

Culture, History and Sexual Attraction: Relationships between Tourists and Locals in Cuzco/Peru



Background

'Travel and sex' has become an area of great interest, particularly with the advent of HIV/AIDS. Being free from the usual social constraints gives travellers more freedom to engage in behaviour which, at home, would be unacceptable. Casual sexual encounters, very often unprotected, between travellers and local partners are abundant..

Cuzco in the Peruvian Andes is one popular tourism destination known for the availability of sexual opportunities. Sexual encounters between travellers and locals may aid the spread of STIs affecting the travellers and their sexual partners at home, as well as the locals and their sexual partners. The prevalence of infections, such as HTLV-1, in the area of Cuzco, may create a travel health problem in the future. To reveal the context of such encounters, this qualitative study describes tourists' and locals' perceptions relating to their experiences of sexual relationships between them.

Methods

- Data collection in May/June 2006 in Cuzco
- Sample: 23 tourists and locals (5 ♀, 8 ♂; age: 19-50+)
- Unstructured interviews (English, Spanish and German), informal conversations, participant and non-participant observation
- Ethical approval: Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Lima/Peru, and James Cook University, Australia

Results

The Attraction

For both groups, the difference in physical appearance was the prime magnet. Female tourists appreciated the "long black hair", "the Inca look", "different to our men", "speaking Quechua, playing the flute", "the wild look", characteristics not valued among local females. Male tourists, tall, with light hair, and blue or green eyes, and their being more attentive, more friendly and less *macho* than local men, attracted local girls. Local men were keen on blond, blue-eyed women with their different lifestyle and views, and sexual experience. Even blond, blue-eyed girls who would be considered unattractive at home were prized for their ability to increase a local man's self-esteem and status:
Pedro: "...not a pretty one but a gringa. The main thing, she is a gringa, this is important".
Chico: "Even the ugly ones - on both sides - have a chance in this game."

Tourist-Local Relationships in Cuzco

The types of relationships between tourists and locals varied from one-night-stands to have fun, to relationships for the tourists' length of stay, to longer-term commitments and marriage. Being away from home and lonely, craving for company and physical contact facilitated openness for new encounters but cultural differences and discrepancies in expectations created some problems:

Cornelia: "They don't fall in love, it's a matter of the moment or sex. When she is gone, there will be the next".

Emotional involvement made the tourist's departure difficult, often more so for the partner left behind:
Chico: "It was very hard when my girlfriend of 2 weeks left. I had great illusions, she was much more realistic."

Short-term relationships had a more sexual undertone. Many tourists added sexual encounters to their holiday experience.

Alison: "Well, really, these guys must know that. Um, really, we just want some fun. I am here for the sex thing. Cuzco is good for getting locals for sex. Hm, yes, I was told there is plenty of sex available in Cuzco."

Some locals enjoyed the steady stream of new tourists arriving, not only serially but simultaneously:
Melanie: "I was a bit surprised that he had managed to be with 3 other girls without me noticing"

Initiating Contact

New contacts were mainly made in the 'gringotecas' (discos), during tourism activities, or by hanging out with artisans/musicians. Most discos offer a free first drink and much can be consumed cruising from one establishment to the next. For the majority of tourists, the encounter with their partner had started with some alcohol leading to dancing and kissing before leaving the disco. Alcohol and drug use was viewed as facilitating unsafe sex at some stage by lowering inhibitions and impairing judgement.

In a few cases it was mutual 'instant connection' while others (tourists and locals) pursued their target keenly. Trekking guides were in the habit of 'stealing' tourists from other groups, while female tourists were known to lure hotel staff to their rooms. Generally, local men were amazed about the boldness of some foreign women were. Sexual encounters initiated in the city usually took place in the tourists' hotel or in the locals' homes. On tours, tents and convenient ruins proved popular.

Safer Sex/Condom Use

Condom use was inconsistent. Some tourists insisted on condoms. Some females in romantic relationships reported that their Peruvian partners also expected their use. Others had to supply them and insist on their use because the local men did not like them, did not buy them or, when drunk or on drugs, did try to have sex without them. In longer-term relationships, stopping condom use created problems.

Alison: "I am not really sure what happened that night. I can't remember much. Did I use it? I honestly can't say right now. Um, I suppose...I don't remember. Maybe that was a bad thing, come to think of it. Um, I just remember, we were real hot and things got fast..." However, she had no regrets: "No, not really, I mean we are here on holidays, that's part of it...you know how it is, things can get out of hand..."

Susan did not use a condom. She had one in her backpack but didn't want to interrupt 'great sex'. She had spotted another local whom she assessed as being a minor risk ('he is this deep, quiet type') and as not having had that many tourists yet.

The contact with more conscientious tourists, taught some male locals that using condoms was the responsible thing to do and they adopted this habit as their own. Many others did not use condoms for lack of understanding, the cost, and because it was 'mas rico' (much better) without. Many local females were glad that the male tourists had condoms, and 'no condom' meant 'no sex' as they were afraid of AIDS.

Knowledge and Education

Only one tourist had received advice regarding safe sex.

Alison: "No, they didn't talk about that, should they? I guess, people do what they want anyway, no?"

Susan: "No, nobody said anything [...] But when you are on holidays, and your mum doesn't control you, you can enjoy your freedom, 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll'."

Few tourists had ideas on how to incorporate the safer sex message into travel health advice. Geert thought the only way to education was to use shocking photos. Liz believed that the "do this - don't do that" method did not work and people should decide for themselves based on reason.

Local knowledge on STIs/HIV/AIDS was assessed by tourists and locals as dangerously limited, not only in locals having sex with tourists but in the general population. No or unsuitable sex education at school leaves young people with some half-knowledge, lots of embarrassment, and the need to experiment, putting themselves and others in danger. General sexual health campaigns were extremely limited. Knowledge was limited to the fact that AIDS concerned homosexuals, other STIs were virtually unknown.



Conclusion

This study tried to add a human face to the context of statistics on sexual behaviour in the city. Understanding people's motives may provide directions to design more promising health education strategies.

Current education strategies to adopt healthier (sexual) behaviour are not very successful. The freedom experienced while travelling, and a seemingly endless supply of arriving potential sexual partners seem to undermine educational efforts on both sides. Unprotected sex with tourists (with unknown sexual histories) puts locals in a dangerous bridging position where infections can be transmitted to their local sex partners and to other tourists.

Recommendations:

More research is needed regarding content, method and target populations of sexual education. Improved sexual health education is needed for:

- 1) **Tourists** (to protect tourist + sex partner/s at home + local contact/s):
 - include safer sex message in all travel health advice
 - encourage continuation of condom use in long-term relationships
 - create awareness of unexpected reaction to seductive environment
 - facilitate empowerment of women to negotiate safe sex
- 2) **Locals** (to protect local + local sex partner/s + tourist contact/s):
 - update local sexual health education policies, incl. information in Quechua
 - target locals connected to tourism and hospitality industry
 - provide correct, and culturally and educationally appropriate information
 - create awareness that risk is immediate, direct and personal

Sex during travel will continue, but people should approach their own and their partner's well-being with great responsibility.

