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# **Paradox, Metaphor, and Practice: Serious Complaints and the Tourism Industry**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper addresses both paradoxes and metaphors within the context of a study that examines serious complaints within the tourism industry. A series of paradoxes were identified when a collection of published complaints from the magazine Condé Nast Traveler were analyzed. It is proposed that metaphors derived from the domain(s) of tourism and mobility may offer some insight into the way in which these paradoxes can be managed. The field(s) of tourism and mobility studies may therefore be a potential source of ideas – and offer some guidance – for those seeking to approach the quandaries created by paradoxes in a more focused manner. Moreover, the metaphors discussed in this work can potentially inform management practice within the tourism industry.*

**Keywords:** *paradox, metaphor, complaint, tourism, mobility*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The conference's central theme is expressed as an adaptation of a popular metaphor. Tourism researchers are invited to analyze the "big picture" (the forest) in conjunction with finer details (the trees). This paper explores the value of metaphors as a means to comprehend the management of conundrums created by paradoxes. The paradoxes discussed in this paper were identified when published complaints about tourism providers, and a third party's efforts to resolve these complaints, were studied.

There is potential to see both the forest and the trees when making observations from a place where the scenery is familiar: one's own backyard. For tourism scholars and managers, this backyard is the field of tourism and mobility studies. Tourism scholars and managers are in a particularly good position to understand ideas and concepts related to tourism and mobility, including certain metaphors. Through an analysis of a range of written complaints, a big(ger) picture (or forest) becomes visible – namely, a series of recurring paradoxes. Metaphors drawn from the realm of tourism and mobility may help managers understand such paradoxes. Both the forest and its trees can be better understood when familiar notions are deployed and adapted for the purpose of clear comprehension and communication.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research that explores complaints in the tourism and hospitality industries is typically questionnaire based. It examines an array of themes and topics: the

characteristics of complainants (Sujithamrak & Lam, 2005), factors influencing complaint behaviour (Heung & Lam, 2005), different types of complaints (Kozak & Tasci, 2006), and the degree of satisfaction with organizational responses (Karatepe, 2006). To date, tourism researchers who study complaints have not explored double deviation scenarios. This type of service failure has been examined by services management scholars (Lee & Park, 2010); it involves analyzing an initial round of complaints as well as the complaints that follow if the first set is not handled properly or simply not addressed. The complaints described in this paper are double deviation scenarios in that a third party has received complaints about the way in which various travel companies have mishandled or simply ignored complaints they have received. Moreover, the use of third parties, such as an ombudsman, to review and resolve complaints has not been addressed by tourism scholars.

This paper examines paradoxes that underpin serious complaints. Paradoxes are situations that have mutually exclusive elements. Mick and Fournier (1998, p. 125) note that paradoxes occur when “something is *both X and not-X at the same time*” (italics in original). A number of tourism scholars have examined paradoxes (Minca & Oakes, 2006). Comprehending paradoxes is of use to tourism managers because it enables them to develop an appreciation for relationships and unintended outcomes. Those involved in the management of tourism are bound to come across phenomena that have contradictory qualities.

Three tourism- or mobility-related metaphors identified in this paper may assist efforts to address paradoxes. Various metaphors have been used to describe tourists: the tourist as stranger, pilgrim, performer, and child. Tourism, more generally, has been portrayed as play, language, and imperialism (Dann, 1996, 2002). The use, and usefulness, of metaphors may reflect aspects of the world today. Phenomena are increasingly understood in relation to other phenomena, and not simply independently or by themselves (Dann, 2002). Metaphors identify similarities that may be useful to consider.

## METHODS

This study is a qualitative exploration of written complaints and attempts by a third party to address them. The data used in this paper were obtained from the US magazine *Condé Nast Traveler* over a 10 year period from 2000 to 2009. Each complaint submitted by a consumer is accompanied by a response from the magazine’s disputes resolution columnist: Ombudsman. These responses either describe Ombudsman’s efforts to resolve the problem or offer explanations that account for Ombudsman’s decision not to take action. Two hundred and ten complaints (and the responses from Ombudsman) were part of the study’s sample.

