WORKING PAPER

Proximity Ethics and Tourism: How a relational approach to ethics offers potential for climate change justice dilemmas.

Introduction

In this paper we examine the normative dimensions of air travel viewed through the lens of an ethics of proximity to reveal a deeper understanding about the ethics of people who fly in a carbon-constrained world. The question we explore here is: Why do some tourists fly despite holding an ethical position on carbon pollution which would indicate they should not fly?

Previous research into the disjuncture between knowledge, attitude, values and behaviour of people who fly has been examined under the topics of general tourist perceptions about flying (Becken, 2007, Burns and Cowlishaw, 2014, Cohen and Higham, 2011, Gössling et al., 2012), attitude behaviour gaps of the environmentally aware tourist (Cohen, Hibbert et al., 2013, Higham et al., 2015, Higham and Cohen, 2011, Lassen, 2010, Kroesen, 2013, Gibson, 2013, Higham et al., 2014), tourist offsetting in the aviation sector (Choi and Ritchie, 2014, Gössling et al., 2007, Lange et al., 2014b, Lange et al., 2014a, Mair, 2011, Ziegler and Schirpplies, 2014) and flying as addictive behaviour (Cohen et al., 2011). These studies tend to use behavioural and/or psychological frameworks to understand people who fly for tourist purposes. Alternative research on the dilemma includes a focus on mobilities (Hibbert et al., 2013, Higham et al., 2013) and sociological perspectives on the contradictions of environmentally aware tourists who fly (Cohen et al., 2013), as well as a critique of the commonly adopted theoretical approach, which treats flying behaviour as a pathology whilst ignoring structural determinants of behaviour (Young et al., 2014). Among perspectives on this problem, ethical and moral philosophy has been under-considered.
This working paper proposes that an ethics of proximity is a useful framework to examine the morality of the self, and how the *other* is implicated in personal ethical action through proximal experiences. The purpose of the exploration is to see if the very features of proximity ethics that lead to the creation and acceptance of the so-called flying dilemma can be harnessed to address the apparent universal ethical imperative of climate change mitigation. In other words, if the domination of ethical decision making by proximal relations leads to people flying more often, can the very same system of proximal ethical decision making be used to facilitate ethical decisions that lead to less flying? The paper uses a co-constructed narrative method between the two authors to explore their personal relational experience of flying for work, for visiting friends and family, and for leisure.

**Proximity Ethics Explained**

Following Nortvedt and Nordhaug (2008), the notion of proximity ethics in philosophy can be understood by attending to three categories of theoretical perspectives: meta-ethics, psychology-influenced philosophy, and anthropology-influenced philosophy. Within meta-ethics (or philosophical phenomenology), which focuses on identifying the roots of ethics as a human phenomenon, some have characterized the I–thou relationship as being at the heart of the matter. In this regard, Levinas contends that an ethic based on proximity is only possible through the irreducible otherness of the presence of a face; he claims that the existence of and responsibility for the other is sourced from the essential relationship of a person recognising the face of the other (Levinas, 1996). Husserl, on the other hand, contends it is the vulnerability of being born into the world that creates a moral dependency, as experienced by the newborn baby. This vulnerability demands action from a carer. In both perspectives, there is a dyadic relationship in which the experience of being human emotionally and cognitively calls upon us to consider the other. Seating the basis of the ethical impulse in the I–thou dyad renders ethics as localized at least to some degree, because the I–thou encounter in its fullest sense features embodied, sensory, emotional and
cognitive dimensions (Thompson, 2001). With recognition of the face come normative implications for personal action.

Secondly, proximity ethics draws on work in moral psychology that grounds moral sensitivity in emotion and human empathy (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008). At the heart of this perspective is the capacity for humans to feel, which is what provides access to (other) human experience. Without such a moral structuring process, people would remain blind to the moral domains of others and fail to comprehend the personal significance of events involving others (Vetlesen, 1997). Face-to-face contact from early childhood on is important in configuring affective empathy. As Nussbaum (2003) argues, in is nonsensical to try to dissociate the cognitive from the affective component of emotional sensitivity because feeling and interpretation are mutually interdependent in allowing a person, for example, to experience compassion for another’s suffering. Thus, moral responsiveness is an important involuntary dimension of empathy throughout a person’s life and is exhibited through moral responsibility and care (Hoffman, 2001). The normative implications of proximity in the experience of affective empathy point towards face-to-face embodied experiences as what guides human action, and indeed renders personal action possible.

