



Imagined relational capital: An analytical tool in considering small tourism firms' sociality



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HIGHLIGHTS

- UK based study on small tourism firms in Yorkshire's towns of Scarborough, Bridlington and Whitby.
- Use of imagined relational capital in examining small tourism firms' sociality.
- Rhizomic configuration of relationality.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I introduce the notion of imagined relational capital (IRC) to examine the sociality of small tourism firms operating in coastal towns of Scarborough, Bridlington and Whitby in Yorkshire. Drawing upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I underline how IRC becomes a portmanteau term for comprehending iterative ties of (dis)association that embody real/imagined affinities and hostilities owners and managers assemble and experience towards each other. The analysis illustrates how IRC emanating from rhizomic configuration of their (in)formal engagement ruptures preset perceptions and moulds milieus where new modes of thinking and feeling are imagined and practiced. By focussing on the constitutive role of IRC in shaping respondents' worldviews, this study offers distinctive perspective in conceptualising ambivalent and complex interface small tourism firms mutually maintain.

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1. Introduction

Small tourism firms, run by members of a single family, a couple, or involving only one owner (i.e. sole proprietors), are distinguished by their individualised and differentiated services and the family atmosphere they create for their employees and customers (Getz & Carlsen, 2000; Medlik & Ingram, 2002). Authors contend that their management practices defy economic logic as family and lifestyle concerns are considered equally significant alongside commercial ones plus their planning/marketing strategies are often short-term, informal and narrow in scope (McCartan-Quinn & Carson, 2003). Further, relationships are viewed more as ends in themselves rather than means for accomplishing specific goals as “the bulk ... do not aspire to grow and are often motivated by non-financial factors” (Thomas, 2000, p. 341). Indeed, as many small-scale entrepreneurs combine

setting up and running a business with managing the household, and tend “not to belong to formal networking organisations” (Doyle & Young, 2001, p. 41), their social and business networks remain restricted mostly to relatives, friends and acquaintances with whom they share a rapport. However, their interface, characterised by close individual-level (un)coupling emerging through a history of both real and imagined negative/positive perceptions, remains largely unexplored in literature. Also, not much is written on small tourism firms' attachment and mutual bonding deriving from “an element of fond imagining” (Anderson, 2006, p. 154) that impact upon enterprise development, social/transactional ties, business orientation of the owner/manager, and any resultant loss or enhancement of “the status quo of smallness” (Morrison & Teixeira, 2004, p. 171).

My study seeks to fill this gap by focussing upon the structure of small tourism firms' interface (i.e. *whom an actor knows*) and the manner in which it exerts its influence on their business performance depending on the essence of ties (i.e. *how well one knows them*). In doing this, I relate to Polanyi's (1969) concept of ‘knowing more than one can tell’ or “horizontal imagining of the

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self and others” (Ray, 2009, p. 78). In my work I equate ‘real’ with territorial space and ‘imagined’ with symbolic space replete with particular sensibilities, values and norms. In fact, I posit that IRC can help to unpack the manner in which relational capital is theorised, namely as the sum of actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or a firm (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In the context of this research it implies that although owners/managers may not know each other intimately or meet infrequently, yet in their minds “lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). Thus in looking at their interface and the manner in which they showcase their enterprise and manage shifts in visitor attitudes and preferences, this paper considers two key questions: a) how actors experience and imagine themselves in relation to the place and each other; and b) how their real and imagined affiliations structure mutual trust and legitimatise their ‘equal footing’ status with each other.

In Section 2, I present the conceptual framework informed by the writings of Deleuze and Guattari to outline key components integral to IRC and discuss how engaging with actors’ embeddedness in real and imagined contexts can provide an added insight into the concept of relational capital which authors consider as fundamental in sustaining small firms’ competitive advantage (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Following Quinn (2010), I have coined the term ‘imagined relational capital’ that embodies the act of relating through imagined and figurative associations with actors not known personally as a source of sustenance and support or conversely as means of drawing reassurance from not belonging to an imaginary community that one dislikes (Field, 2011). The notion is data driven as whilst studying accommodation providers¹ sociality, it appeared embedded in habits, routines and patterns of their daily life, “different degrees of agency and choice exercised by them to engage with or influence the world around them” (Tatli, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin, & Forson, 2014, p. 616), plus real – “clear, definitive and even obvious” (Cooper, 2005, p. 1693) and imagined – “... unclear, indefinite and even nebulous” (Cooper, 2005) – sense of (un)belonging with other businesses and visitors.

