



Measuring empowerment: Developing and validating the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS)



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Scheyvens' conceptual dimensions of empowerment developed into empirical scales.
- The RETS measures empowerment at the psychological, social, and political level.
- The RETS is confirmed as construct valid measure of resident empowerment using CFA.
- Factor loadings ranged from 0.65 to 0.92 and reliability scores from 0.85 to 0.92.
- The RETS is ready for use by others to measure resident perceptions of empowerment.

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ABSTRACT

Despite empowerment playing a crucial role in sustainable tourism development, there have yet to be scales developed to measure whether residents perceive themselves as being psychologically, socially, or politically empowered from tourism. To address this gap, the Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS) was developed following Churchill's (1979) criteria for scale development. The RETS was purified through a pilot and pretest study before being tested in a three county region of western Virginia, USA. The data were initially analyzed using multiple exploratory factor analyses before being validated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Results of the CFA demonstrated that the RETS displayed construct validity with standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.65 to 0.92 for the three subscales and construct reliability scores ranging from 0.85 to 0.92. The RETS is presented as a scale ready for use to measure the extent to which residents perceive themselves as being empowered or disempowered by tourism.

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1. Introduction

Resident empowerment has long been a central tenet of sustainable tourism development (Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999; Sofield, 2003). Sofield (2003, p. 2) refers to empowerment as the “lesser traveled” path of tourism development and believes that without it, sustainable tourism is difficult to attain. Furthermore, Choi and Murray (2010, p. 589) write that “If the government fails to empower residents, the success of tourism development and sustainability cannot be guaranteed.” Despite empowerment playing a crucial role in successful sustainable tourism

development (Cole, 2006), few studies have moved beyond discussing the conceptual importance of the construct to developing measures of resident empowerment. This measurement gap may stem from the difficulty associated with quantifying and evaluating the non-economic benefits of tourism across sites over time (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008, p. 450). For those within the tourism industry interested in measuring and tracking resident perceptions of empowerment, this creates a significant problem as there are currently no measures available to assess how effective a certain initiative has been at empowering residents.

Scale development, with its focus on creating empirical measures of conceptual constructs, is an integral part of advancing our understanding of tourism and is often praised for its rigorous nature (Woosnam & Norman, 2010). Churchill (1979, p. 64) refers to

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scale development as “a critical element in the evolution of a fundamental body of knowledge.” This study seeks to build from the previous conceptual work done on empowerment in the psychology (Rappaport, 1984, 1985, & 1987), development (Friedmann, 1992; Sadan, 1997) and tourism literature (Cole, 2006; Scheyvens, 1999, 2002; Sofield, 2003) and develop a reliable and valid scale measuring residents’ perceived psychological, social, and political empowerment through tourism.

2. Literature review

Empowerment has received attention in many disciplines, including the education, psychology, and planning/development literature. Each has utilized the concept as a potential antidote to social injustice. Within the discipline of education, empowerment is largely traced back to the work by Freire (1973) and his attempts to liberate poor communities in Brazil through education (Hur, 2006). The discipline of psychology shifted its focus to empowerment following Rappaport’s (1981) compelling speech to the American Psychological Association (APA) which argued that empowerment of patients to tackle their own problems was a more appropriate approach to mental health healing than prescribing top-down preventive solutions. In the development literature, Friedmann (1992, p. 31) places empowerment at the forefront of the movement toward an alternative type of development which is centered “on people and their environment rather than production and profits.”

Growing out of this early work, the concept of empowerment has become a much researched topic across multiple disciplines (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Perkins and Zimmerman (1995, p. 571) write that “empowerment has become a vital construct for understanding the development of individuals, organizations, and communities.” The importance of empowerment to the development of individuals and communities is also seen in empowerment’s proliferation of usage and becoming part of the popular vernacular according to Sofield (2003).