Thirdly, proximity ethics draws on anthropological perspectives, which highlight the importance of personal relational attachment for human life (Nortvedt & Nordhaug, 2008). Relational attachment quite often dictates the moral actions of individuals, driving their sense of responsibility towards others. As Scheffler (2001) argues, this is essential in order for relationships to maintain their intrinsic, non-instrumentalist quality; hence, there is a normative basis for an ethics rooted in relational attachment. The proximity of personal relations is important to the affective triggering of moral responsiveness. For example, human suffering, such as that caused by disasters, is felt more acutely by people of the same race or nationality. Airline crashes more deeply affect people when citizens of their own country are on board than when only passengers from distant countries are involved.
Thus, psychology layers with anthropology to render proximity important in producing relational attachments that generate moral responsivenes.

Overall, a key discussion in proximity ethics centres on the question of to what extent proximity and distance have any normative claim when it comes to considerations of distributive justice. For example, if the ethics action of an individual is justified based on relational attachment, then to what degree should that action be reduced or extinguished if universal ethics run counter to the initial proximal ethical action. The ethic of care and its normative implications have been examined within the context of medical ethics (Nordhaug and Nortvedt, 2011), but tourism has predominantly conceived this so-called dilemma from a physiological perspective, with the most common diagnosis being individual cognitive dissonance. Within tourism studies the flying dilemma is identified as the disjuncture between the knowledge and behaviour of some travellers who fly: a large segment of the population knows the negative impacts of flying but continues to fly (Higham et al., 2014). The dilemma can also be understood as the conflict between the personal ethical decision to fly and the universal ethic of climate change justice. How might the three dimensions of proximity ethics be deployed to understand the so-called disjuncture between what people know about the effects of carbon emissions caused by air travel and their continuation of air travel?

**Proximity ethics, mobility and flying**

The need for the proximity of face-to-face contact for the development of social capital is important, and obligation is integral in this process (Urry, 2002). Obligations to maintain social relations occur through legal codes and economic interactions, and in the context of familial, friendship and intimate relationships; in an increasingly globalised and mobile world, these obligations span greater distances. Increasing mobility through air travel now affords an increase in proximal relations.
At the same time, online face-to-face interpersonal communication technologies (ICT) and social networking sites (SNS) have increased communication, which also helps to shape people’s sense of obligations. Relevant research on online communication concludes that SNS online interactions play a positive role in the preservation and development of social ties, in the face of erosion of social capital and weakening of community in western countries (Sabatini and Sarracino, 2013). Interestingly, face-to-face contact through ICTs maintains emotional bonds in deeper ways and is preferred despite time, cost and technological constraints (King-O’Riain, 2014). For example, ICTs have radically altered transnational family experiences to the extent that migration has been induced as a result of the face-to-face contact they facilitated (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014, Bacigalupe and Cámara, 2012).

Although online communication has an important and increasing role in maintaining social ties and emotional connections, lack of trust in an online context may impel people to seek real face-to-face communication as a path to intimacy (Larsen et al., 2012). Our evolutionary context may also have a role to play. As Boyd (2009) explains, humans gain our evolutionary advantage from occupying the cognitive niche, meaning that information-processing is the strongest ace in our sleeve. People also rely heavily on cooperation, so being able to process information collaboratively is essential, and for this people need to be highly skilled at both attention-sharing and empathy. It appears that humans are actually cognitively wired for this, as neuroscientists have identified “mirror neurons,” or neurons that fire in an observer or listener’s mind and match those firing in the mind of the actor or speaker being observed or heard. (For instance, if person A picks up a hammer or says the word “hammer,” particular neurons in her brain will fire related to the motion of grasping the tool, and if person B is watching or hearing her, then the same neurons will fire in his mind.) Although there does not yet appear to be reported experimental work on mirror neuron patterns with the use of ICTs, it is reasonable to hypothesize that transmission time lag, two-
dimensional visual appearance, lack of sensory inputs beyond the visual and aural, or any other number of factors might compromise our neuro-circuitry’s performance of mirroring, which could partially explain why ICTs, though certainly valuable, never quite seem an adequate substitute for the richness of direct human encounter.

