

## **EMPATHY IN TOURISM INDUSTRY: A HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH OF HOSPITALITY IN BUSINESS WORLD**

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*This paper investigates the value of empathy in Tourism Industry, by presenting arguments about a human-centered approach of hospitality in business. "Empathy" is defined as an individual's ability to "see" the facts from another person's perspective while maintaining emotional control. The role of empathy in interpersonal relationships is presented, followed by the application of empathetic behaviour in several service-oriented industries and focusing on tourism market. Some evaluation techniques and tools are presented and certain conclusions are extracted as far as the utilization of this nuance of emotional intelligence is concerned. A lot of research work must be done, mainly in field, for further investigation of this relatively new topic on business service research.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Empathy, as a topic in interpersonal relationships, is relatively new. Available literature is significant but not abundant. Empathy is considered as a major communicative skill, whether inherent or taught. It can crucially effect the experience and thus the outcome of the interaction between a service provider and a customer. Although tourism industry is flourishing, it is an extremely competitive market, especially in the East Mediterranean area. Under this point of view, better tourist experience can make the difference among competitors and can contribute to creation and maintenance of a satisfied and loyal customer background.

## **MANIFESTATIONS OF EMPATHY**

### **The nuances of the term**

Empathy derives from the Old Greek word “*empathia*”, i.e. *em* (in) and *pathos* (suffering). The term was first used by German scholars in the form of the equivalent German “*Einfühlung*”, i.e. in feeling (2). The corresponding Greek term, passed into the English vocabulary as “*empathy*”. As the etymology indicates, empathy describes the individual's ability to feel someone else's feelings. Since this definition is not strictly framed, we could state that empathy is also a person's ability to “see the world through someone else's eyes” (1, 2), “put oneself into another's shoes” (2), understand someone else's point of view (4), or to experience the feelings of someone else's emotions. The other person could be a person who receives our services (a client, a patient, a friend). The term could also be used for circumstances of feelings and self-awareness. Other researchers may define empathy as the participation in someone else's emotional

experience (3) or as the ability to fully understand someone else's personality (3).

It is of major importance for people involved in tourism to use correct and proper vocabulary and terminology, in order to make the valuable extracted information utilizable. A vocabulary of emotions could facilitate the verbal "description" and thus "communication" of empathy (5).

Under the aspect of examining terminology, it is useful to underline that the concept of empathy resembles the term sympathy. There are some significant differences though. For instance, sympathy is described as an emotion triggered by someone else's suffering (2). A more descriptive definition is provided as the ability to understand someone else's thought (5). Empathy is not an emotion, but rather a skill and a behaviour towards others (or towards ourselves).

There is no doubt that individuals with strong emotional sensitivity are more likely to exhibit empathic behaviour under given circumstances. However, most scholars state that empathic behaviour can be taught. According to a research, learning of empathy can be traced back to infant age. An infant that watches his/her mother's reaction to a specific emotion, for instance tears of sorrow, can mimic the behaviour (crying) and consequently the emotion itself (3).

## **Empathy and Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional Intelligence is defined as the person's ability to understand someone else's or his/her own emotions and to express them in a productive manner (2). It can be quantified by using the Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ), as a corresponding index to IQ (Intelligence Quotient). Those two types of Intelligence are not alike. Higher Emotional Intelligence is typically related to better social skills, higher self-awareness, better handling of emotions, and in

some cases higher professional performance. Empathy is a major skill of a person with high Emotional Intelligence.

Over the recent decades, the popularity of empathy as a concept, could be considered as a sign that human interaction should be approached from a different point of view, as empathy could be applied in Education, in Health care and of course in Business.

## **Empathy in education**

Empathic behaviour can be involved in education system as a teaching tool for teachers, as a tool for improving student relationships and as a necessary taught skill for the adult life.

Every student is an individual with a unique personality that is shaped by specific present and past experiences, beliefs, traits etc. Thus, the empathic skills of teaching personnel can personalize the teaching procedure improving the teaching experience and rising the performance of both personnel and student.

Also, several techniques of teaching empathy, could help students to acquire high self awareness and help them successfully cope with common school problems, such as bullying (5). As a taught skill, empathy can offer a student's dramatically higher social performance (creating and handling interpersonal relationships, sexual life etc). This skill can be taught through several ways and techniques (2, 5) and can support the individual both as a minor and as an adult.

