

Rethinking social impacts of tourism research: A new research agenda

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 January 2010

Accepted 30 January 2011

Keywords:

Social impacts

Tourism

Host communities

Research agenda

ABSTRACT

Understanding the social impacts of tourism on communities is extremely important for government at all levels so that action can be taken to reduce the likelihood of a community backlash against tourists and tourism development. Given that the residents of many tourism destinations are a fundamental part of the tourism 'product', resident attitudes and behaviour have a sizable impact on the success or otherwise of a destination. Research on the social impacts of tourism on communities is substantial and ongoing and while advances have been made in the area, the research has not addressed some of the deep seated issues faced by tourist destinations. This paper provides a critique of the social impact of tourism literature, highlighting the inadequacies in the research that has been conducted to date, which then leads to the development of a new conceptual framework. The paper traces the key developments in social impact research and argues that the predominance of quantitative methods potentially limits our ability to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impacts and how they influence both the host community and tourists. The paper finds that the quantitative focus from previous social impact research has led to a narrow understanding of the issues surrounding social impacts and proposes a new research agenda based on 'layers' of social impact understanding through the use of ethnography or phenomenology. The paper concludes with recommendations to progress social impact research beyond simply describing the issues towards explanations of why they occur by suggesting that social impact research examine, in greater depth, the values and intrinsic characteristics of the host residents.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the literature on the social impacts of tourism on host communities and provides an alternative conceptual framework to the predominance of the quantitative methods currently used in this field of research. It discusses the key themes that have emerged from previous research and the methods used. In so doing, the paper highlights the predominance of quantitative methods and the lack of qualitative inquiry that has led to the evolution of social impact 'lists'. The paper first provides a brief overview of the importance of social impact research and the current 'state of play'. Second, it examines the stages of research in this area, acknowledging the difficulties with which researchers have grappled regarding definitions and the dependent variables tested. Third, the paper presents the key literature in the area, grouping the findings into a typology of themes. Finally, a new approach to social impact research is proposed drawing upon

research into organisational culture and the framework and methods used in that research.

The importance of researching the social impacts of tourism cannot be overestimated. It is crucial for industry, government tourism departments and agencies to understand how individuals within a host community as well as the host community overall perceives the benefits and disadvantages of tourism because of the potential hostile response to tourists if a balance is not achieved. Whilst research into the social impacts of tourism is both substantial and ongoing, it has reached a level of maturity that requires regular updates on the work undertaken and findings made in order to reduce the chance of unwitting duplication. Although a number of reviews of the research have been undertaken (see, for example, Andriotis, 2005; Easterling, 2004; Harrill, 2004; Yen & Kerstetter, 2009), most are written with a particular focus and thus only refer to studies that align with this specific focus. Easterling's (2004) review is an exception to this narrow focus in that it draws upon a wide variety of studies that provides an overview of residents' perspectives in tourism research. However, there has been substantial social impact research since Easterling's article was published in 2004 and there is a need to

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review what has been done since then. Much of the most recent research is quantitative, including work by the authors of this paper, and focuses on specific impacts such as gambling or the uses of a particular method such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Although the research is abundant, there are still debates regarding definitions (e.g. Yen & Kerstetter, 2009), performance variables to be measured (Jurowski & Gursoy, 2004; Smith & Krannich, 1998) and methods used (Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002; Huh & Vogt, 2008).

Research into the social impacts of tourism appears to be in a state of ‘arrested development’ – in other words, there is a sense that the advances in understanding the impacts of tourists on host communities is incremental at best, or potentially circular. While there is reasonable agreement as to the nature of the impacts (e.g. overcrowding, disruptive tourist behaviour, higher employment rates) and the variables which influence residents’ perceptions (e.g. dependence on tourism for income), recent quantitative research in this area has analysed specific impacts or used particular methods without providing in-depth insights into the reasons for residents’ perceptions and the subsequent consequences of such perceptions.