Regardless of the mechanism behind the human desire for face-to-face communication, it has implications for proximity ethics and the flyer’s dilemma. To illustrate this, we outline some brief musings on our own ethics of air travel.

Author One (Real name to appear in final manuscript)

- I will travel to the Critical Tourism Studies conference for the third time this year. Travelling from Australia to Europe creates guilt but neoliberal pressures of performance in higher education in Australia means I need to extend to the international sphere of academia. This is a work obligation. The ease of communication through ITCs has maintained face to face communication with others from the conference network and thus a feeling of obligation results. ITCs in some ways replace the need for face communication that can be gained through air travel, but they also maintain connections and obligations.

- My travel to the conference is linked to my wedding in the UK which will occur after the CTS conference. The CTS conference is not the only obligation impelling me to travel. I have family obligations now that span the globe. Since entering into my relationship with my wife-to-be, familial obligations to travel to the other side of the globe from Australia have developed. I have noticed that the more contact my partner and I have with her family and friends through Facebook and Skype, the greater the sense of importance in connecting with these people face to face. I have the feeling that if we were not to engage using these ICTs, I would feel less obligation.
Wanting to have a holiday with my son also has obligations. I feel the pressure to have 'good' holidays with him, and the travel habits of his friends dictate that holidays abroad are a benchmark of what is a good holiday. I live near the beach in Australia and his friends are travelling with their families to distant lands for surfing holidays. I feel obligation to be a good father and provide holidays that satisfy his social and personal desires.

I recently flew to New Zealand and had a holiday with my partner but the impetus for going there was to attend a friend’s wedding. Obligation called for a plane flight once again.

Stefan Gosling gave a talk at the 2014 CAUTHE conference where he stated that the present trip he was undertaking in Australia was his last long-haul trip. Listing to him and chatting to him (face to face) inspired me to act. An example of this is my decision not to cash in frequent flyer points.

I offset my flights and daily car travel. This helps justify the travel I feel I am obliged to take for work, friends and family reasons.

Recently I saw protesters from south pacific paddle out into a major coal port in Australia and stop coal exports in protest of climate change—I saw it on Facebook. The face of people in the pictures and the vulnerability of these people had an impact on me. These people came from countries in the South Pacific like Kiribati. I have friends who either live in this country or who have family there. Through this connection (face to face with people who are impacted) the news of protesters coming to Australia to protest against coal exports brings on a feeling of obligation—of feeling like I have responsibility to my friends and my friends’ families to act on climate change mitigation.

Author Two (Real name to appear in final manuscript)
• When I first came to CTS, in 2007, I found community. I was struggling to find a sense of connection that could animate my academic life and motivate me to keep engaging with tourism studies in a committed way (although I didn’t fully realize this at the time).

• I didn’t really notice at the time that I was one of the only North Americans, and I didn’t think much about carbon back then, or what the consequences of building an academic community in Europe would be. I felt tiny in the huge sea of academia, and only able to focus on what my own immediate needs were: finding a place of connection. So I opened myself to the intellectual–affective dimensions of CTS and began to fall in love with my new friends.

• As I’ve gotten older, more stable, and more confident and rooted in my intellectual identity and my work routines, I’ve paid more attention to the environmental impacts of my choices. I feel very guilty for not making the time to practice sustainable behaviours, and concerns about flying are part of this bigger picture. I took a survey forwarded to my university community by our student environmental action group, and I found myself reporting things like not turning off my computer at the end of the day because I feel like I don’t have time to wait for it to reboot in the morning, or time to create an organizational system where I file my work away at the end of the day instead of leaving open files and websites strewn all over my computer screen so that I can remember what I was doing the day before.