Data analysis proceeded in a fashion whereby the written complaints – and descriptions of Ombudsman’s efforts to resolve them – were reviewed several times. Both similarities and contrasts were sought. A key theme that emerged was that a number of opposing or countervailing tendencies accounted for a range of circumstances

and dilemmas that provoked complaints. In total, four paradoxes are identified. The paradoxes are associated with complexity, bureaucracy, company rules, and the discretion that is sometimes exercised by service employees.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Paradoxes have the potential to create dilemmas for managers. The paradoxes noted in this study demonstrate that serious complaints may emerge from situations where counter-tendencies create quandaries. A particular course of action or choice may have a corresponding, and sometimes unanticipated, drawback. This study explores the four paradoxes that have been mentioned: the tourism industry's complexities (for example, the sheer number of cross-cultural encounters that take place) account for both tourism's appeal and popularity as well as many complaints; bureaucracy hinders the resolution of complaints and yet also provides avenues for their resolution when used by complainants strategically; rules offer consistency, clear standards, and necessary guidelines but generate confusion too; and the personal discretion exercised by company employees both resolves problems and makes them worse. Various examples of these paradoxes arose.

Without a clear means of addressing the problems created by these paradoxes, this paper offers three metaphors – navigation, repeat visitation, and connection – for consideration that may encourage a more defined approach to the study of paradoxes. Navigation is a fundamental aspect of travel and transport. It is an activity that involves identifying and choosing potential routes. Talented navigators possess a collection of skills; they evaluate the external environment with care when setting a course, adapt to unexpected circumstances that arise, and prepare for emergencies.

Management often entails navigating amongst competing pressures and tendencies. One may need to stress the value of company rules at certain times and then promote the exercise of personal discretion at a different time. In order to navigate paradoxes adroitly, one of its key elements cannot be chosen as the solution when its counterpart is entirely overlooked. Problems created by bureaucracy, for example, are not necessarily solved by a complete rejection of structure and organization (in particular, the uninhibited use of personal discretion by service employees). Navigation demands the interpretation and balancing of an array of variables, and decisions may vary depending upon the conditions that emerge. The metaphor of navigation suggests that understanding paradoxes is associated with evaluating potential routes, steering a path through ambiguities, and avoiding hazards.

Tourism creates memories and one can revisit past vacations in one's mind. Repeat visitation that is metaphorical in nature can be associated with recollections and retrospection that may be useful to tourism managers. Sensitivity to particular circumstances would, for instance, contribute to the identification of rules that may be responsible for consistent standards in some instances and confusion in others. Repeat visitation could entail routine reviews of such rules and the contexts within which they are applied. Revisiting specific instances when the exercise of individual discretion is

(un)successful may highlight noteworthy patterns. Repeat visitation is an activity that has the capacity to create more knowledgeable managers who, with each follow-up visit, become more familiar with the “destination” (in other words, the paradox) and its complexities.

Places are interconnected because of a range of transportation networks. Contemporary times are characterized by both mobility and connection. Points of departure are tied to points of arrival. Product variety and the customer satisfaction that is frequently a product of expanded choice – a phenomenon that is related to the tourism industry’s complexity – can, paradoxically, generate conditions that provoke consumers’ complaints. Rules intended to promote rationalization and provide consistency are sometimes connected to irrational outcomes. Phenomena that may seem detached or distant from each other may actually be closely connected. Through the metaphor of connection, one achieves an appreciation for a diversity of relationships and the extent to which unanticipated relationships are sometimes significant.

## CONCLUSION

The field of tourism studies is replete with metaphors taken from domains that are unrelated to tourism (Dann, 1996, 2002; Laing & Crouch, 2009). However, tourism is an activity that provides a set of experiences from which one can develop metaphors. These metaphors can be used to understand unfamiliar or challenging situations such as the conundrums and dilemmas associated with paradoxes. Far from obscuring the big picture, metaphors transport with them a ready-made set of related concepts that enable one to comprehend complicated situations more effectively. Both the forest and the trees – returning to the conference’s main theme – are perhaps more easily seen by tourism researchers when they are viewed from a familiar vantage point: the “backyard” of tourism studies.

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