While empowerment has been heavily researched, defining it has been troublesome, as evidenced in the following quote: “empowerment is a little bit like obscenity; you have trouble defining it but you know it when you see it” (Rappaport, 1985, p. 17). Additionally, Rappaport (1984, p. 3) refers to empowerment as “easy to define in its absences: powerlessness, real or imagined; learned helplessness; alienation; loss of a sense of control over one’s own life. It is more difficult to define positively only because it takes on a different form in different people and contexts.” In spite of these issues, one of the most commonly agreed upon definitions of empowerment is by Rappaport (1987, p. 122): the ability of “people, organizations, and communities to gain mastery over their affairs.” Similarly, Sadan (1997, p. 144) defines empowerment as “a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one’s life, destiny and environment.” A common theme between these definitions is individuals gaining ‘mastery’ or ‘control’ over their environments.

2.1. Empowerment within tourism development

Research on empowerment specific to tourism development has many similarities with the aforementioned discussion of the broader literature. Much of the research in this area has taken place within the context of sustainable tourism development, which argues for a focus on resident quality of life in the form of bringing maximum benefits to a destination’s triple bottom-line (economic, environmental, and socio-cultural sustainability) in a more meaningful way than production and profit (Dwyer, 2005; McCool & Lime, 2001). Choi and Sirakaya (2005) argue that in order to be successful, this type of focus requires community participation. To them, resident control is

the philosophical basis of sustainable tourism. Yu, Chancellor, and Cole (2011, p. 57) even refer to community participation as a “crucial” factor for successful sustainable tourism development.

While this literature supports the importance of involving residents in the tourism development process, there is recognition by some that participation alone is not sufficient and that residents need to be empowered in order for tourism to be considered sustainable (Cole, 2006; Petrić, 2007; Scheyvens, 1999). Cole (2006) argues that community participation is not the final goal and sustainable tourism ultimately fails if residents are not empowered. She indicates that resident empowerment represents “the top end of the participation ladder where members of a community are active agents of change and they have the ability to find solutions to their problems, make decisions, implement actions and evaluate their solutions” (p. 631). Cole draws extensively from work outside the tourism literature. It appears that Arnstein (1969, p. 216) was the primary source of inspiration for Cole, due to his assertion that “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.” Arnstein (1969) was also the first to see participation as occurring along a ladder, which ranges from nonparticipation at the bottom, to degrees of tokenism such as informing and consulting in the middle, and ultimately citizen control (empowerment) at the top. Similarly, Choguill (1996) describes eight levels of participation with citizens having the greatest amount of control when they are empowered. Therefore, empowerment is recognized as a higher level of community participation where residents are not only included in the planning process, but have control over it as well. Empowerment’s spot at the top rung of Arnstein’s (1969) citizen participation ladder could explain why Sofield (2003, p. 2) refers to empowerment as the “lesser traveled” path of tourism development.

While the rhetoric is compelling, only a handful of tourism studies have gone beyond the focus on community participation to specifically concentrate on empowerment in sustainable tourism (Cole, 2006; Di Castri, 2004; Petrić, 2007; Scheyvens, 1999, 2002; Sofield, 2003). Most recently, Cole’s (2006) conceptual work discusses the importance of information and empowerment as being central to achieving sustainable tourism. Di Castri’s (2004) article highlights the steps needed to empower residents in small island tourism, and Sofield’s (2003) book summarizes the link between empowerment and sustainable tourism development. The seminal work on empowerment within tourism is Scheyvens’ (1999) conceptual article highlighting what psychological, social, and political empowerment looks like within community-based eco-tourism. This multi-dimensional conceptualization of empowerment occurring not just at the political level, but also at the psychological and social level follows the psychology and development literature’s conceptualization of empowerment as multi-dimensional (Friedmann, 1992; Rappaport, 1984). This is particularly useful for the current study because it provides detailed descriptions of what empowerment should look like within sustainable tourism development. To deepen this discussion, Scheyven’s (1999) descriptions of psychological, social, and political empowerment are reviewed below.¹

2.1.1. Psychological empowerment in tourism

Psychological empowerment, within a tourism context, occurs when an individual’s pride and self-esteem are enhanced from outsiders who recognize the uniqueness and value of his or her

¹ This decision was made as previous economic empowerment discussions have focused on the economic well-being of the community which does not lend itself to application at the individual level. Additionally, economic empowerment can also be fairly easily determined and tracked through existing secondary data such as income and source of employment.

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