## **Empathy in health care**

Healthcare industry is a field, where interpersonal relationship between service provider (doctor, nurses, auxiliary medical staff) and service receiver (patient) can heavily influence the overall experience and in some cases the outcome of therapeutic process. Empathy is a necessary skill, especially in “sensitive” areas such as the Pediatric,

Cardiological, Psychiatric, Artificial Kidney Unit, and Emergency Department of a Hospital (4). Research also reveals that health care professionals exhibiting high empathy, suffer less from burnout syndrome (4) and they consequently provide better services. The improved experience of the patients due to empathic behaviour of service providers, decrease the tendency of the former to continue seeking satisfying services inside the National healthcare system, thus lowering the overall healthcare cost in national or regional level.

## **EMPATHY AS A SKILL IN BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT**

### **Examining emotional parameters in Tourism Industry Administration**

Empathy was been brought to business's attention as a tool that could increase sales and improve customer satisfaction. Since building solid and long lasting relationships with customers is among the main priorities of companies, much more important than sales numbers, empathy as a tool has become an important topic. Beyond customer satisfaction, empathic behaviour can have a major impact in working environment experience and thus to the overall performance of a corporation.

Tourism Industry is among the most important income resources for several countries. In regional level, it may be the main income resource. At its most fundamental type, tourism industry provides limited services, mainly related with sightseeing and scenic places. Modern-day tourism is a broad industry, where numerous of services can be provided. It includes recreational tourism, cultural tourism, sport tourism, medical tourism, religious tourism, academic tourism and numerous of other categories and subcategories.

## **The impact of empathy on tourists**

Empathy in tourism can be applied in two levels. As a tool for solving problems and overcoming obstacles while the client consumes the service and as a feedback- extraction tool for further investigation of costumers desires, additional services and improvement of the product. The present paper focuses mainly on the first application.

Given the broad nature of available tourism industry product and the promotional agenda of the industry, a tourist (or a potential tourist) can be an individual with a broad spectrum of identities. It can be a single person, a couple or a family, an elderly, an outdoor activity enthusiast, a professional athlete, a patient, a disabled person, a foreigner, a person who is not familiar with the destination place's culture, an experienced traveller or not, someone from overseas or another continent, someone from a hostile country, a scientist or professional and many more. Thus, expectations on the ideal services and overall consumer experience of each may vary. On the other hand, tourism industry exists due to the occurrence of its leaders, such as Managers or General Directors, who run institutions related to tourism or even hotel establishments. The interaction between these two major groups, tourists/customers /guests and leaders is inevitable.

Two factors of significant importance as far as the relationship among individuals involved in leadership are concerned, are empathy and trust (Wan Afezah Wan Abdul Rahman, 2016). Trust could be considered as a parameter of empathy, as a result of an individual's ability to deeply experience the same feelings as others. Although business industry is developed under a strict framework of rules, according to which organizations and companies have to be guided and shaped, genuine concern and compassion are tendencies appearing in modern models of leadership.

Over recent years the bond between a business leader and an employee has varied widely. In particular, hospitality and hotel management can be examined as two fields, where the significance

of this bond can be detected, since the 3omes apparent by the leader of the hotel establishment, namely the hotel manager, the hotelier or the director, empathy could help him to adapt new, probably more positive aspects of attitude towards his employees. Since the leader of the hotel establishment is determined to upgrade his business profile, he is willing to value the level of his employees' satisfaction in order to raise their motivation and their working performance. The interference of empathy is crucial for this achievement, due to the fact that empathy could be used as a "tool" for an honest, true and realistic management and tourism industry. Via his intention to use his emotions for achieving a mental communication with his employees, even on a nonverbal base, the leader diminishes possible feelings of stress, fear, subordination or lack of confidence of his working personnel. Additionally, such a decision would diminish his own possible negative characteristics, for instance the cruelty originating from his leadership as well as his arrogance. By establishing a trust culture in cases of hotel management and generally in tourism, the leadership actually educates the personnel in open, sincere and moral communication. Simultaneously, he demonstrates an –apparently modern pattern of interaction among employees. Thus, empathy and trust work on a dual base, both between leaders and staff and among employees.

Although empathy is a term usually examined under a theoretical perspective (6), an empirical approach could provide the reader with valuable information concerning psychometric properties of empathy. More specifically, leading personalities were selected to participate in an online self-report research. The objective of the survey was to use specific empathy scales and to compare these quantities afterwards. 112 business leaders from the United States and 104 from Malaysia were selected to participate. Their companies were related to stock exchanges, thus the participants had major leading profiles. The results of the research were obtained via Cronbach's alpha test and ANOVA test and confirmed useful data.

