. In a guided context, however, what matters most is the customer. Therefore, this study takes the next logical step in evaluating communication competence by surveying the other individual involved in the communication event, the receiver of the message.

**Purposes**
There exists an on-going debate in the communication literature about what makes someone’s communication be perceived as competent. To understand how the perception of guide communication competence is affected by the elements of the model of relational competence (perceived knowledge of guides, motivation of guides, and skills portrayed by guides), this study uses the framework of relational competence in communication to develop a survey instrument that is contextually specific to the tourist/guide relationship and that measures communication competence. Specifically, the purposes of this study are: to develop a scale that measures the communication competence of outfitters and guides as perceived by their customers, to test the scale for reliability and validity, and to understand if perceived competence is affected more by cognitive, behavioral, or motivational factors in the guided nature based tourism context.

**Research Questions**
1. Are the modified scales measuring perceived knowledge, motivation, skills, and competence valid and reliable?
2. Are customers’ perceptions of guide’s motivation, knowledge, and skills significant in predicting customer’s impressions of their guide’s communication competence?
3. Which of the elements of the relational model of communication competence (perceptions of guide knowledge, motivation of guides to communicate, and skills portrayed by guides in a communicative event) is the strongest predictor of the competence level perceived by clients in the guided nature based context?

**Methods**
The research questions were addressed through the use of a two-page onsite questionnaire. The instruments used in this study were pilot tested before data collection began. The questionnaire was pilot tested for face validity prior to data collection by administering it to white-water rafting customers. The survey instrument consisted of questions that measured customers’ perceptions of the levels of motivation, knowledge, and communicative skills exhibited by their guide as
well as their overall communication competence. Since it is important to reference a communicative event when measuring components of competence, the questionnaire directed customers to think of the interaction they just had with their guide during the forty minute natural history talk given by their guide immediately prior to being contacted (Spitzberg and Hurt, 1987).

**Findings**

Two hundred and fifty two completed surveys were received from the 343 customers surveyed, for a response rate of 73 percent. Fifty-seven percent of respondents were female and 43 percent were male. The mean age was 42 years and mean number of guided trips was 3.7. Seven percent of respondents were from California and 6 percent were from Washington.

All 42 variables in this analysis were normally distributed. All variables in all 4 scales were subject to correlation analysis. Correlations among variables in a scale were .4 or greater. Some items from the motivation scale were highly correlated with items in the knowledge scale. No items were negatively correlated.

Factor analysis was used to determine the underlying structure of the items measuring motivation, knowledge, and skills. Using the guideline for extraction of eigenvalues over 1, a principle components analysis with a varimax rotation was performed on all independent variable items (motivation, knowledge, and skills). Initially a five factor solution resulted. The loading plots were examined and items which loaded lower than a .6 and on any factor were removed. Items that loaded on more than one factor were also removed. The remaining variables were again entered in a principle components analysis with varimax rotation. The three proposed factors emerged in this analysis, motivation, knowledge, and skills. Together they explained seventy percent of the variation in the data. A similar process was used for the variables measuring appropriate and effectiveness. Principle components analysis was performed on all dependent variable items (appropriateness and effectiveness). After removing items that loaded lower than a .6, a one factor solution was determined. This one factor explained 64 percent of the variation.

All factors (motivation, knowledge, skills, and perceived competence) showed high levels of internal consistency ranging from .79 to .94. Composite scores for each factor were created and these variables were used in multiple regression. The factors used as independent variables were motivation, knowledge, and skills and the factor used as a dependent variable was perceived competence. Results of multiple regression show that motivation, knowledge, and skills were all significant predictors of overall competence (p > .05). Skills were the strongest predictor with a \( \beta \) coefficient of .386. The model explained approximately 74 percent of the variation in perceived communication competence with an R square .74.
Application of Results
The instrument tested here was found to be a reliable and valid measure of customer’s perceptions of guide’s motivation to communicate, guide’s knowledge of how to communicate, perceptions of guides’ communicative skills, and overall perceived competence. This instrument would be useful to guiding and outfitting businesses as well as the managers of public lands on which guides operate.

Guides have various objectives to meet when communicating with tourists like teaching them how to safely participate in the activity and about the natural history of the area. Owners of guiding companies can use the instrument constructed and tested here to ensure that customers perceive the guide as motivated, knowledgeable, and skilled when communicating with them. This will increase the likelihood that objectives like learning and safety will be achieved.

Guides who operate on public lands are often given the responsibility of educating and informing the tourist of critical issues on public lands. The ten-year wilderness challenge is an example of the increasing need of guides to be interpreters. The goal of the program is to “insure that Wildernesses are passed to the next generation in better condition than when they were designated” (USFS, 2004). The challenge includes ten elements that exemplify the goals of the Forest Service for Wilderness areas in the next decade. The seventh element regards guiding and outfitting and states that in the future “existing outfitter and guide operating plans for Wilderness direct outfitters to model appropriate Wilderness practices and incorporate appreciation for Wilderness Values in their interactions with clients and others.” Competent communication will be crucial to the success of this element of the challenge.

Guides have more interaction with visitors than managers ever have and this is a critical opportunity to use this interaction to benefit the individual tourist and the land that they are visiting. This instrument would be useful in investigating whether the guides are being effective in transmitting these messages. If they are perceived as incompetent communicators, the use of this instrument would allow for identification of which component of the competence model in which they are deficient. If the perceptions of their motivation to communicate are low, the guiding company must work on educating their guides as to the importance of their communications with tourists.

Conclusions
The importance of communication can be easily lost in an industry that must entertain tourists while still protecting the area in which they are visiting and ensure a safe experience. This study produced and tested an evaluative instrument for use by guiding businesses or the managers of the lands on which they operate. This instrument should be used to evaluate the perceived competence of guides in specific communication events like safety or natural history talks.

Communication skills need to be an integral part of guide training. Training white water rafting guides on swift water rescue, first aid, and history of the area is important however if they are unable to competently communicate these aspects to their customers
the messages will not be transmitted. Tourists often want to learn and they obviously want a safe experience. Competent communication is vital for the attainment of these objectives.
References