A modern day panopticon: Using power and control theory to manage volunteer tourists in Bolivia

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism literature is yet to examine the impact of power and control practices on volunteer tourist compliancy. This paper contributes to closing this research gap by proposing and testing a new theoretical model of power and control practices. Drawing upon the previously un-synthesized theoretical contributions of Foucault (1979) and French and Raven (1959), the model presents power and control practices identified in the extant organizational literature. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, data was collected within a Bolivian volunteer-host community. Examination of results suggested mutually beneficial volunteer-host working relationships occur under ‘softer’ management practices. Our findings also offer insight into the salience of using reward-based management strategies as a control mechanism, as well as identifying two new control practices that emerged empirically. The research suggests several implications for the management of host communities toward creating more harmonious, efficient, and effective working relationships between volunteer tourists and hosts.

Keywords:
Volunteer tourism
Power and control
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1. Introduction

Tourists seeking more authentic, rewarding, and worthwhile experiences have stimulated continuing development of the volunteer tourism sector (Barbieri, Santos, & Katsube, 2012; Otoo & Amuquandoh, 2014). The academic literature has developed in tandem, but is weighted toward understanding motivations, method, and wider cultural impacts of volunteer tourism, rather than the challenging task of managing the often complex volunteer-host dynamic (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). This research contributes to our limited understanding of how power and control practices inform effective volunteer management, and their role in eliciting greater levels of volunteer compliancy.

Uniquely, volunteer tourism offers volunteers an opportunity to combine leisure, travel, and volunteer work (Barbieri et al., 2012; Tomazos & Butler, 2012), rendering the already complex task of managing volunteers in conventional settings (Curran, Taheri, MacIntosh, & O’Gorman, 2016), even more challenging. This can be attributed to the particular volunteer-host dynamic formed as a result of significant personal investment on behalf of volunteer tourists, coupled with the need for hosts to ensure required tasks are completed, and volunteers contribute appropriately to projects that depend upon physical and emotionally demanding work (Alexander, 2012; Barbieri et al., 2012). Consequently, sustaining mutually beneficial volunteer-host relationships for the duration of a volunteer’s placement is a complex, potentially frictional process, aggravated through the inequality of the specific dynamics found within a volunteer tourism context (Terry, 2014; Tomazos & Butler, 2012). Failure to manage these relationships successfully can result in non-compliance of volunteers, and negative consequences for volunteer tourists, managers, and the prospective beneficiaries of planned projects (Barbieri et al., 2012; Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2012). Thus necessitating further investigation exploring volunteer host dynamics and the applicability of power and control theory.

Power and control (French & Raven, 1959) explores superior-subordinate relationships and identifies promotion prospects, wage scale, and employment termination as stimulators of compliance (Cadsby, Song, & Tapon, 2007; Choi & Peng, 2014; Deckop, Mangel, & Cirka, 1999; Degiuli & Kollmeyer, 2007; Vázquez, 2006). Separate from French and Raven (1959), Foucault (1979) has contributed to understanding power and control, yet both tracks of literature have yet to be synthesized.

Thus this research contributes by expanding knowledge of power and control principles among volunteers (Tomazos & Butler, 2012), to develop more effective and sustainable host community projects (Terry, 2014). Specifically, this is achieved through developing and testing a new management framework, bringing together two strands of power and control literature for the first time, within a unique context. The paper is organized as follows: a brief discussion is offered of the prevailing volunteer tourism literature, along with consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of power and control. Next, the methodological...
approach employed in this research is presented, followed by our empirical findings. The final sections highlight the relevance of our study to current literature and offer the theoretical, and practical implications as well as a summary of the study’s limitations.

2. Literature review

Volunteer tourists are defined by Wearing (2001, p.1) as “those tourists, 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 researchers commissioned the paring website Workaway to facilitate the discovery of the host community used for this study, and subsequently deemed an ecological project in Bolivia suitable. This form of non-staged volunteering (similar to Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) programmes) requires volunteers work set hours in return for food and accommodation, with hosts benefiting economically from work conducted (Streifeneder, 2016).

After an advocacy period of volunteer tourism, research began to comment on potential negative effects on host communities (Wearing & McGeehe, 2013). Terry (2014) notes that negative dynamics within volunteer-host relationships often stem from either volunteer indolence or perceived inadequate provision of amenities by a host. McGeehe (2014) proclaims that this dichotomous debate between altruistic and hedonistic volunteers - while enlightening to important issues (such as those presented by Terry) - has proven to be largely dependent upon context; suggesting future studies should focus on more sophisticated avenues of research, attempting to provide frameworks for improvement of host communities rather than merely identifying issues. Accordingly, this paper has answered this call by attempting to create a framework for effective relationships in the volunteer context. The complexity of the volunteer-host relationship in volunteer tourism settings is now considered.