Of highest importance is the fact that empathy effectiveness leadership does have reliability, in strong degree. The extend of empathy was larger among the American leaders than among the Malaysian leaders. In addition it would be of high significance to emphasize on the fact that business leaders of young age presented higher level of empathy in comparison to older managers.

### **The impact of empathy on service quality**

Empathy is one of the five factors of SERVQUAL scale, a scale that is used as a questionnaire by service consumers, among tangibles, reliability, assurance and responsibility (1,3). Empathy in tourism industry could be quantitatively evaluated and it can be related to certain measured research data. Empathy can be actually “measured” using “units” that vary depending on the proposed technique. Usually some form of questionnaire is used. Literature reports several types, such as Progressive Empathic Sorting Model (1), the Jefferson Scale of Physicians Empathy-Health Professions (JSPEHP) (4) and other. Same or equivalent tools can be used for teaching empathy, in education system or in staff training and consulting scheme.

The impact having on consumer experience may be explained via certain common case instances.

Supposing that a tourist lives in a hotel experiencing unpleasant noises from a nearby room, heading to the staff mentioning the problem. An empathic staff would focus on positioning himself/herself in the situation of the guest. He/she should exhibit understanding of the problem, feel the negative emotions and of course acting in a way that would eliminate the problem. Simultaneously, the staff should use the appropriate vocabulary that is adequate for transmitting the empathic message to the guest. At the end of this intercourse, the tourist will have end up with a solution of his/her problem, partial or complete depending on the problem itself, but most important will have experienced a high service quality and



a high level of satisfaction, since his/her demand has been heard and a high amount of energy and effort has been put on it by the staff. The major outcome is the creation of a “bond” between the client and the service provider/company (the hotel in our case), that is also a part of the hotel brand itself.

Hearing is a major function in interpersonal relationships. It is also an essential tool of communication (2). In case of empathic behavior, hearing can be used for monitoring purposes as a “data” mining tool. It enables the extraction of information that is partially rational and partially emotional. The service receiver must hear carefully what the client says and try to “see behind the lines”.

The positive outcome in this simple case study can be exaggerated, if the hotel is replaced by a more personalized service provider, such as a tourist operator. Let’s alter the above scenario and replace the hotel tenant by a group of sport or outdoor enthusiasts and the hotel by a tourist operator that offers sports and outdoors activities. These activities could be hiking, biking, water sports in sea or river, outdoor or indoor cardio classes, outdoor meditation and so on. Let’s also assume that some of the tourists are exposed in such activities for the first time and they are reluctant. Empathic behavior in this case can act in three levels. As a tool for sincere approach of reluctant customers, as a tool for creating a “bond” between the staff and the clients and as a tool for extracting feedback for further improvement or modification of the provided services. Empathic behavior, high social engagement and “Team spirit” are the main topics in these group activities, since the major cause of these services is the recreation and not competency and athletic performance.

In case of professional athletes, the demands and the expectations of service receivers are quite different. In this case, the tourist is a professional who is visiting the place to participate to a sports event and he/she has very high demands and very high sensitivity in changes (3). Thus, service experience can have a significant impact on his/her athletic performance. Although in some cases the athlete is

a member of a group and is accompanied by a support team (managers, trainers, doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists, translators etc), cultural or physical body shock may be present (3). In this case, empathic behavior of the staff is essential part of an overall professional attitude and service.

Let assume that a group of professional athletes travels overseas and reach their destination after a long flight. Let also assume that the climate is significantly different than the one in the location of origin. Also, there are some major cultural differences and maybe a hostility among the country of origin and the country of destination. Cultural differences can even include cuisine and available edible matter. The challenges an athlete may confront in this scenario are various and demand delicate handling. Empathy is among the essential skills of the staff that could result successful handling of the rising issues.

## **FUTURE PERSPECTIVE: EMPATHY TOUGH BY EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT INSTRUCTORS**

Empathy can be inherent or can be taught. Teaching empathic behavior is a process that can take place in school classes or as part of a corporation training scheme for professionals. There are several reports in literature on teaching methods. Most of them are variations or include some role play procedure.

Educational programs of modern schools do not involve any emotional intelligence course, at least in a clear and distinctive way. They are focused on providing knowledge and competency instead (2), ignoring the positive impact of emotional and social “training” on everyday life, on mental health and on the overall growing of students.

