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Prosocial behaviour in volunteer tourism

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies Self-Categorisation Theory to examine issues of role ambiguity and the balance between prosocial behaviour and personal benefits in volunteer tourism. Using interviews with returned volunteer tourists, the cognitive processing of their experiences was analysed; particularly the processes of individuation uncovered through “I” statements, and depersonalisation, through impersonal “you” statements. Results revealed that “I” statements described the tourist experience and personal benefits of volunteering, whilst impersonal “you” statements described the volunteering experience. Furthermore, as the theory predicts, the depersonalisation process (impersonal “you” statements) co-occurred with prosocial behaviour (co-operation, altruism, empathy, and shared norms). The findings suggest new and promising communication-based methods to better understand tourists’ self-assigned roles and prosocial behaviours.

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Introduction

Volunteer tourism is now a well-established area of research within the tourism literature. Wearing (2001, p. 1) proposed one of the first definitions of volunteer tourists as “individuals who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment”. A number of conceptual papers, qualitative and empirical studies provide excellent insights into the demand and supply sides of this sector, as well

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as its relationship to host communities and broader issues such as development paradigms and civic engagement (e.g. Guttentag, 2009; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Palacios, 2010; Wearing 2001).

Yet, there remains at the heart of the volunteer tourism experience a fundamental tension between the ascribed roles of “volunteer” and “tourist” (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). When present, this tension may have a fundamental impact on the volunteer tourist experience as well as on project outcomes for local NGOs, communities or other stakeholders. Thus, a better understanding of this so-called role ambiguity, how it arises, how it is perceived by the actors themselves (that is, the volunteer tourists), and its impacts on the outcomes of this sector, is necessary to better understand the sector as a whole. The expression of volunteer tourists' sense of role ambiguity will therefore be the focus of this study. It uses qualitative data from interviews with past volunteer tourists and a conceptual framework based upon social psychology's Self-Categorisation Theory to understand the ways in which participants shape and re-shape their identities as they recount their experiences. The study also considers some of the impacts that this process may have on the longer-term outcomes of volunteer tourism experiences through its impacts on prosocial behaviour.

Volunteer tourism and role ambiguity

A sense of role ambiguity experienced by volunteer tourists is present in much of the research into this sector. For example, the tension between being a volunteer and a tourist is highlighted through studies on the place of altruism in volunteer tourism, the development of a commodified, hedonic sector replacing the well-intentioned original development agendas of philanthropic host organisations (Coghlan & Fennel, 2009; Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Cousins, Evans, & Sadler, 2009; Mustonen, 2007; Palacios, 2010). It is also evident in research into the balance of holiday and work in the experience, the “otherness” of the volunteer tourist, and their place in the local community and in studies of expectations and their (dis)confirmation (Blackman & Benson, 2010; Brumbaugh, 2010; Coghlan, 2006, 2007; Lepp, 2009; Lyons, 2008; Matthews, 2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Mustonen, 2005; Ooi & Laing, 2010; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Zavitz & Butz, 2011). This tension is perhaps best highlighted in the work by Lyons (2003) in his study of J-1 visitor exchange programs for young Australians; here Lyons identified four simultaneous and ambiguous roles for the participants, which in turn “created frustration and anger that affected the quality of their experience” (p. 11).

Mustonen (2005) on the other hand, also acknowledge the shifting roles experienced by volunteer tourists, but accepts that this is part of the experience, as “the roles of (volunteer) tourists are prone to fluctuate between conventional and altruistic tourists” (p. 165). Other studies also point towards a changing self-concept as a result of participating in the tour. For instance, Leigh (2006) discusses issues of reverse culture shock when volunteer tourists experienced a sense of connection to their host community, thereby developing new ideas, perceptions and values that align more closely with the host community than their own community. Tomazos and Butler (2010) clearly illustrate the changing self-concept, as their respondents felt that “their life story was no longer matching who they were” (p. 373). In many cases, this shifting identity was represented by a new sense of belonging, described by Tomazos and Butler (2010) in the following statement “we were not just volunteers from different places and different backgrounds, we were all volunteers” (p. 369). Meanwhile Wearing (2002) argued the volunteer tourism experience “de-centres an excessive focus on the self” (p. 247). Adopting a different perspective, McGehee (2002) and McGehee and Santos (2005) both point to the role of volunteer tourism in creating social networks and connections, whilst Conran (2011) views the volunteer tourism experience through the lens of intimacy, whereby the experience centres on an aesthetic of attachment and created narratives of a shared experience.

What is clear from the studies presented above is that the volunteer tourism experience appears to have a strong impact upon a participant's sense of self, or their identity and how they view themselves in relation to others (Bailey & Russell, 2010; Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Lee & Woosnam, 2010; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). As part of this shifting identity, it is equally apparent that volunteer tourists may struggle to reconcile their identities as tourists with their identities as volunteer tourists, leading to a certain amount of tension and instability around the nature of their travel experience. This sense of role ambiguity has been held responsible for volunteer tourism's failure to live up to its promise

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