This paper proposes a new research agenda that allows for a deeper understanding of the impacts on the host residents. The paper firstly documents the key research stages and streams in social impact research, the methods used, the variables measured and the findings achieved in order to indicate the development stages of the research and an overview of the current state of play. Secondly, the paper argues that social impact research has reached the stage where much of the work that has been done has focused on single issues and does not, generally, provide a more holistic perspective. What is lacking is the meaning and the nuances of the findings and an in-depth understanding of perception formation and its consequences. The research area has reached a stage where, using a medical analogy, the symptoms of the problem are being examined rather than its deep seated causes. The paper proceeds to a proposed research agenda as a way to progress the analysis of social impacts and further develop the field in a deeper and more holistic manner.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stages of social impact research

Research into the social impacts of tourism has gone through a number of stages of development. Some examples of these stages are summarised in Fig. 1. As with all emerging areas of research, the need for definitions to provide the boundaries for debate is critical. This need has moved attention away from the economic focus which dominated so much of the early tourism impact analysis. While the definitional debates continue, key words such as ‘host residents’, ‘social impacts’, ‘perceptions’ and ‘attitudes’ form the basis of the research. The early research such as that by Belisle and Hoy (1981), Brougham and Butler (1981), Doxey (1975), and Liu, Sheldon, and Var (1987) are largely exploratory and descriptive. The second stage of social impact of tourism research, as illustrated

by Doxey’s (1975) work, began to develop the models within which the research could be conducted and it marked the beginning of a plethora of studies in the area. This stage of the research included the development of model building showing the hypothesised relationships between resident perceptions of the social impacts of tourism and variables such as improved facilities and socialising opportunities (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) and crime, congestion and disruption (Ap, 1992), the latter being underpinned by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Other theories such as lifecycle theory (Butler, 1980) have also been used to underpin social impact research, although Butler’s theory has been found to be less useful as it assumes homogeneity within communities. Over time, these models were expanded to provide a basis for testing. Work by Ap and colleagues in questionnaire development signalled the beginning of the third phase, which focused on measurement and this work was continued and refined by other researchers such as Choi and Sirakaya (2005) in the fourth phase.

The pending issue, confronted by research in the social impacts of tourism is the dominance of a quantitative paradigm which has not facilitated a deep understanding of the impacts. The research undertaken to date has tended to provide lists of impacts without a clear understanding of how the perceptions of these impacts were formed and, more importantly, how such perceptions could be changed if necessary. There has been insufficient descriptive work to adequately explain the ‘why’ of this research area. We would argue, therefore, that social impact of tourism research requires a new research direction and agenda.

2.2. Definitional issues

Much of the debate in the literature revolves around residents and focuses on the meanings of ‘attitudes’ (Gu & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Scotland, & Montgomery, 1998), defined by Ajzen and Fishbein (2005: p. 174) as ‘verbal reactions to symbolic stimuli [that] provide insight into how people behave in the real world’. Attitudes sometimes appear to be used interchangeably with ‘perceptions’ (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Dyer, Gursoy, Sharma, & Cater, 2007; Kayat, 2002; Ross, 1992; Sharma, Dyer, Carter, & Gursoy, 2008; Small, 2007) and these are argued to describe a person’s experience of the world and usually require further refinement. Occasionally ‘reactions’ (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000) and ‘opinions’ (Williams & Lawson, 2001) have also been used. Recent work by Yen and Kerstetter (2009) found that attitudes towards current tourism development and attitudes towards future tourism development were statistically distinct from each other. Gu and Ryan (2008: p. 638) discuss the complexities of attitudes based on a definition of an attitude as ‘an enduring predisposition towards places, people and behaviours’. This provides a useful basis for social impact research. The complexities arise, however, through the role of intervening variables such as lack of income, the importance of the impact on the resident and the assumption that attitude formation follows a clear process which may not actually be the case. This current review acknowledges that Gu and Ryan’s (2008) discussion on the definition of attitudes highlights the

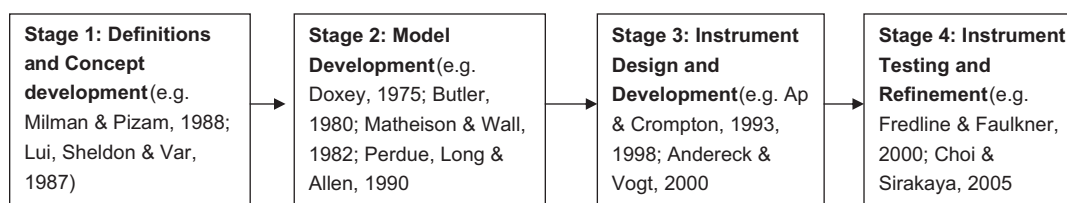


Fig. 1. Stages of development in social impacts of tourism research with examples.

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