A research propose as a methodology for children’s emotional education, the following pattern (2): Awareness regarding student’s feelings, recognition, hearing with empathy and confirm student’s feelings, help student to name his/her feelings, setting limits while

helping to explore strategies for problem solving, recognition and setting targets, thoughts on possible solutions, assessment of proposed solutions on the basis of family values, Helping the student to choose a solution.

Other researchers (5) propose that empathy training should initiate with an introduction on emotional vocabulary, ie the words that can be used for describing and naming precisely each emotion an individual can experience. This step can help students to acquire self awareness of their emotions as they experiencing them. Thus, they can apply this ability on other people's emotions. Another important step is the understanding on differences between emotions and thoughts. Thoughts are ideas whereas emotions are feelings. They can be both expressed through speech using sentences, but the necessary vocabulary in each case is different.

Role reversal exercises can also be used as a teaching technique (5). Students can talk about themselves answering questions made by another student. The latter tries to repeat/describe this information. The accuracy of the latter student can be used as an index of his/her empathic skill. Then, these two students reverse roles and the process takes place again. In a variation of this technique, personal information can be replaced by a personal story (a real event or a desire). A student talks about a real event that happened or a desire he/she has. Another student speaks at the same time, supplementary, adding emotional vocabulary in the sentences. The former student, corrects or not the latter. Again, accuracy is used as an index of empathic skill.

The objectives of these techniques is acquiring and improving the skill of empathy and also to train individuals putting aside their own thoughts and emotions and focus on someone else's thoughts and emotions. Similar role play techniques can be applied for giving an emotional insight of bullying behaviour (5). In such a technique, three students play the role of a bully, a victim and an observer respectively. Then, the students switch roles and they finally describe their

experience. Bully can be also replaced by an individual that we see as an “enemy” and the surprising information we get (as part of the role play) about his/her harsh life give us a more empathic explanation on his/her hostile behaviour and a desire of “forgiveness” towards him/her.

Other scholars propose psychodrama as a basis for emotional training techniques (1).

The above techniques can be easily adapted for use on adults as part of a professional training scheme.

## **Neuroscience and Empathy**

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, that is, the capacity to place oneself in another's position. (7)

Theory of mind is the ability to attribute mental states — beliefs, intents, desires, emotions, knowledge, etc. — to oneself, and to others, and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one's own. (8)

Theory of mind is crucial for everyday human social interactions and is used when analyzing, judging, and inferring others' behaviors. (9)

Much evidence is accumulating that we automatically simulate the internal experiences of others, and that this simulation contributes to both empathy and theory of mind. (10) Recent studies have shown that even newborns from the age of forty- two minutes to seventy-two hours can imitate facial expressions accurately. (11), (12)

The ability to imitate must be innate. (13)

Some facts and highlights concerning the neuroscience of empathy are:

- Empathy for pain requires simulation via networks involved in experienced pain.

- Distinct networks support empathy for distinct phenomena like pain, pleasure, and suffering.
- Activity in these networks or in mentalizing networks can promote empathic concern.
- Empathy and concern rely on subcortical structures shared across social species.

Individuals vary widely in both their empathic abilities and empathic proclivities. (14).

## **RESULTS**

There is no doubt that individuals who participated in some sort of emotional intelligence or social training show higher performance on empathic behaviour and thus, can provide high quality of services when they properly use empathy.

In some industries, such as healthcare, empathic behaviour of staff can be intentional without any relevant training.

Researches on healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses and auxiliary personnel), have also shown that those who had more years of service had higher empathy performance than juniors (4).

Gender has also an impact on empathic behaviour. Women have higher score on empathy than men, a trend that is revealed in several literature reports and can be attributed on inherent (biological) and non-inherent (taught social roles) differences between the two genders (4).

Department of hospital, ie the object of work, had also an impact on empathy performance. In departments of high emotional demands, such as Pediatric, Pathological, Cardiological, Psychiatric, Emergencies etc, empathy performance was higher. This result confirms the common belief that spontaneous empathic behaviour is related to the identity of the service receiver (patient, student, tourist, client, colleague etc.) and it co-exists with compassion.

Other characteristics of individual such as age and marital status do not seem to have much of an impact on empathic behaviour.

A research on tourism and travel management students showed medium empathic tendency at this group. No significant correlation of empathy performance and age, marital status and working experience was found (1).

## CONCLUSIONS

Empathy is a social and emotional skill that can be inherent or can be taught. It can be applied in several industries as a tool to improve the provided services. In tourism industry can make the difference among competitors, due to its positive impact on the overall client experience. Several researches on this topic are available, but a lot of research needs to be done in field and more statistic data to be extracted and trends to be revealed.

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