In Section 3, I summarise research methodology and the rationale for choosing three coastal towns of Scarborough, Whitby and Bridlington in Yorkshire as case study areas, dominated primarily by small tourism firms that have seen their repeat custom steadily decline and tourism employment opportunities often limited to the peak summer season (SBTS, 2011). The analysis presented in Section 4 centres on uncovering real and imagined (dis)connections between entities and particular *assemblages*² – ad hoc social and material groupings with the capacity to endow actors with agency (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983) – to which they belong. Section 5 concludes by underlining the potential of IRC as an important contributor to informed policy making that is sensitive to the needs of micro businesses operating in marginal economies. Drawing upon the writings of Deleuze and Guattari which offer a far richer model of the social context than is available in studies on small tourism firms’ sociality I now proffer IRC as disparate framework for examining the patterns and processes that shape interconnections and interdependencies existing amongst them.

2. Imagined relational capital

I define IRC as inherent in and emerging from (in)formal mutually reinforcing and recursive encounters and a series of affective and relational ‘becomings’³ that attend them, enhancing actors’ ‘capacity to act’ – enact particular roles, achieve specific goals and experience a feeling of (dis)connectedness with each other depending on the nature of their communion. Thus IRC stems from the mind’s fluid capacity to imagine ‘contact’ even when the physical evidence says otherwise (Newmann, 2006) and actors’ embeddedness in “... social totalities ... passing each other on the street, without ever becoming acquainted, and still [feeling] ... connected” (Anderson, 2006, p. 25). Such ‘stretched out’ sociality, one that is not necessarily reliant on face-to-face interaction but constituted through impression, intuition and a shared sense of community (see Allen & Hamnett, 1995) corresponds with Deleuze’s (1995) notion of the *virtual*. Jagodzinski (2005) regards virtual as disruptive of solid notions of social existence for it operates below the general threshold of perception and exists beyond that which is already known and experienced. Thus it is fair to argue that IRC may originate from a range of affective hues – affinity, hostility, suffering, fear – in whichever shade, its primary characteristic is that it can be sensed and generates a series of affects with the capability of transforming into finite affinities and mutual exchange of tangible (e.g. financial resources) and “intangible relational assets” (Hormiga, Batista-Canino, & Sánchez-Medina, 2011, p. 617) comprising of exchange of complementary information, ideas and knowledge. However, it is to be noted that the act of imagining or what Drohan (2010) calls the “language of imagination” (p. 291) in itself is not faulty, but can include/exclude the existence of those facets which it imagines to be (un)desirable.

2.1. The act of ‘coming together’

My concern is, following Deleuze and Guattari (2004), with the act of ‘coming together’ (p. 284) through which actors respond to each other’s needs whilst discursively (re)configuring relational space, foregrounding desirable elements and discarding undesirable ‘relations and contexts’ that inhibit their agency. Indeed, as small tourism firms are inherently a part of collectivities comprising of ties of family, kinship, culture, religion and ethnicity (Danes, Lee, Stafford, & Heck, 2008), their act of coming together can be understood as actors’ “... capacity to multiply connections... to varying degrees in different situations...” (Massumi in Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, xvii). Jamal and Hollinshead (2001), after Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 2004), regard the process as empowering mainly because it allows individuals to re-understand themselves and re-think their cultural and national heritages.

So how do actors’ real and imagined affiliations generate relational capital which they are then able to employ for economic gains? Forson (2007) states that the sociality of micro-businesses operating in non-urban landscapes and in communities at the margins of the mainstream society is normative as informal relational ties are regarded as key to the success of their business. Small firms overcome their size and resource-related disadvantages through their relational capital skills or social networking strategies which are deployed for augmenting self-interest through mutually profitable relationships (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Also, such mutuality implies that the process of ‘helping

¹ Most were micro-businesses in my sample and owned by couples, employing less than 5 and in a majority of cases set up to supplement retirement income.

² Davies (2012) regards assemblages as “social formations... temporary aggregates of objects and people. These constellations... each moving in their own ‘line of flight’, can temporarily cohere at certain times, before dispersing again” (p. 276).

³ Deleuze and Guattari (2004) explain that, “... a line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle... a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination ...” (p. 293).

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