2.1. The volunteer-host relationship

The ideal quintessential relationship between host and volunteer should constitute a mutually beneficial agreement, toward creating an enviable cross-cultural partnership (Singh, 2012). The act of contribution by volunteers and reciprocation of gratitude from hosts can stimulate cultural, and community integration, as well as establishing cross-cultural relationships grounded upon friendship and solidarity (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Zarandian, Shalbafian, Ryan, & Bidokhti, 2016). However in order for effective and mutually beneficial relationships to evolve, positive contribution by volunteers should not only be viewed as potential, but rather an inevitable outcome of the interaction (Guttentag, 2012). The commercialisation of a supposed altruistic activity has often led to ineffective working environments, whereby large organisations find it easier to market projects that incite high expectations with no code of conduct condemning inappropriate or obstructive behaviour from volunteers (Grimm & Needham, 2012; Nyahunzvi, 2013; Smith & Font, 2014). Lupoli, Morse, Bailey, and Schelhas (2015) and Alexander (2012) argue that in order to resist negative counter-productive relationships, host communities must be empowered in order to take control of their own projects. Lupoli et al. (2015) argue for a bottom-up organizational structure that empowers host communities to take control and be the administrators of their own community.

Such volunteer predilections cannot be dismissed however, as they form part of the power and control process. Motivations of volunteer tourists can range from very focussed upon poverty alleviation and altruism, toward more hedonistic pursuits whereby volunteers are motivated by the opportunity to conduct experiential activities concerning their personal self-development (Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2012; Otoo & Amuquandoh, 2014). Neo-colonial arguments assert that tourists have the power to regulate the host environment and cultivate norms which are unconsciously reproduced by other tourists (Hollinshead, 1999). This paper reviews effective management practices found in superior-subordinate relationships in traditional organizational structures, subsequently identifying how effective these practices are in a host community context through the use of template analysis. From the findings of this study power and control is suggested to be effective in managing volunteers and creating effective relationships, mutually beneficial for both volunteer and host community.

2.2. Development of power and control theory

Eisenhardt (1985) defines two separate strategies of control: Control as the process to minimize divergence of subordinates away from organizational values, and control utilized to monitor and reward subordinates dependant on performance. Setting remuneration traditionally has significant influence over a superior’s ability to control subordinates, as it is management’s ability to offer remuneration in return for work conducted that establishes a base level of control. Within the volunteer context, remuneration becomes inappropriate, and in the case of Workaway and WWOOF programmes this is replaced with non-financial reward alternatives such as additional food, free-time and accommodation (Streifeneder, 2016). Arguably, traditional practice encouraged managers to wrest complete organizational control away from subordinates by the use of ‘hard’ influences such as fear, coercion and remuneration (Berson & Sosik, 2007). The inherent sense of power resides in the fact that labour is unskilled, all organizational knowledge belongs to managers, and any worker can potentially be replaced, resulting in persistent job insecurity and an imbalance of power in favour of employers (Choi & Pang, 2014; Vázquez, 2006). Authors maintain that bureaucratic mechanisms can remain effective under particular market conditions (Styhre, 2008; Walton, 2005), specifically recognising employee ability to exhibit social adaptability and proactive voice as being contextually important factors in employee compliance under coercive control (Frieder, Hochwater, & DeOrtentiis, 2015; Mackey, Ellen, Hochwater, & Ferris, 2013). Podsaloff, Todor, Grover, and Huber (1984) claim bureaucratic forms of punishment and reward if administered appropriately (contingent upon performance) generate positive effects on subordinate compliance and organizational commitment.

Foucault (1979) developed an alternative sociological perspective explaining how the power concept is developed through social ‘norms.’ Foucault perceived power not as a concept that must be forced or repressive in nature (Gaventa, 2003), but rather a consistent presence producing social discipline and conformity through implementing codes of social norms (Foucault, 1991). Foucault’s (1979) interpretation represents a development of Bentham’s (1843/1791) panopticon (Fig. 1). Foucault (1979) notes how prisoners would become accustomed to observation, to the extent that even when not under the ‘panoptic gaze’ they aligned their attitudes with social norms to become ‘self-disciplined’ (Elmes, Strong, & Volkoff, 2005). Such social control induces rational compliance from individuals who aim to avoid punishment and seek reward from the ever-present panoptic mechanism (Raven, 1999), and in the context of tourism the tourist gaze (Hollinshead, 1999). Sewell and Wilkinson (1992, p107) describe how once subordinates align their personal goals with that of the management system, disobedience recedes as workers are no longer ‘defending the frontier of control.’ The modern day panopticon manifests in numerous forms including team-working, open plan offices, and computer monitoring systems (Ball & Wilson, 2000; Sewell, 1998), facilitating managerial or peer surveillance, and forcing employees conformity to with organizational expectations. Investigations into forms of normative control show negative and adverse associations with such approaches. Mann, Nolan, and Wellman (2003) coin the term ‘sousveillance’ describing how individuals are likely to resist and rebel against forms of panoptic surveillance while Fleming and Sturdy (2009) and Kunda (1992) identify subjective resistant responses present in employee behaviour stemming from the lack of authenticity of normative controls and responses.
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