Ethical Confusion and Confusion of Ethics: Unpacking the Complexities of Tourist Photography

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Abstract

For many decades authors (see Sontag, 1976, Baederholt, 2006, Chalfern, 1979, Crang, 1997) have recognised the fundamental role of photography within tourism. Many such as Urry (1999, 2002), Crouch (2000, 2002) and Crouch & Lubbren (2003) have explored the position of the visual in the tourist experience. Others have explored the social relationships between tourists that emerge through photography (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003; Badernholt, 2006), or the practices of photographing in a particular context (see Edensor 1998, 1999, 2001). However, despite references to the photograph as a tool for consuming and constructing in the tourist experience, little attention has been afforded to the effects of such practice (see Cohen *et al*, 1992). This paper therefore unpacks the complexities of the seemingly fleeting relationships between tourists and host communities that emerge during photographic encounters as local residents can become photographed subjects and objects of the tourist gaze. Focusing on the emergent interactions between tourists and locals who are photographed, it explores the social and cultural values that underpin tourists' ethical considerations of whether or not to photograph local people. In doing so, it suggests that gaps in cultural and social knowledge affect of such values on these relationships as tourist practice is driven by subjective interpretations of that which is appropriate, acceptable or responsible with regard to photographing. Thus, encounters become driven by ethical confusion and a confusion of ethics (Scarles, 2009) as photography emerges as a complex fusion of both predictable and reactionary practices that align general ethical viewpoints with unpredictable ethical response in the immediacy of the moment of photographing.

The methodology of this research adopted a series of qualitative and semi-structured interviews, observations and autoethnography. Due to the sensitive nature of the issues researched, interviews were highly flexible and responsive as both tourists and local residents were given the opportunity to share knowledges and experiences of the complexities of their photographic encounters. A three-stage methodology was adopted when interviewing tourists with 20 interviews conducted at each stage. Of this, six were recruited on a longitudinal basis and the fourteen on a semi-longitudinal basis (before and after travel interviews), with six recruited on a longitudinal basis in order to identify potential

shifts in practice between pre-travel anticipations of perceived experiences and post-travel reflections of actual experiences in the context of Peru. First, pre-travel interviews provided insight into the general, predicted ethical stances and perceived effects of photography on local communities and identified the photographic behaviours and habits tourists predict they will employ at destinations. Secondly, interviews were conducted at key tourist sites around Cusco. By addressing and witnessing tourists' photographic encounters, the researcher was able to gain insights into the ethical considerations tourists face during the immediacy of such encounters as they meet and photograph local residents. Finally, on tourists' return from their holiday, interviews were conducted in order to explore tourists' ethical reflections of experience and encounter. Interviews were also conducted with 20 local residents who are photographed by tourists on a regular basis at six of the principal tourist sites in and around Cusco. In the context of qualitative and semi-structured interviews, autoethnography was also adopted as a means of accessing deeper, embodied nuances of experience. Thus, autoethnography provided a reflexive tool for negotiating the relational demands of photographic encounters and provided a reflexive understanding of the subjective positionalities that were identified in the emerging relationships between respondents.

While some research (see Pollard, 1986, Scarles, 2009) attends to the ability of photography to mobilise an intense visibility of the subject, this paper attends to the practices that underpin such decisions to photograph. It suggests photographic practices are driven by an ethics of confusion and confusion of ethics that are founded in a negotiation of subjective reflection across a spectrum of moral values and judgements. Thus, confusion is driven by tourists' subjective and moral reflexivity and their partial understandings and perceptions of the downstream effects of their photographic demands on the socio-cultural frameworks of those being photographed. For some, the complexities of ethical considerations that emerge during photographic encounters centre around personal experiences of and reactions to being photographed and a desire to minimise intrusions and respect for local culture as tourists draw upon their own past experiences of being photographed or actively imagine themselves in the place of the locals being photographed and the feelings of discomfort, unease and intrusion that would ensue. For others, considerations were driven by a willingness and/or ability to request permission or engage in financial exchange or conversation with locals or taking comfort and reassurance from fellow tourists' practice. As such, photographic practices emerge via a web of subjective reflections and actions as tourists attempt to make sense of the potential effects of their actions.

Secondly, the paper suggests that as a consequence, the complexities of tourists' subjective reflection of the effects of photographing are defaulted to local residents as tourists' cultural and social perception are imposed on those being photographed. Such transference and

partiality in understanding holds the potential to generate further complexity as tourists engage in negotiations of *other* as they strive to be sensitive *of* and *for* those they are (not) photographing. For some, the effects of photographing locals were perceived as creating opportunities for empowerment, increased income, cultural preservation and sharing culture. However, while such constructive relationships arise between tourists and locals, confusion and the perception of photography as perpetuating poverty and facilitating cycles of dependency, staging and commodifying culture also infiltrate tourists decisions whether to photograph. Driven by uncertainty, partial knowledges and fleeting, surface encounters, such gaps in understanding and subsequent practice can emerge as a confusion of subjectivities and awkward performances as tourists experience uncertainty in the effects their photographing *may* have. Indeed, the paper suggests such confusion of ethics is further fuelled by tourists' uncertainty of the 'rules' of photographing as they rely upon subjective judgement, or third parties such as tour guides, guide books and fellow tourists (which are in themselves often criticised for their partiality) to establish a framework of responsible practice. Indeed, due to limitations of communication and time, locals themselves are generally removed from such decision-making process as tourists finalise their decision to photograph before encounters. Alternatively, the immediacy of interaction is limited to fleeting gestures as tourists raise cameras or mime their intention to receive permission before moving on. As such, photographing inevitably emerges in a state of constant flux; a game of photographic play as tourists rely upon a fusion of predictable and reactionary practices that determines their decision to photograph or not.

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