• The problem is that I’m always doing too much, trying to work on too many different projects at the same time. Some of my dear ones at other universities can relate, and for them this sense of never-ending treadmill busyness is driven by the demands of a neoliberal academy that values quantity over quality and instrumentalises the minds and hearts of academics, seeking more output in terms of papers written and students taught, for the same input. I’m sheltered from this, at a young university
where my level of research engagement is rare and is therefore appreciated. I take
on too much because I don’t want to say no.

- I take on too much because my fundamental stance toward life is to be nurturing. My
  ethic of care drives me.
- I feel guilty about not having a life of balance, where I can practice sustainable
  behaviours in a small way every day, including by taking the time to figure out how to
  pay up for carbon offsets when I fly—and I fly a lot, living in Canada, with family in
  the US and Spain, and friends all over the world. Not spending time with my loved
  ones far away—including my CTS colleagues—is not an option for me. To not travel
to see those who are part of my far-flung community face-to-face would literally
undermine my life purpose. Instead, I need to find a balance of relationship
engagement and slower living that gives me time to take care of the earth and the
other species that share it with me, as well as taking care of my humans.

From these reflections we can surmise that a system of proximal ethical decision making
certainly does compel flying activity—at least in the case of our own personal narratives—but that there is also potentially space for it to play a role in decreasing flying activity. The
following aspects are important in the obligations that we experienced.

- Firstly, ethical decision making that involved obligations from the work domain meant
  face-to-face contact was important in establishing identity and professional
  relationships.
- Secondly, being part of the neoliberal university places demands on academics that
  make it obligatory to take on large workloads, and the ensuing proximal relations are
  subsumed in a work culture of speed and efficiency. Gender socialisation and ethics
  of care can dovetail with these demands rather than necessarily representing a path
  of resistance. This culture of speed leaves little time for reflecting on one’s choices
  and means that the “noisiest” and most immediately pressing concerns get
addressed first, with less thought given to long-term concerns for ourselves and our neighbours.

- Thirdly, the complexity of one single flying decision is imbued with multiple social and cultural obligations—family, work, relationships, etc.—which characterize postmodern de-differentiated life for people on “creative class” career trajectories (Florida, 2014) and thus make travel difficult to categorise simply as tourism. These obligations tend to have strong emotional overtones. Even when travel is clearly for pleasure (i.e., what is traditionally classify as “tourism”), the obligations that compel flying often lie in familial and social realms of daily life.

- Fourth, ICTs are integral in maintaining the proximal relations facilitating continued obligation for face-to-face relations. ICTs complement but do not replace face-to-face communication.

- Last but by no means least, emotions were an integral part of obligation and in many ways were the fuel for unquestioned action.

Based on the above summary reflections, we can conclude there is the possibility of using the power of proximal ethics in ways that could facilitate ethical responses which are underpinned by universal ethical principles. Although this shift is problematic, there are several promising pathways, including reconfiguring life purpose; reconnecting with a local lifeworld; slowing down to allow proximal relations to be fully considered; and connecting with people who challenge one’s sense of proximal relations (and in this case challenge present flying activity).

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the call within tourism studies for “better theorization and research, especially to examine the interdependencies between changes in physical movement and in electronic communications, and especially in their increasing convergence” (Hannam et al.,
Proximity ethics offers a unique way to conceive of the moral basis of flying (or not). The proximity ethics underpinning flying might be best summed up as the primacy of the face in human experience, which creates obligations for actual face-to-face contact and proximal relations.

Both authors think that there is no actual dilemma in our own flying activity. Our flying activity is grounded in the importance of proximal ethical decisions found in family, social and work domains of our lives, and quite often these domains intersect. Instigation and maintenance of face-to-face proximal relations were a key feature of obligation in our personal narratives. The universal ethical considerations of the climate change impacts of flying were identified as personally important as an environmental ethic but marginally experienced within the proximal ethical realm. Proximal ethics may nevertheless potentially play a role in changing flying activity, if there can be a diminishment of the proximal ethics that currently obligate people to fly, in favour of cultivating an awareness of the impacts of our carbon consumption on our neighbours. Additionally, flying activity may be challenged if there is an increase in face-to-face contact with people who challenge the flying paradigm. These initial conclusions invite further investigation into the role of proximity ethics in encouraging—as well as in holding potential for discouraging—flying activity.

References


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