A theoretical framework for sustaining culture: Culturally sustainable entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

While the three phenomena—culture, sustainability, and entrepreneurship—have been discussed separately, or paired in the tourism literature, they have rarely been studied together. This paper proposes culturally sustainable entrepreneurship as a new, theoretical framework for insight and advocacy in indigenous and non-indigenous tourism contexts. Culturally sustainable entrepreneurship encourages adapting entrepreneurial models that sustain and enhance the values and traditions of a community for its self-defined benefits, rather than imposing economic entrepreneurial models that may change conditions within a community. Entrepreneurial strategies in the mainstream proceed upon values that may diverge sharply from those of non-mainstream cultures. Culturally sustainable entrepreneurship promotes sustainable empowerment through owned-decision making for marginalized populations. Living cultures are presented as particular application for culturally sustainable entrepreneurship.

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Introduction

From the earliest centuries, indigenous cultures have been attractive to tourists who are often drawn to the exotic and unknown, for edification, entertainment, and enrichment (both economic and intellectual). The danger (and realities) of cultural compromise have always been present. Effects of colonialism and other historic factors have had a lasting, negative influence on indigenous populations, leaving them economically and politically impoverished. More recently, the spread of neo-liberal values emphasizing privatization, deregulation, and market efficiency at the expense of locally-centered and indigenous economies have been harmful. As a result, many such communities have turned to tourism to address the economic, political, and cultural challenges facing them. This type of tourism has drawn the attention of tourism entrepreneurs. Appropriately managed, tourism is seen as a sustainable activity generally consistent with inherent values about the sanctity of the land and people's relations to it. Too often, however, entrepreneurs have sought economic benefit at cost to marginalized populations.

Positive and negative consequences of tourism for indigenous communities have been documented (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Campo & Turbay, 2015) and have relevance to other non-mainstream cultures as well. Consequences include the economic, such as increased jobs, tax revenues, and new opportunities—but just as often—exploitation and

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infringement on economic rights; the sociocultural, resurgence of traditional arts, expanded social networks, greater feeling of personal growth—but also compromises to traditional practices through exposure to non-indigenous groups; and the environmental, increased awareness and protection of indigenous lands and wildlife—as well as concerns over crowding, pollution and other environmental factors.

These consequences are apparent for many living cultures, where tourism has been proposed as a potential solution for increased economic prosperity, but where, too, economic stability comes at the price of cultural marginality and damage to traditions and cultural values (Azarya, 2004; Mulligan, 1999). More specifically, some living cultures fear an increase in tourist dollars will come at the expense of ways of life and the often hard won ability to exercise cultural rights of a sovereign people. Some also associate the entrepreneurial methods of dominant (white or Western) culture—undergirded by neoliberal ideals—as devaluing their tenets and beliefs (Campo & Turbay, 2015; Peters & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2012).

While tourism, ethnic or cultural, has the potential to bring social and economic benefits to a culture, it can also have an adverse impact on the culture's way of life and cultural identity, through commodification (Yang & Wall, 2009). Cultural compromise also occurs from cultural misunderstandings leading to lack of respect for traditions and values. The goal of this conceptual paper is twofold: to introduce culturally sustainable entrepreneurship as a framework for conceptualizing methods for mitigating negative entrepreneurship and tourism on a living culture, and to flesh out the idea of living cultures as potentially vulnerable communities where culturally sustainable entrepreneurship has particular application. More firmly stated, culturally sustainable entrepreneurship is proposed as an entrepreneurial framework for reducing economic hardship for marginalized, living cultures in ways that sustain and empower—with tourism at its core. It should, therefore, be considered as part of any entrepreneurial project involving indigenous and other non-mainstream communities.

Case studies

The conceptual model presented in this paper has formed from work on two consecutive, formalized case studies focused on undergraduate applied research; additional non-formalized field work conducted by the researchers; and additional input gleaned from scholarly presentations. The formal case studies concerned communities that were faced with difficult choices between economic prosperity and cultural integrity. Cultural integrity, as defined here, refers to "autochthonous cultural traditions" that have "aesthetic, social, and ceremonial meanings able to exist outside of the system of capitalist exchange" (Root, 1998, p. 80). It refers to connection of objects and activities to a social and ceremonial matrix—"a cultural wholeness" in which they are made or used (p. 80). The first community studied is an indigenous population, the Hopi Tribe of northeastern Arizona, USA. The Hopi Tribe is a sovereign nation made up of 12 villages on three mesas with a population of approximately 10,000 members. The case study focused on tourism policy. Separate from the tourism policy field work, the conceptual idea for culturally sustainable entrepreneurship emerged.

The second community studied is a non-mainstream community, Arcosanti. It is an experimental town, located in the high desert of northcentral Arizona, USA, launched in 1970. As the embodiment of the vision of architect Paolo Soleri, it is an urban laboratory focused on innovative design, community, and environmental accountability based on his theory of arcology (architecture + ecology). Residents and tourists live, work, visit, and participate in educational and cultural programs concentrated on Soleri and arcology. The case study focused on arts policy and tourism retailing. Again, apart from the case study, this non-mainstream culture provided rich, exploratory data which, anecdotally, confirmed the idea of culturally sustainable entrepreneurship identified earlier.

Insights that were gained from the case studies included acknowledgement that both communities had: 1) strong emotional and familial ties to the culture that dominated decision-making; 2) internal as well as external struggles with regard to maintaining the culture (including disagreements as to who were the decision-makers); 3) an origin story (however, not always the same interpretation) that was present in decision-making; and, 4) a willingness to participate in entrepreneurial activities when the activities did not adversely compromise the culture. Although scientific investigation was not undertaken to make a direct comparison, similarities between the two communities became evident. Therefore, living culture has been adopted for use with culturally sustainable entrepreneurship to incorporate both indigenous and other non-mainstream cultures that exhibit similar value systems. While there are certain elements of an indigenous culture that give it rights against governments that non-indigenous groups don't have (whether or not they are mainstream), the struggles to find entrepreneurial ways to sustain a culture are similar. Entrepreneurial activities that enhance cultural traditions and values provide encouragement for these living communities to achieve cultural sustainability.

Various authors speak of living cultures—as existing in present time with members who live everyday life through past traditions (Timothy, 2011); or cultural heritage composed of the essential elements of living culture of human communities (Lenzerini, 2011); or commoditizing a living culture (Bunten, 2010). However, a definition of living culture is not evident in the literature. All present day indigenous cultures are living cultures; however, as defined by the authors, non-indigenous, non-mainstream cultures, such as Arcosanti, may also qualify as living cultures if they exhibit particular characteristics.

The 2003 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) General Conference provides a general definition of *intangible cultural heritage* as "the culture that people practice as part of their daily lives" (Kurin, 2004, p. 67). A list and discussion offer assistance in deciding what is and is not intangible cultural heritage. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (as reported in Hinch & Butler, 2007) classifies a group as indigenous if they were present and occupied a given area prior to the creation of modern states and borders. Additionally, these groups are seen as distinct in cultural and social identities and institutions relative to dominant groups and desire to preserve that cultural identity.